

Values-driven leadership in higher education change management: A mixed-methods approach

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Abstract

Higher education is in a state of flux. With financial uncertainty, rapid digital developments, and changing patterns of student engagement, the challenges for higher education leaders are evolving. The rate of change is predicted to increase, with how we teach our students and what we teach them likely to look very different in the next years. Staffing levels are under threat, and external income generation is increasingly critical. Data drives decision-making, and people often feel secondary (or lower), with perceived pressure to do more with less, increasing workloads and higher rates of staff sickness. This paper presents the results of a mixed-method analysis, exploring how higher education leaders perceive and address the challenges of fostering compassion and collegiality before, during, and after significant changes within their institution. We reflect on what leaders found worked (and what didn't) as well as lessons learned.

Full paper

The role of school/department leadership within higher education has evolved substantially from the traditional 'chair' approach; there is now an expectation to drive the strategic direction of a department and to deliver to high-stakes targets in an uncertain environment. This has contributed to the increasing complexity and diversity of leadership roles in higher education (Dopson et al., 2018). The (limited) empirical literature in this field has highlighted the unique challenges of a higher education managers, both in itself and in comparison to industrial leadership roles, alongside the limited theoretical and empirical guidance for higher education management (e.g., Black, 2015; Hassan et al., 2018; McCaffery, 2018). In addition, there is a clear and identified interdependence of academics' job satisfaction and leadership style experienced (e.g., Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016).

In recent years, change management has become an increasingly important element of leadership in higher education (Rieg et al., 2021). The financial crisis within higher

education has resulted in structural changes across institutions, threatening academic identity and increasing job insecurity. In addition, the expectations of the academic lecturer role have, and continue to be, changing, given digital developments, altered patterns of student engagement, and a drive for teaching efficiency. These threats to job identity and security can result in reduced creativity and a more insular, more rule-focused ethos (Hirst et al., 2009; Probst et al., 2020).

The leadership approach taken by higher education leadership teams at any level can have significant impact on the culture and community experienced. As part of the academic career journey, higher education leaders frequently are not prepared for the managerial element of their leadership roles. In addition, they often operate within the traditional flat hierarchical structure of higher education units, frequently being solely responsible and accountable for both the directional and strategic as well as “soft” management of their team (see also McCaffery, 2018). While there is an established link between the impact of change management, organisational structures, and staff wellbeing in higher education contexts (e.g., Dasborough et al., 2015), the relevant empirical literature is more developed across other sectors (e.g., Ratnapalan et al., 2024; Santos de Souza & Chimenti, 2024).

Preceding the recent financial chaos on the higher education sector, a survey of nearly 6,000 academics within the UK (Erickson et al. 2020) found academics reported very low satisfaction with their managerialist governance, with the study highlighting the “dominance and brutality of metrics; excessive workload; governance and accountability; perpetual change; vanity projects; the silenced academic; work and mental health” as core themes impacting their scores. However, there is also a recognition that the role of higher education managers is challenging, with Hokka (2023) concluding “that current neoliberal academia leaves little space for deans to demonstrate compassionate collegial management”. Despite the ‘little space’, as Ngare (2024) pointed out “Heads of Department may cultivate a vibrant academic climate that supports faculty development, student achievement, and institutional advancement by exercising effective leadership and accountability”. This paper therefore explored the perspectives of higher education leaders in the implementation of change management and the challenges experienced.

Employing a mixed methods approach, we were able to identify functional and less functional leadership styles, examining the challenges and opportunities experienced by school leadership teams in relation to cultivating compassion and collegiality before, during, and after substantial change at school/department level. The analysis was theoretically guided by a values-based approach to authentic leadership (Arieli et al., 2020), drawing on the principles of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes, 2020) which explores a person’s core values, “allowing to take action based on what matters most to us”. The authors’ own identities as higher education leaders, researchers, and psychologists is inextricably interlinked with the analysis of the data.

The findings confirmed the crucial role of higher education leaders in successful (or at least not harmful), change management and provided direction into “what worked” (and what

did not) as well as allowing reflection on what support was available to them and/or desired in the process. It provides a critical examination of the role of values and compassion in higher education leadership and management, and reflects on the voices not heard in this study. The discussion highlights potential tools that leaders can use in the future to enhance compassion and collegiality in a leadership approach that is authentic to them.