

Synthesis of Findings on Leadership and Student Engagement

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From the Literature on Leadership and Student Engagement

Leadership:

Bryman's (2007: 14) study of effective leadership in Higher Education found that

...not enough is known about exactly what makes an individual effective as a leader in higher education context, and what in turn can make them ineffective.

From interviews and a review of the literature, he identified the following facets of effective leadership in a HE context (2007: 27)

- Providing direction
- Creating a structure to support the direction
- Fostering a supportive and collaborative environment
- Establishing trustworthiness as a leader
- Having personal integrity
- Having credibility to act as a role model
- Facilitating participation in decision-making, and consultation
- Providing communication about developments
- Representing the department / institution to advance its cause(s) and networking on its behalf
- Respecting existing cultures while seeking to instil values through a vision for the department / institution
- Protecting staff autonomy.

Reviewing scholarly literature published between 1985 and 2005, he encountered challenges to the orthodoxies privileging “the new leadership approach” such as transformational leadership or vision, concluding (2007: 15) that

(t)he inference that different situations call for a different leadership style, and the belief that approaches such as transformational leadership are likely not to be effective in some situations, are gaining increasing support within the higher education literature.

Additionally, questions are raised (2007: 16) about the nature and extent of dispersed or distributed leadership in HEIs, and its desirability, following on from debates raised within the compulsory education sector:

Moreover, little research exists on whether, or how far, the low value many academics place on leadership and managerial positions limits (or even militates against) the prospects for the introduction of dispersed leadership in universities.

However, given that the only targets considered for dispersion of leadership are academic staff, rather than the multiplicity of others (including support staff, blended professionals, and students) providing *de facto* leadership, the value of this is moot.

Another limitation (2007: 17) arises from the relative paucity of data concerning leadership effectiveness in relation to students:

Further, roles like course tutor and programme director are not just to do with leadership of other staff but also of students. This perhaps further inhibits our ability to investigate the leadership potential in such roles, because we know very little about the impact on students of different leadership approaches and styles. This is largely because most research on higher education leadership is concerned with outcomes for employees rather than students.

Leadership and Student Engagement:

Jantzi & Leithwood, in a study (1996: 514-15) of the compulsory education sector, identified the following six dimensions in the practice of educational leadership:

- (1) identifying and articulating a vision;
- (2) fostering the acceptance of group goals;
- (3) providing individualized support;
- (4) intellectual stimulation;
- (5) providing an appropriate model; and
- (6) high performance expectations.

Using this model, Quinn (2002: 464) found that:

... higher levels of Active Learning/ Active Teaching occur in schools where the principal serves as an instructional resource. Examples of this include setting expectations for continual improvement of the instructional program and actively engaging in staff development activities... Higher levels of student engagement are also present in schools where the principal rates highly as a resource provider. This indicates that the principal has the ability to garner personnel and resources within the building, district, and community to achieve the school's vision and goals... A third indicator of high levels of active learning/active teaching is a principal who promotes communication by modeling commitment to school goals, articulating a vision toward instructional goals, providing for integrated instructional planning and goal attainment, and setting and adhering to clear performance standards for instruction and teacher behaviour.

While caution should be exercised in extrapolating conclusions from the compulsory education sector to the higher education sector, in the absence of similar studies in the HE sector these findings do raise interesting points for consideration. It is not unreasonable to expect that leadership would be among the institutional factors that would have an effect on student engagement; nor is it unreasonable to expect that those aspects of central leadership – academic leadership, resource provision and communication promotion – identified above would be beneficial to enabling a climate conducive to student engagement in a higher education setting.

Looking again at the compulsory education sector, Leithwood & Jantzi (2000) undertook a study to examine the relationship between student engagement and transformational leadership, which they defined as

leadership [which] fundamentally aims to foster capacity development and higher levels of personal commitment to organizational goals on the part of leaders' colleagues. Increased capacities and commitment are assumed to result in extra effort and greater productivity... Authority and influence associated with this form of leadership are not necessarily allocated to those occupying formal administrative positions... Rather, power is attributed by organization members to whomever is able to inspire their commitments to collective aspirations, and the desire for personal and collective mastery over the capacities needed to accomplish such aspirations.

This study (2000:124) found that

transformational leadership effects are significant although weak on ... student engagement.

The authors argue (2000: 127) that:

[a] plausible implication of these findings is that high levels of student engagement reduce teachers' perceived needs for either teacher or principal leadership. Student engagement could be conceived of as a substitute for leadership... as well as a student outcome.

Student engagement, thus, obviates the need for centralised top-down leadership, allowing for more dispersed forms of leadership as students – through their engagement with their learning and with the institution – internalise values and identify with institutional goals and absorb leadership attributes and part of the leadership function themselves. That this may be equally relevant within in a higher education context appears feasible.

While the role of leadership was alluded to in some of the student engagement literature, studies which focused on the role of leaders in Higher Education contexts in enhancing and promoting student engagement were less conspicuous.

Breakwell & Tytherleigh (2010: 491) examined the performance of UK HEIs against their chosen Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and its relation to the characteristics of the Vice-Chancellor. Their findings

...suggest that whilst the performance of a university may be 'moulded' by the characteristics of its leader, most of the variability is explained by non-leadership factors.

Given that those KPIs would in some cases include measures against which student engagement has been positively correlated, such as completion rates, or measures which have been positively correlated against student engagement, such as widening participation, this suggests an ambiguous (at best) relationship between senior leadership (through the person of the Vice-Chancellor) and student engagement. However, because the KPIs used in the study had not expressly been framed in terms of student engagement, the degree to which leadership has affected student engagement is moot.

Internationally, there has been a greater focus in the literature on student engagement specifically as an outcome. The role of staff in promoting student engagement has been noted previously. As Hu & Kuh (2002: 570-1) note, all staff can also have a role to play:

In addition, faculty members, academic administrators, and student affairs professionals can influence the extent to which students perceive that the institutional environment values scholarship and intellectual activity by communicating high expectations.

The role such staff can play is picked up elsewhere by Kuh (2009: 697):

At high performing colleges and universities, student affairs staff collaborate with others to periodically review data about the effectiveness of policies and practices with an eye towards insuring that what is enacted is of acceptable quality and consistent with the institutions espoused priorities and values...

Looking at leadership, Kezar (2005: 1) states that

Collaborative, shared leadership among administrators, students, faculty, and staff is a key component to creating campus environments that foster student success... But collaborative approaches to leadership and program development do not come naturally within higher education institutions that reward individualistic endeavors over collaboration.

The DEEP Project (Documenting Effective Educational Practices – a collaboration between the National Survey of Student Engagement and the American Association for Higher Education) (Kezar 2005: 2-4) documents leadership characteristics common across engaged / engaging institutions, such as

- Developing a shared understanding of institutional mission and philosophy;
- Building a strong sense of community;
- Modelling collaboration and distributed leadership through shared governance;
- Ensuring that students have a prominent voice in campus governance;
- Adopting structures which encourage cross-functional activities focussed on student success;
- Tightening the philosophical and operational linkages between academic and student affairs;
- Empowering and supporting academic leadership;
- Creating and capitalising on cross-functional, boundary-spanning activities.

while elsewhere Kezar and Lester (2009: 726-732) identify conditions which can, in turn, support leadership – such as the presence of supportive individuals, role flexibility and autonomy, collegiality and campus networks, cultures that permit questioning, and mentoring. However, the views of leaders in different loci within the institution regarding the

effectiveness of their practices within their own specific contexts are opaque within the literature.

Institutional governance:

There was very little focus in the student engagement literature on student engagement with institutional governance, and what there was tended to be found in grey rather than peer-reviewed literature. Journal articles on the role of students in institutional governance tend to be tagged with keywords other than “student engagement”, suggesting a different discursive orientation.

Lizzio & Wilson (2009, 70) observe that:

...the value of actively involving students [in university governance] is generally described from one of three perspectives: functional (how does it benefit the university?), developmental (how does it benefit the student?) and social (how does it benefit society?)

Kezar (2005, 2) comments that:

Students bring an essential perspective for creating a success-orientated learning environment. No wonder that high-performing schools include students in policymaking and on committees, task forces, and governance groups, often in leadership roles.

...while Magolda (2005, 2) describes institutions where:

students are actively engaged in a variety of campus committees and provide meaningful input to decision making groups. Large numbers of students take responsibility for their learning and are involved in teaching and working with other students in educationally purposeful ways as tutors and peer mentors in campus residences and student organizations.

Here in the UK, Little, Locke, Scesa & Williams (2009, 32) describe how

in another university, the involvement of student union officers in 'away-days' for governors is viewed as a further positive route for student voices to be heard by those responsible for the overall governance of the institution.

However, student engagement in governance is not always unproblematic. Magolda (*op. cit.*, 1) describes how, in some universities,:

...in addition to... personal benefits, student leaders can contribute much to the quality of the learning environment, the experiences of their peers, and the larger campus community. Unfortunately, too often these potentially positive effects are not fully realized. Student governments get sidetracked on trivial issues. Social organizations inadvertently discourage participation by students from diverse backgrounds. Service clubs touch in relevant ways only a small fraction of those who need assistance. Established campus governance structures ignore or limit active, meaningful involvement by students.

Our Findings

We undertook this study to identify behaviours by a range of leaders in Higher Education – senior managers, student leaders, leaders among academic and support staff – which promoted and enhanced student engagement. Interviewees commented on the roles of **individual leaders** in shifting to a climate of engagement rather than simply engaging students isolated aspects:

The opportunity for students to have a voice, to be co-producers in all aspects of their education and the university and its wider community... is something we've been focused on as the students union for a long time, but I must say since the arrival of [the current VC] we've had a real commitment. We have had a commitment from senior leadership prior to that, but it tended to be solely in the area of the academic experience... We're in a fantastic position now and the university is really committed to making sure the student voice is heard. (Student Leader)

The issue of **resources** was stressed in a number of contexts, from the initial provision of resources to students or student representative bodies to enable them to participate as equals in university governance, to the resourcing of departments and frontline staff whose remit contributes to creating and enhancing the climate of engagement:

Sometimes we actually see in a very different sort of way that senior management agree with what the students union have to say, and it's the average academic and programme support staff who disagree and it tends to be in areas of student rights... where they have concern about their ability to deliver that on their schedule, and the university needs to provide the resources to make sure that it happens. And that's something the university is

committed to sorting out. So we do sometimes see interesting tensions, and that's the first time we've seen that happen, because it used to be loggerheads with senior management, and the average academic and support staff agreeing with what we're saying. It's not that they disagree, it's that they can't see it being feasible with their current models, without it having a negative effect on students, or something else having to give. (Student Leader)

Communication was important for enhancing engagement – not just one-way communication, but a willingness to enter into discussion on issues and to make leadership accessible, as was illustrated in an incident involving discussions around new student fee proposals:

But there was a little bit of a challenge with the student body, we overcame that... And actually the vice-chancellor met with those students himself. They wrote to him and he said I want to come and meet with you myself. And to me, that's one of the welcome things I see. For the vice-chancellor to meet with a group of students is fantastic. He can't meet with every student individually, but I think the commitment is there from the senior leadership group. Just last night the PVC copied me in to a student who had written to him personally, who had some concerns. He articulated the university's position but that was a personal email back to that student and he said if you want to have further discussions I will be there or the Head of School will be there. I think that commitment is very positive for students. (Student Leader)

Findings from Leithwood and Jantzi (2000: 127) cited above that

Student engagement could be conceived of as a substitute for leadership... as well as a student outcome

...are consistent with the findings from our study, where one of the themes which emerged strongly was that of partnership:

The relationships between students' unions in the UK and universities, there has always been tensions, and I think we've come to an agreement that we are the critical friends and partners in delivering the student experience, and I think that ethos has meant that it's sometimes acceptable that we have different points of view. (Student Leader)

This partnership can lead to internal conflicts for individual leaders, who find themselves – as partners – having to put the interests of the university ahead of the narrower sectoral interests they represent:

One of the most difficult things which causes conflict – I have access to information that's under embargo. If you tell me that this information is in confidence then it's in confidence and I will never leak it, but how can I – one person – represent the views of 20 000 students? If you show me the financials, I'll see the rationale – but I've been here [in the student leadership role] for two years now, I've become institutionalised, I sometimes think a little more like the university side than the student side... It's challenging, because before we had the position of never being consulted on anything, of being quite reactive, and now we are in that privileged position... And while I understand the reasoning for [some of those decisions] it makes it very challenging for me as a student leader. So, I think, it's a tough one. And in all honesty, you do your best. (Student Leader)

Importantly, respondents argued that partnership started with mutual respect, allowing power to become more equally shared as sectors learned together to work collectively:

Most of that is about inspiring engagement, by people to an extent seeing that it's about partnership. It may start with respect and develop into something more jointly owned. I think often it starts with a power relationship and then it builds into something which is much more equal. (Senior Manager)

Partnership is predicated upon trust – an attribute of leadership identified by Drucker (2007: 205):

The final requirement of effective leadership is to earn trust. Otherwise, there won't be any followers – and the only definition of a leader is someone who has followers. To trust a leader, it is not necessary to like him, Nor is it necessary to agree with him. Trust is the conviction that the leader means what he says. It is a belief in something very old-fashioned, called "integrity". A leader's actions and a leader's professed beliefs must be congruent, or at least compatible. Effective leadership – and again this is very old wisdom – is not based on being clever; it is based primarily on being consistent.

In other words, leaders need to be seen “walking the talk”, with their actions consistent (or congruent) with their rhetoric. Examining the documentary sources from the case study institutions, this was apparent. For example, the Annual Report of the Students' Union of one of the case study institutions quoted the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) as commenting:

The past three years have seen a sustained commitment to strengthening the partnership between the University and the student body. The audit team identified the close and sustained partnership between the University and its students, which enhances the learning experience, as a feature of good practice.” (Students' Union Annual Report)

Dispersion of leadership extends beyond the polarity of students – university, to encompass other groupings in and beyond the university, when the notion of partnership is fully considered:

The university has accepted that higher education has changed, and it truly wants students to be a part of that. The university, I think, is truly committed to having the student at the heart of things, but it has to accept that sometimes that view will disagree with the view of the institution... But I think the university sees the student community, and the staff community, and the university community, as part of the broader community of [city], and that's what a lot of the work is focused on. (Student Leader)

Notions of partnership and community were also viewed across the dimensions of disciplinary rather than geography:

We work much more with project-led teaching, so we get [students] to engage in making products, at all levels. I run a competition in [disciplinary application] which is a UK and international competition...and obviously students engage with this... it's all good stuff as far as [disciplinary group] is concerned. And what goes into that is multi-disciplinary, so you can't get in my view a better engagement tool for [disciplinary cluster] than that, so we've tied that into our teaching for the past several years, and again that engages the students. We're also [disciplinary cluster] ambassadors, and we've been pushing the student [disciplinary cluster] ambassador programme, which again is an engagement process, because they tie in to us, and they tie into the outreach programmes that we do at schools, masterclasses that we run for schools and teachers. This is engagement at a different level – before they even get to us, we want to engage them. (Academic Leader)

...or indeed “communities of interest”, such as student parents:

Student parents are an “at risk” group because of all the conflicting pressures they're under, yet they're also an invisible group because there are no indications during the enrolment process, so it's difficult to target support... We've developed a programme training student parents to mentor other student parents, those at the University and including those at local college. Engaging this group of students is important because the student body is changing, and we need to engage all students. (Student Leader)

...or “communities of practice”, such as the “virtual students' union”:

Another initiative was the creation of a FE college network to familiarise FE students with the Students' Union in order to increase their awareness and understanding of the Union....[This project] offers training for FE-based

student representatives and a pre-arrival “vision” of the University and the Students’ Union with information and advice on university life... (Student Union Annual Report)

Respondents recognised that institutional motivation for embracing SE sometimes arose from more instrumental motivations, and accepted the inevitability of this to some degree.

What the University wants from [student engagement] is some instrumental things, a more satisfied student population as measured, it wants a more successful student population, so it wants a student population that loses less students, so it wants all of those instrumental measures of success. But increasingly the University recognises that the only way to get there is to achieve a more participative environment, a more supportive environment, a more positive environment... and thus for those things to emerge... We might all have different motivations in wanting to get to a particular place. So, I might well say to students, we want to provide you with a richer experience, let’s discuss what else should be prioritised in order to do that, at the same time that I’m saying to Deans and [other senior managers] the reason for going down this road of engaging with students and trying to an extent frame expectations but also meet expectations and create a more partnered environment is that it will help you achieve your financial bottom line because you’ll lose less students. So I think you can have people on the same journey for different motivations and I don’t think that matters particularly. What matters is the journey. (Senior Manager)

And, while progress is being made toward a “culture of engagement”, respondents recognised that there was still some way to go before it was fully realised:

I think we’re all finding our way, though, to the constitutional and management forms that will allow that to happen effectively, and lots of things are being added in. But a grand structure for that to happen isn’t clearly articulated in any UK university that I can see. We have student representatives being added to a whole range of different bodies and groups within universities. Certainly almost all of the bodies and groups I work with we have student representation on. But understanding how the balance of power might work, I don’t think is fully understood because we haven’t had that very difficult many tests of it yet. But I feel that some of the challenges that the sector is going to face will bring that into stark relief. (Senior Leader)

Other findings

Other leadership practices which respondents had found particularly effective in promoting or enhancing student engagement include:

- Bringing student representatives onto all kinds of university structures, including those concerned with changes to systems, structures or processes (such as building project boards) in material ways – such as equal numbers of staff and students on programme committees.
- GOAT (go out and talk) & GOAL (go out and listen) - speaking informally, and often, to leaders and representatives of other sectors (students, senior managers, staff leaders, etc), to gauge their feelings and views, and developing strong personal relationships based on mutual respect
- Actively involving the university in students' union activities
- Ensuring that the student representative system is truly representative of all constituencies within the student body, including “invisible” groups such as part-time students, student parents or students from elsewhere
- Active student involvement in the selection of senior managers with a high level of personal commitment to student engagement – and then holding them accountable to this commitment
- Reviewing procedures to ensure that these don't themselves give rise to problems or complaints, and lightening the bureaucratic load
- “Closing the feedback loop” – ensuring that everybody sees the results and can celebrate the “wins” of engagement
- For managers and staff, wanting to see things from students' perspectives, and being genuinely committed to ensuring students have a positive experience at university
- Shifting the official rhetoric to reflect a genuine prioritisation of partnership and community, and the prioritisation of student engagement, and ensuring consistent messages from senior management
- Not being A Manager – working against a “managerial” image to connect in a way that is meaningful to students / staff
- Replacing a culture of compliance with a culture of permission, tolerating “mess” and uncertainty
- Dogged persistence until the mindset and the culture change, so that collaborative approaches become automatic and can be self-sustaining
- “Finding the right people”

Conclusions

In the same way that changing times have led to more collaborative approaches in the workplace producing better results, so more collaborative approaches in universities appear to be promoting and enhancing student engagement – which is itself positively correlated with a host of positive outcomes. Respondents in very different institutions all lauded “partnership” as a means to a climate of engagement, and the fostering of “community” – whether that manifested in a geographic, disciplinary or other way. Leaders in all positions stressed that genuine respect and a willingness to cede, and share, power on *all* sides helped foster a climate of trust and a willingness to place the interests of the institution above individual or sectoral interests, and a sense of belonging to a community that warranted one’s very best efforts.

While some literature (e.g. Breakwell & Tytherleigh 2010) expressed at best ambivalence about the extent of influence of top leaders over the performance of their universities, the repeated references by all respondents to individual leaders within their institutions whose personal commitment – as evidenced by their behaviour as well as their rhetoric – to fostering and enhancing student engagement had inspired, assisted or driven them and their colleagues in their own engagement orientation bears testimony to the positive effects this influence can produce. Whether through small acts of symbolism – such as asking students to present on the student experience at the Vice-Chancellor’s conference, or joining student protests against fee increases – or material acts of power-sharing – such as ensuring equal numbers of students and staff on programme committees, or the VC operating a mutual hot-line policy with the SU president – individual leaders endorsing the culture of student engagement with their personal seal of approval resonates across all sectors within the university and models best practice for their followers.

Recommendations

- Student engagement needs to be a thorough-going commitment throughout the university if it is to be sustainable. While pockets of “good practice” are useful for modelling and inspiring, without a genuine commitment from leaders in all sectors and at all levels of the university, student engagement runs the risk of being “the next big thing” shuffled off the agenda once something else comes along.

- Student engagement has at its root genuine mutual respect. Without trust, a willingness to share power in appropriate ways struggles against inhibition and reluctance. True partnership shares responsibility as well as authority.
- Community matters. Beyond the partnership, the sense of belonging to something greater than one's programme, one's department or one's university provides investment, involvement and purpose in an outward-facing direction.
- Students are inspired by staff who are inspired. Student engagement requires engaged staff – of all kinds.

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