Leading Universities in the Twenty-First Century

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"The Quality of University Leaders in the 21st Century"

Introduction

The President of Ireland spoke eloquently at the opening of the Centennial Conference about the role that the University of Ireland had played in many aspects of economic, cultural and social life, including the political process that brought peace to Northern Ireland. As she said, "Universities – and the University of Ireland specifically – helped to prize open the space that let the future in". This phrase encapsulates the role that universities are increasingly being asked to play in the 21st century through their core activities of teaching, research and knowledge transfer, but also in their role as leading institutions in civil society.

This 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; 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).

The starting propositions suggest a 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.

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 are also challenges that are serious and difficult to resolve. In addition, the pace of change appears 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.

Expectations of higher education are rising

Governments, parents, employers and students alike have rising expectations of what universities can or should deliver. They 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 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 sustaining 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, but are they changing fast enough?

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. The boundaries between 'public and private' higher education are becoming increasingly fuzzy in the 21st century as public-sector institutions now 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.

Do we need a step-change in leadership?

The context for 21st century leadership of universities and colleges is 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. 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. 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 21st century 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.

There is also 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 institution in which leadership is exercised. 21st century leaders also need to operate across boundaries both within the institution, 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 an institution 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 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).

Within the UK's Top Management Programme (mounted by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education), some of these 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).

Change and continuity

While there are new directions and dimensions emerging for leaders and leadership in the 21st century, 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....:

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'.

The leadership of 21st century universities will need to be more diverse 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. Finally, there is one 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 task for 21st century universities and colleges.

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