

BEYOND THEORIES OF CRISIS: TOWARDS CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN ROMANIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

If being ranked below 500 in the international rankings suggests the crisis, then all Romania's universities are in crisis. First, we explain why this situation calls for crisis management rather than for a theory about this crisis. Then we argue for two practical steps. A long term response based on what we know about mentoring and coaching and a short term response based on what we know about creating cultures that encourage creative thinking. Throughout we state and illuminate ideas that can be implemented immediately if an institution or an individual has the will to do so.

Keywords: higher education, university rankings, crisis management, leadership, creativity

Introduction

The strong urge of Romanian universities to get into international rankings and then to position themselves in as good a position as possible have triggered a lot of controversy among the various stakeholders of the Romanian system of higher education. Set against the background of the education reform that is going on at present at a speed that some consider too high and others too slow, this pressure for international visibility has led to various theories of why the education system is in a crisis and of how to manage this crisis.

The 2010 QS World University Rankings were released on 8 September 2010. The information on its web site at www.topuniversities.com points to a growing European challenge to the domination of US universities, with leading institutions in the UK, Germany and Switzerland improving their positions. Cambridge took first place from Harvard in the first change of leadership in the seven years of these rankings. It was voted the best for the quality of its research by more than 15,000 academics around the world. Although Harvard rated more highly among the 5,007 employers polled globally, Cambridge squeezed into an overall lead.

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The criteria that are used and their respective indicators are the most subjective aspect of any ranking. While universities often focus on a wide variety of missions, QS believes that any university that aspires to be considered world class needs to be strong in four broad areas: research quality, teaching quality, graduate employability and internationalisation.

Ben Sowter, head of research at QS, believes that, because they focus on these four areas, the QS rankings reflect the highly competitive environment of global higher education:

Unlike other ranking systems which rely heavily on statistical indicators of university research, QS also takes into account the most up to date views of employers and academics, reflecting the broader interests of students and parents. And, given the uncertain economic outlook, it is reassuring for students that the top 200 universities are also, by and large, the most popular universities with employers. This suggests that a world class degree remains the best path to a great job. (from a press release at www.topuniversities.com)

There it is. From an academic's perspective, being out of the top 600 means missing out on top research projects and teaching opportunities. From a student's perspective, being out of the top 600 means being left behind in the competition for a top job. From an administrator's perspective, being out of the top 600 means losing students to other institutions.

For all these reasons, Romanian academics and students and administrators need to address the crisis which their universities face.

Beyond theories about a crisis

A theoretical approach to a crisis is the opposite of a practical approach. It feeds on what's academic, used as an adjective. So it's associated with being impractical or unrealistic, with lacking worldliness, common sense or practicality.

This certainly isn't what's required in a crisis.

But Terry Eagleton's *After Theory*, published in 2003, argues that things are worse than this. Although his primary target is literary theory, he's shooting at postmodernism and the way in which it has generated so many theories about everything that our ability to act has been paralysed. The discrediting of norms is a significant part of this trend. And so, discussions of standards and criteria and rankings quickly degenerate into avowals of what is liked or disliked. And often individual or institutional weaknesses are excused by attributing them to our "culture" or "history" or "tradition".

Towards crisis management in Romanian Universities

If Romanian universities are going to give their academics and students a chance to enjoy what comes with teaching or studying, they need to take some practical steps that are driven by crisis management. Instead of wallowing in "poor Romania" theories of the crisis they are in, they need to create some long term, medium term and short term plans to move away from where they are to where they want to be.

Towards a long term plan for establishing mentoring and coaching relationships

Romanian universities (RUs) could explore the idea of establishing mentoring and coaching relationships with one or more foreign universities (FUs) that are ranked significantly higher than they are. Say, between 100 and 300 or higher. This would enable institutions, faculties, departments and individuals to move towards more effective and efficient research and doctoral supervision and administrative leadership. In other words, it would lead to acquiring more demanding benchmarks in these areas.

This, of course, is a very challenging idea. It requires RUs to be willing to learn about things they believe they already know. It asks FUs to share the knowledge that gives them a competitive edge over RUs. That enables them to be ahead of RUs in the university rankings game.

Perhaps the clue to making this work is for the RU rectors, acting together, to approach QS World University Rankings to include this idea in the internationalisation dimension of its scorecard. For example, RUs and other universities with a low ranking could be rewarded for being willing to enter this kind of relationship with a more highly ranked FU. And FUs could be rewarded for their willingness to be involved in this kind of knowledge transfer. For their willingness to take time out from knowledge creation for knowledge transfer.

Towards a medium term plan for managing the present and the future

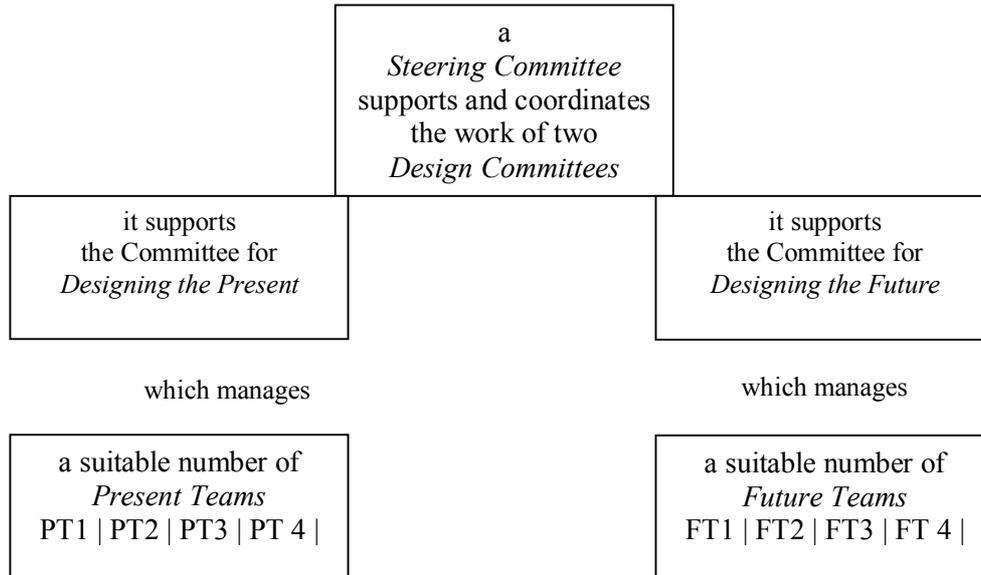
A challenging dimension of university and other institutional leadership is to manage the present and the future simultaneously. One way to do so is to adopt Ken Blanchard and Terry Waghorn's 1997 team based organisational model. It's a model for constantly improving what's being done today, yet at the same time, constantly looking for tomorrow's opportunities.

Briefly, the leadership creates two sets of teams throughout the university, or throughout a faculty or a department. One set is charged with finding and

implementing improvement ideas for the present. The other is charged with finding and implementing innovation ideas for the future.

There's a Design Committee to support and evaluate the work of the teams for designing the present. There's also a Design Committee to support and evaluate the work of the teams for designing the future. Finally, the university's Executive acts as a Steering Committee for supporting and coordinating the work of the two Design Committees.

Essentially, the structure looks like this:



In general, the Present Teams try to figure out how the university or faculty or department can improve the teaching and research and administration it already does. On the other hand, the Future Teams try to figure out what new ways of teaching and research and administration are required. For example, Present Teams may focus on how to improve the present student selection process, while Future Teams focus on how to create a new and more effective process.

The Two Design Committees receive ideas from the Present Teams and the Future Teams. In each case, the Design Committee does two things. First, it evaluates and coordinates the ideas it receives sometimes asking a team to do some more work on an idea sometimes asking two or more teams to turn similar ideas into a single idea sometimes explaining to a team why one of its ideas can't be implemented. Second, it decides which ideas can be implemented immediately and which have to go to the Steering Committee for a decision.

Finally, there's the work of the Steering Committee. It balances the present and future focus of the university by supporting the two university wide Design

Committees. Both need its support to get people involved in the change process and to remove obstacles that inevitably hinder all change programs.

Other needs will be more specific. For example, the Present Design Committee needs to know what can and what cannot be changed. But the Future Design Committee doesn't need boundaries; it needs freedom to imagine the future and to think the unthinkable. Whatever the needs of the Design Committees, the Steering Committee must support both fully and equally to ensure as complete a balance as possible between the university's present and future needs.

It takes some time to create these teams; in particular, if it is implemented throughout the university. A good idea is to create faculty wide structures of the kind that's been diagrammed, with the faculty based Steering Committees say, the deans and deputy deans feeding their ideas to the university's Executive.

Towards short term plans for cascading creative thinking

In Mariana Nicolae and James Moulder's book, *Managing Creativity: One's Own and Other People's*, Moulder describes a cascading model that was born in the University of Cape Town's Public Relations Department and refined in the University of Natal's Philosophy Department. It has been tested successfully in various for profit and not for profit organizations.

It rests on two assumptions. Everyone has the ability to think about how they can change or improve the work they have to do. If they are given time to use this ability, they can learn how to think creatively about their work; that is, they can change or improve the work they have to do.

In an academic department this means ending every semester with a meeting in which everyone tells everyone else two things. How they plan to improve or change their teaching in the forthcoming semester and how they plan to improve or change the research they are doing in the forthcoming semester. They also share how they feel about the teaching and the research they did in the semester that has ended.

Simple. Not very timeconsuming. But very effective. When implemented for nine years in the University of Natal's Philosophy Department the return was sustained rather than spectacular. From no publications for the five years before the program was introduced to each academic having at least one publication every year. The most spectacular improvement was from someone who went from no publications in 20 years to 12 publications during the nine years she participated in the program.

In addition, the program achieved two other quantifiable results: an increase in postgraduate students; and an improvement in student evaluations of teaching.

Towards a conclusion

It's difficult to deny that, measured by the 2010 QS World University Rankings, most Romanian universities are in crisis. In particular, their students are at a disadvantage in an internationalised job market. For sure, it's possible to look for a theory that will explain why this crisis exists and who is responsible for it. On the other hand, it's possible to adopt a crisis management approach to the situation. An approach that tries to establish mentoring and coaching relationships with more highly ranked foreign universities. An approach that tries to manage a university's present and future simultaneously. An approach that cascades creative thinking into improved and new ways of teaching and research.

A final thought. Managing a university's crisis will be more effective if it is initiated and driven by its top leadership. But if the top leadership isn't able or willing to manage the crisis the university is in, there's nothing to stop individual administrators and academics from trying to implement the ideas in this paper. They can find mentors and coaches in more highly ranked universities. At a faculty or departmental or individual level, they can reflect on how to improve the management of their present responsibilities while they try to identify future opportunities. And anyone who wants to improve or to change their teaching and research can do so almost immediately.

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Dr. James Moulder was educated at Rhodes University in South Africa and Linacre College in the University of Oxford. His majors were theology and philosophy. He has taught various business related subjects in MBA programs in Australia, China, England, Indonesia, New Zealand, Romania, South Africa and Spain. He retired in 2006 and lives in Melbourne, Australia. His present research is focused on reading Confucius in business environments and exploring organizational climates that encourage and support creative thinking. In South Africa and Australia, his consulting work involved working with multinationals on scenario thinking and corporate creativity, as well as on general management training in creative thinking, problem solving and decision making. Moulder is also a poet and currently writes under the inspiration of Romanian poets, including Eminescu.