Chapter 1

Ethics in Higher Education Leadership:
Current Themes and Trends

Geraldine Torrisi-Steele

iD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6045-4114

Griffith University, Australia

ABSTRACT

Universities have been around for a very long time and operated in very similar ways for hundreds of years, but they are not immune to the disruption of the 21st century. In resonance with the surrounding environment, institutions of higher education are in a state of change and having to respond to the globalization, unstable economies, and to the changing expectations of society. In what is sometimes referred to as the most tumultuous time of change in higher education, leaders are faced with the challenge of frequent and complex decision making, and oftentimes implicit ethical challenges. As higher education is thrown into upheaval, and corruption in higher education comes to the limelight, it is an opportune time to take stock of the ethical status of higher education leadership by identifying emerging themes in relation to ethics, as a platform for encouraging deeper consideration of ethics in higher education leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is fundamental to the success of organizations. Leadership is not easy. The great volumes of literature around leadership attest to the difficulties and complexities of leadership. To complicate matters further, the present time, as is often acknowledged in literature, is tumultuous, bordering on chaotic. As Peter Drucker (2012) observes, 21st century organizations, as a result of globalization and technological revolutions, are on a "threshold of chaos". If organizations are to persist at this time then there is urgent need for leadership capabilities to support innovation, and agile strategic decision making.

"Leadership must be exercised in a fair and just manner mindful of the human dignity, the environment and rights of others that may be affected" (Pityana, 2017).

Leadership is inextricably bound to ethics. Most everything a leader does has a moral component – relationships with others, decision-making, exerting influence on followers, etc (Eubanks, Brown, & Ybema, 2012). Leaders, intentionally or unintentionally will engage in unethical as well as ethical behaviours (Eubanks, Brown, & Ybema, 2012), (Eubanks & Mumford, 2010). But there is yet much to learn about how leaders behave and how they construe ethics in relation to behaviour. Thiel, Bagdasarov, Harkrider, Johnson, and Mumford (2012) strongly argue for the need to better understand how leaders construct ethical behaviour, particularly in the context of their organizations and the surrounding complex environment. There is substantial evidence to suggest that ethical leadership is closely linked to positive employee outcomes in terms of well-being and job satisfaction Avey et al. (2012)

It is against the above described background that the issues of ethics in higher education leadership are considered. The enormous challenges faced by higher education at the present time are well-acknowledged in literature (Kisner & Hill, 2011). Higher education institutions are exposed to unprecedent social and economic forces never before experienced. Subjected to these forces, universities are compelled to change; change that is not merely surface but deep-rooted change, which inevitably forces examination of core values and brings to the fore the issue of ethics in higher education leadership.

Mervyn Frost (2016) argues that higher education plays a central ethical role in societies with respect to the advancement of knowledge. The "ethical duty of universities" upholds Frost (2016), " is to question truth claims, to seek explanations, to find good understandings, and not to propound one or another doctrine without question". Unethical behaviours in higher education undermine the ethical values that are indispensable to the very reason for the existence of higher education – the pursuit and production of knowledge (Frost, 2016). Furthermore, because the business of higher education is knowledge production, universities exert substantial influence over society at large and therefore the ethical character of universities ultimately influences the ethical character of society at large.

There are thus two tenets underpinning the present chapter. Firstly, the key mission of higher education is knowledge production and ethics is integral to this mission. Secondly, the increasingly complex nature of the social and economic fabric within higher education are embedded is disrupting higher education in a manner which is challenging traditional values of universities. Thus, in the present chapter the authors aim to 'take stock' of the state of ethics in higher education leadership by identifying emerging themes in relation to ethics in higher education leadership, as a platform for encouraging further discussion and development. The key question addressed is: What are the emerging ethical issues with which leaders in higher education must contend? To gain insight into the present state of ethical issues facing leaders in higher education, the author turns to Australian edition of *The Conversation* (https://theconversation.com/au). *The Conversation* is an independent online platform for academic commentary and/or debate about current issues. A search of *The Conversation* (https://theconversation.com/au) using keywords Higher Education /University/ethics/morals yielded a number of key themes in the ethical landscape of higher education.

Many of the ethical challenges faced by leaders in higher education are connected to positioning universities as a business. Hence, the chapter begins with a discussion of universities as a business. Stemming from the background of universities as businesses, the ethical issues of 'selling students short' are identified, and the ethical perils of industry research funding are highlighted before moving to a succinct review of corruption in higher education. Having described the ethical lay of the land of higher

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