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Leadership Skills in the Higher Education Sector: A Study of Scotland

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Abstract

The dynamic nature of the Higher Education (HE) environment and the challenges faced by institutions has led to a call for effective leadership by academics and practitioners, however what this means in practice remains ambiguous. Particularly, within Scotland there is limited research that examines leadership skills within HE. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine leadership skills within the HE environment in Scotland. In order to assess this, a research methodology which draws on a pragmatic philosophy and an abductive approach was employed. A mixed method which incorporates both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews as its mode of data collection was used. The study is in two phases. Phase 1 has been conducted in a HE in Scotland with a view of rolling out across other universities. Preliminary findings from phase 1 of the study will be presented at the conference and further developments in improving the paper are considered.

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Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been changing since the 1980s, with an increase in students, marketisation, globalisation and a greater availability in student funding (Black, 2015). Universities are now much more competitive as, they strive in a global market, with both the promise and challenge of attracting more students. As HEIs continue to grow and change, leaders are needed with skills to meet these new requirements. Therefore, it is important to investigate what leadership means within a HEI setting. The number of published research studies in the field of leadership is vast and spans several decades (Harrison et al., 2018). However, there are few studies that have examined leadership skills within HEIs in the western world (Murphy and Curtis, 2013; Spendlove, 2007; Wolverson et al., 2005). Moreover, currently, there is limited knowledge available regarding university leadership and knowledge of the ways in which university leaders develop and sustain skill sets (Bijandi et al., 2012). Particularly, within Scotland there is scant rigorous and systematic research examining leadership skills within Higher Education. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine leadership skills within the Higher Education environment in Scotland, to better understand the challenges faced, and to determine the leadership skills which are important for success in this environment.

Background

In order to situate this investigation, it is useful to first gain an understanding of the development of the Higher Education (HE) sector in Scotland. Education is part of the portfolio of powers devolved to the Scottish Parliament. Since the 1998 Scotland Act, the Scottish Government has developed various policies concerning education in Scotland. Historically, there have been quite different priorities in the Scottish university sector as compared to the rest of the UK, which have resulted in unique characteristics in Scottish HE and an understanding that universities in Scotland serve a fundamentally different purpose within Scottish society.

Scottish HEIs differ in certain ways from the rest of their British counterparts. For example, in Scotland an undergraduate degree is undertaken over four years as opposed to the three years in institutions throughout the rest of the United Kingdom. Scottish HEIs award degrees to students, from undergraduate to postgraduate levels. This differs from the rest of the United Kingdom where this power lies with the state. One of the most prominent differences between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom is that all Scottish Universities are funded by the Scottish Funding Council (The Scottish Government, 2014). Essentially, this means that Scottish residents do not need to pay tuition fees for their undergraduate education.

However, how universities should be led, and what leadership means in this context, is less clear. Black notes that 'leaders in Higher Education have to examine how to better lead their organisations and must also find approaches which best fit in the HE context' (Black, 2015, p. 55). While this may be true, Kennedy (1994) points to the idea that there is no clear consensus on the definition of leadership (in Black, 2015, p. 55). Indeed, Lord Robbins, in his report on universities in the UK noted that the management is led by the vice-chancellor or principal whose role, according to Robbins, 'probably fortunately, is seldom precisely spelt out in written

constitutions' (Scottish Report, 2012 p.1) Thus, there has historically been an ambiguity in terms of the role, function, and responsibility of institutional leaders.

The Concept of Leadership

To date there is no consensus on the term “leadership”. It has even been stated that there are as many different definitions of leadership as there are those who try to define it (Bass, 1981; Harrison, 2018). Leadership has been described by some as the process by which an individual is able to exert their power over a group of people (Gibson and Cohen, 2003). Others, such as Kotter, describe leadership as the ability to inspire and establish direction (Kotter, 1990). Stanfield, on the other hand has described a leader as someone who takes charge in a situation (Stanfield, 2009). It is clear that a variety of different definitions and meanings exist with regards to leadership. However, almost all definitions of leadership agree on the importance of influence. A leader may be defined as a person who is able to exert influence, through a variety of means and methods, over other people (Rost, 1991). Such an individual requires special qualities and skills which are discussed below.

Leadership Skills

Leadership skills can be defined as the qualities a leader possesses that he or she is then able to utilise to help them influence others (Kurucz et al., 2013). It has also been explained that cultivating leadership skills is a great way to pave the way for success (Caldwell, 2004). Therefore, understanding leadership skills is important as it can then be used to train other leaders about the skills necessary to be effective in their role.

The study of leadership skills was developed alongside the early study of leadership. This was due to wide criticism of the trait perspective which focused on what leaders possessed. Therefore, the major difference between the trait approach and the skill approach was that, unlike the traits (which were said to be innate and cannot be learned), skills or competencies could be developed (Harrison, 2018). It emerged as a result of researchers beginning to focus on identifying the skills that set leaders apart from non-leaders (Derue, et al., 2011). There has been an increased interest in leadership skills as they are widely accepted to be an integral aspect within the study of leadership. In fact, it is now the case that skills are acknowledged by many as one of the key elements of effective leadership (Adair, 2007).

Scholars have proposed several theories on leadership skills (e.g. Fiedler, 1997; Harrison, 2018; Katz, 1955; 1974; Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991; Mumford et al, 2000a-d; 2007 etc.) Therefore, rather than attempting to explore the many different theories and approaches to leadership skills, this study will focus on the most prominent skills. Katz (1955) in his seminal work on leadership skills, put forward three types of skills which he argued were essential to be an effective administrator: technical, human, and conceptual skills.

Technical skills relate to a person’s knowledge or expertise within their field. It is concerned with factual knowledge of an organisation or practical skills such as knowledge of processes and equipment (Harrison, 2018; Yukl, 2014). Human skills involve the knowledge and ability to work with people and conceptual skills relates to concepts and ideas and working with them. However, it is arguable that the above skills and many more in literature may not be suited for

the Higher Education environment. As a result, more research is required to authenticate its veracity in this context.

Leaders in Higher Education Institutions

The above suggests that leaders require a multiplicity of skills, however, the nature of leadership within Higher Education is further problematized due to the complexity of universities as institutions (Petrov, 2006). HEIs usually promote individualistic leadership based largely on awarding leadership roles to people due to professional recognition and achievement (Astin and Astin, 2000). Yiedler and Codling have found that within HEIs, staff are usually promoted to senior positions based on their academic and research achievements (Yiedler and Codling, 2004). Due to the changes in Higher Education that have emerged since the 1980s, leaders within HEIs have been placed under increasing scrutiny (Black, 2015). This scrutiny has been particularly prevalent within the United Kingdom as leaders have had to adapt to a greater number of students than ever before due to the increase in university accessibility (Deem, 1998).

As a result of these changes it has been stated the Higher Education systems within the UK and on a wider European scale have been propelled into moving from being administration led to the more American style of leaders in charge of departments (Clegg and McAuley, 2005). Leaders in HEIs therefore have the arduous task of trying to decide upon the most effective approach to leadership for their organisation. Additionally, they must be flexible to the ever-changing environment within which they work. It is therefore useful to examine the skills that may best assist HEI leaders in operating to their maximum success as well as that of their institution.

Further Development

The study comprises two phases. The first phase of the project was carried out within the University of the West of Scotland and employed a mixed method approach in order to fully understand and explore the in-depth experiences of the effective leaders within the HE. From the study results, a vivid picture of the leadership skills required for success within the HE was formed. Phase 2 will be conducted in other universities across Scotland.

The research methodology employed a pragmatic philosophy; as the intention is to understand the experience of university leaders which has influenced their skills development. Pragmatism which combines thoughts of both objectivism and constructivism philosophical assumptions to examine the research phenomenon under study is better suited to identify appropriate solutions to this social problem (Saunders et al., 2012). The intent of this study is to search for new data, and create novel concepts about leadership, with particular reference to Scottish Higher Education. As a result, an abductive approach, which is a discovery-oriented process that combines both inductive and deductive reasoning, was therefore adopted for this study. These insights were gathered through a mixed method approach consisting of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, namely questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

The first phase of the project involved leaders across the institution (i.e. line managers). Leaders were invited to complete an online survey to gauge views on leadership skills and how

these relate to wider policy. The survey questionnaire was developed based on a review of the leadership literature and an analysis of the Scottish Government's evolving policy on the Higher Education sector. Based on the outcome of this review, questions were developed that enabled a clear understanding of where institutional leaders' experience and expectations align with or diverge from current government policy. Following this, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected respondents to provide a more in-depth understanding of the leadership skills required in HE. The interview schedule was developed from themes identified through the literature review and quantitative data analysis. The rich data obtained during the interview will be analysed thematically. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative analytical method (Braun and Clark, 2006; King and Horrocks, 2010; Welch and Piekkari, 2006) and refers to the analysis of data through emerging themes. Therefore, data will undergo a process of thematic coding to facilitate interpretation.

Phase 1 will serve as a foundation for phase 2. In phase 2, the project will involve other universities in Scotland. The line managers will be identified based on the academic/programme structure of their respective institutions and mixed method approach (i.e. questionnaires and semi-structured interviews) will be the mode of data collection.

The findings of this study will serve as a useful reference for practitioners and policy makers of the skills required for effective leadership within HE. The conceptual framework on leadership skills developed will usher a new era for successful leadership within HE. Such skills will be important in influencing policy in HEIs. The key lessons from this Scottish test bed can be widened to encompass other countries in further work. It is anticipated that the full findings of phase 1 of the research will be provided by the conference date.

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