

Developing Excellent Academic Leaders in Turbulent Times

Shelda Debowski

Senior Consultant, Higher Education Development

Shelda@Debowski.com.au

Abstract

The higher education sector needs good academic leaders. Unfortunately, the development and support of good leadership has been largely missing, despite its criticality in preparing institutions for these turbulent times. This commentary explores some of the challenges facing the sector with respect to academic leadership. It profiles some of the issues that are emerging with respect to building a robust sector, including addressing higher education's poor performance with respect to viable and well-considered strategy, academic management and the support of vulnerable academic members. It argues that these issues may stem from poor academic leadership and maps some of the reasons for this challenge. Suggestions as to how we might improve the higher education environment through enhanced valuing and support of good leadership are offered.

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The higher education sector is experiencing a number of challenges: increased global competition; the need to build more economical educational practices; a push for new, innovative ways to undertake research and teaching; and a burgeoning desire to increase efficiencies, particularly with respect to staffing and student-teacher ratios. Certainly, one cause of these pressures relates to the shifting contexts in which universities operate. A number of nations have experienced reduced governmental sponsorship for their universities, resulting in increased pressure to build more business-oriented practices and accountabilities. This has certainly put considerable pressure on university administrators to look more seriously at the costs of university activities. At the same time, it has led to some significant changes in university practices and values that are generating considerable unforeseen consequences, particularly with respect to academic cultures, work contexts and outcomes.

In dynamic and uncertain times, it is essential that institutions are supported by good leadership. The broader literature highlights the need for leaders who are insightful, courageous, strategic and generous in guiding their communities forward (Jackson & Parry, 2011). Unfortunately, in the higher education sector, our understanding of good leadership remains largely exploratory and ill-defined, with limited transference of broader, proven, leadership principles to this more specific context (Gayle, Tewarie & White, 2011). This is proving to be particularly problematic for academics, where leaders are often thrust into more senior roles with limited preparation or guidance on the standards, practices and expectations that they should reflect (Fullan & Scott, 2009; Middlehurst, 2008; Scott, 2011; Sirat, Ahmad & Azman, 2012).

The changing higher education environment is concerning: not only because of the austere context in which it is operating, but also the responses that are emanating from universities. In times of economic stringency, a number of “solutions” are emerging, largely driven by economic imperatives and particular business models. These include the increased use of casual academics (McFarlane, 2011), particularly at the early career level; a growing emphasis on performativity and related invigilation of performance outcomes (Tourish, 2011; Wilson & Holligan, 2013); an escalating focus on fast results and rapid shifts in strategy, and substantial sectoral and institutional initiatives directed toward controlling and monitoring academic outcomes and activities (Harding, Ford & Gough, 2010). This focus on academic accountability and rapid repositioning of institutions brings particular challenges, particularly to those who are leading institutional strategy and those responsible for implementing key reforms and agendas.

A push toward better outcomes and higher performance is not a bad thing in itself. Universities benefit from aspirational targets and a quest for ongoing improvement. This helps encourage the growth and development of staff and ensures institutions remain collectively focused on key priorities. However, the mechanisms that are used to stimulate improved performance need to

be carefully considered and managed. Academics are keen to perform and to be recognised for their contributions. However, the ways in which they are encouraged or prodded to be high performers will have a major impact on their commitment, motivation, creativity and outcomes (Coates, Dobson, Goedegebuure & Meek, 2010). The quality of leadership across the institution plays a key role in determining whether academics are keen volunteers who are fully motivated to play a part in generating university advancement or reluctant conscripts. Poor leadership can generate a range of undesirable strategies to ensure people are supporting key goals. Emerging approaches include coercion and an insistence on rigid uniformity across diverse communities. An absence of consultation and clear justification for the change can also lead to loss of good staff, sabotage, factionalism and widespread disengagement.

Unfortunately, many of us have experienced critical, aggressive, competitive or perfectionistic leadership that generates fearful, under-performing and unhealthy academic communities. This form of leadership is encouraged when the focus on outcomes and external indicators becomes the sole focus of determining effectiveness. A potential risk is the exploitation of talented new academics who are employed as casuals and treated as expendable fodder (Debowski, 2012c). Many find themselves less competitive after several years, as they remain under-developed and under-supported. Constructive leaders operate differently: setting a clear vision, encouraging strong communal engagement, looking for creative ways to resolve challenges, and encouraging each individual to optimise their performance through good use of their talents, developing further capabilities, working with other colleagues and staying motivated (McCaffery, 2010). The recognition that some degree of risk-taking can benefit the long-term outcomes also underpins these leaders. Interestingly, the performance of institutions where constructive leadership operates is significantly stronger than those experiencing aggressive or defensive leadership.

Senior leaders are particularly influential in supporting a university's outcomes (Drew, Ehrich & Hansford, 2008; Scott, Bell, Coates and Grebennikov, 2010). Their primary responsibilities relate to carriage of institutional strategy: this may relate to determining strategy and / or implementing the initiatives to achieve key goals. Executive leaders generally operate at a whole of institutional level, carrying responsibility for institutional wide portfolios such as research or learning and teaching, or for campuses or administrative functions. These leaders may have direct responsibility for budgets and staff, or may be required to operate as influencers, working with deans and other senior leaders as collaborative partners. They are strong determinants of the direction the university or their portfolio takes, and also play a key role in identifying and promoting critical priorities that will be resourced and supported by university staff.

While there is status in filling executive roles, these positions are not necessarily secure. The uncertain times universities have faced over the last few years have resulted in a more tumultuous leadership environment. There have been instances of new vice chancellors

spilling all leadership roles at dean and above, assuming that only new appointees will be loyal or effective. In some instances, dissenting voices or perspectives may be perceived to be adversarial, resulting in rapid dismissal. The tone of the most senior leadership can certainly impact on the quality of decisions and actions that flow through the institution. In turn, less constructive executive leadership will generate highly competitive and adversarial environments. This can have major consequences for the culture and values that are played out across the institution – including the different ways systems and processes are set up to guide academic practice.

While executive leaders have considerable power and authority, they are highly dependent on the support provided by the other senior leaders such as deans or heads of school, institutes or centres. Deans can be particularly influential, as they oversee heads and have significant influence over the enactment of university strategy and resource management. They also play a key role in promoting (or ignoring) institutional strategies and may act as gatekeepers for which institutional priorities their community will address. Thus, if there is good synergy and a common sense of purpose across these three senior levels, it is likely that the institution will more readily achieve its desired goals. Unfortunately, this synergy is not always evident. The degree to which deans can influence and / or support the broader institutional direction will be largely dependent on the context in which they operate: in some universities, these leaders are very much part of the executive decision team and able to offer contextual guidance that can encourage an adaptive approach to accommodate variations across the institution. In others, they may be strongly marginalised by executive leaders, regarded as impediments rather than assets. When alignment does not occur, policies or change initiatives may be driven without effective consultation resulting in considerable havoc if the input of those who must implement is disregarded. The engagement of deans and heads therefore plays a key role in determining the success of new university initiatives. In turn, they must also model good leadership practice to cultivate high motivation and commitment across their disparate communities.

Deans and heads face a particular challenge in mobilising their workforces to focus on large-scale agendas. Many academics are experiencing major challenges in building and maintaining their competitive edge and in identifying what is really important for their careers and the institution. The demands of a complex academic work role are increasingly challenging. Academics do not come fully prepared for academic work: they need time to build a vast array of complex and sophisticated professional skills. A newly minted PhD only establishes the foundational entry-level credential. Post PhD, academics must develop advanced skills in teaching (including instructional skills, online learning, curriculum reform, coordinating teaching teams, work-integrated learning, teaching innovations, teaching research); research (including publishing, grant seeking, research supervision, leading and or managing research projects, teams, programs, centres or institutes) and more generally, engagement and leadership across a number of contexts (Debowski, 2012). These sophisticated capabilities take time to develop, particularly if the individual is experiencing high workloads or finds it hard to sequester time to reflect, learn and test new ideas and

approaches.

When university leaders then disrupt established systems and processes to implement new reforms, organisational structures, expectations and standards, they will find it hard to engage academics if they cannot offer a cogent, persuasive and logical case for these innovations. Further, the tendency to inflict multiple concurrent change reforms from different portfolios may result in increasing disengagement by the institutional community: change becomes noise and, in a number of cases, can often be ignored while staff wait to see if it a) makes sense b) works and c) has been properly planned and tested. Early adopters often find that changes are poorly designed, with considerable time lost in renegotiating a better approach. Little wonder many academics aim to remain observers, rather than participants, particularly if multiple reforms are being generated at the same time. The capacities to lead change transitions and establish a credible, trusted persona as a responsible leader are key factors that will assist senior leaders in bridging the cynicism that multiple change agendas tend to generate. These qualities require conscious focus as they develop and are not necessarily well established when senior academics move into their influential roles.

There are many consequences of operating in a setting where inexperienced or ill-prepared leaders abound. These can include:

- Failed initiatives, leading to disillusioned staff, costly turnarounds and significant loss of goodwill;
- Bullying, with little recourse or support for those being victimised;
- Weak support for students, as academics strive to minimise their coordination duties to ensure they are make time for what really counts;
- Difficulties in finding recruits to take on key service or leadership roles; or
- A strongly individualistic culture that disregards the broader institutional needs.

Thus, the calibre of senior leaders strongly determines the success and health of the institution at large. For the most part, the monitoring and conscious management of leaders is absent from universities. Instead, we are relying on a laissez-faire approach where only disastrous leadership is addressed. It is possible that our universities are reluctant to explore leadership because of a misconception that it cannot be evaluated effectively. Further, the consequences of poor leadership can be deflected if the institutional oversight is weak. Unfortunately, the degree to which executive and senior leaders are evaluated, developed or challenged is generally quite limited. University councils generally review the overall growth of the institution, rather than the leadership that operates within. Further, the direct consequences of poor decisions or leadership generally take considerable time to emerge. Additionally, those who are in more senior roles can generally blame their predecessors for poor outcomes, or attribute

their lack of success to poor performance by their staff or followers.

Certainly, times are tough and unpredictable, but this commentary highlights the criticality of focusing on leadership, rather than letting it run unfettered and ill-framed. It is time to make leadership a key strategic priority of universities. The next section offers some basic suggestions as to how academic leadership at more senior levels can be better framed and positioned as an essential component of university strategy.

Incubating good academic leaders

The profound impact of senior leadership needs to be better acknowledged, valued, managed and monitored. The following principles offer some preliminary thoughts as to how these goals might be achieved. Many of these strategies are evident in various universities. However, they are often introduced in a piecemeal fashion, with particular ideas and principles sponsored, rather than operating as a coherent, integrated and well-articulated institutional architecture.

1. Seek the right leadership qualities

A scan of advertisements for senior leadership roles highlights the criteria that generally guide selection: show that you can make a significant difference by leading key reforms. The focus on demonstrable outcomes has led to some unfortunate consequences. Few recruiters investigate the culture in which those reforms operated and whether they were successful. In fact, few universities question the efficacy of the shifts in university practice that were engineered. Were they necessary? Did they enhance the institutional outcomes? The push to be seen as an innovative leader who changed *something* can encourage incoming senior leaders to look for what is wrong, critiquing past practice and denigrating those who enacted previous executive plans. This practice of rebuilding from the foundations up generates considerable institutional stress, as it may require reformation of whole systems, policies, practises and cultures. Often, the end result may have added little substantive value, but in the meantime, substantial disruption has occurred, with consequences for academic productivity and well-being. Desirably, new leaders should consider what operates as a good foundation and then scaffold enhancements. However, this would require a different view of leadership: focusing on qualities that are custodial and constructive, rather than heroic and pioneering. Certainly, universities need to carefully consider what they are looking for in their leaders. Evidence of good change leadership where communities engaged, where reforms increased institutional baseline performance, and where colleagues valued the leadership offered, would significantly enhance the types of leaders being sought and recruited. It would also decrease the lost productivity that is generated with new appointees who create additional turbulence as they seek to imprint their identity on the institution.

2. Define and model the values that underpin institutional leadership

The explicit articulation of leadership qualities and expectations is often largely invisible in universities. High quality leaders should demonstrate a number of characteristics. First, they should have a long-term vision of the institution that will build on the strengths and established capabilities of the staff and heritage of the institution. Second, their portfolios should balance innovation with pragmatic consideration of the degree of change that is possible or reasonable, particularly if other executive members are also seeking substantive reform. Third, the capacity to consult, engage and partner with the broader academic community is an essential characteristic of good executive leadership. University staff are informed, committed, intelligent contributors to the university enterprise who appreciate shaping the future, not simply implementing it. Finally, the ability to treat others respectfully, and to build cultures that are predicated on respect and valuing are important components of effective leadership – at all levels, but most particularly, at these senior levels. The influence and modelling of good leadership plays a critical role in determining how others operate.

Leadership is often ill-defined in many universities. We assume that we all have common understandings as to what constitutes good leadership. However, this is not the case. The key principles of effective leadership need to be clearly defined, articulated and modelled. This should cascade from the most senior levels down through the full institution. Vice chancellors play a key role in setting the tone: they determine what will be discussed in their executives and ideally, should reflect these qualities in their own leadership. Making leadership important means exploring it in meetings and retreats; monitoring the impact of leadership actions on the community; monitoring institutional indicators of culture and ensuring the university staff feel safe in identifying concerns.

An explicit and well-articulated model or set of principles that describe the key attributes of good leadership can greatly assist. Consider, for example, the framework developed by the University of Western Australia (see: <http://www.hr.uwa.edu.au/managers/leading>). Further, it makes leadership behaviours public and accountable, and encourages those in formal roles to apply mindful leadership to their practices: they will need to model these institutional standards.

3. Promote leadership capacity-building

An important goal for universities is to encourage distributed leadership across the institution (Bolden, Petrov & Gosling, 2009). This serves to build a strong leadership ethic and promotes leadership as a key strength of the university. Institutions that are building strong leadership cultures reflect three key principles:

- Leaders are publicly acknowledged and valued;

- Leadership is recognised as an important academic role and contribution; and
- The institution promotes and values those who move into leadership.

Unfortunately, the development of a leadership culture may prove challenging in some of our universities even though almost every academic in a university will encounter opportunities to fill leadership roles. Faculties, schools and centres rely on dedicated staff to take responsibility for different portfolios and to ensure the student experience and academic activities are well executed and regularly enhanced. Without the support of numerous academics, there is a strong risk of systems and processes undermining the effective functioning of the institution. Commencing with coordination of projects, teams or educational or school initiatives, there are numerous ways academics can take carriage of important activities. However, the shift into leadership is not without its challenges in our universities.

A crucial issue relates to how leadership is perceived across the broader university. The push toward performativity has greatly skewed the work that is primarily valued: research, that which can be measured, costed and compared, tends to be used as a performance proxy, and thus, becomes the key focus of those seeking recognition, security or surety. Academics are advised by their mentors to focus on their research to ensure they are competitive, and in the case of early career staff, employable. In many instances, a move into leadership is regarded as a career-limiting decision, as it will increase daily commitments and reduce the capacity to focus on higher-order thinking and outputs. The drive to position oneself in this way encourages highly individualistic behaviour that may be successful initially, but in the long-term, ill prepares academics for more senior leadership roles. And it reduces the depth of leadership across the academic community, with some very unfortunate consequences. By the time they reach the professoriate, many academics will need to enact high-level leadership, but with little exposure or experience in working at a more contained level (Rayner, Fuller, McEwen & Roberts, 2010). This puts the university at risk and raises the probability of promoting poorly prepared leaders, this perpetuating the vicious cycle.

Obviously, this may require a change to the ways in which performance reviews, promotion weightings and rewards are structured. Many universities have employed compliance driven approaches to push academic adoption of service, governance and leadership roles. Workload models and measurement of hours of activity across teaching, research and governance /service have been used as a blunt tool to push people toward adopting particular roles and achieving minimum performance standards. Whilst intended to ensure equity, fairness and transparency, these management initiatives are often encouraging strong cultures of working to rule and resentment. The specificity and detail of many workload formulas and role statements introduces a significant risk of disempowering academics. While guidance on standards of performance offers an important cue as to achievement priorities, micro-management in the form of detailed articulations of academic work disempowers academics,

particularly in terms of working to their strengths. Academics who are required to meet stipulated role requirements and quotas will experience lower motivation and distrust of the motives of their leaders. They will also perceive leadership to be an undesirable work component. Leadership does not operate well in a context where it is forcibly instituted, rather than culturally driven. Universities need to review how they are valuing and promoting leadership roles and responsibilities. It is time to review how leadership is embedded in academic practice.

4. Monitor leadership impact

A major weakness in many institutions is the lack of vigilance in evaluating leadership impact. Key institutional indicators such as turnover, absenteeism, drops in collective performance and the non-competitiveness of staff are valuable indicators of a leader's impact. Longitudinal data, segmented by the organisational structure, offers valuable comparative evidence of the relative impact of different leaders (particularly deans and heads who influence resource dispersal and strategy implementation strategies.)

An important strategy is to identify and review baseline measures before implementing key reforms. This will help assess the impact of different initiatives and will guide leaders to focus on what really matters. The need to articulate how a new strategy will support the bottom line would build more accountability and rigour into these leadership processes.

5. Integrate tools and other support mechanisms

There are many valuable tools and processes that can offer deep guidance and insight to leaders. Frameworks and models provide a clear articulation of the values and principles that underpin institutional leadership. However, leaders often find it hard to see how effective their approaches are in practice. Fortunately, there are a number of valuable tools that can greatly assist leaders in reflecting on their leadership effectiveness (Debowski & Blake, 2007). 360 degree reviews are particularly helpful in providing leaders with a sense of how they enact leadership and how that leadership impacts on others. These reviews provide feedback from a range of sources: including the supervisor, peers, staff, self. The capacity to triangulate feedback and view the composite perspectives of different stakeholders provides important perspectives and cues as to strengths and areas requiring further focus. There are various types of instruments, ranging from those that emphasise leadership and management practices, to those that are more values driven. (Extensive experience with both suggests that a values-based instrument is more powerful and has a greater impact on the recipient.) These are sophisticated instruments that require careful management and debriefing – often by a professional qualified consultant. Additional coaching and support may be necessary as new skills and capabilities are cultivated.

An important principle when using such tools is that these are developmental in nature: they offer powerful diagnostic insights, but also generate considerable reflection and vulnerability. Thus, they must be managed confidentially and with a recognition of their purposes and boundaries. While 360 degree reviews are often integrated into leadership development programs, they are generally under-utilised for those who in formal leadership roles. Ideally, leaders from vice chancellor down would be engaged in seeking regular feedback on their impact. Certainly after a year in a role, it is particularly important to check that the leadership approach is generating the right outcomes. Regular follow-up reviews to build a longitudinal view of leadership impact and effectiveness are also extremely beneficial.

Where contract renewals or other employment related decisions are being undertaken, other sources of evaluation might be considered. The use of organisational data (including institutional culture audits; turnover; capacity building of staff; increased productivity or revenue etc) all provide important indicators of successful leadership based on collective action. The development of a leadership portfolio also has great potential, encouraging conscious reflection about a leadership philosophy, goals, strategies and achievements. The identification of institutional indicators as to success is a useful framing of these reflections.

6. Sponsor the leadership community

Leaders need strong support. They are potentially the most powerful force for good in the university. On the other hand, a poor leader can generate irreparable harm. There is a pressing need to recognise the criticality of integrating effective sponsorship of leaders over their full cycle. Some of the possible mechanisms include:

- Provision of an induction program for new leaders (including those moving into associate professor and professor roles);
- Access to 360 degree reviews for all senior leaders at 12 – 18 months after their appointment, and every two years thereafter;
- Access to coaching, mentoring and shadowing;
- Provision of targeted development programs as a core part of preparation for those moving into formal leadership roles (such as those developed by the University of Sheffield: <http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/hr/sld/sheffieldleader>);
- The provision of strategic workshops and retreats that continue to scaffold and promote good leadership practice and reflection;
- Access to just in time online training (see, for example, <http://www.epigeum.com/component/programmes/?view=programme&programme=24>); and
- The brokering of networks to facilitate peer learning across the leadership community.

These forms of support, along with 360 degree reviews, require funding. They will rarely flourish if specialist support staff and related program funds are not included in the budget. A challenge that is evident in many universities is that the group that often supports these initiatives are located in Human Resource departments. They may find it difficult to gain sponsorship or valuing of the work to be done. This might be more readily achieved if these departments introduced better diagnostics of cultural trends and analyses of performance impacts of poor leadership. Improved profiling of their roles and strategies would also assist in garnering executive level support (Debowski, 2012a).

Conclusion

This commentary has offered a personal view of the nature of university leadership at present. I have explored the critical role that senior leaders play and suggested that one of the reasons that our institutions are struggling may relate to how we articulate and model leadership. When times are tough and turbulent, good leaders are desperately needed. They can guide their communities safely through, providing structure and opportunity for next generation leaders to embrace their leadership potential. It is time to move past our traditional practices and to embrace the principles and strategies that other sectors use so successfully. Leadership matters. And it needs to be visible through articulated values, consistent actions, positive modelling and integration across all parts of academic activity.

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