

LEADING IN TURBULENT TIMES

Findings from an Investigation of Leadership Practices in the Australian Higher Education Sector

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Abstract

Australian higher education institutions (HEIs) are currently experiencing significant turbulence because of a myriad of factors, including funding cuts, changing educational and workplace technologies, more demanding student expectations and increased competition especially from new entrants to the sector. Focusing on leadership practices in the Australian HE sector, this study uncovers the complex perceptions of leadership at different HEIs, from the perspective of formal leaders to practicing academics. The findings suggest that HEIs increasingly operate in corporatist ways, often leading to some form of managerialist culture. This study finds that there is a perceived need for leaders to strike a balance between hierarchical managerialist leadership and traditional collegial approaches that recognise the need for knowledge-based environments to operate in collaborative ways.

Keywords: Leadership, Higher education, Collegial and Managerialist approaches

INTRODUCTION

Australia's higher education institutions (HEIs) have experienced significant turbulence in recent years as a result of an apparently endless stream of change (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018; Popenici & Kerr, 2013; Zepke, 2007). These include reductions in government funding (Davis, 2017; Fullan & Scott, 2009; Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018), technological disruptions (Becker et al., 2017; Ernst & Young, 2018; James, French, & Kelly, 2017; Popenici & Kerr, 2013; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2018), changing and more demanding student expectations (Drew, 2010; Ernst & Young Global Limited, 2018; James et al., 2017; Longden, 2006), internationalisation and increased competition (Matthews, Garratt, & Macdonald, 2018; Szekeres, 2004). These factors not only pose major challenges to higher education (HE) leaders, but they also have the potential to shape the ways in which institutions are governed and managed. In Australia, HEIs include both university and non-university higher education providers (NUHEPs). As at June 2019, there were 174 higher education providers in Australia, including 43 universities and 131 NUHEPs (TEQSA, 2019).

Changes in higher education have taken place globally as well and, coupled with digital disruptions (EY, 2018) and increased competition (Considine, 2006), university cultures have taken a more competitive stance in the globalised environment (Bobe & Taylor, 2010). Higher education has also become an economically significant industry in recent times, with participation continuing to grow (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018). These factors mean that public universities are increasingly operated as if they were tightly managed corporations (Schramm, 2008), with focus on profit maximisation and practices that monitor and measure financial performance and staff effectiveness through key performance indicators. These factors make leadership in HE particularly difficult because of the sector's complex operational settings.

While earlier leadership theories (eg, trait, behavioural and situational theories) have been criticised for their over-emphasis on the individual attributes of leaders or the context in which leaders operate (Northouse, 2013), leadership is recognised as a multifaceted and often confusing concept (Clegg, Kornberger, & Pitsis, 2011). There have been extensive discussion in the literature on the

different approaches to leadership, including postmodern (Clegg et al., 2011), value-oriented (Fairholm & Fairholm, 2009), post-heroic (Fletcher, 2004), distributed (Spillane, 2005), shared (Pearce & Conger, 2002), collaborative (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Rubin, 2009), participative (Somech, 2005) and dispersed approaches (Bryman, 1996; Bolman & Deal, 2003). Authors have used a variety of terms to describe contemporary leadership approaches, with each often emphasising a more dynamic understanding of leadership, particularly in the context of flatter and team-based structures (Collinson, 2011). HEIs, as 'knowledge' organisations, may need to consider adopting contemporary leadership approaches, recognising that effectiveness in knowledge-based environments may depend more on collaborative practices distributed throughout the organisation than on the actions of a few individuals, as leaders at the top. This paper reports on a study of contemporary leadership styles in a selection of HEIs by addressing the research question: 'How is turbulence in the sector affecting leadership practices in HEIs?'

METHODOLOGY

Employing a mixed methods approach, the study was conducted in two stages and combined features of qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Creswell & Clark, 2011). In stage one, practising academics, including associate lecturers, lecturers, senior lecturers, associate professors and professors were invited to complete an online survey to provide their opinions on various aspects of leadership practices in their institutions. In addition, interviews were conducted with institutional leaders and managers including Vice Chancellors, Presidents, Deputy Vice Chancellors, Pro Vice Chancellors, Provosts, Associate Vice Chancellors, Deans, Deputy Deans, Heads of School and Directors of Centres. In stage one, a total of 140 surveys were collected, and interviews were conducted with 24 Higher education leaders at two public universities and two private NUHEPs. Survey data were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and descriptive statistics (mean, medium and mode), and interview data were analysed using NVivo.

The participants in the first stage of the data collection were invited to participate in stage two, which involved completing a Delphi survey (in two rounds). While a detailed discussion of the Delphi is beyond the scope of this paper, in short, its purpose was to determine whether a consensus

could be reached among the academics and leaders at different types of HEIs regarding the various aspects of the leadership practices identified in stage one of data collection.

FINDINGS

The findings uncovered a clear perception of the need for HEIs to undertake a balanced approach to leadership. Also, policy uncertainty in the sector is increasingly forcing institutions to seek additional revenue sources, and resource-driven changes are driving institutions to be more efficient in order to grow and succeed in the increasingly competitive environment. As discussed in the following paragraphs, the findings go on to suggest that there is a perceived need for flow-on changes because the current workforce practices may not be fit-for-purpose for modern institutions, and organisational cultures and values can both enable as well as inhibit leadership practices in institutions. Further, the findings suggest that there is need for a more inclusive policy approach in HE, to more equally accommodate the university and non-university elements of the HE sector.

Perceived need for changes in the higher education workforce

This study revealed that the composition of the current HE workforce is a challenge, and changes need to be made, particularly in the university sector as opposed to the non-university sector. Leaders noted that workforce practices among HEIs are relatively rigid and generally do not allow leaders to make required changes in the constrained environments in which HEIs currently operate. According to one Dean:

...in most institutions currently, the workforce is in the wrong shape. It's not fit for purpose for the kind of institution we have now; it might have been fit for purpose in the '70s or '80s. ... [there are] lot of legacy staff unfortunately still trying to live in the past era (F Dean 1 UniB).

Leaders believed that when managing the workforce in such a tight financial environment, unions and industrial awards are unhelpful. Leaders indicated that the significant industrial unrest is because the sector is bound by unhelpful industrial awards preventing them from making necessary changes to reshape the workforce. Leaders further emphasised the external environment, specifically unionism, as a significant factor and challenge in making workforce changes. Recent developments in the sector such as the Fair Work Commission's decision to give Murdoch University the right to

terminate an enterprise bargaining agreement (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2017) have highlighted the point made by leaders in this study. Institutional leaders have expressed these views:

...there are issues with rigidity of workforce practices. The industrial environment differs between institutions, with some institutions being more industrial or unionised than others. That's part of the context in which leaders have to operate (M Dean 2 UniB).

...what staff must realise they're doing is being part of running a very high stakes business which has to be managed tightly (F Dean UniB)

What makes the difficulty worse is an unwillingness of staff to accept that the world has changed (M President Non-UniA)

In contrast, academics had different views regarding unionism. Academics considered that unionism is traditional in the sector because it protects academics from exploitation. An academic stated that unions are vital and disagreed with leaders that the HE industrial environment is rigid. Other academics argued that management would prefer not to have unions, so they could make unilateral changes and decisions that may not necessarily benefit the institution. The academics believed that employee representation, such as unions, provides a counterbalance against management. Another academic took the view that a strong union is essential when conditions are being eroded so quickly. Below are some of the quotes from the Academics:

Unions are vital and higher-education union is not rigid (M Prof UniB).

Management would prefer not to have unions, so they can make unilateral changes for the benefit of their positions, not necessarily the best of the institution. Employee representation [in the form of unions] provides a counter-lever against management. Yes, it is challenging but needed (M Snr Lect UniB).

The data also suggest that finding the “right” workforce is particularly difficult in regional areas. Participants noted that Australia has a distributional problem with the workforce, with regional areas having difficulty attracting highly qualified academics. One university leader explained that careers in higher education are much less appealing than they were some decades ago. According to one Provost:

There's a distributional problem with the workforce, most of which is concentrated in metropolitan rather than regional areas. (F Provost UniA)

This study suggests that the composition of the HE workforce, in particular as a result of the increased casualisation of the workforce, needs to be addressed, and this is consistent with the findings of Lacy et al. (2017). There are indications that casualisation is a matter of concern for the HE regulator TEQSA (TEQSA, 2017), and uncertainty around funding is often cited as a reason for the growing tendency to engage casual academics. Hence, HE leaders need to carefully consider the current composition of their workforce, which affects not only collaborative practices, but also leadership succession planning within their institutions. A Dean stated:

...with the high levels of casualisation in the workforce, this is where the succession planning falters, because we simply don't have the continuing staff from whom to select the next generation of leaders (F Dean 1 UniB).

This study finds a lack of overall succession planning in the sector, with most institutions tending to undertake succession planning on an ad hoc basis, and this is consistent with the findings of Loomes et al. (2019) and Garman & Glawe (2004). Both leaders and academics noted that institutions were not preparing enough people for leadership and management roles, and not providing enough training to those staff capable of moving into leadership roles. They further noted that collaborative approaches to leadership may enable leadership succession planning, whereas a strong managerial approach can inhibit succession planning in the institution. A university leader stated that Australian institutions are not successful at succession planning, as they do not produce enough leaders locally and do not support the development of staff to take leadership roles. Thus, it was claimed that Australian HEIs must develop better ways to engage with early and mid-career academics and researchers. Academics also raised concern over short-term appointment of leaders, particularly mid-level leadership positions. Participants have expressed these views:

...there is stability in senior leadership but a revolving door in middle-level leadership. (M A/Prof UniA)

I don't think we do enough to promote the next generation of leaders and provide opportunities for leadership, both in the professional and in academic staff (M PVC1 UniB).

Participants identified the casualisation of the HE workforce as a major factor that has severely diminished the number of academic positions available and added to the uncertainty of

employment in the sector. Institutions tend to employ fewer full-time staff to minimise both payroll costs and the long-term commitment of retaining staff, because there is no certainty that current levels of student enrolments will be maintained. Given the nature of their appointment, casual staff are arguably less committed than full-time permanent academics.

The high level of casualisation (Lama & Joullié, 2015; May, 2013) and funding cuts have arguably contributed to poorer student experiences because there are fewer student support services in public institutions. Because of the demand-driven system, many feels that enrolled students are not academically well prepared and may require additional support to complete their studies. So, if institutions are unable to provide that level of support, students may tend to drop out, resulting in higher attrition rates. Thus, it appears that the sector has experienced over-casualisation because of uncertainty regarding funding and government policies.

The data from this study also suggest that the relationship between leaders and academics in institutions is often poor, and the growing gap between academics and management is consistent with the findings of Shepherd (2017) and Gill (2009). Most academics believed that they were not involved in the decision-making process at their institutions, and that only nominal consultation occurred to ‘tick a box’. In contrast, the leaders believed that academics lacked commitment to being involved in the decision-making process. Some academics believed that they were not well treated, whereas some leaders thought that academics simply wanted to undertake less teaching and focus more on research. These views indicate a mismatch of perceptions. This mismatch may have occurred because of a perceived lack of trust and respect, and institutional promotions are largely based on research, whereas a significant proportion of revenue is derived from teaching.

Organisational culture and values can enable as well as inhibit leadership practices

The study reveals that organisational culture, values and leadership practices in institutions are closely linked. Leaders can play a key role in creating conditions for collaborative leadership to occur because they can encourage others to take the lead at appropriate times: therefore, they can be enablers in terms of creating an effective environment. Leaders and academics noted that factors such

as building trust and respect, rewards and recognition, communication and openness are central in establishing a collaborative culture in institutions. The data suggests that there is scope for leaders to provide an environment in which people can speak and be heard. The participants indicated that organisational culture can both enable and inhibit leadership practices in the institution.

A senior university academic stated that a silo mentality and an ego problem exist among staff. The academic explained that institutions have a top-heavy management structure and that decisions are made unilaterally at the highest levels, which may not produce the best outcomes. Another senior academic added that the sector has a culture of secrecy that excludes academics from decision-making processes, which may inhibit collaborative leadership practices.

Academics noted that leaders should develop a supportive and collegial culture, and simultaneously be willing to make decisions in the best interests of the institution. A senior institutional leader added that formal leaders are fundamental in creating the culture and allowing opportunities for dispersed, shared or collaborative leadership approaches, but that was not happening at the institution. Literature suggests that an innovative and supportive organisational culture supports differences in approaches to leadership in higher education (Lok & Crawford, 2004). One academic stated that:

I cannot regard managerialist 'leaders' at my institution as trustworthy when I feel totally disrespected by them (F Snr Lect UniB)

The data suggests that people at the top of the HEIs need to trust their workforce. Academics noted that people at high levels are generally untouchable and tend not to trust others at the frontline. The study found that building trust between people in leadership roles and those who do not have a formal leadership positions can help building a resilient organisation. From a leader's perspective if academics do not trust management, it would be difficult to work with them and, conversely, from the academic perspective if leaders are not trusted, staff may lose interest in the organisation. Trust and respect were found to be critical for building a resilient organisation. In line with the findings of Raffnsoe (2013) and Paavola et al. (2004), this study suggests that trust is an important form of power

because it is central to the development of knowledge innovation and is subsequently important in knowledge organisations. Other academics shared their experiences by saying:

I would not trust anyone from management in this current climate. (F Snr Lect UniB)

There is a massive distrust for academics and even more so of sessionals. (M A/Prof UniA)

Academics suggested that leaders in formal leadership positions should share rewards and recognition with everyone who contributes to the institution's performance, and one senior university academic even stated that there is no reward system in the sector. Collegiality requires commitment from individuals: however, if people are not interested in contributing, attempts at a collegial approach must necessarily fail. A mid-level leader from a non-university institution indicated that little recognition is given to academics, even though they are those who sell, design and deliver the educational "product". Some academics and leaders argued:

... 'expertise' in the sense of meaningful accomplishment is recognised, but 'respected' to a secondary degree (M Snr Lect UniB)

... [there is a] lack of respect for people who are designing ... and delivering the product. (M Assoc. Dean Non-UniA).

Data suggest that staff commitment is important for collaborative approaches to decision-making because if staff are not committed, it is difficult to maintain a collaborative environment. A senior university leader added that commitment should be part of enterprise bargaining agreements. If people who are not in formal leadership positions do not demonstrate commitment, it is difficult to involve them in the decision-making process. Collaborative or participative approaches to leadership will not be successful unless everyone in the institution is committed to achieving the organisation's common goals. However, a senior university leader mentioned that not all staff members want to take a leadership role because they may not be willing or able to bear the associated risk.

The study indicated that there is disjointed communication between people in leadership roles and practising academics. A senior university leader argued that it is important to promote open dialogue and to consider the language used in communications between leaders and frontline

academics. Staff should feel comfortable expressing their views and making their voices heard, and senior leadership teams should encourage open communication among staff. This is seen to be pivotal to maintaining a collaborative environment. Communication also plays an important role in the extent to which debates are encouraged, whether critical voices are allowed and whether any differences of opinion are encouraged or subtly repressed. If the decision-making process is not communicated well to academics, they are likely to feel that they are part of the process and implementing decisions will therefore be difficult. A bottom-up and flatter organisational structure would therefore promote better communication. One leader and an academic had these views:

...we must make sure the language we use - and the ways in which we open dialogue - is supportive (F Provost UniB)

Frank, and open discussion and perceived willingness to 'go to bat' for the wider institution would be helpful (M A/Prof UniA)

This study further suggests that institutions – particularly public HEIs – appear to be reactive to risk rather than proactive, and this could affect the institutional leader's ability to respond to changes in a timely manner. Thus, leaders need to develop a robust appetite for risk to succeed in an increasingly competitive environment. The data show that public institutions are somewhat complacent and generally have a risk-adverse culture, whereas private NUHEPs appear willing to take greater risks. The data also suggest a prevailing culture in Australia in which some politicians and HE leaders and managers are 'anti-intellectuals' who appear not to value HE as a long-term investment, but rather as training for jobs. The statement on the prevailing culture existing in Australian HEIs was close to reaching a consensus in the Delphi survey. Some leaders and academics argued:

Universities are far too complacent and internal looking (F Director of Centre UniB).

... sometimes government regulations limit proactive risk mitigation (M Snr Lect UniB).

Perceived need for inclusive approaches in higher education policy and regulations

This study indicates that leadership at government levels across the sector is unbalanced with most policy in HE is being broadly focused on the public sector. However, as the private sector is a

growing market and comprises two-thirds of institutions, policy attention may need to adopt more inclusive approaches to better include private institutions. The research suggests that private providers currently feel they are excluded from the consultation process at policy level. Some leaders from private HEPs noted that they have been treated differently by the regulator compared with public institutions. In this regard, Edwards et al. (2009) reported that stringent standards and processes were deemed necessary for private HEPs, although they were not required by the legislation. One leader from a NUHEP argued:

...the regulator interferes in the operations of organisations, because frankly, the regulator does not understand how private organisations work and they don't go anywhere near universities so how would they understand how universities work? (M President Non-UniA).

Non-university leaders revealed that regulators may have unreasonable expectations of private providers. Those leaders noted that regulators sometimes try to force private providers to engage fewer casual staff and expect them to involve casual staff in most decision-making processes, in professional development and in scholarly activities. Meanwhile, these leaders stated that more than half the academic workforce of most public universities is comprised of casuals. Further, in some cases, academics delivering qualifications have the same level of qualification (the Higher Education Standards Framework requires academics to hold at least Australian Qualification Framework plus one qualification). But the regulator expects academics at private providers to have a minimum of a doctorate to teach a bachelor's degree. This indicates a mismatch between expectation from public and private providers. A Dean from a non-university noted:

... the way that private HEIs respond to the regulator and are held to account against the standards is quite different than it is for universities (M Dean Non-UniA).

This study finds that the private higher education sector may need better representation on, or even leadership of, committees, subcommittees and various panels of the higher education regulator and other representative bodies, which currently seems widely dominated by university or ex-university people. There is scope for better acknowledgement that private providers form an important part of the HE sector because they seem to be able to explore niche markets and, according to some

participants, they often provide a better customer experience to students. Individuals who are familiar with the private sector or who have worked in the private higher education sector may need to be broadly included during consultation and policymaking. Two leaders voiced their opinion by saying:

Our biggest challenges are meeting TEQSA requirements; they seem to have higher standards for private providers than it does for universities (F HoS Non-UniB).

The regulator is populated by ex-university people & have skewed views on NUHEP. (M D/Dean Non-UniB)

Both academics and leaders from non-university institutions reached consensus that there is overregulation and too much focus on compliance over quality. In contrast, there was a very low agreement among university participants on this statement.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study provided a new theoretical approach for the study of leadership practices in the Australian HE sector by giving attention to a wide range of shareholder perceptions of leadership. The study demonstrated that these perceptions, from frontline academics to vice-chancellors at different types of HEIs, allowed a new angle on the myriad of issues relating to leadership in higher education.

The research can also claim to make some contributions to policy approaches and attitudes in the HE sector. It suggests that HE in Australia requires more stable and inclusive policy approaches to better accommodate the whole sector, including universities as well as non-universities. It is clear that current policies appear to be more focused on the public sector, even though non-university HE providers constitute two-thirds of all Australian HEIs.

Further, the study draws attention to the need for change in Australia's public universities. While frontline academics are often called upon to understand the need for change, the study also identifies the need for change among university leaders and managers. Universities need to be more responsive, as well as effective and efficient in taking greater risks and making changes that respond to the changing Australian HE sector. This research also contributes to the leadership literature by suggesting that there is a perceived need to adapt more commercial approaches to leadership in HE

and, in a practical way, to find a balance between the traditional collegial and the hierarchical managerialist approaches in the changing environment.

CONCLUSION

This paper has reported on some of the key findings of this study of leadership practices in Australian HEIs, with particular attention to the difficulties presented by the current turbulent environment. This environment raises issues and challenges for the sector that can impact the ways in which the institutions are led, and this appears to have implications for academics as well as the institutional leaders. Thus, the findings of this study are timely given the current difficulties and uncertainties in the sector.

The results suggest that a balance is needed between managerialist styles of leadership and the more traditional collegial approaches to lead and manage contemporary HEIs. Further, there is a strong perception of the need for change in the HE workforce, because current practices may not be fit-for-purpose for modern institutions. Also, organisational cultures and values can both enable as well as inhibit leadership practices in institutions, so careful attention needs to be paid to their management and communication. Further, there is a perceived need for an inclusive approach to HE policy and regulations to accommodate the entire sector, universities as well as non-universities. The paper draws attention to some of the practical and theoretical implications of these.

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