SOUL: An Institutional Transformation Framework for Indian Higher Education

Ankur Gupta and Sahil Sawhney

The Indian Higher Education sector has made remarkable progress in the last few years in terms of capacity expansion and improving the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) significantly. Out of the three stated objectives of the national higher education policy, equity and access have been achieved to a large extent, while excellence remains confined to a few pockets. Quality concerns reiterated by reports from government agencies, studies by industry bodies and manifested in rapidly declining student enrolments persist. Therefore, there is an urgent need for institutions to transform themselves to create value for their stakeholders. It will help successfully navigate the challenges facing the higher education sector. We present SOUL (Strategy, Operations, Urgency, Leadership), a comprehensive institutional transformation framework customized for Indian academia, enabling leadership teams to introduce validated interventions and global best practices at their institutions in a phased manner. SOUL is novel, relevant and timely, especially in the Indian context considering that disruption and crisis create opportunities for institutional transformation.

Introduction

The Indian Higher Education (IHE) space, long considered a sunrise sector, is witnessing its worst degrowth since independence. Quality concerns, learner disconnect, poor stakeholder perception, institutional malpractices, policy

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paralysis and frequently changing statutory norms have manifested in rapidly declining student enrolments and existential concerns for many institutions, especially in technical education. This has also been highlighted in the National Education Policy, 2020 (Sawhney et al., 2019). Many institutions in the higher technical education space run the risk of becoming irrelevant (Tnn, 2020). Urgent interventions at the institutional level are needed to transform their fortunes. Value creation needs to be a priority area for these institutions coupled with a sense of urgency and backed by the speed of execution of the transformation plans.

A large number of universities in the west which have been around for much longer have had to reinvent and transform themselves several times throughout their existence to respond to environmental disruptions, regulatory changes, industry expectations, low student enrolments and societal expectations. Eckel et al. (1998) in their report, On Change: En Route to Transformation, state that institutional transformation: 1) alters the culture of the institution by changing select underlying assumptions and institutional behaviours, processes, and products; 2) is deep and pervasive, affecting the whole institution; 3) is intentional, and 4) occurs over time. Eggins (2014) identify institutional culture, readiness and strategic planning as the core of institutional transformation. Successful case studies of institutional transformation (Dooris, 2002; Xie, 2014) rooted in strategic management can serve as important markers for Indian institutions to attempt similar turnarounds. However, the strategic frameworks adopted by foreign universities are not directly applicable to the Indian context. For one, foreign universities have always possessed higher capital resources owing to public funding and high tuition fees. Being part of developed economies and enjoying proximity to large industries, they also had access to world-class intellectual resources which were critical to devising and executing complex strategic plans. A vast majority of the Indian institutions lack the leadership and the expertise to successfully imbibe strategic thinking and planning at all levels of the institution.

We present SOUL–strategy, operations, urgency, leadership - an overarching framework for institutional transformation customized to the Indian context. The basis for SOUL has validated outcomes on strategic management implementation at a few pilot institutions in India with positive feedback from the stakeholders, assimilation of global best practices and empirical research to back some of the suggested interventions for institutional transformation. The SOUL framework is an attempt to answer the question, "How can institutional transformation be affected in resource-constrained environments?". In this context, resources are both financial and human. Tier-II institutions in India (located in Tier-II or Tier-III cities) typically fall in this category, although the SOUL model is equally applicable to Tier-I institutions.

Rationale for the Study

The Indian Higher Education sector is undergoing disruption, especially in the technical education space. Institutions in Tier-2 and Tier-3 towns are facing existential concerns amidst dwindling student enrollments. With the imbalanced enhancement in intake by universities, there is unprecedented consolidation in the sector with a few large universities dominating the landscape in each region in India. Thus, the present situation begs the following questions: Is there a future for affiliated colleges in the country? Can the affiliated colleges remain relevant? What models for institutional sustenance and transformation can the affiliated colleges leverage to stay in the game? Has sufficient research been carried out to explore institutional transformation models in resource-constrained environments?

These questions are relevant for many affiliated colleges in India which are not only facing regulatory hurdles but environmental and market-related headwinds. Further, these questions have broad implications for the health of the sector as a whole. India needs a vibrant higher education sector with a broader footprint of institutions with different capabilities, catering to all classes of students. This will help provide access to quality education at scale. The present exploratory study, therefore, assumes significance in this context.

Review of Literature

In his best selling book, "Strategy is Destiny", author Robert E. Burgelman (Burgelman, 2020) establishes a strong correlation between organizational success and its strategy. Using Intel's case study, conducted over 12 years, the book demonstrates how strategy-making shapes a company's future allowing it to survive major upheavals and thrive in the long run. Strategic Management has also found wide applicability in academia led by top US and European Universities with significant success as evidenced by their domination in the world University rankings. The Harvard Policy Model (Bryson, 1988) proposed by the Harvard Business School remains the most comprehensive foray into formal strategic management in academia. Eckel and Kezar (2003) defined five core strategies for effecting institutional transformation with special emphasis on creating unique strategies aligned with the institutional culture. The five core strategies include senior administrative support, collaborative leadership, robust design, staff development and visible action. Kezar and Eckel (2002) studied the process of change in educational institutions examining existing change models, strategies for change management and the reasons for a high percentage of failures in change initiatives. He espoused a multi-dimensional approach that is inherently complex, amalgamates multiple models and takes place at multiple levels across the institution with many activities proceeding

in parallel. Strategic management in higher education provides the required framework for institutions to align their vision and mission with institutional core values and create a clear roadmap for institutional growth.

Thus, any model for institutional transformation needs to have Strategy at its core. Achieving operational excellence is yet another important element of institutional transformation (Gajendragadkar, 2019). Strong backend teams, processes and systems are imperative to attain stakeholder delight and enhance their experience. Efficient operations empower faculty members with the right tools, resources, and environment to deliver outstanding learning experiences to the students. Thus, Operations, the second element of our model is a key enabler for the successful execution of institutional strategy. Institutional change is non-trivial and time-consuming. Therefore, speed of execution is essential to demonstrate institutional intent, creating small success stories and infusing confidence among all stakeholders. We define Urgency (Kotter, 2008), a critical institutional trait, as the third foundational element of the SOUL framework. Finally, transformational leadership (Wang et al., 2011) coupled with the quality of leadership determines the success of any transformational endeavour. Thus, Leadership, encompassing the gamut of people development initiatives and increased focus on attaining institutional objectives, is the final element of the SOUL framework. The proposed SOUL framework is depicted below in Figure 1.

The elements in the SOUL framework are not mutually exclusive but complementary with many overlapping elements and activities which can proceed independently. The core values and institutional intent to effect change are the glue that binds them together.
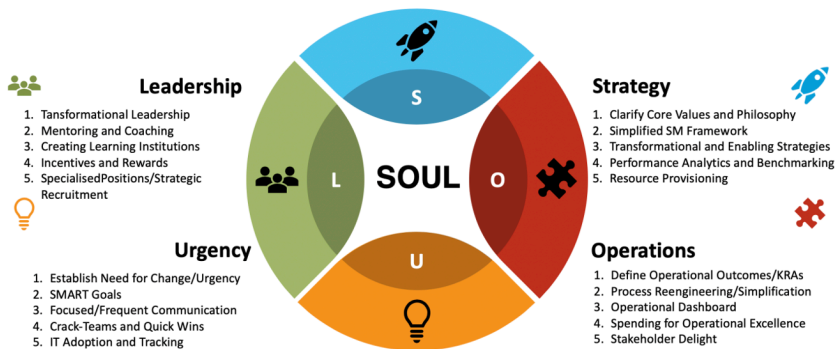

Figure 1. SOUL Framework for Institutional Transformation

Devising Viable Strategic Plans for Institutions in IHE

While research studies have strongly advocated the adoption of Strategic Management (SM) in IHE, its prevalence remains abysmally low. A survey of 368 leaders in IHE was carried out to understand the penetration of SM and the perceptions of these leaders towards the adoption of SM (Sawhney et al., 2020). They found that there is significant awareness about the role of SM as a leadership tool among the leaders in IHE but there exists a large vacuum in its implementation. The reasons for low SM adoption were lack of awareness and skills, resource constraints, poor quality of leadership and lack of management support. The leaders surveyed while expressing the urgent need for SM implementation had cited the inherent complexity of SM as a deterrent that hinders its comprehension, assimilation and implementation across the institution. The leaders also stressed the need for institution-wide training and handholding to enable them to devise strategic plans and practice formal SM.

Simplified Strategic Management Framework

Based on the survey results, and analysis of existing SM frameworks, Sawhney et al. (2019) proposed the Simplified Strategic Management Framework (SSMF) for institutions in IHE. The framework is based on five dimensions with Students, Faculty, Information Technology, Resources and Outreach & Branding as its five dimensions. The framework further defines multiple maturity levels across each dimension allowing institutions to track the progress and maturity of SM implementation at their institutions. The SSMF is detailed in Figure 2. The SSMF process life cycle comprises seven steps that the institution needs to follow for the effective formulation and implementation of its strategy. These steps are tabulated in Table 1. Detailed checklists along with suggested interventions for each dimension at each maturity level accompanying the SSMF help institutions in implementing SM at their respective institutions in a phased manner. The SSMF was validated by implementing it at two pilot institutions in India for 18 months and the results obtained in terms of institutional outcomes and stakeholder feedback indicated that the SSMF was highly relevant and effective in the Indian context.
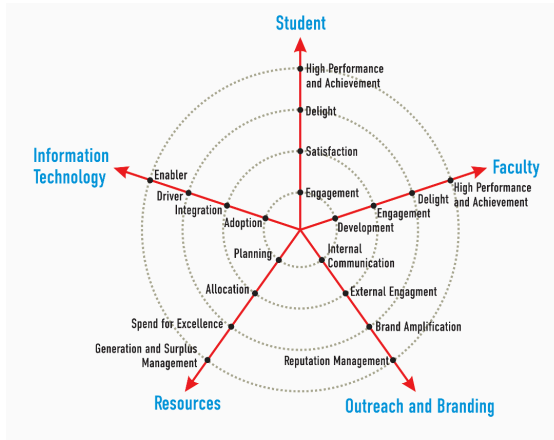
Figure 2. Simplified Strategic Management Framework (Sawhney et al. (2019))

Table 1

The Seven-Step SSMF Process Lifecycle (Sawhney et al., 2019)

Steps	Key Activities	Outcomes/Deliverables
0	Evaluating Readiness	Determining the current SM maturity level of the institution
1	Know your Institution	Internal benchmarking of the institutional performance through analytics
2	Environmental Analysis	SWOT Analysis
3	Clarification of Core Values	Strategy Document, Vision, Mission, Objectives
4	Strategy Formulation	Defining transformative and enabling strategies along dimensions of SSMF, Strategic Plan, Risk Management Plan, IT plan, Quality Plan, Departmental Plans

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Table 1 continued

5	Strategy Implementation	The setting of KRAs, identification of internal strategy champions and orientation, clarification of roles, process ownership, responsibilities and outcomes, assignment of authority, communication hierarchy and flow.
6	Measurement, Tracking, Analysis and Intervention	Continuous improvement through measuring the impact and effectiveness of the strategy, tweaking strategic interventions to improve outcomes.

MEASURING STRATEGY EFFECTIVENESS AND OUTCOMES

One of the challenges in effective implementation of SM at academic institutions is the lack of ability of institutions to measure the effectiveness of strategy implementation outcomes and track them continuously (Kiriri, 2018). This causes the institution to lose focus and confidence in the effectiveness of the SM process. A measurement and tracking mechanism which provides a unified and unambiguous view of institutional progress along key performance parameters is required. Gupta (2013) described the Performance Insight 360 (PI-360) quality analytics framework which tracks institutional performance on a wide variety of parameters providing individual, group and institutional level dashboards and performance indices with detailed trend analysis. The tool helps institutions perform internal benchmarking besides providing detailed insights for the institutional leadership to design strategic interventions. The PI-360 software was a part of the SM implementation at the two pilot institutions. Key stakeholders at these institutions rated PI-360 as a key element in the success of SM implementation at their institutions, especially in attaining high grades during accreditation, which was their major strategic objective.

OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE

The McKinsey article on "Building Operational Excellence in Higher Education" (Gajendragadkar, 2019) presents the potential value of transforming operational and administrative functions in Universities through a case study. The article states that Universities risk non-attainment of their strategic objectives if the support functions like HR, finance, facilities etc. are

not rapidly modernized. Several US Universities have published plans for attaining operational excellence with well-defined KRAs, demonstrating its significance (University of Manitoba, 2015; University of Wisconsin, 2018). Indian academic institutions have not prioritized improving operational efficiency as a key focus area, leading to stakeholder dissatisfaction. The current operational setup in Indian institutions typically operates in silos (general administration, establishment, finance, HR, facilities management, procurement), often lacking a cohesive strategy. This leads to inefficiency due to process complexity and lack of accountability. Some suggested interventions for attaining operational excellence are outlined below:

- Regular and formal stakeholder feedback, analysis, and follow-up action

- Operational process review and re-engineering by a competent task force to simplify processes, speed-up compliance and reduce stakeholder touchpoints in existing processes ("Operational excellence higher education," 2015)

- Defining measurable operational outcomes for administrative sections and the institution

- Creating detailed operational checklists for process workflows with well-defined roles and responsibilities ("Operational efficiency in higher education," 2015)).

- Regular personnel training for improving operations and compliance covering all staff members

- Strategic outsourcing in new and existing areas such as security, conservancy, IT services, faculty recruitment, student training, placement support, student housing and guidance and counselling have also emerged to free up organizational bandwidth and improve quality-of-service

- IT-based digital transformation by adopting IT tools encompassing security, maintenance, personnel management, recruitment and HR, document management, inventory management, CRM etc. beyond the usual ERP tools to improve compliance and organizational efficiency.

- Measure and manage stakeholder experience with deep engagement, genuine concern, professional facilities management and dedicated personnel using a multi-pronged approach.

- Budget for operational excellence through imaginative financial allocation to create world-class learning environments and build back-end teams empowered with the necessary tools to execute operational plans quickly.

- Create an operations-focused dashboard tracking key operational KRAs and compound metrics allowing institutional leadership to quickly introduce

strategic interventions as required.

We propose an operational excellence maturity model for Indian institutions in Figure 3, adapted from the model of the Operational Excellence Society (Paris, 2015).
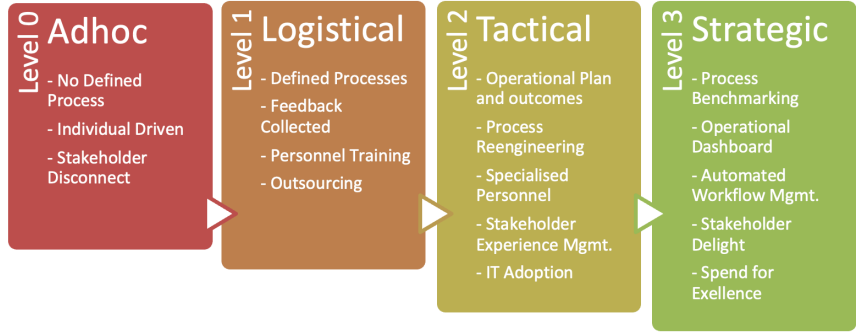
Level 0 **Adhoc**	Level 1 **Logistical**	Level 2 **Tactical**	Level 3 **Strategic**
- No Defined Process - Individual Driven - Stakeholder Disconnect	- Defined Processes - Feedback Collected - Personnel Training - Outsourcing	- Operational Plan and outcomes - Process Reengineering - Specialised Personnel - Stakeholder Experience Mgmt. - IT Adoption	- Process Benchmarking - Operational Dashboard - Automated Workflow Mgmt. - Stakeholder Delight - Spend for Exellence

Figure 3. Institutional Operational Excellence Maturity Model

URGENCY: THE DRIVER FOR CHANGE

The first step in Kotter's (2021) 8 step model (8-Step process for a leading change) for leading change in organizations is to "create a sense of urgency". The reason why creating urgency within the organization is deemed critical is to prepare the organization for change. Urgency allows institutions to transcend the planning phase and move to the execution phase, with well-defined short-term goals and action items to create quick wins and improve the confidence of key stakeholders in the transformation strategy. Inducing a sense of urgency in academia is challenging as academic institutions tend to be resistant to change with a greater sense of inertia (Zalaznick, 2019). Some of the suggested interventions to promote urgency within the institution are:

a. Articulate the need for change

b. Create short-term plans with prioritized objectives

c. Create small crack teams tasked with creating quick wins on stated objectives

d. Staff these crack teams with professionals having the right mix of diversity and complementary skill sets

e. Communication by leadership needs to be frequent, crisp and unambiguous

f. Tasks need to be focused and assigned in small manageable sub-sets

g. Workflow, processes and the task pipeline need to be well-defined to sustain urgency

h. Meetings need to be short and impactful

i. Identify and remove obstacles

j. Celebrate early wins and reinforce the right behaviours and values

k. Reward action

l. Employ IT-based productivity tools and collaborative platforms

Complacency is the antithesis of urgency. Kotter in his book, "Sense of Urgency" (Kotter, 2012) argues that achieving and sustaining organizational urgency is rare as it is not a natural behaviour of most of the employees. Further, a crisis is the best time for an organization to expect urgency in action from its employees. Many institutions in the Indian Higher Education sector are in the midst of an existential crisis. Hence, it is the perfect time for these institutions to imbibe a sense of urgency and achieve their objectives on time.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is required for institutions to challenge the status quo and successfully navigate change. Plummer (2016) found that leadership and communication were the two most important factors during institutional transformation and change. Some of the important elements of transformational leadership gleaned from research (Hartog, 2019; Mencl et al., 2016) include:

i. Articulating the need and justification for the change

ii. Formulating a clear vision and strategy

iii. Communicating and re-communicating that vision across the organization

iv. Putting together a core team, change evangelizers and transformation champions

v. Clarifying roles, responsibilities and expected outcomes

vi. Provisioning resources in line with requirements

vii. Investing in upskilling personnel and capacity building

viii. The individualized focus on people development

ix. Defining milestones, timelines and deliverables

x. Practice quick and decisive decision making

xi. Devising credible tracking mechanisms

xii. Incentivizing and rewarding behaviour aligned with objectives

xiii. Initiating regular deep-dive reviews and corrective interventions

Beyond top leadership, institutions need to cultivate the second line of leadership and leaders driving specific key initiatives. Therefore, developing leaders across all levels of the institution is important for sustaining transformational initiatives. Specific interventions to support leadership development and facilitate transformational leadership at the institution level are listed below:

a. Undertaking faculty mentoring (Gupta, 2021) for creating a high-performance workplace

b. Using data, analytics and insights for an unambiguous view of institutional performance and informed decision making (Gupta, 2013)

c. Creating a Learning Institution with a focus on continuous upskilling and professional growth and development (Bratianu, 2011)

d. Participative planning with distributed leadership to increase the scope and scale of transformation (Goksoy, 2015)

e. Employ fun at work to promote bonhomie, manage stress and improve performance (Ehteshami & Sandell, 2019)

f. Taking tough decisions and letting non-performers go in a humane manner

Adopting and practising transformational leadership shall be critical for Indian higher education institutions going forward. Further, multiple empowered leaders across all levels shall be needed to accelerate the transformation journey.

Conclusions

Organizational/institutional transformation is non-trivial, requiring considerable resources and time, a committed leadership team, with a high probability of failure (Kotter, 1995). Institutions in the Indian Higher Education sector need to overcome these challenges to affect change and undertake transformation. The SOUL framework provides a set of guiding principles and areas of intervention along with the tools for helping institutions initiate their transformational journey based on sound strategy. The Simplified Strategic Management Framework (SSMF) is validated in the Indian context, while PI-360 is a national award-winning quality analytics framework helping institutions track

their progress in real-time and over both the short and long term. Accompanying recommendations and amalgamated best practices provide valuable inputs for institutions to adapt and customize them to work in their local context. We believe that the SOUL framework has high relevance to the Indian Higher Education space. Its adoption and implementation across institutions shall help refine it further and enhance its efficacy.

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