Inspiring
Leadership

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for Higher Education

What do we know about leadership in higher education? The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education's research.

Review paper

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Review Paper Series

The Leadership Foundation is pleased to launch its new series of 'Review Papers' which are intended to inform thinking, choices and decisions at institutional and system levels in UK higher education. The papers were selected from an open tender which sought to commission focused and thought-provoking papers that address the challenges facing leaders, managers and governors in the new economic environment facing the UK.

The themes addressed fall into different clusters including higher education leadership, business models for higher education, leading the student experience and leadership and equality of opportunity in higher education. We hope these papers will stimulate discussion and debate, as well as giving an insight into some of the new and emerging issues relevant to higher education today.

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Executive summary

The stimulus for this report was a question from the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE); what do we know about leadership in higher education from our research? The report explores what, if anything, might be claimed about leadership in higher education. It considers key questions:

▎ What is the knowledge base on which claims might be made?
▎ Does the higher education context demand a distinctive approach?
▎ Who are the leaders in higher education?
▎ How do they operate and how effectively?
▎ How important is leadership?

The method

The research commissioned by LFHE that deals centrally with leadership was identified and coded. Additionally a literature search for articles in refereed journals for the period 2006-2012, based on data from the UK, identified relevant research in the wider body of literature. Analysis provides a synthesised assessment of what we know about leadership that emerges from LFHE's work with reference to the wider literature.

The knowledge base

The major part of the body of educational leadership research has an indistinct concept at the heart, generally employs a narrow range of methods, and reflects the perspective of a skewed group of organisation members in a limited range of roles. These issues are raised in many LFHE publications. With the exception of distributed leadership, theory is generally drawn from corporate practice rather than from other sectors of education. Definitive knowledge is elusive but this may be intrinsic to leadership research. The insights and examples generated, though not definitive, are helpful to support praxis.

The distinctiveness of higher education

Higher education is sometimes claimed to be a distinctive context in which to lead. All of the characteristics noted as distinctive are discernible in other kinds of organisation. Higher education may not be as different as is sometimes claimed. However, the particular mix of factors and, above all, the nature of academics and academic work create a distinctive environment. The characteristic intensity of resistance to limited and limiting forms of leadership may sustain the core work of research, teaching and enterprise.

Who are the leaders?

The research shows varied perspectives on who leads higher education, depending on the criteria selected. Some believe that those in formal senior and middle leadership roles lead; others do not believe this to be the case. Resistance by determinedly autonomous staff is argued to negate leadership. A different view perceives leadership as much more widely dispersed and emergent as well as intended. Overall, LFHE's research distinguishes institutional management from leadership, and sees the latter as widely and fluidly dispersed, including, but not limited to, those in formal leadership roles.

Leadership to what end?

LFHE's research and the wider literature embodies a yawning divergence in leaders' espoused values and beliefs about who and what universities are for. Much literature treats higher education institutions (HEIs) in the same way as commercial business. Other literature reflects the foundational belief that HEIs are not businesses. What is indicated as characteristic of higher education is the complexity of the interplay between different values within each HEI and across the sector. The research discerns the choices made in daily practice only distantly. If establishing values is the core task of leadership, then understanding who is setting dominant values, and with what support, is another means of establishing who are functioning as leaders in higher education and to what end.

What do leaders do?

Given the dearth of observation of practice, the evidence is what people report that leaders do. The most common reference to what leaders do, or should do, is related to vision. While there is a frequently reported desire for vision, there is little evidence of its practical creation or impact. Summaries of actions other than vision tend to the general and positive, and are in many cases ambiguous. This may be in part a result of self-reported methods and also of generalising across varied roles in different contexts. We know little about the detail of practice.

Judging leadership effectiveness

Evidence of the impact of leadership on the extent and quality of research, learning and enterprise is rather slim. This is not only because of methodological challenges but also, at least in part, because the research spotlight is generally focused elsewhere. The current approach tends to be self-referential, most often focused on the meditating variable of staff perception and acceptance of leadership and not on the outcomes of leadership.

Characteristics of effective leadership

What works in one context will not necessarily work in another, and equally may be judged as effective and ineffective in the same context. As in the wider literature, the research generates lists of characteristics of effective leaders that are somewhat idealised and apolitical. Oppositional narratives underpin estimates of effectiveness; a rational narrative stresses data-driven, command and control, while an alternative prizes an open-ended and fluid creation of space in which autonomy can flourish. Effectiveness is currently related to individuals, but might be more usefully applied to units.

The importance of leadership

Despite the widespread assertion that leadership is vital, in the absence of convincing evidence of the impact of leadership on higher education's core activities there is only evidence of the degree to which people believe leadership to be discernible and important or otherwise. The evidence base is unsatisfactory but still suggests that leadership is often, although not always, important.

Looking forward

Evidence would be useful about the impact of leadership on teaching and learning, research and enterprise; that is, whether and to what extent outcomes are influenced by leadership. It may be helpful to fill in some of the gaps about how leaders operate, particularly in micropolitics, through observation and ethnographic material.

A good deal has been achieved in depicting the richness of players and their approaches to leadership. LFHE's commissioned research avoids reductive over-simplification and provides certainty that there is no certainty about how to act, no rules about what works. Its research on leadership provides stimulation and material for praxis rather than definitive models. What it offers is a contribution to understanding the ecology of the leadership of higher education, so that actions and interventions may be located within a better knowledge base.

Leadership in higher education

The question of leadership

The stimulus for this report was a question from the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE); what do we know about leadership in higher education from our research? The question may be straightforward: the answer is anything but. Although the concept of leadership has exerted a powerful interest for millennia and attracts a conviction of its central importance in the success of human endeavour, it would be a brave person who claimed to know exactly what it is or how it might be exercised most effectively. The sum of what can be definitively agreed is that it is complex, contingent and contested. Nevertheless, this report will consider what research commissioned by the LFHE suggests in relation to key leadership questions in the context of higher education:

I What is the knowledge base on which claims might be made?
I Does the higher education context demand a distinctive approach?
I Who are the leaders in higher education?
I How do they operate and how effectively?
I How important is leadership?

There never have been and probably never will be definitive answers to such questions, so this report cannot say with any certainty that this is what is known. It will however explore what, if anything, might be claimed about leadership in higher education from the work of LFHE and with reference to the broader field of related research. The intention is to marshal relevant research into an overview of current understanding to stimulate and inform all those with an interest in higher education leadership.

The method

Research commissioned by LFHE was identified that deals centrally with leadership, rather than with governance or related areas such as partnership activity. An exploratory thematic coding of the text was evolved. Axial coding then searched for convergence and divergence in findings, for example in views on who are seen as leaders or how leadership is experienced. This was in order to construct an overall picture of leadership as reflected in the body of work. Consequently, the analysis is not a cumulative description of the individual findings of each report but a synthesised summary of the picture that emerges from the work as a totality. Additionally a literature search for articles in refereed journals for the period 2006-2012, based on data from the UK and using a range of key words related to higher education and leadership identified relevant research in the wider body of literature. Where findings usefully confirm, challenge or add to the picture, these have been referenced.

The knowledge base

Research commissioned by LFHE has the aim of supporting current and future leaders of higher education to meet existing and emerging challenges. Reflecting the diversity of the sector, the research spans a range of approaches. Some work reports empirically-based, critical studies. Other publications reflect a consultancy approach, using research to identify and communicate good practice. The difficulty of researching leadership is noted in a number of projects reflecting the issues evident in the wider body of research on leading in an educational setting.[1] The large majority of research on leadership in all sectors of education is based on self-report through analysis of interviews, questionnaire responses or documents, which are a further form of self-report. There is little observation of leadership in action and very little ethnographic or longitudinal material providing dense descriptions over time. Self-report may be shaped not only by the desire of the respondent to project a particular identity, but by the prevalent leadership-speak of the time.[2] There are few attempts to move beyond such self-report. There is no equivalent methodology to the quantitative methods to assess leadership effectiveness that have been developed in research on leading schools and colleges. A means of assessing the impact of leadership on research, enterprise and teaching, "let alone... student learning",[3] has not been established.

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1 Owen, G. (2007); Oakley, K. & Selwood, S. (2010) **2** Bryman, A. (2007); Gronn, P. (2009) **3** Gibbs, G. et al (2009) p7

The spotlight may also be limited to certain areas. The focus of research may reflect the willingness of respondents to present themselves in particular ways. Failures in leadership, for example, or behind-the-scenes micropolitical tactics, are not often researched in education. Heroic narratives tend to prevail. The focus is usually on those in formal leadership roles.[4] Data is consequently often skewed to the perspective of the limited group in authority roles rather than the recipients of its effects; staff, students and the wider community. There is also a fundamental bias in that leadership research undertaken in both corporate and educational settings predominantly reflects the experience of white, middle-class men.[5] The theory that it generates is shaped by a discriminatory system that selectively privileges their entry into, and incumbency of, leadership roles.[6] On all these grounds, the depiction of leaders and leadership is therefore a construction reflecting a very particular world view.

The theoretical basis used in studies of higher education is subject to further challenge. Some higher education researchers draw on research on the leadership of schools and further education. This is most notably in the consideration given to distributed leadership, a theory originally developed in relation to education by its application to primary and secondary schools, but which has gathered pace in higher education. However, theory is more often drawn from research on corporations than on other phases of education. Corporate leadership is of contested application to higher education institutions (HEIs), which many believe have a fundamentally different mission.[7] The justification given for the relevance of corporate research is that HEIs are multi-million pound businesses and so must be led as such. A more critical interpretation is that leading corporations is seen by some as more prestigious and more skilled than leading education, and so research on corporations is valorised above research on other sectors of education. This stance, which depicts higher education leadership as inadequate and compares it unfavourably with that of corporations, is reflected in a history of criticism of higher education leadership,[8] embedded, for example, in the Jarratt9 and Lambert[10] reports. Finally, uncertainty about the concept of leadership itself frequently results in definition only at a general level, most often describing leadership as activity designed

to influence and align others in the direction of valued goals,[11] a description of behaviour that could be applied to a very large number of organisational actors. It may be differentiated from management by both respondents and researchers, but not always and not in consistent ways.[12] In summary, the major part of the body of educational leadership research has an indistinct and shifting concept at the heart, generally employs a narrow range of methods, and reflects the perspective of a particular gender,[13] ethnicity and abled group of organisation members in a limited range of roles. These issues are raised in LFHE publications.

If there is certainty that leadership is complex and contingent, the absence of definitive knowledge is not just a result of insufficient research or inadequate methods, but intrinsic to researching leadership. However, this does not rob leadership research of value. On the contrary, because leaders are persistently challenged to make adroit decisions about values and actions, the insights, stimulation and evidence of effect provided by research is more necessary than in areas where cause and effect are more predictable. This report consequently sets aside unattainable and unhelpful ambitions for definitive knowledge and aims more modestly at a kind of inventory of evidence to-date and assessment of its implications. Bearing in mind the limitations of the knowledge base, the report explores what might be claimed about leadership in higher education.

The distinctiveness of higher education

One of the questions illuminated by the body of LFHE-commissioned research is whether higher education is a distinctive environment in which to lead. It is difficult to think of any unique characteristics of higher education. For example, the tensions of meeting public good goals while remaining viable in business terms are evident in other types of educational and public sector organisations. The vulnerability to changing government policy is common. The challenges of leading highly expert, creative, driven and independent staff are faced by commercial sectors such as those at the cutting-edge of new

4 Milburn, P.C. (2010) **5** Bebbington, D. (2009); Acker, S. (2010) **6** Sinclair, A. (2004) **7** Karakas, F. and Fenton-O'Creevey, M. (n.d.) **8** Smith, D., Adams, J. and Mount, D. (2011) **9** Jarratt Report (1985) **10** Lambert, R. (2003) **11** Levitt, R. et al (2011) **12** Bolden, R. et al (2012) **13** McTavish, D.M. and Miller, K. (2009)

technologies and by schools and further education. The degree of autonomy demanded by staff, "you can't get anybody to do anything they don't think is a good idea",[14] is sometimes suggested to be distinctive of HEIs although it is common throughout all phases of education. Staff autonomy is under strain in all sectors of education. In HEIs a longstanding "bureau professional regime"[15] translates the power derived from expertise into discretion to identify how service users should be treated and what work should be done. Each individual decides how to act because his or her exclusive expertise is seen to justify, even demand, such autonomy.[16] LFHE-commissioned work provides evidence of both pressure on this contract, with moves to more corporate and entrepreneurial ways of leading,[17] and apparently unshakable persistence.[18] In retaining this characteristic, the higher education sector may be aided by one feature that, while not unique, is different to most other organisations: its longevity.[19] Universities that can trace their origins back for centuries have established social capital and ways of operating that may act as ballast in the whole higher education sector. They may moderate the nature and pace of change and act to some degree as a sea wall, which resists the trammelling of leadership into forms encouraged by those external to HEIs.

All of the characteristics noted are discernible in other kinds of organisation. Higher education may not be as different as is sometimes claimed. However, the particular mix of factors, the ambivalent goals, the multiple and divergent cultures amongst disciplines,[20] and above all, the nature of academics and academic work, create a distinctive environment. Academics tend to feel entitled to autonomy and protection and "it is the intensity of this requirement in higher education which makes it distinctive"[21]. Consequently, though LFHE-commissioned work provides rich evidence of the kaleidoscopic array of leadership in action and attitudes to leadership, it also provides evidence that the result is not ultimately dysfunctional – in fact, it is quite the opposite.[22] As numerous studies suggest,[23] it is the very intensity of resistance to limited and limiting forms of leadership that shapes leadership in the sector and may sustain the core work of research, teaching and enterprise. It has allowed UK HEIs, at least so far as the time of writing, not to fail.[24]

Who are the leaders?

A primary question is who might be considered the leaders of HEIs? Different perspectives emerge. There are numerous formal roles where the job description refers to leading, including the vice-chancellor, pro- and deputy vice-chancellors, heads of a range of professional services, deans and heads of school/department.[25] Kennie and Woodfield[26] map the considerable variation in structure and roles. The degree to which any of those in such roles believe themselves to be leaders, or are seen to exercise leadership by others is dependent on the criteria. If, for example, leadership is a formal responsibility to align and motivate people in the direction of strategic goals, one set of people would be placed in the category of leader. If the criterion is the actual achievement of motivating people in such a direction, then the kaleidoscope will shake and settle into a new pattern. Kennie and Woodfield's analysis of responses from interviews in 17 HEIs and a questionnaire survey of all HEIs uncovered a view that top management teams had a significant impact on others, but also a contrary view that they had little impact, or even that they impeded progress. Some therefore doubt whether they are leading, if this is defined as influencing others towards valued goals. Similarly, Bolden et al[27] found that many of the respondents in their study rejected the idea that those in formal leadership roles were engaged in leadership.

In middle management, a similar picture is apparent. Bolden et al[28] report a view that heads of department in many cases do not have sufficient control of resource and direction to be credibly perceived as engaged with and influencing academic work. In any case, they often have little time left after dealing with the exigencies of day-to-day operational management. Similarly, Ball's study concluded that "the presence of formal research leaders does not necessarily mean that the leadership of academics in research will occur".[29] There are, then, a range of roles whose formal designation is as leaders, but the degree to which they are perceived as exercising leadership is contested.

LFHE's research surfaces a somewhat polarised view from HEIs that positions leadership as values-based, focused on the academic work of teaching, research and enterprise, in contrast to institution-focused

14 Whitchurch, C. (2008) p59 **15** Clarke, J. and Newman, J. (1997) p61 **16** Bolman, L.G. and Gallos, J.V. (2011) **17** Kubler, J. and Sayers, N. (2007); Bolden et al (2008); Gibbs et al (2009) **18** Bebbington, D. (2009); Özbilgin, M. and Tatli, A. (2008) **19** Guest, D.E. and Clinton, M. (2007) **20** Gibbs, G. et al (2009); Blackmore, P. (2007) **21** Bryman, A. (2007) p3 **22** Burgoyne, J. et al (2009) **23** Gibbs, G. et al (2009); Bolden, R. et al (2012); Levitt, R. et al (2011) **24** Burgoyne, J. et al (2009) **25** Lauwerys, J. (2008) **26** Kennie, T. and Woodfield, S. (2008) **27** Bolden, R et al (2012) **28** Bolden, R et al (2012) **29** Ball, S. (2007) p74; Saltmarsh, S. et al (2011)

process management that concerns itself with finance, marketing, accountability and day-to-day operations. The latter is characterised by some as institutional management rather than leadership and several studies provide evidence of the belief that those in formal leadership roles, even the most senior, are essentially engaged in institutional management and not leadership, because they do not influence the work of the majority of staff in a significant way.

An alternative perspective relates specifically to leadership in the context of higher education; 'self-leadership'.[30] While this term is referred to in only one LFHE study, many others emphasise the degree of autonomy demanded and enjoyed by academic staff. 'Self-leadership' may be merely another way of indicating what is described elsewhere as individual autonomy, or professionalism, but the intensity of autonomy is argued to create a context that negates leadership from others. The notion that a different kind of leadership or no leadership at all is needed in organisations staffed primarily by professionals, that is, those who have a very high level of expertise and who are guided by a formal or informal code of practice, is not unique to higher education or even education more broadly. For example, Health Service leaders work within the parameters created by the power of medical professionals.[31] Bryman suggests that "when 'subordinates' have a professional orientation and a need for independence – both of which are arguably characteristics of academic staff – the impact of leader behaviour will be neutralised".[32] LFHE's commissioned research presents some support for this assertion but also some ambivalence. On the one hand, respondents in some studies reject the idea that they want or need to be led.[33] A research and or teaching mission drives staff strongly without the input of leaders.[34] They produce the outputs of the core business and only institutional management, rather than leadership, is required from those in formal authority roles, to enable individuals and the organisation to flourish. On the other hand, Bolden et al found that most of their respondents wanted visionary leadership,[35] and the conviction of its necessity is evident in other studies.[36] It appears that staff both reject the necessity for leadership and desire its presence.

A different perspective that does not focus primarily on individual leadership is also evident in LFHE's publications. Distributed leadership has become the preferred, and in some cases a virtually prescribed, approach to leadership in other sectors of education.[37] As pioneered in primary and secondary schools for over a decade by, for example, Gronn[38] and Spillane[39], it was as a conceptual framework through which to understand how multiple players constructed leadership in relation to the physical and social context. Viewed through such a lens, leadership is simultaneously intentional, intuitive and emergent. Leadership is consequently a property invested in many; it is an organisational property. As Gronn[40] points out, this is an idea with roots at least as far back as the 1950s,[41] but its serious consideration in higher education has a much shorter history. If heroic top-down leadership is at one end of a theoretical spectrum and organised anarchy at the other,[42] distributed leadership sits in between. It acknowledges the presence and necessity for individual, hierarchical leadership by the few and also accounts for its inadequacy in both theory and practice to capture the multifaceted, simultaneously intentional and emergent phenomenon of organisational leadership by the many.

Overall, the body of LFHE-commissioned research constructs a 'hybrid'[43] or 'blended'[44] view of leaders, leadership and management. Institutional management is distinguished from leadership by some. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged as necessary to establish the context within which leadership by many of the core businesses, research, teaching/learning and enterprise can flourish. When the focus is on leadership rather than management, some studies position leaders as those in formal roles. Others position it as much more widely dispersed. From the LFHE body of work as a whole, the conviction emerges that many from both academic and professional service career tracks, hybrids between,[45] and those in formal and informal leadership roles, contribute and should contribute to the leadership of higher education.

Leadership to what end?

Whoever is assumed to be leading, the body of research commissioned by LFHE exposes not only diverse goals but also tensions in the value base that underpins them. Hall depicts the long-time ambiguity

30 Bolden, R. et al (2012) p6 **31** Degeling, P. et al (2003); Swan et al. (2002) **32** Bryman, A. (2007) p17 **33** Tuson, J. (2008) **34** Bryman, A. (2007); Guest, D. and Clinton, M. (2007); Powell, J. and Clark, A. (2012) **35** Bolden, R. et al (2008) **36** Breakwell, G. and Tytherleigh, M. (2008); Fielden, J. (2011); Smith, D. et al (2011) **37** Seashore Louis,K. et al (2011) **38** Gronn, P. (2000) **39** Spillane, J. et al (2004) **40** Gronn, P. (2008) **41** Gibb, C.A. (1958) **42** Cohen, M. et al (1972) **43** Gronn, P. (2008) p143 **44** Bolden, R. et al (2008) p41 **45** Whitchurch, C. (2007)

of HEIs that "provide life-changing opportunities" but also act as "gatekeepers, maintaining differentiation by exclusion and ranking, and contributing to enduring inequalities".[46] A similar ambivalence is evident in Bebbington's[47] review of diversity in higher education, quoting Morley's evidence that "widening participation [is] perceived as dilution, or pollution"[48] by some. Such views are expressed by leaders in terms of not dropping standards or wanting to recruit only the 'best' staff and students, an implicit assumption being that increased diversity of socioeconomic class, gender, ethnicity or disability, for example, must involve recruiting those of lesser ability.[49] The same implication appears in assertions that excellence matters more than social mobility.[50] LFHE's research and the wider literature embodies a yawning divergence in leaders' espoused values and beliefs about which students HEIs should serve, and the degree to which equality and diversity matters; in other words, for whom and for what universities exist.

A polarised set of assumptions is evident. For example, there are sharply different values underpinning Hall's[51] emphatic call for HEIs to prioritise increasing equality of opportunity and Kennie and Price's[52] research that explicitly sets aside any consideration of social purposes to explore HEIs as competitive businesses, targeting differentiated markets to maximise income streams. These are just two studies illustrative of a widely evident gulf in values. Much literature treats HEIs in the same way as commercial business. Other literature reflects the foundational belief of many leaders that, while being run in a business-like way is necessary, HEIs are not businesses. Post-1992 HEIs are indicated to be more comfortable with the business stance.[53] Within LFHE's research no resolution of such values' conflict emerges. Tensions between values are perhaps inevitable in educational contexts. What is indicated as characteristic of higher education is the complexity of the interplay between different values within each HEI and across the sector.[54] Tensions and resistance are evident in multiple approaches to leadership that are by no means neatly nested. Bolden et al found that "accounts of how leadership practice actually occurs within universities included descriptions of dislocation, disconnection, disengagement, dissipation, distance and dysfunctionality".[55]

Research on the power plays and micropolitical struggles is more detailed in the wider literature on higher education,[56] including that considering new public management, managerialism, democratic leadership and equality/inclusion.[57] The interplay of values and leadership choices in daily practice is often discerned distantly and only by implication in LFHE studies and wider higher education leadership literature. On what basis leaders make value choices and how this informs decisions and actions could be illuminated more explicitly by further research. One narrative of leadership argues that setting values is the foundational and most important task of leadership; it is the defining activity. Bolden et al's finding that "academics appear to look for leadership in relation to values and identity; not in the allocation of tasks"[58] accords with transformational or authentic theories of leadership.[59] If the premise is accepted that establishing values defines leadership, then understanding who is setting dominant values and with what degree of support is another means of establishing who functions as leaders in higher education and to what end.

What do leaders do?

If leadership is embedded in daily activity, the choices made and the relationships enacted, then understanding what leaders do, their practice, may be significant. Given the dearth of observation of what leaders do, research tends to communicate what staff want leaders to do and what staff or leaders themselves think they or others do.

Reflecting the wider literature,[60] one of the most frequent references to what people want of leaders in LFHE-commissioned research is 'vision'. Bolden et al note a widespread wish for vision. Numerous studies,[61] each with a different focus on HEIs, note respondents referring to vision as a key attribute of leadership. Bryman points out that reference to being a visionary leader may be an attractive element for inclusion in the heroic narrative.[62] Despite the fact that the idea that leaders set a vision is 'commonplace',[63] some dissent is also evidenced. UK vice-chancellors' insistence that vision is essential,[64] supported by a similar finding in relation to US presidents,[65] contrasts with some scepticism from Bryman's respondents and a review of the wider literature.[66] While references are frequently made to the crucial need for leaders to create a vision,

46 Hall, M. (2012) p16; Deem, R. (2007) **47** Bebbington, D. (2009) **48** Morley, L. (1999) p36 **49** Lumby, J. et al (2005) **50** Newman, M. (2009) **51** Hall, M. (2012) **52** Kennie, T. and Price, I. (2012) **53** Kok, A. et al (2010); Bolden et al (2008) **54** Bolden, R et al (2012) **55** Bolden, R. et al (2008) p3 **56** McNay, I. (2008) **57** Smeenk, C. et al (2009); Blackmore, J. (2005); Giroux, H. (2002) **58** Bolden, R. et al (2012) p61 **59** Bass, B.M. (1998); Cooper, C. et al (2005) **60** Papadimitriou, A. (2011); Sarros, J. et al (2011) **61** Breakwell, G. and Tytherleigh, M. (2008); Burgoyne, J. et al (2009); Fielden, J. (2011); Gibbs, G. et al (2009); Powell, J. and Clark, A. (2012); Quinlan, A. (2011); Smith, D. et al (2011) **62** Bryman, A. (2007) **63** Bryman, A. (2007) p11 **64** Breakwell, G. and Tytherleigh, M. (2008) **65** ACE (2007) **66** Bryman, A. (2007)

examples of the creation and communication of vision and how it is received are far less so. Where the practice of vision-setting is probed, it tends to emerge as an expression of goals that are at best general and at worst banal. Bennis, for example, suggests it should be communicated through metaphor.[67] More critical voices challenge the normative assumptions about the value of vision:

> As generally conceived, vision statements provide the impetus for missions. And mission statements provide the targets for goal statements. We might find the relationships easy to understand with this simple illustration:
>
> l Vision statement: We'll have pie in the sky, by and by.
> l Mission statement: We'll bake something that flies.
> l Goal statement: We'll make some dough.[68]

Rozyscki compares vision to 'happy talk',[69] at best enrolling all in unrealistic, general aspirations, the effect of which is to deaden the acuity of shaping goals, rather than the opposite. There is little to counter this scepticism in LFHE-commissioned research. Staff state that they or others create, or should create, vision, but this appears to evaporate when what this means in practice is probed. Gibbs et al found that it "revealed itself in more prosaic ways"[70], as presenting the need to solve a practical problem. Tourish argues for encouraging leaders to set explicit goals rather than visions.[71]

The importance invested in leaders setting a vision and its effect has been challenged in the corporate world:

> Most corporate statements we've encountered - be they called mission, vision, purpose, philosophy, credo or the company way - are of little value. They don't have the intended effect. They don't grab people in the gut and motivate them to work towards a common end. They don't focus attention.[72]

And in research on vision statements in primary and secondary schools:

> Such statements tend to be long and complex, and often the result of compromises among the staff with competing and different interests. Many

are not inspiring... are not 'owned' by anyone and... often not remembered.[73]

It would seem that throughout education and corporations there is a widespread conviction that leaders have vision, or should construct and communicate it, alongside doubts about what vision is and criticism of the unsatisfactory nature of content and ownership. LFHE's commissioned research uncovers more yearning for vision than examples of its establishment and effect in practice. There is insufficient evidence to conclude whether this is because vision could be, but is not yet being set effectively enough, or because the idea of vision-setting is illusory, a process that serves a ritual purpose of establishing a desired endpoint unlikely to be reached. Put differently, the evidence does not allow conclusions about whether the point of vision may be its presence or its absence.

Beyond reference to the core leadership activities of setting values and vision, motivating and aligning others, the evidence on what leaders do in higher education spans many different roles and such diverse settings that researchers are faced with either summarising activity at a general, macro level or providing detailed descriptions and analysis of specific instances of leadership in action, which may be highly contingent on the particular context.[74] The majority of evidence in LFHE's commissioned research, that is, self-report interviews and questionnaire responses, provides largely shorthand summaries of actions and intentions through recall. Consequently, the generalisation in describing what leaders do may be related both to methodological issues and to the diversity of practice that needs to be captured. Gibbs extracts nine areas of leadership action associated with excellent teaching:

l Establishing credibility and trust.
l Identifying teaching problems and turning them into opportunities.
l Articulating a convincing rationale for change.
l Devolving leadership.
l Building a community of practice.
l Recognising and rewarding excellent teaching and teaching development.
l Marketing the department as a teaching success.
l Supporting change and innovation.
l Involving students.[75]

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67 Bennis, W. (2009) **68** Rozycki, E. (2004) p94 **69** Rozycki, E. (2004) p94 **70** Gibbs, G. et al (2009) p16 **71** Tourish, D. (2012) **72** Collins, C. and Porras, J. (1991) p30 **73** Murgatroyd, S. and Morgan, C. (1993) p69 **74** Smith, D. et al (2011); Oakley, K. and Selwood, S. (2010) **75** Gibbs, G. et al (2009) p2

A similar overview list is articulated by Owen in relation to the successful leadership of regional and local regeneration partnerships:

l Build on firm foundations.
l Display conviction.
l Secure local support.
l Negotiate effectively.
l Mobilise influence.
l Create effective teams of experts.
l Balance costs and benefits appropriately.[76]

Both sets of conclusions are empirically supported and reflect the kind of findings evident in many leadership studies.[77] Some elements, such as involving students or displaying conviction, are specific enough to be understood in similar ways by a range of readers. Others, such as building a community of practice or building on firm foundations, are open to a much wider range of interpretation and understanding. The devil may be in the detail and, in offering conclusions drawn from self-report and/or diverse perspectives; research on educational leadership is driven to conclude in a way that obscures detail. In this sense we know little about the practice of leaders in higher education. Our views are from a distance and refracted, like looking at an object in moving water. We can discern its general shape, but not its exact contours. We can see its view from above, but not what lies beneath.

Judging leadership effectiveness

Insights into leadership activity offer the possibility of analysing the impact of actions and which approaches to leadership are more effective than others. The more developed methodological and empirical base related to schools and colleges, has grappled with the conceptual pitfalls and practical difficulties of defining and judging leadership effectiveness since at least the 1970s.[78] There are difficulties in identifying priority organisational goals from the plethora of perspectives, weighting their relative importance, finding measures of achievement and methods to accurately attribute the cause of success to leadership and not wholly or partly to other factors. There is recognition that most leaders may be differentially effective; that is, they may have more success in achieving goals in some areas of activity

than others or at different points in their tenure. There are also degrees of effectiveness. Setting unchallenging goals is an easy way to be judged effective, if the latter means merely achieving agreed goals. Effectiveness is also relative to the degree of difficulty faced in the context. To address such issues, school effectiveness has evolved calculations based on value added and not just raw student attainment scores. An effective leader may therefore be defined as one whose organisation achieves more than might be expected in the light of its starting point. School effectiveness literature has reached a point where it is able to claim an assessment of the percentage of variance in student outcomes related to the principal's leadership and to the concerted leadership of all those contributing to leadership.[79]

Research on leadership in higher education has no such equivalent body of work. In part, this may be because HEIs face greater difficulties in assessing effectiveness than do schools in terms of, for example, encompassing a greater range of aims and being much larger and more diffuse organisations. Bryman's review of literature concluded that studies of leader effectiveness in higher education were relatively rare and most were not of sufficient quality.[80] Conceptual and methodological issues may account for the gap only in part. Gibbs et al provide an example of what is possible, connecting leadership not only to direct but indirect effects. [81] They establish a relationship between approaches to leadership, the impact on teaching and the impact of teaching on the nature of learning. In primary and secondary schools it has long been recognised that leaders have an indirect rather than direct effect on organisational outcomes. They are enablers who can construct a supportive or inhibiting environment in which staff produce desired outcomes; but it is the outcomes that matter most. Models have been devised that underpin research to track the impact of moderating and mediating factors on particular forms of leadership and resultant student engagement, achievement and attainment.[82] Several theoretical models potentially frame understanding of the relationship of leader and effect. Hallinger and Heck refer to "direct-effects, antecedent-effects, mediated effects, reciprocal effects and moderated-effects models".[83] The relevance of this comparison between the two sectors is that the response of staff to leadership is considered a mediating variable, not the end point. The GLOBE research project, based

76 Owen, G. (2007) p19 **77** Judge, T. et al (2009) **78** Muijs, D. (2006); Sammons, P. (1996; 1999) **79** Leithwood et al (2008) **80** Bryman, A. (2007) p4
81 Gibbs, G. et al (2009) **82** Leithwood, K. and Jantzi, D. (2005) **83** Hallinger, P. andHeck, R. (1996) p18

on businesses in 62 societies across the world, uses a similar framework with leader acceptance as a moderating variable related to leader effectiveness.[84]

The body of school effectiveness research is contested on conceptual, methodological and political grounds.[85] Nevertheless, a key point is its assumption that, while the views of staff are of relevance, they are not ultimately firm enough ground on which to judge what leadership achieves. Research commissioned by LFHE and the wider body of research on the sector generally takes a different approach; studies of leadership primarily explore perceptions about its influence on staff and partners. Evidence of the impact of leadership and different forms of leadership on the extent and quality of research, learning and enterprise is slim.[86] Middlehurst makes the same point.[87] Unequivocal statements of cause and effect in higher education leadership may be a dream too far, or undesired by some. Nevertheless, the self-referential nature of the current approach that most often focuses on mediating variables and not on outcomes raises questions:

> Much of what is published on 'academic leadership' is actually about the leadership of academic institutions rather than leadership of academic work per se.[88]

Some might argue that the bureau professional social contract that persists in higher education,[89] based on trust of the judgement and efficacy of professionals, justifies a primary focus on the views of staff rather than a managerialist focus on the impact on end users. Whether or not this is accepted as justification for the current research profile, it is apparent that we do not know a great deal about the effect of leadership in higher education on its core business. This is not only because of methodological challenges but also, at least in part, because the research spotlight is generally focused elsewhere.

Characteristics of effective leadership

Analysis of the characteristics of effective leadership abounds in the wider literature. Whether the basis is statistical studies or qualitative research on staff perceptions of what constitutes effective behaviour, the results tend to list traits or actions that depict

a somewhat idealised leader. The GLOBE project, an international study of the cultural modulations of leadership, identified six leader attributes and behaviours that are globally desirable; charismatic/values-based, team orientated, participative, autonomous, humane, and self-protective.[90] In the field of school leadership, a recent review of relevant literature concluded that effective leaders establish direction, systems and structures "in a motivational, optimistic and enabling manner".[91] A similar kind of result is reported by Bryman, whose study identified six main elements of behaviour associated with effectiveness in higher education:

l An effective leader is a figure who is trusted, and who has personal integrity.
l An effective leader is supportive of his/her staff.
l Effective leadership requires consultation of others.
l Effective leadership requires the inculcation of values that help others to understand and appreciate the leader's direction.
l Effective leadership requires a sense of direction.
l Effective leaders protect their staff.[92]

Bryman comments that only the first was mentioned by more than a third of respondents. There was, therefore, no consensus on what effective leadership in higher education looks like. Spendlove used a different concept: what makes a 'good' pro vice-chancellor. The resulting list included similar attributes to those which elsewhere are related to effective leaders, such as being open, honest and sensitive to the views of others.[93] Bryman's review of effectiveness factors lists led to an "inescapable conclusion that department leaders need to be good at pretty much everything".[94] As Gibbs et al comment laconically: "This is potentially unhelpful."[95]

An overview of LFHE-commissioned work that engages with effectiveness in varied higher education contexts such as collaborative ventures or with a specific focus, such as leading teaching and learning, does not support the notion of universally effective characteristics or behaviour. Bryman suggests that behaviours that make a leader effective in one context could have the opposite effect in another,[96] a view borne out exactly by the evidence of a study of departmental leadership in teaching.[97] Equally, variation in views may be indicative of the influence of culture and values on perceptions of effective leadership, not least because of the cultural

84 House, R. et al (n.d.) **85** Wrigley, T. (2004) **86** Gibbs, G. et al (2009) **87** Middlehurst, R. (2008) **88** Bolden, R. et al (2012) p17 **89** Clarke, J. and Newman, J. (1997) **90** Javidan et al (2004) **91** Lewis, P. and Murphy, R. (2008) p17 **92** Bryman, A. (2007) p24 **93** Spendlove, M. (2007) p415 **94** Bryman, A. (2006) p8 **95** Gibbs, G. et al (2009) p5 **96** Bryman, A. (2007) **97** Gibbs, G. et al (2009)

diversity amongst staff.[98] Questioning staff members who hold conflicting preferences related to leadership is highly likely to elicit conflicting findings about perceptions of effectiveness. There is a further issue that common understandings of terms like trust, integrity, open, honest, and what they look like in practice cannot be assumed. Lists of effectiveness factors are replete with idealised humanity. The moral relativity of integrity and trust, the human impossibility of absolute honesty and openness, the contested understanding of what consultation and participation mean and how far they are feasible are set aside. Analysis of leadership effectiveness in LFHE's commissioned research and the wider literature seems to exist in an apolitical world.

Underlying the analysis of effective leader behaviour in LFHE's commissioned work are different and contrasting narratives of leadership. A rational narrative assumes that effectiveness relates to a command and control approach, with explicit goals, clear lines of accountability, data-driven market positioning, adherence to the tenets of normative corporate leadership prescriptions and professionalisation of previously somewhat amateur leadership. On the other hand, narratives embedded in an alternative culture reject top-down rational management, seeing alignment to organisational goals with tight accountability structures as impractical in higher education, or even as destructive.[99] These oppositional narratives form a sort of yin and yang of higher education leadership, the one displaying more stereotypical masculine characteristics of rationality and competitiveness and the other more stereotypical feminine qualities of intuitive, people-centred practice. Such a stark dichotomy understates the complexity and interplay of values and practice that emerges in LFHE-commissioned work; the acceptance, resistance and accommodation of different positions over time,[100] leading Bolden et al. to conclude that "academic life is inherently 'bipolar'".[101]

Generally, most respondents' narratives are underpinned by an individual perspective on leadership. The attitudes and behaviour of individual leaders are effective or otherwise. If a more dispersed view of leadership in higher education is adopted, it is not effective leaders but effective subunits such as departments/faculties or an effective organisation that is the more appropriate focus. Producing further lists of idealised factors of effective individual leaders may not contribute much. A more fruitful approach might be to establish the ways of working of a unit or organisation that lead to desired outcomes, recognising the multiple contributions to leadership emerging from diverse, competing values and agendas.

The importance of leadership

The claim that leadership is very important in higher education, as in other sectors of education, has become something of a mantra.[102] It is argued to be essential to achieve, for example, quality teaching and learning,[103] excellent research,[104] diversity and inclusion,[105] and to turn around underperforming HEIs.[106] LFHE's commissioned research offers a more nuanced picture. In the absence of convincing evidence of the impact of leadership on higher education's core business activities, there is only evidence of the degree to which people believe leadership to be discernible and important or otherwise. Questioning them is an unreliable process. The presence or absence of leadership, and its perceived effect, are assessed by each individual using their archetype as a comparator. If heroic, visionary leadership is used as the comparator, individuals might well conclude that leadership is absent, even when an emergent form of leadership flowing amongst teams and individuals is present. Perceptions of the occurrence of leadership are therefore relative and imperfect, like a hidden image stereogram that disappears from one angle, only to appear if you change your viewpoint. Given this caveat, evidence of the perceived importance of leadership is inevitably tentative.

It is clear that staff do not always feel leadership to be important. There was a range of assessments in Gibbs et al's study of leading teaching in 19 case studies: "In two cases there was little evidence of leadership playing a major role, in all other cases it appeared important and in many it was pivotal."[107] Bolden et al's study found that, generally, academics did not invest much importance in leadership from those in formal roles.[108] There are negative attitudes to the 'banal role of management'[109] and to leadership, viewing it as a low-status activity, a tedious distraction from the real work or as actively harmful.[110] In some collaborative contexts, it would seem

98 Javidan, M. and House, R. (2001) **99** Bolden, R. et al (2012) **100** Oakley, K. and Selwood, S. (2010) **101** Bolden, R. et al (2012) p39 **102** Smith, B. and Hughey, A. (2006) **103** Lomas, L. (2003) **104** Ball, S. (2007) **105** Bebbington, D. (2009) **106** Fullan, M. and Scott, G. (2009) **107** Gibbs, G. et al (2009) p2 **108** Bolden, R. et al (2012) **109** Oakley, K. and Selwood, S. (2010) **110** Bryman, A. (2007)

that directive leadership is seen as at best irrelevant and at worst counterproductive. The perceived requirement to achieve core business outcomes is mutual facilitation of space for self-directed work to evolve.[111]

In contrast to denial of the significance of leadership is substantial evidence for a perception of its importance. Much of this is from those in formal leadership roles who are projecting an identity and perhaps justifying their own sense of achievement and worth. Nevertheless, the body of evidence gives considerable weight to the achievements of leadership and to its importance in making things happen.[112] The evidence base is unsatisfactory but still suggests that leadership is often, although not always, important and that its impact is embedded through different modes of operation involving a wide range of players.

Claims for leadership in higher education

There is little that is known definitively about leadership in higher education. We can, however, use the research commissioned by LFHE and the wider literature to make some claims in response to the questions outlined at the opening of this report.

What is the knowledge base on which claims might be made?

There is considerable evidence of people's perceptions about leadership, but this is compromised to some degree by fuzziness around the concept of leadership and by the variability and or vagueness of definition of key related terms such as management, vision and collaboration. The largely self-reported evidence tends to highlight behaviour in line with current normative leadership scripts. Evidence is largely absent about behaviour outside the scripts, such as micropolitical tactics and leadership failures.

Does the context demand a distinctive approach?

Although the characteristics of higher education are to be found in other organisations, the degree of hybridity between educational organisation and business, and the intense resolution with which staff pursue their own valued ends creates an environment in which emergent leadership by the many has an immovable place. The distinctiveness of higher education is that leadership

persists strongly as a property rooted throughout the organisation, exerting a strong influence on the subset of formal leaders.

Who are the leaders in higher education?

Those in senior formal leadership roles persist as a group reflective of the status accorded to white men. Their selection may also be influenced by the kudos of particular educational trajectories and the prestige of the HEIs in which they held prior roles.[113] Those in the middle of the hierarchy are sometimes, but not always, reluctant leaders.[114] Some do not consider those in formal roles to be leaders. On the basis of LFHE's work, it can be claimed that the leadership of each HEI is actually the construction of both designated leaders and of a very much wider group of people, many of whom do not hold formal leadership roles.

How do leaders operate and how effectively?

There is evidence that the contexts of pre- and post-1992 institutions and of academic discipline have a considerable impact on the approach to leadership and the response. There is evidence of a variety of forms of leadership in operation. A good deal of ambivalence is present, with both hostility to top-down leadership and a wish for such leadership to set vision and values and to establish productive environments. There is little evidence of the impact of leadership on the core business of research, teaching and enterprise. Much evidence deals rather with the challenges of running a large organisation. The assessment of impact is currently largely self-referential.

How important is leadership?

The body of LFHE-commissioned work counters the ubiquitous insistence that leadership is consistently vitally important. Leadership appears to be often important, but not always. While there may be insufficient evidence to make definite conclusions, there is enough to suggest that, in terms of impact on staff and through them on the core business, the leadership of the most senior staff is sometimes but not always significant.[115] The informal leadership of a wide range of others may also be so. We know that the management of the institution, the creation of the enabling spaces and frameworks to support academic work are important. In summary, we do not know how important leadership is; only that people often believe it to be so.

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111 Oakley, K. and Selwood, S. (2010) **112** Smith, D. et al (2011); Burgoyne, J. et al (2009) **113** Breakwell, G. and Tytherleigh, M. (2008) **114** Floyd, A. (2012) **115** Barrett, P and Barrett, L. (2009)

Looking forward

There are indications of further research that may be helpful. The first and most important is more extensive in-depth evidence about the impact of leadership on teaching and learning, research and enterprise, that is, whether and to what extent outcomes are influenced by leadership. Second, we need to fill in some of the gaps about how leaders actually operate, through observation and ethnographic material. Third, Becher used a theatre metaphor to suggest that in HEIs there is the onstage public view of activity, backstage micropolitical manoeuvrings, and under-stage subversive activity.[116] Much of the research is focused on the onstage public view; more knowledge of the less publicly visible may be helpful.

In summary, the answer to the question from the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE); what do we know about leadership in higher education from our research, is that a good deal has been achieved in establishing the distinctive nature of leading in higher education and depicting the kaleidoscopic richness of players and their approaches to leadership. Does it matter that little is known with certainty? If the goal of research had been clear-cut guidelines for thought and action, then the answer would be yes. However, the body of LFHE-commissioned research provides certainty that there is no certainty about how to act. There are no rules about what works.[117] The same behaviour can be judged effective in one context yet ineffective in another and even in the same context receives different judgements. The body of LFHE's commissioned research avoids reductive over-simplification. Its research on leadership provides stimulation and material for praxis rather than definitive models. What it offers is a contribution to understanding the ecology of leadership in higher education, so that actions and interventions may be located within a better knowledge base than would otherwise be the case.

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116 Becher, T. (1988) **117** Glatter R. and Kydd, L. (2003)

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Acknowledgements

Biography

Professor Jacky Lumby

Jacky Lumby is a professor of education at the University of Southampton. She has taught and led in a range of educational settings, secondary schools, further, higher and adult education, and has also worked in a Training and Enterprise Council with regional responsibility for the development of leaders in both business and the public sector. She has researched and published widely on educational policy, leadership and management in the UK and internationally, drawing on research in South Africa, the Peoples Republic of China and Hong Kong. Her work on leadership encompasses a range of areas, including comparative and international perspectives, and equality and diversity issues. She is concerned to explore how leaders can be supported to lead people, systems and processes which offer success to learners and staff in the context of living a life they value.

Notes

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