



# Achieving change in HE professional support

**Professor Edward Byrne** argues that professional services resources must be aligned and focused on meeting future strategic needs and describes how he has approached this issue at three world-class higher education institutes

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**A**t King’s College London our core mission statement is “to make the world a better place”. A grand aim, indeed, and a grand challenge in these troubled times for the world. But universities have enormous potential to make a positive difference; we are intrinsically in the business of shaping the future, through the graduates we prepare and the ideas we produce.

Expectations about what universities should deliver are rising, technology is changing, funding is becoming more complex and challenging to secure and the world of work is set to undergo tremendous transformation.

The changing context the higher education sector finds itself in demands that universities adapt and strengthen the way in which we work together. Raising our game does not mean “do more of what you’re doing”. It means changing aspects of what we are doing as the world changes around us.

Transforming professional support services to adapt to evolving student, academic, partners and societal expectations is a significant part of this change. Change can be an intimidating word in particular contexts – not just for employees but to the leaders charged with being change makers.

We must change the way we operate as the growth of higher education continues apace; we must respond to the growing view that universities need to become better at working with industry and less reliant on the public purse in terms of funding world-class research and underpinning the facilities it requires.

We are expected not only to advance the frontiers of knowledge but play a role in generating tangible social and economic benefits. In short, we are not going to be left to our own devices.

Indeed, I would say we never were. At times people can be slightly rose-tinted about a golden age of university autonomy and unalloyed academic freedom at the individual and institutional levels.

The utility of a university – its purpose, its value, who accesses it, how it funds its activities and how its performance is evaluated – has become one of the most questioned areas in politics and policy making in the UK and Australia, two countries I am extremely familiar with. Indeed, in these two and in many other countries it is increasingly a subject of prominent public debate.

Broadly speaking, modern universities are now large financial concerns and expensive places to run. Institutions such as my own will be at or be nearing the £1 billion annual budget mark within five to 10 years. In England, we also have a big regulatory landscape to comply with and very sizeable human resource footprints covering everything from catering and finance to programme administration, external relations and data analytics.

It is crucial that professional services teams are aligned and focused on meeting future strategic needs and are efficiently deployed and evaluated. No matter how good your educators and researchers are if you have a dysfunctional, immature professional services base, you certainly will not thrive and are likely over time to decline. And you certainly will not generate the margins you need to reinvest for the long run in your facilities and new academic endeavours.

Much of my time “in the trenches” as a senior leader has been spent preparing universities to be resilient to the changing world around them, both in the UK and my native Australia, by making difficult but essential choices to change how they operate and engage with the opportunities and expectations in their surrounding environments.

These experiences, in the context of professional service change programmes, supported broader change agendas during my time as Dean of Health and Medicine at University College London; as Vice-Chancellor at Monash University; and of course my ongoing time as President and Principal at King’s College London.

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At all three I have faced different internal situations informed by similar external pressures. I have been privileged to play a part in the evolution of university models that allow universities to play their full role in society. In any organisation, across any sector, there can be scepticism and even distrust of transformation programmes. Higher education is no different, with “management speak” from on-high often the cause of real tension in university communities. Many hurdles exist in change programmes; overcoming them can sometimes be a painful experience.

However, I believe it is a fundamentally worthwhile experience and journey, so as well as briefly examining how to overcome these hurdles I want to look at the impact on staff and students that positive change can drive.

At UCL, the Faculty of Biomedical Sciences faced structural challenges following the amalgamation of three medical schools and five postgraduate institutes in the early 2000s. My job as Dean was to take a faculty that was a product of many decades of responding to changing incentives and behaviours in a public-sector market and ensure it was a faculty in practice as well as name.

It inherited teams across different schools and institutes who handled the same tasks in very different ways and in some cases duplicated activity needlessly.



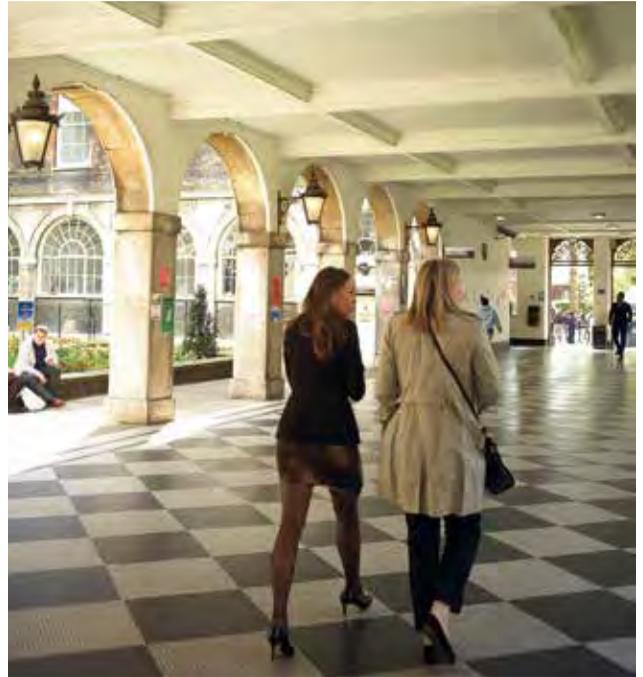

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# £1bn

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The process succeeded for four main reasons: First, its aims were clear (and clearly communicated) and it tackled a range of real, commonly identified problems.

Second, it had the clear, unambiguous and active support of the Faculty Dean and the UCL Chief Operating Officer, who personally sat on the review management group, assuaged concerns of colleagues in the central support services directorates and marshalled support for the change there.

Third the overseeing process struck the right balance between staff ownership and senior management ownership. It was made clear from the outset that the review was not a job-cutting exercise but neither did it guarantee the retention of all roles in their current form.





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# 33%

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Fourth, and arguably the key to its success, was a project structure that included and respected the input of all interested staff without relinquishing senior management control of the process and outcomes. It was made clear that all staff would have the opportunity to input their thoughts, ideas and criticisms and that that input would be taken seriously by the Working Parties and Management Group.

Above all, in my view, it also vastly improved relations between Faculty and central support services staff – the us v them mentality that had been such a wall to collaboration came down.

In 2009 I returned to Australia as Vice-Chancellor at Monash University, the country's largest university. And not only that, it was an increasingly global university, with campuses and major research and teaching outposts in China, India and Italy. The scale of change required here was on a different level to UCL.

Monash was a university new to prominence that had only ever known growth – however, growth had been messy and built unevenly.

Our service transformation at Monash was broad and encompassed seven main areas – student services; finance; HR; function-based staff number controls; general administration; marketing; and IT. In staff number control, for example, new rigorous controls and central tracking combined with senior function leadership signing off all contract adjustments led to a 33% reduction in normalised operations cost between 2012 and 2017.

Staff job satisfaction improved and the use of agency staff and contractors, as well as churn and the need for constant recruitment, decreased as a result. Our changes had a direct impact on students. Student services were combined to create a single, multi-channel contact model – “Monash Connect” – for all current students.

Within Monash administration, an internal industry had emerged to arrange the many course transfers. This was not good for staff or students. So we revamped our undergraduate portfolio, reducing it to 35 courses.

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Crucially, though, and to maintain student choice but prevent it having to be made as young as 18, we retained the degree classifications associated with each course. This allowed students a choice of final degree title based on their composition of modules to sit alongside their course title. They could decide up until two weeks prior to graduation which to choose and make that decision at a more mature age and based on their ambitions in the job market.

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Four and a half years into service transformation, there is significant progress in many individual areas of professional services and a much greater acceptance of the need for change and in particular the need to support a larger and growing student and staff population with a lesser rate of growth in the overall cost of professional services.

Today we are one of the pace setters within the Russell Group of leading UK universities in terms of student population growth and student income growth and one of the largest recruiters of international students in the UK. That said, we still have higher than average cost factors to get under control and there is still a long way to go on our functional alignment journey.

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#### About the Author

*Professor Edward Byrne AC has been President and Principal (the chief academic and administrative officer) of King's College London in the UK since 2014. Previously he was Vice-Chancellor at Monash University, Australia, from 2009 to 2014, and Dean of the Faculty of Biomedical Sciences at University College London, UK, from 2007 to 2009*