239

An exploration of how leaders at UK Higher Education institutions are influenced by changes in regulation.

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

Set against an background of an increasingly marketised Higher Education sector, the Office for Students was established in 2018. The Office for Students has adopted a risk-based approach to regulation; the implementation of which has been subject to criticism from the sector including an unflattering report from the House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee.

The research was conducted via semi-structured interviews with two Vice Chancellors, one Deputy Vice Chancellor and one Pro Vice Chancellor and examines impact of regulation and other factors on the leadership behaviours of senior leaders at UK universities.

The findings confirmed that senior leaders' behaviour has changed as result of regulation by the OfS. The research echoed existing calls within the sector for changes in the way the OfS operates including in relation to clarity of purpose, relationships with universities and students and OfS' reliance on quantitative data to determine sector benchmarks.

Full paper

How does regulation impact on senior leaders' decision making?

Set against an background of an increasingly marketised Higher Education sector, the Office for Students was established in 2018. The Office for Students has adopted a risk-based approach to regulation; the implementation of which has been subject to criticism from the sector including an unflattering report from the House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee.

The research was conducted via semi-structured interviews with two Vice Chancellors, one Deputy Vice Chancellor and one Pro Vice Chancellor and examines impact of regulation and other factors on the leadership behaviours of senior leaders at UK universities.

This research sought to answer the question: How does regulation impact on senior leaders' decision making? This research was particularly relevant because of recent regulatory changes

implemented by the OfS. This research is a valuable contribution to a currently limited body of research on the impact of the OfS' recent policies. Very little academic literature could be located that has been written on the impact of the OfS and in particular how it has impacted senior leaders in the sector. In this way this research is unique. It serves to provide an academic voice to add to the commentary that has been produced by the HE sector media.

The literature review covered two main areas, namely regulation and leadership. The literature regarding leadership showed that the definition of leadership is contested and unclear. Several types of leadership have been prevalent in HE including transformational leadership, distributed leadership and situational leadership. Changes in leadership approach have been reactive to changes in the sector and wider society. This reflects the changing nature of HE and its purpose. This was followed by an examination of the principles of regulation and a summary of the current regulatory position in HE. Regulation was identified as a driver of human behaviour and a mechanism to enact policy change (Bilz & Nadler, 2014). Extensive examination was given over to the OfS including its creation, guiding principles and reception. It was noted that the OfS' work and impact are a fast-moving area with several of the documents cited in the literature review only having been produced in the three months preceding this research (Broderick, 2023; Industry and Regulators Committee, 2023; OfS, 2023a; Phoenix, 2023).

Alongside confirmation of the importance of regulation on leadership from literature, the most notable finding from these interviews was the adaptable and situation specific leadership approaches adopted by the participants.

Research conclusions

The overall conclusions emerging from the research are:

- <u>Senior HE leaders' behaviour is impacted by regulation</u> – In particular the 4 participants took the enforcement powers available to the OfS very seriously. They cited a number of actions they had taken to ensure that they could produce data that met or exceeded the OfS' sector benchmarks in relation to progression, student retention and graduate outcomes.
- <u>Senior leaders agreed with the OfS' risk-based approach but did not feel that the way in which the approach had been implemented had been positive</u> – The participants expressed limited confidence in the regulator and were concerned that this was impacting on the culture in the sector. The findings show that there is significant concern among the participants and the wider sector that the OfS would not take account of context when conducting quality assessments. However this concern has not been borne out in the first of these reports to have been released by OfS.
- <u>Other factors apart from regulation also impact on senior leader's behaviour</u> – This research supports the contention that, as expected, there are also other factors that should be taken in account. The factors were not homogenous across the research sample. Important issues cited included financial stability, AI, student outcomes and staff experience. The participants ranked factors outside their locus of control such as global health crises and environmental sustainability as having less of an impact on their leadership behaviour.

- Senior leaders' characterisation of their own leadership style depends on their context and the task they are doing – The participants' leadership styles focussed on values driven principles and how they could facilitate success of others. Examples given regarding leadership style related to a number of different leadership approaches discussed in the literature review including transformational leadership (Bass, 1999), transactional leadership (Bass & Avolio, 2011), distributed leadership (Bolden, 2011) and situational leadership (Hersey, Blanchard & Natemeyer, 1979).

Given the serious concerns and negative viewpoints raised by the participants, there is clearly more work for the OfS to do (re)gain the trust and confidence of the sector.

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