

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Leadership, complexity and emotional labour: a collaborative ethnographic study of adaptive and enabling leadership during COVID-19

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**Research Domain:** Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

**Abstract:** COVID-19 presented leaders in higher education (HE) around the world with complex and pressing challenges that required an adaptable and agile response. Using a collaborative autoethnographic methodology the study explored academic leadership in HE during the pandemic and how adaptation and innovation was supported during this time. We used recorded conversations and other artefacts to gather qualitative data about our leadership experiences as associate deans for learning and teaching. Complexity Leadership Theory was used as a theoretical framework to guide the data collection and analysis. Two key themes emerged from the narrative analysis: the importance of enabling leadership; and emotional labour and compassionate leadership. These themes point to a need to consider the significance of compassionate and empathetic practice as a core component of enabling leadership, to ensure that leadership practices are effective particularly during periods of change.

### **Paper: Introduction**

COVID-19 brought unimagined challenges for academic leaders in Higher Education (HE) as they responded to complex change, at a time of stress and disruption (at system and individual levels). There have been examples of effective change as well as leadership that has been counter-productive (Uhl-Bien, 2021), and this research study aimed to explore academic leadership in learning and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. We also explored ways to support the development and resilience of leaders to negotiate the complex systems within HE.

### **Methods**

The study used a collaborative ethnographic approach, in which two of us who are associate deans for learning and teaching (LM and SH) used recorded conversations and other artefacts to gather data about our experiences of leadership during COVID-19. This novel approach enabled longitudinal reflective dialogue to be captured, to help deepen understanding of how leadership practices adapted during the major system shock. This was enriched by the different disciplinary perspectives we brought; we are from different schools and academic backgrounds and our co-author (MB-D) brought expertise in educational leadership research. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Dundee and qualitative data was gathered between March – August 2020, using Microsoft Teams to gather the recordings, reflective written exchanges and visual data (personal photographs representing our mood, state of mind or achievements). The recordings were

transcribed verbatim and analysed manually and using NVivo. A thematic and dialogic narrative analysis was undertaken (Riessman, 2007). Including a dialogic component enabled us to foreground contextual and photographic components of the data, enhancing the analysis and ensuring the complexities and sometimes conflicting positions were recognised.

### **Theoretical framework**

We used Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017) as a framework to construct our reflections and for data analysis (Howden et al., 2021). We used CLT's three leadership functions of operational, entrepreneurial and enabling leadership as reference points to guide the data analysis, including critical incidents and experiences. CLT is a valuable framework for leadership work because of the way it embeds enabling leadership between operational and entrepreneurial leadership. Enabling leadership is essential in elevating innovation whilst operational activities continue within the bureaucracy of a complex HE system (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). CLT therefore acted as a framework during data collection and analysis, making sense of our leadership and the responses to the turbulence brought about by the pandemic.

### **Findings**

Two themes emerged from the analysis:

#### *Importance of enabling leadership*

It became clear how important enabling leadership was to advance adaptation and new ways of working across our respective teams. Whilst we faced intense and necessary operational tasks, enabling leadership was essential to support innovation amidst the crisis. We recognised part of our role as being the interconnector across a variety of teams, fora and individuals, and experienced enabling leadership as a tension between what we wanted to do (supportive, collaborative leadership) and what we felt we were doing (directive, operational leadership).

#### *Emotional labour and compassionate leadership*

We identified the need for compassionate leadership (Parkin and Brown, 2020) alongside experiences of emotional labour through adapting our own emotions to empathise with and support colleagues and students (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006). What emerged from our analysis was the importance of supporting the wellbeing of staff and students. As has also been reported by Newcomb (2021), we needed to take account of isolation and adapting to remote working when considering colleagues' challenges. We also had to simultaneously consider our own wellbeing. It appeared clear that being an enabling leader and experiencing emotional labour went hand in hand and raised questions about how this could be sustained.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

As we emerge from the pandemic's initial shock phase, questions arise about how to continue to adapt through enabling leadership and to build sustainable resilience in HE (Parkin, 2020). In the context of our reflections using CLT, we propose that there is a need to consider the significance of compassionate and empathetic practice as part of the enabling function. Social and emotional connectedness appear significant in working with others in ways that were sustained and productive. We propose that an ethic of care and compassion should be considered as an integral element of

enabling leadership practices to create an environment in which learning and teaching can flourish throughout periods of forced change and beyond. When considering practices aligned with engendering social and emotional connectedness, we argue that leadership development should create time and space for leaders to reflect on the benefits and risks of sustained emotional labour, and the place of self-care and how that can be supported.

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