



# ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION



*A Guide to Becoming a High-Performing Educational Institution*

***This Quick Insight explores the transformation of higher educational institutions into High-Performing Educational Institutions using a unique, evidence-based framework. It outlines six key building blocks, including strategic positioning and organizational strengthening, essential for achieving excellence in both educational and managerial aspects. The practicality of this approach is demonstrated through the case study of Hue University of Agriculture and Forestry. This Quick Insight is particularly valuable for educational leaders and policymakers focused on elevating institutional performance amidst current educational challenges.***

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

-  **Evidence-Based Approach:** The article proposes a scientifically-backed framework for transforming higher educational institutions into High-Performing Educational Institution.
-  **Six Building Blocks:** The framework is built on six key building blocks —Defining the Strategic Position, Enhancing the Educational Aspect, Goal-Setting, Strengthening the Internal Organization, Implementation, and Monitoring—that serve as a comprehensive roadmap for institutional improvement.
-  **Strategic Alignment:** The framework ensures that all levels of the organization, from senior management to individual units in the institution, are aligned with the institution's overall strategy. This is crucial for effective implementation and achieving the institution's mission.
-  **Balanced Focus:** Unlike traditional approaches that focus mainly on educational quality, this framework emphasizes the importance of both educational and organizational excellence for achieving high performance.
-  **Practical Application:** The case of Hue University of Agriculture and Forestry illustrates how the framework can be applied in real-world settings, making it not just theoretical but also practical.
-  **Iterative and Adaptable:** The framework is designed to be flexible, allowing for ongoing monitoring and adjustments, making it adaptable to the unique challenges and opportunities faced by individual institutions.



## INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the focus in educational research has been on enhancing the quality of teaching in educational institutions. While this is crucial for an institution's development, it is only part of the story. After all, in recent years, educational institutions have faced new challenges. They are dealing with an influx of students, both domestic and international, while grappling with tighter budgets due to economic constraints. They need to manage a growing student population, expand facilities, maintain high teaching standards, secure funding, improve student employability, and innovate their teaching and management processes. This has put a strain on resources, forcing educational institutions to do more with less.

Educational institutions that excel in this challenging environment are termed High-Performing Educational Institutions. Research indicates that these institutions focus not just on teaching but also on organizational and managerial aspects. Both need to be top-notch for an educational institution to truly excel. While there is a lot of discussion on how to improve these aspects, there is no clear agreement on the best approach. That is why this article proposes an evidence-based management approach to building high-performance educational institutions. We have identified six key building blocks in this approach.

## THE SIX BUILDING BLOCKS

### *Building Block 1: Defining the Strategic Position*

The first step in creating a High-Performing Educational Institution is to clearly define its strategic position. This involves making key decisions about the institution's focus and direction. A well-defined strategic position helps the educational institution communicate what it stands for and what it offers, ensuring a coherent set of activities. The strategic position is shaped by choices in four key areas, referred to as the 4Ps:

- **Product:** The curriculum offered by the institution.
- **Price:** Tuition fees and available funding options.
- **Promotion:** How the curriculum and institution are marketed.
- **Place:** The physical and/or virtual spaces where academic programs are delivered.



**Building Block 2: Enhancing the Educational Aspect**

Once the strategic position is defined, it directly influences the educational offerings of the educational institution. This means revisiting and strengthening the curriculum and the way students are serviced. While this article focuses primarily on the organizational and managerial aspects of becoming a High-Performing Educational Institution, the educational side is intrinsically linked and cannot be overlooked.

**Building Block 3: Setting the Goal**

After defining the strategic position, the next step is to translate this into specific goals that permeate all levels of the organization. Educational institutions can use various frameworks to set these goals, such as the Balanced Scorecard, the EFQM model, or the Malcolm Baldrige Award model. Some institutions may opt for frameworks specifically designed for the educational sector, like the U-map. A commonly used approach is the Performance Measurement Pyramid, which breaks down the institution’s strategy into objectives, critical success factors, and key performance indicators for each organizational level (as shown in Figure 1).



Figure 1: The Performance Measurement Pyramid



The Performance Measurement Pyramid breaks down into five essential components:

- 1. Mission and Strategy:** The institution needs to define its mission by answering, "What do we aim to achieve?" The strategy is formulated by answering, "How will we achieve our mission?"
- 2. Strategic Objectives and Indicators:** To make the strategy actionable, the institution sets strategic objectives. These are measured using critical success factors and key performance indicators, which senior management uses for tracking progress.
- 3. Unit Objectives and Indicators:** Different organizational units translate the strategic objectives into specific goals for their areas. These unit objectives are also measured and tracked using their own set of indicators. It is crucial that these align with the institution's overall strategy; if not, they need to be revised.
- 4. Key Processes and Indicators:** The institution has essential processes that help achieve its objectives. These can be direct, affecting the results immediately, or indirect, essential for ongoing operations. Both types are monitored using specific indicators by the managers responsible for those processes.
- 5. Environmental Factors:** External elements that might impact the institution are also considered. These could be things out of the institution's control but could significantly affect its performance. Managers need to account for these when setting performance goals.

Each component is designed to ensure that the institution is aligned from top to bottom, making it easier to track progress and make adjustments as needed.

#### ***Building Block 4: Strengthening the Internal Organization***

The strategic position also impacts the internal workings of the educational institution. To successfully achieve its goals, the institution must assess its current capabilities and identify areas for improvement. While various models exist for this purpose, many lack scientific validation. One exception is the High Performance Organisation (HPO) Framework, which has been rigorously tested in practice.



The HPO Framework identifies five factors and 35 underlying characteristics that contribute to high performance:

- 1. Management Quality:** HPOs have reliable, trustworthy, and committed managers who communicate values and strategies effectively.
- 2. Openness and Action-Oriented:** These organizations foster an open culture where employee input is valued, mistakes are seen as learning opportunities, and there is a focus on dialogue and knowledge exchange.
- 3. Long-term Orientation:** HPOs build long-term partnerships and create a secure workplace, prioritizing internal promotions.
- 4. Continuous Improvement and Renewal:** These organizations are always improving and innovating, focusing on their core competencies while outsourcing non-core activities.
- 5. Employee Quality:** HPOs have a diverse and complementary team, with employees who are resilient, skilled, and accountable.

Research shows a direct, positive relationship between the HPO factors and the performance of the organization. Educational institutions can assess their performance using the HPO questionnaire, which helps identify areas for improvement.

### ***Building Block 5: Implementing the actions***

During this phase, the educational institution organizes and prioritizes the actions developed in the previous building blocks. The first step is to identify which HPO factors are addressed by these actions, as each action should aim to improve at least one of these factors. Next, the nature of the strategic actions needs to be determined.

### ***Building Block 6: Monitoring progress***

Finally, the effectiveness of the implemented actions must be monitored. Various tools exist for performance management, with the Balanced Scorecard being commonly used in many sectors, including education.



## BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER: A ROADMAP

Figure 2 provides a comprehensive overview of the six building blocks that together form the roadmap for transforming an educational institution into a High-Performing Educational Institution.

- 1. Defining the Strategic Position (Building Block 1):** This is the starting point that influences the activities in the subsequent building blocks. It sets the direction for strengthening the educational side of the institution (Building Block 2) and for setting specific goals (Building Block 3).
- 2. Enhancing the Educational Aspect (Building Block 2):** Although not discussed in detail in this article, this block is crucial as it directly impacts the institution's goals. Changes or improvements in the educational setup will naturally lead to new or revised goals.
- 3. Setting the Goals (Building Block 3):** The strategic position is translated into actionable goals. These goals are also influenced by any changes or improvements made in Building Block 2.
- 4. Strengthening the Internal Organization (Building Block 4):** The goals set in Building Block 3 are aligned with the institution's current capabilities. This ensures that the internal organization is robust enough to achieve the set goals.
- 5. Implementing the actions (Building Block 5):** This is where all the actions identified in Building Blocks 2, 3, and 4 are collected, prioritized, and organized into a classification matrix.
- 6. Monitoring progress (Building Block 6):** The final step involves tracking the execution of the strategic actions. Based on the monitoring results, adjustments may be made to the actions in the classification matrix.

The flow between these building blocks is not strictly linear. For example, the dotted line from Building Block 6 back to Building Block 5 indicates that the process is iterative. Monitoring may reveal the need for adjustments, leading to a revisit of the implementation phase.



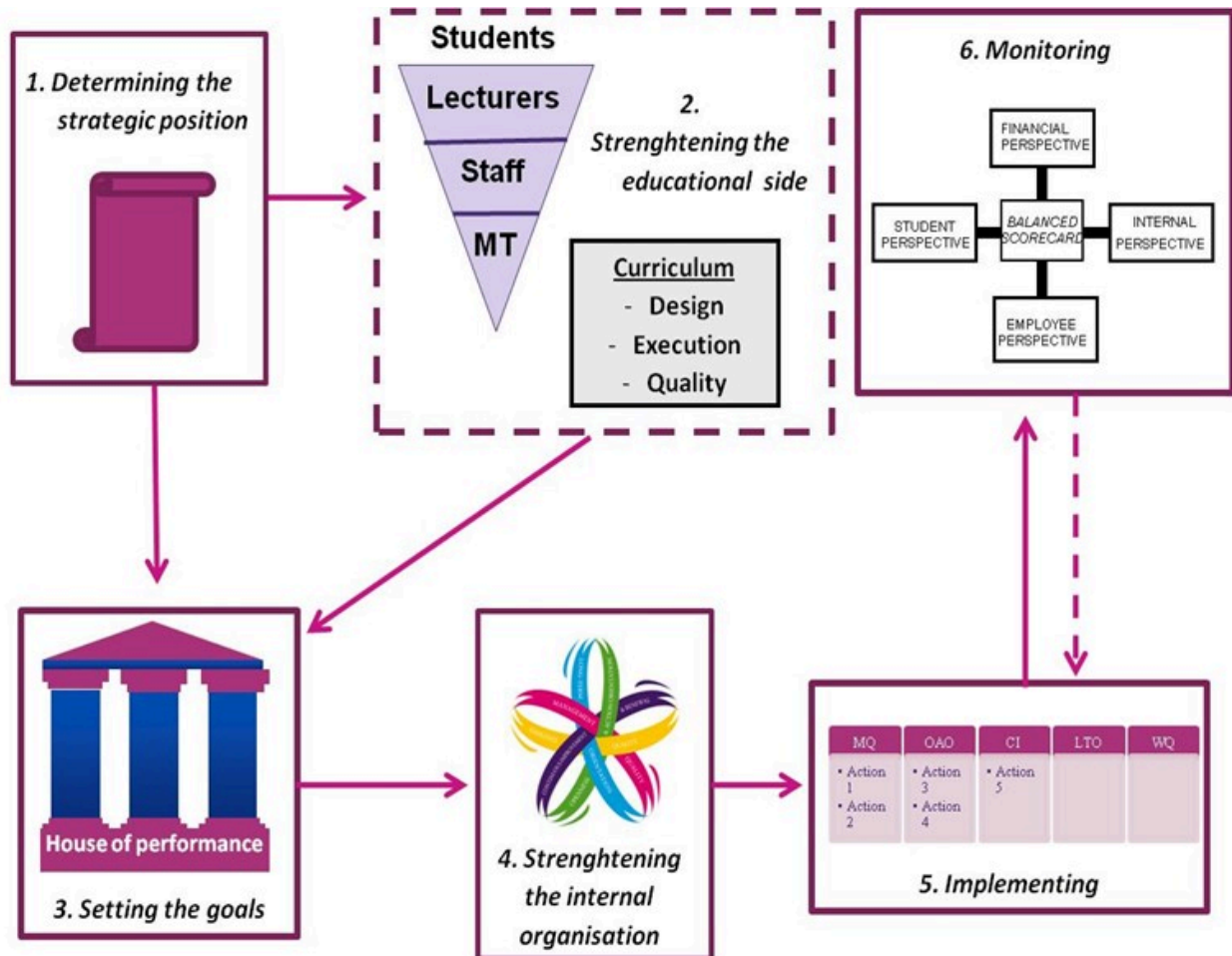


Figure 2: The building blocks of the development framework for high-performance higher educational institutions

## PUTTING THE FRAMEWORK TO THE TEST AT HUE UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY

### *The University's Background*

Hue University of Agriculture and Forestry, located in Hue City, Vietnam, is one of the country's leading agricultural universities specializing in life sciences. With an annual enrollment of around 1700 full-time and 500 to 700 part-time students, the university offers undergraduate and graduate programs in various fields like agriculture, forestry, and rural development. The institution also collaborates extensively with various stakeholders in Vietnamese society, including government ministries and labor market representatives.





### *The Challenge*

At the time of the study, the university was in the midst of organizational improvements. Management realized that their existing monitoring and evaluation systems were insufficient for the university's growth ambitions. A key issue was the inadequate planning of resources and limited development of the employees. Moreover, the university's primary goal—producing employable graduates—was at risk due to insufficient labor market analysis. This was particularly worrying given the Vietnamese government's decision to establish new universities, intensifying competition and impacting Hue University's enrollment figures negatively.

### *The Development Approach*

The Maastricht School of Management and Wageningen University in the Netherlands were tasked with enhancing the university's institutional and leadership capabilities. This initiative was part of a larger project funded by Nuffic, aimed at integrating climate change concerns into agricultural curricula in Northern Vietnam.

The project began with a series of three workshops for the university's leadership:

- 1. First Workshop:** This session aimed to create awareness about the strategic positioning process. It was a crucial step as the university's planning was traditionally operational rather than strategic. A 'House of Performance' was developed as part of this workshop.
- 2. Second Workshop:** This workshop focused on implementing the university's strategic plan and developing key performance indicators. Data for applying the HPO Framework were also collected during this session.
- 3. Third Workshop:** The final workshop dealt with the implementation and monitoring activities required for the university to become a high performance institution.



By systematically applying the six building blocks of the high-performance framework, Hue University of Agriculture and Forestry aimed to transform itself into a high-performance higher educational institution. The workshops served as a structured approach to enhance the university's strategic capabilities, align its internal organization, and set it on a path to high performance.


## CONCLUSION


This Quick Insight outlines a robust, evidence-based framework for developing educational institutions into High-Performing Educational Institutions. Through six building blocks, the approach addresses both educational and organizational aspects, offering a guide for achieving excellence. The case study of Hue City University demonstrates the practical applicability of the framework. By following this structured approach, educational institutions are capable of overcoming complex challenges and, thus setting themselves on a course for sustainable success.




# ARE YOU READY TO TRANSFORM YOUR ORGANIZATION INTO AN HPO?

Then insight is essential. Our [HPO diagnosis](#) (short validated questionnaire and in-depth interviews) provides you with this insight. You will get a clear picture of the current situation within your organization or department and receive practical improvement themes that managers and employees can tackle together. The HPO diagnosis is not just a mirror; it is a compass that guides you in taking crucial steps to achieve your strategic goals and become an HPO. Do you want to elevate your organization to a higher level? The HPO Center can support you in this. We combine over fifteen years of practical experience with hundreds of organizations worldwide with scientific research to provide you with the knowledge and focus that result in demonstrably better performance. HPO is not a project, but a mentality that makes your organization more resilient, flexible, and future-proof. It helps you identify the 'hard nuts' and provides a basis for measuring the effectiveness of the HPO transition. It also strengthens the solidarity within your organization (or part of it) by identifying and addressing shared, supported improvement themes.

 **Customer Focus:** An HPO is invaluable to its customers. The primary goal is to boost customer value and satisfaction.

 **Employee Engagement:** Aiming for high performance re-energizes your team. It leads to increased job satisfaction as HPOs concentrate on what genuinely drives organizational success. It's not a new project; it's a new mindset and approach to work.

 **Adaptability:** An HPO is designed to evolve. It thrives in our ever-changing, competitive world, making your organization more resilient and future-proof. This is achieved through ongoing adjustments, learning, and improvements.

## Our Offer

- ✓ Customized [HPO Diagnoses](#)
- ✓ Interactive [Lectures and Workshops](#) on the HPO Framework
- ✓ Comprehensive Interviews, [Articles](#), [Books](#), and Networking Opportunities
- ✓ Guidance in Implementation Led by our [HPO Experts](#)



## Why choose the HPO Center?



### Experience & Credibility

With over 15 years of practical experience combined with rigorous scientific research, the HPO Center is at the global forefront of organizational improvement advice.



### Global Knowledge Center

Based in the Netherlands, the HPO Center collaborates with partners, including in emerging markets, with the aim of fulfilling its mission to improve organizations worldwide.



### Unmatched Expertise

HPO doesn't stop at diagnosing organizations. We also explore, investigate, and delve deeply into related topics such as High Performance Leadership, Silo-busting, Futurizing, Social Value Creation, and High Performance Business Ecosystems—evidence of our commitment to continually expand the HPO universe.



### More than Just an Organization

With a passion for inspiring, stimulating, and networking, the HPO Center is not just an organization; it's a movement. Through scientific and professional publications (all freely available at [hpocenter.com](http://hpocenter.com) and [www.hpocenter.nl](http://www.hpocenter.nl)), books, seminars, and roundtables, we continually disseminate the knowledge of the HPO Framework and unite professionals interested in continuous improvement and excellence.

## Considering an HPO transformation?

The HPO Center is ready to support and guide you on your journey toward high performance. Contact us today for an inspiring conversation or to experience an HPO workshop. Together, we'll redefine your performance.



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