

Five pillars of Institutional Research

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As my job title contains the words 'Institutional Research' I am often asked what the practice of Institutional Research (IR) actually involves in HE institutions. This is a good question. In the UK context we are a 'broad church', much more so than Institutional Researchers in the United States, for example.

At HEIR conferences I have met colleagues whose main focus is on the analysis of institutional performance and the impact of decisions on funding and reputation; those whose role is primarily quality enhancement based; and academic researchers undertaking highly quantitative survey analysis and/or qualitative research in the field of higher education.

My professional background is in policy, strategy and planning in the higher education context. Recently, colleagues working in similar areas have approached me to find out more about my current role. A common theme in our work is the need for institutional data to be used more consistently to drive decisions in an organisation. Steve Chisnall, Director of Strategy & Planning at the University of Southampton, neatly summarises how IR can support strategic decisions:

"At Southampton, we feel that Institutional Research could allow us to consolidate our institutional knowledge and intelligence in order to support a more-evidence driven approach to decision making."

To achieve this goal, IR must identify and respond to the challenges posed by strategic objectives.

It is self-evident that clarity around the strategic objectives is an essential foundation of successful Institutional Research. Beyond this though, is there a set of principles that this disparate group of IR practitioners could develop to guide their work? As a starter for 10, I'd like to suggest five 'pillars' of a strong IR function. This approach will doubtless be familiar to many of those working in institutional research, planning and data management functions, but is perhaps worth exploring all the same.

First, and most obviously, there is a need to establish sources of reliable data, both external and internal. Sometimes this is straightforward, but often there are tensions between internal and external definitions that need to be debated and resolved.

This goal of developing robust institutional data is supported by my second pillar: ensuring that the value of data quality and data accuracy is embedded in the organisation. As many HE institutions have discovered, this can take a long time to establish when there are so many guardians of data at various stages in the student lifecycle, or the duration of a research project. One of the key challenges for IR practitioners to overcome is to develop awareness of how data will be used by those who enter the data into systems, and to construct system rules. Consistent use of a defined data set as a core element in the assessment of institutional performance helps to address this challenge.

With these two pillars in place, the third can be built: ensuring that analysis is more ‘question-driven’ than ‘event-driven’. If this pillar can be put in place, rather than the majority of management information reporting happening in response to a particular survey, set of published performance indicators or league tables, it is built around core themes. One such theme could investigate how the institution might improve student retention. This level of focus helps counter the danger of information overload and helps bring some coherence to decisions and interventions. Done well, it will allow for an assessment of trade-offs between different elements of the institution’s strategic goals.

This approach is also more likely to encourage the building of the fourth pillar – collaboration. A culture of collaboration is deeply embedded in universities, but so too is a culture of competition and developing pockets of bespoke expertise. As in any sector, functional silos will develop their own internally logical business processes and plans for supporting data and analysis, but integrating these into a coordinated effort can be tough – even in institutions with a well-resourced centralised planning function. This level of competition and devolved management clearly can be highly effective at times but also risks inconsistency in messages and duplication of effort, with many people working on similar questions in slightly different ways.

Collaboration with academics can also be difficult because our approaches differ in terms of focus and timescales. Dr Camille Kandiko, a Research Fellow at the King’s Learning Institute in King’s College London, notes that:

‘...in contrast to the management-led view of Institutional Research, the academic approach often comes from an enhancement angle. Usually this would be on-going work, rather than identifying a problem to solve’.

Nevertheless there are advantages to adopting a more academic approach to IR – not least in the use of richer data collection approaches, and finding ways to connect the work to the wider world. As Camille points out,

‘Academics may also be involved in policy and practice research in higher education, and engaged with longer-term shifts in policies and approaches, and be able to fit institutional projects in the context of wider issues in the sector, and academics would be more likely to collaborate on projects and present findings to wider audiences’.

The fifth pillar focusing linking data analysis to interventions. IR has a critical role to play in proposing and evaluating interventions that are intended to move the organisation towards its strategic goals. Such interventions are more likely to promote lasting change since they will require those involved in IR practice to engage more closely with those who are carrying out research and teaching.

I don’t think by any means that having a named IR function is a precondition to building these pillars,

but it may help in providing some direction and focus. I'd be interested in colleagues' comments on these principles and any suggestions for other principles that might guide those carrying out IR in all its guises across our hugely diverse sector.

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