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BUILDING A SENSE OF BELONGING IN HE: WHY LEADERSHIP MATTERS

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Biography

Professor Liz Mossop is Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University. She is a veterinary surgeon whose academic career has focused on teaching and learning, specifically clinical education. She was a founding staff member at the School of Veterinary Medicine and Science, University of Nottingham where she led and evaluated curricular initiatives. She was Deputy Vice Chancellor (Student Development and Engagement) at the University of Lincoln, later becoming Provost. She moved to Sheffield Hallam in 2024. She holds a PhD in clinical education and is a Fellow of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons.

ABSTRACT

Leadership at all levels of an institution is important in order to develop and build a community which supports a sense of belonging amongst students in higher education. Without visible and engaged leaders, initiatives at all levels are unlikely to fulfil their potential. Universities are complex communities, and leaders need appropriate skills to recognise and grow connections between different stakeholders, to ensure their community is one in which students can thrive both academically and personally. Whilst students should always be the first priority, balancing their expectations and needs with those of academic and professional service colleagues, as well as the demands of internal governance and external regulatory bodies, can be challenging.

Leadership theory is helpful to support reflection on skills and approaches. Distributed leadership and complexity leadership are both useful theories to consider in the context of developing trust with students as a basis for a strategic approach to developing a sense of belonging. Working with students and the Students Union as partners is key in this, with consideration of the challenges and opportunities this approach brings. Several steps should be considered when planning and implementing student engagement and belonging initiatives, including evaluation of impact.

KEYWORDS

Leadership, higher education, strategy development, students as partners, organisational culture

Why leadership matters in belonging work

Higher education (HE) is a complex and challenging environment, consisting of multiple stakeholders often with competing priorities. This complexity is even more challenging in a multi-site institution, or a multi-institution Higher Education Institute (HEI) (Jarrett and Newton, 2021). Resources are frequently strained, and the influence of external policy is strong, with multiple regulatory bodies requiring evidence of a broad set of quality and standards in teaching and supporting students. If students are to develop a sense of belonging to an educational community and thrive within it, effective leadership at all levels is needed to ensure appropriate prioritisation is given to strategies which support this approach. My institution is a large post-92 HEI with a high proportion of students from underrepresented backgrounds. Belonging is a key consideration at all stages of the student life cycle, and this has particularly come into focus following the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic. The direct link between belonging, retention and attainment is a key consideration in ensuring students with potential can thrive. Initiatives are embedded within and external to the curriculum to encourage students to identify both with their discipline and with the university and city. Working with students is key to this - they know “what works” and partnership is essential, particularly with the Students’ Union.

Whilst the many competing priorities in HEIs may mean a focus on building a sense belonging for students is challenging to prioritise, there are clear reasons for doing so beyond the obvious benefit to the students themselves. It is important to recognise that students who develop a stronger sense of belonging to their HEI and engage both within and outside of the curriculum are more likely to be satisfied by their experience and complete their studies (Masika & Jones 2015; Johnson et al 2015; Naughton et al 2024). This satisfaction is likely to lead to a stronger academic performance and a more positive perception of their time studying in Higher Education (Thomas, 2012; O’Keeffe, 2013). The current UK HE climate means positive student outcomes for students from all backgrounds alongside a positive perception of their experience expressed through the National Student Survey is critical for strong performance in metrics such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Leaders at

all levels, including student leaders, should therefore be interested and engaged with considering how to build a community in which both students and their colleagues feel a sense of strong and long-lasting belonging. As belonging is “complex and multi-dimensional” in students (Ahn and Davis, 2020), it is likely that a range of initiatives will provide support, meaning that a clear overarching institutional strategy is important.

This conceptual chapter discusses the importance of considering strategic leadership of individual student belonging initiatives at HEIs, as well their relevance to overarching teaching and learning strategies aimed at enhancing student engagement and experiences holistically.

The importance of culture

HEIs are examples of complex adaptive systems and therefore assuming that a straightforward “command and control” model of leadership will deliver the intended outcomes of sense of belonging projects and initiatives is unlikely to be effective. Notions of control and consistency as are frequently lacking within HEIs, and leadership involves tolerating uncertainty and ambiguity (April and Hill, 2000; Newton, 2023). Whilst heroic leaders may have strong charisma which influences organisational culture, there are alternative and more reliable ways of ensuring this influence from leaders (Schein, 2010). Different leadership approaches and theories underpinning them in HE will be considered later in this chapter, but whatever style is adopted may become ineffective if organisational culture is not a key consideration (Hogan and Coote, 2014)(Johnson, 2015). Good leaders at all levels of the organisation need to consider the unseen influences both students and faculty will experience every day, which are inherently shaping their behaviours. These inherent “organisational habits” are often value-related and include things like rituals, routines structures and role models within a community (Johnson, 2015). Whilst organisational culture can be difficult to influence, active and critical reflection by leaders and teams will help to surface challenges and identify aspects which may be preventing initiatives from delivering.

Johnson’s 2015 cultural web model is a good starting point for this process. The framework identifies six main areas to consider: symbols, stories, power structure, organisational structures, control systems and rituals and routines. A collective exercise of discussing and identifying these elements is particularly useful if there are concerns that the culture or

“hidden curriculum” within an HEI may not be particularly inclusive or welcoming to students (Mossop *et al.*, 2013). This exercise can be particularly powerful when conducted with students. By reflecting on their own experiences of developing belonging within their HEI they often identify hidden, unseen negative aspects which otherwise would not be addressed.

Once an understanding of organisational culture is identified, leaders can work to proactively address elements which may be perceived as working against any attempts to increase belonging amongst students. For example, a lack of clear Equality, Diversity and Inclusion leadership and actions within an HEI could mean students feel “othered” by an organisation. Whilst HEIs in England must produce an Access and Participation Plan, expecting this to be delivered without key resources for student support would again impact negatively on organisational culture if the intention is to deliver an inclusive approach to the student experience. Addressing these issues is always more powerful when working in partnership with students and the Students’ Union. Co-created strategies and initiatives are then developed to help support a sense of belonging amongst students which is relevant and applicable. However, it is important to continue to reflect on organisational culture which itself will change inherently as well as through proactive influence. Leaders at HEIs must be aware that their good intentions in helping to support students could be damaged by organisational culture, and if initiatives fail this should always be part of the analysis (Hafferty, 1998). This requires flexibility and dynamism to respond to external and internal pressures, and the adaptable and engaged leader is far more likely to succeed.

Educational leadership

Effective leadership of teaching, learning and the educational environment of an HEI has been described as having three dimensions (Quinlan, 2014). Firstly, a leader must have knowledge of teaching and learning. This may seem obvious, but the professionalisation of teaching within higher education has ensured this expertise is readily available and important for credible leadership of initiatives which influence student learning. Secondly, Quinlan lists personal characteristics – appropriate values and authenticity facilitating leadership and influence. Finally, she describes the ability to create organisational conditions which enable teaching and learning initiatives to flourish – the culture of the HEI which should support individual leaders to influence practice and develop new approaches, as described in the

previous section of this chapter. These three dimensions sit within the broader context of the HEI and society more broadly and form a useful framework.

Leadership is a somewhat fluid concept within HEIs, with individuals stepping between leadership and followership depending on the context in which they are working. For example, as a Lecturer an academic could be leading a module or set of activities for students – developing content and assessments and engaging others in their delivery. This has been described as “little l” leadership (Bohmer, 2010) and is carried out in the context of a broader programme, led by another individual. A more senior service director, identified as a “big L” leader, may lead large numbers of colleagues – for example in student wellbeing, leading a team of student support staff and counsellors. It is important to recognise that this leadership is done in the context of the broader university strategy, meaning they are “managing up” as well as down to their direct team. Leadership is therefore present at all levels of an HEI, and students are a crucial part of this, leading initiatives and groups aiming to enhance the student experience or working in partnership with staff on larger strategic projects (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2016).

Leadership theory

It is helpful at this point to consider relevant leadership theory relating to leadership of belonging within Higher Education. Two theories – distributed leadership and complexity leadership - are used as a stimulus for reflection. Any leader considering how to develop their skills in relationship to co creation and belonging will be helped by proactively considering these theories and reflecting on which may help them understand how to lead better in this context. Leadership theory should not be considered an instruction booklet – they are a way of reflecting on how you lead as an individual, but not one size fits all. Leadership skills take time and support for development which should also be provided through peer feedback, group reflection and specific professional development programmes, with active participation in experiential learning.

Distributed leadership

Contemporary leadership theory moves away from simple consideration of the skills good leaders require and instead includes context and environment when describing different approaches. Distributed leadership was traditionally described by Spillane et al (Spillane,

Halverson and Diamond, 2001) as a shift away from the heroic individual leading a school or other educational establishment to a set of strategic objectives. Instead, leaders should be re-identifiable across all levels of the organisation, working to influence and inform each other, in a network working towards outcomes informed by a similar value set (Quinlan, 2021).

This approach is frequently seen in higher education, where different leaders sit at all levels of the organisation including students themselves, either individually or collectively through Students Union representation. Individuals are very likely to develop new initiatives or projects to support student belonging – and joining up these innovative ideas can be challenging. However, the development of cross disciplinary/ departmental networks within higher education have the potential to function effectively and collaboratively to ensure a sharing of practice. This can be formal – for example within higher education teacher development programmes, or at teaching and learning conferences and networks. It is frequently informal, given the natural peer support within a collegiate system.

Complexity leadership

Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) has emerged from the concept of complexity science which recognises the intricate and complex nature of systems and organisations. It encourages a move away from solely top-down, bureaucratic leadership and instead encourages leadership to respond to the changing needs of a complex organisation, evolving and responding to different demands. Uhl-Bien, Marion and McKelvey (2007) describe this approach as an “emergent, interactive dynamic” moving away from the command and control models seen in traditional industrial approaches to an adaptive approach more suited to the modern day knowledge economy. These authors go on to describe three types of leadership in CLT – administrative leadership is the more traditional approach utilising hierarchy and control, enabling leadership encourages the development of conditions which enable problem solving, learning and adaptability and adaptive leadership which “underlies emergent change activities” encouraging the disentanglement of administrative from enabling approaches.

Leading an HEI or part of an HEI to encourage a culture which supports a belonging in staff and students aligns with these concepts. The diversity and complex nature of HE means that one approach is unlikely to work consistently, and leaders must adapt their skills to enable the delivery of strategies and programmes aiming to develop belonging.

Leading strategy development to support belonging in higher education

Strategy development is a key part of delivering all aspects of the student experience, and it is an important consideration in any initiative aimed at supporting belonging. Students are key stakeholders in any HEI strategy and should always be engaged as partners in this process (Healey and Healey 2019).

During the worldwide coronavirus pandemic of 2020 onwards much was written about the challenges for students and how social isolation during lockdown periods disarticulated them from their academic and social community, potentially leading to significant negative impact on their health and academic performance (Khan, 2021; Besser, Flett and Zeigler-Hill, 2022; Gopalan, Linden-Carmichael and Lanza, 2022; Sutcliffe and Noble, 2022; Versteeg, Kappe and Knuiman, 2022; Tang *et al.*, 2023). There was a subsequent rise in HEIs proactively developing co-created strategies and initiatives to help return students sense of belonging to their academic communities, with the UPP Student Futures Manifesto¹ delivering a sector wide call for action. Bearing in mind the significant impact felt by many students during this time and afterwards, this became an important element of many institutions' recovery. Building a sense of belonging and community further helped shaped future learning and teaching strategies, with the swift pivot to online learning demonstrating the different ways this delivery method could be used (Benito *et al.*, 2021; Neuwirth, Jović and Mukherji, 2021; Wong, Fink and Bhati, 2021). The opportunity was, and continues to be, provided for both educators and students to critically reflect on the benefits and challenges of different aspects of online teaching and learning and work together to consider where it could best be implemented in the curricula of the future.

Step by step – leading a belonging strategy or project within an HEI

Whilst there are many different ways to lead a strategy or project within an HEI, the following list provides some prompts on what is often an iterative process. By stepping back at the beginning of the planning process, leaders can ensure better engagement with peers and students and a potentially better outcome and impact overall. The reverse is often true of a poorly planned and executed project.

Pre-delivery

¹ <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/a-student-futures-manifesto/>

1. *Put together your project team and identify key stakeholders* – who would you like to influence? How will you convince senior leaders of the need for the project? Should the idea be piloted in one programme or department before further roll out? Who will be thinking about this problem as much as you are? How will you involve students to co-create your strategy or project? Are there any regulatory questions to consider?

2. *Understand where you are now* – key metrics will include continuation and completion rates, NSS survey outcomes, formal and informal teaching feedback, and informal feedback more generally from students. Where is the HEI in its current strategic cycle – specifically, what is its teaching and learning strategy?

3. *Identify your intended strategic outcomes* – what are you trying to achieve with this strategy or project? Which metric(s) are you trying to improve? What about qualitative feedback? How will you evaluate your initiative, and what will you need to measure on the way?

4. *For each outcome, develop key objectives (steps on the way)* – how will you achieve each potential outcome? What are the key steps in your project and how will you resource each one?

5. *Consult more broadly and seek feedback* – present your strategy or project formally and informally to others. What are their thoughts? How about your students – what do they think of the idea? Do you need to present to senior leaders?

6. *Refine and finalise* – use your feedback to formalise your idea and implement. Consider the length of project – how long does it need to run to ensure a valid evaluation?

Post/during delivery

7. *Evaluate your outcome(s)* – this is where planning evaluation prior to starting a project can really pay off. Collate your feedback and outcomes and bring together into a report or publication. Consider the role of students in this process

8. *Communicate clearly, formally and informally* – ensure your colleagues understand your project and what it planned, as well as your students. Develop a formal communication plan – can you present internally at a conference, or communicate through internal webpages?

Working with students as partners on belonging projects

As key stakeholders in HEIs, it is important to engage and involve students with initiatives aimed at enhancing engagement and belonging. This could be through the Students' Union or their elected representative system, or it could be by working with interested or engaged students on an individual basis. Some HEIs also have their own specific approach to working with students through a "Students as Partners" programme or similar.

However, if students are engaged, they will provide insight into their wants and needs and help with developing projects appropriately. They can also provide crucial co-leadership which can be more influential than something led solely by a staff team. It is important that they receive reward and recognition for their input, either through monetary payment or through an employability initiative.

Healey and Healey (2019) describe different levels of co-creation with students and emphasise the importance of involving students all the way through the process, from identifying the issues which are being addressed through to developing and implementing a plan. Evaluation should also be added to this, as students are a key contributor to understanding impact and outcomes.

Conclusion

Whether developing and leading a small, locally delivered project or a larger strategic intervention aimed at enhancing students' sense of belonging, there will be challenges and opportunities along the way. These are often the most rewarding activities at any level or stage of leadership development for a university educator, and with planning and reflection on leadership style and approach these can help improve outcomes. The most senior leadership of most HEIs will not require excessive convincing that improving student engagement and retention is essential. However, encouraging active support and funding for initiatives that aim to do this is a different challenge, and patience is key. Working in partnership with students is one of the most helpful ways to support this, seeing a project through from planning and implementation to really making a difference.

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