Towards a Strengthened Steering Core: University Management and Governance for the 21st Century

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Burton Clark identified one of the distinctive aspects of the University of Strathclyde’s approach to management of the modern university as being the creation of a “strengthened steering core”. In the 1980s Strathclyde undertook a fundamental management reform and restructuring to enable the university to be able to behave more flexibly and in a more business-like mode than traditional structures would allow.

The “strengthened steering core” is essentially demonstrated through the operations of the University Management Group, as the key group through which all major decisions can be quickly progressed. Like most major UK universities, Strathclyde has a Senate, which is responsible for all academic matters within the university and a Court or Governing Body, which is responsible for the management of the university’s resources. The University Management Group (UMG), which was established in 1987, is the key management body that undertakes the formulation of major policy and oversees the operational management of the university on behalf of Court and Senate.

The UMG is chaired by the Principal and has a statutory membership of 10 comprising, in addition to the Principal, the Vice-Principal, the Pro-Vice Principal, a Deputy Principal, the Secretary to the University and the five Deans of Faculty. Other senior members of the university, including from the Lay Governing Body and Students’ Association also attend. The Group meets fortnightly and works to a tight, fully prepared agenda. It has its own Secretariat to prepare the business for its discussion. Decisions taken by UMG are reported to Senate and Court on a regular basis.

A significant aspect of the Strathclyde system is that the university operates a devolved financial management system whereby resources are allocated to all the Faculties, the Central administration and the Library by an agreed formula linked to student numbers and other factors. Thereafter the Line Managers for these areas – i.e. the Dean of each Faculty, the University Secretary etc, are fully responsible for allocation within their own management area. Membership of the UMG comprises all these budget-holders so that agreement on major policy decisions can be reached by those ultimately responsible for their implementation. UMG therefore faces the challenge of determining overall institutional strategy and policy while at the same time squaring the circle of overall institutional interests with the interests of each of the major constituencies represented on the group. While each budget-holder may defend their area they are obliged to work towards the evolution of a corporate view for the university as a whole. Inevitably this leads to certain tensions, especially when one area may be adversely affected by an institutional decision. As the Chair of UMG, I observe the chemistry of these interactions with great interest! In the words of Samuel Johnson: “I dogmatise and am contradicted and in this conflict of opinions and sentiments I find delight....”
It is generally accepted within the university that this *modus operandi* for progressing the business of the university has served Strathclyde well for a number of years. The frequency of meetings and preparation of high quality documentation with options analysis enables key strategic decisions and major decisions on deployment of resources to be made quickly in a manner that is open and transparent. Reports of UMG discussion and decisions are disseminated throughout the university.

The composition and operation of UMG is essentially a working compromise between traditional collegiate university management and a fully blown business model of executive management. The traditional mode of university management – which Strathclyde operated prior to 1987 - tends to the proliferation of academic committees and depends on widespread and lengthy consultation and consensus to be reached before decisions can be taken. It also leads to a lack of clear direction for the university as a whole. However a full business model of top-down executive management is not necessarily desirable or workable in a university, where there is an imperative to preserve both academic autonomy and freedom and where the academic community should be the driver of developments and new ideas. The main distinctive feature of a university is that the individual academic staff have – and are expected to have - a commitment to the development of their own expertise in-subject and to the overall development of their subject as well as commitment to their own institution.

The Strathclyde UMG combines a mixture of elected academic managers alongside appointed managers. The Deans of Faculty, as well as the Vice-Principal and Pro-Vice Principal hold posts by election from the academic community. They work alongside those posts that are appointed, and therefore executive, such as the Principal and the Secretary to the University as well as the senior members of the Governing body and the elected student representative.

This compromise has enabled the university to make substantial progress in adapting to the demands of financial constraints as well as to not only respond but be proactive in developments of value to the university. UMG strongly steers the university but avoids top-down hierarchical management.

This is crucial for an organisation of the size and dimensions of Strathclyde. The University has an annual turnover of £140M, employs around 3,500 staff and has over 26,000 students studying for university degrees as well as over 36,000 part-time continuing education students. It is an extremely complex organisation and requires sound management across a very wide range of activities.

The Principal is not only expected to fulfil the traditional role of academic leader but is *de facto* the Chief Executive of a large business.

On personal reflection, having operated this approach to management over 10 years, I feel that its strengths should be judged in terms of the success of the university in carrying through innovative approaches and new developments, such as a major institutional merger and establishing strategic business partnerships with other universities and business organisations. These innovations are both academic and commercial, and have enabled the University to be at the forefront in delivery of flexible and relevant programmes of teaching and research.

The challenges to the Chief Executive are to maintain that impetus in the light of limitations such as:

- The lack of possibility to execute a top-down corporate management approach,
- Recognition that a number of UMG members are elected and at the end of their term of office must return to their academic areas,
- The rapid decline in the proportion of State funding for HE in the UK means limited flexibility for strategic development - and the devolved financial management structure means limitations on the financial resource available centrally to UMG for strategic overall developments.

- Growing intrusiveness of the State through the Funding Councils and other government agencies seeking to impose additional layers of bureaucracy and accountability on the universities, as well as seeking to place greater operational management responsibilities onto the lay governing body rather than allowing universities to operate their own models of management practice.