

Leadership and Strategy in the University Sector: Lessons from the WISE Leadership Conference 2014

By

Wil Brewer and Mahboob Mahmood

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WISE Leadership Conference

World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE), a division of Qatar Foundation, is an international, multi-sectoral platform for creative thinking, debate and purposeful action in the field of education. Through an annual summit and a range of ongoing programs WISE promotes innovation and building the future of education through collaboration.

WISE conducts an annual leadership conference in Doha for recently appointed heads of universities – presidents, rectors, vice chancellors – the titles vary from country to country. The 2014 program, conducted in early November, was attended by heads of both public and private universities from sixteen countries: Cameroon, Ecuador, Ghana, India, Kenya, Liberia, Mexico, Myanmar, Nigeria, Mongolia, Myanmar, Oman, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Zimbabwe.

The 2014 program in early November covered institutional and leadership challenges, leadership style, innovation, student employment, fund-raising, use of technology, and institutional and personal goal-setting. The program was facilitated by faculty members from Asheshi University, InnoOmnia, Institute of International Education, Palestine Technical University, The Parthenon Group, and the authors of this article, Wil Brewer of Performance-Solutions-Group and Mahboob Mahmood of Knowledge Platform. Despite the differences in mission, size, culture and funding, we found all the heads of universities faced common challenges in leadership, management, organizational and people issues.

Leadership Readiness

Preparation included a behavioral intelligence assessment conducted by Wil Brewer, President of Performance Solutions Group, consisting of the DISC behavioral profile and an emotional intelligence assessment, measured as EQ (Emotional Quotient). Just prior to the commencement of the leadership conference and continuing during the conference, each participant received one-on-one feedback and coaching from Wil. This is a special experience in which both professional and personal issues are addressed with emphasis on increasing self-awareness. This is preparation for an extended session on Leadership and Self-awareness in the three-day program.

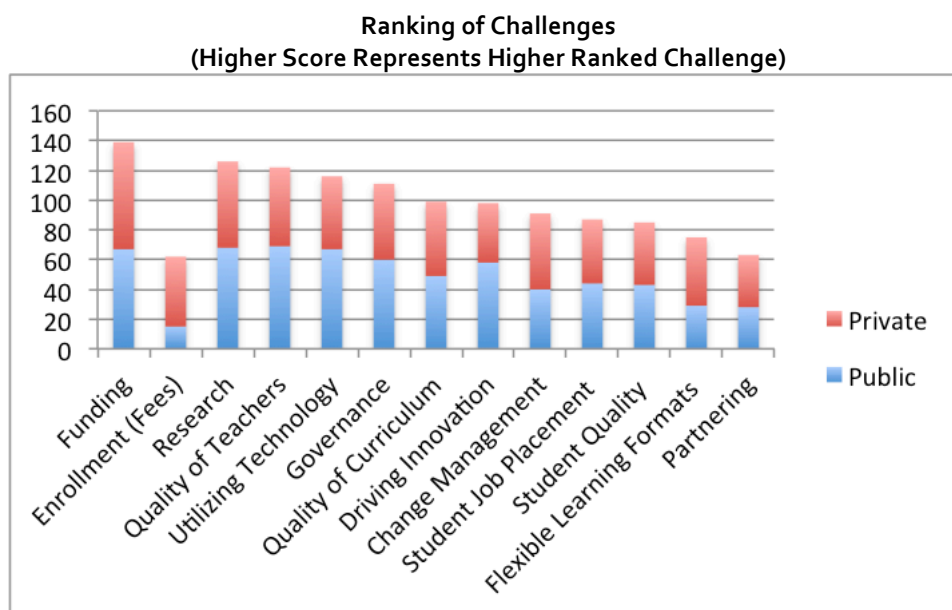
What do we learn from the DISC profiles? Over the past five years, 81% of all participants are high on the “Compliance” characteristic with the average at 66.5 on a scale of 1 to 100. Compliance represents attention to detail, inclination to closely follow rules and procedures, focus on facts, precise and meticulous concern for detail. What is the danger? It’s the inability to extricate from the details, to be strategic, and to look at the big picture.

This common characteristic is indicative of bright and often brilliant people, with careers as lecturers, then professors, almost all with PhDs, who are thrust into positions requiring high capabilities in leadership and management. Most have not had training, preparation nor the tools required to be effective heads of higher education institutions. There are some obvious exceptions – the few with business backgrounds, management training, etc. So from heading a department or faculty, they now have to “herd cats,” with many direct reports from multiple functional areas – academic affairs, admissions, student affairs, facilities, finance, HR, IT, legal, PR, etc. This is accompanied by accountability to multiple stakeholders.

There is also the additional primary leadership role of developing the institution’s vision together with long-term strategic planning. This requires plotting the roadmap to answer the question: “What do we want the institution to look like in five years’ time and how do we get there?” Many corporations fail to do this effectively, yet a newly appointed university head is meant to step up and take responsibility for leading into the future.

Strategic Challenges and Priorities

Mahboob Mahmood, CEO of Knowledge Platform, conducted a mini-survey during the 2014 program to address these strategic issues. Participants were asked to rank thirteen major strategic challenges typically faced by educational institutions in order of significance. We received seven responses from representatives of public sector institutions, and seven from private sector institutions.



- For both public sector and private sector institutions, *funding* (including *student enrollment fees*) was the most significant challenge, with 16% of all ranking scores considerably higher than *research* and *quality of teachers*, which jointly took second place at 10%.
- The two student oriented challenges, *student job placement* and *student quality*, were among the lowest ranked challenges, with both public sector and private sector institutions exhibiting almost equally low concern.
- More inward facing, institution-strengthening challenges - *research*, *teacher quality*, *utilization of technology*, *governance* and *curriculum quality* - ranked high.
- In contrast, the four lowest rankings were accorded to *market-facing challenges*, starting with lowest:
 - Forging *partnerships*
 - Developing *flexible learning formats*
 - Improving *student quality*
 - Enhancing *student job placement*.

- The challenges of *driving innovation* and *managing change* occupied the intermediate band of concerns. Coupling these two concerns with *utilizing technology*, which featured higher in the ranking of challenges, one may conclude that both public and private sector institutions *recognized the importance of innovation and change*, but did not give the same weight to *market-linked challenges and solutions*.

Conclusions:

The leadership awareness and strategic challenges segments of the program clearly indicated overlapping issues facing leaders of universities across the world. The following steps would contribute to addressing these issues:

- Newly appointed presidents require support in the form of coaching or mentoring to provide guidance through the initial challenges.
- Boards of trustees, directors or governors need to better prepare for their governance and strategic roles to be able to provide better guidance and direction.
- Leadership teams require training in leadership and management skills to more effectively support the head of their institutions.
- Major strategic issues are not getting sufficient priority due to lack of preparedness and recognition of priorities on the part of newly appointed presidents.
- Greater attention needs to be given to developing effective succession plans in university institutions, accompanied by appropriate professional development, to prepare potential presidents for their future roles.
- There is a general recognition of the importance of bringing about change in university cultures. This includes enhancing teacher quality and utilizing information technology, but there remains a lack of clarity on how to bring about this change.
- Greater emphasis needs to be given to financial self-reliance.
- Greater priority needs to be given to addressing student-centric challenges, such as jobs placement and improvement of student 'on-boarding' programs and strategies for effective linkages with the private sector.

Far-sighted and effective university leaders can play a positive role in an age of profound change. Many of the leaders of today's universities are ready to embrace this change. With more support, networking and conferences such as the WISE leadership program, significant steps will be taken in supporting their transformational journeys.