

Chapter 5

Leadership, Vision, and Values in a Time of Change and Crisis: A Perspective From a UK Research- Intensive University

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyses the principles and practices of effective leadership and management in times of complex change. It presents an illustrative case study of a UK research-intensive university's strategic response to global and national changes in the higher education sector as they intersected with a profound and unexpected crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter explores emergent possibilities for practising leadership that respects the culture(s) of the academic and professional collective of a research-intensive university, while considering some of the lived contradictions and kinds of emotional labour experienced during this time of great pressure. The authors propose a new cross-cutting articulation of 'leadership in academia' based on seven key principles as a means of bringing faculty members and professional staff into new collaborative spaces. Their conclusion highlights the importance of establishing a culture of consent to cooperation to enable institutions to navigate disagreements over policy decisions.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter analyses the principles and practices of effective leadership and management in times of complex change. Our illustrative case study focuses on one UK research-intensive university's strategic response to global and national changes in the higher education sector, at a time when those changes intersected with a profound and unexpected crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic. We analyse what happened

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‘on the ground’ exploring some of the complex issues that education leaders had to navigate during this time of extraordinary challenge; the institution needed to navigate differing and contradictory needs and interests that cut across both staff and student communities together with questions about the future financial viability of the institution. We explore emergent new possibilities for practising leadership that respects the culture(s) of the academic and professional collective of a research-intensive university, while considering some of the lived contradictions and new kinds of emotional labour experienced during this time of great pressure. Analysing possible definitions of leadership, management and administration in times of change and crisis, we conclude with a new cross-cutting articulation of ‘leadership in academia’ based on seven key principles. We propose ways in which leaders in academic institutions can articulate a shared vision and shared values and bring faculty members and professional staff into new collaborative spaces highlighting the importance of establishing a culture of consent to cooperate including in the context of disagreement over policy decisions.

The authors of this chapter hold the roles of Pro-Director of Education (equivalent to Deputy Vice Chancellor or Vice President) and Director of a Centre for Education Development, respectively, in the same university. The first author is an academic member of the institution’s senior leadership team and the second a senior Service Lead with a doctorate and significant academic experience, currently occupying what Whitchurch (2013) has identified as a ‘third space’ role in the overlapping territory between academic and professional. We both have direct line management responsibility for a number of teams (faculty members and professional service staff).

With complementary expertise, the authors share a common portfolio focused on education and the wider student experience across the whole institution; we are charged with leading on the first section of the university’s 2030 strategy, which comprises: ‘Excellent Research-rich Education’; ‘A Consistently Excellent Student Experience’; and ‘Community, Inclusion and Wellbeing’. The education-focused strategic plan is underpinned by the values of inclusion, of giving ‘voice’ to all members of our community. It is informed by the principles and practices of the Connected Curriculum framework (Fung, 2017), which emphasizes the value of critical enquiry enriched by dialogue and collaboration between students, researchers and external partners. We both have strong networks beyond our home institution, situating our visions, values and practices within the landscape of a community of scholars whose research focus is higher education itself, and we both engage in regular dialogue with local, national and international education-focused specialists. In this chapter, as we analyse the notions of leadership in research-intensive universities during times of great challenge, we explicitly draw on and refer to our own lived experiences; we are therefore participant observers of the messiness of everyday activities as well as analysts of the cross-cutting themes we present here. Our analysis is also informed by previous studies in which we have interviewed and surveyed higher education staff about their perceptions of leadership and ‘being led’, both in general terms (Floyd and Fung, 2015, 2018; Creton and Gordon, 2020) and specifically in relation to education-focused roles (Fung and Gordon, 2016). While the main focus of this chapter is the research-intensive sector in the UK, we acknowledge that many of the issues that leaders have had to grapple with during the pandemic and that are examined in this chapter share commonalities with higher education institutions across the UK and beyond.

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