MINERVA

Leading in Times of Turmoil

Ben Tucker

Credit: Jung Seo Anna, Break Time

Credit: Ishai 2016, The Cliff

Introduction

Our system ***"is never tested during times of tranquility."*** [i]

For the past few years, it has felt distinctively as if we are in a time of turmoil, with the whole higher education sector being menaced by a many-headed beast. And it is a beast that has an uncanny ability to sprout new and surprising heads to aggregate the threat: funding shortfalls; botched marketisation; volatility in national and international recruitment; regulatory and political challenges; unsustainable pension schemes; rising utility costs; the confusion of AI; changing student needs and behaviours; uplifts in NI contributions; and culture wars and freedom of speech. The list goes on. These are challenging times.

In response to these factors, most universities are experiencing a scale and pace of change to which they are unaccustomed – everywhere you look there is restructure and reduction, cost-saving, accelerated programme review and development, and wide-ranging changes being made to terms and conditions of employment. Even the idea of mergers is not dirty anymore, especially now that they have been rebranded as "radical collaborations".

What is it like to lead in this context? Is it all bad? How might the sector emerge from this period, and how might it become stronger? Will the coaching jargon, "turmoil stimulates" be true for UK higher education, and what sort of change or innovation might emerge?

In the academic year 2025-2026, we interviewed several university vice-chancellors/principals/presidents from across the UK to hear about their experiences of leadership in these times of change. We looked for themes in how they feel that their roles are evolving, and what the pressures and opportunities are. Given our work at Minerva, a consultancy with a strong focus on the development and recruitment of leaders in the sector, we were also interested in the path that leaders' own development has taken and what we might draw out that could be helpful for individuals aspiring to become vice-chancellors or equivalent, or for governing bodies, councils and courts seeking to appoint at this level. What sort of qualities should we look for in the coming years?

[i] Mike Honda, 'Supporting Goals of Certain Communities in Recognizing National Day of Remembrance', Congressional Record Volume 150, Number 26, 3 March 2004

In times of change, leading in universities involves heightened emphasis and nuance around:

- setting strategy, tone and vision;
- delivering on the business (chief executive) elements of the role;
- team building and development;
- fronting things up and presenting the context at institutional level;
- encouraging performance;
- working to get the most out of governance.

University leaders are feeling a different kind of stretch and stress now than at any time in the past. One striking observation is that those we interviewed have not become cynical in response. They consistently demonstrated a huge depth of commitment to their roles, to their universities and to the wider importance of higher education. The challenge is recognised, but vice-chancellors have not lost their commitment to their roles:

"It's still the best job in the whole world."

It is possible that, for some, the current context of change and challenge provided them with more stimulation – and possibly even enjoyment – than a more stable time would have done. Difficult times offer opportunities to focus and identify what really matters, and these opportunities have not been wasted. We explored with our interviewees how they approached their roles, what style of working seemed to be most effective, and how they looked after themselves.

We then explored with leaders how they imagined the next years might pan out; where is the change heading? What kind of innovation might it trigger? This report looks in depth at these explorations, and ends with some observations on what this research might mean for those who aspire towards leadership roles in higher education, and for those who are in the position of selecting leaders.

We are very grateful to the following university vice-chancellors, presidents and principals for taking the time to talk to us. We chose them to ensure representation from different types of institution in different parts of the country. All of them were frank and open with us and provided an intimate glance into their professional lives. Throughout, when quotes are provided from these discussions, they are italicised, and not attributed.

It was important that our discussions were conducted in an environment where people could be comfortable opening up, and we are keen to honour the sensitivities that an essentially public role involves. We hope that we have done some justice to their insights in this report:

- **Professor Emma Hunt, Falmouth University.**
- **Professor James Knowles, Southampton Solent University.**
- **Professor Sir Peter Mathieson, University of Edinburgh**
- **Professor Sir Gerry McCormac, Stirling University**
- **Professor Steve Olivier, Robert Gordon University**
- **Professor Sir Steve West, University of the West of England**
- **Professor Shearer West, University of Leeds**
- **Professor Sally Wheeler, Birkbeck, University of London**
- **Professor Joe Yates, Wrexham University**

Several others, who did not wish to be explicitly mentioned, also contributed thoughts and reflections, and we are grateful to them for their contributions.

Credit: Agha Jan, Watermelon Man

The Pace of Change

Not surprisingly, a common theme in our discussions was the pace and scale of change.

"The timing has become much more compressed. Vice-chancellors have always been focused on change, but now it's much faster, and at a different scale."

"The need to demonstrate improved productivity and efficiency, and the pace at which we have to meet demands, is getting faster and faster."

"In the past we had the luxury of time on our side; we have a lot less now and maybe less resilience in our organisations."

With multiple factors causing pressures on universities, leaders often feel a new degree of urgency around responding to them at base level to ensure financial survival, and in a context where they feel their institutions are not always fully aware of the challenge: *"When I arrived I talked to [senior colleague] about the changes we needed to make. He said, 'It will take fifteen years'. I said, 'We've got two.'"* All of those we spoke to commented on the amount of heavy lifting going on in the sector at the moment: *"It's so difficult. It's almost impossible."* As we explored with leaders their experience of leading in this context of change, it seems worth emphasising three general points of reflection:

First, there appears a strong sense of increasing multiplicity across the sector. It is important to recognise the wide variety of institutions that make up the sector, and that there can be no one-size-fits-all. The success of any vice-chancellor will be within a specific context and at a specific time. Across all the leaders we talked to and their institutions, there was a sense that each operates with a unique mix of challenges and opportunities.

"It's not one sector, some have deeper pockets than others. Everyone has different circumstances and needs to make a different strategic response."

Different universities have experienced different facets of the beast in different ways, and there is increasingly significant variance in the way that the four different administrations of the UK approach higher education. There are growing divisions in aspects such as pension costs, amongst other things, and the pressure to compete globally affects some more than others. Each institution seems increasingly to require a unique path forward. The sector is, *"an eclectic set of organisations, with different shapes, in different political structures."* We detected a distinct paradox here. On one hand, leaders felt that there is some advantage in universities operating increasingly as clearly distinct, individual businesses.

"The positive is that we are better at knowing what we are and operating within that context."

Every institution succeeds or fails as a separate organisation in the new reality.

On the other hand, there is an awareness that increasing recognition of the sector's multiplicity, and the isolated status of each university, is making the sector much less collaborative. It is becoming more difficult to speak as one sector, and this was felt by many to be a real loss.

"Money is getting tighter, and the sector is pulling itself apart."

"Are we individual businesses, or are we here for the greater good? We talk about a sector, but it is getting harder and harder to know what it means."

Leaders have not lost a sense of the wider purpose of higher education – the extensive contribution it makes to society – and regret the way that, as each institution is having to think more and more solipsistically to secure its own future, we are witnessing a diminishing capacity in the sector to think and act as more than the sum of its parts. It is possible that the concept of a sector that works holistically has been more sentiment than substance for quite some time and that, now, even the sentiment is giving way.

Second, there is a sense of constantly managing a fine balance between maintaining a healthy culture – one that still feels like a university – with the pressure of external expectations. Regulatory and governmental expectations, and even the behaviours of governing bodies, can make it increasingly challenging to practise collegial decision making, or to look after the wider academic culture.

Third, we also sense that the days of the "rock star" vice-chancellor are fully gone. Not so long ago, there was a lot of media coverage of "fat cat" vice-chancellors, criticising perceived luxuries in expenses and travel, and other behaviours. The lived reality as of now, and for the foreseeable future, feels very different from this, despite a small number of very high salaries at some universities. Anyone who takes on these roles with the hope of self-aggrandisement is likely to be disappointed, given the reality of day-to-day challenges in the sector. In our interviews with university leaders, they framed their roles using the language of service leadership. The position can be immensely challenging, and we detected in our interviewees a universal sense of humility regarding their positions and their approach to steering things through. There is a sobriety about their commitment to the sector and what they can do to help it.

"If I come in on Monday morning, and the place hasn't burned down, that seems a good starting point to me."

"Over time, you spend less time thinking of personal achievement; you spend less time thinking of yourself and more about whether you've helped the university and the sector more widely."

Credit: Cooper James

Credit: Mooney Hannah, Looking out towards the Ferry House II

Setting the North Star

One consistent topic that arose in the interviews was the importance of high-level shaping of strategy and vision. We interviewed leaders who had been in post for a wide range of tenures – between one and 20 years – and they all concurred that, in challenging times, it is perhaps even more important to have clarity as to the type of university they serve than it is in more comfortable times.

"We had a discussion with everyone about what kind of university we are – it set the North Star for us."

"I go back all the time to strategy, vision and values."

A lot of the change taking place in higher education has been about reacting to increasing financial hardship, in most cases, caused by a mix of reduced international student numbers and increased costs across national insurance, utilities or pensions liabilities. And generally, there has been consistent underfunding of home undergraduate teaching for decades, its severity varying with administrations. It is well known that some institutions, particularly those who relied heavily on international student numbers, have lost as much as a third of their income in a relatively short period of time. However, once again, this process has affected different universities to very different extents.

Leaders feel that it is critical to act in response to these hardships within a clear strategic framework. It is not so much about making the medicine more palatable, although that might be a part of it; most significant is setting the context in which everything happens. It is not just about contracting to ensure sustainability, but also about setting the framework and principles within which all growth and development will happen.

"Crisis management is not the same as strategic leadership."

It is both a rallying call:

"If we simply carry on as we are, we will fail. Given we all care about the sort of university that we are, let's all come together and work to find a way forward."

And a guiding purpose:

"There'll be no growth for growth's sake. Everything we do needs to fit within our strategy, and be sustainable."

"We need to grow income, but it must be done through quality activities, and it must be aligned to our mission."

Some of the leaders we spoke to felt that their institutional strategies were easy to outline.

"We've always known what we are and what we are about."

Others felt that focusing the university back on its core and setting the path forward has been a larger piece of work. Understanding the sort of university yours is at heart is an important part of being successful; it can be very costly to try to become something different.

"We've always been practice-led, professionally oriented and the research we do is very applied. It's what makes us successful."

We also heard that, whilst part of achieving strategic clarity requires a university to be *"true to its DNA"*, and to understand what will help it be most successful, it is also important to establish guidelines that protect it from repeating past errors.

Credit: Zhang Sophie, Symphony

"Organisations can learn a lot from their mistakes, but these mistakes often keep repeating themselves."

Along with strategy, we heard that a framework of mission, values and behaviours is increasingly vital. It seems perhaps odd that, for a sector so historically cynical about culture-setting exercises and any seemingly "corporate" practices, these activities are becoming more important. They provide an essential framework for vice-chancellors to operate within, defining standards to which they can be held accountable, while providing a blueprint for establishing the expected tone and culture for the executive team. These clear expectations then percolate through the wider university.

"When I arrived, we didn't have a mission statement. Now we do and we know what our specialisation is."

"We did a lot of work on vision, strategy and values to set things out – we weren't going to compromise on quality, we were going to transform ourselves and society, and we were going to do things sustainably."

"I needed people to take ownership and accountability for the conduct of their part of the business."

The process of tone-setting is an ongoing discipline, and leaders find it helpful to refer consistently to the framework when undertaking their roles. It supports a mixture of drivers including curbing bad behaviours, getting the institution out of its comfort zone, and striving for excellence.

Many of those we interviewed felt that tone-setting was as much about inspiring a new sense of courage as it was about curbing negative behaviours. There is a real sense that, in these challenging times, universities must continually innovate and try out new things, and that they need to take risks. In the past, many universities have found it hard to try out new things, and there has been a real fear of failure.

"It's not about blame, it's about pulling people together. We need to look at lessons learned if there's an own goal."

"Although there's not a lot of wider freedom to do things now, there's a real fear of failure that we need to move on from."

Running the business

As well as the apparently enhanced importance of setting strategy and tone during times of change, leaders talked to us about the necessity of understanding the business elements of their universities. Many leaders' job titles now include CEO or Chief Executive, and this element is pivotal in a way that it might not have been in the past.

It is a motif that has become familiar over the years. One leader talked about being aware of various leadership and governance scandals that took place in the sector in the earlier part of their career and recognised that the question of whether people leading universities had enough business acumen to perform their roles was often asked. Has the business savvy of vice-chancellors developed to keep pace with the ways that universities are increasingly having to operate as businesses?

In our interviews with current leaders, it is hard to believe that this is a widespread issue in the sector now; vice-chancellors of today seem generally very attuned to the business elements of their institutions – and by "business", we particularly mean "finances".

"The reason I wanted to work in universities was the research; it didn't remotely occur to me that we should make money. Now I think about surplus all the time. I think about people's jobs."

Leaders at this level are no longer comfortable focusing on the academic aspects of the university without understanding the financial dimensions. And always lurking in the background is the memory of what happened in Dundee, and the rapidity with which an apparently positive financial position can deteriorate to near bankruptcy unless there is persistent attention to the finances.

"The University had lacked focus for a while, it had gone into a lot of areas of activity that weren't making us stronger and we needed to pull out of stuff that wasn't making profit."

"When I arrived, financial planning wasn't what I expected, and nor was student number processes."

Although it is perhaps less true for larger institutions than for smaller ones, all the leaders noted that, whilst needing to set strategy and tone, they also spend more of their time focused on operational activities than they had expected. They spent less time sitting on top and looking strategically across large enterprises than some might think, and more time down in the weeds.

"It's surprising the extent to which you get drawn into the need to count paper clips one day, then deal with a crisis, then work on strategy."

An element of surprise is commonly reported by people starting out in the top job in any sector. There are very often additional complexities or problems that they could not have seen from the outside. It seems impossible to do enough due diligence, and this is apparently true also in higher education. On one hand, it is possible that governing bodies and councils could do more to ensure that appointees see a fully unvarnished view of the university before they accept the role; on the other, it is simply the case that people discover things when they are in post and look under the bonnet. Sometimes these issues might have been unknown to the boards themselves.

"When I arrived, I was told there was a much bigger deficit than had been previously revealed."

"You never know how bad it actually is."

It is also important to note that this heightened emphasis on getting involved in the details of business delivery does not reduce the vice-chancellor's role in ensuring academic standards. Many felt that raising the sights of their university presented a particular challenge in their early years.

"I sat on every professorial and senior academic appointment for the first four years. I had to get the whole place more ambitious about who to shortlist and who to go for."

Credit: Jung Seo-Anna, Cool Boys

It's all about the team

University leaders spend a lot of their time developing their teams. It is not just about getting the right people in a general sense; it is also about recognising that what might be the right person for them personally might not be the best for the institution and its needs. Having the right bodies in place is important, but equally so – again – is the tone setting and behaviour modelling, and awareness of how this percolates throughout the university.

One common theme is the importance of building teams whose members work together effectively, rather than undertaking their roles as excellent individuals. Vitally, this is about ensuring that people locate their roles within the full breadth of the institution's needs and strategic direction.

"The objective of making sure that it's a shared problem, we need to sort this out together, the constant thing is getting people out of their siloes."

We heard that leaders feel very clearly that the effectiveness and integrity of their top teams is extremely visible to the wider institution. It takes a lot of shaping and modelling to manage multi-faceted change in institutional structures that have typically worked in very separate subject and service areas.

Many leaders come into their roles feeling that some degree of reshaping is needed in the top team. They would prefer to see if the existing team and structure can be supported to work as effectively as possible before making radical changes, rather than feeling, as was common in the past, that a clean sweep of the whole team is sensible. They often feel that the work of ensuring the right tone is as important as ensuring that the right people are in post.

"I had to do a lot of demonstrating and modelling the behaviours I would expect, and how I would hold myself to account as much as anyone else."

Vice-chancellors need to navigate the challenge of leading in a type of institution that is generally culturally ambivalent about authority. Universities can have a lot of self-styled rebels who spend a lot of time critiquing leadership and hierarchy, identifying very individually with their own research and disciplinary interests, and who are practised in challenging anything that happens centrally. On the other hand, universities can also operate in an extremely hierarchical fashion, particularly in the context of top teams. Whilst it may not be the case in every senior team in the country, the leaders we spoke to were determined to build teams that did not observe hierarchy very much; they wanted to be challenged and for people to bring different ideas and views.

"I wanted to open things out, bring in more voices. I wanted a situation where opinions could be voiced regardless of status. I wanted equality of opinion. I wanted diversity of thought and input."

"I had to build the team I trusted and then get them to challenge me, and I had to create a safe space for challenge, I had to retrain them; we needed more candour."

Leaders are increasingly conscious of the context-specific elements in building a team. They recognise that the situation is constantly in flux. The right shape, structure and composition for a university in one phase will not be the same in the next phase, and it is important to be aware of the need to adapt in these circumstances. External pressures require a different response, and the university will enjoy more success in certain areas than in others. The individuals themselves within the team will also develop in different ways, and be better at delivering on some aspects of their roles than others. Team leadership is always done in a context of maximising efficiency, but there is no such thing as perfection.

It was interesting to reflect with leaders on what they felt was the ideal size of top team. Some leaders expand their teams in pursuit of their university's development, and others reduce them. On the whole, there is, in the current context, a strong and unsurprising preference for top teams that are as lean as they can possibly be without compromising their ability to deliver. Some deliberately reduced structural layers to ensure they could feel more intimately connected with the institution: *"I restructured the team and reduced it so that I could be closer to people."* Restructuring at the top is not always just about saving money; it can also be about sending the right messages and being visible in challenging times. Getting more done with less is, of course, a pivotal theme.

"Gone are the days of well-padded senior teams."

There is a sense that the team building at vice-chancellor level is a skill that people get better at, but it does not always happen fast. However, getting better at it is critical to ensuring a good balance between being drawn into operational delivery and being able to operate at a more strategic level.

"I managed to build a sufficiently large and trusted team, and then I could move from management to leadership and then get the university more recognised."

The effect of wider change across the whole university is something that leaders are very conscious of, but again this has been – so far – very variable across the sector. Some universities have not been through large-scale restructure and seem to be managing to weather the current situation quite effectively, while others feel that they acted fast and reshaped themselves ahead of the sector. However, many have now been through repeated rounds of restructure and reshaping.

"Staff are fatigued with change; you restructure twice a year and can't see an end in sight."

Most vice-chancellors feel that they are adapting to the new environment, and some feel that they are now closer to having a place to grow from, while recognising that this growth will not be massive or rapid in the current climate. And there is obvious anxiety about the effect that more surprises or shocks could have on institutions.

Fronting things up

Vice-chancellors are spending a lot of time fronting things up in times of change, and getting these wider institutional communications right is critical. When we worked with WONKHE in 2019 on a report that looked at how vice-chancellors strike a tone of humanity in their role, there was a lot of discussion about authentic leadership.[ii] At the time, there was much public criticism about salaries and behaviours at vice-chancellor level, and universities seemed full of people who liked leaving anonymous comments on internet sites that pilloried their leaders. Some of the leaders we interviewed at the time found this very challenging.

Over the intervening years, as the sector has found itself facing new and different challenges, there seems to have been a definite shift of tone. Today, the idea of authentic leadership – of locating a real sense of oneself in the job – seems a little performative. The tone is much more about owning the message, but presenting it objectively and dispassionately –about character rather than personality. It is as if the emperor admits to being naked, but does it whilst recognising that no-one anywhere has a stitch to wear.

"Be open and transparent – we are going to have to adapt and change, we need you to own the change; there are going to be some really shitty points."

We were struck by the significance that leaders currently place on being willing to stand up and deliver messages and to answer questions. The importance of the open forum/"townhall" engagement is prominent, and they are very conscious that this is not the time to hide in their offices.

"I've doubled down on face-to-face engagement, staff fora and surgeries. I've walked through the process with the University."

"You have to be open, with no secrets – anyone can ask me any question."

Credit: Cooper James

"You have to stand up, take the flak and be honest. Everyone wants certainty, but we're in a time of ambiguity."

The element of balance here is critical. Many echoed John Raftery's reflections on the way he used clear and open communication during his time leading London Metropolitan University between 2014 and 2018, at a time of significant challenge; they provided stark reminders that fundamental survival of the institution was at risk.[iii]

"Don't lose the power of a burning platform – 'if we carry on as we are we will fail' is a powerful rallying call."

But leaders also feel that they need to offer more, and this is where clarity of strategy and vision – the framework of what they are fighting for – is important. Those we interviewed were very aware of the need to offer positivity.

"In my efforts to be open and transparent, after six months I realised I needed to balance doom and gloom versus hope, confidence and the sense of possibility. I needed to start telling the positive story, I needed to congratulate people."

"Every day, there are incredible things happening here."

"We need to maintain the energy and excitement and sense of opportunity, we need to try to accentuate the positive but be realistic about what can be done – optimism is a strategy."

[ii] Debbie McVitty and Ben Tucker, I, Vice-Chancellor, Minerva / WONKHE publication, November 2019
[iii] John Raftery, A University Turnaround: Adaptive Leadership at London Metropolitan University 2014–2018, HEPI Policy Note number 9, October 2018

Credit: Rogan-Sofer Diane, Heterotopia 3

Encouraging performance

Universities have a complicated relationship with the idea of performance. There has always been a strong current of belief in many academic communities that the wider purpose of research, teaching and contributing to society is not one that lends itself well to performance management. And historically, when universities have introduced new approaches to performance, it has tended to be in the context of professional services staff first. This is often also the case with many restructuring and cost-saving exercises.

Yet, all the vice-chancellors we spoke to recognise the challenge of performance across their institutions. It is something they see close up when managing and developing their direct teams, but it is also something that concerns them in the wider university context. The pressure of tightened finances means that performance inevitably becomes a focus. Everyone everywhere is looking at doing more with less.

For leaders, a key part of this is about clarity in setting expectations and understanding of what they are looking for.

"Have a straight conversation, treat people like adults."

This is a time where – depending upon the size of the institution – more on-the-ground visits to schools and departments, and more open discussions seem to be taking place. Some of those we interviewed were particularly keen to make sure that these discussions happen in an open way: facilitating open discussions about how the challenges can be met together rather than punishing bad performance.

"I spoke to all heads of school – it was a really open conversation, supportive scenarios, not the Spanish inquisition."

Many leaders – like a lot of change initiatives – are trying to shift the people in the middle modestly towards the direction of travel. Not much can be done about those who are decidedly against change, nor much needed for those who are already on board. But setting a positive, progressive tone around the direction of travel (back to the North Star) and spotting individuals from around the university who can play a role in championing the change is key.

"Find the people who will take the opportunities and grasp them, supporting people in talent management, being clear about expectations."

"I will be as open and as transparent as I possibly can, straight talking, honest and direct."

Many vice-chancellors are conscious that it is not always easy to combine pressures to improve performance with the institution's human capacity.

"We need to build the capacity but don't want people to burn out. We all need to up the game, but some individuals can't do more."

Credit: Jung Seo Anna, At Good Intent

Governance

There is widespread recognition that governance in the sector has seen significant change. This is not the place for a full discussion on the topic but the changing nature of it means that it is central to vice-chancellors' lives. This has probably increasingly been the case over the past decades, but the recent events at University of Dundee (*"After Dundee, boards are sharpening their pencils"*) and, in England, recent and alarming missives about institutional sustainability have heightened the focus.

"Governance has changed a lot. Board members can no longer turn up, eat sandwiches and go to a graduation. The time commitment has increased, the regulatory burden has exploded and the risk of something going very wrong is very different."

Not surprisingly, in this context, vice-chancellors see the need to invest a lot in board relationships. Obviously, the direct relationship with the Chair is critical, and leaders are in regular contact, often more than once per week with their Chairs: *"I get a lot of airtime with the Chair."*

"You have to have a great relationship with the Chair – whether you like them or not. You have to have open conversations."

But generally leaders perceive the need to ensure that relationships are built effectively across the board, involving a serious investment of energy and time: *"I spend 10–15% of each week on the board."*

"Make sure you have good relationships with the board, it will determine your effectiveness."

"You need to build a very strong level of trust."

There is a sense that the increasing business dimension of a vice-chancellor's life is paralleled by an increasing need for business-like governance.

Leaders feel the need to build absolutely transparent working relationships with their boards, and to make sure that their executive teams are committed to the same.

"I hear, 'We're going to have to manage the board,' and I say, 'Hang on, there'll be no management of the board, we'll be open with them completely.'"

The trickiest point in developing good relationships with a board might be early in tenure when someone has come into the role and discovered that there are more issues in their institution than the board might have been aware of. The shock of arrival needs to be dealt with carefully, given that boards themselves will have been around when the problems developed. It is important to find a positive tone for fixing things and keep people focused on moving forwards: *"You can't rubbish what went on before."*

There is, of course, a formal set of rules and guidelines that structure governance relationships, and in a healthy situation these also sit in balance alongside a set of much more informal interactions, where there can be open and honest conversations: *"We're not joined at the hip, but we are collegial."*

Many vice-chancellors talked of the huge benefits they derive from being able to rely on their board members for advice and guidance. Opportunities to talk outside of minuted meetings is critical.

"You need to invest a lot of time – a lot of subsidiary meetings, no nasty surprises."

"There is a Chairs group [Chair and Chairs of sub-committees] that I can bounce ideas off; I give them ideas of what is coming, it's completely informal."

Vice-chancellors are also aware that, across the sector, governance is potentially heating up during these challenging times. They recognise that it takes time, openness and discipline to keep things on track. There should be no secrets and no surprises.

Keeping discussions realistic can be challenging. The model of governance in higher education is one where boards are made up largely of lay members who are at some distance from the lived realities of the institution. Ensuring that boards govern in the realm of what is possible is important.

"What are the conditions we're willing to tolerate for success – extreme workloads for a reduced workforce?"

"Stop asking for the moon when you know we can't deliver it."

From time to time, relationships will be challenged. In the current climate, many operational elements are difficult to control, and it will be necessary to take some difficult messages to boards. And – for a whole variety of reasons – board cultures themselves are not always perfect. Most vice-chancellors will, at some point in their tenures, have some difficult things to navigate at this level. Working out who on the board it is best to raise things with can be important.

"There were things wrong that I wasn't prepared for; I needed to talk to the right people about it very quietly and confidently."

A number of our interviewees felt that so much relied on their relationships with the Chair that they deemed it important to have in place a senior independent director figure or equivalent. This did not necessarily need to be a formal designation, but it was very helpful to have a wise figure in place who could reflect on relationships and who would have the social capital in the board setting to head things off at the pass.

"Thank goodness we put it in place – you need to be able to talk to someone else."

"If you don't have it in place, you won't know you need it until it's too late."

The need for no surprises is leading some institutions to think about how they can maximise the quality and quantity of information available to their boards. One university we talked to has created an app that provides more or less daily updated information on the key metrics of the institution – finances, student recruitment and numbers – to board members. The data is primarily used for executive purposes, but provides a practical way of creating a spirit of complete openness.

Credit: Rogan-Sofer Diane, Wild Space 3

Iterative styles of leadership

The ability to learn different styles of leadership, and to make good judgements about which ones to employ in which situations, appears critical. There is no perfect approach for all situations: *"I have an iterative leadership style."*

Generally speaking, vice-chancellors are committed to collective decision making and to finding solutions through their teams. For obvious reasons finding ways forward that are supported by the institution is what they strive for.

"I try to do things consensually, it's a model of co-curation."

They also note that this does not always work perfectly, or fast enough, and that sometimes there is a need to step into faster, more singular decision making.

"Tough decisions will need to be made."

The memory of Covid, during which time it became acceptable to make quick, top-down decisions in leadership, is clearly in mind. No-one wants the sense of emergency of that situation again, but the leaders we spoke to recognised that they needed to be quite single-minded: *"At times I need to be really quite directive."*

They are less attracted to practising heroic leadership than ever before, but recognise that the approach must be context-specific, and that sometimes it can be necessary to take a more directional stance.

The vice-chancellors spoke about the resilience needed in these more difficult times. They recognise that ensuring the survival of their universities cannot be a popularity contest – *"You can't please all of the people all of the time"* – and that their roles naturally attract criticism. Many address this through their efforts to ensure an openness of tone in institutional communications, but most accepted that, whilst there is a need to be open to new ideas and contributions, it is important to shut out blatant negativity.

"Stick to the original purpose, don't get distracted, get on with it."

"Shut the noise out and get on with doing the job."

No-one we spoke to pretended to have all the answers in the current context; their practice of leadership seemed grounded in the responsibility to make the best possible decisions with the information available to them, ideally in partnership with their teams and boards.

"You need to do the best you can with the available information; you have to be willing to admit where things have gone wrong and learn lessons."

"I try to do the right thing for the University; you have to believe that you're doing the right thing."

Credit: 2014 Yafo

What's next?

The vice-chancellors we interviewed expressed incredibly mixed views of the prospects for the future. A number were determined to keep a long-term view, recognising:

"Apart from the church, universities are the longest-standing institutions that we have. It tells you that we have been capable of evolution. But we don't do it in response to fashion, we do it thoughtfully."

All were strongly committed to making changes and developments thoughtfully. Throwing everything in the air and doing everything differently is not a practical solution; it is about being even better at the core of what they do. Even despite the restrictions of the times, planning and delivery of change needs to be future-focused.

"We have so few levers to pull, but need to do a lot of prioritisation, and deciding what to do less of in many cases."

At the heart of this, there is a recognised need to double-down on the role that universities seek to play in society, and the tone that they take. On one hand this is about delivering outputs more visibly to the outside world than delivering implicit information through impact statements and regulatory indices; it is important to work with society and businesses differently.

"We're not just a big school of content, we're also engines of economic growth for development and we need to be more strategic."

On the other hand, there is an impetus to refresh the humanity and directness of the conversation between universities and the wider public.

"We've been prone to navel gazing and introspection. We struggle to talk human, and we need to be better at communicating what we do in a way that is relevant."

One challenge – for example in the wake of events in Dundee – is that a lot of the media airtime over the past few years has been preoccupied with negativity and scandal in the sector, with much less focus on the positives.

"Everyone's fixated on the big stories, no-ones talking to the people just getting on with it, who are improving and fixing their universities."

A lot of the product/programme-based developments that vice-chancellors expect to see in their universities over coming years are well-known trends. AI is, of course, a big theme in the sector, with most leaders viewing it as a big challenge, while recognising that the specific degree and nature of the challenge is not fully known. Some felt that they are increasingly managing to monitor, build in, and adapt. In some cases, there was a degree of scepticism about whether AI would make as radical a difference as the current frenzy on the topic might suggest. Could this be another area where universities prove that a conservative, thoughtful approach to change is better than rushing in and making radical changes?

In terms of delivery, many see that block teaching – increasingly widely practised in the sector – provides a genuine opportunity to ensure that higher education is accessible to people who are in employment. There was more scepticism around how some of the elements of the current post-16 education and skills White Paper (published December 2025) will actually work, particularly around modularisation and portability, and the life-long learning entitlement proposals. A little bit like the enthusiasm for two-year degrees some time ago, there seems to be little empirical evidence to show that these proposals are really attractive to potential students.

It might be that there is greater difference in how programmes are developed and designed – perhaps with more involvement from external, advisory or industrial voices – than in the actual shape or mode of delivery. And the need to scale back, expand or develop programmes in an increasingly nimble way is key to ensuring sustainability.

Not surprisingly, there is a consistent view that a shift in balance towards trans-national education and away from visa-based in-person international students will continue. Many leaders we spoke to were very hesitant about the development of overseas campuses and were watching closely to see how the current spate of investments – in India in particular – will play out.

The implications of increasingly limited funding for research are obvious. The wider prioritisation of STEMM disciplines over other areas continues, as do the problems around adequately attracting funding for the sort of interdisciplinary work that is encouraged at policy level, when so much systemically relies on locating an academic's personal distinction and profile within their own subject and even sub-discipline.

Perhaps the biggest effect that the next few years will have on research might be less visible to the naked eye. A gradual, incremental salami-slicing of research capabilities across the country, centre by centre and academic by academic, could have huge implications for the overall strength and depth of the country's research machinery.

"Research is becoming so costly – a lot of research will go to the wall, and it might not be seen – it's not a priority. The lights will go out one by one."

There was a lot of discussion about structural change, particularly in the context of the recent merger announcement from Greenwich/Kent. To this has been added more recently Kings/Cranfield, and a recent UUK report suggests that 40 per cent of Vice-Chancellors are now considering merger. And the increasing policy-level interest in developing a combined tertiary system that connects further education and higher education more closely, as is being actively explored in Wales at the moment. Generally, there seems to be a degree of scepticism about mergers. They are widely recognised as being more expensive and more complex to deliver than any business case will suggest.

Credit: Chappalley Diane, Three

"They're much more difficult than people they think they are, and what problem is it that they're trying to solve?"

Of course, if the context is one of a merger in which at least one of the parties has tipped into a serious level of financial unsustainability, the reason for the merger becomes clearer. However, there is a sense within the sector that a merger is the last option taken when a board and their executive have run out of road.

It was noted that if mergers are to become more common in the sector, it would be better for them to happen when there are still resources available to invest in combining institutions.

"If you're going to do it, do it before it's too late."

"Ideally we should act in the good times, when we're still comfortable."

The leaders we spoke to expressed a definite expectation of and interest in exploring other forms of collaborative activity – joint-ventures with other institutions, further education and, businesses, and shared service models being two examples – and recognised that the sector has examples both good and bad ways of doing shared services; UMIST and Victoria University of Manchester had a lot of shared services leading up to their merger, now nearly 25 years ago.

A fundamental hesitancy to rush into discussions about mergers seems well-founded; questions must be asked about risk and benefit. Leaders recognise that their institutions are complex entities, with distinct histories and values, rooted in their regions and local economies. When other initiatives might make more sense, the destabilising process and potential costs of engaging in a merger would need to be balanced by a clear upside to justify the investment of senior leadership's time and resources. And in spite of extreme funding pressures, we do still have a sector comprising institutions that have strength in their distinctiveness, and there is a reluctance to meddle with this.

"We over-problematise the differences between us, when we should be celebrating and stewarding the diversity of the sector."

Across the UK there are now four different regulatory regimes with different tenors and approaches. While not absolutely a consistent picture, many leaders are genuinely concerned about the performance of their regulators. In one regime, there is a clear frustration with an operating environment where it has become acceptable for the regulator to routinely send *"the wrong letters at the wrong time to the wrong people,"* although one would expect that if there are enough wrongs in here, they might start getting more things right. Many leaders had examples of situations where

Credit: Clarence Michael, The Red Room

their institutions had loyally followed the guidelines of the regulator in a particular initiative, right up to the point where the matter should have been cleared or endorsed, only to encounter a last minute, arbitrary change of rules.

"The system is ridiculous and broken, I can't get consistent information – this is chaotic."

And it is also clear that regulatory approaches do not seem to be doing a good job of sponsoring a sector where diversity is a strength; instead, there seems to be a determination to simplify and focus on one-size-fits-all approaches. Supporting genuine space for innovation should be a much higher priority.

"The message is: 'You're all autonomous, but you can't do anything.'"

The relationship with wider government of course overlaps with regulation, but is not the same. Leaders have learned to have very sombre expectations of where higher education fits in government policy, and it is widely noted that the white paper feels more like *"an FE paper, with an HE annex"*. Some leaders noted the wider long-term risk of this.

"Do politicians recognise the nature and depth of the crisis for the sector? We run a real risk in putting a whole generation off higher learning, with dire consequences for economy and social fabric."

And this is to say nothing of the fundamental, UK-wide problems with shortfalls in undergraduate funding, or the worrying question as to how things might develop under a potential Reform government…

We can expect that our universities will become increasingly business-like over the next decade. How each individual institution will determine and protect its culture in this context will be the key question.

One issue that has lurked for a long time in the too-difficult category is that of performance management and contracts. Leaders who have spent times in other national systems – particularly in the USA – commented that we still have, in many parts of the sector, quite light-touch expectations of how contracts are applied, and how performance is assessed.

"I grew up in a system where I was regularly sent a dashboard that told me how I was doing along a wide set of metrics. And if you didn't cut it, you were out."

"We're hamstrung because our contracts are 30 years old and we're stifled by pensions – the business model can't survive as it is."

One predicted a model – already visible in many parts of the sector – of the broadening of academic roles. Research and teaching are still the core components, but much more participation in and responsibility for organisational tasks is expected. Increased involvement in, for example, recruitment, will become a requirement of the role, not a mark of good citizenship.

There is also a growing sense that the sector is working with academic contracts that are no longer fit for purpose. There is a deep commitment to trust and good faith behind this, and a recognition that the ideal would be to find a future in which academic communities have a balance of activities that is attractive to them. Moving to a more transactional and technocratic approach to contracts will be culturally challenging, but avoiding it forever might be a luxury that the sector cannot afford.

Whatever changes take place in the sector over the coming years, leaders are deeply invested in their universities remaining places of cultural positivity, inclusion and support.

"We have to work out what to keep – we have to offer people a brilliant environment in which to thrive."

And whatever changes are embraced, they will be focused on the heart of what matters in universities; achieving sustainability of finances is not the only goal.

"Everyday amazing things are happening here, and this is what we need to protect."

Credit: Mulford Ines, Surgical Still Life

Multiple games of chess

Coping with the role day-to-day is something that vice-chancellors are very mindful of. The current operational context is stressful, and leaders develop different mechanisms and approaches for coping.

"The cognitive load of playing so many different chess games at the same time is stressful."

They recognise that, in the current context, it is impossible to keep everyone happy. Their professional lives might involve choosing the best option from a set of unattractive alternatives, and having to take tough decisions in the interests of institutional sustainability.

"So much of the time, you're damned if you do, and damned if you don't."

The volume of the role is something that they are very aware of – and several confessed to never having had good work-life balance, despite feeling that a key part of their role is promote balance and well-being in their institutions.

One critical discipline appears to be prioritisation. It is very easy to get drawn into everything and confuse an overloaded diary with an effective diary. Many vice-chancellors cite the discovery of the limitations of their own personal resources and ability to be everywhere all at once as an important moment in their tenure. Working out their key priorities rather than trying to do everything is crucial to success.

"Have a clear sense of what your priorities are for the next six months, and make sure that your meetings and time align with these."

The importance of delegating to a strong team and ensuring that there is time to focus on the strategic matters is critical. One talked about being encouraged by their mentor – a former vice-chancellor – to ensure that they have a day a week clear of meetings so that they can focus energy on the most important activities. It can feel uncomfortable for some, who worry that, in difficult times, they should fill every possible moment to demonstrate activity in their roles.

"You need to make sure you have enough time out of the grind to do the strategic thinking."

Some talked about the consuming nature of the roles in terms of their overall lives – *"I'm very invested in the work, I don't have a huge amount outside of it"* – but most talked of the importance of shoring up a proper hinterland outside of work, and outside of their identities as vice-chancellors.

"You need a support structure – family or partner – to keep you grounded and remind you that you are still the same person."

"I find it really important to get out of the bubble and into a different world."

Credit: Murgatroyd Conor, Modern German Art 1938, An Egg And A Dart Cabinet

Developing and appointing leaders

Reflecting on the discussions we had with university leaders, things were emphasised that might be important considerations, both for those whose careers are progressing towards roles at these levels, and for those who are seeking to appoint vice-chancellors.

One whom we interviewed, who has been an external adviser on the appointment processes of several institutional heads, expressed concern about the conservatism they had witnessed.

"A lot of universities seem to be becoming very conservative, almost as if the only qualification for doing the job should be to have done it elsewhere."

Indeed, there is a common strand of feedback to candidates who put themselves forward for these roles that, unless they are already deputies or existing vice-chancellors, they have no real credible chance of making the shortlist. For example, the sort of progression that the late Sir Eric Thomas experienced, moving from being Dean at Southampton to Vice-Chancellor at Bristol, is unlikely to happen in these times, even though he was, by many accounts, very successful in the role. It is possible that much more could be being done to ensure that the qualities and capabilities of individual candidates are taken into account, as opposed to merely concentrating on their role titles or scale of responsibilities as outlined in a CV. At a time of change, it can be tempting to think in a more limited and less adventurous way, even though the wider context might ask for a more innovative and reflective approach. And there are always caveats: the safe-pair-of-hands long-standing deputy or even existing vice-chancellor might not be as safe as they seem on paper, if they have served for so long in senior roles that they might have become institutionalised in their expectations and approach. Real people are appointed to these roles, and the title of the current position that they hold is only one facet – albeit a very significant one – of their candidacy.

Some characteristics that seem particularly important in this current moment are:

- A solid grasp of the **business** dimensions of running a university. Working well with a chief financial officer and having a strong grasp of the finances is essential. Anyone who is progressing towards leadership roles in the sector needs to master an understanding of the numbers, and this should also apply to key systems and processes around planning and, for example, student numbers.

- Embracing **diversification**. We are seeing a movement away from the idea that we are a singular higher-education sector, and this direction may seem inevitable. There is increased recognition that universities perform differently nuanced roles: some are more research intensive than others, while some are more focused on providing skills-based learning than others. Specialism may increasingly become a virtue, with only a relatively small proportion of institutions continuing to be as broadly based as they currently are. In particular, for those who are selecting vice-chancellors, it is important to understand if your candidate will work effectively with the sort of university that yours is; it might not be best simply to fixate on the candidate in your list that currently works for the highest-ranked institution if, once in post, they find themselves at sea in terms of really understanding the university's raison-d'être.

- **Governance** is critical. One of the biggest shocks for people arriving in vice-chancellor roles can be becoming the singular focus of so much governance attention. Several of the vice-chancellors we spoke to said that sitting on boards at earlier points of their careers had been invaluable in helping them prepare for this; they knew what to expect, how to build relationships and how to conduct themselves. Those who are building their careers in the sector should seek opportunities to do this.

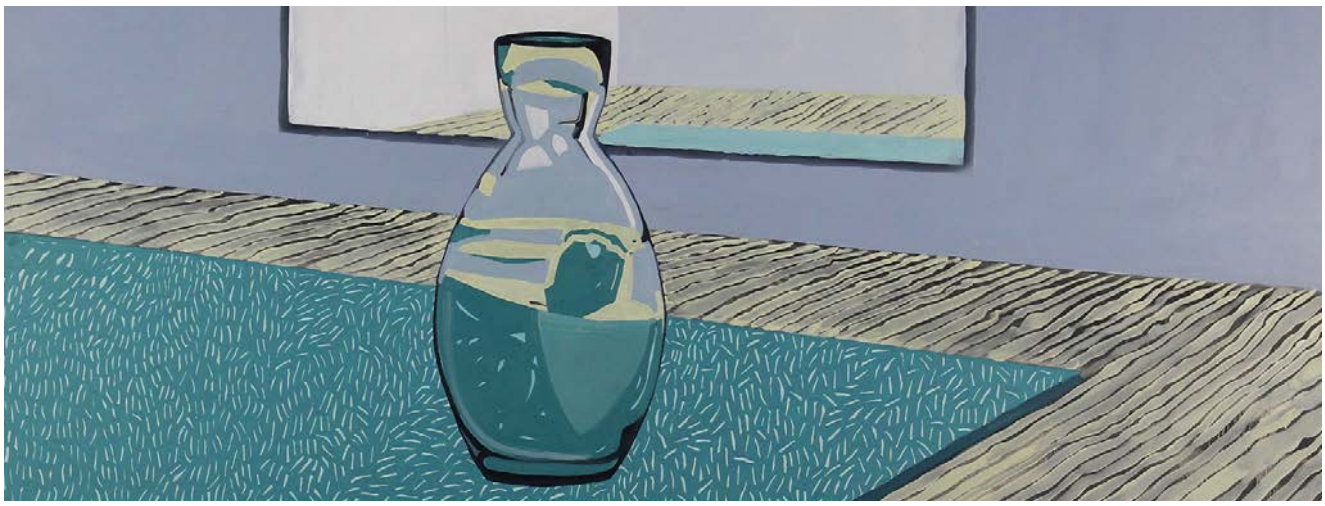
  "You learn from all of those environments and bring stuff back into the university."

  And for those who are sitting on boards, we sense that a lot more could be done to reflect on tone and culture, ensuring a collaborative approach and creating conditions for success. The juncture of seeking to appoint a new institutional head is the perfect time to question working assumptions, habits and practices. You can never practise too much self-scrutiny.

  "Boards tend to shy away from thinking about culture: 'How are we working together and being open and trusting.'"

- **Broaden perspective.** Several of the vice-chancellors we talked to recognised that the developmental activities they had undertaken outside of the sector – at high-ranking business schools for example, or even through working in different sectors at different times in their careers – had been more significant than those they had experienced within it. The opportunity to learn from other business models and people leading in other sectors, and to explore similarities and differences, can be invaluable. In a world where universities are exploring new options and approaches, it is more important than ever to have conversations and learn from examples outside of the sectoral bubble. And any widening of understanding beyond higher education is good preparation for the role.

  "Vice-Chancellors need to understand business, people, politics and positioning."



Credit: Lock Kristofer, Synthesiser

- Recognise **humility** as a leadership quality. The brief, speed-dating nature of senior appointment processes in UK higher education does not always give boards and their candidates a huge amount of time to get to know each other. There is still a risk that those who are choosing are overly swayed by candidates who present confidence and swagger. Such candidates might oversimplify or make borderline preposterously bold statements, which can be confused for strategic clarity. Worse still, they might be narcissists. Do not be drawn in, and give time and space to the candidates who seem more measured, more grounded and who recognise the complexity of the situation. There are no simple answers for the sector at the moment, and the best leaders are sober, reflective and self-questioning. Of course, anyone should be able to inspire and motivate at this level, but this can involve many different approaches and styles.

- Work on **resilience and character**. Many of those we interviewed recognised that the one critical element in getting better in their roles was the development of emotional intelligence, and becoming increasingly reflective on how they understood and worked with the people around them. You can be as rational and evidence led as you want, but this will only get you so far if you can't build great working relationships.

  "It's the emotional landscape created by the change which is key. There's a lot more mental distress across senior teams and in the body of both staff and students. More than ever, university leaders need to have well developed emotional intelligence and resilience."

  Coupled with the challenging nature of the roles, many leaders make a lot of use of coaching throughout their senior careers to ensure that they have space to work on continued personal and professional development, and to help them cope with the roles more broadly.

  "It can be lonely – who do you talk to if you're struggling? I've been lucky to work with some brilliant coaches."

- Practice **optimism**. Despite the difficulties of the times, universities are still transforming lives and wider society on a daily basis. In the wake of so much media negativity, it is important to remember the core purpose of the sector, and the incredible benefits that universities bring. Whilst it seems obvious, there can be no doubt that, however much the sector might explore different models or become more business-like over the next years, mission and purpose must be central.

  "I can't think of anyone working at this level who isn't trying to do a fantastic job. I think we fundamentally believe in the power of HE to make a difference. The next generation needs to be better than us, they need to be better equipped."

About the Author

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Ben Tucker is a founding partner at Minerva. He supports universities in appointing to leadership and governance roles, and provides other services such as 360s and governance effectiveness reviews.

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Credit: Valengin Margaux, Growing Out