



Review article

Leadership in modernising dental facilities

Paul Brunton

Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Health Sciences University of Otago, New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Providing academic leadership for modernisation projects of dental school and hospital facilities can be challenging; however, a structured approach to such projects is helpful and good communication will reduce much of the stress.

1. Introduction

Faculties and schools of dentistry are some of the most complex and expensive real estate that a university will have in its property portfolio. Depending on the jurisdiction, the situation is further complicated by frequently having an academic component “the school” and a clinical component “the hospital” either managed jointly by the university or in partnership with another organisation, typically a healthcare provider. The replacement or modernising of clinical and academic facilities can be challenging in itself, let alone the challenge of leading a team of academic and professional colleagues through the process. This is further complicated by the fact that the replacement and modernisation of facilities, in contrast to the building of new facilities, requires education and clinical service to continue whilst the modernisation and replacement of facilities work is being carried out. This can feel like trying to change the wheels on a moving car. It can therefore be stressful and demanding on both staff and students alike and places quite a burden of responsibility on an academic leader.

2. Important things to get right

2.1. Vision

Developing a vision is an important first stage in the process. Form should follow function, so an early discussion with all stakeholders is important. Stakeholders include all staff, both academic and general and students on all programmes. In addition, it is important to include service provision partner organisations, regulators, the wider university and anyone else who might be impacted by or have an interest in the project.

2.2. Future-proofing

Modernisation of facilities presents an opportunity to re-evaluate core functions and to consider and plan what new activities and innovations new infra structure will allow you to develop. Don't fall into the trap of simply continuing existing activities in modernised facilities. It's important to use modernisation as an opportunity to re-evaluate the core objectives of your institution. What will these new facilities allow you to do that you are unable to do in the old facilities? This is the time for some ‘realistic’ blue skies thinking. Consider educational and service initiatives you might wish to develop, explore possibilities for wider collaboration across the university and what present and future infrastructure you will require to deliver this. If you are planning to grow student numbers, for example, think about the additional space, facilities and staff you will need to achieve this.

2.3. Buy-in

Leading colleagues and students through this process is rewarding. The objective of the process is to get a shared vision that the majority of colleagues will subscribe to. It is important to be realistic, as the likelihood of defining a vision that all colleagues will support is unfortunately slim. The author works to a pragmatic 80:20 rule, whereby if 80% of colleagues are happy with the direction of travel, this can be defined as a successful outcome. As an academic leader, the way forward can't be your vision alone, although it's important you drive and lead the process. To help give colleagues some ‘skin in the game’ and to develop a wider shared vision, the following approach is recommended.

E-mail address: paul.brunton@otago.ac.nz.

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2.4. Facilitator

For large projects, appoint an external facilitator, ideally someone who has experience of working with clinicians, to lead the process and brief all stakeholders on the intended direction of travel. This can be a challenging part of the process as different disciplines and departments present their individual needs and aspirations. There will be disagreement and some competition between disciplines and departments. A suitably qualified and experienced facilitator will manage such difficulties. This will involve a number of workshops, which you must attend, but take a back seat at, with all relevant stakeholders engaged in the process. This is where the temptation to lead should be resisted, as it mustn't be your vision, but a facilitated shared vision. The danger is if you stamp your vision on the process, then there is a risk that you will be the only person happy with result. The author is familiar with projects which have been developed in this way. Its problematic when it comes to commissioning the facilities if the academic leader is the only individual happy with the result! It is important therefore to insist that colleagues attend planning events. All too frequently colleagues will say they are too busy with teaching and clinical commitments to attend, but it's important that they make time and get involved. The mission-critical importance of a shared vision cannot be over emphasised.

2.5. Voices

It's important that everyone has a voice as part of the process and that the right voices are heard. In contrast to academics, dental nurses and auxiliaries, for example, know a lot more about how clinical areas should be designed and configured to run efficiently. Frequently, junior academic staff will have a more up to date knowledge of pedagogical innovations and the infrastructure that will be required to deliver success in the future. Students will have views about learning and social spaces and how they wish to learn, and clinical teachers will understand intimately the teaching requirements for clinical and simulation areas.

The collective thinking of the anticipated users of new facilities will inform the functional brief for the architects, who must understand in detail what you require of the space you are modernising or developing. This, in turn, will underpin the detailed design of the project and only at that point can an indicative budget be calculated.

2.6. Managing budgets

Clarity around the project budget is a milestone. This, however, can be a testing time, as in all likelihood the initial cost estimate will exceed the available budget. Assuming additional budget is not available, the project then enters a phase of the process known as value management. Leading colleagues through this phase of the project is difficult, as decisions will have to be made to prioritise what can be afforded: what is mission critical and what are the aspirational elements of the project that are currently beyond the available budget. Put another way this is a time to focus on the "must" and "should" haves, parking carefully the "might" haves, should more funding become available. Try and plan the facilities so that you can add or enhance them, albeit that it's difficult to predict when additional project funding may become available. Colleagues need to be carefully led through the process of value management as some will be winners and others losers in the process. The importance of developing the narrative and making decisions as a team cannot be over emphasised. The "why" aspect of decisions needs careful thought, because as the academic leader you will have to justify and, to a certain extent, "sell" these decisions to all stakeholders and the wider university. In the authors experience, if colleagues understand why difficult decisions have been made, they are much more accepting of the situation.

2.7. Narrative

Once agreement is reached, it's important that the vision is articulated coherently and consistently throughout the process to all colleagues, both internal and very importantly to those external to the school or faculty. The vision can become a powerful narrative when persuading your host university to fund the new facilities, not least as it provides a very important part of the business case development and approval process. In addition, its vital to make sure that the design of the facilities is informed by this vision. Focus on the benefits that the project will realise but be prepared for the benefits realisation to be tested when the project is concluded.

2.8. Shared leadership

It's important to share the leadership of the process with heads of department and discipline leaders. This ensures a balanced view and increases the likelihood of getting it right, not least because the leadership team has been involved in the process.

The use of external facilitation, at an early stage in the process, has already been alluded to. In addition, it's important to appoint a project manager who can lead and manage the project on your behalf. The relationships between you, the project manager and the facilitator are critical, as you must provide day to day academic leadership to the school, necessitating delegation of the day to day running of the project. Build around the project manager an Executive Planning Team who can support the project manager. Key to the success of this team is having a lead clinician involved to provide clinical advice to the team on your behalf. In addition, the university should establish a Project Steering Committee to provide oversight of the project from the wider university point of view. Such a committee is an important sounding board and support for the academic leadership as this is where problems and challenges, that you can't solve, can be escalated for discussion and resolution.

2.9. Stress and strains

The process of modernisation of any facility brings with it considerable stress and strains to both the staff and students. Staff find it difficult to continue to provide high quality education and clinical service whilst, in effect, working in the middle of a building site. In the author's experience, however, continued high quality education and clinical service will continue, in the most difficult of circumstances, provided colleagues subscribe to the vision and communication and support throughout the project is good. These are shared responsibilities, but strong leadership is required.

Students experience a different stress to that of staff. Their principal concern is that their educational experience might be compromised because of the disruption. They will need constant reassurance, as will any relevant regulators who, in the authors experience, will monitor significant building projects quite carefully to check that educational standards and the development of core competencies are maintained. Regular communication with regulators and other external bodies is therefore highly recommended.

2.10. Communications

Communication is in many ways the most important key to success in projects to modernise facilities. Think carefully about what you want and need to communicate, who the audiences are and what is the most effective way of communicating with different groups. In the author's opinion you can't have enough communication and you will need specialised assistance with this. It is strongly recommended, if you don't have access to a marketing and communications resource, that you access some communication expertise and cost this into the project.

Experts in communication will advise on the best forms of communications for each audience, the frequency of communication and the importance of key messages principally the vision you wish to articulate. They will also deal with urgent communications, as and when the project encounters a problem, whatever that might be, especially if authorised to issue urgent messages on your behalf, if you are away from the University.

2.11. Decanting

A frequent issue with modernisation projects is the need to decant staff, students and physical facilities to other parts of the campus. This may be some distance from the main facility. Keeping in touch with colleagues and students at some distance is something you must invest time and effort in. Frequent gatherings that bring staff together, a monthly meeting is recommended at the very least, coupled with occasional face to face visits to decanted facilities. Social events with all staff are also important; this is money well spent. Use these events to remind colleagues of the shared vision, get feedback, listen to the issues that colleagues are having and report back on progress on addressing them at the next meeting. Inevitably you will not be able to be all things to all people, but most things you can fix, and colleagues do accept an explanation as to why other requests can't be accommodated. The author has found it helpful to have an agenda for these meetings, with the project manager providing a report on progress and the next steps for the project. Use these meetings to celebrate milestones, concentrating on positive messages.

In addition, meet with the student body regularly. Lunchtime meetings with the student committee, with some catering, are usually appreciated. Reassure the students about the integrity of their academic experience, tell them honestly about the challenges you are facing. You will be surprised that they will want to help you—it's their academic alma mater. Whilst current students might not benefit from the modernisation process, it pays to remind them that the standing of their dental school will be enhanced and they personally will benefit when they return to study at the postgraduate level or when their children follow them, as frequently happens, to train for the profession.

2.12. Commissioning

Commissioning, in the author's experience, is a part of the process that doesn't get the attention it deserves at an early stage in a modernisation project. Once detailed design has been completed and the project is underway, task your Executive Planning Team with starting to plan the commissioning of the new facilities. Think about any change management required, for example, do job descriptions need amending, or do new roles need to be developed. A good example of this is the transition to electronic patient records as part of the modernisation of new facilities. If you are incorporating new technologies into your

facilities, you need to think about training (retraining) of staff and students. Try to align training with the commissioning date for the new facilities. It's better to have any training required provided just before the new facilities open. If the training is too far in advance, frequently the training has been forgotten before the new facilities are operational. This is less than ideal and possibly a waste of valuable resources. This is also a time to lead by example, attending training yourself. In the process you can remind colleagues of the shared vision and the need to embrace new ways of working.

Resistance to change can be problematic. Some colleagues can be slow to embrace or may completely oppose any changes required, particularly if job descriptions or staffing levels need to be changed; for example, reducing the number of administrative staff when moving to electronic patient records. Support from human resources is needed in such matters to guide you through your relevant employment and contractual processes.

Consider also obtaining assistance and expertise in change management to facilitate commissioning. Training of key staff in change management processes such as ADKAR [1] and PROSCI [2] will, in all probability, in the authors experience, proven helpful.

A phased opening to your new facilities is recommended, as it's highly likely that you will encounter problems with new equipment and processes not all working on day one. This is normal and should be anticipated. Support of colleagues at this stage of the process is again important. Be visible and don't be afraid of rolling up your sleeves and pitching in. It's appreciated by colleagues and demonstrates good leadership.

3. Final remarks

Successful leadership during the modernisation of dental facilities is demonstrated by:

- 1 Developing a shared vision for the project which colleagues will buy into
- 2 Appointing the right people to support the project and any required external support to ensure success
- 3 Regular communication with all relevant stakeholders
- 4 Considering commissioning in parallel with building the new facilities
- 5 Investing in the training and development to ensure the new facilities are successful

References

- [1] J.M. Hiatt, ADKAR: How to Implement Successful Change in Our Personal Lives and Professional Careers, Prosci Research, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA, 2006.
- [2] T. Creasey, R. Stise (Eds.), Best Practices in Change Management, Prosci Research, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA, 2016.