

Leadership in a distinctive institution

CLAIM FOR DISTINCTIVENESS:

Commitment to excellence in all they do, influenced by sporting excellence and the extension of the behaviours and values of team spirit into every aspect of the experience of life at Loughborough.



PROFESSOR SHIRLEY PEARCE

THE VC'S VIEW:

“Sport is everywhere at Loughborough. In the winter hardly a night goes by without the various areas being floodlit for matches or training – you can’t fail to be aware of sport. One of the challenges for me was how to use the distinctiveness which comes with sporting excellence to raise the profile of the whole institution. Even those parts of the university which aren’t keen on being known for sport, have staff and students from their subject base who are successful sports people. Paula Radcliffe, for example, was a politics student – and got a first.

“The sporting ethos contributes to the success of the university: the competitive spirit; the determination to train, train, train; not getting big-headed about your successes, not getting disturbed by your failures, but just getting up and training again. And the team spirit that goes with the sporting culture. Even in an individual event you only succeed at the highest level because of the coaches and the people around you. That has an impact on the identity of the institution. For me it’s about helping everyone to recognise and make use of what sport brings to the institution to raise their own profile.”

CASE STUDY – LOUGHBOROUGH UNIVERSITY

Loughborough has one of the largest engineering and technology student bases in England, was in the top quartile of institutions in the last RAE, and has come top in the student experience award for five years running. Yet when they conducted research into their reputation¹, it was sport that seemed to be what they were best known for. So how have they avoided the trap of being seen as a 'one trick pony'?

When Professor Pearce arrived at Loughborough in 2005 there was no Director of Marketing and Communications and no coherent communication to the outside world of what Loughborough was and what it was achieving. She appointed Ian Cairns to the role, and he has worked with her over the last seven years to help the institution understand and appreciate its identity and to develop and grow its public persona.

HOW DID THEY WORK TOWARDS THEIR DISTINCTIVE IDENTITY?

One of the first tasks for the new VC was to produce a strategic plan for the university. To do that she needed to develop her own understanding of the institution. As Professor Pearce says, "The first six months were about getting out and listening to people, inside and outside the institution. People will talk to you in those early days in ways in which they won't later on." This enabled her to identify and listen to the informal influencers in the university. "Opinion leaders aren't always the people with management responsibility but you have to identify them and make sure that you have got them on board," she says. She took her senate and council on a strategy awayday, to listen to their views on what the institution was and could aim to be and had them working in subgroups on individual aspects of the strategy. But as the leader of the institution, the VC took individual responsibility for both the first draft of the strategy and the decisions about what appeared in the final version, following a three month consultation with stakeholders inside and outside the institution.

The Director of Planning, Fidelma Hannah, played a central role in development of strategy and one of the outcomes was the decision to establish a Department of Marketing and Communications.

The remit of the Marketing and Communications Director has included extending the stakeholder consultation process and bringing in the views of a wider audience, through an initial 'brand review' – which was nothing to do with the logo, and all about the character of the institution – and more recently through reputation research with ABCI's and opinion leaders externally. Once the strategy and direction was in place, Ian worked on ensuring that a wider audience recognised that what makes Loughborough distinctive is not just sporting success. A key element of his contribution has been the introduction of a research magazine to substantiate the university's claim of research intensiveness and to demonstrate its breadth. Secondly, the development of the university's court into a 'club' which people would want to join. The latter brings the university's partners and potential partners together to do business and generate new ideas and opportunities as well as making sure that key influencers outside the institution have a good understanding of the institution. Ian also works with the VC to define and communicate key messages: "The VC gets out and talks to a whole range of external audiences and is a great ambassador. She is a key reason why we are where we are. When the VC is invited to speak, for example on student experience, she goes with an agenda of sub-messages to deliver to increase understanding of what Loughborough is all about. She is also excellent at exemplifying the team ethos – she always makes a point of personally thanking people who have been involved in a project."

WHAT DID THEY LEARN?

Being known for sport is a double-edged sword. On the one hand it provides a high profile for the institution, on the other it is not always recognised as a basis for academic credibility. The path that Loughborough's VC has led the institution along is that of embracing the positives, identifying the fundamentals that make for sporting success – team spirit and excellence – and integrating them into the wider institution. At the same time, the negatives are acknowledged, not ignored, and addressed through a comprehensive, targeted approach to communicating the facts about what Loughborough is and does.

HOW DO THEY KNOW THAT IT'S WORKING?

At the inaugural *Times Higher Education* Leadership and Management Awards in 2009, the award for the outstanding leadership and management team was presented to Loughborough University. The judges made special mention of VC Shirley Pearce's inclusive management style in the award citation.

Ewart Wooldridge, Chief Executive of the Leadership Foundation of Higher Education, and one of the judges, said he was particularly impressed with the results of Loughborough's staff survey, in which more than 90% of staff expressed the view that the VC and her team were doing a good job. Professor Pearce's response was, "This truly is a team award. It not only recognises the commitment of our senior management team, but also that of every manager, supervisor and team leader across the university, who all contribute so much to making Loughborough such a successful institution."

In recent years, Professor Pearce has been in demand as a speaker about excellence in student experience and leadership in higher education. This is an example of a virtuous circle where being the best gets you the chance to speak with authority, which reinforces the message that you are the best.

Internally, Loughborough people know that the institution has a clear identity. The term 'very Loughborough' is often used. It refers to the behaviours and attitudes that exemplify the team spirit which is endemic in the institution.

¹Syndicated research for the 1994 Group, involving interviews with opinion leaders and the public.

²A, B, C1, C2, D, E are the socio-economic groups commonly used in marketing and market research for analysis and targeting.