Equipping New University Presidents to Lead Effectively in the Developing World

Lessons from the WISE Leadership Conference 2014

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INTRODUCTION

The Institute of International Education (IIE), in the pursuit of promoting mutual understanding worldwide, seeks to develop leaders in every aspect of our work. In each of the more than 250 programs we administer annually, the Institute prioritizes leadership development for every participant, from youth to senior government officials. Partnering with the Qatar Foundation and the World Innovation Summit on Education (WISE) on the WISE Program for Education Leadership is therefore strongly aligned with IIE's mission, and it has been an honor to work together on this program for the past five years.

The WISE Program for Education Leadership is part of the Qatar Foundation's WISE initiative, which is an international, multi-sectoral platform for creative thinking, debate, and purposeful action in the field of education. Through an annual summit and a range of ongoing programs, WISE seeks to improve the future of education through collaboration and innovation. The annual WISE Summit brings together more than 1,500 leading experts, innovators, thought leaders, and influential political and corporate decision-makers from over 100 countries.

Since 2010, the WISE Program for Education Leadership has worked with more than 70 university presidents, rectors, and vice-chancellors from more than 35 countries on leadership development training. Each year, a group of 10–20 new university leaders are selected to take part in the three-day program in Doha. Hosted by the Qatar Foundation, the participants are guided through a rigorous program delivered by expert trainers from around the world, covering some university-specific topics and other more general leadership and management themes. Core to the training philosophy is the understanding that new university leaders have a unique opportunity to effect change at their home institutions, communities, and countries. The WISE leadership program aims to better equip these new leaders with the knowledge, skills, and self-awareness needed to lead effectively in a variety of institutional, social, political, and economic arenas.

Each year the newly selected leaders convene on the first day of training and share some of their current challenges. Inevitably the commonalities in these challenges are far greater than any participant anticipates, and the cohort of strangers starts circulating a sense of empathy, shared concern, and support for one another. This briefing paper provides a compelling analysis of data collected from the most recent WISE Program for Education Leadership class, providing key distinctions of challenges and strategic priorities, but also describing the many important similarities. Brewer and Mahmood conclude with essential recommendations for new university leaders in any country.

Since 2010, the program has received positive feedback from all alumni, with the vast majority reporting significant growth and increased effectiveness as a leader. Past participants have also utilized the

concepts and approaches learned through the program in their professional activities, and feel their leadership has affected others around them. Just as important, though, are the anecdotes we receive from time to time from past participants who have been successful in using their leadership-training skills to address real-life challenges. A 2013 alumnus, Yakubu Ochefu, from Kwararafu University in Nigeria, faced devastating crises at his home institution immediately after his program. Violence and ethno-religious fighting forced him to close his university multiple times, and he described the mental torture of having to deal with months of instability. Acknowledging lessons learned from colleagues from his cohort and specific training elements from the program, Vice Chancellor Ochefu remarks,

> The experience of that session last year has helped to shape and position me as a University administrator with the capacity to triumph in the face of extreme adversities … I always found a way of negotiating out of the more serious challenges I found myself in in the past one year. For me basically, the leadership training has helped tremendously. I am two years old on the job—older and wiser.

THE WISE PROGRAM FOR EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

WISE conducts an annual leadership conference in Doha for recently appointed heads of universities—presidents, rectors, vice chancellors—the titles vary from country to country. The 2014 program, conducted in early November, was attended by heads of both public and private universities from 16 countries: Cameroon, Ecuador, Ghana, India, Kenya, Liberia, Mexico, Myanmar, Nigeria, Mongolia, Myanmar, Oman, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Zimbabwe.

The 2014 program in early November covered institutional and leadership challenges, leadership style, innovation, student employment, fundraising, use of technology, and institutional and personal goal-setting. The program was facilitated by faculty members from Asheshi University, InnoOmnia, Institute of International Education, Palestine Technical University, The Parthenon Group, and the authors of this article, Wil Brewer of Performance-Solutions-Group, Inc., and Mahboob Mahmood of Knowledge Platform. Despite the differences in mission, size, culture, and funding, we found all the heads of universities faced common challenges in leadership, management, organizational and people issues.

Leadership Readiness

Preparation included a behavioral intelligence assessment conducted by Wil Brewer, President of Performance-Solutions-Group, Inc., consisting of the DISC behavioral profile and an emotional intelligence assessment, measured as EQ (Emotional Quotient). Just prior to the commencement of the leadership conference and continuing during the conference, each participant received one-on-one feedback and coaching from Wil. He addresses both professional and personal issues with emphasis on increasing self-awareness, which helps to prepare participants for an extended session on leadership and self-awareness in the three-day program.

What do we learn from the DISC profiles? Over the past five years, 81 percent of all participants are high on the "Compliance" characteristic with the average at 66.5 on a scale of 1 to 100. Compliance

represents attention to detail, inclination to closely follow rules and procedures, focus on facts, precise and meticulous concern for detail. What is the danger? It's the inability to extricate from the details, to be strategic, and to look at the big picture.

This common characteristic is indicative of bright and often brilliant people, with careers as lecturers, then professors, almost all with PhDs, who are thrust into positions requiring high capabilities in leadership and management. Many do not have the training, preparation, or tools required to be effective heads of higher education institutions. There are some obvious exceptions—the few with business backgrounds, management training, etc. So from heading a department or faculty, they now have to "herd cats," with many direct reports from multiple functional areas—academic affairs, admissions, student affairs, facilities, finance, HR, IT, legal, PR, etc. This is accompanied by accountability to multiple stakeholders.

There is also the additional primary leadership role of developing the institution's vision together with long-term strategic planning. This requires plotting the roadmap to answer the question: "What do we want the institution to look like in five years' time and how do we get there?" Many corporations fail to do this effectively, yet a newly appointed university head is meant to step up and take responsibility for leading into the future.

Strategic Challenges and Priorities

Mahboob Mahmood, CEO of Knowledge Platform, conducted a mini-survey during the 2014 program to address these strategic issues. Participants were asked to rank thirteen major strategic challenges typically faced by educational institutions in order of significance. We received seven responses from representatives of public sector institutions and seven from private sector institutions.

RANKING OF CHALLENGES (HIGHER SCORE REPRESENTS HIGHER RANKED CHALLENGE)
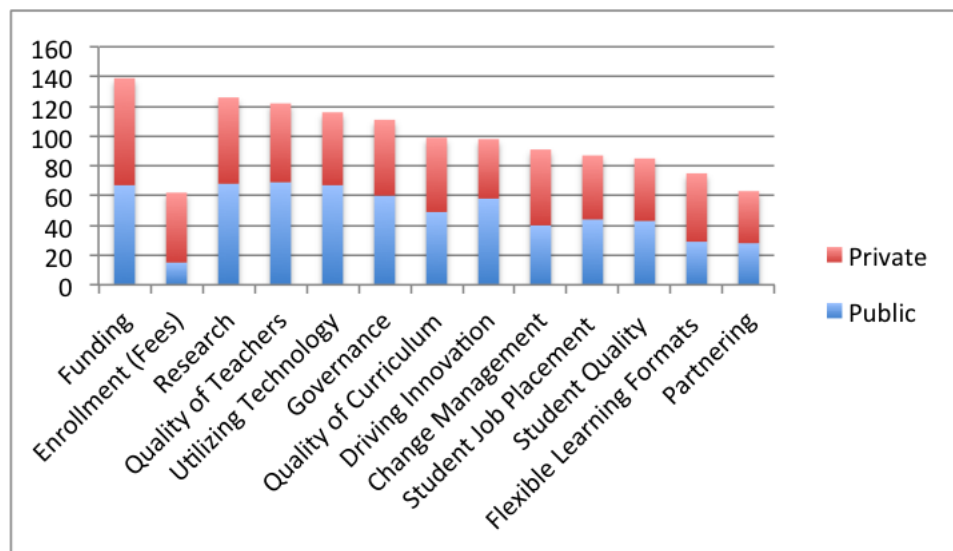
- For both public sector and private sector institutions, funding (including student enrollment fees) was the most significant challenge, with 16 percent of all ranking scores considerably higher than research and quality of teachers, which jointly took second place at 10 percent.

- The two student-oriented challenges, student job placement and student quality, were among the lowest ranked challenges, with both public sector and private sector institutions exhibiting almost equally low concern.

- More inward-facing, institution-strengthening challenges—research, teacher quality, utilization of technology, governance and curriculum quality—ranked high.

- In contrast, the four lowest rankings were accorded to market-facing challenges, starting with lowest:

    - Forging partnerships
    - Developing flexible learning formats
    - Improving student quality
    - Enhancing student job placement

- The challenges of driving innovation and managing change occupied the intermediate band of concerns. When coupling these two concerns with utilizing technology, which featured higher in the ranking of challenges, one may conclude that both public- and private-sector institutions recognized the importance of innovation and change but did not give the same weight to market-linked challenges and solutions.

CONCLUSIONS

The leadership awareness and strategic challenges segments of the program clearly indicated overlapping issues facing leaders of universities across the world. The following steps would contribute to addressing these issues:

- Newly appointed presidents require support in the form of coaching or mentoring to provide guidance through the initial challenges.

- Boards of trustees, directors, or governors need to better prepare for their governance and strategic roles to be able to provide better guidance and direction.

- Leadership teams require training in leadership and management skills to more effectively support the head of their institutions.

- Major strategic issues are not getting sufficient priority due to lack of preparedness and recognition of priorities on the part of newly appointed presidents.

- Greater attention needs to be given to developing effective succession plans in university institutions, accompanied by appropriate professional development, to prepare potential presidents for their future roles.

- There is a general recognition of the importance of bringing about change in university cultures. This includes enhancing teacher quality and utilizing information technology, but there remains a lack of clarity on how to bring about this change.

- Greater emphasis needs to be given to financial self-reliance.

- Greater priority needs to be given to addressing student-centric challenges, such as jobs placement and improvement of student 'on-boarding' programs and strategies for effective linkages with the private sector.

Far-sighted and effective university leaders can play a positive role in an age of profound change. Many of the leaders of today's universities are ready to embrace this change. With more support, networking, and conferences such as the WISE leadership program, significant steps will be taken in supporting their transformational journeys.

AUTHOR PROFILES

Wilfred Brewer

Wil Brewer is President and founder of PSG. He is a chartered accountant with an MBA and an Honors degree in Economics (cum laude). Wil has provided coaching and training for the annual Qatar Foundation/WISE leadership program for the past five years. Applying his experience as an executive coach (certified by Marshall Goldsmith Stakeholder Centered Coaching), he has conducted behavioral assessments and provided one-on-one coaching and leadership training to participants.

Wil has lectured in compensation and performance management at NYU's Stern School of Business and at Fairfield University, CT. He has also facilitated workshops in productivity measurement for SIOP (Society of Industrial & Organization Psychologists), SHRM (Society of HR Managers), DMAI (Destination Marketing Association International) and for a benchmarking group of Fortune 500 companies.

Prior to PSG, Wil was COO of Performance Management, Inc., a management consulting company, for twelve years and prior to PMI, a consultant with Deloitte & Touche. He was also President and the major stockholder of Emseal USA, Inc. for some ten years, supplying the construction industry.

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Mahboob Mahmood

Mahboob is the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Knowledge Platform. Mahboob has deep experience in designing innovative large scale learning solutions that typically blend interactive teaching methods and online learning strategies. Between 2006 and 2011, Mahboob also served as Adjunct Professor of Entrepreneurship and Family Enterprise at INSEAD. He is also International Counselor to the Institute of International Education. Prior to establishing Knowledge Platform, Mahboob was a partner at the international law firm of Sidley Austin, where he worked from 1986 to 2000. He has a J.D. from Columbia University School of Law, a Diploma in International and Comparative Law from Columbia University School of Law, an M.A. from The Johns Hopkins University, and a B.A. from Princeton University. He has been a member of the New York State bar since 1987.

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