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## Working Paper No. 2012/47

# Leadership and Management in Higher Education: A Research Perspective \*

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November 2012

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\* This paper was prepared for the Maastricht School of Management's research seminar on Leadership and Management in Higher Education, held in Maastricht on 23 November 2012



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# **Leadership and Management in Higher Education: A Research Perspective**

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## **Abstract**

This paper provides an overview of research on higher education leadership and management from the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It highlights the development of specific research in higher education contexts as well as the relationship between research in the management sciences in general on which higher education researchers, practitioners and policy makers have drawn, not always with beneficial consequences. The paper draws particularly on the work of Bensimon et al (1989) and Kezar et al (2006) in the US as well as research in the UK over the last quarter century, including recent research commissioned by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education in the UK.

## **Key Words**

Leadership, management, governance, higher education research

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## **Introduction**

Research on leadership and management in higher education has increased in volume and range in the last 30 years, but is still a relatively new and specialist domain that has a locus both in education and management sciences. This brief overview will focus on leadership and will first identify some of the main research paradigms and associated issues in the body of work published in this period. Second, it will identify the main theories and key insights from the research, drawing on the important work of Bensimon et al (1989) and Kezar et al (2006) in particular. Third, it will highlight some specific pieces of research that have informed the practice of leadership, governance and management; this work draws largely on research commissioned by the Leadership Foundation in the UK. Finally, an agenda for future research is presented.

## **A note on terminology**

The terms ‘leadership’ and ‘management’ are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature and sometimes as distinct concepts and practices. Research on management has a long history and covers a wide spectrum of topics that bear on the running of organisations, the co-ordination and planning of activities and the acquisition and deployment of resources to achieve optimal levels of performance. Studies and guides to management in higher education (McCaffery, 2004) reflect many of the topics and themes that are found in the wider literature on management and organisations.

Early studies of leadership took place within the research paradigm of ‘scientific management’ associated with Frederick Taylor (1911) and Henri Fayol (1930) which may explain the inter-relationship of the two concepts. In a post-industrial context, Kotter (1990) in a seminal study of leadership and management in changing contexts argued that while leadership and management could be differentiated conceptually and practically, both were needed in organisations. They formed complementary systems of action, with management being necessary for the smooth functioning of an organisation and leadership needed to achieve change. In more recent work, focusing on the future of management in organisations, Hamel argues that we need to re-think both management structures and leadership processes in organisations in ways that are better fitted to complex and uncertain environments, globalisation, connectivity and knowledge-societies (Hamel, 2007; 2012).

For the sake of simplicity - and brevity in relation to a vast and growing literature - leadership and management will be referred to separately in this paper where relevant, but otherwise treated as inter-connected concepts and practices.

### **Research paradigms and issues arising**

A striking feature of research on leadership in organisations over the past century is that despite increases in volume and range, there are still no clear definitions or answers about what counts as effective and successful leadership; the field remains diverse and contested. As Bolden (2004, p3) has suggested: “There is [still] no widely accepted definition of leadership, no common consensus on how best to develop leadership and leaders, and remarkably little evidence of the impact of leadership or leadership development on performance and productivity”. Bryman’s review of research on leadership effectiveness in higher education came to similar conclusions: “Not enough is known about exactly what makes an individual effective as a leader in the higher education context, and what in turn can make them ineffective” (Bryman, 2007, p14).

There is a range of reasons as to why leadership in theory and practice remains elusive and – by extension – an interesting area for research. In the first case, scientific research on leadership took off in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but in a relatively narrow range of disciplines, mainly political science and business administration (that is, politics, psychology and organisational behaviour). Secondly, the settings for studies that laid the foundations of the field were business, military and governmental organisations. The focus of studies tended to be on those in positions of leadership – resulting in a particular bias towards studies of white, Anglo-Saxon males who typically occupied those positions in the organisations studied at the time. The cultural context of studies was the USA, and the USA remains the largest producer of research and literature on leadership. The research undertaken in these organisational and cultural contexts was lifted directly and applied to higher education; however, some important studies undertook a systematic critique of the literature as well as new empirical research over a five-year period (1988-1992) (Bensimon et al, 1989; Birnbaum, 1992; Birnbaum, 2000). These and other studies (Middlehurst, 1993) sought to examine leadership in the specific context of higher education.

Beyond context, there are also methodological issues associated with leadership research over time. First, most research until the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was undertaken using a positivist research paradigm in the search for universal leadership characteristics (Kezar et al, 2006) and second, different perspectives were taken as to the concept and locus for leadership. For example, some research studies were focused on the characteristics of people (assuming it

is who people are that makes them leaders) or results (presuming that it is what leaders achieve that makes them leaders) while other studies concentrated on those in formal leadership positions (assuming that it is where leaders operate that makes them leaders) or on processes of leadership (presuming that it is how leaders get things done that makes them leaders) (Grint, 2005). In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup>, the focus of leadership studies has shifted from a positivist to a social constructivist framework and has involved a wider range of disciplines including history, drama, anthropology, as well as insights from physics and biological sciences.

## **20<sup>th</sup> century research on leadership**

### *Trait theories*

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by ‘trait theories’ of leadership which sought to identify definitive individual characteristics associated with successful leaders. The focus was largely on people in positions of leadership, carrying management responsibilities in formal, hierarchically structured organisations. Little attention was paid to context or to the relationship between leaders and ‘followers’ at this time.

Although the search for individual characteristics did not reveal definitive answers, it has yielded useful insights and has continued to evolve as a focus for research from an early interest in ‘charismatic authority’ in organisations (Weber, 1947) through a focus on affective elements of relationships within transformational leadership to a recent flowering of interest in emotional intelligence as ‘the heart of leadership’, brought to prominence in the work of Daniel Goleman (1995). In more recent studies, the relationship between followers and leaders has become much more prominent.

### *Behavioural theories*

Behavioural theories also emerged in the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century in parallel with trait theories. The focus here was on the actions and behaviour of successful leaders – again with an emphasis on individuals who occupied formal positions within organisations. These theories challenged the idea that leaders ‘were born, not made’ and enabled a new focus on how leadership could be learned through training and experience. Initially developing the concept of ‘Action-centred leadership’ from a functional perspective in military settings in the 1960s, Adair took this model first into industry settings (Adair, 1983; Gosling et al, 2007) and then into higher education in the UK when he established leadership development programmes for heads of department and later for those in institutional leadership positions (Middlehurst, 2008). During a similar period in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the US, a series of studies focused on the role of chairpersons of departments (Tucker, 1984), Deans (Tucker & Bryan, 1988) and Presidents (Birnbaum, 1988, 1992). Insights from trait and behavioural theories that have been applied to higher education include the following (Kezar et al, 2006, p105-6):

- Leaders need to balance a relational and task orientation
- Leaders should work with people, listen and be open to influence, recognising the shared governance environment in higher education
- Leaders must be clear about their values and act authentically
- Leaders must focus on direction-setting and vision
- Leadership differs in different units and at different levels

### *Contingency theories*

Contingency theories (Fiedler, 1997) offered an important breakthrough for leadership studies in general and for higher education studies in particular by noting the influence of context and situation on leaders and leadership effectiveness. These theories recognised that different styles of leadership were called for in different settings and that situational factors could influence who emerged as a leader. Such theories were a challenge to those who were searching for a set of universal characteristics associated with special and distinctive individuals; on the other hand, the range of situational variables that could impinge on leaders and leadership made both empirical research and practical application of the theories challenging. In more recent studies, a 'process' approach has been taken, seeking to understand how a process of leadership emerges and changes over time (Pettigrew et al, 2001).

### *Power and influence theories*

Organisational theorists and leadership researchers have long been interested in the exercise and dynamics of power and influence in organisational settings. Power and influence theories focus on leadership as a social exchange process characterised by the acquisition, deployment and demonstration of power and its effect on tasks, relationships and the purpose of leadership. Transformational leadership as discussed in the seminal work of Burns (1978) focuses on ethics and morals in the exercise of leadership and shifts the emphasis from functional organisational outcomes (effectiveness) to moral purposes such as equity. This theory, although focusing still on leaders in a hierarchy, builds a bridge towards later theories that concentrate much more on the dynamics of relationships between leaders and followers. Bass (1985) did much to bring transformational leadership into the development and practice domain through developing a survey instrument (the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire) while Kouzes and Posner (2002) contributed their challenge model of leadership associated with exemplary leaders that has been widely quoted and used in higher education settings. This consists of five practices:

- Modelling the way
- Inspiring a shared vision
- Challenging the process
- Enabling others to act
- Encouraging the heart

### *Transformational and transactional leadership*

Transformational leadership is typically defined as a power and influence theory where the leader acts in ways that influence and appeal to followers' higher order needs, inspiring and motivating them to move towards a particular purpose (Bensimon et al, 1989). It is usually contrasted with transactional leadership, described as a process of social exchange where leaders interact with and influence followers through granting access to resources such as information, funding, projects, promotions and other rewards in exchange for certain kinds of work, behaviour or performance. Transactional leadership may also be interpreted as synonymous with 'management' and management behaviours, while transformational

leadership is associated with real or effective leadership. Both these theories have been widely applied and researched in higher education and continue to promote interest. In practice, both transactional and transformational leadership are seen as useful and leaders are encouraged to identify the appropriate approach for different situations. Furthermore, transformational leadership is viewed as particularly important for issues that challenge the status quo such as access, diversity, technology and quality (Kezar et al, 2006). Power and influence theories have yielded a range of insights that are of practical use in higher education, including the following (Kezar et al, 2006, p108):

- Understanding historical patterns of power and conflict are essential to becoming an effective leader
- Academic staff, unions and boards of governors all play a significant role in shaping the power dynamics that affect leadership processes and these need special attention
- Leaders need to develop political skills in environments where power is being centralised
- Mid-level leaders are negotiators; their role is typically constrained more by power and conflict than leaders at other levels.

### *Cognition and leadership*

In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, cognitive approaches to the study of leadership have gained prominence. These focus on the thought processes of leaders – their ‘mental maps’ of leadership and perception of events and relationships – seeking to understand how people attribute actions and outcomes to leaders and leadership, both positively and erroneously. One of the largest studies of higher education leadership – the institutional leadership project in the US (1985-1990) led by Robert Birnbaum used the concept of cognitive frames to study how Presidents of universities, in particular, conceptualised their roles as leaders and the assumptions and beliefs they brought to the role. Four frameworks were used to capture their perspectives: bureaucratic, collegial, political and symbolic. Birnbaum (1992) found that leaders were considered more effective when they developed ‘cognitive complexity’, using the different frames to analyse and address situations. In subsequent research, various studies have sought to identify the cognitive orientations of staff sub-cultures in different organisational roles while other studies have examined how the disciplinary background of academic leaders has shaped their leadership perspectives and practices or how leadership varies in different disciplinary contexts (Kekale, 2001; Kezar 2001; Becher & Trowler, 2001). A further development in relation to research on leaders’ cognitive frameworks has considered links to learning - how Presidents learn from their mistakes (Birnbaum, 1986; Neumann, 1990) and how leaders develop over time, focusing on different stages of development and styles of leadership (Ramsden, 1998). Other trends in this field include a focus on followers’ - examining the interactions between leaders and followers, followers’ perceptions of leadership and attributes of leadership. Some of the practical insights arising from research in the cognitive domain include (Kezar et al, 2006, p 122-3):

- Using multiple cognitive frameworks may be related to better decision-making
- Different units have particular cultures that attract people with certain frameworks – this can limit cognitive complexity unless diversity of perspectives is actively sought and valued
- Alignment between followers’ and leaders’ cognitive frameworks affects perceptions of effectiveness

- Leaders help to manage ambiguity and complexity by shaping meaning for others
- Leaders who identify and learn from mistakes develop greater cognitive complexity
- Leaders develop over time and in stages; these stages may be related to different leadership outcomes
- Leaders can use data to challenge cognitive frameworks and create dissonance to move individuals and HEIs beyond the status quo.

### *Cultural and symbolic theories*

Cognitive theories are not unrelated to cultural and symbolic theories which explore the symbolic and cultural functions of leadership, including how leaders use symbols and rituals in their approaches to change management (Birnbaum, 1992). Research in this domain is also linked to contingency theories since it highlights leadership as a cultural construct that is linked to and affected by particular contexts, communities, values and beliefs. In practical terms, the findings from various studies illustrate how leaders can shape culture, develop communities, provide meaning and interpretation of events and contribute to the development of values and institutional identity. Particular insights from research include (Kezar et al, 2006, p130-131):

- Leadership processes need to be aligned with campus cultures; archetypes of campus cultures (collegial, political, bureaucratic, corporate, entrepreneurial) help leaders negotiate and align the process
- The culture of a particular institution and how leaders deal with culture and history affects perceptions of good or effective leadership
- Inspirational leaders can enhance the morale of followers
- Leaders will be more successful if they are ‘cultural workers’
- Vision is best fostered at the nexus between grass-roots and top-down approaches
- Leaders from different disciplinary, gender and racial backgrounds may have different approaches to leadership that should be acknowledged and encouraged.

### **21<sup>st</sup> century research on leadership**

Research on leadership since the 1990s has shifted in its focus and direction from that in the early to middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Early studies focused on individuals, were leader-centred, examined power and hierarchy and went in search of universal characteristics that could predict behaviour and outcomes. Modern (or rather post-modern) studies recognise leadership as context bound, focus on mutual power and influence, place emphasis on collective and collaborative perspectives including leadership processes and with an orientation towards the perspectives of followers. Studies are also concerned with how leadership promotes learning, empowerment and change. As noted above, a wider range of disciplines is drawn upon to identify new conceptual and theoretical directions for leadership research.

### *Complexity and chaos theory*

Theories in this domain have been influenced by Wheatley’s seminal work which sought to link leadership and management research to new understandings of how the natural world was organised arising from physics and biological sciences in particular (Wheatley, 1999). These theories emphasise the dynamic, relational and self-organising dimensions of leadership in



complex organisations and focus on ambiguity and non-linear processes. In common with cognitive theories, there is interest in the role of interpretation and the creation of meaning through leadership. Birnbaum's study of higher education institutions is a classic work in this genre, focusing on the cybernetics of academic organisation and leadership (Birnbaum, 1988). This study can also be related to Cohen and March's earlier work on leadership and ambiguity and their description of universities as 'organised anarchies' (Cohen and March, 1974). Some key insights using this research lens include (Kezar et al, 2006, p114-115):

- Universities have ambiguous goals and purposes and diffuse power so that notions of complexity and chaos are critical
- Leaders are more successful if they develop networks (involving key individuals with expertise or resources) to guide the leadership process; networks are increasingly important as organisations change
- Leadership processes are enhanced when they include ways to foster learning
- It is helpful for leaders to view institutions as loosely-coupled systems that are inherently flexible and can be responsive to change
- Listening to people on the margins and gathering additional data are key in making effective and ethical complex decisions
- Using multiple cognitive lenses is one way to address complexity.

#### *Teams and relational leadership*

Research focusing on teams in higher education settings (Bensimon and Neumann, 1993) and on relational leadership (collaborative, shared or distributed) examines collaborative relationships and structures that foster teamwork and its impact on organisational outcomes. Practical insights from this work include the following (Kezar et al, 2006, p134-5):

- Leadership teams help to make more cognitively complex decisions
- Real teams characterised by open communication, trust, a willingness to challenge, a lack of hierarchy and limited politics need to be carefully developed and fostered
- Decentralisation is a key aspect of redesigning organisations to collaborate and create communities of difference
- Organisations need to be redesigned to foster collaborative forms of leadership, breaking down hierarchical and bureaucratic structures.

In research commissioned by the Leadership Foundation in the UK, team and relational theories have featured in a study of top team structures in universities (Kennie and Woodfield, 2008) and in a study that examined the concept and practice of distributed leadership in higher education institutions (Bolden et al, 2008). In another study of teaching excellence and leadership of academic departments (Gibbs et al, 2008), a wider range of leadership theories was drawn upon. Still more recently, in a research study that aimed to explore academic leadership, researchers focused on the development of academic identities and pathways towards academic professionalism, finding that informal leadership processes were stronger and more influential than those that were linked to formal positions of leadership. This study identified a clear conceptual and practical separation between academic management and academic leadership (Bolden et al, 2012).

#### **Research and Policy borrowing**

Over time, there has been an ebb and flow between research on leadership and management in higher education and the wider management and leadership literature that focuses largely on corporations and businesses. In the early to mid-twentieth century, higher education borrowed models and concepts from general management sciences and sought to apply them to higher education before identifying a sharper and more nuanced understanding of the specificities of higher education leadership and management. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on one's perspective) – politicians and policy-makers have been equally influenced by management ideas and ideologies emanating from the corporate and business sectors and have sought to apply these to public services as well as to higher education under the banner of 'New Public Management' (Politt, 1990; Ferlie et al, 1996). In a European context, various Communications from the European Commission (2006, 2011) clearly reflect the influence of New Public Management ideas, while recent studies of governance in the European Higher Education Area (that incorporate institutional leadership and management) also illustrate the influence of general management concepts (and more particularly, 'managerialism') on university structures and processes (Middlehurst and Teixeira, 2012). Birnbaum's critique of what he terms 'management fads in higher education' and their failings (Birnbaum, 2000) still has much to teach researchers, practitioners and policy-makers about the dangers of assuming that theories and concepts applied in one organisational setting can be transferred to another with only beneficial consequences.

Interestingly, the tide may now be flowing in the opposite direction. Recent studies emerging from management sciences with a focus on large corporations echo the focus of these relational studies set in a higher education context. They argue the need for changes in management and leadership in businesses - away from hierarchy and bureaucracy towards flatter, more networked structures, communities of practice and ideas and team-based processes of leadership – given that businesses are operating in organisational environments characterised by complexity, uncertainty and inter-connectivity. Some of the management features of the case study organisations highlighted in Hamel's case studies (2007, 2012) could easily resonate with the collegial structures and practices of universities.

### **Future prospects for research**

There are multiple avenues for future research on leadership and management in higher education; suggestions here are far from exhaustive.

A fruitful strand of work could make more explicit cross-sector comparisons, particularly with organisations that share similar features to higher education such as hospitals, creative sectors and professional services. As with the corporate sector, there is a need to explore the implications of globalisation for leadership and by extension, to look at the impact of leadership on the core functions of universities that are changing - teaching and learning, research and enterprise. In increasingly multi-cultural national contexts and in relation to universities that are increasingly international in their staffing and operations, the theme of cross-cultural leadership will rise in importance. In another direction of change and challenge, relationships between the state and higher education are shifting, making studies of the interaction of various levels and aspects of leadership, management and governance a useful focus. Finally, but by no means least, there is a need to understand success and failure in leadership and management more precisely since both of these systems of action are ultimately concerned with the achievement of successful outcomes from higher education for individuals and for society.

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