

3 Roadblocks to Setting Useful Goals in Strategic Planning

Having reviewed over a hundred university strategic plans, EAB experts have found that most fail to set “useful” goals, goals that can galvanise concerted action toward institutional outcomes.

Target-setting is difficult in any industry, but it is uniquely challenging in higher education. The ultimate goal is to translate high-level strategic vision into explicit objectives with time-bound measures for progress. However, apprehension about failing to meet “Moon Shot” goals, lack of consensus on relevant metrics, and the challenge of responding to market volatility create barriers at many institutions.

Outlined below are three common roadblocks to setting useful goals. Each of these “mistakes” has understandable root causes. Eliminating them is conceptually straightforward but politically challenging. And yet, *not* eliminating them will make it impossible to achieve your institutional objectives.

SETTING UNREALISTIC GOALS

Ambitious goals can be effective if backed up by a clear strategy, but lacking that, they breed cynicism and burnout among staff being asked to achieve the impossible.

Examples:

- “We will grow total enrolment by 20% over the next five years.”
- “We will be among the Top 10 universities in *THE* World University Rankings in three years.”

Solution: Look at historical data and future projections for your institution and your competitors and ask yourself:

- What would we have to assume for us to hit our target?
- Are those assumptions reasonable?
- If we are projecting a dramatic change in our performance, what strategy do we believe will achieve that change?

PREFERRING ACTIVITIES OVER OUTCOMES

An institutional plan should not be expected to outline in detail every aspect of the institution’s strategy, but it needs to set clear goals rather than call for more plans.

Examples:

- “Create a plan for increased internationalisation.”
- “Fund additional professional development for staff.”

Solution: A good plan frames a small number of outcomes and suggests the most impactful activities to accomplish them. In reviewing your goals, ask yourself:

- Is this goal a means to an end or an end in itself? (e.g., Would we be satisfied with creating an internationalisation plan if it led to no other results?)
- If it is a means to an end, is that the most essential end? (e.g., Is improving our brand one of our top 3-4 institutional goals, or is it to improve the brand to increase enrolment?)
- Is this the best means to that end?

SELECTING UNMEASURABLE GOALS

Vague or generic phrases show up so often in strategic plans because the writers are more focused on producing a document that no one will object to. The price of consensus is ambiguity and a lack of strategic focus.

Examples:

- “Increase academic excellence.”
- “Become a student-centric university.”

Solution: The planning process must push decision-makers to clarify the specific goals they need to accomplish.

As you review the goals, ask yourself:

- How will we know if we have achieved the plan’s goals?
- How will we determine if a proposed action is more or less likely to help us progress toward the goal?
- How will we ensure that the metrics used are accurate and up to date?

