

Investing in Leadership Development: The UK Experience

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Across the world, in developed and developing countries, higher education is seen as central to economic growth and regeneration as well as to social well-being and cohesion. It is also tied into the spread of globalization, through expanding trade in transnational education and global networks of research and innovation. National competitiveness agendas are mirrored by competition between institutions and higher education systems, in a global race for status and reputation.

Institutions operating in this environment have become large, complex, and increasingly focused businesses. Taking two UK examples in one city: the University of Manchester now has 40,000 students, including 7,400 international students from 180 countries on its campus. It has 9,755 staff, making it one of the biggest employers in the northwest region, and claims to have a financial impact on the region of £1.4 billion, annually. The newer Manchester Metropolitan University has 34,000 students, including 2,800 international students from 109 countries. It has 4,300 staff and claims to have an economic impact on the region of £690 million. To run these organizations—as

successful not-for-profit businesses, *and* as engines of local and regional development, *and* as world-class academic institutions—calls for a wide range of skills and experience. New management structures and working practices that build cooperation between academic leaders and professional managers are also needed. The European Commission recognizes this in its communiqués on the modernization of higher education (2006, 2011) arguing both for restructuring and more investment in professional management.

Such an agenda is not new to the United Kingdom, as successive governments have put pressure on universities to diversify income streams, become more efficient, and contribute broadly to public policy goals. In response, institutions have created executive management structures; developed top management teams; reduced committee-based decision making; increased budgetary and staff management responsibilities for heads of department and deans; and strengthened leadership at all levels (albeit with different balances of collegiality and managerialism across the 165 universities and colleges of the United Kingdom). Senior academic leaders from deans to vice chancellors (presidents) are now typically selected for their positions and appointed on fixed-term or permanent-management contracts; and engagement in management preparation and development increasingly counts as part of selection criteria for leadership roles.

VICE CHANCELLORS VOTE FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

A significant boost to senior-level leadership development came in 2003, when vice chancellors voted to set up a Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, owned by

the sector. A grant from government of £10 million now represents just 20 percent of its income; the remaining revenue comes from fees for programs and membership dues (almost 90% of UK universities and colleges are in voluntary membership). The foundation offers a range of United Kingdom-based and international programs for leaders at all levels; programs for new and experienced governors; professional networks for leaders and managers; topical leadership conferences and events; tailored in-house management programs; individual coaching; audits of effective governance; top-team development; and wider organizational change initiatives (such as the Change Academy for cross-functional teams working on institutional projects). The foundation also invests in the sector by commissioning research on leadership issues, creating management resources for institutions and providing competitive development grants for institutional and cross-institutional initiatives. Notably, this much expanded national-level activity has not diminished institutional effort. In 2000, 70 percent of higher education institutions reportedly provided little formal development for senior leaders. By 2010, 73 percent of institutions reported having systematic leadership and management development in place. Interestingly, 90 percent of academics surveyed believed it to be advantageous to their careers.

The developmental landscape today matches the variety of institutional needs and individual career trajectories. Particular features of UK higher education include a wide range of disciplinary and professional experience, among leaders and managers; increasingly blurred roles between academics and professional staff; and entry into the sector of numbers of senior managers from business, health care, and local and central government. Cross-cultural skills and understanding are increasingly important, as staff

and students become more diverse. To prepare themselves, heads of department, deans, and professional service managers mix on master of business administration and master of science programs on higher education management, while potential chief operating officers and chief executive officers work together on the top management program. Preparing for strategic leadership attracts academics wishing to benchmark their skills and leadership potential against others. Vice chancellors (presidents/rectors) have tailored opportunities, such as individual coaching; paired programs with the chair of their board; or an intensive program on transitions: personal, institutional, and system level. In-house programs are equally important and include cohort programs for 100 senior leaders and managers in a university; a specific focus on team building for the top team; and targeted initiatives for developing new cadres of research team leaders.

International opportunities include twinning programs, policy-oriented study visits, and strategic leadership programs for cohorts of leaders and ministry officials from other countries. Programs are designed to achieve mutual benefits for individuals, institutions, and higher education sectors in the United Kingdom and overseas; they can also benefit local communities and leverage higher education business links across regions. As universities develop their internationalization strategies, there are opportunities to use leadership development creatively—to facilitate wider international partnerships in teaching, research, and enterprise.

LESSONS OF EXPERIENCE

While there is a constant need for innovation in response to a dynamic and volatile higher education landscape, some lessons from three decades of experience may have

continuing utility. First, leadership development needs to be tailored to day-to-day management agendas, so that it is relevant and timely; second, it should challenge thinking and practice, as well as provide support and a safe space for discussion and experimentation; third, development needs to be conceived within a “whole-systems” philosophy of engagement at individuals, groups, and sector levels, if substantive change is the target; and fourth, if designed strategically, leadership development can offer much more than individual preparation and development, by providing a vehicle for developing academic business through relationships and partnerships, nationally and internationally.