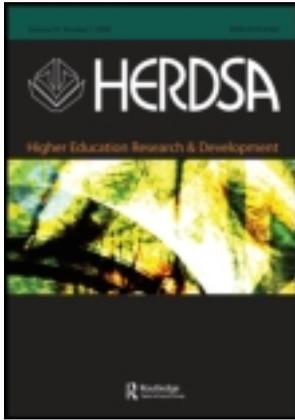


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Challenging leaderism

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EDITORIAL

Challenging leaderism

Judging by the number of submissions to this special issue there is considerable interest in the subject of leadership in higher education. The 45 papers received from researchers based in 16 different countries provided an insight into how the concept of leadership is being (re)interpreted and (re)constructed in a university context across the world. In the recent past, this has largely tended to mean researching the views of vice chancellors, deans and heads of department. It was about formally designated and high- or middle-ranking ‘leaders’. The research agenda focused on investigating their traits, challenges and tribulations. Yet only five of the papers submitted to this special issue focus on this line of enquiry, represented here by Pat O’Connor, Teresa Carvalho and Kate White’s exploration of the challenges facing senior positional leaders in a cross-national study involving Australia, Ireland and Portugal.

By contrast, the majority of papers submitted can be classified as about some aspect of distributed leadership. This is an understanding of leadership based on open boundaries within organizational communities where expertise is, in reality, shared between the many rather than seen as the preserve of the few (Bennett, Wise, Woods, & Harvey, 2003). Hence, who ‘counts’ as a leader is broadly interpreted or, perhaps, more rigorously questioned, a perspective succinctly conveyed in the title of Adisorn Juntrasook’s paper ‘You don’t have to be the boss to be a leader’. In her paper, Kathleen Quinlan presents a model of leadership for student learning needs on the basis of an inclusive and community-based ethos while Linda Evans provides a distributed definition of research leadership via an analysis of the perspectives of ‘the led’.

Interest in distributed leadership in higher education is not in itself anything new and has featured in the work of Whitchurch, on the ‘third space’ professional (2008), and Bolden, Petrov, and Gosling, in their multi-level analysis of professional practice (2008). The role of full university professors who as ‘intellectual leaders’ may not necessarily hold a formal managerial position has also become the subject of recent attention and enquiry (Macfarlane, 2012; and see the paper by Evans). What does appear to be new is that distributed leadership has now become a mainstream, and even perhaps dominant, mode of analysis if submissions to this special issue are anything to go by. It is no longer an alternative or marginalized way of understanding leadership in higher education. Contesting who counts as a leader in this way has both practical as well as theoretical implications. In comparatively recent years, universities have started to take the business of leadership training more seriously. But this has tended to be bounded by the conventions of ‘great man’ theory and only those holding formal, senior positions are usually invited. If leadership is genuinely distributed what does this mean for leadership development? We will know that distributed leadership has started to have a real impact when university development programmes start to considerably broaden their pool of recruits.

Distributed leadership represents part of a broader challenge to what has been termed ‘leaderism’ or the ‘leaderist turn’ (Morley, 2013; O’Reilly & Reed, 2010). This critique suggests that leadership has turned into a dominant discourse in the public sector, including higher education, in the heroic mould of ‘great man’ theory.

Here, the emphasis is on the power of personality and the individual agency of the transformational leader who is parachuted in and overcomes all opposition to lead successful organizational change. There is a belief, found perhaps even more strongly in the schools sector in the UK and elsewhere, that a charismatic individual can ‘turn around’ or ‘transform’ institutions in a relatively short period before moving on to work a similar trick in another school or university. The faith in the power of the individual to change things, and change things very quickly, can be observed in the messianic qualities expected of new soccer managers in the English Premier League. But the time granted to turn things around is getting shorter and today’s messiah turns rapidly into tomorrow’s ex-manager. The assumptions which inform this cultural phenomenon have seeped into the higher education sector with the average term of a UK vice chancellor now less than five years (Crace, 2013).

Part of the challenge to leaderism also lies in facing up to, and addressing, gender inequality. The under-representation of women in senior leadership positions in universities around the world is well documented and illustrated by a number of contributors to this special issue (see papers by Sarah Aiston, Sandra Acker, Jill Blackmore, Kathryn Enke and Louise Morley). The wasted talent of generations of ‘lost leaders’ (see Louise Morley’s paper) represents both an economic cost that is hard to quantify and a social cost that makes the espoused commitment of many universities to the goals of global justice appear like empty rhetoric. A recent UK survey of principal investigators and research leaders found that almost a third of female respondents thought their institutions failed to treat women fairly and 20% of them reported a personal experience of discrimination (Mellors-Bourne & Metcalfe, 2013). These are sobering statistics for anyone imagining that universities are in the vanguard of social change. There is a strong connection here, of course, between distributed leadership and the position of women in the academy who disproportionately undertake roles which carry low levels of prestige and recognition. Sandra Acker’s paper on women academics in lower-middle management perfectly illustrates the fusion between issues of gender equality and distributed leadership while Sarah Aiston’s analysis of data related to universities in Hong Kong also demonstrates how gender-based barriers to senior leadership operate in a South Asian context.

Being a formally designated leader or manager is seen increasingly as a vocation rather than an act of academic citizenship. It is no longer something tagged on to the tail end of a successful research career generating a degree of followership as a result. This might be part of the reason why, in Jill Blackmore’s words, there is such widespread disengagement and disenchantment with leadership in universities. Sometimes problems can arise due to a disconnect between leadership responsibilities and the extent to which individuals are perceived as credible and qualified to take on such roles. In Barbara de la Harpe and Thembi Mason’s study of Associate Deans for Learning and Teaching in the Creative Arts, the majority of interviewees did not possess a learning and teaching qualification and those without a relevant qualification were found to have a less sophisticated understanding of leadership than their better qualified counterparts. This curious state of affairs says a lot about the relative status of leadership roles in learning and teaching and a continuing culture of amateurism. How likely is it that an Associate Dean for Research would be appointed without a doctorate or publications? The nature of some of the wider tensions that exist between business-focused and academic values is exposed by Rajani Naidoo, Jonathan Gosling, Richard Bolden, Anne O’Brien and Beverley Hawkins in their analysis of business school branding. This reveals how the idea of distributed leadership is deployed as a

manipulative, semantic device to suggest that we all have a collective responsibility for the reputation of the brand.

The perception within the academic community grows that there is a widening gap between the values and goals of the ‘managers’ and the ‘academics’ even though these two groups are far from distinct. As David Watson remarks in his Points for Debate article, university leadership used to be seen as a ‘one-shot’ opportunity. This is no longer the case as ambitious and mobile individuals make running a university a career path moving regularly to climb the ladder of institutional prestige. Many of the papers in this special issue represent an attempt by members of the academic community to wrestle the leadership agenda away from its leaderist focus and promote the cause of more inclusive ends.

Yet, it is important not to get carried away. Invoking the importance of ‘collegiality’ is a familiar rallying cry but is it, as Giedre Kligyte and Simon Barrie discuss, anything more than a ‘subliminal fantasy’? In setting out the alternative to leaderism, there is a need to get beyond the myth that there was ever a golden age of collegial leadership. It is important to remind ourselves that what is often represented in these terms was really an autocracy run by a small number of senior male professors, not democratic governance by the whole academy. Ritualistic complaints about the loss of collegiality can also be disingenuous. As Jon Nixon (2010) has argued, there is a culture of complicity that allows leaderism to flourish. The nature of this deal with the devil is that others can run things as long as we, as academics, are left alone to get on with our research. Sadly, careerism and academic capitalism have as much to do with disengagement as poor leadership.

Are we now in an era of post-heroic leadership where our collective understanding of what leadership means has matured? Or, is this just an example of the way that higher education scholars have tried to domesticate leadership as a concept? Are we too easily seduced by the democratizing ideal that ‘everyone is a leader’? These, and other questions, remain. However, there are certainly grounds for optimism in the direction of scholarship on leadership in higher education. Whether this will translate into more distributed and inclusive leadership *practices* in our universities is yet to be seen.

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