Issues and Challenges in Higher Education Leadership: Engaging for Change

Glenys Drew
Queensland University of Technology

Abstract

It is proposed from this study that engaging productively with others to achieve change has never been more critical in educational environments, such as universities. Via semi-structured interviews with a cohort of senior leaders from one Australian university, this paper explores their perceptions of the key issues and challenges facing them in their work. The study found that the most significant challenges centred around the need for strategic leadership, flexibility, creativity and change-capability; responding to competing tensions and remaining relevant; maintaining academic quality; and managing fiscal and people resources. Sound interpersonal engagement, particularly in terms of change leadership capability, was found to be critical to meeting the key challenges identified by most participants. In light of the findings from the sample studied some tentative implications for leadership and leadership development in university environments are proposed, along with suggestions for further empirical exploration.

Introduction

The increased complexity of the leadership role in the higher education environment has gained attention as a subject for study over the past ten years (Coaldrake & Stedman, 1998, 1999; Cohen, 2004; Knight & Trowler, 2001; Mead, Morgan & Heath, 1999; Ramsden, 1998). The list of challenges grows longer as university core business increases in complexity (Barnett, 2004; Drew, 2006; Hanna, 2003; Marshall, Adams, Cameron, & Sullivan, 2000; Marshall, 2007; Middlehurst, 2007; Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008; Snyder, Marginson & Lewis, 2007). This paper discusses some of the points of tension for academic and administrative staff pertaining to leadership in higher education. It reports the results of a qualitative research study undertaken to identify what a sample of emergent and new senior leaders in one Australian university considered to be the major challenges for universities, and hence for

leaders in universities, over the next five years. The findings suggest implicitly and explicitly the centrality of sound engagement capabilities in meeting the challenges identified. The paper commences with a review of literature relating to perceived challenges in university leadership.

Major challenges

Researchers and workers in the field have explored a canvass of intersecting and potentially competing challenges impacting on academic staff and academic administrators. A number of these challenges relate to engagement of different kinds. For example, some commentators cite the changed and differentiated ways in which students engage with the university (Cooper, 2002; Longden, 2006; Snyder et al., 2007; Szekeres, 2006). Szekeres (2006), Whitchurch (2006) and others consider the effects of change relating to administration and general staff experiences in universities. Offering a quality higher education experience fit for the needs of both the individual student and society (Longden, 2006) might be accepted broadly as a concerted goal of university educators. However, reality may see academic leaders charting a course between different, even opposing, paradigms such as "student as scholar" focusing on fostering enquiry, scholarship and life-long learning, and "student as consumer" where students seek a relatively expedient, efficient, vocationally oriented educational experience. Snyder et al. (2007) and Giroux (2005) note the oppositional yet intersecting forces of mass education and of sound pedagogical principles in higher education, with the student as collaborator and critical reflector on the one hand, and, primarily, proactive consumer, on the other.

Other commentators point to the challenge for academics to partner with cognate disciplines, industry, commerce and government, creating linkages in order to compete for industry-based funding and undertake research and development (Stiles, 2004; Whitchurch, 2006). Here, the notion of academic as independent thinker and researcher vies with the more pragmatic orientation of what Whitchurch (2006, p. 167) terms the "business enterprise project". An enterprise or business manager may preside over a "communication web of [parties such as] directors of research, academic staff, and external partners", requiring an ability to "synthesise academic and business agendas" (Whitchurch, 2006, p. 167). Stiles (2004) sees the most effective leaders in education leadership as those who repudiate boundaries to engage in innovative solutions. The recent study of themes and issues identified from academic leaders surveyed in Australian universities confirmed that relationship-building qualities of engagement are most potent in leadership roles (Scott et al., 2008).

Further writers suggest that partnering around a common sense of vision is vital in the increasingly complex environment of academic leadership (Hanna, 2003; Yielder & Codling, 2004). However, in an environment of potentially differentiated agenda,

background, skill and knowledge bases it is not an easy matter to foster the quality of strategic engagement that can build unity of purpose. Yet it is effort worth taking. Indeed, Snyder et al. (2007) state that complexity in the interplay of different approaches, paradigms and overlapping influences in education leadership are as interesting as the identification of the multiple paradigms themselves.

Over the past decade tensions have arisen between delivering on sound principles of pedagogy and research *and* the necessity to create efficiencies in a global environment of mass education (Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999; Meek & Wood, 1997; Pratt & Poole, 1999; Ramsden, 1998; Szekeres, 2006). Studies in the United Kingdom have shown that downward pressure resultant from efficiency gains "applied year on year by government" (Longden, 2006, p. 179) has resulted in higher education providers "opting for either larger classes or reduced contact time, or a combination of both" (Longden, 2006, p. 179). While the global higher education environment suffers from "resource reduction, increased stress and increased expectations" (Szekeres, 2006, p 141), collaborative engagement with industry is increasingly vital in securing research funds and in enacting research (Coaldrake & Stedman, 1998; Drew, 2006). We see pockets of educational leaders sharing resources, ideas and practices to find more effective, streamlined ways of supporting learning, simply because so many of the challenges are the same.

The need to navigate change and adapt is widespread. Barnett (2004), Hanna (2003) and others point to the challenge of leading within uncertainty in the higher education environment, which involves the courage to take action when the longer-term way ahead is unclear. Not surprisingly, it has been suggested that a capacity to support and develop leaders capable of handling complexity, engaging people in vision, partnering effectively and leading through change is "not a luxury but a strategic necessity" for today's universities (Fulmer, Gibbs, & Goldsmith, 2000, p. 59). Of change leadership, Kotter (2007) sees the ability to guide change as the ultimate test of a leader.

The theoretical framework for the study follows the ideas of John Adair and his Action-Centred Leadership Model discussed by Middlehurst (2007) and outlined in Adair's book, *Training for Leadership* (1968). Middlehurst argues that John Adair's model, with its interlinked foci on achieving the task, building and maintaining the team and developing the individual are key dimensions of leadership applicable to the university environment. Indeed, Middlehurst credits Adair's ideas in relation to this model and Adair's subsequent work as ultimately spawning the formation of the United Kingdom Leadership Foundation. The key feature of the model and its application is its emphasis on the personal, human dimension, in each of the three foci. Middlehurst (2007) strongly argues the importance of taking account of this

dimension in exploring all of the challenges of practice and development in the university leadership setting. Hence, the model, although dated, is a useful reference point for the study. Precisely, this personal, human dimension was found to be an important consideration in exploring key issues and challenges in the empirical study.

The brief scan of education leadership issues confirmed the researcher's interest to conduct a qualitative study to discover what a group of new leaders (having held their roles for one to four years) in one Australian university saw as the key challenges that they faced over the next five years in their roles. The study sought to discover the drivers and influences bearing upon the university leadership role which would appear to have challenging implications for leadership practice and development. For this purpose, in this study, a sample group of university academic and administrative leaders were interviewed.

Methodology

The focus of this study was an investigation of a cohort of mid to senior level university leaders' perceptions on what they saw as the main challenges over the next five years for the Australian tertiary sector and, hence, for themselves as individual leaders. Semi-structured interviews were held with eighteen participants, all of whom were part of a "by invitation" accelerated succession leadership program at an Australian university. The university had acknowledged the need for leadership succession planning in recognition of age-related attrition anticipated globally over the ensuing five years (Jacobzone, Cambois, Chaplain, & Robine, 1998; Yielder & Codling, 2004).

Senior and near senior academic and administrative staff completed the development program over three years – one cohort per year – totalling forty-five staff in all. The program comprised eight half-day sessions over a period of one year. At the end of the third year, participants were asked if they would be interested in participating in the interviews. The offer of invitation to participate in the study was made to all forty-five participants of the succession leadership program cohorts at the same time on the conclusion of the third year/cohort of the program. A total of eighteen, eleven females and seven males, participated in the interviews. Ten of those participants held academic supervisory roles and eight held administrative supervisory roles. This breakdown was typical of the gender and role type breakdown for the forty-five participants who undertook the succession leadership program over the three cohorts. In signing off on nominations, the Vice-Chancellor had paid attention to achieving reasonable balance across gender and role type dimensions, for example, overall. Reasonable balance was achieved, with, overall, marginally more women than men, and marginally more academic than administrative staff, taking part in the program over the three cohorts. The types of roles occupied by the eighteen

participants, listed in terms of multiple to single representation in role type, were: heads of school; associate professors; faculty administration managers; information technology project managers; faculty postgraduate studies co-ordinator/ academic; undergraduate studies co-ordinator/academic; senior supervisor (administrative) in information technology, senior supervisor (administrative) in the office of research, head of research institute/professor; and an information technology research professor. Typically, participants had held their roles for between one and four years.

Hour-long semi-structured interviews with each participant were held to gather data. The following open question posed at the interview was provided to participants approximately one week before the interview. "What do you see as the most significant challenges for university leaders over the next five years?" The interviews were held as conversations with little structure other than to encourage interviewees to provide their views frankly. Qualitative in-depth interviewing based on sound ontological and epistemological principles, and tied to a specific research question (Mason, 2002) characterised the investigation. This methodology, where interview conversations with participants are held in an environment where participants feel comfortable to provide their views, is described by Silverman (2000) as the "gold standard" methodology in qualitative research.

A laptop computer was used by the researcher to record participants' responses. These responses were confirmed with participants individually after the interviews. Data analysis took the form of constant comparative analysis (Cavana, Delahaye, & Sekaran, 2001) whereby themes were identified and coded as they surfaced. As new themes emerged, these were compared with the previous ones and were regrouped with similar themes. If a new meaning unit emerged, a new theme was formed (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The thematic analysis also noted any differences observed between the comments of academic and administrative participants, respectively. While the study was set in Australia it is anticipated that the findings may have implications for other university settings given some similarities in the higher education environment globally.

Findings and Discussion

The most significant challenges with major implications for contemporary university leaders, in the view of the group, clustered around the following five themes:

- Fiscal and people resources.
- Flexibility, creativity and change-capability.
- Responding to competing tensions and remaining relevant.

- Maintaining academic quality.
- Effective strategic leadership.

While "maintaining academic quality" was identified mainly by academic staff, the remaining four themes reflected the ideas of both administrative and academic staff. The discussion that follows considers these themes, reflecting the most frequently cited key challenges. Following that discussion, note is taken of participants' views which may be said to have disagreed with the majority view; in other words, who cited as their key challenge an item which was not cited by other participants, or by one other participant only.

Fiscal and people resource issues

Competing for resources, the amount of time taken to gain funds, dealing with paperwork and compliance issues, and concerns at recruiting and retaining quality staff were cited as key challenges by academic staff in particular. This is not surprising given reported reduced government funding and increased monitoring accountabilities experienced by universities in recent decades (Cohen, 2004; Knight & Trowler, 2001; Ramsden, 1998). Concern was expressed at the need for new skills as people in leadership roles in universities are not necessarily experienced in work associated with attracting funds, while perceived increases to the bureaucratic burden sit somewhat uncomfortably on academic shoulders.

One academic participant commented on the amount of time spent trying to gain funds and said that "doing this [funding acquisition] part of the role effectively" was a key challenge. Consistent with the projections of Coaldrake and Stedman (1998), concern at resource constraints in the face of high academic workloads and increased monitoring and reporting requirements was an issue for most of the academics interviewed. This concern was cited by administrative senior staff as well as by academic participants. Participants' comments included the following (note that new paragraphs denote comments from different participants):

> The challenge is working smarter not harder. The . . . significant challenge is to realise that the university sector is changing and that sources of income are coming more from research . . . and hence our focus, primarily, is supporting *that*. (Administrative senior staff member)
>
> We have to learn to . . . make more positive overtures to government. We have to be cleverer about how we do that. (Academic senior staff member)
>
> Individually, the challenge is trying to achieve unrealistic expectations about having the resources to do what is required. (Academic senior staff member)

Indeed, the Bradley Review (Høj, 2008) asserts that strictures represented by reduced resources have impaired universities' capacity to make their utmost contribution to society. Consistent with Hanna (2003) and Knight and Trowler (2001), competing for scarce resources was seen as increasingly driving the academic agenda, and as ultimately forging a binary divide between research and teaching. One administrative leader said:

> I think we will see the tertiary system split again in Australia. I'm not sure whether it will be split along the lines of research or teaching. The "pie" stays the same but the money becomes scarcer, so we have to streamline what we can . . . the implication for the leader is that you are always doingmore with less.

Two out of the eighteen participants specifically foresaw that reduced funding would forge a bifurcation between research and teaching in universities, as, in their view, aiming for excellence in both research and teaching may become problematic because of limited resources. Concern at scarcity of resources extended to concern at recruiting and retaining the right people. As identified earlier, the contemporary leadership mandate extends beyond leadership in research and teaching to include community outreach supported by management of quality, information, finance and physical and human resources (Marshall et al., 2000; Snyder et al., 2007).

A number of academic participants expressed concern that lack of certainty about ongoing funding for projects inhibited their capacity to enlist postgraduate students. While staff retention and succession planning were critical to the research effort, planning staff resources adequately was jeopardised by an inability to offer other than limited contract opportunities. Participants commented:

> We want to achieve things and we have to spend money to get outcomes such as research student numbers . . . but if we don't have the money for the scholarship we lose that potential income.

> For leaders, a big challenge is the difficulty of retaining good staff because of limited contract opportunities; managing with declining budgets; being able adequately to recognise staff . . .

> For the sector . . . it is getting people with right skill sets. Skills shortage is everywhere.

The comments reflect the complexities of building a culture of scholarship along sound educational principles in the face of an increased compliance agenda, increased government intervention and relative skills shortage (Drew, 2006; Rochford, 2006). Nonetheless, participants' comments overall clearly demonstrated a positive

spirit. Positivity and openness to new ways of thinking were evident in their body language and verbal expression. One participant said:

> We have to have the courage to explore options and take risks.

From another:

> It means bringing in different people who are not like us and allowing them to "be".

The challenges identified were seen as requiring an ability to extend outwards and operate flexibility. Cohen (2004) and Hanna (2003) agree that capabilities to streamline processes, adapt and innovate are critical in the current complex university leadership environment.

The need for flexibility, innovation and change-readiness

Views of academic and administrative leaders (participants) were equally represented under this theme, typified in comments relating to preparedness to take risks, to think and act creatively, and to help others deal with change:

> The level of risk that one has to be prepared to take now is a lot higher than previously. Leaders need to be ready . . . to be flexible, creative . . .

> The greatest need is being able to think creatively . . . Some universities can be very set in their ways . . . we need to be able to operate with flexibility as the changes are making big impacts upon us.

Participants' views concurred with Barnett (2004), Cohen (2004) and Hanna (2003) that a university's key challenge is the ability to be flexible, adaptable and know how to problem-solve in order to "meet the demands of an increasingly complex and dynamic environment" (Hanna, 2003, p. 26). As argued by Marshall (2007) and Gayle, Tewarie and White (2003), there is a need for leadership development which addresses key challenges including "how to gain consensus among constituents that change is needed" (Gayle et al., 2003, p. 1). Indeed, a recurring theme from participants was having the courage in leadership to think and act creatively, to take considered risks and to help staff deal with the impact of change. Scott et al. (2008), referring to their study of leadership challenges and issues in higher education, write of the need to assist academic leaders in "making sense of the continuously and rapidly changing context" in which they operate, and that, overall, "what emerges is how important it is for academic leaders to be able to deal with change" (p. 27). Participants' comments reflected the ambiguity of concomitant educational and commercial drivers in higher education which call for an innovative, flexible approach that is prepared to take risks. For example:

> The most important thing, if the sector is to thrive, is to allow innovation . . . [to] shake loose old ways of thinking . . . allowing the risk of failure . . .

Ramsden (1998) observes that academic people fundamentally understand change, given their familiarity with the "uncertain process" of "discovering and reinterpreting knowledge" (p. 122) but, he adds, to accept change, they need to see change and innovation as being genuinely beneficial to their work. The observation resonates with the data of the study in that participants appeared to be very accepting of the need for innovation and change, but found that a significant challenge for them, as leaders, was engaging others in change and innovation. In this regard, participants implied that an important dimension of their role was to help build robust capacity in others to accept and adapt to change. As one academic participant expressed:

> The main challenge for leaders is to communicate that change is taking place . . . and that it [change] will be constant. Being a manager of change is the most important thing that I can be and do for staff so that they can understand . . . how to "be" [to function] within ongoing change.

Marshall (2007), Scott et al. (2008) and Whitchurch (2006) concur that the ability to tackle topical issues and lead universities through major change are the most critical needs in the contemporary university environment. Of organisations generally, Wheatley (2003) argues that change leadership calls for a focus on the people expected to work with the change rather than relying upon a devised system or structure.

Responding to competing tensions and remaining relevant

Challenges associated with responding to competing tensions and remaining relevant were reported mainly by academic leaders. As one academic participant expressed:

> Achieving balance between research and teaching and achieving the right balance intellectually and financially in the sector are major challenges.

Remaining relevant, apprehending the real needs of students and engaging effectively with students were cited. As one participant expressed:

> The challenge is to stay in tune with what the needs are . . . to prepare students in ways which match the real needs.

Other participants said that helping students develop both knowledge and values was a challenge:

> The most significant challenge is to develop in students the necessary generic skills as well as a values base, and help equip them for the

> conflicts between the two that occur in practice. We have tended to train for the ideal world and the world "out there" is not always "ideal"
>
> A challenge is dealing with the clash of values and tensions that leaders encounter in contemporary practice: managing the tension between personal values and outcomes.

The observation resonates with research into the school leadership environment which noted the prevalence of ethical dilemmas faced by school principals, concluding "it is clear that as schools become more complex and the challenges facing the leaders of those schools more acute, that some attention to this area of ethics and ethical dilemmas is required" (Cranston, Ehrich, & Kimber, 2004, p. 15).

Many participants revealed a need to balance the increasing demands of compliance and the leadership aspects of their roles. They expressed a concern that time paucity inhibited their sense of executing all aspects of the leadership role well, including attending as fully as they wished to their relationships with staff, students and peers. This challenge was particularly noted amongst heads of school; for example:

> There is a sense of competing demands to do well in everything. In the tertiary sector, a major challenge relates to compliance . . . The risk is that we place more focus on administration than on creating a leadership environment. That is a balance that needs to be managed very effectively . . .

Participants' comments reflect that responding to competing tensions around teaching and research, administration and academic work, intellectual quality and affordability is not a straightforward matter. As Cooper (2002) and others observe, divergent philosophical differences and relationships between stakeholders such as students, academics, universities, government and commerce spell complexity for managing in universities. This suggests that the differences between treating universities and businesses and managing universities in a business-like way, as discussed by Gayle et al. (2003), represent implicit tensions which need to be managed. Participants' comments, however, suggest a will to engage forward with strategic clarity and positive relationships and values.

Maintaining academic quality

Dissent encountered in academic departments, Ramsden (1998) suggests, frequently concerns leaders underestimating resistance related to academic values and, hence, failing to pay attention to "the need to gain shared consent within a culture that so values autonomy and cooperative decision-making" (Ramsden, 1988, p. 122). A major challenge identified in the study was finding balance around the business model, a

more regulated environment with increased administrative demands, and academic quality. One participant said:

> I do believe that compliance models which have been applied to universities do not realise the unique set of values that universities have. It is acknowledged that we are dealing with public money and we need appropriate processes to ensure that this money is spent wisely, but we should not be thinking of ourselves as operating a business and that acknowledgement is out of alignment with current thinking.

This suggests that universities not allow business imperatives to undermine their unique positions to extend knowledge and learning. The challenge of maintaining academic quality while responding to government policy efficiency changes resonates with some of the literature in the field, globally (Meek & Wood, 1997; Cooper, 2002; Szekeres, 2006). One participant said:

> Responding to those [efficiency] changes whilst protecting the academic environment within is the challenge; getting the balance at that point is becoming harder.

Preserving quality for credible engagement was seen as a priority. For example:

> Our results will be better if we go with quality and academic leadership in our society.

Yet balancing tensions between developing a collegial academic culture and competition is the reality for universities. As one participant expressed:

> For the individual leader, building a viable and collegial academic culture is essential. I . . . think about how we develop sustainable collaborative models . . . In my view, in developing a business like approach . . . we create inefficiencies. It creates an environment where people compete with each other. Part of my challenge is how we share resources across parts of an institution and across institutions as well.

Participants appeared to call for an integrated approach to academic planning to foster collaboration and the preservation of academic values including teaching quality so that these were not sacrificed for business efficiency.

Strategic leadership

The need for sound strategic leadership in particular "change leadership" was equally represented in participants' comments. A need for change leadership that fosters innovation, collaboration and ability to influence was implicit in a number of

comments. Participants saw a key place for leadership which "takes the longer, strategic view", which is inclusive, and is prepared to serve. This concurred with the scan of the literature concerning the need for sound strategic leadership to help staff navigate change and collaborate in new and different ways. This requires learning and understanding of cultural differences within the university and amongst key external parties in order that university members think and act strategically in a global context in cognizance of different cultural mores. Two participants stated:

> . . . Whether it is quality assurance, bringing new courses out, having our client satisfaction improve – you are there to serve . . . It is about changing the whole culture of the university so that people see the bigger picture.
>
> For the leader, gathering people around the strategic aims, and having to deliver on this is the biggest challenge.

Leadership capable of aligning people around strategic vision was emphasised:

> We can't really afford to look only at the short-term picture, but [need to] focus on the strategic, longer-view. This wider thinking takes time to build. A lot of people don't realise . . . that there are now significant implications for staff to adopt a different, wider strategic perspective . . .

This concurs with the view of Yielder and Codling (2004) and others that rallying together people from diverse backgrounds in pursuit of common goals is vital. The conflation of responsibilities, ambiguity and challenge reflected in the literature and participants' comments are confronted by Barnett (2004, pp. 251-252) who writes:

> To see universities and teachers as consumers of resources, or even as producers of resources and on the one hand, and . . . as sites of open, critical and even transformatory engagement are, in the end, incompatible positions, no matter what compromises and negotiations are sought.

Barnett's (2004) suggests an ontological "way of being" approach where the difference-making element is to depend more on building personal resilience to deal with fluctuating circumstances than to depend upon the circumstances being favourable. This epitomises the importance of the personal, human dimension emergent in the study. It might be said that hope of engaging others vests largely on a leader's personal resilience and ethical consistency to model the way positively to others. Authors such as Cranston, Ehrich and Kimber (2004, 2006) and Dempster and Berry (2003) note the ethical considerations that are critical to inspiring trust and engagement. Views that were much less represented in the data are recorded next. One participant cited as the key challenge the increase of paperwork and compliance issues, making tough

decisions, and difficulty retaining and rewarding staff within budgetary constraints. It is noteworthy that, here too, the personal dimension was in play. One participant said:

> It is the reducing budgets, the paperwork and compliance issues. For leaders, a big challenge is the difficulty of retaining good staff because of limited contract opportunities; managing with declining budgets; being able adequately to recognise staff; undertaking performance management constructively, and making tough decisions.

Another participant referred to organisational structure issues creating tensions for heads of school:

> When one is positioned between university executive leadership and ground level, the challenge for the leader, say head of school, is how to manage the stretch between those two. The senior leadership is interfacing between university and government, and the head of school is interfacing between the "coal face" and senior leadership, at the same time as trying to nurture creativity and the academic environment.

Middlehurst (2007) seems to reflect this point, in part, when he suggests that one of the distinctive features of leading in the university environment is "[i]nsufficient departmental autonomy to carry management through" (p. 50). Gayle et al. (2003) imply the importance of university leaders grappling with relevant issues and reflecting on their perceptions and attitudes in relation to institutional structures and organisational cultures in universities.

Implications and Conclusion

The identification of key issues and challenges identified in the study would appear to support the literature discussed earlier in the paper and the theoretical framework identified for the study. Both the literature and the theoretical framework propose the critical nature of the human dimension in issues and challenges to do with leadership. The study revealed that quality engagement, including the ability to deal with change, is a critical challenge for university leaders, and that to neglect the human dimension is to fall short of the potential for task accomplishment, building and maintaining the team, and individual development of those involved. How university leaders balance their time and hone required skills to partner with others to gain funds, fulfil administrative accountability measures, effect process efficiencies, demonstrate strategic leadership and ensure a quality experience for all in their charge all depends to some extent on an ability to engage through change. This concurs with the three foci of the model–task achievement, building and maintaining the team and developing the individual – and recognition of the human element in each of these foci, as necessary in meeting the challenges identified.

The study found that inter-relational capabilities to engage and mobilise staff (through change, for example) were most needed. One gained the sense that it is more effective to focus on the people who are expected to embrace strategic change and innovation than focusing on the structure itself (Hanna, 2003). This is implied in comments such as:

> [a] lot of people don't realise . . . that there are now significant implications for staff to adopt a different, wider strategic perspective.

This might be said to exemplify, as Adair (2005) implies, that leadership is best understood at a personal level, and leaders must know themselves and be clear about what they are aiming to achieve in order to be effective (Miller, 2006). In this example, it might be argued, the role of the leader is critical to a team being able to adopt a different perspective in organisations as changing strategy might demand.

A key challenge noted by the participants in the study, and again reflected in the literature review, was striking a balance between effecting necessary efficiency changes and protecting academic quality. Here, too, the findings are consistent with the triple foci of the theoretical framework model. It might be agreed that achieving such balance depends upon clear communication of the goals, team engagement to pursue and work within perhaps competing agenda, and individual development to foster relevant skills and knowledge (Drew, 2006; Mead et al., 1999). A need to acknowledge the human element in trying to achieve balance in complex working environments such as universities is unmistakable. Remaining relevant within the competing tensions was a key, associated challenge.

In terms of remaining relevant, setting up mechanisms by which to receive feedback from a range of sources may help individual leaders tailor development effort most effectively for continuous improvement. The study suggests the interdependency of knowledge/skill *and* human-centred behaviours for effectiveness in leadership. Scott et al. (2008, p. 15) note that a number of studies, "including a small number from Australia, (e.g. Ramsden, 1998; Drew, 2006), shed light on the specific qualities deemed as important and necessary for leaders now and in the future", and that "similar domains of focus and development can be seen in 360-degree leadership instruments and processes used in higher education, such as the Quality Leadership Profile" (Scott et al., 2008, p. 15). Academics co-developing mutually informing research and teaching agenda in cognate disciplines may assist universities to enrich student learning, reflecting the intersecting borders of discipline and cultural domains which operate in society and life. Teaching that excites enquiry *and* leverages consideration of values has the golden capacity to make a difference; as Ranasinghe (2001, p. 1) asserts, "to make the world a better place".

That the eighteen interviewees demonstrated confidence about the future reflects their strong commitment to key academic and professional goals and a readiness to engage with change.

While many participants expressed confidence for the future, comments from just one or two participants reflected concerns about the future – for example, whether ever-tighter budgets and the difficulty gaining research funds would place university teams in a position where they were hard pressed to undertake core business and deliver services adequately. The study supports the view that leadership support and development deserves increased attention today given the multiple and ambiguous drivers of the higher education agenda, differentiated expectations of students and stakeholders, and the disparate ways in which quality is measured.

As outlined above, the findings of this study align with the interrelated concepts of the literature review reflected in Adair's Action-Centred Leadership Model and the more recent distillation of that work to reveal the personal, human dimension as most critical in key issues and challenges cited. In this regard the study proposes, with Brown (2001, pp. 312-323), that the challenges in higher education will be assisted by "paying greater attention to people and process and more consciously practising the principles of effective leadership".

The above findings have implications for the appropriate development of leaders. The study supports the importance of pursuing task accomplishment in a way that takes account of the team who will do the work, and of the development and growth of the individuals involved. An associated implication is learning from the diversity with which higher education is blessed. This is summed up in one participant's comment.

> The more complex the organisation, the more complex will be the issues to be considered in terms of leadership . . . Leadership is much more dynamic and honest where you are able to enter into a dialogue that is real . . . In complex education/university environments . . . we could make more use of the variety of opinions and expertise in considering all kinds of issues.

The findings have implications for how universities not only espouse but place resources to training and preparing leaders capable of responding to competing tensions, balancing multiple agenda and embracing ambiguity. Tracking the progress of leadership development in universities is not attempted here, but it is noted that, typically in the late 1990s, audits of the "quality movement" responded to the inherent challenges of embracing new paradigms for leadership in the late 1990s, and a need to respond to challenge and change was noted in responses to the quality movement at that time (Mead et al., 1999; Meek & Wood, 1997). Further significant work has been

done since then to suggest the desirability of leadership programs and the usefulness of their contribution to building stronger, change-capable and engaged higher education communities (Barnett, 2004; Brown, 2001; Cohen, 2004; Cooper, 2002; Drew, Ehrich, & Hansford, 2008; Marshall, 2007; Middlehurst, 2007; Scott et at., 2008).

That interviewees in the study indicated that they appreciated being able to voice their key challenges suggests the importance of providing an environment where leaders may share and discuss the challenges they face, and benefit from each others' strategies for meeting challenge and change. Gryskiewicz (1999) proposes the concept of "positive turbulence" where the very challenges of changing organisational landscapes and shifting priorities may become sites for consciously developing climates for creativity, innovation and personal/professional growth. Valuable organisational learning experiences are lost unless there is a way of harnessing and sharing the insights gained.

It has been noted that in the complex roles of education leadership, accountabilities may be blurred (Cranston, Ehrich, & Kimber, 2004). Similarly, this study, and that of Scott et al. (2008) recognised that competing tensions in academic leadership domains represent challenges to leaders, calling for clear, engaging, strategic leadership. The findings have supported the need for strategic leadership development supported by a trustful environment where, for example, feedback on leadership may be gained and monitored for continuous improvement. Similarly, a well-contextualised leadership program may provide a useful forum for sharing new relevant information and the challenges of practice. Institutional support, ideally, is critical to building individual self-efficacy that is necessary to successful leadership learning in organisations (Maurer, Mitchell, & Barbeite, 2002). Finally, Marshall (2007) discusses change leadership as the key difference-making component and challenge of today's university; critical to effecting cultural shift, globalisation, diversity and equality and strategic adaptation. The research findings of this study reinforce this view.

As stated, a key implication of the study is that the findings may inform leadership development in universities. In that regard, a note on the distinctiveness of the university sector in terms of development needs may be helpful and is included, in closing. Middlehurst (2007) argues the distinctiveness of the university sector. He reports research conducted by way of evaluating the Adair leadership courses where "respondents drew attention to the distinctiveness of universities as organizations as well as the receptiveness or otherwise of their institutions toward more executive styles of management" (pp. 49, 50). Of the university environment, Middlehurst (2007, p. 70) posits a number of distinctive features including "[t]he difficulties of managing change in universities where strong democratic and antimanagerial traditions existed"; secondly, "[t]he problem of managing highly individualistic academics with no strong

sense of corporate identity to department or university" and, thirdly, "[t]he need for a level of understanding of management concepts and the freedom to exercise degrees of control and influence in order to exercise effective leadership". It may be noted that each of these allegedly distinctive features pertains to the human element in managing and leading people. Finally, two main limitations of the study are discussed.

There are two main limitations to this study. Firstly, the findings of the study need to be treated with some caution because of the small sample size. Thus, the size of the sample mitigates mounting strong arguments by way of implications and recommendations from the study. The second limitation, and a point worthy of exploration in further research, is whether the views of the sample might have been unduly favourable given that research participants were chosen as individuals receiving accelerated development in a succession leadership development program. A significant proportion of the eighteen participants, and indeed a significant proportion of the forty-five participants overall in the succession leadership development program's three cohorts, have gone on to gain more senior roles at the university, while some have left to take up other higher level positions at other places.

Overall, the findings of this pilot study support the tenets within the literature as to the key challenges faced by leaders in higher education. The study, offers a vantage point from which further studies might be undertaken to ask the same research questions of the same participants in, say, four years' time; to compare results of this sample with those of a broader sample unrelated to a particular development program, and cross-sectorally to gain a sense of shared and different issues and challenges faced.

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