Turning Around a University: Lessons from personal experience

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About the Author

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Acknowledgements

This paper describes a collective journey, one I was privileged to share with the leadership team, staff, students and Board of the University of Hull. The publication of the story of our transformation affords me the opportunity to thank them further for putting their trust in me and being the most outstanding of colleagues.

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Introduction

I accepted the position of Vice-Chancellor at the University of Hull because I enjoy challenge and I relish change. My formative years in the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa shaped me profoundly and I remain strongly values-driven and committed to the pursuit of social justice. I might describe myself as an 'accidental vice-chancellor' (with apologies to Anne Tyler).[1] Like many people who have stepped into leadership roles, I never particularly sought out positions of power and authority, rather I have been persuaded to consider them. I accepted when I felt that I could make a difference.

The role of universities is to transform lives and positively impact society through delivery of an academic mission. For me therefore, universities are in the business of social change. To effect social change, universities must be financially sustainable, deliver high-quality education, research and community engagement and be seen to contribute demonstrably to the communities they serve – regionally, nationally and internationally.

On being approached about leading Hull, my research uncovered what I described then as a 'gem of a university' but one that was in trouble. Moreover, this position was not recognised or understood by all within the institution. I was told by some University Council members, 'all the difficult change and hard work has been done, you just have to engage the staff and students'. This in itself was a telling statement.

This paper describes our journey in changing the fortunes of the University of Hull – in particular, in relation to financial sustainability, academic performance and identity and profile. Our success would not have been possible without the key observation that was pivotal to my accepting the role: from the moment I stepped onto campus pre-application, the staff were friendly and kind, passionate about their institution, city and region and desperate to be proud of an institution they loved.

1. Uncovering the Unpalatable Truth

For the English higher education sector, the 2010s were characterised by a fundamental shift in the nature of undergraduate student recruitment. Controls on student numbers were gradually relaxed before being abolished entirely, creating today's highly competitive and market-driven system. The rate of 18-year-old participation in UK higher education continued to rise across the decade and, notwithstanding a temporary dip on the introduction of the £9,000 tuition fee cap in 2012/13, rose from 22 per cent in 2009/10 to 31 per cent in 2019/20.[2]

At the same time, however, the UK was experiencing a decline in the 18-year-old population, with this principal pool of university applicants 14 per cent smaller by 2020 compared to 2009.[3] The period also saw a pronounced contraction in part-time and mature students, particularly outside standard first degree provision. Thus, intakes to 'other undergraduate' programmes in England fell by 80 per cent (part-time) and 77 per cent (mature) between 2009/10 and 2020/21.[4]

Meanwhile, under the post-2012 undergraduate fees regime in England, students have become consumers and increasingly discerning in choosing where to invest their tuition fees. Furthermore, demand for different ways of learning, from online programmes to degree apprenticeships, has challenged institutions to innovate beyond traditional forms of provision.

The impact of this combination of trends has been felt differently across the sector but presents significant challenges for mid-tariff institutions offering a broad range of disciplines, particularly those – like Hull – where home undergraduates on Bachelor degrees comprise the overwhelming majority of its student body.

By the latter part of the 2010s, the sector was also having to come to terms with the profound changes in the regulatory landscape being

ushered in by the Higher Education and Research Act (2017) and the shift from the Higher Education Funding Council for England to a new regulatory body, the Office for Students. Despite the eventual publication of the Government's long-awaited consultations on the back of the Augar Review in February 2022, the prospect of further fundamental reform continued to hang over the sector, just as it had done when Prime Minister Theresa May launched the Review of post-18 education and funding back in February 2018.

When I took up post in August 2017, the University of Hull had been experiencing falling student numbers and shrinking market share for a number of years. The recruitment challenge was exacerbated by regional variations in the demographic decline. The University of Hull had always focussed strongly on serving the educational needs of its region. However, an increasing reliance on recruiting locally coincided with a decline in the 18-year-old population in the Humber region that was both steeper and lasted longer than in the UK as whole (having fallen by 25 per cent compared to 2009 when it reached its lowest point in 2021). A further compounding factor was the parallel decline in the University's performance in UK league tables, affecting perceptions of quality for home and international applicants.

Before I arrived, Hull had sought to reshape its organisational structures and deliver cost efficiencies. However, the University's performance had continued to decline. A more fundamental transformation was required for Hull to address its deteriorating academic performance and return to a position of financial solvency and sustainability.

The downward trends in the University's performance were evident. Reversing these would only be possible if the institution understood fully the root causes and was able to communicate a compelling case for change to every member of its community. Moreover, change would take time. By autumn 2018, and as we had predicted,

the University had fallen to a sub-100 position in the newest league tables. The value of tuition fees, frozen since 2017, was being eroded by inflation, and changes to pensions were adding to the growing pressures on the University's financial position. Costs remained too high for the size of institution we had become and for our projected levels of income. Consequently, the University was operating with a deficit.

At the core of our case for change was a recognition that the University needed to anticipate and understand the implications of the shifting higher education landscape for Hull. The University had not moved with sufficient agility or innovation to keep pace with other institutions in the higher education sector, nor had it grappled adequately with the consequences of this for the sustainability of its operating model.

A range of internal challenges were also hampering progress.

i. Identity and purpose

Engagement with staff during my first few months at Hull made it clear that there had been a loss of clarity and confidence in the University's identity. Colleagues expressed confusion about the sort of institution Hull wanted to be and, therefore, how they could contribute to delivering on its priorities.

ii. Inconsistent academic performance

Underlying the overall decline in academic performance was a considerable degree of variability between disciplines, with some pockets of excellence but too many areas where performance was well below sector benchmarks. In research, for example, a minority of cost centres were performing well in attracting funding. However, the University's total research income per member of academic staff was below the sector average and the results of the Research Evaluation Framework (2014) had been disappointing. Similarly, National Student Survey results (NSS) needed to be improved.

Staff reported discontent with a culture which included a perceived lack of willingness among leadership to recognise and reward excellence and to tackle poor performance, as well as with variability in messaging cascading down to staff through some senior managers.

iii. Entry tariff strategy

Over the period 2014/15 to 2016/17, the University had lowered its entry tariff to meet recruitment targets in the face of declining student numbers. This strategy had an impact on national and international perceptions and Hull's ability to be seen as a university of choice, contributing to the increasingly local nature of the student body.

iv. Programmes

The University had not been sufficiently adaptive in reviewing and modernising its portfolio of programmes in response to changes in student demand. Many undergraduate programmes no longer appealed to the core market of 18-year-old A-Level students and opportunities to diversify provision had not been taken.

v. Infrastructure

A sizeable capital programme to construct a new building for the medical school, redevelop the University library and sports facilities and create new on-campus student accommodation was well advanced. People described a lovely, single site campus which was friendly, safe and secure. However, the University had underinvested in its academic infrastructure over a substantial period, resulting in an estate that fell short in significant areas of student, staff and funder expectations and it was not cost effective in its operations.

vi. Structures, systems and processes

The organisational structure introduced in 2016 had not achieved its intended purpose to enable more efficient, effective and high-

performing academic units, instead creating greater complexity in the distribution of leadership responsibilities and flow of activity. Many systems and processes were similarly complex, inefficient and disempowering.

vii. Culture

In my first round of visits to academic and professional services departments, I outlined my view of the University and my plans for 'turning the tanker'. My presentation included a bullet point noting some staff were 'change-weary'. Interestingly, staff countered this openly within a strong theme captured in the words of one colleague: 'we are tired of change that brings no benefits; if we can engage in change that brings benefits, we are in'. Furthermore, there was a rather tense divide between some academic and professional services staff at senior levels and between 'the centre' and 'the faculties' as well as issues with internal culture in several areas.

This was not helped by challenges at the senior executive level. For example, in response to my very first presentation articulating the importance of us being a team delivering the strategy of the University, I was informed the executive had debated this and decided they were not a team but a group, each working on their own portfolio of activity.

In essence, a perfect storm of external and internal factors that had been brewing for some time was about to hit the University. While this was seriously challenging for the survival of the University itself, it also had grave implications for the city of Hull and the wider Humber region. Characterised by deep inequalities, significant deprivation and poverty, and with the Humber being the most carbon-intensive industrial cluster in the country, this was precisely the sort of place that desperately needed a resilient and purposeful university.[5]

2. Leading with Purpose

There is no shortage of research and practical advice on how to lead and, while elements of approaches such as compassionate leadership and adaptive leadership chime with my approach, none fully resonates. Consequently, I set out below the precepts that explicitly guide my leadership, which were pivotal to leading change at Hull and have been honed through years of leading change in a diversity of universities.

I trained as a psychologist but, disillusioned by mainstream psychology in South Africa and its failure to engage with injustice and inequality, I turned initially to critical social psychology and then completed a two-year Master's in Community Psychology. The first of its kind in South Africa, the programme aimed to deliver an appropriate 'liberation' community psychology practice in the oppressive Apartheid landscape.[6] I mention my early history as this experience and training have impacted profoundly on how I see and approach leadership:

i. Leadership is primarily about social change on two levels: social change within the university to maximise delivery of an institution's strategy and academic mission and to ensure a strong, purposeful and resilient organisation capable of impact and influence; and social change beyond the university through, among other things, educating the next generation, contributing to solving the challenges facing the planet and its people and constructive civic engagement. Stitched through all of this has to be an underlying value-set that aims, quite simply, to make the world fairer, more equitable and sustainable.

ii. Achieving a university's vision, mission and strategy requires collective ownership to propel purposeful action. Success depends upon members of a university community being engaged meaningfully in shaping these key elements of an

institution's identity, building the desire to take ownership and be accountable.

iii. A university's strategy needs to be parsimonious, distinctive, memorable and well socialised. Every individual in the university should know how their work contributes to the strategy. This results in shared purpose, enables the organisational *gestalt* to deliver institutional objectives, and assists with evaluation of outcomes at the university, unit and individual level.

iv. Delivering against strategy and associated plans – whether short, medium or long term, or at the level of an individual, a team or a whole organisation – requires 'dialogue, decision, delivery'. This was my mantra at Hull: engagement with your community is key. Leadership must take decisions and ensure that action follows to ensure outcomes are achieved. Evaluation of impact is a vital and oft-missed step. Gathering quantitative and qualitative data to construct a valid, reliable picture enables lessons to be learned genuinely and success to be celebrated.

v. Behaviour must be understood in social context. While people have agency, structural factors also determine behaviour. These are not necessarily explicit; indeed, they are sometimes 'in the walls / part of the institutional fabric'. To understand the impact of these exigencies, one must be aware that they operate in all institutions and leadership has the power to change them. Identifying these factors is key to facilitating positive change; to do so, one must listen actively to a diversity of staff and students, triangulate the data and act to bring about change with transparency and integrity.

vi. Taking people with you is a *sine qua non* of leadership and pertains to both internal and external partners (such as key regional leaders, national bodies and international players).

Meaningful and sustained change relies on collective trust and confidence in an organisation's leadership: this is earned through how you engage and what you say and do (or omit to say and do). Communication is key – talking with, not talking at.

vii. The personal / professional balance should be a focus of leader reflection. Mature professional behaviour is always required of leaders; these are positions of power, and power needs to be navigated carefully. People observe their leaders in and out of work; they are role models. Defensiveness and disrespect have no place. Being open to hear the most difficult of criticisms is part of the job; without hearing the worst of things, you cannot affect impactful and lasting change. Furthermore, leaders must not only 'own' the good bits – some things work and some do not. The collective will help you steer the right course if you are listening, open and honest.

viii. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion are core: we should all be fighting for a better society and practising what we preach. Research consistently demonstrates the benefits of diverse workforces at every organisational level. All sectors, including higher education, have more work to do.

ix. Language constructs reality: it does not simply reflect it. Understanding the importance of language, and the impact of what one says and how, is vital to the entire process of change. Similarly, people's expressed perceptions are their reality; invalidating what they say because you disagree with it has no place in leadership.

x. Change is the constant: being proactive, rather than reactive, positions individuals and organisations to cope with change (although one should also be resilient in the face of the unexpected). Unless this is appreciated, and change seen as an opportunity to innovate rather than a

challenge requiring reaction, the organisation will stand still at best and more likely go backwards. The process of change needs careful consideration of the interaction between component organisational parts (the Rubik's Cube offers a useful metaphor) and of consequences both intended and unintended – multiple voices help avoid bear traps that one might not see from one's own perspective.

xi. Leadership requires an executive team who own and believe in the university and its strategic ambitions. The beauty of a high-performing team is the orchestration of individual accountability and collective ownership as you combine strengths, expertise and skills to deliver what you set out to achieve. People are complicated and so this is probably one of the most difficult facets of leading an organisation.

xii. The principles of transparency and openness operate too in a leader's relationship with their Board, and particularly their Board's Chair. Baffling boards with reams of paper that obscure reality is not helpful to anyone. The Board's understanding, support, and critical challenge, especially when embarking on serious programmes of change, is vital.

3. Facing the Stark Reality: The call to action

During my first four months at the University of Hull, I poured over data, engaged with every area of the University to present my analysis and hear the perspectives of staff and students, as well as setting up an open email for confidential feedback – all of which I read and responded to. I held a round of visits with regional leaders to hear their views of the University and had conversations with trusted local and national colleagues to test my thinking. This was important to ensure I had a thorough and rounded understanding of the University's position and helped rebuild a sense of community while gaining the trust and confidence of stakeholders.

Detailed analysis of benchmarked external and internally focussed quantitative and qualitative data, confirmed my view that the University was in a worse position than some realised. Moreover, things were going to get worse before they got better – even after major intervention. The leadership team and I worked through the implications and developed a plan but, critically, we needed the University Council's support.

With the support of the leadership team, I spent the Council away day in May 2018 on my feet taking lay members through the very significant challenges the University faced and what was needed to reverse its rapidly declining position. At a time when the Government and media were talking about 'universities going to the wall', the risks for the University of Hull were considerable. As the only University in the Humber, an area of deep deprivation and inequality, the wider impact of losing the University was all too obvious.

At a series of all-staff forums, filmed for those who could not attend in person. I laid out the unpalatable truth, describing our financial position as 'unsustainable' and our league table position as 'untenable'. I was honest about the fact that things would get worse before they got better. The reasons for our decline were clearly

evidenced through presentation of performance data pertaining to our academic mission and financial position, and there was plenty of time for questions and comments. I apologised sincerely for what would need to follow but reiterated the importance of transformation for securing the University's long-term survival and sustainability.

The trade unions were essential but work was required to strengthen the relationships with them. My commitment was to build positive, constructive relations; after all, we both had staff as our focus. While we might disagree at times, I valued their input and expected us to engage professionally, to seek dialogue and to operate with mutual respect and honesty. After a bumpy first meeting, with rules of engagement established, we set a new course. However, this did not stop them submitting a vote of no confidence in the whole of the leadership team on the grounds that they had delivered the University's current situation. I was excepted, being afforded 'the benefit of the doubt, for the time being'.

The student community was vital to our success. Hull's once proud metrics now showed significant challenges in recruitment, falling retention rates and issues with the student experience. For me, it was a matter of ethics. If we accept students into our institutions, we have a responsibility to facilitate their success through meeting their diverse needs. Blaming the student, often implicitly, is still overly common within the sector.

We needed to do better for our students and our alumni (too many of whom told me they avoided telling people they had completed their degrees at Hull). I met with the students' union and walked them through the position, my desire to do better and my firm intention to work in genuine partnership with them in students' interests. Steeped in participatory pedagogy, I could not understand reluctance to listen to and engage with students. In my experience, students are almost always constructive, mature and professional

and they provide a perspective which we genuinely cannot otherwise expect to see.

I spoke with external stakeholders one-to-one or via Board-level briefings. My key message was that a strong University was pivotal to the success of our region. I needed their support and their understanding that external delivery may be curtailed as, in order to secure such a future, our clear focus would be internal for the next two years. Interestingly, the response from many external stakeholders could best be described as a sigh of relief, noting their voiced concerns had gone unheeded over a considerable period.

With widespread understanding secured, acknowledgement that the situation was critical and intervention vital to its very future, we set about transforming the institution.

4. The Transformation Programme

Substantial transformation was required for the University to thrive and not just survive. We had to deliver sustainable change and associated improvements and benefits. We knew this would take three to five years. Change needed to happen at all levels of the institution, be led from the top and include the offices of the Vice-Chancellor and executive. We were in this together and there was no room for anyone to hide.

Achievement of our objectives would require constructive dialogue, decisive action and thorough delivery. We were confident we could do it, and our passionate and committed staff were critical to facilitating that institution-wide, wholesale change. Over 1,000 staff attended my all-colleague forums to launch the programme of change; just under 400 provided feedback: 95 per cent understood why the University needed to change and 76 per cent felt confident they could play a role within their area.

Stage One

The initial stage of the transformation programme, announced in June 2018, established a set of workstreams to advance key strategic projects: to improve the quality of Hull's education and research; to tackle the challenges associated with falling recruitment; and to develop a position that would secure the University's financial sustainability.

A crucial project was the creation of a clear and inspirational vision statement that reflected the collective views of students, staff and stakeholders on the identity and purpose of the University of Hull, along with agreed sets of values and behaviours. Addressing issues around clarity of direction, loss of confidence and falling morale, the vision, values and behaviours workstream formed the bedrock for the rest of the transformation programme.

Other elements of the programme included: introducing an academic careers framework; developing a new research strategy;

transforming the portfolio of programmes and diversifying Hull's offer; streamlining faculty organisation to address complexity previously introduced; developing an international strategy and associated infrastructure; enhancing business intelligence and market insight; and aligning professional services.

We needed to achieve a reduction of £20 million in the annual cost base by July 2021. To do this, and to achieve improved performance, we were absolutely honest about an approach that would see investment in areas of strength and genuine opportunity but divestment from areas of persistently weak performance and with an inability to generate income.

To tackle the uncertainty as to the type of institution we were, I announced three parameters. First, the University was 'dual intensive'. Historically sitting in the group of institutions just below the Russell Group, Hull had long been defined as research-intensive, but we were also passionate about our students and had a strong track-record of giving a diversity of people a chance.

Secondly, we would, initially at least, become a 'smaller, higher quality institution'. We had already ceased the year-on-year reduction of the entry tariff intended to mitigate falling student numbers. This reduction had seen Hull in direct competition with the post-92 institutions and resulted in the student experience declining as student support had not kept pace with the needs of the changing population. Instead, we would focus on quality in education and research and provide students with an excellent, supportive academic and wider experience.

Thirdly, we were an 'internationally-engaged civic'. As the only university in the Humber, our role was vital to our place, and we should have been contributing strongly. However, we also needed to reclaim our international reputation and profile through drawing a strategic thread between local challenges and global solutions and vice versa.

Stage Two

There is no doubt, people worked hard over 2018/19. However, it became clear as the months slipped by and our data became more valid and reliable that the University's operating model differed from sector norms. Furthermore, the pace of change needed to be faster and our savings greater, while understanding of what we needed to achieve remained variable. Some were talking a good talk, claiming (perhaps even believing) to have enacted agreed changes, but in truth they were not actually delivering.

Challenges to recruitment continued. The demographic dip, especially deep in our region, was biting and competition for students intensifying. Changes to pensions, the impacts of Brexit and flat tuition fees were all exacerbating the financial challenge. In simple terms, revenue was set to continue to fall (as smaller cohorts of students moved through the system) yet some costs were increasing.

Six months into the transformation programme, therefore, validated data and hard reflection saw the need to reset, with a higher savings target, and increased pace. Initiated in the summer of 2019, this 'stage' sought to deliver three aims:

i. ensure sustained institutional improvement in benchmarked quality indicators for education, research, enterprise and student experience;

ii. secure organisational sustainability within two years through a £25 million reduction in the University's cost base by July 2021, with £20 million of that achieved by July 2020; and

iii. align infrastructure, resources and activity around the University vision.

Five workstreams were established, consolidating work from Stage One and bringing sharper focus still to priorities: student recruitment

and retention workstreams sought to build income while those focusing on our workforce, estate and non-pay expenditure sought to reduce operating costs wherever possible. This was not about salami-slicing but about reimagining the University such that we worked differently and with greater common purpose to deliver our academic mission through more efficient, effective and user-focused activity. Our guiding principle throughout was that we should prioritise, simplify and redesign, not stretch resources ever thinner by trying to continue to do everything and in exactly the same way.

Staff engagement followed with further all-colleague forums and open discussion. Honesty was important, articulated through a clear evidence-based narrative. Feedback was collected at each event assessing the extent to which we had achieved our goals and enabling us to understand what more was needed to achieve effective dialogue with staff and engage them in change at the local level.

The trade unions were pivotal too, and I found that our local representatives became increasingly valuable stakeholders. They were clear that while we might disagree at times, we had to work together for the good of the University.

At this juncture, many of our remaining Council members' terms of office came to an end. I was explicit that we needed people who understood the journey we were on and would provide constructive and critical challenge. I wanted them to play a key role in testing us and holding us to account. This opportunity to bolster the existing strength of the Council was vital to our progress. Indeed, their support of me and the leadership team in seeing through very challenging change at pace was invaluable.

Governance of the change programme was enhanced through the establishment of a Transformation Subcommittee of the University Council which received reports from a Transformation Implementation Board. Clear lines of accountability through

individuals and committees sat below this. We were determined that delivery would follow dialogue and decision.

Stage Two, which became the transformation programme in effect, had three phases through which our three aims were threaded. The order of the phases, while not ideal, was essential in the interests of financial stability:

i. The first, over the summer of 2019, was focused on our workforce. It had various components to strengthen our community, improve employee experience and manage excellent and poor performance. However, the key element was a large-scale voluntary exit scheme informed by a set of parameters to ensure, as far as possible, that we did not lose staff we needed to retain. It was important to me that we supported staff at this difficult time. Opportunities to engage in CV writing, careers advice and job-seeking support were provided and we worked with regional partners to ensure vacancies were brought to the attention of staff who were leaving – the total numbered over 400 staff at every level of the organisation, the majority of whom were in our professional services.

ii. The second phase was service redesign. This focused primarily on fundamentally redesigning professional services to ensure efficient, effective user-focused delivery in support of the University's academic mission. Professional services had grown disproportionately, in part to manage legacy systems that were no longer fit for purpose. However, it would be fair to say that, in some areas, 'what we have always done' continued to be protected and change was resisted. No professional service was excluded, and the process was guided by a set of principles, project initiation and tracking documentation, staff and trade union consultation and engagement plans and clear timescales.

At the same time, Deans continued to review the performance of their Faculties with their Heads of Department or School, and PVCs as appropriate. A year earlier, we had withdrawn a large number of programmes which were recruiting tiny numbers of students. This subsequent phase focused more explicitly on academic quality and included plans to improve student outcomes, enhance the student experience and increase high-quality research and knowledge exchange. Further programmes were suspended, including seeing the teaching out of subjects (with a heavy heart, Modern Languages), while a number of units were closed. In areas of strength and opportunity (specifically Engineering and Health), investment saw key appointments to drive change. The academic careers framework facilitated conversations regarding each individual's contribution to the University and their personal and professional development. An enhanced performance management framework enabled high performers to feel more valued (alongside an improved promotion framework) and processes to be appropriately deployed where performance was not at the right level.

iii. The third phase was systems and processes. Like many institutions, the University was beset by bureaucratic, inefficient and siloed administrator-focused processes enacted through a host of different and poorly designed systems. Hull seemed to have taken this one step further, priding itself on rapid implementation rather than on delivering systems that were fit for purpose. We had started this work in my first months at Hull after I ran a survey asking academics for their top three processes that needed revision. Regrettably, this was like unravelling badly knotted Christmas lights, and quick solutions proved impossible. Incompatible systems, resistant staff in some quarters and a lack of understanding or will to engage with end users saw the valuable initial work undone

or quietly reversed. Therefore, we had to re-initiate this work with new leadership and, we were making progress, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

iv. This fourth, unanticipated phase tested our mettle. As we moved from reports of a novel coronavirus in Wuhan, to the plight of passengers on the Diamond Princess and to the reality of a World Health Organisation declared global pandemic, like everyone else our absolute focus was on the health and safety of our staff and students, closely followed by our desire to enable students to continue learning. Our work on systems and processes ceased as we moved rapidly online and worked our way through multiple lockdowns and new ways of working. Frequent, honest and supportive communication with staff and students was paramount. While the systems and processes work resumed in earnest in September 2021, progress has been impeded. Yet at least two positives are worthy of report in what was a period of darkness for many. First, more staff than I could have expected wrote to me during the pandemic to say that the two previous years of transformation meant that we were 'used to working at pace and delivering change', 'so we picked ourselves up, went online in four days, and focused hard on what mattered'. Secondly, we changed aspects of our working post pandemic. Having run 'learning from COVID' projects for staff and students, we were determined that we would not simply return to the familiar but would integrate this learning into our processes and system re-design.

Balancing on the knife edge of change

The description I have provided of immensely complex, whole-institution change is simplified. As such, it risks missing the brutality of tough turnaround. The vast majority of staff came with us on this journey, to their tremendous credit. As the Vice-Chancellor,

upon whose shoulders these decisions ultimately rested, and as a psychologist, I spent many wakeful hours concerned about the impact of transformation on our people. The long-term gain would be worth it, and I was confident that we could do it, but the short- to medium-term pain was etched on the faces of at least some of our staff.

The risks of not delivering were serious but pushing such pressure through the University carried risk too. Mitigating this as far as possible was a primary concern for me and the leadership team: high levels of visibility, compassion and care were key. Critically, the words of staff rang in our minds – we do not mind more change, just so long as it delivers benefits.

5. Delivering Benefits

Evaluation of the outcomes of our transformation was embedded within the programme. Collectively, we had been through a very difficult time. Was it worth it?

This section describes the impact of transformation at the end of July 2021, the delivery deadline, assessed against the three programme aims. However, comment is also provided on performance to July 2022, as ensuring that change is sustained was key to our objectives.

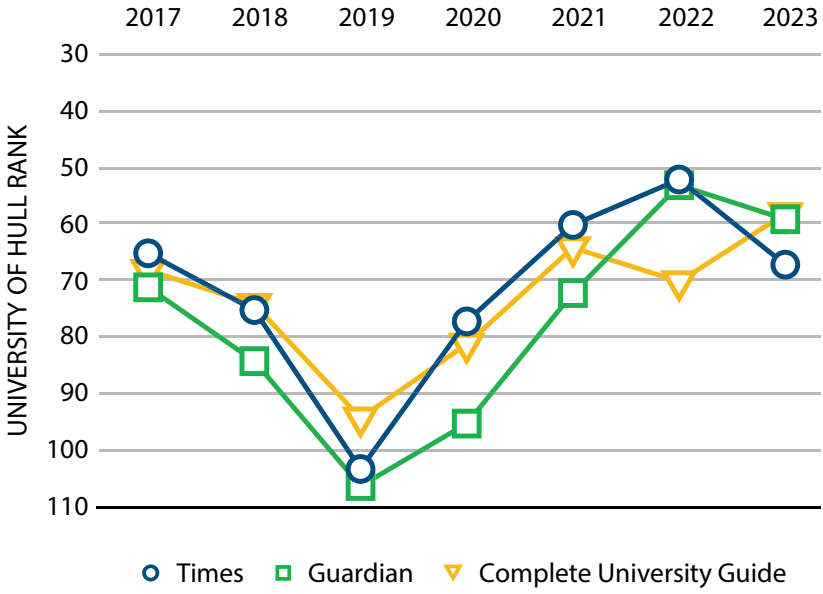
i. Aim One: Ensure sustained institutional improvement in benchmarked quality indicators for education, research, enterprise and student experience

While the merits of league tables can be debated, they impact student perception and choice while influencing reputation and profile. Hull's declining rankings illustrated weakening performance and we were insistent that improvements to our position would be needed, reflecting genuine improvements in quality.[7]

Graph 1 shows the steady upward trajectory of the University in the main UK league tables. Within each league table, over the period 2019 to 2021, Hull was among the top three highest risers and was the highest riser in the *Guardian*. Performance dipped in the 2023 *Times* and *Guardian* tables, driven principally by a dip in NSS scores and staff:student ratio. This fall was disappointing but served to illustrate that factors both within and outside one's control continue to influence activity, sometimes adversely. Moreover, it is how one responds to such fluctuations that is critical.

Substantial improvements in the *Times Higher Education* Impact Rankings and in People and Planet's league table, assessing sustainability, further underscored the value of focussed change.

Graph 1: Hull's UK League Table Performance



A steady improvement in undergraduate student satisfaction against the sector over the period of transformation suggested the hard work of staff had brought success.[8] Unfortunately, 2022 saw a fall in overall student satisfaction and the University dipped back below the sector mean – the subject of much staff disappointment and detailed analysis to establish the causes and target action.

Similar improvements in postgraduate taught and research student experience were recorded. (The taught postgraduate experience continued to be above the sector average in 2022 although, as with undergraduate student satisfaction, postgraduate research student satisfaction saw a decline.) Investment in the international portfolio at Hull paid dividends seeing the increased number of students reporting very positive attitudes toward their experience.

Student retention rates reflect multiple factors; however, student engagement and a sense of belonging have been associated with improved retention.[9] Student-centred work and a focus on an inclusive curriculum within academic Schools and Departments, supported by an excellent team within Hull's Teaching Excellence Academy, as well as improvements in central services, saw student retention increase.

In terms of research, Hull's *Research Strategy* set out to focus on strategic priorities and deliver high-quality impactful research. There had been a culture in which at least some non-research active staff were allocated significant time for research as well as a two-tiered system in which research was valued more highly than education, and this had to be addressed. Here too the imperative was to invest in strength. Thus while slightly fewer staff were entered into the national Research Excellence Framework 2021 than had been the case in 2014, the results revealed a significantly improved performance. Indeed, improvements were seen across all Units of Assessment entered and in each of the three aspects assessed: research outputs; impact; and environment. This resulted in a *Times Higher Education* rank of 55 in REF 2021 compared to 72 in REF 2014.

Efforts to raise the University's impact in the region were also finally beginning to bear fruit. Key stakeholders across the public and private sector described the University as more engaged, more open and, importantly, delivering more reliably. As with Hull's alumni, a sense of relief at restored pride and confidence, was described.

ii. Aim Two: Secure organisational sustainability within two years through a £25 million reduction in the University's cost base by July 2021, with £20 million achieved by July 2020

The year end of 2018/19, as predicted, was immensely challenging. We squeaked over the line as a 'going concern', but it was way too close for comfort. At the end of July 2021, the £25 million savings

target had been slightly exceeded; £26.9 million had been delivered, with the majority achieved in the first year. Central to Hull's successful financial turnaround was the redesign of the operating model such that cost could be reduced and income increased without compromising – indeed while improving – performance.

Increased revenues were driven through higher levels of student recruitment and retention, thus moving the University from the initial position of 'smaller and higher quality' to one of strategic growth. A focus on priority areas saw targets reached overall, although inevitably there were disappointments, requiring further concerted effort. Like other higher education institutions, the sizeable increase in international postgraduate students was not entirely predicted. However, it helpfully offset continued challenges in undergraduate home recruitment during the pandemic as students secured their first-choice university, traded up or deferred entry. Moving with agility to capitalise on this opportunity and ensure that it could be sustained was crucial. Moreover, Hull's ambition to increase both the proportion of postgraduate students and international students to around one-quarter of the total student population was realised early.

At the end of 2021, Hull recorded the best financial out-turn in seven years, and 2022 saw the position improve again. The clearly evidenced and sustained improvements in performance, linked explicitly to the confident delivery of our transformation of the institution, and a well-articulated strategy for the future enabled us to secure significant investment in April 2022.

A range of relevant financial and legal institutions supported us in this ambition, and we worked closely and collaboratively with these trusted colleagues. Without either our substantial turnaround, financially and academically, or the nature of these relationships with our bank and others, this would not have been possible. As it is, Hull's attractiveness to investors, and their confidence in us, secured

£86 million to invest in the University's academic infrastructure and carbon-neutral ambitions through a green financing framework.

iii. Aim Three: Align infrastructure, resources and activity around the University vision

The University's vision – 'Motivated by society's challenges and inspired by the power of our global community, we are shaping a fairer, brighter and carbon neutral future' – had formed the bedrock of our transformation. It resonated with staff, 'felt like Hull' and engendered a strong sense of pride and purpose.

Our third aim, therefore, was to ensure the University's fabric and practices explicitly enabled delivery of this vision and improvements to performance. Deep engagement was one thing, but if the hard and soft infrastructure of the institution were not aligned with the ambitions, success would be limited, frustration high and commitment could wane.

The immediate impact of the global pandemic was to slow the systems and processes work. It likewise impacted plans for the estate, which was large and included dispersed properties that were unused, no longer fit-for-purpose and expensive to run or refurbish. Re-imaging our campus to align with our desire to create an environment characterised by efficient, vibrant and attractive spaces for students, staff and visitors was critical.

Galvanised by our vision, our academic strengths in climate change and green energy and the fact that the Humber is characterised by strong regional commitments to decarbonisation, in November 2019 we set the target of becoming a carbon-neutral campus by the end of 2027, the University of Hull's centenary year. The attraction of financial investment and successfully 'turning the tanker' ensured that the pieces were in place to deliver on the longer term vision for the University.

iv. Changing culture

Cultural change is both an outcome and enabler. As an outcome, it does not lend itself readily to direct measurement, but indirectly it can be seen in the results of Hull's transformation programme. Without a revitalised culture, change would have been constrained or temporary. Although the transformation objectives did not specifically mention culture, everything was designed to change the institution's culture. The critical question is: how does it feel now to be at Hull?

From the start, we had listened to our staff, students and partners and we worked collectively to shift from a position of drifting along, somewhat disconnected from each other, our region and the higher education landscape. Cultural change takes time, but staff survey feedback suggested that Hull's culture is shifting. In May 2022, 81.3 per cent of respondents felt that their department or team was supportive and inclusive, with 63.5 per cent reporting similarly for the University.[10]

Anecdotal feedback gathered over the period from February to August 2022 suggested more staff felt listened to and valued and that their work was noticed; some staff described a greater positive energy within the University. Throughout the 2021/22 academic year, after COVID, we had re-doubled efforts to strengthen a sense of community, purpose and pride – building on the incredible efforts of staff during the pandemic. Developing and beginning to 'live' Hull's new *Strategy 2030* provided a focal point.

6. Foundations to Futures: Strategy 2030

The need for Hull to keep on track preyed on my mind during the pandemic. There was the risk that, entirely understandably, the sheer weight of operating under those conditions could see us lose sight of the longer-term strategic goals which were pivotal to our continued transformation and future success. Therefore, I decided that we should press ahead and develop the University's new strategy, providing a blueprint for the future. The previous strategy, which preceded my time at Hull, was due for renewal and had not guided our passage: rather, we had been focused on our vision, values and behaviours and on our transformation objectives.

The transformation work, however, very much laid the foundations for the new strategy. Thus, *Strategy 2030* was the culmination of all that had gone before. Too many university strategies read the same, are chock full of aspirations and putative actions and, unfortunately, gather dust on shelves unread or unreferenced. I trawled the extant literature for guidance, including Mike Baxter's very useful analysis of UK universities' strategies, to identify best practice.[11] Hull's strategy needed to be distinctive and to resonate with people and our place. Staff understanding, ownership and engagement in delivery would only be achieved through co-creation and thorough socialisation. The Strategy needed to be a living document, infusing every facet of our operations.

Guided by the University's new vision, defined as an internationally engaged civic institution and informed by a desire to contribute to solving regional and global challenges, social justice and environmental sustainability sat as the two themes at the heart of the emerging document. Three pillars supported delivery: people; place; and partnership.

Early on, I had established a group of staff and students to guide our thinking on how to engage members of the University once *Strategy 2030* was approved.[12] We were determined that the Strategy

would represent Hull's authentic past, present and future and guide individual and collective action. Embedding *Strategy 2030* involved a programme of events fronted by staff and students over several months from February 2022. As important was the explicit alignment with *Strategy 2030* of university sub-strategies pertaining, for example, to education and research, Faculty and School / Department and professional services Directorate plans, as well as all policies, guidance and protocols. In short, *Strategy 2030* needed to infuse our practice and keep us focussed.

By August 2022, 85 per cent of staff were aware of the pillars of *Strategy 2030* and feedback both internally and externally was extremely positive. The majority of staff said they understood how to play a role in delivery. Undoubtedly there were cynics, but planning and appraisal processes were being revised to include the role that individuals and teams were envisaged to play in keeping Hull on an upward trajectory and achieving the University's ambitious *Strategy 2030* goals.

7. Critique: Continuity, Consistency, Community

This paper set out to describe substantial, whole-institution change. According to research by McKinsey, fewer than a quarter of organisational redesign efforts succeed: 44 per cent 'run out of steam after getting under way' and a third fail to meet their objectives or improve performance.[13] Even when change is delivered successfully, a major risk is that on conclusion of the programme – and particularly if positive gains have been achieved – everyone breathes a sigh of relief and relishes a return to 'normal'. This is precisely what sees the ups and downs of an institution's fortunes. Change is never finished, and performance must continue to be monitored.

Reflecting on our transformation at Hull, the exceptional hard work of the leadership team, alongside our staff and students, saw much success. However, inevitably, not everything worked. Some aspects were delayed, and we had to reset our objectives early on. Staff learned to talk about Hull as being on a journey, acknowledging that set within the framework of *Strategy 2030*, there is always more work to do.

i. Following periods of considerable financial constraint, the inevitable and appropriate easing of central control requires careful management. Supporting sound financial literacy and developing an empowered sense of financial discipline among colleagues is vital. Increased ownership and accountability should follow and any spend should be harnessed to the pursuit of the university's academic mission, vision and strategic priorities.

ii. Year-on-year improvements almost always falter. Managing disappointment and the loss of hope when performance dips require sensitivity. This is not to say that remedial action is not expected or that accountability is disregarded. A culture of constructive and supportive challenge is essential to high performance. This is very different to 'blame'; it is rooted in the collective rather than in pointing fingers at others.

iii. Leading such wholesale change is not for everyone, and the scale of challenge that transformation entails must be made clear to both those within the organisation and those who might join it. Hull's success is testament to those who came, with their eyes wide open, to make a difference. They are stronger leaders for it and should feel rightly proud of what they have delivered with their colleagues and students.

iv. An institutional narrative operates as the facilitator of change. We learned through this process the importance of telling the story of Hull – clearly, consistently and accessibly – to staff, students and partners. Communication, both to keep staff up to date with our progress and to engage in active dialogue throughout, was a lynchpin of our success.

v. Celebrating success and genuinely saying thank you is often spoken about but is not enacted nearly enough. As green shoots emerge, they need to be grasped and made explicit to stimulate increased self-belief, confidence, motivation, action, and pride.

vi. Financial strategy must be inextricably interlinked with the strategy and objectives of the institution. While this sounds obvious, it took time for people to appreciate that financial matters are not the exclusive domain of the Chief Finance Officer.

vii. The pace of change at Hull was necessarily brutal, but even so we faced delays and setbacks. These are almost inevitable in any big change programme and need managing honestly to ensure they do not throw you off course. Similarly, the operational aspects of running a change programme can become all consuming. Keeping a sharp focus on the longer-term vision is essential: it is the centre point for hope and optimism and the benchmark for success.

In conclusion, a personal reflection: leadership is about learning. You never stop. To reiterate, my passion for universities is founded in their role: transforming individual lives and positively impacting society. In creating the conditions in which individuals and teams can flourish and thrive to achieve the University's goals and aspirations, one discovers much about oneself. In short, my colleagues at Hull and our students have taught me a great deal. Perhaps then, leadership is not only about social change but fundamentally about individual change too.

Endnotes

1 Anne Tyler, *The accidental tourist*, 1985

2 https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/participation-measures-in-higher-education

3 ONS population estimates

4 ONS population estimates

5 https://www.zerocarbonhumber.co.uk

6 See Sandy Lazarus, *Power and Identity in the Struggle for Social Justice: Reflections on Community Psychology Practice*, 2018

7 Higher Education Statistics Agency; Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

8 Student satisfaction was assessed using the National Student Survey for undergraduates, the Postgraduate Taught and Postgraduate Research Experience Surveys for postgraduate students and the International Student Barometer for international students.

9 For example, see Malcolm Tight's paper on this subject: https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2019.1576860.

10 Pulse survey, May 2022, 225 respondents

11 Mike Baxter, *University strategy 2020: analysis and benchmarking of the strategies of UK Universities*, 2019

12 https://www.hull.ac.uk/choose-hull/university-and-region/key-documents/docs/university-of-hull-strategy-2030.pdf

13 Steven Arononowitz, Aaron De Smeth, and Deirdre McGinty, *Getting organisational design right*, McKinsey Quarterly, 2015

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Changes to the UK higher education landscape since 2010 and a range of internal challenges had seen the University of Hull confront a position of considerable risk in around 2017. Yet the city of Hull and the wider region is precisely the sort of place that needs a resilient and purposeful university. The paper describes how both the academic performance and financial sustainability of the University of Hull were turned around.

Professor Lea sets out the leadership approach required to produce sustainable change in a complex organisation. Issues covered include how to communicate the unpalatable truth, how to lead with purpose to effect change, how to engage meaningfully with a university community and how to deliver a programme that realises the intended benefits.

Universities drive and deliver social change when they stay true to, or sometimes rediscover, their purpose. Financial and academic survival call for clear-headed analysis and tough decisions, but it is the values, vision and strategy of an institution and its leadership that provide the backbone of successful and sustainable change.

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