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Protecting Distinctiveness

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Is Higher Education's competitive instinct working against it?

Universities are fiercely, proudly distinctive. Their academic character, research strengths, student culture and civic relationships are not peripheral to what they do; they are central to the value they create. That distinctiveness has real weight: for students choosing where to study, for researchers deciding where to work, for employers seeking partners, and for the communities universities serve. In a sector where institutions are increasingly required to compete for students, funding, talent and reputation, protecting their differentiation is a strategic necessity.

But there is a paradox quietly at work in Higher Education. The pressure to differentiate has not only influenced the areas where the university is able to demonstrate unique, visible value; it has also influenced parts of the operating model where a focus on differentiation can be harder to justify and, ultimately, more costly. As competition intensifies, institutions have become wary of common approaches, even where shared services and platforms might reduce cost, strengthen resilience or free capacity for innovation and research contribution towards the things that genuinely set them apart.

Roc Technologies recently brought together a group of senior IT leaders from across Higher Education for an open roundtable conversation. The challenges they described were familiar: legacy estates, financial pressure, AI adoption outpacing governance, cyber risk rising faster than the capacity to manage it. What was more interesting was the pattern beneath them — the sense that the sector understands its situation well, but is finding it increasingly difficult to act on that understanding within the constraints of how it is currently organised.

The “university of the future” is the wrong frame

The sector is spending its distinctiveness defending things that were never distinctive to begin with.

For years, the phrase “university of the future” has shaped how the sector thinks about change: how it competes, modernises, differentiates. That framing has done useful work. But it has also, quietly, kept the sector’s gaze fixed on siloed institutional transformation at precisely the moment when the most significant challenges are sector-wide.

Common technology dependencies. Common security challenges. Common questions about data governance and learner mobility. Common constraints on funding. These are not problems that vary meaningfully from institution to institution. They are shared challenges, and yet the sector’s default response is to solve them independently - every university maintaining, integrating and governing its own version of foundational capability, at its own cost, with its own team, against its own risk profile, with the ultimate goal of each of them achieving largely the same outcomes.

The cumulative toll of that approach is not just financial. It is the resource pull away from the things that genuinely differentiate. Teaching quality, research strength, student experience, civic relationships, academic culture - these are where university identity lives. Identity management, data governance, cyber resilience, infrastructure: these are the foundations that allow institutions to focus on those things. When setting up and maintaining the foundations consume disproportionate effort, the capacity to protect what is genuinely distinctive quietly erodes.

That is why the more useful frame is the “Higher Education of the future” - and the capabilities the sector needs to build, share or standardise so that every institution has more room to focus on the things that make it a top choice for applicants.

The capacity problem is structural, not motivational

Universities are full of people who understand what needs to change and want to make it happen. The issue is not intent. IT is now implicated in almost every strategic priority, from student experience and research infrastructure to flexible learning and AI. And yet in most universities, the majority of the technology team's resource is consumed by keeping existing services running. Maintaining legacy and managing accumulated complexity, the team whose real value sits in enabling transformation is spending most of its time on tactical continuity.

Legacy systems remain in place for reasons that are rarely simple. Replacing them is disruptive, expensive and institutionally risky, and the workarounds people have built are quickly embedded in how the university functions. The cost of change is visible; the cost of not changing is harder to see and quantify, so it tends to lose the argument.

The deeper problem is that much of this burden is repeated across the sector. Every institution maintains its own legacy, solves its own integration problems and creates its own routes around systems not designed for the flexibility now required. Some of that work is necessarily local, but much of it sits in foundational areas where universities face similar constraints and duplicate similar effort - consuming the innovation capacity that IT teams need to modernise. If teams could share more of the burden around common foundations, they would have more room to focus on the work that genuinely needs local insight.

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Governance has not caught up with the technology brief

Universities remain, first and foremost, places of learning. But the operating environment around them has changed dramatically. Technology now sits beneath almost every strategic pressure facing the institution: student experience, research capability, cyber resilience, AI, financial sustainability, employer engagement and new models of learning.

For CIOs and CTOs, the issue is not simply whether technology has a seat at the table. It is whether the institution understands how to best drive value from technology as part of the strategic operating model, rather than purely as a delivery function brought in once decisions have already been shaped. The problem is not that boards don't value technology. It is that they often don't understand it well enough to interrogate the status quo - to ask what the current estate is really costing, what the risk of inaction looks like, or whether the traditional model of every institution solving the same core problems independently still makes sense.

Where governance recognises the operational weight and potential of technology, conversations about investment, shared foundations and the true cost of inaction become more strategic and more honest. Where it does not, technology leaders spend too much time making the case for work that is foundational to the institution's ability to change, and often struggling to fully articulate the full return on investment. This is particularly important as the sector considers more shared approaches: if every question of infrastructure, data or operating platform is treated as something each institution must own, and even fund, separately, the sector will continue to carry duplicated burdens that not only limit the capacity of every IT team within it, but also fall foul of commercial inefficiency – limiting budget for truly innovative, value-driven investments.

The question boards are not asking often enough: what is the status quo actually costing us?

Collaboration exists in the sector. Shared operation does not.

Higher Education is genuinely collaborative in the ways that come naturally to it. Academic communities cross institutional boundaries as a matter of course. Research partnerships span universities, industry and public bodies. Knowledge moves through relationships that have nothing to do with organisational charts.

Shared operation is more difficult, because it asks institutions to share parts of how they work: the good, the bad, and the inefficient. That brings governance, procurement, accountability and risk into the room - and in a sector shaped by competition and institutional autonomy and differentiation, the preference for local control can reassert itself quickly.

The sector's challenge is turning collaborative intent into shared delivery. Existing shared services work in some cases, but changing the operating model is genuinely hard. Someone has to own the governance, measure the value and hold the service quality. When procurement processes create consortiums that move slowly or struggle to demonstrate clear benefit, the incentive to participate weakens. Core-office functions - including technology and IT - are more likely to be running parallel versions of the same solutions independently than genuinely sharing the load. Each institution carries its own systems, integrations and governance routes, even where the underlying problems are the same. The result is duplicated effort that consumes the capacity IT teams need to focus on genuine differentiation.

Collaboration is already part of the sector's culture. The harder task is building the structures that allow it to carry more of the operational burden.

Flexible learning will expose where the foundations are missing

The traditional student lifecycle - enrolment, study, graduation - is no longer the only model. The boundary between education and work is becoming less fixed, with lifelong learning, apprenticeships, modular provision and professional development all pointing towards a future in which learners return at different points and through different routes.

Those learners will make sharper judgements about the return from a specific course against the broader value of the university experience: belonging, networks, exposure to research, pathways into employment and the reputation of the institution itself. The user experience matters more than every, because student loyalty will bring real commercial reward in a way it hasn't previously.

This is precisely the kind of change that should play to Higher Education's strengths: a more flexible, more continuous relationship with learners, built around the genuine value each institution offers. But it requires something the sector's current operating model does not easily provide. Learner mobility depends on identity, records, credentials and support services that can maintain continuity across a longer, less linear relationship. If those foundations remain fixed inside institutional boundaries, the ambition for flexible learning will be constrained before it starts by the very systems meant to support it.

Australia has developed more federated approaches, with learner mobility between institutions and stronger alignment between education and employment. Closer to home, the University of London's federated colleges illustrate what more portable learning looks like in practice. Neither is a direct blueprint, but both make the same point: the infrastructure for flexible learning has to work beyond the individual institution. Shared foundations are not a threat to distinctiveness. They are part of what allows universities to offer more flexible routes while protecting the value of the experience they provide.

AI is being adopted faster than it is being governed

The AI conversation in Higher Education is real, it is moving quickly, and it is outpacing governance in most institutions. Tools are being adopted in everyday workflows - often informally, at department or individual level - and the decisions being made now will shape dependencies and data exposures that will be much harder to unpick later.

Shadow AI is the sharper version of a problem the sector already knows: when departments choose their own tools outside central governance, the estate fragments, risk accumulates and the centre loses control. The challenge for Higher Education is that professors are very much experts in their field, and the ability for IT teams to dictate tools and usage is often met with indifference. Therefore IT teams need to focus on guardrails, security, and enablement.

The vendor relationship sits directly alongside this. Technology vendors are not engaging with Higher Education's specific needs as well as they should be. Zoom's global education council has been cited as a rare example of a supplier that has made a genuine effort to understand and respond to the sector. Others have not followed suit. As universities face major platform commitments, the nature of that relationship becomes a strategic question: who owns the data, what the pricing model looks like at scale, and what happens when the contract changes. The risk of deep platform dependency creating leverage for vendors is real, and it needs to be considered before the switching cost makes the conversation academic.

AI is, in this sense, the sharpest live test of the argument this paper makes. The decisions institutions take now - about platforms, governance, data ownership and supplier relationships - will determine whether they retain meaningful control over a core part of their operating model for the next decade, or quietly cede it. Those are decisions that benefit from sector-level thinking, not just institutional instinct.

Resilience is not hygiene. It is the route to capacity.

There is a tendency in transformation conversations to treat operational resilience as the unglamorous work that happens before the interesting work can begin. That framing needs to be challenged.

When technology teams are heavily focused on maintaining continuity, their ability to support new ideas narrows: existing weaknesses carry forward into new programmes; fragmented data limits the effectiveness of AI and analytics, or worse leads to incorrect decisions; and poor visibility of cost and performance makes it difficult to build a compelling investment case. The cumulative effect is institutions caught between the need to modernise and the difficulty of demonstrating why it cannot wait - a trap that is harder to escape the longer it persists.

Resilience creates headroom. Headroom is what makes everything else possible. The sector does not need to choose between fixing the estate and imagining the future: fixing the estate is what makes the future possible.

Change will come to the sector. The question is whether it is chosen or imposed.

The sector is saturated. Demand has softened. International student numbers are under pressure, and to manage this risk in the short-term many universities are opening international campuses, thereby cannibalising the very market they depend on in the long-term. The emergence of 'Super Universities' – such as the merger of Greenwich and Kent as a recent example - may become less exceptional and more expected as a mechanism to force operational efficiency and broaden the market.

It means the conditions for external intervention - whether through funding reform, regulatory pressure or mandated standards - are more present now than at any recent point.

There is a certain irony in the possibility that institutional autonomy, the thing the sector has protected most fiercely, may ultimately be diminished not by a decision to collaborate, but by the consequences of not doing so. The institutions that will navigate structural change most effectively will be those that have already done the work: strengthened their digital foundations, clarified their operating models and built genuine capacity for collaboration. They will have more choices, and more leverage, than those that waited.

Waiting for a mandate is a strategy, but it leaves institutions with far fewer options when it arrives.

Shared foundations. Genuine distinctiveness.

This paper opened by asking whether the desire of universities to protect identity is working against them. The answer is yes - but only in certain places. The fix is not to abandon that instinct, it is to apply it more deliberately. Universities should compete fiercely on the things that genuinely differentiate them: the quality of their teaching, the strength of their research, the character of their student experience, the depth of their civic and employer relationships. Those are worth every ounce of the sector's considerable energy and pride.

The foundational infrastructure that makes all of that possible should not have to be solved repeatedly, institution by institution. Identity. Records. Data governance. Cyber resilience - these are not where distinctiveness lives. They are the conditions under which distinctiveness can be expressed.

The CIOs and CTOs closest to this challenge have a more important role to play than is often recognised. The shift from institutional to sector thinking does not begin with a policy decision or a government mandate. It begins with technology leaders championing shared foundations: where they already work, where they could be extended, and what becomes possible when the effort spent on parallel solutions is redirected towards genuine differentiation.

A more distinctive and future-proofed sector is possible. It just requires individual institutions to stop solving the same problems alone.

Roc Technologies works with Higher Education institutions on the digital foundations that make sustainable change possible. To continue the conversation, visit **roctechnologies.com**