

# A Lesson in Using Organisational Excellence Principles

*Strategically Managed Higher Education Event  
Pollock Hall, 20th February 2009*

As the higher education sector faces ever increasing pressure from society and government, with expectation that it not only holds the key to social mobility but also to the country's future economic success, Michael Brown, in a recent event hosted by Quality Scotland, stressed the need for and benefits of strategically managed Higher Education.

Professor Brown was appointed as Vice Chancellor and Chief Executive at Liverpool John Moores University in 2000 and having already experimented with the European Excellence Model, using funding secured from the Higher Education Funding Council for England to test the relevance of organisational excellence in a range of higher education institutes.

Although initially unconvinced that the organisational excellence principles associated with the EFQM Excellence Model could be applied in a Higher Education institution, it had quickly become apparent that the university environment was highly complex and so an overarching excellence framework was needed. The success ingredient was that the language used had to be appropriate and the performance goals needed to be expressed in a digestible manner.

Where to start was not so obvious. Liverpool John Moores was going through a difficult time. Previous practice had bred a workforce that was scared to make decisions and so a committee culture had taken hold which stifled much potential for change. Furthermore, departments were completely siloed and unable to work together effectively. This lack of

organisational transparency and holistic culture would have made it impossible to engage directly with the Excellence Model, and so it was decided to pursue the underpinning principles to facilitate a change in culture.

Professor Brown adopted a graduated approach to this organisational change. Developments over the first five years of his leadership were part of quiet but determined preparation. His first step was to establish the broad purpose and behavioural values of the university. In a wide consultation process, he made sure that he personally heard the viewpoints of all the various stakeholders and openly communicated this information back. With a clear common purpose agreed upon, he moved on to restructure the university, to empower his staff and encourage individual accountability in a supportive environment. All decision making committees were removed (an idea that seemed particularly popular amongst our delegates) ensuring that those in senior positions were empowered to make appropriate decisions. Decisions on how to improve structures and processes were guided by using an organisational diagonal slice approach with advice being openly published. These changes were complemented by ongoing leadership and management training. Additionally, he implemented a single source of open data to facilitate the capture of agreed outcomes on a Balanced Scorecard and thus, the ongoing review of performance. This stage really tested whether the culture change was deeply rooted as staff were faced with the prospect of their own performance being publically available on an executive dashboard.

Staff were now fully aware of the principles of the Excellence model and Professor Brown was able to point out that a framework existed that neatly encapsulated all of the things that they were trying to achieve. Staff were already convinced of the importance of constancy of purpose, management by fact, results orientation, joined up thinking, continuous improvement and people development among others and could now be trained in this framework to undertake effective self-assessment as part of their continuous improvement planning.

With decisions now being made quickly within a clear strategic direction framework which is informed by measurable results, Professor Brown is satisfied that Liverpool John Moore University is strategically managed evidenced by being the only university in Europe to reach the standard required for a European Excellence Award (British Quality Foundation, October 2008).

Professor Brown now sees excellence as highly appropriate to higher education and applicable to higher education institutions as a whole. There is no reason why higher education institutions could not be managed in a business-like way to achieve its main objectives as a university.

The purpose of the institution has constantly informed the move towards strategic management and through adopting a strategic approach, the university found itself in the unique position of having a really powerful mechanism that has the potential to offer more than a degree without compromising the quality of the academic programmes. Every single degree course has been tangibly connected to relevant world of work skills, students will come out with measured graduate skills assessed against a national benchmark, extra curricular activities will be captured and certified and in addition students will be expected to take advantage of the high level World of Work (WOW) skills courses that have been developed in conjunction with major commercial and industrial leaders and are assessed by employers. This ambitious plan was implemented in an equally ambitious timeframe and would not have been possible without strategic management and the associated culture change underpinning it.

The message that resounded from Professor Brown's presentation was that a commitment to organisational excellence principles and practice can produce extraordinary results and is universally applicable but that the first question always must be to decide what you are trying to achieve and then ask how excellence can help you do this. It is not a question of being a slave to the system, but making it work for you.

Quality Scotland is pleased to announce a joint venture with Edinburgh Napier University Business School which will enable those undertaking both the 2-day Self-Assessment and the 3-day Accredited Assessor Quality Scotland courses to combine those with other business modules of leadership and work-based learning to create a masters programme pathway leading to the potential for an overall masters degree. **This will be available from September 2009.**

**If you would like to find out more information, please contact Dr. Alaine Sommerville on 0131 556 2333.**



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