



Integrated leadership – it's complex

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As universities jockey for position and purpose in today's complex public-private dynamic, having the right sort of leadership to embrace integrated

thinking – and its reporting – is vital to understanding and actually adding value to the institution and its key stakeholders.

Of course, this is easier said than done! When you start to consider what ‘the right sort of leader’ is, the list of attributes is eye-wateringly ambitious. Integrated thinking and reporting requires connectivity and interdependencies between a range of factors, consideration of all six capitals ([find out more here](#)) and a good understanding of key stakeholders and their legitimate requirements. It also needs to fit any strategy and action to institutional business models as well as financial and other performance expectations.

Adding into the mix the enigma of academic cultures (and there is rarely a single organisational culture within a university), multiple disparate views on institutional purpose (from staff, students, community, government etc), the leadership task could seem overwhelming. To adapt Elizabeth Bennett’s response in *Pride and Prejudice* to Mr Darcy’s full list of an accomplished lady’s attributes: “I am no longer surprised at you knowing only six.....I rather wonder now at your knowing any”.

Leadership theories and models abound about ‘good’ leadership. These have developed from early, prescriptive models identifying traits (innate personality characteristics) and styles (interpersonal interaction), to recent models where leader as individual is viewed within the organisational context, seeking the ‘sweet spot’ where context and individual work productively and constructively.

More recently, leadership models have developed exploring the attributes required for leadership to manage sustainability. By sustainability, they refer

to the complex dynamic between economic, societal and environmental sustainability not just institutional/financial 'viability'. Exploring these provides valuable insights into what the 'right' sort of leadership needs to be for integrated thinking and reporting, as they parallel the holistic nature of integrated reporting (IR) through consideration of all six capitals.

Each recognises that leaders are dealing with a plethora of challenges, including: (i) definition of purpose (i.e. what is the organisation trying to achieve?); (ii) competing priorities in the institution (particularly when it comes to a multi-faceted agenda such as IR offers); and (iii) the complexity of the decision-making process.

Additionally, the integrated leader is likely to be able to influence others outside of the traditional line management relationship. Facilitation, influencing skills, relationship-building and emotional intelligence become front and centre.

As with leadership theories more generally, there is no single leadership model presenting 'best practice' here. Rather, there is a range of suggestions to take forward:

The need for 'systems intelligence'. This means that the individual needs to be able to analyse complex situations across disciplinary/functional boundaries and between academic and professional services functions. This approach has been termed 'deep systems leadership'.

The individual needs to be able to deal with uncertainty (in the 'evidence' or data being presented). Not everything can be monetised or measured, but trade-offs may need to be made, and the concept of understanding value and the consequences of trade offs, (monetised or not) is crucial to

integrated thinking.

Vitally, the individual needs to communicate and build relationships throughout the organisation, be inclusive and diverse in their approach, and able to understand others' perspectives, bringing direction in a collaborative, co-creating way. Integrated thinking requires whole-institutional involvement and cannot take place within the finance or strategic planning teams alone.

These suggestions speak to a transformational leadership approach. Here the leader mobilises action in an organisation whilst transforming values, attitudes and behaviours of followers. This presents substantial challenges in universities as leadership may be able to present and convince others of the value from integrated thinking, but the stalling point of existing hierarchy and governance in the university can stymie progress.

Many leadership models look to the attributes of the individual (as discussed above) but also the context they are operating in (in this case the university sector). There are particular challenges facing integrated leadership here:

- It may not be clear where decisions get taken, as integrated reporting requires consideration of the parts as well as the sum. The agenda affects so many aspects of the institution – and so many committees, working groups etc – that to take forward change could be slow progress!
- Integrated thinking will invariably involve presenting 'value' from academic activities in a range of new ways, and leadership needs to be able to speak legitimately to the academic agenda and academic cultures to gain traction.
- Integrated thinking will require the senior leadership team and governing body to understand its value, which presents a significant change of

approach to the current KPI processes, league table, 'excellence' frameworks and so on currently used. Integrated leadership needs to find a means by which integrated thinking and reporting is incentive-compatible with these embedded measurement tools.

- The value of 'our people' (human capital) and relationships – both internal and external – must be here as one of the challenges.

Fortunately, decision-making processes do exist which offer help here. The first of these, termed the Core Business Integration for Sustainability (CBI-S) model has been developed through the Center for Health and Global Environment at Harvard University. This model provides a helpful means to understand the need for interplay between a university's Command-Control Operating System (CCOS, or 'hierarchy') and its Adaptive Operating System (AOS, or how things happen and get discussed in teams, project groups and informal interaction). The ability to explicitly embrace both mechanisms helps integrated leadership build deep engagement and commitment.

The second process, Living Labs, has been embraced by many universities through work by the Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges (EAUC), as well as individual institutions such as the University of Newcastle in its development of its Institute for Research on Sustainability. The concept is deceptively simple: it provides a geographically-grounded opportunity for multiple stakeholders to engage in and work on real-world problems.

Additionally, it provides a means through which experimental approaches, such as new techniques for governance, can facilitate change. Where they have been used by universities, they create a legitimate platform to further understand the wider value of universities to their city-region, through engagement with public and private sectors and government.

Approaches required for successful integrated leadership will require a radical change in how universities take forward decision-making and governance. The first step is to give integrated leaders the tools and training to persuade senior leadership and governance that – through enabling integrated thinking and reporting – that institutional and societal-wide benefits will follow.

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