The Dark Side of Institutional Research

By David Watson

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This paper is about Institutional Research when it goes wrong. I have identified six "traps," which are discussed below. However, before that, a little theory is required.

I start with a philosophical point of view, which Elizabeth Maddison and I used to animate *Managing Institutional Self-Study* (Watson and Maddison, 2005). The following text is from Walter Lippmann, the twentieth century American political philosopher and commentator. Writing in 1914, with Europe on the brink of chaos and in America the "progressive" ideal running into the sand, Lippmann set out a manifesto for a careful, determined, scientific, non-dogmatic approach to social and political problems. His title was *Drift and Mastery*.

> All we can do is to search the world as we find it, extricate the forces that seem
> to move it, and surround them with criticism and suggestion. Such a vision will
> inevitably reveal the bias of its author; that is to say it will be a human
> hypothesis not an oracular revelation. But if the hypothesis is honest and alive it
> should cast a little light upon our chaos. It should help us to cease revolving in
> the mere routine of the present or floating in a private utopia. For a vision of

latent hope would be woven of vigorous strands; it would be concentrated on the crucial points of contemporary life, on that living zone where the present is passing into the future. It is the region where thought and action count. Too far ahead there is nothing but your dream; just behind there is nothing but your memory. But in the unfolding present, man can be creative if his vision is gathered from the promise of actual things. (Watson and Maddison, 2005: 10).

We need a little more "vision gathered from the promise of actual things" or what Lippmann calls later in the book "enthusiasm for the possible." Or as Kierkegaard said, "life is understood backwards and lived forwards."

Although I used to chair something for Universities UK called the Longer Term Strategy Group, I'm generally sceptical about futurology. I think back to my childhood and all of the predictions made then about inter-galactic conflict (the Cold War was at its height), supersonic travel or hydroponic agriculture. Before they happened so suddenly, nobody spotted the fall of the Berlin Wall, the capabilities of the internet or the impact of *El Nino*. I'm with Glen Hoddle, when he famously said, "I don't make predictions, and I never will."

1. Oversimplification: seduction by scenarios.

The first trap is about the seductive power of scenarios. The current fashion is for creating HE Scenarios - everyone in the UK is doing it, from our governments through the Funding Councils to the institutions themselves.

The results, in my view, are pretty feeble. There are only really three scenarios:

- The first is IT-driven: *the wireless/wired universe*. Everything and everybody is wired to everything and everybody else.

- The second is political-science driven: *the new Cold War (with increasing hot spots).* Islamic faces Christian fundamentalism, leavened by north-south polarisation.

- The third is economically driven: *the victory of the Asian tigers.* This is a kind of reverse colonialism. We'll end up by feeding their economies.

Cleethorpes University College has to decide by Thursday which of these it will be dealing with in five years time.

This reminds me of Christopher Booker's famous thesis that there are only really six stories in the whole of literature:

- Overcoming the monster

- Rags to riches

- The quest

- Voyage and return

- Comedy

- Tragedy

- Rebirth (Booker, 2004).

Applying this to the story of your own institution, which one are you?

2. The lure of change: change or change for the better?

The second trap is the assumption that change is the solution to everything.

Of course, change is a condition of life (both Heraclitus and Darwin were right). But change in the university context usually means organisational change, or "restructuring." In my experience, this is almost invariably a research and evidence-free zone, in terms of both the case for change and the assessment of its impact.

3. Benchmarking for comfort or for challenge: "Inside the whale."

The third trap is "benchmarking for comfort."

Too many bench-marking clubs are of institutions who perceive themselves to have common assets, fates and grievances. A well-developed example is the benchmarking carried out by the '94 group (for whom this will be made worse by the secession of the University of Warwick).

Again, as Elizabeth and I argue in the book, one of the major points of benchmarking is to test yourself against the "other." If you don't the result may be quietism and stasis. George Orwell – discussing Henry Miller – called this situation "inside the whale."

> The passive attitude will come back, and it will be more consciously passive than before. Progress and reaction have both turned out to be swindles. Seemingly there is nothing left but quietism – robbing reality of its terrors by simply submitting to it. Get inside the whale – or rather, admit that you are inside the whale (for you *are*, of course). Give yourself over to the world-process, stop fighting against it or pretending that you control it; simply accept it, endure it, record it. (Watson and Maddison, 2005: 162)

What about the forces affecting the ocean as a whole? For example, never underestimate the role of students in moulding "their" higher education.

This is partly about choice of subjects, where the reports have underlined the difficulties providers have faced (more successfully in recent years) in adjusting to the popularity and unpopularity of certain courses. The "Media Studies" vogue, in a deeply ironic way, was a *demand*-led phenomenon (it's ironic, because one of the chief charges from the political-industrial complex is that HE doesn't respond to demand). Student choice is also about mode of study, where the sectoral super-tanker has to deal with rapid growth in demand for part-time undergraduate and full-time postgraduate courses. Meanwhile, "hard to reach" groups remain concentrated in one particular part of the sector, and contrary to the propaganda of the Sutton Trust, their choices are not necessarily irrational. To quote the Teaching and Learning Programme's project on the Social and Organisational Mediation of University Learning (SOMUL), "the amount of learning is not related to 'quality' rankings of institutions (you won't necessarily learn more if you go to a posh place)" (SOMUL, 2005).

4. Following the crowd: RAE-fixation

Fourthly, the biggest pathology in the sector is probably - to give it its posh clinical name - isomorphic behaviour.

This is nowhere more true than in relation to the RAE. The mistake is thinking that research is all about the race for "quality-related research funding" (QR) from the Funding Councils.

Two outcomes are certain from the current RAE. Hyper-concentration of funding in the hands of a few "QR-winners" will continue: four HEIs will continue to scoop about 30% of the spoils, and up 23 about 75%. As a result we shall have to learn to live with a two-tier system. This division will not, incidentally, simply recreate the binary line: "old universities" without medical schools will mostly be outside the charmed circle; "new universities" will be well-placed to prosper in the second tier. The main effect of the new citations-based "research-excellence framework" (REF) will be to freeze funding in a state set somewhere between 2001 and 2007. Moreover, this appears to be the basic policy intention: note how much of the HEFCE consultation is about "stability" and avoiding "perturbation".

Life among the QR winners will not, however, be a bed of roses. The real value of "dual support" has been in steady decline since 1992, and genuine FEC (full economic costing) remains out of reach. Missions here will become narrower as internal concentration of resource mirrors external funding. They will also be

increasingly dominated by medicine and science; not least because funding required to "match" investments in science and technology will progressively bleed the arts and humanities.

As for the rest of the institutions, life outside an inflexible and backwards-looking QR-winners' circle will have its compensations, as well as some ongoing challenges. The most important task will be to "right-size" an approach to their own morsels of QR, that recognises their relative contribution to a wider pool of research funding. Meanwhile a concerted effort must be made to demonstrate that institutional reputations (including for research) can be made away from an RAE/REF which will cease to be "the only game in town." Such reputations will depend upon catching a number of waves: the increasing importance of the creative and service economies; a renewed interest in "liberal" values in undergraduate education that fuses the research and teaching agenda; a similar demand for "translational" research and what the surgeon Anul Gawande calls in his wonderful new book *Better* the "science of performance;" and the tendency (spotted by Gary Hamel in *The Future of Management*) for really innovative companies to operate in a fluid, experimental, partner-friendly, "university-like" way (Gawande, 2007; Hamel, 2007).

5. Reputation over quality.

Fifth, we can all too easily confuse reputation and quality.

There are reputations to be made - and defended - in the middle range. The inescapable fact is that reputation varies according to mission and activity, and not just in relation to performance.

Which of the league tables in Figure 1 is most important to you? Among the 100 places represented here, 57 different institutions appear.

Figure 1: Ten "top tens"

A. Shanghai Jiao Tong Academic Ranking of World Universities (2007)

1. Cambridge (4)
2. Oxford (10)
3. Imperial (23)
4. UCL (25)
5. Manchester (48)
6. Edinburgh (53)
7. Bristol (62)
8. Sheffield (72)
9. Nottingham (81)
10. KCL (83)

(Institute of Higher Education. Shanghai Jiao Tong University 2007)

B. Times League Table (2007)

1. Oxford
2. Cambridge
3. Imperial College
4. LSE
5. St Andrews
6. UCL
7. Warwick
8. Bristol
9. Durham
10. KCL

(Timesonline 17.11.07)

C. Research as a proportion of total FC grant (2005-06)

1. Imperial (29%)
2. UCL
3. School of Pharmacy

4. St. Andrews
5. Southampton
6. Oxford
7. Sussex
8. Institute of Cancer Research
9. Sheffield
10. Bristol

(UUK *Patterns 7*)

D. <u>Number of international (non-EU) students (2005-06)</u>

1. Warwick (5,602)
2. Manchester
3. Nottingham
4. London Metropolitan
5. UCL
6. Oxford
7. Birmingham
8. LSE
9. Middlesex
10. Leeds

(UUK *Patterns 7*)

E. <u>First destination survey in employment (2005-06)</u>

1. Buckingham (100%)
2. Courthauld Institute of Art
3. Cranfield
4. Royal Academy of Music
5. Royal College of Music
6. Royal Veterinary College
7. St George's Hospital Medical School
8. The School of Pharmacy
9. Trinity Laban
10. Dundee

(UUK *Patterns 7*)

E. <u>National Student Survey (2007)</u>

1. Buckingham
2. Oxford
3. Open
4. Loughborough
5. Leicester
6. Exeter
7. Institute of Education
8. St. Andrews
9. East Anglia

10. Birkbeck
(THES 14.9.07)

F. Proportion of Firsts and Upper Seconds (2005-06)

1. Oxford (90%)
2. Courthauld Institute of Art
3. Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama
4. Cambridge
5. Royal Academy of Music
6. Bristol
7. St Andrews
8. Royal Veterinary College
9. University College Falmouth
10. University of London (Institutes)
(UUK *Patterns 7*)

G. Percentage of students from social groups 4-7 (2005-06)

1. Harper Adams College (59%)
2. UHI Millennium Institute
3. Wolverhampton
4. NEWI
5. East London
6. Greenwich
7. Trinity College, Camarthen
8. Ulster
9. Bell College
10. Teesside
(UUK *Patterns 7*)

H. The security index (2005-06)

1. Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies
2. Bishop Grosseteste College
3. Robert Gordon
4. Swansea Institute of HE
5. Royal Academy of Music
6. York St John University
7. Central School of Speech and Drama
8. Trinity College, Camarthen
9. Strathclyde
10. Trinity and All Saints College
(UUK *Patterns 7*)

I. Gay Friendly Universities (according to *Diva* 2005)

1. Manchester Metropolitan
2. Brighton
3. University of London (!)
4. Birmingham
5. Lancaster
6. Leeds
7. Hull
8. Bradford
9. Durham
10. Edinburgh

(*Guardian Online* 10.8.05)

To take the options in turn:

A. is the current obsession - to which I shall return.

B.   is the domestic variant. It's a classic multiple factor table, and as a result it really tells you very little.

C. This is the table on which VCs think their reputations (and their remuneration) rests.

D. represents is one of our most intensively competitive markets.

E. is liked most by students and parents. It has received a lot of attention, but it's important to recognize that it tells about more about subjects than institutions.

F. is at the time of writing the current moral panic.

G. is a standard measure of widening participation.

H. is a consolidated measure of financial performance (and is a table that lay governors like). It doesn't correlate with reputation.

I. Don't laugh at this. There's a lot of work connecting gay life-styles with creative communities.

To return to world-classness: I'm amazed at how the university world has rolled over in response to the politicians' obsession with the world-class rankings. We know that

they are statistically illiterate. We also know that this is at heart journalism, or "edutainment" (Bowden, 2000).

For all of the reliance on counting winners of Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals in the Shanghai Jiao Tong list or the polling of academics and employers by the *Times Higher* it is clear that the status is more often than not asserted rather than proved. Many of the "common-sense" elements of high performance by comprehensive universities – like teaching quality, widening participation and social mobility, services to business and the community, support of rural in addition to metropolitan communities, as well as contributions to other public services - are conspicuously absent (Watson 2007b: 34-46)..

6. Only good news: dealing with the counter-intuitive.

My final trap is about ignoring the evidence when we have got it - especially when it says the wrong thing.

Figure 2 is a list Elizabeth and I put in the book of our own examples of the challenge of the "counter-intuitive" at the University of Brighton.

Figure 2 : dealing with the counter-intuitive

• Debt and liquidity

• "Course not appropriate" as dominant reason for withdrawal

• Elder care out-weighs child care needs

- Part-time work not related to financial circumstances

- Part-time students prioritise staff contact over services

- No growth in % Firsts and Upper Seconds

- No correlation between widening participation and retention at School level

(Watson and Maddison, 2005: 155)

Coda: know your history

If there is a moral to this story, it's about being comfortable - but not too comfortable - with who you are as an institution. And that in turn involves knowing your history - where you come from and where you are, as well as where you want to go.

As they say at Birkbeck College, when faced with difficult issues: "what would George do?"

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