I, VICE-CHANCELLOR:
finding the humanity in higher education leadership

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Why would anybody want to be a vice-chancellor? The job is tough in its complexity and its scope, and it can be isolating. If you go back a number of decades, the role was essentially that of a first-among-equals leader of the professoriate, with minimal, or undiscovered executive scope. Go back one decade and this picture had changed, with vice-chancellors expected to preside over the development and delivery of clear institutional strategy, but doing so in the context of influence and power, and with a credible amount of implicit trust from their institutions and society. Today, we see a different picture: the public is now suspicious of the “establishment”, politicians are anxious to distance themselves from – or attempt to tame - institutions painted as unduly liberal and elitist, and vice-chancellors are not uncommonly under public attack from their own staff.

Though universities have to some extent been insulated from public funding cuts in the last decade, finances are being squeezed, and financial pressure combined with increased external accountability has at times seemed to be putting the collective morale and wellbeing of university communities at risk. Several high-profile crises in leadership at UK universities, seemed to confirm for us as we started this research the view that we have a leadership problem in higher education.

Yet UK higher education is a precious national resource. If universities are to sustain their current impressive output and impact, and adapt to the changing political, economic and social order, they will need leaders who are exceptionally capable in multiple domains, intellectually, strategically and emotionally.

Our hypothesis is that ongoing support and work is needed to equip those responsible for developing, recruiting and supporting higher education leaders to identify and test for the leadership qualities that the contemporary university requires. That the role is increasingly complex and multifaceted does not always seem to follow through into the appointments process in the way that it should.

There is a risk that reputation, ambition, or narcissism are better predictors of being appointed to a leadership role than clear evidence of the capability to lead a complex organisation and safeguard the long term wellbeing of the university community. There is an associated risk of pressure on leaders to succumb to the mythology of the heroic leader whose strength of vision can turn around the fortunes of a struggling university. And when the leader is exposed as less than heroic, they may become a scapegoat in some quarters for the institution’s (or society’s) ills.

But higher education leaders are humans - flawed and vulnerable, with different strengths and weaknesses that may be applied in the role of head of institution. So our project sought to explore how this humanity plays out in how vice-chancellors approach leadership, how they look after their own wellbeing, and how they maintain their humanity despite their personal status and profile as a head of institution.

We spoke to vice-chancellors and principals from England, Scotland and Wales, with responsibility for different kinds of universities (research-intensive, modern, and specialist) and with different lengths of experience as institutional heads. We do not claim that our sample is representative in terms of the demographic of vice-chancellors in general, especially in relation to gender: where women make up the majority of our sample, they are still in the minority among heads of institution.

We selected individuals on the basis of our existing experience as institutional leaders who we had personally experienced as “human” in their interactions. We also benefited from the insight of institutional leaders whose names do not appear in this publication. We are enormously grateful to all the individuals who gave their time and shared their thoughts with us.

We hope that the insight recorded here will help to present a more rounded and human picture of the role of vice-chancellor than is represented in the popular narrative. We believe it will help boards of governors, those considering whether a head of institution role is for them, and those responsible for developing future leaders to reflect on the breadth of qualities future leaders might require, and how they might be supported to perform their role as effectively as possible.

"Universities are collegial organisations. I believe in that approach – I think the term ‘managerialism’ is frequently used loosely with different meanings and interpretations. The best leaders and managers I’ve worked with have been brilliant at consulting, at engaging people and building trust. Of course if you’ve got an institution in crisis you need a different model, quick decisions, decisive leadership. But you’ve got to be adaptable to context, without losing sight of your values.”
The changing role of institutional head

We doubt that leading a higher education institution has ever been easy, but over the last decade it has grown considerably harder. Public expectations of universities have increased with the rise in the numbers of young people benefiting from higher education. University research is expected to contribute to the national interest, in international excellence, in economic growth and in social impact.

Though only the English system has been "marketised" in the sense that university income is highly dependent on a fiercely competitive student recruitment market, across the UK universities are subject to the ebb and flow of student numbers, public funding and the associated impact on cross-border flows of students. The costs of funding pension schemes is increasing, public funding is scarce, and demographic pressures, international competition and government policy are squeezing university income, with particular challenges for those institutions that are less well-placed to compete. These changes can be seen to have brought about a massive change in the role of leadership in universities.

At the same time, there has been a significant cultural shift in perception of the status of universities and, by association, their leaders - and in public perceptions of leaders more generally. Since the financial crash of 2008/09, public scepticism about those in positions of power has been expressed in numerous different ways. In higher education, the furore over senior remuneration, which reached a peak in the summer of 2017 is an obvious example.

But from both sides of the political spectrum there has been scepticism about the value of going to university, whether the right things are being taught,

"We've seen a loss of credibility of universities as leaders of thought and those who speak truth to power. Universities have lost some of their role in society as contributing to public debate from a disinterested perspective."

Inside higher education institutions, there is a longer-standing tradition of scepticism about "managerialist" leadership, that has an ideological problem with a trend in university leadership that prioritises compliance, efficiency, financial sustainability and entrepreneurialism or, as adherents might express it, "running the university as if it were a business."

Institutional leaders are characterised as having lost sight of the core academic values of higher education.

The expression of this view was seen during the industrial action over the Universities Superannuation Scheme in 2018, in which a number of high-profile leaders experienced direct personal attacks. There is a trajectory in which additional political and financial pressures on institutions can lead to a tendency to blame the leader for the organisation's ills, which can in some cases combine neatly with a pre-existing narrative about out-of-touch, overpaid leaders to lend a cloak of perceived moral legitimacy to personal attacks.

"The critique of university leaders is a sign of the end of the age of deference. It's happening across the piece, in the voluntary, private and public sectors. But a particular dimension of this in HE is the myth of the golden age of how universities were once run. University leaders are seen to be representative of a bastard culture, a managerialist culture that has no place in universities, set against the myth of the collective, collegial leadership of the past."
The rise of social media creates additional vulnerabilities for all of us. Leaders – in every field – are particularly likely to attract criticism and personal attacks, sometimes anonymously, which can create a deep personal strain. For women and ethnic minority leaders, attacks may also take on a racist or misogynistic flavour. One institutional leader described in vivid terms the personal impact of social media attacks which included tears, insomnia and suicidal thoughts. Another described the shock of realising that they were the victim of an orchestrated campaign of personal attacks, which was very upsetting for them personally and also for their family.

Both cases illustrate the disproportionate impact a small number of determined people can have on the personal wellbeing of institutional leaders. Whether or not our interviewees had experienced direct personal attacks in their time as an institutional leader, all clarified that their experience was that attacks tended to be the action of a minority or in some cases a passing impulse rather than a sustained campaign.

“The surprising thing to me is how intemperate social media is. I was quite naive about that. One time in response to something we proposed a student wrote on a comment board ‘the vice-chancellor is a witch’. So I added a note saying I’d be available to discuss it at a specified time - and I was worried someone would come along and call me a witch in person - but nobody showed up.”

“Nine times out of ten when I’m walking around campus when people stop me it’s to say something nice and have a chat.”

The leaders we spoke to broadly accept that it can be difficult for them to be seen as distinct from their institution. In one sense the vice-chancellor or principal embodies the institution, carrying ultimate accountability for its success, and shaping its external reputation.

“In organisations - particularly in large organisations - people hold the leader accountable for things that go wrong. It’s not personal but because of the role you occupy.”

“I don’t think anyone prepared me for quite how much everything I did would be interpreted as relating to the university. If I’m walking around looking puzzled because I’m wondering what to have for tea tonight that’s interpreted as being about the university.”

“For most people they know it’s important in the abstract but they don’t ‘live it’ every day. Once you are in charge of an institution and you are committed to it, it’s something you lose sleep over.”

“It’s lonely at the top, and that’s the way it is. You hope to establish good relationships with your senior team, but there’s always a gap. However good your colleagues are, they also recognise that, when it comes to it, someone else is going to carry ultimate responsibility.”
There has recently been a series of high-profile examples of where university governance has broken down, particularly in rifts between vice-chancellors and boards. The media has gravitated towards situations where vice-chancellors are seen to have breached expected propriety (for example in international travel expenses, in the constitution of their entourage, or in their choice of expensive furniture). But the executive tends to carry the can for institutional strategic missteps as well - an unprofitable overseas campus, a drop in league table position or student recruitment projections that in hindsight turn out to be over-optimistic.

In some cases, boards of governors have not kept abreast of the scale of the challenges facing contemporary universities, and governors can be as prone to attribute changes in institutional fortunes to faulty leadership as any member of university staff. Experienced and senior individuals on boards may be vulnerable to the casual bravado of “I could do a better job than that.” Lay members may focus on restrictive indicators of success - such as league table performance - which can create an environment where there is not enough patience for vice-chancellors to deliver change sustainably in complex institutional environments.

Lay members do not always seem to appreciate that delivering changes in the university sector requires a level of collegiality, and committee scrutiny, that can be alien to those from more private sector backgrounds.

Where institutional leaders have failed to invest in building the knowledge and understanding of their board of harsh realities - either through a desire to gloss over the unpleasant truth, or from an inability to understand themselves how the ground has shifted - they are vulnerable to a serious breakdown of trust. Several vice-chancellors noted the importance of building relationships with the whole board, not just the chair, so that if an issue arose with the chair, other board members would be in a position to offer an alternative viewpoint.

“My best advice is spend lots of time with governors - get round and keep going round them individually. If you don’t maintain relationships when things get difficult, then nobody will have your back.”

“My bosses have always made it abundantly clear to me that I’m on the hook for looking after the success of the institution. I do see the chair of governors as my boss - it creates clarity. This is not someone that you just go and have a chat with, you have an appraisal with them, they decide whether they are going to extend your contract or not.”
We were struck by how differently interviewees described their approach to leadership. Though there was a lot of consistency in the principles and values expressed, part of being a human leader is finding ways to be a leader that are authentic to you and your personal style.

“Authenticity is really important in the role - people very quickly detect individuals who are playing a role and it’s not what they believe. Difficulties emerge, especially for new VC’s, when they try to act like they think a VC should and they’re not being themselves.”

There is a stereotype of the high-status leader, who is remote, inaccessible, and apparently invulnerable. In a large organisation it can be difficult to have a personal relationship with everyone, and so some leaders make efforts to avoid perpetuating the mythology of the all-powerful leader and to stay as grounded and human as possible.

“I decided that the job would either work for me or it wouldn’t - I would only do it if I could be me. I counted it a real plus when the ladies in the refectory started to call me by my first name. There are all sorts of structures around power that are irrelevant and hold things back.”

In a highly complex landscape, leaders are prioritising values, in some cases explicitly prioritising articulation and practise of values over developing strategy. A strong belief that your actions are grounded in what you believe to be right is necessary when you are dealing with uncertainty and doubt. Values help to bring the wellbeing of the institution to the fore and give a counterbalance to external pressures on performance. Values can contribute to authentic leadership, as long as the leader is prepared to demonstrate consistency in efforts to live those values on a personal level as well as advocating for them at the corporate level. Living your ideals on a daily basis is challenging, and one of the ways that leaders express their humanity is acknowledging that on occasion they fall short of their own aspirations.

“Work out what is core, what you exist for, and try and do that as far as you can, and bulwark as far as possible against things you can’t do.”

“For me personally, I am conscious of wanting to live the values of my university but I’m a human being and I don’t get it right all the time.”

“In leadership roles you need to stay true to your own values and apply them consistently - if you do that you can live with yourself - it helps enormously if those values are agreed and shared by the institution that you’re leading. Coherence between personal values and institutional values is very important.”

“Extending a sense of trust from senior teams across the whole community is something I work at every day through interactions with staff, communications, being present with staff when things haven’t gone well as well as when they have. It’s not something you do as an activity, it’s keeping that investment in and commitment to building trust at the forefront of my mind. I can’t do that for 1600 people on an individual basis, and so I must model and demonstrate through my behaviours and that of my teams and their teams. It’s hard to get everybody to live in this way and hard for myself to do it every day. Colleagues must feel confident to be able to call out and challenge where any leader is not living our organisational values. We’re still on that journey”

“Universities are places where open discussion and debate is encouraged – there is very little that you can’t discuss with the whole university community”

“What people need in case of staff restructuring, redundancy - honesty, clarity, why it’s in the interests of the university. Treat people as you’d want to be treated - thinking about what you’d want to be treated fairly in that situation.”
“You have to treat your staff as adults, talk about how finances are made up, how that works, what they are looking like. It’s important to say ‘we’re heading into really uncertain times but this is the certainty I can give you’ - that level of honesty is really important.”

Interviewees were pragmatic about the necessity of crafting a message around decisions that represents the rationale for the decision as simpler than the messy process of arriving at that decision.

“The role of leadership is to make complexity of decisions very simple - this is what we have to do, and this is why - sometimes it’s around core values and sometimes it’s a pragmatic reason.”

There is, perhaps, a risk that simple honesty in communication reinforces the myth of the autocratic vice-chancellor “leading from the top”. In addition to being honest about plans and priorities, it’s necessary to be honest about when things go wrong, and be open to criticism and challenge.

When we asked about how comfortable vice-chancellors are about showing vulnerability, it became clear that different vice-chancellors view vulnerability in different ways. Soliciting feedback, and being open to critical challenge are core parts of academic life, and, in fact, some interviewees found it difficult that some staff felt the need to resort to personal attacks when they felt they had made themselves very open to challenge.

“Challenging decisions is healthy - I worry if people don’t.”

“When people raise things they should get a fair hearing. That’s the point of talking to people - to enable you to address issues - but I do like it to be evidence-based.”

“Compared to my former institution I had to be much more proactive when we’re doing change in teasing out what people really think - more proactive in seeking feedback and providing different channels for people to be able to express their opinions and not be fearful about something adverse happening because they didn’t agree with someone at a senior level in the organisation.”

For some people, acknowledging their vulnerability meant the simple acknowledgement that leaders are not perfect, and do not always make perfect decisions. For others, there was a concern about the impact on university staff of having a leader who appears uncertain or anxious - some interviewees suggested that being too vulnerable could be irresponsible rather than positive. Leaders are understandably careful about how and when they expose their vulnerabilities, and tend to have evolved strategies for when and how they will do this.

“It’s a difficult line to tread - on the one hand they want to see humanity and vulnerability but on the other they don’t want a leader who is wobbly.”

“You don’t pass on anxiety to staff and students who can’t do anything about it.”

“You don’t always get it right and sometimes you have to say ‘we thought that was the right thing to do, but the circumstances have changed’ - it’s about being open about where you’ve made a mistake, where you didn’t spot things.”

“Recently I had an email from a member of staff about an item in one of my newsletters saying something like ‘when you communicate the vulnerable side of you when things don’t work out it must be difficult, but it does create the feeling there is a human running the organisation - it’s not just a role, it’s a person’ - that feedback was both valuable and supportive to me as a leader.”

“Academics follow people more easily if they know them - they need to know what their passions are - passion is quite a vulnerable thing, because it’s not logical - I’ve learned it’s very empowering for people if I share some of their worries.”

In addition to managing personal vulnerabilities, many interviewees spoke of the need to distribute leadership, share credit for success, and resist the temptation to have oversight of every aspect of everything in the university. We found it especially interesting when individuals were able to articulate the struggle to delegate, as it suggested a high degree of self-awareness. The accountabilities of the role of head of institution can create enormous temptation to be highly directive - and we have no doubt our interviewees succumb to that temptation on occasion. But the aspiration to distribute leadership is entirely healthy, for the reasons interviewees explained.

“You have to give people credit for knowing what is working in particular areas. Getting people together creates insight that can be used - people often don’t take the trouble to learn from each other.”

“Making decisions is adorable - it’s lovely. I could have it all my own way. But I might well lead the university to perdition if I did. And it would seem arbitrary - everybody would come in in the morning not knowing whether they could make a decision or not. I put time into the senior team’s development, lots of time one to one, leadership events, we work reflectively in committees, and I ensure there’s a level of social interaction so they know each other well.”

“Yes it is the case that at the end of the day I will take a decision but I need to hear the different views of people. If you are an organisation that is based on cleverness, intelligence, if you try and say that people don’t have a say - that doesn’t work.”

“Find capable people, create an agreed broad outline of what it is we’re trying to achieve and then let them get on with it - there are many different routes to success and professionals doing their respective jobs will know how to do it better than me.”

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Wellbeing strategies

As a society we are learning to value personal and organisational wellbeing, in part because the pace and complexity of modern life seem to be putting our wellbeing under strain. In contrast to the mythology of the heroic leader who has no personal or emotional needs of their own and lives to work, human leaders consciously adopt strategies to build their resilience and enable them to cope with challenging times.

Don’t sweat the small stuff

“Don’t internalize abuse... if you let it get to you, it will rot your soul.”

“Thinking about what’s important in life and not getting your stomach in a knot because you’ve had a disagreement with someone.”

“I’ve got a lot tougher since I moved into the job - if people are going to be capable of doing the job for a while you have to toughen up - I suppose it’s important that you don’t become coarse.”

Seek advice and support

“I’ve always had an informal mentor - someone I’ve chosen to share conversations with.”

“I have a fantastic and supportive senior team and Council.”

“I have developed resilience over many years - mostly through engagement with networks and peer support. I am a great believer in formal and informal action learning sets - from an early time in my leadership career I gravitated towards them and have set them up.”

“I have some friends who are VCs who I find useful as a sounding board - but probably because they are friends rather than because they are VCs.”

“It is part of our job to offer support to colleagues and the next generation. It is fundamentally lonely, and that does mean that you need to, even if you don’t necessarily agree with another VC, recognise it’s tricky for everyone, and people have different strengths and sometimes when things go wrong it’s because people’s strengths aren’t right for the situation.”

“Worry about having people around you who don’t say it like it is - value openness and honesty from others and try to understand yourself as they see you. Stay tuned to the reaction you elicit from others and reflect on what may have been the cause.”

Take a break, laugh

“I’ve realised that it is to the detriment of others if I don’t take time out, stand on the balcony, think about things, so now I ensure that I schedule time for myself to refresh, re-engage, and be the best I can be when I come back again.”

“I can’t tell you how lucky I am with my partner - he and I have been together forever - we met when we were sixteen - it means we know each other incredibly well. He cooks - there’s nothing more wonderful than coming home at the end of a rubbish day and someone being there with a glass of wine and some fabulous food. I love the theatre, I love jazz, walking, art galleries. I can enjoy my life outside the university and I do try to make sure there is one day a week where I don’t do any work.”

“I sit with my partner and a bottle of wine and howl with laughter at the absurdity of what is going on.”

Focus on the positives

“At the risk of sounding too like Mary Poppins, it’s a huge privilege to lead a university. It’s hugely important what we do for the next generation, and you get the value of discourse with that generation, their ideas, the sustainability ethos of that generation, and you want to help them.”

“My role as Principal is really rewarding, there’s a strong sense of purpose - and I know that is what draws so many of our staff into universities. How fantastic to be in an organisation that is educating and developing people, doing research and ultimately, serving society.”

“Universities are spaces where people complain a lot, but most of them are places that are really nice to be.”

“You can make a real difference - leadership should not be a toxic thing; if you need to be the person with the flaming torch in your hand, the job’s not for you.”

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“You can make a real difference - leadership should not be a toxic thing; if you need to be the person with the flaming torch in your hand, the job’s not for you.”
There is no meaningful training or way to safely
practise being a vice-chancellor, you just have to do
it. Some find that the role is very different from what
was expected (or how the role was billed during
recruitment). The public attacks on vice-chancellors
are causing some to keep their heads down and
avoid offering public commentary on issues, which
is an enormous loss to the public debate.

But more could be done to diversify the
leadership pipeline, support people to prepare
for the role and succeed once in it.

“We’re still incredibly nervous about cultivating talent
at senior level - colleagues are nervous about spotting
talent or being someone who is talent spotted.”

“The leap from being a deputy to a VC is big - you
don’t realise the weight of responsibility and the
opportunity to shape things it brings you.”

“I’m worried about diversity - we’re not seeing
enough women coming through, and we’ve not
cracked in any form the BAME issue - there’s
not a lot of BAME even middle managers, never
mind senior managers, never mind VCs.”
Some recommendations from our research for surviving modern leadership roles and enabling it to be as effective as possible:

For vice-chancellors
- Actively champion personal wellbeing and share your strategies with new leaders
- Talent spot and mentor up and coming leaders
- Be strategic and pragmatic in your engagement with social media
- Embrace the learning and surround yourself with people you can learn from
- Retain a self-definition that is much broader than your role as vice-chancellor, and find ways to disengage when needed

For governors / council members
- Reflect carefully on the qualities you are looking for in a vice-chancellor and whether they are sufficiently nuanced; reflect on the ways in which the qualities that enable vice-chancellors to lead effectively in universities are not the same as in businesses
- Consider depth, humanity and moral compass as strong criteria for selection
- Review the tools you are using to identify candidates and the evidence presented on their competencies, ranging from psychometrics to more informal interactions; reduce dependency upon the final set-piece interview as the be-all and end-all
- Work with the incoming vice-chancellor to put a support plan in place
- Sense-check your expectations
- Support vice-chancellors to speak truth to power

For those aspiring to be vice-chancellors
- Be clear about your personal values and be prepared to test the alignment of your own values with those of the institution(s) you may be appointed to lead
- Actively develop your human side, and find ways to reflect on your own resilience
- Seek opportunities to understand governance and how it works, recognising that cultures at governance level do not always mirror institutional cultures, and live with that ambiguity
- Develop very positive and careful ways of approaching external communications, especially social media

All of us
- Acknowledge the humanity of our leaders in our expectations of them and our interactions with them, whether in person, on social media or in organisational or sector interactions.

List of interviewees
David Bell, University of Sunderland
Janet Beer, University of Liverpool
John Last, Norwich University of the Arts
Julie Lydon, University of South Wales
Gerry McCormac, University of Stirling
Andrea Nolan, Edinburgh Napier University
Sue Rigby, Bath Spa University
Mary Stuart, University of Lincoln

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