

Framing the Future

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“The Heart of Leadership: Preparing Leaders for Tomorrow”

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Introduction

The title of this conference, ‘Framing the Future’ can be interpreted in different ways. The first implies that Ministries of Education will frame the future of universities’ activities through their national objectives and policies for higher education. A second interpretation suggests that environmental conditions – economic, social, technological and political – will be the drivers of higher education strategies and university activities, including research, teaching and service agendas. A third possibility is that higher education institutions themselves will frame their own futures and the future of the societies which they inhabit. Extending this interpretation further, universities may also increasingly contribute to global development. It is the third interpretation that is particularly relevant to this paper, although all three are important.

The paper begins with some starting propositions about the role of universities in the 21st century since this is the context in which university leadership will be exercised. As leadership researchers appreciate, the nature of leadership cannot be understood without reference to context. Indeed, a common definition of leadership characterises this social process as a dynamic relationship between leaders, followers and the particular circumstances and contexts in which they operate (Hughes et al, 1999). These starting propositions point to the need for a step-change in leadership both in theory and in practice. There are already some signals of the direction in which research on leadership in higher education is moving and in this paper, I suggest some pointers to changes in practice. There are also clear implications for the development of leaders and leadership.

Starting propositions: the context for university leadership in the 21st century

The 21st century brings new and difficult challenges

Within this first proposition, there are a number of different elements. An important and significant one is globalisation – meaning the flow of information, ideas, technology, finance and people across the world. While there are different interpretations of globalisation as well as positive and negative effects arising from it, few now doubt its reality or its impact in making the world a different place. Globalisation has increased the levels of connectivity between countries, sectors, organisations – and as we can see in the present global recession – between economies. Universities are already involved in globalisation and are likely to

become more so through the education they provide to students as ‘global citizens’, in their research and enterprise activities and in their own institutional positioning in global markets and league tables. National agencies are also increasingly involved in global agendas and AKEPT’s emergence and higher education development agenda is but one such example.

For some, globalisation is also linked to serious challenges that are difficult for individual countries or regions to resolve. These challenges include climate change, shortages of natural resources such as water and fossil fuels, and volatile weather conditions that can bring devastating damage to cities and regions. The global demand for energy requires an ongoing search for new natural resources as well as the development and deployment of new technologies. In large parts of the world, poverty, conflicts and the need for basic education also present significant challenges. In addition, the pace of change appears to many to be accelerating, driven by developments in a range of technologies from Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to biotechnology, and from the interconnections between technological developments and other features of globalisation. These impacts and effects of globalisation require collective solutions and partnerships between countries, higher education institutions and agencies offer useful mechanisms.

Expectations of higher education are rising

Governments, parents, employers and students alike have rising expectations of what higher education can or should deliver. Institutions are expected to engage much more closely with local and community issues as well as contribute to regional and national development. In many cases, universities and colleges play an active role in leading regeneration projects or contributing to the re-building of transition economies and societies. Through their research as well as their other educational activities, they are also actively engaged in seeking solutions to the global challenges described above. The European Union at regional level, for example, has set out the new expectations for universities, both in terms of their role ‘in the Europe of Knowledge’ (EC, COM 2003) and in how they need to modernise their structures and systems in order to deliver the expectations that stakeholders now have of them (EC, COM 2006). These Communications argue the European Union needs a healthy and flourishing university system with a focus on excellence in order to underpin a knowledge society. In addition, the European Council has called on European systems of education to become a ‘world reference’ by 2012.

Students’ expectations of higher education are also changing and becoming more diverse, just as there is growing diversity in the population of students and their needs, interests and life-styles. This can only increase as the much heralded life-long learning agenda gets seriously underway. For example, in one Australian study, researchers noted that within the period 1984-2000, the number of students working while studying had increased from 49% to 72% and the hours students were working in a week had increased from 5 hours per week to 17 hours (Long and Hayden, 2001:98). Twentieth century distinctions between part-time and full-time education will break down in the twenty-first century and new models of delivery will need to be found.

A number of market surveys have also been undertaken to examine the different aspirations and attitudes of ‘Generation Y’ young people (those born in the last two decades of the twentieth century) – within advanced and developing economies - and these point to some interesting features (NAS Insights, 2006; Macleod, 2008). For example, these young people, while ethnically diverse, often have similar expectations; they are used to ‘customising their experience’ through technology devices of all kinds, they expect high performance and they are also ‘high maintenance’ in terms of the ability to sustain their levels of satisfaction. They seek collaborative learning environments, intellectual challenge and adequate support for learning, as well as sound preparation for employment.

Systems of higher education are changing: what kind of systems do we need?

Higher education systems around the world are changing, under pressure from governments, students and other environmental drivers. China, for example, is investing more resources in higher education than any other country in the world, and there is large-scale investment also in India and the Middle East. Malaysia and Singapore, as well as Dubai, are aiming to become regional hubs for higher education, attracting international students from the region and beyond to their countries. In Europe, the target is to develop the European Higher Education and Research Areas by 2010 to promote student and staff mobility and build co-operation in research and education across countries.

While national governments are investing in their public systems, encouraging trans-national education and supporting private institutions, there is a parallel development in for-profit higher education provision. New providers such as Kaplan, Laureate International Universities and the Apollo Group have created and grown a large market among working adults seeking new skills and qualifications (CVCP, 2000). Some providers such as Kaplan, Into, Study Group and others now offer a range of educational services that are sought after by public universities (such as marketing, Foundation courses and English language provision) and they are entering into partnerships with UK universities to deliver these services. These providers have much to teach public institutions about ‘customer-focused education’. In the future, the boundaries between ‘public and private’ higher education will become even less sharp as public-sector institutions provide ‘private goods’ and private bodies seek to provide public goods at a cheaper rate to governments (King, 2008).

The speed of change in public systems of higher education may need to accelerate under the pressures of changing student expectations, developments in learning technologies and competitive pressures from other countries and for-profit education businesses. Indeed, governments may need to ask more often than in the past about the kind of higher education system that they need ‘to frame the future?’ I offer some suggestions:

- Higher education systems with multiple types of provision
- Systems that contain elements of competition (to enhance quality) and collaboration (to enhance student choice and to encourage innovation)
- Connected systems, horizontally and vertically, with flexible progression routes to attain different levels of qualification and different kinds of learning experience

- ‘Borderless systems’ that are inter-linked with other sectors and that encourage lateral mobility between sectors
- Systems that support independent and accountable higher education institutions with sufficient freedom to work hard on the agenda of ‘framing the future’.

Within these higher education systems, there are already many different models of higher education institution. These include: multi-campus and multi-disciplinary institutions that teach and undertake research in locations across the world (Monash University is an example); universities joined in regional systems with a large number of different levels of institution (as in the US and India); regional and trans-national consortia of universities; for-profit educational businesses; ‘multi-discipline campuses as in the Education Cities of the Middle East region; corporate universities, virtual universities and distance learning mega-universities such as those in the UK, Turkey and India with over 100,000 students. This evolution, or perhaps revolution, in higher education systems and institutional models has implications for leadership at many levels.

Do we need a step-change in leadership?

The context for 21st century leadership of universities and colleges is, as we have seen, dynamic and volatile, requiring considerable agility within higher education institutions if they are to be able to survive and prosper in this environment. Does this context also suggest a need for a step-change in leadership? I would argue that it does; 21st century leadership needs to be qualitatively different in style and approach, with more diversity of leaders to match the range of types of institutions needed and the changing population of students. System-level leadership will also need to evolve to match environmental changes and the requirement to develop more autonomous institutions. In addition, relying on the skills and qualities of individual leaders alone, will not be enough to tackle the range of challenges that face institutions and systems. In an influential analysis of ‘futures’ studies’, the author argued that organisational leadership in the 21st century would be more difficult and more burdensome, because of the wide scope of challenges facing leaders, the wide range of expectations of leadership and the need to conduct leadership within the full gaze of the media and the public (Tate, 2000).

There is already some evidence of a shift in the direction and focus of leadership research (Kezar et al, 2006). Twentieth century research concentrated on the study of those in positions of leadership, the designated leaders, focusing on them as individuals and exploring their skills, qualities and styles, as well as how they exercised leadership through different forms of power and hierarchy. A dominant theme in twentieth century leadership research was a search for universal leadership characteristics. The shift in direction of recent studies is towards different conceptions of leadership examined through different theoretical frameworks. Non-hierarchical and collective approaches to leadership are explored, where there is mutual power and influence between people at different levels of an organisation and where context and process are all important to the understanding of leadership effectiveness. While there will be differences across cultures, to some extent, global interconnections may influence a closer alignment across cultures than in the past.

There is also some evidence of changes in practice, building either on theory or on the lessons of experience, or both. A key distinction is now made between ‘leader’ (describing either an individual who exercises formal or informal leadership) and ‘leadership’ as a collective responsibility. In management, teaching and research teams, leadership in this sense requires a level of mutual accountability for shared goals as well as individual delivery of specific outputs. There is a further dimension to ‘collective responsibility’ that is evident in organisations with large numbers of professionals who are used to exercising considerable autonomy in their work and independent judgement within their professional practice. Universities are archetypal ‘organisations of professionals’, so successful leadership needs to recognise the reality of ‘mutual power’ and the requirement for ‘mutual influence’. As one higher education researcher observed in his five-year study of presidential leadership in US higher education, ‘good followers make good leaders’ (Birnbaum, 1992).

The importance of context is recognised in the notion of ‘leadership fit’ whereby there needs to be a match between particular leadership skills, experience and track-record and the history, location and stage of development of the organisation in which leadership is exercised. 21st century leaders also need to operate across boundaries both within the institution (or system), so as to build teams and lead cross-functional and cross-disciplinary projects, and externally, to build bridges into communities and to create and draw value from networks of relationships across sectors and countries. Leadership needs to be ‘engaged and connected’ and leaders need to be able to exercise leadership ‘beyond authority’ since the formal power and influence that they carry inside the organisation is of much less value, or even no value, outside it. Acting as a representative of the university and seeking resources and benefits for it requires a form of leadership that recognises that all external relationships are negotiable.

The particular context of recession that is affecting many parts of the developed and developing world in the first decade of the 21st century has served to highlight another aspect of leadership that is captured in the title of a book: ‘Leadership and the Quest for Integrity’ (Badaracco and Ellsworth, 1989). Ethical leadership is required in many organisations and sectors and universities will be expected both to act as role models for ethical leadership and to be involved in training and developing future ‘ethical leaders’ through their business schools and wider education of the leaders of tomorrow. Closely related to this quest for integrity is the expectation that leaders (or the leadership cadre in institutions) will focus attention on core values and will also help to interpret the signals of change in ways that are meaningful to staff, students and stakeholders alike. This expectation of ‘leadership as the management of attention’ and ‘the management of meaning’ is captured in Warren Bennis’ and colleagues’ studies of exceptional leaders (Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Bennis, 1989).

The kinds of skills and capabilities that will be required of leaders are wide-ranging. What kind of skills will be necessary? Job descriptions and person specifications for higher education leaders in the UK give some indications of skills’ requirements, and consultancy work with leaders suggests others, for example:

- Skills in leadership, governance, management and administration
- Technical, financial and inter-personal skills
- High-level cognitive skills

- Imagination, curiosity and lateral thinking
- Listening and learning
- Organisational analysis and understanding (knowing how to ‘get things done’)
- Ability to engage and connect with a range of stakeholders, groups and cultures
- Energy and the ability to focus attention
- A ‘moral compass’

Within the UK’s Top Management Programme (mounted by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education), some of the new requirements for leaders and leadership are already being reflected in the approach to leadership development. For example, in the 360 degree review process that is used to provide feedback to individuals on their leadership behaviours and impact on others, new elements have been added to try to capture the wide range of characteristics and capabilities that are needed for 21st century leadership. The original model of ‘Four C’s Leadership’ developed by Azure Consulting has been amended and extended to a ‘Five C’s’ model. The new framework includes the following dimensions:

Credibility (using depth and breadth of knowledge, experience and achievements to operate as a major decision-making force; gaining attention, support and backing of peers through ability to command respect; building strong relationships with key stakeholders to gain their support and backing; reputation as a dependable colleague).

Capability (seeing the future; decision-making; planning the way ahead; managing implementation; optimising team effectiveness; creating organisational influence).

Character (including Integrity – role-modelling ethical standards and building trust; Resilience – demonstrating courage in adversity, persistence and flexibility to adapt to different circumstances and situations; and Distinctiveness – creating positive energy; projecting individuality and catalysing excellence).

Collaborative management (ability to manage the politics of organisational life constructively; gauging the organisational mood shrewdly; positively using differences in a group as a source of advantage; ability to manage difficult negotiations).

Cultural sensitivity (displaying tolerance in relation to different values and beliefs; adapting inter-personal style in relation to the expectations of other cultures; connecting easily to others from different backgrounds and life-styles; taking a lead in promoting the diversity of perspectives arising from cultural differences).

This new framework provides a wide-ranging assessment and review of leadership capabilities. Combined with other elements of the programme such as individual coaching, facilitated action learning, group work, institutional projects, study visits, briefing, reading and personal reflection, individuals are offered insights into their own leadership and its impact and their contributions to collective leadership. Feedback can be sought from peers, team members and line managers as well as external clients, sponsors or other stakeholders.

The Leadership Foundation also commissions research and development projects to investigate the strategic challenges facing institutions, to examine how roles and careers in higher education are changing and how leadership, management and governance are evolving. This research is disseminated widely and is available through the Foundations's web-site (www.lfhe.ac.uk/research).

Growing Talent

A major responsibility of today's leadership is to recruit and develop talented people both for the institution's own activities and for positions of leadership in the economy and society. In many countries, the academic work force is becoming more diverse and multi-national, for example, a survey undertaken by the Association of Commonwealth Universities in 2006 reported that on average, 12% of academic staff were 'foreign nationals' (ACU, 2006). A related study in the UK (UUK, 2007) reported a higher percentage in 2005-6; 19% of academic staff were non-UK nationals, while 27% of all academic staff appointed in the same year were non-UK nationals. The main countries of origin of these staff were Germany, China, the USA, Ireland, Italy and France. The majority of the staff were aged between 25 and 35 (63%) and were principally lecturers and researchers (67%).

Other sectors also demonstrate changes in their talent pool and these changes are prompting questions about the motivations and career aspirations of the future workforce. PriceWaterhouseCoopers, for example, undertook a survey of 3,000 of its new graduate recruits in three countries, the US, UK and China in 2007 in order to understand better the kinds of working environments that were needed in future and the demands that would be made on the capabilities and capacities of human resource professionals (PWC, 2007). The authors of the research developed three different scenarios as a means of describing the potential variation in working environments and approaches to talent management. The scenarios were set around two axes: the vertical axis presented a continuum from fragmentation (of companies and organisations) to integration (of companies and organisations) and the horizontal axis presented a continuum from collectivism (in organisational cultures) to individualism in these cultures. The three scenarios were described as 'Small is Beautiful' (the Orange World), 'Corporate is King' (the Blue World) and 'Organisations Care' (the Green World). The Orange World is a scenario in which there are many collaborative networks between organisations and sectors, and considerable professional specialisation. In the Blue World, big company capitalism is predominant and organisations grow in size; and in the Green World, social responsibility dominates the agenda.

While these scenarios are imaginative creations of what might develop in future, they are useful in pointing to differences in approaches to talent management. In the Blue World of large corporations, people are graded early and take control of their careers. Employees are demanding of their employers and in turn, reap development and financial benefits. In the Orange World, individuals are responsible for skills development and seek high-grade specialisms and rewarding environments. In the Green World, organisations take a holistic approach to developing people, based both on personal development and impact on the world and this produces greater employee engagement. Universities are different environments to business corporations or small and medium-sized enterprises, however, their employees may have aspirations

that resemble those expressed by the respondents in the PWC survey. The 'Millennials' (ie those entering the workforce in 2000) may be very different in their career hopes and directions than the generations now occupying leadership roles in universities. What is clear from both the higher education surveys and the PWC survey is that to recruit and retain talented people, organisations, including universities, will need to develop leadership behaviours and contexts that value cultural diversity.

Conditions for Innovation

The combination of strategic challenges facing universities, the more turbulent and dynamic environments in which they must operate and increasingly demanding stakeholders and clients place a premium on creating innovative approaches to leadership and organisational development to support higher education's change agenda. Both AKEPT and the UK's Leadership Foundation must be innovative in their approaches; they must also help to create the conditions for innovation inside institutions.

The Leadership Foundation began (in 2004) by creating a core of 'open programmes' for leaders at all levels, from top management to emerging research team and course team leadership. Applied research on many aspects of leadership, governance and management were also a core part of the work of the Foundation from the outset. In recognition of the wide range of professions that contribute to the higher education enterprise, the Leadership Foundation made connections with the professional networks and provided tailored leadership programmes for many such networks including HR Directors, Estates Directors and Academic Registrars. Specialist academic groups were also included, for example, Deans of Medical Schools. Recognising the difference between 'leader development' (focused on individuals) and 'leadership development' (focused on groups, teams and organisations), the Foundation, in partnership with the Higher Education Academy in the UK, developed capacity in 'organisational development' through consultancy within universities. A further innovation was to offer programmes for teams from institutions to progress an institutional change project, supported by expert facilitators as well as through sharing experience with other institutions. Through these different strands of activity, and by developing programmes and projects for leaders, managers and governors of institutions, the Leadership Foundation has been able to change its products and services to meet individual and institutional needs and to keep ahead of the shifting strategic priorities of the higher education sector.

Innovation is not always welcomed, particularly if it challenges existing practice and successful ways of operating. Yet these methodologies may be linked to the past rather than the future. For this reason, the Leadership Foundation has developed a series of 'cross-cutting themes' that are intended to influence all activities. These include international dimensions, cross-sector dimensions, sustainability and diversity. The international dimension has enabled a wide variety of programmes to be developed with inter-cultural dimensions, including twinning projects, study visits, joint research across countries and joint programmes. Cross-sector programmes and projects are no less important in building bridges to other sectors, developing mutual understanding and promoting innovation in higher education practices.

Change and continuity

The discussion above points to many new directions, dimensions and changes that are emerging for leaders and leadership in the 21st century. However, there are also continuities. The qualities of integrity and courage, the skills of building trust, credibility and commitment, the task of providing direction, making strategic choices, taking charge of situations and leading and managing change are not new, but they will need to be exercised in diverse and challenging contexts. Over the centuries, leadership has been examined, described and debated, and in each generation, new insights and perspectives are added to what is now a rich tapestry of knowledge and experience about leadership. There are some important messages that have survived over time, including this one from Lao-Tzu, writing about leadership in 6th century BC China (quoted in Adair, 1989, p45):

A leader is best when people barely know he exists, not so good when people obey and acclaim him, worst when they despise him. 'Fail to honour people and they fail to honour you'. But of a good leader, who talks little, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will all say, 'We did this ourselves'.

Clearly, the leadership of universities will need to be more diverse in the future than in this example from 6th century BC China, but the approach to leadership depicted here still resonates. It is echoed in Jim Collins' study of exemplary leadership (Collins, 2001). Collins' 'Level Five Executive Leadership' encompasses those leaders who 'build enduring greatness through combining personal humility and professional will'. In organisations of professionals, this mix is particularly appropriate. There is also another task that is the particular responsibility of leaders and leadership that has stood the test of time and that is of fundamental importance for the future of the university. This is the responsibility to create the space and freedom for others to lead. Developing the leaders of tomorrow remains a key responsibility of leaders and a central leadership task for 21st century universities and colleges.

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