

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY REPORT

SUCCESSION PLANNING IN THE UNIVERSITY SECTOR

Who the report is for

The report is aimed at those involved in university succession planning, primarily university managers and board members. The report can be read as a whole or in sections according to the reader's interest.

The context of the report

Universities in the United Kingdom face a raft of strategic challenges arising from the economic downturn, the ongoing debate about top-up fees, the outcome of the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise, demographic changes amongst students and staff, and continuing growth in the global university market.

Against this background, we interviewed the senior officers of twenty-one universities about how they fill their key positions and what they see on the horizon over the next decade. The sample represents a mix of UK higher education institutions. Our report seeks to capture the flavour of how senior university managers think about succession planning, given its importance to the running and success of their institutions.

Key findings

Our report finds that:

- The benefits of succession planning are not confined to filling individual positions and extend to educating and integrating the workforce more generally, as well as promoting diversity.
- Universities respond to the mismatch between supply and demand in the leadership field in two main ways. One is to expand supply, through internal leadership development, external recruitment, and changes in incentive structures. The other is to reduce demand, through re-structuring and other organisational changes. In between are non-conventional measures designed to encourage and assess leadership talent and to manage organisational risk.
- The argument over whether to favour internal or open competition features in many succession planning debates. There are variations in practice between different parts of the university sector, with open competition being more deeply entrenched in post-1992 institutions than elsewhere. But there is also widespread recognition that the key factors to be weighed against one another are retention, morale, cost, the circulation of talent, the opportunity for re-invention, and diversity.
- In deciding who should fill leadership positions university managers and selection committees must contend with scepticism about the value of generic human resource methodologies and with different levels of information about candidates, internal and external. Informational overload and asymmetry are much more important issues than is generally recognised. Universities must reconcile their appetite for as much information as possible against the need to ensure consistency of treatment.
- There remain blockages in the career paths of professional services staff and a recognition that this is an area where succession planning and career development could be improved. Some of these blockages are structural and spring from increasing functional specialisation. Others derive from deep-seated beliefs about the nature of academic credibility.

- Universities have become more sophisticated at attracting staff *from* one another – and therefore more vulnerable to losing staff to one another. Recruitment consultancies have played a role in this development, raising questions about the nature of the benefit they bring.
- The retirement of the baby boomer generation, an increasing dependence on academic staff from outside the UK, and the effects of the economic downturn are all seen as having potential implications for university succession planning and risk management, as well as for the overall shape of the sector, over the next decade. Uncertainty and the prospect of heightened competition sit alongside a belief that UK universities should recognise their achievements and approach the future in a spirit of self-confidence.

The underlying themes

Four themes recur in the report:

- *The notion of leadership itself.* There are differing views on what leadership *is*, from those who see it in terms of relations of authority to those who see it as a principle of individual action animated by a spirit of purpose and ambition. Individual leaders can transform the fortunes of institutions but reliance on individuals brings with it risks of discontinuity.
- *The place of process and uniformity.* In their different ways, universities are wrestling with the issue of how to balance the spontaneity and informality they have traditionally prized against the desirability of submitting their activities to common, impersonal standards. In designing schemes of succession planning, many universities appeal to ideas of best fit rather than best practice, with their schemes being moulded around their prevailing management culture.
- *The trade-off between stability and mobility.* What constitutes the right level of turnover and how far they should go to retain the services of key staff are important issues for universities. Universities approach this issue in a variety of ways but with the common aim of guarding against complacency and atrophy at the same time as ensuring stability and organisational commitment.
- *Competition versus common cause.* The competitive incentive to take (and keep) staff from their rivals sits alongside the ethos of reciprocal duty that binds universities together as a single community of institutions. The question of how university leaders reconcile their responsibilities to individual staff, to their institutions, and to the university sector as a whole appears in a wide range of management contexts.

Who we are

Syllogism was created earlier this year to bring benefits to clients by extending the boundaries of traditional consultancy. Our approach is led by research but focused on practical results. As well as providing our clients with advice, we aim to add to the stock of knowledge in the subject areas and sectors we work in. This report is the first in a series about the UK university sector. We will be commencing our next study in the early months of 2010.

As consultants, we offer expert advice in three areas: we can recruit your senior team, audit your ethical practices, and assess your strategy. We can also bring these factors together to provide a comprehensive picture of how your organisation can achieve its goals. Succession planning is a key part of our portfolio.

Comments

If you have any comments on the report – or if you would like to know more about the work of Syllogism – please contact us on projects@syllogism.co.uk or telephone us on 020 7873 2217.