Leadership in the Rough

Rejuvenating academic leadership for Australian higher education

Hamish Coates and Leo Goedegebuure

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engage@hefl.net

www.hefl.net

Executive brief

As the future of universities is debated, so too should the nature of how they are led be up for deliberation. This is a vital conversation to have. And it is important to have it in public.

- Leadership matters to universities, and academic leadership matters the most of all. Australia needs to maintain its excellent universities, which relies on a young generation of academics to support and cherish them.
- Universities need to create space for teachers, researchers and students to fail, develop, and succeed. They need to make academic careers exciting and enticing for our younger colleagues, not perilous and precarious.
- Transparent and thorough analysis of university leadership is essential to ensuring its strength and contribution.

The relationship between leadership, management and institutional performance bedevils the higher education community. Does university success come about despite, irrespective of, or because of management?

There is no doubt Australia has a world class tertiary education system. We do not question the need or even the obligation to run a tight ship. On the contrary. But it does matter where the ship is heading. Sound financial management is a means to one end, not many good ends in itself.

Australian universities have indeed moved too far from the academic to the corporate. Increasingly, these two don't talk, which is a problem in most relationships. For that to change, we need to bring the academic back into leadership, or get today's leaders teaching and researching, and to curtail unproductive institutional environments which have been created and condoned.

Academics have to do this construction themselves. We clarify eight steps required for productive change.

The leadership conundrum

- **In his seminal book *How Colleges Work* Robert (Bob) Birnbaum poses the ultimate question on the paradox of universities and colleges in the United States. How is it, he asks, that they are among the largest industries in the country, with an unparalleled reputation for diversity and quality, but are also regarded as poorly managed?**
- From this paradox Birnbaum derives three contrarian propositions. First, the system's success has come about despite bad management, and if management could be improved the system would perform at an even higher level. Second, in fact performance and management are not closely related, so improvement in management practices would not yield any significant performance increases. Third, United States colleges and universities are so successful because they are poorly managed, implying improvement in management practices might actually lead to diminishing effectiveness and performance.
- **Thirty years later, the relationship between leadership, management and institutional performance still bedevils the higher education community.** There are the believers who argue that "of course" leadership and management matters. They find support in the existence of hundreds of higher education leadership and management programs and roles. There are the critics for whom the notion of managerialism is antithetical to the hallowed idea of *the* academy. They see it as linked to neo-liberal ideology and new public management and consider it to have invaded institutions and given rise to a new cadre of professional managers. And then there are the cynics who grimly say, "Show me the money." They seek proof that indeed a relationship exists between leadership, management and performance.

Leadership in the frame

- These are pressing contemporary issues of public relevance to explore. **Not too long ago, university leaders rose or shot from scholarly ranks into head, dean, then a small suite of university-wide roles. Things changed as higher education grew into massive credentialling machines.** Since around the turn of the millennium, reforms have ushered in C-suites, corporate bureaucracies, and a mobile class of generalist executive officers, all lubricated by debonair, industry-hopping *chasseur de têtes*. Massive institutions do of course need competent administration. But on many fronts current arrangements fall short and are obviously failing. There has been a wave of executive departures in recent years, seismic schisms between universities and government, and institutions crashing over financial cliffs.
- **As the future of universities is debated, so too should the nature of how they are led be up for deliberation. This is a vital conversation to have. And it is important to have it in public, not in secret or private meetings.** Our analysis and concluding recommendations are based in Australia, with an eye to similar systems, noting that as not all systems and universities have followed the paths sketched below these paths are neither inevitable nor irreversible. We begin with the provocation that in terms of leadership and management, Australian tertiary education has lost the academic plot. We understand this is a controversial and contested statement. But experimenting with risky ideas sparks wonder, dialogue and development, which is core to our broader point.

Universities unravelled

- **There is no doubt Australia has a world class tertiary education system.** There is no doubt about certain parts of its research community performing way above what might be expected. There is no doubt that Australian universities pioneered administrative reforms necessary to move with contemporary social, industrial, and sectoral transformations. One of the best affirmations is the most modest – Australia's doctoral system is recognised as globally leading. As in tracks of sport, Australia is punching well above its weight in terms of research performance. And in terms of size, the system has grown at an incredible pace, partly due to price-capped domestic tuition, and partly (as with prowess in sporting and mining) due to an insatiable and historically resonant rush for gold. But at what cost?
- Participation rates have increased across many though not the most disadvantaged segments of the population, which is good news. There is a ton of evidence acknowledging that a higher educated population is good for a country and its people, despite quivers of populist doubt. We don't need to dwell on this. But we also need to acknowledge that the primary driver of growth, and counterpoint to domestic decline, has been the international student body. A combination of great academic entrepreneurship and a very attractive country in a safe part of the world. Indeed, for many a galaxy far, far away...
- **Leaving aside cynicism, educating international students has created a vast export industry and an incredible easy revenue stream for Australia, for its cities, and for its higher education institutions.** Talk about trees growing into heavens, or too good to be true...
- **Many analysts have warned about the danger of overreliance on single, volatile markets.** The pandemic was a clear indication that this was real. But it didn't bring the academic message home. After all, "she'll be right." Well, not quite right. It has taken a totally dumb political decision fostered by an offensive immigration narrative to reinforce the risk message. And at what cost? Probably a couple of thousand academic jobs, primarily filled by young, enthusiastic, brilliant and ambitious experts. Most universities lurching in a uniform direction. All of which reveals the real problem.

Leadership unbound

- **For we should have seen it coming. Especially in a system dominated by an extensive executive cadre generously resourced to buffer institutions from just these stupidities. Alas, this is not the narrative of what could have, should have. It is the narrative of marginalizing the academic perspective, the rise of administrative importance, and the principle of the (evidently unstable, in many cases) bottom line.**
- **We do not question the need or even the obligation to run a tight ship. On the contrary. But it does matter where the ship is heading. Sound financial management is a means to one end, not many good ends in itself.**
- All Australia's public universities are established through legislation. In this legislation, the mission of our universities is enshrined. Invariably, this is a combination of teaching, research and community engagement. It is not about administrative supremacy. Yet this is where we find ourselves.
- **There is no doubt that academic practice needed to professionalize given the growth of the sector. Yet in today's workplace, academics find themselves at least as busy keeping up with compliance as with teaching, research or engagement.** This simply is wrong. Academics' intellectual training is not about ticking boxes and filling forms. People go into academe because it is exciting to work with bright and motivated colleagues, because it is exciting to get involved in all kinds of research, and because it is exciting to make a difference to people's lives, both young and aged.
- Sure enough, not everything works. And sure enough, serious mistakes are made. But this is in many respects 'part of the job.' This is what matters to academics. Such intellectual venturing is core to the work. Learning from mistakes and making things better. Trial by error, literally – often called tinkering, experimenting, creating, innovating, or perhaps designing.
- How different from today's institutional environment, where risk management no longer is about managing risk, but avoiding risk. Where a PhD student's major achievement is not a risky empirical research project, but timely completion of administrative compliance processes. Where supervision of students and staff is not just about helping them grow through challenging critical discourse, but helping them handle administration. Where universities all pretty much play the same game and tinker percentages around credential production as a form of strategy. And all of that under the gaze of powerful administrators. This is what we mean by 'leadership unbound.'

Recapturing leadership

- These reflections are not naïve, simplistic, or trivial. This is not the space for going into the weeds, but the points are substantiated in media and scientific research. Clearly the university world of the 1980s is not the same as in the 2020s or 2050s. Change is normal and so it should be. Standards, morals and practices march on. But academic work fundamentals remain. And so they should.
- **First, the most basic idea – educating people is not a Ford-like production line with explicit limits on time for engagement, for assessment, and for feedback**. Crowds of precariously employed 'content deliverers' grossing ten dollars to mark an evermore computer-produced essay is the antithesis of what an academic environment is and ought to be. There should be time to talk, to get muddled, and get better. Even, and especially, in a larger and less human-scale education environments.
- **The second is that research is risky business.** It is bound to fail to deliver all we hope and work for. That simply is the nature of the research game. But not pushing for the limits and hoping 'to find something' makes it a pretty much useless undertaking. It is all about knowing what we don't know based on what we know. The world's major higher education systems all get and fund this despite cultural differences. Indeed, such conviction defines the pointy end of today's sharpest geopolitics.
- **Third, the ivory tower syndrome.** It is so easy to talk about academe as "out of touch" with the "real world." And sometimes that simply is true. But much of the time, most academics are very seriously engaged with the world around them. They aim for positive impact and change because of what they do.
- But how many of our institutional management systems reflect all of the above? Reductive administration prevails. Progress and satisfaction drives teaching reviews. Funding and citations monopolize research performance. Community impact hardly generates income, so why should we value it, let alone promote it? Or even train our colleagues to be good at it?

Recapturing leadership

- **This is where we've lost the 'academic' in leadership. We have indeed moved too far from the academic to the corporate. Increasingly, these two don't talk, which is a problem in most relationships.** We have forgotten our institutions have a public mission: to do good, not to make money. For that to change, we need to bring the academic back into leadership, or get today's leaders teaching and researching, and to curtail unproductive institutional environments which have been created and condoned.
- **Academics have to do this construction themselves.** Governments can be of no help. It's beyond their remit. Most of the change is too much in the weeds for governing councils. Executives have disclosed vested interests in prevailing arrangements. So the chance of fundamental change coming from this administrative elite is slim indeed. Difficult conclusions from provocative ideas, but they fit the data. So, it will have to be an academic leadership revolution from within. Not easy, but further stumbling in current directions will yield diminishing returns for universities and the communities they strive to serve, at increasing cost, not profit.

Eight feet ahead

- We circle back to the start, to loop ahead. Big universities, and Australia has several which are huge, do need large management operations. This does not also require breakdown of academic community. Leadership matters to universities, and it should resonate with the academic heart. What tools can academics use to turnaround leadership?
- **First**, academics need to bolster their own talent communities. Physics and mathematics academics, for instance, may have more venturesome things to do than manage, yet their voices matter enormously to Australia's future. If contemporary universities have become too large and complex to 'lead,' even in any new-fangled sense of the term, then smaller departments may be necessary.
- **Second**, as Birnbaum and contemporary critiques rightly demand, there is a need for robust study of what works. Reflecting on Birnbaum's three contrarian propositions, the first conclusion unfortunately has to be that the jury still is out. Data abounds for performance reviews, and on hints and tips, yet scientific studies of leadership in higher education are few and far between. Evidence rather than inclination would build trust.
- **Third**, it is clearly vital to make university leadership attractive to academics. Invariably, this means injecting 'academic spirits' back into leadership roles by, for instance, enabling leaders to teach, research and engage with campus and community vibes. It also means, as per legislation, re-prioritizing value-creating academic work over short-term administrative functions.
- **Fourth**, role clarification would go much (though still not all) of the way towards professionalizing the field. So much analysis has shown that one university's dean is another's pro vice chancellor, or a head of school at another. While seemingly trivial, nomenclature inconsistencies signal an anarchical and unprofessional field.

Eight feet ahead

- **Fifth**, cultivation and training for academic leadership is essential. Commercial leadership and management programs only harden pesky and distracting thorns. Part of the solution lies in doctoral program reform, but the sector cannot wait for the decades this will take. More immediate solutions are required. Students only ever receive part of their academic training ‘on the job,’ so it shouldn’t be considered good enough for leaders. Learning about universities is serious business.
- **Sixth**, academic epistemology matters. There will always be tribes and factions, but academic perspectives transcend these. Meritocracy matters. It is essential to inclusion and growing with academic integrity. Scaling commoditized education is not productivity improvement. Adversarial industrial cultures are foreign to scholarly and scientific cultures.
- **Seventh**, being more open about leadership would certainly make it real. Curriculum is on the internet, lectures theatres have glass walls, yet leaders increasingly huddle in redacted meetings. How does it make any sense that consultants are resourced to know more about institutional matters than long-serving professors with expertise on a topic or the sector?
- **Eighth**, when well-intended lawyers write regulatory rules about academic matters, they fail to grasp, and they damage, the phenomenon. Writing legally about the scholarship of inorganic chemistry or art history invariably ends up being about law, not inorganic chemistry or art history. Sharp legal lingo can scare off chemists, or scare art historians into compliance rather than intellectual delight. Cultural tolerance, even enjoyment, of the inherent uncertainties and quirks of academic work is essential to its success.
- **Surprisingly, none of this is new. It has just been lost. It needs restating to ensure universities flourish academically into the future.**

Further reading for inquiring minds

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In memory of Jon File who used such provocations in his leadership training programs.

Next steps

1. What three actions can you take from this briefing?

2. What work is already underway?

3. Connect to engage:
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