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Leading change together: managing cultural change across the higher education workforce

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Small Development Projects

Small development projects (SDPs) were first launched in 2004 - shortly after the creation of the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. Since then they have proven to be very popular and have introduced a range of innovative activities of benefit to higher education.

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Executive Summary

This report describes findings from a Leadership Foundation for Higher Education-funded Small Development Project. The study explored how university staff view and cope with change. It aimed to develop an understanding of the role and dynamics of formal and informal leadership practices and strategies. It also aimed to make evidence-based recommendations grounded in real world challenges to support programmes and interventions suited to promoting the career development of 'leaders' at all levels.

The project collected evidence from a national survey that had 356 respondents, from interviews with 11 people and from focus groups with 11 participants that were representative of the higher education workforce. The project hosted a Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (LTHE) Tweetchat on the theme of change and teaching, which engaged 168 people, and drew on participants' artefacts in the form of drawings to elicit their experience of change. The project was supported by an advisory group comprising academics, professional services, governors and the vice-chancellor of the University of Northampton, Professor Nick Petford.

Key findings

Change: Change is pervasive across all levels and functions of the higher education sector. While accepted as necessary, participants drew attention to the increased pace and ongoing nature of change. At the time the study was conducted, most of the changes were in relation to restructuring, adopting new managerial approaches, settling in new campuses, and using technological innovation for teaching and learning and administration. There is variation in the change management strategies adopted and their degrees of effectiveness.

Leadership: While acknowledged as key to effective change, leadership remains a contested and complex notion and practice. The key features of leaders comprise setting and communicating effectively the vision and strategy for change. However, the participants' expectation is that formal leaders apply a more inclusive, relational, empathetic, contextual and 'diffused' leadership practice. Of interest is also a discrepancy between personal self-assessment of leadership roles and skills and their formal recognition by universities and institutions.

Working together: Despite 'differing practices' across universities and agencies, there are examples of effective collaboration between academics, professional services and administration. Yet, a pervasive managerialist turn creates dilemmas and tensions, while current changes redefine professional identities and boundaries. However, when given the appropriate resources and opportunities to work together, academics and professional service staff are able to create spaces for change to take place. ■

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01 Background and rationale

As a result of the fast-developing knowledge economy, the higher education sector has been at the centre of major changes that are impacting on universities' core activities. In a context of austerity-driven changes, the traditional university based on teaching and research does not seem be sustainable any longer either as an educational concept or as an institutional entity. Even the expectation that universities should operate in a triple helix system of knowledge production characterised by dynamic trans-disciplinary links between academia, government and industry (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2000) is fast losing ground. More recently, and as a response to the need for both economic growth and innovation, universities' new goal is to contribute knowledge that has social and civic impact (Goddard and Vallance, 2011).

Such profound changes, located within a developing new economic structure, are based on the exploitation of knowledge in the form of intangible assets and intellectual capital (Devecchi and Petford, 2015; Sánchez et al, 2006; Ramirez-Corcoles and Manzaneque-Lizano, 2015; Secundo et al, 2010). The challenge of managing and exploiting knowledge is thus reshaping the higher education sector and, consequently, the role, nature and day-to-day ways in which universities operate. From an economic perspective the mission and values of universities are caught within a dilemma of 'usefulness' whose extremes espouse both a utilitarian approach to economic growth and a more inclusive approach focused on ensuring social impact. Both discourses permeate every aspect of university life from research to teaching, from enterprise to social innovation.

Cast within a discourse of national and international competitiveness for funding and student recruitment, universities have been forced to adapt and adopt business-like models that comply with the ongoing marketisation of the sector. In order to provide transparency to government, society and students – now perceived as consumers of university services – ever-increasing accountability measures are also determining major changes. All such factors are resulting in modifications of the roles and responsibilities of the university workforce, of management, leadership and governance. Yet, the process has not been smooth or linear, and a variety of different business models co-exist from traditional collegial models to more performance management-driven ones. The result is a sector, which, in adapting to external drivers of change, is changing at its very core by implementing, testing and trying various solutions.

UK higher education providers are increasingly under pressure to maximise performance by overcoming financial and academic challenges, responding to changes in policy, adapting and adopting new funding mechanisms and management styles, and staying ahead of competitive research and teaching assessment. In such times of financial instability and economic, political and social challenges, change management as an approach has required the development of leaders able to create, respond and manage these changes (Senior, 2002). Change, described as a "fuzzy, deeply ambiguous process" (Graetz and Smith, 2010, 136), is therefore more complex than the accepted stages of unfreezing, changing and refreezing (Cummings et al, 2016). Parker (2000) believes that achieving organisational strategic objectives requires organisations to undergo organisational change management in an environment that is susceptible to change. Yet, there is a lack of literature exploring the human and emotional aspects of change, and little on the dynamics of identity development in a workplace under conditions of change (Reissner, 2010). Therefore, current conceptualisations of leadership and change management lean towards New Public Management's high-level objectives and efficiency, consequently promoting a cultural shift away from universities as collegial self-leading organisations (Mansour et al, 2015; Lumby, 2012).

However, change is more complex than embracing a single view of how to achieve it. As Trowler (1998: 150) argued, a precondition for effective change in universities is to understand the multiple cultures within universities and to "conceptualise organisations as open systems and cultural configurations within them as multiple, complex and shifting". Since 70% of all change management initiatives end up in failure (Balogun and Hope Hailey, 2004), "managing change in higher education involves changing management" (Tam, 1999, 228). Changing management starts with conceiving change not as a single incident, but as an ongoing process in which leaders and managers need to support re-thinking and re-acculturation to transform the sector.

Todnem By (2005: 370) claimed, based on Burnes's (2004) work, that

"It may be suggested that this poor success rate indicates a fundamental lack of a valid framework of how to implement and manage organisational change as what is currently available to academics and practitioners is a wide range of contradictory and confusing theories and approaches."

Of pivotal importance in driving change is the role of leadership in shifting the culture necessary for change to happen. Definitions of leadership and traits of effective leaders abound, and there is certainly no dearth of literature on the topic (Spector, 2016). However, current conceptualisations of leadership and change management lean towards New Public Management's high-level objectives and efficiency, while simultaneously auspicating for a caring, nurturing, ethical, courageous and democratic leader (Gini and Green, 2013; Parkin, 2016). At the heart of the competing demands put on the leader is a profound paradigmatic schism, outlined by Beer (1957), between a deterministic paradigm onto which strategic thinking is based (eg Porter, 1980, 1985; Kaplan and Norton, 1992), and a probabilistic paradigm favouring tactical decision-making. Consequently, universities are witnessing a cultural shift away from universities as collegial self-leading organisations (Mansour et al, 2015; Lumby, 2012) thus undermining a sense of participation and co-leadership especially among academics (Bolden et al, 2015).

Although much research focus has been directed at the figure and practice of formal leaders, the impact of change is felt across the whole higher education workforce. It is at the chalk face of daily practice that change impacts – not only on established ways of working, but also disrupting familiar formal relationships by altering and subverting traditional professional roles and boundaries. Alternative models for managing change across both academic and professional services, such as Whitchurch's (2013) concept of 'third space', Laloux's (2015) TEAL organisations, Robertson (2014) holacracy, or the absence of leadership, provide new ways to analyse how different higher education organisational players can create new and mutually effective ways of working together across traditional professional boundaries. In dealing with this dilemma, Longhurst (2007, 80-81) developed the idea of the "prosthetic version of identity" in which,

"It is not just that different dimensions can be added to our sense of self and indeed subtracted when we want to shift direction, in the so-called prosthetic version of identity, but that as well as this kind of additional and subtractive dimensions, various aspect co-exist. […] Furthermore, they co-exist in modes of identity and culture that increasingly require the performance of a diversity of different aspects of roles at almost the same time."

Within this context, the contribution of this research is original and timely as there is a need to develop "a more systemic perspective that acknowledges the complexities and interdependencies of organisational life" (Bolden et al, 2015, 13), including a deeper understanding of the complex ways in which formal and informal leadership practices operate at the individual and organisational levels (Tysome, 2014). Furthermore, this project draws from recent studies (Peters and Ryan, 2015) on leadership while seeking to contribute new knowledge by gathering evidence across the higher education workforce, thus including those whose roles are not acknowledged as being related to formal leadership. In doing so, the report provides a holistic view of higher education's complex workforce dynamics. It puts forward the notion of change as ubiquitous, of leadership as 'diffused' across the institution and therefore at times invisible and thus unrecognised and unrewarded, and of a workforce that can work effectively together. In brief, the findings point to the need for a more inclusive view of stakeholders' interests, fears and hopes to form the basis of a future leadership for successful organisational change. ■

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02 Aims and objectives

This exploratory study took an innovative approach to exploring how the different views of academics, the professional services, managers, governors and formal leaders on change and leadership impact on their ability to manage and respond to culture change. It aimed to:

▌ Develop an understanding, through the use of change management and shared leadership theory, of the dynamics of formal and informal leadership practices and strategies.

In order to:

▌ Make evidence-based recommendations grounded in real world challenges to support the Catalysing Change strategy with regard to programmes and interventions suited to promote the career development of 'leaders' at all levels.

▌ Provide a comprehensive account of the role formal and informal leadership can play as a catalyst to change.

By collecting evidence on:

▌ The main values and attitudes of academics, managers, governors, senior leaders, and the professional services toward change, and how each group of stakeholders view each other's contribution to leading change. ■

03 Research methods

The study applied a sequential and composite two-phase mixed method approach using focus groups, a cross-sectional national survey, semi-structured interviews, drawing as a visual means to elicit personal feelings towards change, and social media to ensure coverage, triangulation, complementarity, development and expansion of ideas (Bryman, 2006). Table 1 below reports the methods used and the number of participants.

Table 1: Methods used and number of participants

Methods	No participants
National survey	356
Individual interviews	11
Focus groups	11
LTHE Tweetchat @LTHEchat	168
Drawings	11
Total:	**557**

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Phase 1: The survey

Phase 1 gathered sectoral data across the higher education workforce through a national survey. To set the foundations for the project and design the survey, Phase 1 included: convening the advisory panel, conducting initial focus groups with cross-sectional representatives of the higher education workforce; and piloting the survey prior to its launch. To ensure as wide a coverage as possible of all higher education stakeholders, the survey was communicated to individuals through sector-wide associations and groups, such as the Committee for University Chairs, British Universities Finance Directors' Group, Staff and Educational Development Association, Heads of Educational Development Group, Association of University Administrators, Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, Universities UK, and also through social media, such as LinkedIn and Twitter.

The four-part survey sought respondents' views on change, leadership, examples of how they worked together to support change, and key demographic data. Initially planned to be launched in June 2016, the launch was delayed to July due to the Brexit referendum, which took place on Thursday 23 June 2016. A question related to the decision to leave the EU was added to seek the sector's views on the impact of the decision.

Survey respondents, as reported in Figure 1 below, cover the entire higher education workforce.

Figure 1: Survey respondents' roles
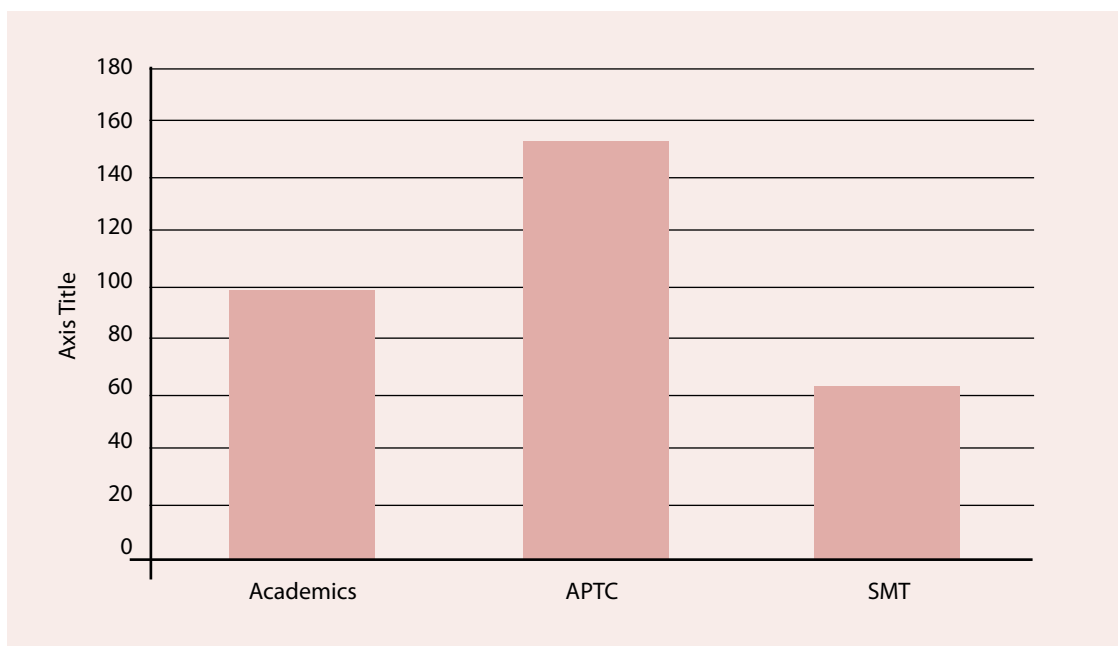
Figure 1: Survey respondents' roles

Of these, 86% (307) worked full-time, and 40% (142) had worked in higher education between 11 and 20 years. 76% (271) were between 31 and 55 years old, 73% (262) were female and 78% (278) were White British.

Although offering coverage of roles across the higher education sector, the sample has limitations since the administrative, professional, technical and clerical (APTC) respondents - hereafter referred to as professional services staff - comprise 48% of the sample.

Phase 2: Interviews and focus groups

Phase 2 provided a more in-depth understanding of how change impacted on the higher education workforce and how formal and informal leadership practices enabled or stifled change. This phase consisted of semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups with selected and self-selected representatives of the higher education workforce partly identified from the Phase 1 survey, and partly identified through the researchers' contacts and membership of various associations. To minimise costs while ensuring coverage and representation, Phase 2 also made use of social media such as LinkedIn and Twitter. The Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (LTHE) Tweetchat that focused on change and pedagogy was a particularly effective means of engaging a varied sample (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Infographics reporting LTHE Tweetchat's activity

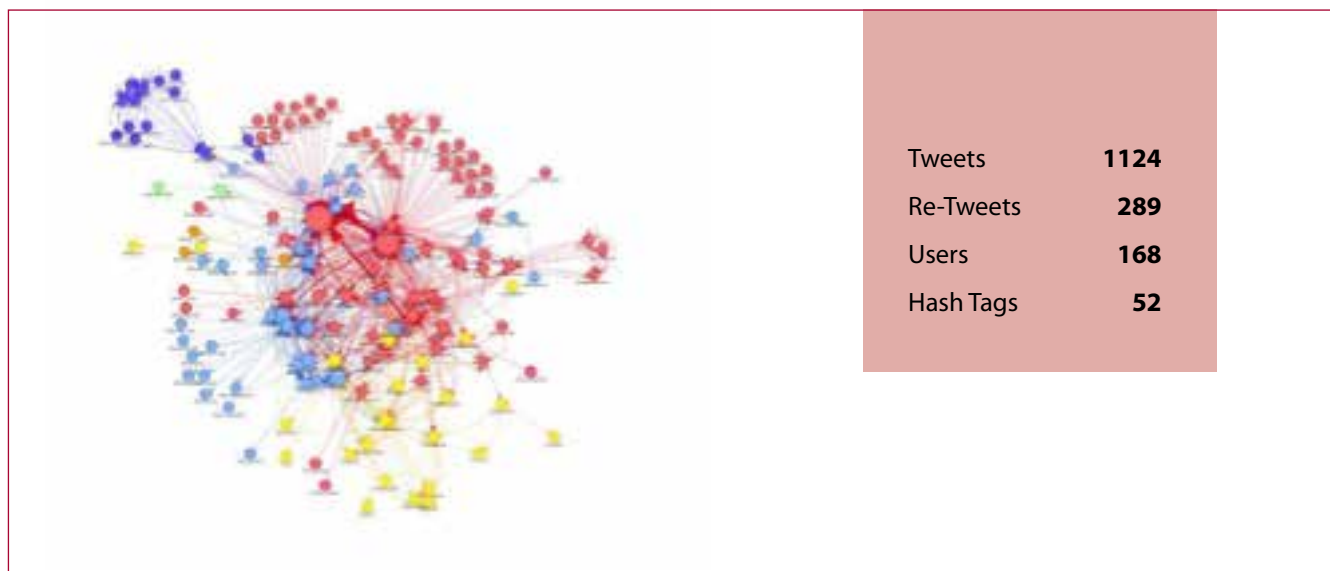|	
Tweets	**1124**
Re-Tweets	**289**
Users	**168**
Hash Tags	**52**

Focus group and interview questions were designed to cover the three key areas of interest (change, leadership and collaboration across the workforce) by focusing on the following aspects:

▋ Outline of changes affecting the higher education sector.

▋ Examples of changes in their own institution.

▋ Considerations about how change is managed and led.

▋ Examples of ways in which academics, professional service staff and senior management can and do work together.

As part of the focus group, participants were also asked to produce a drawing portraying how they felt about change. This method resulted in a rich set of information which allowed for a discussion about both factual evidence and the emotional aspect of coping with change.

All interviews and focus groups were transcribed and the transcription was sent back to ensure accuracy. Participation in the interviews and focus groups was voluntary and ethical considerations about anonymity and confidentiality were paramount throughout the study. Participants received information about the project and were asked to sign a consent letter. Focus groups and interviews were conducted under the Chatham House Rule. ■

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04 Key findings

This report provides a summary of key findings from the extensive data collection. In doing so, it has been divided in three sections, each representing one of the three key areas of change, leadership and working together. Each sub-section will draw evidence from the survey, interviews and focus groups and, where appropriate, from other methods. In the use of quotations, we have assigned the role to the speaker that they used to define their role in their university.

Change in higher education

"I think we are in probably the most radical period of higher education policy development and also social change in a generation if not more. We have seen big reforms. We have had the Robbins Review, we've had Dearing so on and so forth but we, I think, live in a world divided, we live in a country divided, I think we live in higher education sector now which is about to be divided […] I think we're going through a social revolution actually in terms of people, more people engaging in politics than have been for a long time and some of this begs the question of the roles of universities; what is their role in this divided landscape, this divided world? At the same time, you've got increasing competition, you've got the Higher Education Research Bill which is deliberately set up to increase competition and that is definitely impacting on how universities are operating and have to work.
**[Sector agency leader A]**

The quote above summarises well the general findings from the survey, interviews and focus groups since it reflects and reiterate the concerns regarding the nature, pace, management of change, and staff emotional response. Three key themes emerged from the data: the variety of changes taking place; the necessity of change; and the emotional dimension of change.

The landscape of changes: 'the goal posts keep changing'

Although there is a tendency to speak of change as a singular phenomenon, participants in this study highlighted the varied and fragmented nature of multiple, and at times simultaneous, changes taking place in universities and the higher education sector more broadly. Such changes ranged from global to national, and, more specifically, to those within their institutions as a response to external drivers. The latter included increased globalisation, competition and accountability; students' related matters, such as recruitment, retention and satisfaction; finance; and ongoing fast-changing policy context.

Ninety-two percent (n 328) of survey participants agreed that change in higher education is a necessity. At the time of the survey, 76% (n 269) also agreed/strongly agreed that future change is going to be impacted by Brexit. Also, 79% (n 248) believe change is the product of a collaborative effort and 65% (n 233) agreed/strongly agreed that it is driven by leadership. Somehow more surprisingly, respondents did not see change as undermining collegiality, being dependent on the availability of financial resources or being a top-down decision (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Factors impacting on change in higher education
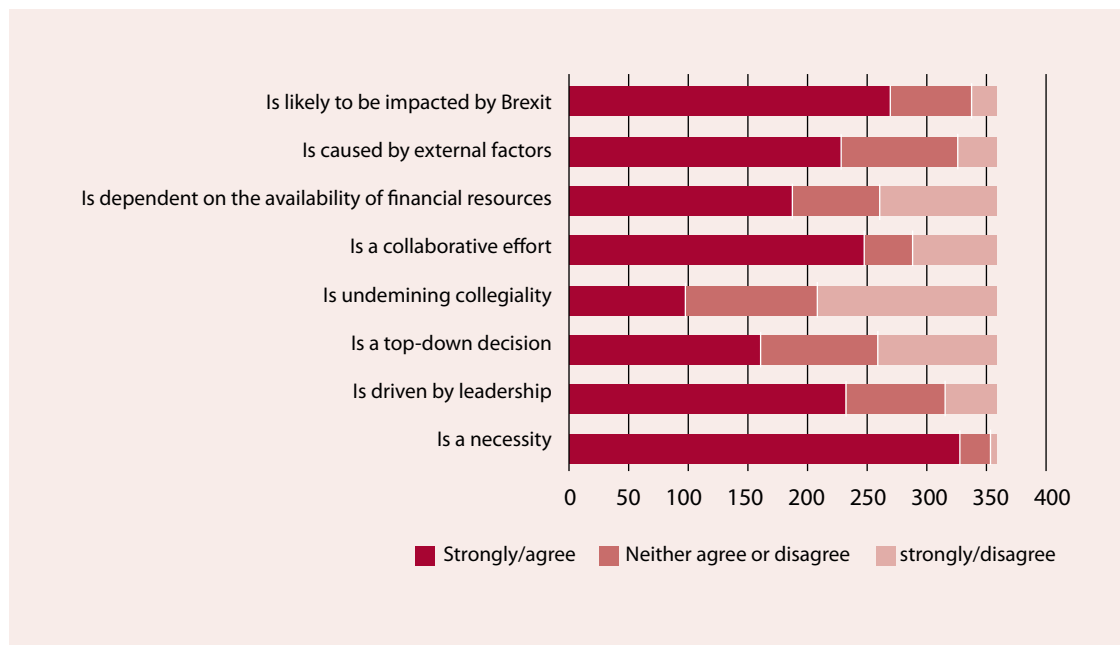
Yet, it is important to note that responses from academic staff were more critical – as seen in the Table 2 below, which provides an overview of the range of changes taking place. It is clear that irrespective of university type, change is endemic.

Table 2: Key changes in UK universities

Areas of change	Selection of quotes
Change in teaching and learning (TEF)	*Enforced changes to teaching and learning with no clear direction or support from senior management. The goal posts keep changing and it as if there is no clear strategy as to what is required. [Academic, post-1992]* *Changes to modules, teaching programmes which need to be refreshed and revised to include online/blended learning. Academic, post-1992]* *Implementation of T & L [teaching and learning] policy, restructuring of faculties, closure of 10 English regions. [Senior management, pre-1992]*
Student experience and administration	*We are implementing a curriculum design model that will involve putting employability and skills material into every single undergraduate course and enabling undergraduates to 'personalise' their degrees - across every faculty and department. [Role not disclosed, Russell Group]* *Graduate school has instigated changes to matching doctoral candidates with students - rigid and inflexible rules applied. No consultation or discussion allowed. [Academic, Russell Group]*

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New leadership and/or new strategic plan	*The university has just articulated its strategic ambitions over the next 10 years which will significantly change the size, shape and culture of my organisation. [Professional services, Russell Group]*
	New VC, new strategic plan and direction. [Senior manager, Million+]
	New VC - new strategies and lots of new ideas. [Professional services, Russell Group]
Organisation restructuring, impact on job security and workload	*Faculty restructure, location restructure and closure of some offices - redundancy or relocation of 500 staff, new policy for provision of face to face teaching - these are all huge! [Academic, pre-1992]*
	Merging of administrative support from 10 departments into five. [Manager, post-1992]
	The recent restructure entitled 'admissions project'. [Academic, specialised university]
	Constant restructuring of the university, grouping departments into institutes and now changing those again. [Professional services, pre-1992]
	Restructuring of whole academic structure and related professional services structure. [Senior manager, Russell Group]
	Increasing the amount of impact work undertaken by academics while reducing the total amount of money/time available for non-teaching activities. [Professional services, Russell Group]
	Restructuring of the entire university's professional and support staff leading to redundancy risks, uncertainty and job losses. [Professional services, post-1992]
Moving place	*The move to (new campus) which is considerably unsettling, is involving people losing their jobs, and seems to benefit few staff. Communication is atrocious, and there seems to be little consideration as to the logistics of being an academic and delivering a good, professional level of education in a setting where staff are forced to feel like nomads with no place to call their own space. [Academic, post-1992]*
	Being forced to move to open plan office, unable to see students in the office, very anxious about the impact on student/staff contact; also, will be unable to talk to academic colleagues (rule imposed saying silence in the office). [Academic, post-1992]
Managerialism	*The separation of 'senior management team' from the body of academics. [Academic, post-1992]*
	Workload modelling - telling me exactly how much time I am to 'get' to mark an essay/exam and give feedback or to prepare a lecture. People who decide on these 'tariff's' have no idea how long things take. Its turning universities into assembly lines where we churn out graduates forgetting these are humans! [Academic, Russell Group]
	Introduction of a workload planning model for academic staff. [Senior manager, post-1992]
	The introduction of integrated planning and university target setting across all functions. [Senior management, post-1992]
Technological innovation	*Implementation of a new finance, HR and student records system. [Professional services, post-1992]*
	Changes in IT and systems we use to approve and manage degree programmes and programme and module information. [Professional services, post-1992]
	Replacement of student records system. [Professional services, post-1992]
	A new student administration system. [Professional services, Russell Group]

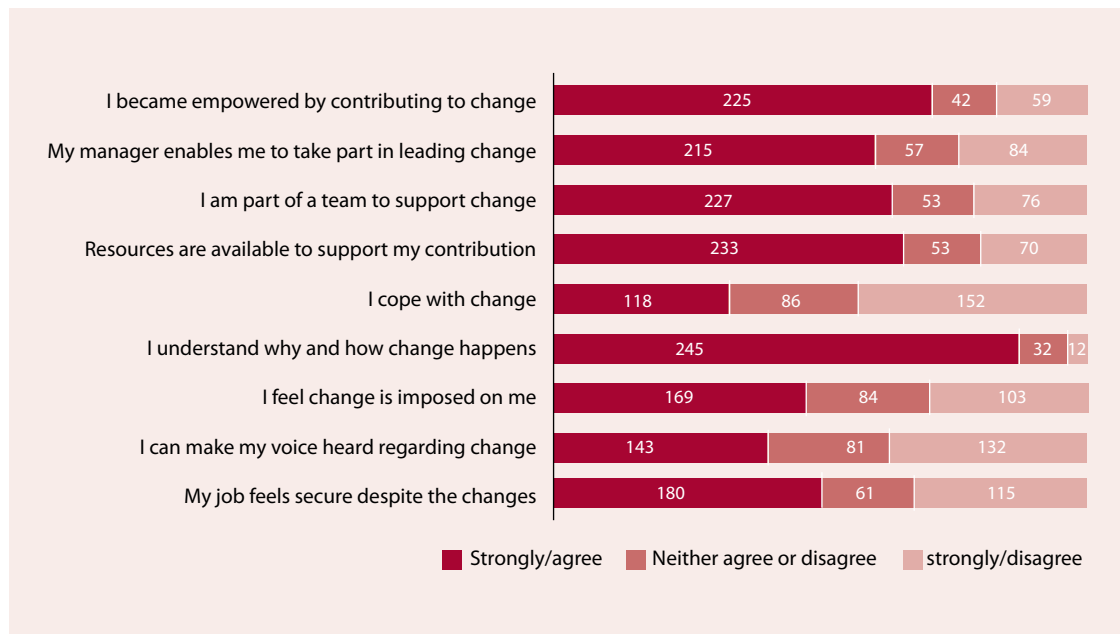## The emotional response to change: support and academic staff wellbeing

While many of the changes highlighted in the previous section have a material quality impacting on and creating new ways of working, and in some cases actually new places in which to work, participants also stressed the emotional impact that continuous change has on their ability to cope and on their wellbeing.

"Change is persistent and ongoing. Referring to 'change' somehow implies it is a fixed thing whereas to me it seems more on an ongoing evolution of processes. My institution is changing so rapidly (it needed to in many ways) that our academics are struggling to keep up."

[Professional services, university not disclosed]

As reported in Figure 4 below, the relationship between change and personal and emotional impact is not straightforward.

Figure 4: Impact of change on staff (Source: survey)

However, this last point chimes with evidence regarding how their universities supported respondents to cope with change, showing a different and less positive picture (Figure 5). While a slight majority of respondents felt that their university helps them to understand why and how change is happening (56% and 51% respectively), only 19% (n 67) agree or strongly agree that their university 'effectively manages expectations from different stakeholders', and only 32% (n 112) agree or strongly agree that their university 'communicates well before, during and after change'. Along similar lines, only 32% (n 128) agree/strongly agree that their university 'implements change by supporting collaborative work'.

While 88% (n 312) claimed to cope with change, and 72% (n 255) felt empowered by being part of change, only 40% (n 143) felt that they were listened to and 47% (n 169) felt that change was imposed on them. The picture is more positive at the team level where 60% (n 215) stated that managers enabled them to take part in leading change. Despite the overall positive perceptions of respondents' abilities to personally cope with change, only 33% (n 118) agreed or strongly agreed they had the necessary resources available.

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Figure 5: How universities support change (source: survey)
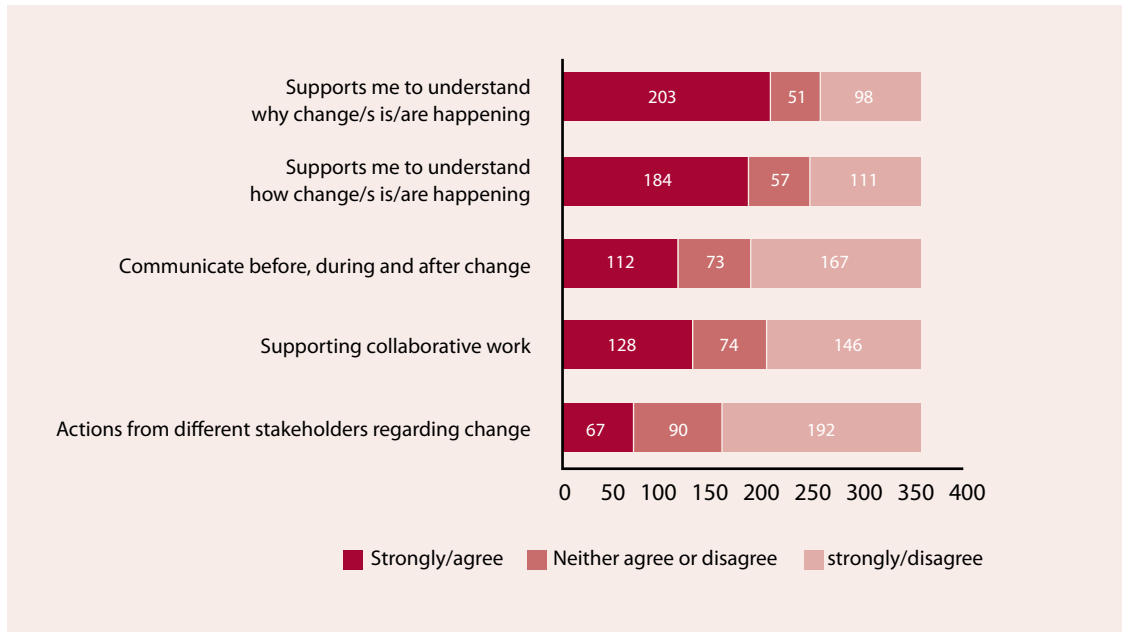
The evidence about how individuals cope at the personal level and within their closest team portrays an overall positive picture of staff being able to adjust to change and feeling supported. Yet, it is at the level of how the university and its management support staff that the picture becomes more negative. Lack of communication and effective inclusion of all stakeholders show a possible inability of senior management to relate to staff. Both issues of communication and inclusion are also relevant, as we will report in more detail in the next section, on the nature of leadership and the features of the leader.

Although most of the respondents confirmed the survey results that leaders have the key responsibility to make change happen, some of them added that leading change is a responsibility of everyone in the organisation:

"I think of it as 'leadership as a verb rather than as a noun'. So it isn't about any one person, it is about the collective activity of taking the opportunity when they present themselves, to actually support, develop, bring along other people. And that can shift on a constant and regular basis."
[Sector agency manager A]

It is also clear that change is an emotional process that everyone engages with in a different way. The emotional aspect of change was well captured by the drawing activity participants were asked to engage with at the start of the focus group. Most of the respondents' drawings and explanations portrayed change as a journey, at times stressful and threatening, but also an opportunity to look forward to.

"I feel like I'm a juggler, I'm dancing and these are all the balls, of course, and I can't drop any of them because I've got to keep the students happy, I've got to keep the staff happy, that's mainly academics but some professional services as well. I've got to keep the top table happy, because it's all about money."
[Academic A]

Leadership

Findings related to leadership show, again, a varied picture, with similarities and differences across the workforce and tensions, at times, even within a single individual. As the leader of one association explained,

"We're seeing this kind of globalisation market, the marketisation of higher education on a global level driving league tables, performance metrics and kind of driving a new managerialism into institutions which are impacting on the academic leadership role and, you know, academic leadership is driven by a core set of values and beliefs, behaviours, practices which have a set of timelines, a set of philosophies which are directly challenged by different timelines in the organisational world, different measures of performance and there is a kind of clash, I think, between some of the things. So, for me, the way forward in terms of this change process is the increasing need for dialogue between not just, as you say, academics and administrators but within academics intra as well as inter community."

[Sector agency leader A]

The suggestion that a solution to the challenges the higher education sector faces is an 'increasing need for dialogue' reflects the evidence gathered from the survey in which a lack of communication was perceived as being unsupportive of staff. Simultaneously, the quote above sheds light on the external drivers that leaders have to contend with. In such a context, the qualities, skills and competences of university leaders are key to enabling change and creating the premises within which change can happen.

The qualities of leaders and leadership

With regard to leaders and leadership qualities, which are perceived to be supportive of change, there seems to be an expectation that leaders should have a range of qualities and styles to be deployed differently in different contexts to achieve different purposes.

"… does it [higher education] need a new kind of leadership? […] I think we maybe need to … keep continuously adapting our leadership approach to the context – context is all and the leader's role is to interpret what's going on in that external environment and make it make sense for people and to… the leaders job is to interpret it, know what the right thing is to do, OK, and then take people on that journey. So I don't think there's anything much new about that but I think perhaps what needs to be new, particularly in universities is how you go about doing that and it's the emotional intelligence thing."

[Sector agency leader A]

The quote above is symptomatic of many others which stressed the role of leaders as effective communicators, able interpreters, and capable of using their emotional intelligence to adapt their message. The quote also reflects the overlapping of and simultaneous distinction between leaders and leadership. Participants in this study used the terms to refer to 'formal' leaders and formal leadership, that is senior management. In this case, they usually referred to the qualities and role of the vice-chancellors. However, both in the survey and in the interviews and focus groups, participants also reiterated the fact that leaders and leadership are to be found across the institution. The effective implementation of change, thus requires leaders and leadership to be distributed and diffused across all levels of the organisation.

Whether formally recognised within a traditional hierarchical structure, or more flexible and diffused, the key features of good leaders and leadership are related to communication, trustworthiness, vision, integrity and empathy as shown in the word cloud below drawn from the survey responses (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Features of good leaders (source: national survey)

Within the need for an emotionally intelligent leader, interview and focus groups participants further outlined the features of transformational, ethical, authentic and distributive leadership styles. Leaders are expected to have knowledge of the wider picture, set the vision, be good listeners, and be competent communicators who can 'translate' in such a way to make the changes required meaningful and understandable. As another leader of an higher education association said, leaders should be able to:

"unblock the blockers" and "have the courage to drive things forward."

[Sector agency leader B]

Courage was used by other participants as a key quality. Interestingly, it was used in relation to the leader knowing when to stop and when to acknowledge that too much change is not required and, in the long run, ineffective. Related to courage, other key features outlined by participants were integrity, authenticity and the ability to admit one's lack of knowledge, and possible failure. A leader of a higher education association described the successful leaders as those who

"… can adopt colours but they are true to themselves."

[Sector agency leader B]

The notion of a brave but also pragmatic leader who can change to 'adopt' new styles and adapt to the context also reveals some tensions in the participants' expectations of how such qualities could and should be put in practice. While on the one hand, for example, there is the expectation that leaders will be able to develop their staff, be facilitators, get things done by collaborating with staff and making decisions based on trust and respect, there is also a 'dark side' of leadership where change is not a consensual agreement, but an imposition decided behind back doors. A senior manager provides this explanation of the drawing reflecting change,

"So what I've drawn basically is just a box at the top with the leaders and then a box way down at the bottom with everyone else. And around the leaders there's sort of, focus groups and a bit of chat going on. And there's some things being said by everyone else at the bottom. And I've got two arrows going down from leaders to everyone else. So I should stress, this is not so much my own perception of the changes that are happening, but a sort of institution-wide thing that I see. So what I've tried to convey visually (quite badly) is there's a lot of stuff that seems to be going on by the leaders who are doing change. So they're holding focus groups, they're holding, you know, 'Let's come and consult; please tell us what you want us to hear; please email us if you have anything to day'. And people are saying stuff but it doesn't seem to be getting up here, so it's all going one way and not the other.'
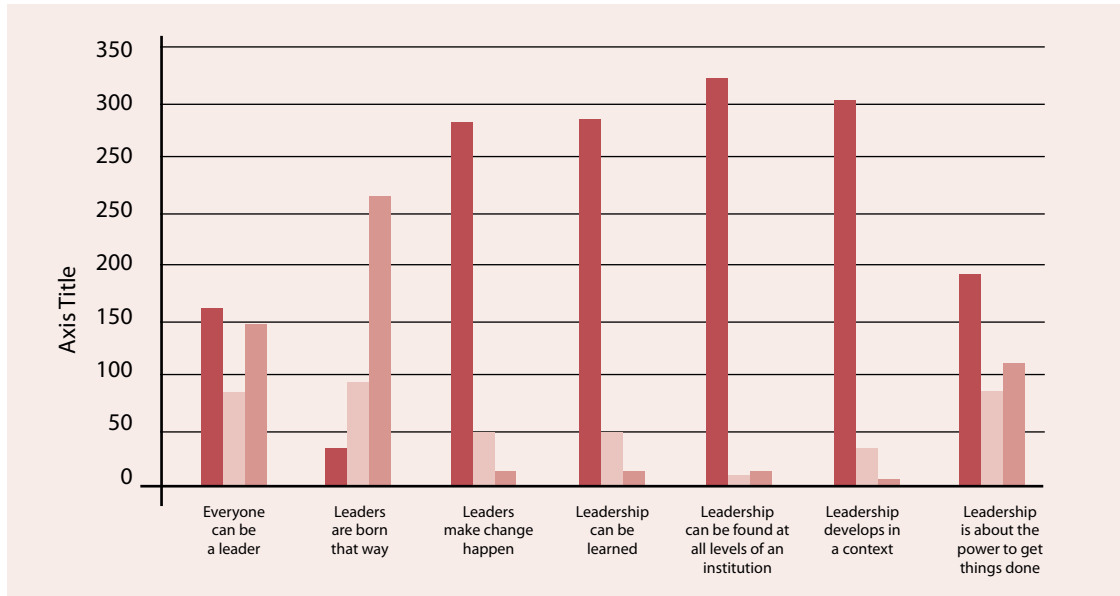
[Professional services A]

Such tensions between collaboration, power distribution and inclusivity and a more authoritarian and managerialist approach surface throughout the participants' accounts and are further supported by the survey findings.

Leaders supporting change: inclusive and 'diffused' leadership

The overwhelming majority (95%) of survey respondents across the entire workforce agreed that leadership can be found at all levels of the institution, it is contextual, and it can be learned rather than being an innate feature. However, only 41% (146) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that 'everyone can be a leader'. This finding might point to the fact that while leadership can be found at all levels and therefore not just as formal leadership, in reality being and becoming a leader is a much more complex enterprise.

In regard to change, although 84% (300) of the respondents believed that 'leaders can make change happen', only 50% (177) agreed that leadership is about the 'power to get things done'. The remaining 50% of respondents were roughly split equally between those who disagreed or neither agreed or disagreed. This evidence raises questions as to how leaders can get things done. One possible explanation was that the choice of words determined the response. This is supported by the evidence from the interviews and focus groups where the word 'power' is rarely used and most probably associated with authoritarian styles of leadership.

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Figure 7: Relationship between leaders/leadership and change (source: survey)

A further question elicited respondents' views on leaders' actions and behaviours that the literature sees as conducive to supporting change and whether such behaviours were occurring. There are a number of significant and interesting findings that reveal the complexity of doing leadership, reported in Table 3. Overall, respondents agreed or strongly agreed with all statements, although less so with the one related to monitoring performance.

Interestingly though, this is also one of the two actions which respondents feel are happening to a great extent, 'setting the vision' being the one cited to be happening the most. The action that is happening the least is the sharing and distribution of power by leaders.

Table 3: Expectations and reality of leaders' actions and behaviours

	Strongly agree/ agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly disagree/ disagree	Happening to a great extent	Happening to some extent	Not happening
Leaders should discuss organisation changes with staff before taking action	326	22	6	24	187	60
Leaders should recognise staff achievements	350	4	1	35	191	44
Leaders should enable staff to develop their skills and ideas	352	2	1	38	195	35
Leaders should direct staff and monitor performance	217	68	63	55	178	37
Leaders should share and distribute power	312	37	5	12	158	92
Leaders should set the vision and the strategy	287	41	22	99	135	33

The findings from the two questions reported in Figure 8 below and Table 3 raise further questions in relation to how respondents view leaders and leadership. They reiterate the view of leaders and leadership as supportive, fair and distributive. They also show that these are not happening to the extent wished for. A possible answer to this conundrum can be found in the mismatch between how respondents feel they act and the extent to which the institution acknowledges it.

Figure 8 shows that while 238 respondents considered themselves working as leaders, only 159 are recognised in this role. Given that 84% believed that leaders make change happen and that 95% thought leadership can be found at all levels of an institution, this finding raises some serious questions about the effective management of human resources and the use of leadership potential within institutions.

Figure 8: Personal perception of leadership role and institutional recognition
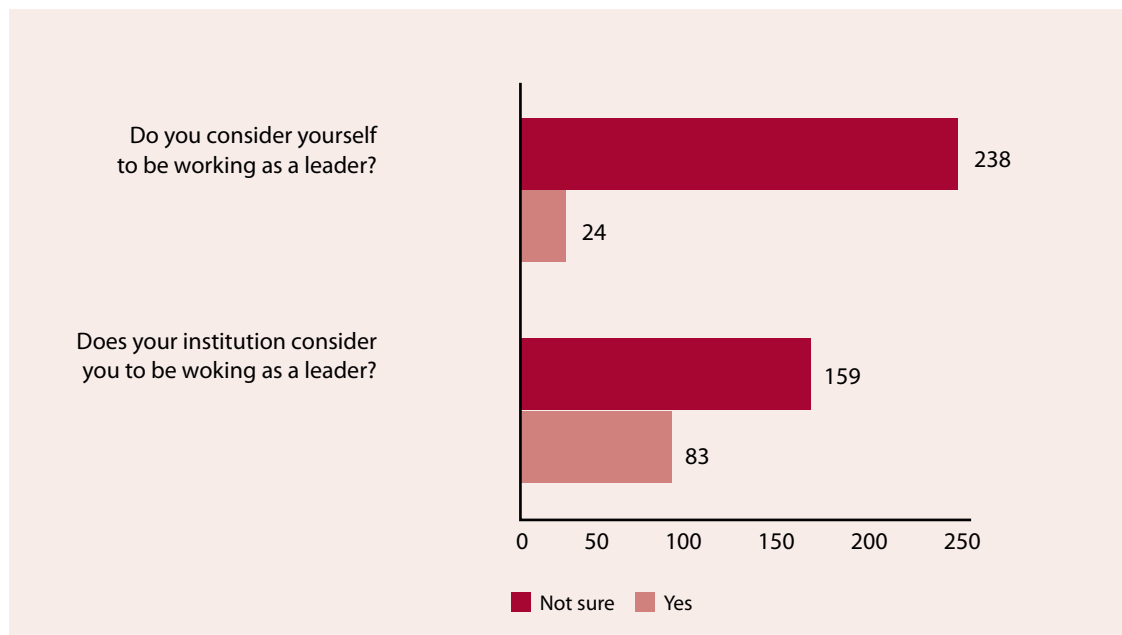
Participants in the focus groups and interviews spoke of both leaders and leadership in terms of aspirations of what a good leader or good leadership should be like by providing more practical examples of leadership in action. However, there was a tendency to ascribe leader and leadership to those who are already formally invested with leadership roles, a finding which seems to disagree with the wider views from the survey.

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Working together

"And my belief is just, you know, we need to have a more inclusive approach to change."

[Academic B]

Within universities, it is increasingly necessary to deliver change projects and activities that oblige staff from diverse backgrounds to work together. Our research shows that change is endemic in UK higher education institutions with participants offering rich descriptions of diverse examples of changes that are taking place, at whole institution level or within particular sections of the university such as a faculty or department. It was clear that dealing with the challenges facing contemporary higher education is a necessity and that it requires professional services staff and academics to develop close working relationships and create cross-sectional teams.

"We have absolutely no choice as a sector but to look at our systems, which are completely antiquated in many cases; which have to be renewed and revitalised because we won't be able to function in the modern world when the rest of the world is, you know, taking leaps and bounds in relation to their systems."

[Sector agency leader A]

In this section, we explore staff roles and effective relationships among diverse higher education staff within the change management process. Our research found some innovative methods being used to bring individuals together in formal development and informal contexts to create the conditions for effective change and yet our research participants spoke at length about the roles of academic and professional services staff (see for example, Conway, 2014; Deem, 2008; Martinelli-Fernandez, 2010) and the relationships between them. Key among our findings from this area of our research was the need to support middle managers and those considered to be change agents as well as to develop trust and involvement in change among people.

Creating cross-sectional teams and building respect among individuals

Cross-sectional relationships and teams require time and space to develop respect and trust for one another and knowledge of the different views and skills that individuals hold. This is enabled through the development of a shared understanding, often limited initially by differences in the language use among individuals and groups, and by their varied perceptions or views of the change or issue. Cross-sectional teams work well when there is a nurtured sense of genuine partnership, where teams are not pitted against each other but are brought to work together towards a clear shared goal that is focused on continuous improvement or resolving an issue. In terms of overall workplace relationships, developing trust and acts of support for one another were felt to be key in terms of ensuring effectiveness.

"I've seen a lot of people working together and when they do they come up with very creative solutions because they can understand both sides of the coin and they can resolve an issue."

[Academic C]

"Frankly, the best way to build respect is to get people working together"

[Sector agency leader C]

"…probably need to look at the structures that actually support and reward collaborative work and the bringing together of people able to work on shared goals."

[Sector agency leader D]

Perceptions of academics, professional services staff and their different roles

The role of an academic today was recognised as being much broader than the traditional triumvirate of research, teaching and administration. However, research was commonly singled out as the defining activity of the academic role. Characteristics that define academic leadership comprised core values and beliefs and behaviours and practices enacted by senior leaders in the university although it was noted that the most senior leadership roles were no longer only occupied by those with academic backgrounds.

Professional services, as a group of roles and role holders within universities, was a less developed and understood term. It was often used interchangeably with administrative staff or instead, specific roles or responsibilities were named, for example library staff, human resources, marketing and admissions. Indeed, it was recognised that the term and the contrast to academic work was reductive.

"…there isn't just one typical person who works in professional services, so it's a bit reductive just to say "oh well, it's professional services and it's academics."
[Professional service B]

When considered in a unified way, the role of professional services staff was described as to 'make it work', 'create a smooth oiled machine' around academic endeavour and to translate that work for those outside the university sector.

"And maybe it's the job of us in professional services to rephrase what you're doing, we'll do the linguistic acrobatics to make it meet up with the current vogue vocabulary used by government, but you keep doing what you're doing."
[Professional services C]

The strong archetypes of academics and professional services staff described here clearly persist in many organisations despite a range of examples in this research that challenge the simplistic distinction and present some strong views on the limitations of simplification. For example, newer roles are being created to lead and manage areas of academic activity. One individual described her job role as unique to her institution.

"I would consider myself an academic although I'm not on an academic contract."
[Academic D]

There were many examples given of academics that had moved into professional services roles and where some past experience of empathy with the academic role was supportive in their new professional services role. We also heard about professional services staff that were contributing to academic enterprise by lecturing students on their specialism. Examples were also shared that challenged the notion of universities as institutions led by senior academic teams. There were examples of people with more varied, often commercial or public sector backgrounds, being appointed to the most senior academic leadership roles, including that of vice-chancellor. There was evidence of power-sharing between academic and professional service role holders in the senior team and of changes taking place to the composition and background skill sets of those elected to university councils and boards.

Change agents as translational links are those who articulate change

In this research, a key element of working together effectively was the identification and preparedness of people who had fundamental roles to share information about the change process. These people were important to make change locally relevant to people.

"I think you do have to find a hook for people. I think you have to make the changes relevant to people. They have to see why it was important to them; how it's going to benefit them and what they're going to get out of it. And if they don't understand it or see that there is any benefit to them then you are going to struggle to get any buy-in."
[Academic E]

"You've got to find people who are able to articulate the change and why we're doing the change, even of itself, and not seen as change agents as a means to their own personal ends …We all see the same end there but we're using different language to get to the means."
[Professional services C]

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The term 'translational link' was introduced by one research participant to describe the importance of people that could enable communication among different people. These links are individuals who might be directly involved in the change process, or might be tangentially linked to the change.

"What you have is really good relationships here… but what you don't have is a good translational link between people who understand here and understand here and are able to facilitate communication between the two."

[Professional services D]

Working and relationship building with others: informal and formal mechanisms

A key contributor to the success of working together was the creation of fora through which individuals came together to develop respect, trust and knowledge of one another and sometimes of change processes and practices. These fora have additional benefits.

"We have a, kind of a Managers' Away Day …. I asked them afterwards what they got out of it, they said they were really frightened about going because - I was really surprised at that, because they work with people across the institution all the time. But they said that - and at the end… and the value to them was the fact that they said they'd sat next to somebody at dinner and they had got to know them. And suddenly they were a person rather than a title. And they felt they could pick up the phone."

[Professional services E]

Concern was nonetheless raised about the limits to the value of formal fora that were not well managed. There were also a number of research participants that valued informal meetings and events.

"I have used fora to address organisational challenges but (this must have) a clear purpose otherwise people get really cross sitting around having a chat without purpose it needs to achieve something…"

[Sector agency leader A]

"I think the university could have more informal mechanisms, such as having shared social spaces that colleagues could access. So not for formal meetings as such but just social space at lunchtimes or whatever, when people can come together and informally find out more about what one another do, etc. I think that enhances communication and networks."

[Academic D]

"…we have a new singing group, I never thought that people [who] like to sing so much, about 150 people want to join, there's a first meeting in January… That is also the environment that people from academic and professional services backgrounds can really join in and meet each other."

[Academic C]

Staff development as a joint academic and professional services staff activity

A number of the interviewed participants commented on the value of learning and development opportunities. These were perceived as particularly valuable for middle managers, to support their development of leadership capabilities and skills of working together to effect change and enabling succession planning. It was notable that, in the senior executive teams, academic and professional services staff would routinely work together. However, cross-sectional working practices commonly needed to be facilitated and supported at lower levels in the organisation. In our survey, 30.8% of respondents had received some leadership development. For those that had not, the main reasons for not doing so were they were not in a leadership position (16.7%), they were not given the option (32.5%) or were refused owing to a lack of financial support (7.5%). 71.8% of respondents were interested in leadership development.

Figure 9: Reasons for not attending leadership programmes
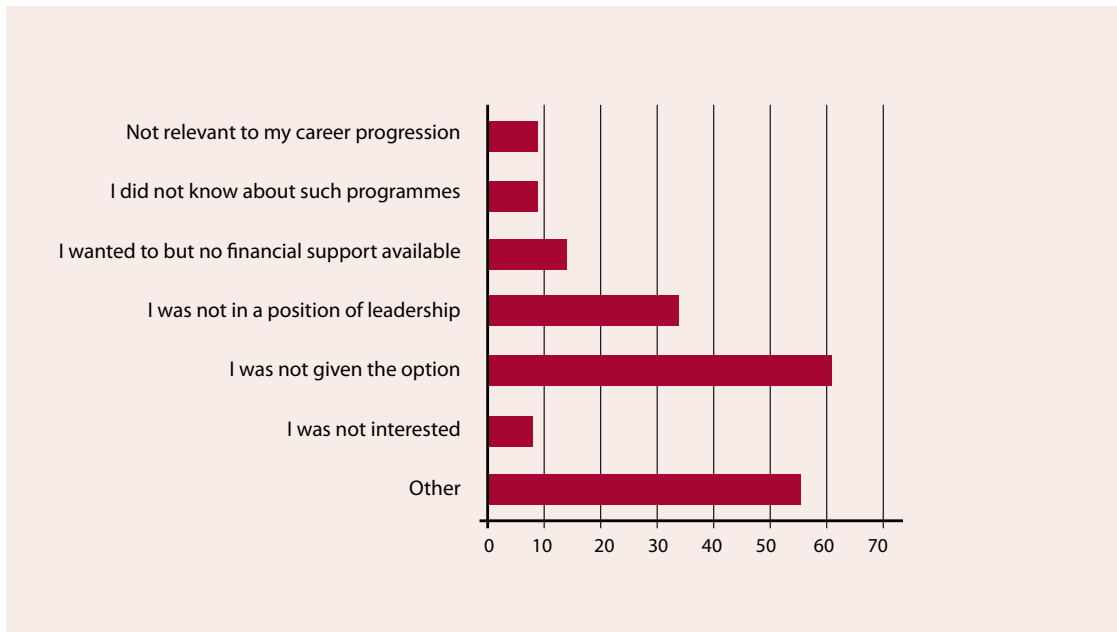
Yet 71.8 % of respondents were interested in leadership development.

"…when we talk about leadership we always think about the vice-chancellor and the executive team, but actually the people who are going to make the change are the people in the middle."
[Academic C]

Institutions provide leadership development and change management support as training and development programmes, conferences, using live project work, as away days with an element of networking to develop social cohesion among varied role holders, as wrap-around support to teams embarking on change programmes, through coaching and as action learning.

"…they can be a very powerful tool for cultivating change actually, for learning and development but they need to be well designed, well structured, well-led, facilitated."
[Sector agency leader A]

Approaches to learning and development that were inclusive, bringing together diverse colleagues to learn from and with each other and through exposure to real world dilemmas and projects were valued.

Work around complex tasks, that required the diverse expertise and skills of a range of colleagues was considered rich ground for development as, through working together, participants would learn to trust and respect each other despite their very different roles in the organisation. Space and time for networking was valued for the same reasons. Spaces were valued that allowed people to meet others informally and to experiment and be creative with ideas. Time away from the role was considered important to reflect on learning and role delivery.

"Training is for having dedicated time away from your day job to reflect on your practice."
[Professional services D]

"There's been some feedback we've picked up, one of the most powerful bits of the process, I think has been the networking."
[Professional services E]

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Development of middle managers and key role holders for succession planning

Interviewees and focus group participants talked about the need for widespread communication and engagement with change and the critical role of middle managers, who are perhaps less interested in strategy and who may not have a full insight into the rationale or details of the purposes of change. They described experiences where they had seen a wide gap in readiness for change and the understanding of the drivers and need for change between the most senior leaders and the rest of the organisation. They described middle managers as playing a crucial role in operationalising change and in motivating and empowering others: in effect, leading change on the ground. It was suggested that giving them as much responsibility as possible to determine the approach to problem solving was a way to make change leadership more meaningful and supporting them to take forward that responsibility was key. Acknowledging and recognising distributed leadership was noted as a tactic employed in one institute, which had grown fast in recent years and had developed a lot of new leadership roles to help with the management of change.

"I think the level at which it's going to be difficult is not the senior management level, or indeed even director or probably heads of department, it's going to be – maybe heads of department, that kind of middle tranche of managers …who find their roles most difficult because they've got to look upwards and downwards at the same time and manage things operationally, but also be aware that things are changing for them, uncomfortably."

[Professional services E]

Seeking early engagement in change processes leads to success

Engagement of individuals within the change process, particularly from the outset, was felt to be a particularly important aspect of working together. The benefits of early engagement were described as discussion, shared skills and creativity to problem solve and develop solutions.

"…I also think that it's a good opportunity to get together with different groups of people with different skill sets and ideas so that we can share understanding and learn a bit more about our colleagues' input into a certain system or process, which we can use to try and drive that change forward and learn at the same time."

[Academic D]

"…it's like when they say, 'You will do this', there's not enough discussion. I wish there was more discussion about how we do it, rather than, 'Let's do that', first. Because I think if we could work together from the start, to work together to work out how to do it, I think it would work better and there would be more acceptance."

[Professional services G]

"A good example I can think of has been my own department, which is being restructured, not fundamentally but it's affecting me and my team a lot, under a new director. But his line was very much, 'I'm not completely sure what I want to do, but we want to achieve this. I have this strategic thing and the VC seems to be up for it, so we'll need to make some changes, so here's my sketch of what I think it's moving towards…. - he wasn't completely sure about the detail yet and wanted some input on that and - asking for help is a hugely successful tactic. And I mean, not just in terms of getting people on board and as a communication tactic, but also in terms of getting the content right."

[Professional services D] ■

05 Discussion and conclusion

The evidence collected through the national and cross-sectional survey, interviews, focus groups and individual drawings shows a complex and, at times, contradictory set of expectations with regard to how change is led and managed, and how academics and professional services staff are supported and cope with change. While external drivers have given rise to a more managerialist, performative and business-like approach to how universities are run, collegial and collaborative approaches are still evident.

This is particularly the case at the middle or lower institutional levels, such as departments and teams, where the study collected evidence of successful partnerships between academics and colleagues in the professional services. At these levels, the pragmatic need to implement change results in a blurring and challenging of traditional and more hierarchical notions of leaders and leadership. It is within these newly constituted partnerships that change agents as translational links reshape the boundaries between long-held distinctions of roles and professional identity and can reconfigure teamwork, knowledge sharing and application. The role of middle manager was identified as critical.

Yet, these new ways of working can remain isolated instances or temporary measures not shared across the institution, or not sustained beyond the moment of need. In this regard, evidence from the survey shows that university staff have to contend not with a single, uniform change but, rather, with multiple and simultaneous changes, some of which seemingly stretch limited resources in opposite directions.

The role of leaders becomes central in such a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous context. Participants in the study expected their leaders to set the vision, guide them through the array of competing demands, but also to communicate effectively by being trusted interpreters. A lack of communication and dialogue, which is inclusive of all stakeholders, was highlighted as one of the reasons for failure to implement change.

Additionally, unwillingness to enter into dialogue was also perceived as one of the causes of breakdown of the relationships between staff and senior management.

However, the study did not find outright resistance to change. Participants at all levels and across the higher education sector viewed change as a necessity. However, there were also instances where change felt like an imposition, or where not enough resources were allocated to secure a successful outcome. In such situations where change was not managed effectively, staff paid an emotional toll.

In conclusion, the study was able to shed light on the nature and impact of change, and on the role of leaders and leadership. The study showed that effective leadership is not only distributed but also diffused across the organisation, at times in ways which traditional recognition and reward systems do not recognise.

However, the study's original contribution to the timely issue was in bringing to the fore examples of effective practices of collaboration between academics, professional services and senior management. The study was not intended to explore the details of how such practices are established, evolve and are sustained. Consequently, further research and applied work is needed to explore the distinctiveness and complementarity of different stakeholders' roles in change management. In particular, as an outcome of the study, we suggest there is more to learn about the roles played by middle manager professional services staff in higher education providers and the work of "rank-and-file" academics. ■

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06 Recommendations

For institutional senior leaders

▌ Our research shows there are benefits of early and ongoing engagement in change processes by as many, and as diverse, stakeholders as practicable. Leaders should ensure the greatest early involvement of individuals in change processes to facilitate productive engagement in the process of change.

▌ Cross-sectional working and teams are crucial to the delivery of projects responding to complex change in the higher education sector. Bringing people together to develop trust and respect is crucial to allow effective collaboration. It requires time, commitment and investment in the support and development of cross-sectional teams and needs to be proactively managed by leaders in institutions.

▌ Institutions should consider the further development of context-specific and appropriate fora where individuals with leadership responsibilities and/or engaged in change can discuss and resolve challenges associated with leadership, change and working together.

▌ Effective leadership is not only distributed but also diffused across the organisation, at times in ways which traditional operating system do not recognise. Therefore, we recommend reviewing the current approaches and alternative possibilities to acknowledge, recognise and reward both formal but informal leadership skills and competences.

For those with responsibility for learning and development

▌ Effective practices described in this study were those which involved all members of a team or brought together individuals across departments and functions. We therefore recommend the creation of more development activity and cost-effective, inclusive learning and development opportunities for leaders in higher education providers which explicitly bring together diverse role holders. These activities need to invite academic and professional services staff to learn together around the real, challenging work that their institution must tackle to meet the external demands on higher education providers.

▌ Middle managers are a critical locus for support and development in driving forward change and projects responding to external changes in higher education providers. Our survey shows they are overwhelmingly interested in staff development opportunities but are often not offered the opportunities. We recommend undertaking more work to better identify and then appropriately support these key individuals who could act as effective change agents through staff development or other more informal or experiential mechanisms.

For higher education researchers

▌ In our study we found differences among the views and experiences of individuals based on their institution, their change context and their role. Further work to explore the distinctiveness of the roles of middle managers, professional services staff and academics in higher education providers in the context of change could expose better the value and importance of diverse role holders in extending institutional agility to better deliver the mission of higher education providers in complex, changing contexts. ■

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