SRHE Annual Conference ‘Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?’ Exploring Meaning, Identities and Transformation in Higher Education (14-16 December, 2010)

Roundtable

EXPLORING INTELLECTUAL LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

The study of leadership and management in higher education is closely associated with examining the challenges of senior academics holding formally designated roles, such as heads of department, deans of faculty and vice chancellors. By comparison, relatively little attention has focused on understanding the broader concept of intellectual leadership linked to the work of academics in informal and distributed roles operating within and beyond their institutional context. This observation prompts a number of questions which will form the starting point for a roundtable discussion:

• What is intellectual leadership? What are the purposes of intellectual leadership?
• What are the qualities or characteristics of an intellectual leader?
• What is the role of intellectual leadership both within and without the university?
• How can intellectual leadership re-shape our understanding of conventional notions of university leadership and management?
• How can intellectual leadership be fostered and sustained?

A series of opinion pieces have been contributed by leading researchers and writers about leadership in higher education in support of this roundtable proposal:

Intellectual Leadership: What does it mean? (Robin Middlehurst)

What is intellectual leadership? (Rosemary Deem)

Intellectual leadership: I know it when I see it, and not before (David Watson)

Intellectual leadership and transdisciplinarity (MJC Crabbe)

Leading Intellectuals (Amanda H. Goodall)

Intellectual leadership among university professors: beyond the macho myth (Bruce Macfarlane)
Intellectual Leadership: What does it mean?

Robin Middlehurst (Professor of higher education, Kingston University and the Leadership Foundation for higher education)

“To the man in the street, who, I’m sorry to say, 
is a keen observer of life, 
The word ‘intellectual’ suggests straight away 
A man who’s untrue to his wife.”


“For who would lose, though full of pain, this intellectual being, 
Those thoughts that wander through eternity, 
To perish rather, swallowed up and lost 
In the wide womb of uncreated night, 
Devoid of sense and motion?”


“How Eugene Aram, though a thief, a liar, and a murderer, 
Yet, being intellectual, was amongst the noblest of mankind”.


Introduction

‘Intellectuals’ have been revered and reviled, probably in equal measure, over time, epoch and culture. Like many other labels such as ‘hero’, ‘activist’ or ‘saint’, the term ‘intellectual’ is perceived differently by different groups and societies. In societies from ancient Greece through China, Russia and modern-day Iraq, Myanmar and North Korea, intellectuals have been persecuted and prosecuted for views that challenge prevailing values, ideas or political power blocs, yet in other regions such as Scandinavia, intellectuals enjoy a social and political status that reflects their value to society. The reaction to intellectuals may lie deep in the character of a society (if Hofstede’s (2001) characterisations of ‘collectivist’ and ‘individualist’ societies are valid), or may be related to how ‘intellectuals’ perceive their role and carry out their activities within and outside established (and sometimes protected) locations such as universities, political arenas, or the media.

Our topic is not intellectuals in general, but academics working in higher education, with a particular focus on ‘intellectual leadership’. However, it is first worth thinking about intellectuals and how they are received in our society, if we are to understand their role within the academy. The UK has a chequered history with regard to intellectuals; some are recognised through Nobel Prizes (chosen from outside the UK) and others are recognised through the Honours’ system or other public prizes for their contributions to science, engineering or other professional and academic domains. Yet intellectuals are also ignored or disowned when their ideas are challenging to politicians or to other vested interests (including academic interests): a recent example being the dismissal of David Nutt, Chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs by Alan Johnson, Home Secretary, on 30 October 2009, after questioning government policy. The particular context of the UK may, perhaps, call for a particular kind of intellectual leadership from academics, one that is
resilient, forthright and capable of withstanding significant academic, political and media challenges.

**Intellectual leadership in a university context**

The wider societal context within and beyond the UK is important for an understanding of the role of intellectuals and intellectual leadership, but this is not complete without an appreciation of ‘academic freedom’ and ‘institutional autonomy’ in the UK, the former enshrined in law, the latter part of custom, practice and public rhetoric. Also important is the principle of ‘freedom of speech’ as applied more broadly in UK society.

These three concepts and practices, I suggest, lie at the heart of academic privilege and academic duty. The first offers a unique privilege while also placing a duty on individual academics (and groups of academics) to exercise their academic freedom by teaching, researching, publishing and engaging in public dialogue and debate, free of political constraints. The second places a duty on universities individually and collectively to exercise their autonomy by supporting and promoting intellectual leadership at all levels. The third places a requirement on universities as ‘protected spaces’ to support and promote freedom of speech. These three principles offer a rationale and legitimacy for the exercise of intellectual leadership and also suggest a requirement for it if these privileges are to be retained by higher education.

Individual academics, at all levels, have the potential to exercise ‘intellectual leadership’ through the power of their ideas promulgated in the classroom, the laboratory, seminal texts or other media. This power may be channelled and formalised through promotion within an institution, as individuals move through the ranks of lecturer to Professor. Other individuals may earn these titles and associated privileges through entering academia via professional practice routes. Groups of academics, particularly in science and technology disciplines, may exercise intellectual leadership in similar ways. But seeking to exercise ‘intellectual leadership’ and being granted the accolade of ‘intellectual leader’ are not the same. Recognition of achievements is granted by others within the academy and outside it; leadership without followers is a path that quickly peters out.

Those who are recognised as ‘intellectual leaders’ have a double duty: to continue to practice their science or art as individuals (and groups) and to nurture others who will extend and challenge their ideas. They will be assisted – or hindered – by the culture and climate created by the university in which they are located. ‘Intellectual leadership’ can flourish or be stifled by universities. Where it is encouraged and promoted, the university is likely to gain prestige and reputation. In practice, universities promote intellectual leadership through academic and managerial channels. Heads of Department, Deans and Pro Vice Chancellors can shape this culture through institutional structures and processes; professors and research team leaders can shape the culture through disciplines and academic processes. Both domains shape the standards and practices of the academic enterprise: intellectual leadership in today’s universities requires strong academic and managerial cultures.

**References**


What is intellectual leadership?

Rosemary Deem (Dean of History and Social Sciences and Professor of Higher Education Management, Royal Holloway, University of London)

Intellectual leadership might usefully be defined as leadership that involves setting and enabling others to contribute to intellectual agendas, the production and communication of new knowledge or the reconstruction and communication of old knowledge in new ways and the capacity to map and contribute to the future direction of intellectual currents, whether in the academic or public realm. It is something that may be provided either via a formal leadership position or informally. The role of public intellectuals in providing intellectual leadership in civil society and the deployment of academic ideas and knowledge in political engagement was raised many years ago by Antonio Gramsci (Hoare and Nowell-Smith 1971), although he used the terms traditional and organic intellectuals rather than public intellectuals. In recent years, doubt has been cast on whether genuine public intellectuals, organic or traditional, still exist or if so, whether they are in severe decline (Posner 2003). However, in the UK, the recent and controversial emphasis on demonstrating research ‘impact’ in the economic, social and cultural arenas as well as in academe, in a reconfiguration of the periodic research audit of all research active academics, which has been previously known as the Research Assessment Exercise (Higher Education Funding Council for England 2009), may provide an impetus for the revival of a tradition of public intellectuals.

Intellectual leadership is not something that figures extensively in the educational leadership literature, because, although not exclusive to the academic profession, it seldom arises in contexts outside of academe. Even in literature dealing specifically with academic leadership, intellectual leadership is not discussed all that often. Thus in Bryman’s review of recent studies of academic leadership, departmental leadership (Bryman 2007), intellectual leadership is not one of the characteristics explicitly mentioned, although there is mention of related aspects such as setting and facilitating a clear direction/strategic vision, providing feedback on performance and making resources for research and scholarship available. Goodall’s detailed empirical study of who gets appointed to run the world’s top universities is unusual in paying attention to the academic record of university rectors, vice chancellors and presidents and arguing for its importance in research intensive higher education institutions (Goodall 2009) However, some recent studies of those holding academic-manager posts (Deem, Hillyard et al. 2007; Smith, Adams et al. 2007) have noted that even those with posts at senior level often wish to retain some vestiges of their academic identity such as writing papers or supervising research students, although of course this is not necessarily the same thing as providing intellectual leadership.

Within universities intellectual leadership is often provided by those who run research groups or teams, although this is easier to do within the context of laboratory based sciences, engineering and medicine than in the more individually scholar based disciplines in the arts, humanities and many of the social sciences. At the same time, explicit ‘research management’ has become a widespread and increasingly professionalised practice in many universities across the world (Green and Langley 2009), as the visibility and status attached
to rankings in global league tables based on research becomes ever more prominent (Marginson 2005; Marginson 2006a; Marginson 2007c; Stensaker and Kehm 2009). What research management means can range from setting institutional research themes (which does amount to setting academic directions) to assuring good research governance and ethical practices in higher education settings or overseeing the preparation of research bids (Deem 2009; Deem 2010). Because intellectual leadership can be informal as well as formal, it may come from a wide variety of sources both inside and outside academe and it is not something that is easily steered or controlled, particularly given the important role of disciplines in shaping academic endeavour (Abbott 2001; Becher and Trowler 2001) and the international composition of most academics’ networks and contacts. Intellectual leadership is not explicitly taught and indeed the conventional doctorate, outside most of the Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine (STEM) disciplines, with its emphasis on lone scholarship, is unlikely to foster it.

We might consider expending rather more effort on explaining to research students what intellectual leadership might mean (i.e. it is not just about writing grant applications or publishing papers but also refers to acquiring the art of skilful and constructive peer review, widening intellectual networks, critiquing and shaping academic trends, understanding and participating in team-based interdisciplinary research, learning how to engage non-academic audiences in both research processes and the application of research outcomes, mentoring of new researchers and nurturing academic freedom). Within the academy, it is arguable that intellectual leadership is most likely to be facilitated by enabling academics to undertake exciting and innovative research, which in the new conditions of financial constraints and severe restrictions on public spending may prove challenging indeed.

References


Intellectual leadership: I know it when I see it, and not before

David Watson (Professor of Higher Education Management, the Institute of Education, University of London)

One of the major faults of the modern academy is its loss of respect for our sacred words (like “excellence’). Another is the relentless rise of self-ascription, at an individual as well as an institutional level. Like all other forms of leadership, genuine intellectual leadership has to be earned, not asserted. Empty institutional claims about “world-classness” are not that far away from some individuals’ aggressive self-promotion as “public intellectuals” or “thought leaders.”

It’s a commonly recognised trait of great sportsmen and women as well as musicians that those who can really “do it” don’t have to tell you. There’s a humility, and an associated generosity of spirit, about the unquestionably top performers. The same can be true of some leaders in academic fields, although aspects of our internal culture militate against these traits. Consider the hyperbole to which senior academics can resort when talking about things they don’t really understand: it’s one of my most robust “laws” of academic life that individuals gain in confidence the further they are away from their true field of expertise. Among higher education institutional leaders the right mixture is rare, although I have observed it: the late Lord Eric Ashby had both of these key qualities, and was extraordinarily effective.

So, to follow the line of argument that I can acknowledge or grant intellectual leadership (the reciprocal of which is that I’m not prepared to have it thrust upon me), where do I find it? For me is at least as much outside as within the academy. And the discovery is very much correlated with my personal (including private) interests.

The people who “do it” for me include: great pianists (and thinkers about their art and what it means more broadly) like Alfred Brendel and Mitsuko Uchida; novelists, including from the popular end of the street, like John Le Carré (an extraordinary gazetteer of our evolving socio-political situation) or Sue Thompson (whose structured observations of our culture are for me as powerful as those of George Orwell); and (in my own academic field) historians of ideas like Richard Sennett, Quentin Skinner and Bruce Kuklick. There are (currently) no politicians on my list (although I’m monitoring Barack Obama) and virtually none of the usual subjects in terms of those chosen to regulate our professional or public life.

An exception in the latter case is the late (and much missed) Lord Ron Dearing. Ron approached all of the challenges he faced in the various educational minefields which he volunteered to cross by pretending to be a seriously engaged naïf. As such he won confidence across a wide range of interested parties, and respect for his adjudication of the most complex and fraught issues. In fact this trick was soon rumbled by anyone properly involved; he had a habit of discovering quickly exactly what was going on. He also had an extraordinary capacity for hard work, for clear thinking, for never ruling out an idea because of its origin, and above all for keeping teams or groups of individuals focused on their
collective goal. He would have been astonished to have been called an intellectual leader, but that is exactly what he was.

**Intellectual leadership and transdisciplinarity**

**MJC Crabbe** (Executive Dean of the Faculty of Creative Arts, Technologies and Science and Professor of Biochemistry, University of Bedfordshire)

Intellectual leadership can be seen as one of four categories of leadership: Intellectual, Emotional, Social and Moral (Wepner et al., 2008). While all four are inter-related (Antonakis et al., 2009), intellectual leadership, relying as it does on scholarship and/or research, is a key factor in the dynamics of a corporate university (Dealtry, 2001), as well as in an individual leader’s academic credibility in higher education and beyond.

One of the challenges of a leader in higher education is to move out from the relative ‘comfort zone’ of a specialist subject to a wider area of integration; one of transdisciplinarity. Although multidisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity and crossdisciplinarity are often used interchangeably, strictly they have different definitions. Here I use the word loosely – an integration or interrelation of disciplinary generated knowledge and non-disciplinary generated knowledge and its application to complex problems and issues. It is addressing a subject from various angles and methods, eventually cutting across disciplines allowing a new understanding of the subject. Examples include training for tropical conservation (Kainer et al., 2006; Crabbe et al., 2009), and, in my own Faculty, linking dance performance (in the Department of Performing Arts & English) with computer graphics (in the Department of Computer Science & Technology) to provide new insights into choreography, via an Arts and Humanities Research Council grant.

Creativity and critical thinking are important ingredients for intellectual leadership, and vital for leadership in transdisciplinarity. Here I define creativity as a process involving the generation of new ideas or concepts, fueled by the process of either conscious or unconscious insight, and critical thinking as purposeful and reflective judgment about what to believe in response to observations, experience, verbal or written expressions, or arguments.

I identify three key elements in fostering and sustaining such intellectual leadership:

- The importance of freedom
- The importance of communication
- The importance of iteration

Intellectual leadership in other cultures raises many issues; China is particularly challenging from a Western perspective. The nature of ‘instructor behaviour’ is important in relation to leadership (Sleeboom-Faulkner, 2007), and this is very apparent in China (Patrick et al., 2009). Working with Universities, the creative arts and industries in China throws the three elements above into high relief. They need continual re-interpretation through a Chinese
perspective for a Chinese audience. Other countries and cultures have different perspectives on intellectual leadership. For higher education leaders in the UK it is important that we have the freedom to listen to those cultures, and to communicate and interact with them at all levels.

References


Leading Intellectuals

Amanda H. Goodall (Leverhulme Fellow, Warwick Business School)

To me, the term ‘intellectual leadership’ means one thing -- those who lead intellectuals. Great scholars may be thought-leaders, but leadership is about hierarchy and real power. Leadership is not an intellectual exercise; it is a formal position, one that should be judged in terms of performance.

In this think piece I will try to make two points. First, that leadership research is important because leaders are important; second, that it matters greatly who leads our universities.

Being a leadership researcher in a business school is challenging. The field has lost respect. Critical management authors believe that leadership is elitist so they ignore it. MBA students often look to the ‘charismatic leader’ for solutions. The head of a US business school told me all MBA students want Jack Welch to be dean. Psychologists have tended to focus on individual characteristics such as traits, and sociologists have stepped back into the wider context; in my view, the former get too close, and the latter too far. Mostly leadership research is criticised for being empirically weak.

Another factor plaguing the field in my view is the inherent nature of social science to reject causal inference. This is common in many UK business schools and may partially explain the low impact of management research. Arguably, the success of a leader will be due to many immeasurable factors, and unlike in science, we cannot randomly assign a CEO to an organization. But despite the cloudy conditions, it is essential that empirical researchers try to establish the effectiveness of heads. Leaders have the most power in organizations, and substantial resources are invested in their recruitment and pay.

Possibly the most controversial view of leadership is that of managerialists. Implicit in much New Labour policy is the assumption that experts, such as scholars and doctors, either cannot lead or are somehow inferior to professional managers. My research on leaders suggests that this position is flawed. In universities and other organizations where knowledge is central, such as hospitals, it is experts (the best experts) not managers who should lead. My work shows that UK universities improve in their RAE performance when top researchers are at the helm. To try to get to a causal explanation, I look at the leaders a number of years before I examine RAE outcomes, and I control for factors such as size.

Why should the best scholars lead their universities? Humans tend to prioritize that which they excel at. A manager will assign greatest importance to management systems and processes, whereas a successful scientist or humanist will prioritize differently. They may focus attention on matters of research. Leaders should, I believe, understand the core business of the organization they are to lead, and they should be experts in that activity. In a research university the core business is research and teaching. Without these, universities do not exist. It doesn’t matter how good the management systems are.
To conclude, I believe that if our universities are led by scholars who understand the needs and values of the core workers – academics – then the business of the academy will be better protected from both government and managerial intervention.

**Intellectual leadership among university professors: beyond the macho myth**

Bruce Macfarlane (Associate Professor for higher education, The University of Hong Kong)

I recently conducted a study about intellectual leadership thanks to a development grant from the UK Leadership foundation. Part of this project involved interviewing (full) professors about what it means to be a professor (Macfarlane, 2011). Many of these individuals were what I would call ‘professors without portfolio’. In other words, they did not hold a ‘hybridised’ (Whitchurch, 2006) position as a professor and a managerial position such as a head of department, a Dean, or a pro vice chancellor. While they were not necessarily ‘managers’ they were still leaders of other academics; people who are looked up to for advice and possibly inspiration. How then do they try to meet these expectations?

What struck me about their responses to my questions was how they identified a series of qualities which any ‘good’ professor needs. Roughly, these divide into qualities connected with exercising academic freedom and those connected with academic duty. It is a truism that a professor has to ‘profess’ something. This invariably involves being a critic of certain concepts and theories in the discipline, perhaps of disciplinary boundaries, or even conventions and norms in society. Being a critic is a building block for a professor’s being known for something more constructive. This can involve being an advocate for a form of analysis, a model, concept, idea, a movement or a set of principles connected with a discipline or profession. They are only known by engaging and debating with others in various ways.

But being a professor is not just about exercising academic freedom and having something to say. It also involves other-regarding qualities such as being a mentor for less experienced colleagues through encouraging and nurturing their potential; a guardian of academic standards in the discipline through peer review activities for example; an acquisitor of resources to sustain research centres and teams; and sometimes an ambassador on behalf of the institution. Finally, professors need to be role models; meta-academics who possess the credibility upon which to lead not just good researchers or good teachers.

Perhaps the most precious commodity in academic life is time. All these activities demand selflessness by giving a fair proportion of this time over for the benefit of others. There is a gendered dimension to what I found inasmuch that female professors feel that they are often expected to take on more elements of academic duty partly as a result of becoming a professor, on average, at a later stage in their academic career when they have already made their main creative contribution.

I believe that effective intellectual leadership demands a balance between the qualities associated with academic freedom and academic duty. A professor must be prepared to
speak out and have something that they ‘profess’ in order to be respected. Yet, they also need selfless qualities associated with making a contribution back to their own academic community. This is about inter-generational equity as much as anything else in nurturing the next wave of academics who will carry the torch for the discipline into the future. What concerns me is that the messages of modern academic life – demonstrating the ‘impact’ of our research, grant-getting, and citation rates - are spawning a generation of selfish professors who are rationally withdrawing from wider responsibilities connected with academic duty.

When I made a presentation about my work to an away day of senior staff at a UK post-1992 university last year, the Vice Chancellor took issue with my analysis and pronounced that what he needs are professors who are ‘selfish bastards’. In my view, we have enough of these already. This kind of attitude perpetuates the macho myth of the professor although it is symptomatic of the competitive, but often hollow, ethos of modern higher education. What we need are more professors who take both elements of their intellectual leadership role seriously by balancing academic freedom and academic duty.

References
