Three perspectives on leadership in higher education: traditionalist, reformist, pragmatist

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Abstract

There is a fragmented and complex literature about higher education leadership representing a diversity of ideological perspectives about its nature and purposes. Internationally, the literature has been strongly shaped by the importation of concepts and theories from management studies and a tradition of scholarship led by university leader-researchers. Drawing on an extensive literature review—drawing on over 250 books, book chapters, reports and journal articles—this paper identifies three key perspectives. The *Traditionalist* perspective is concerned with the cultural context, arguing that the import of neoliberal business practices into university leadership and management has undermined academic self-governance. The *Reformist* perspective focuses on values from a social justice perspective arguing for a more democratic and inclusive style of leadership including participation from historically under-represented groups. Finally, the *Pragmatist* perspective is more functionally focused in identifying the capabilities, skills and competences needed for effective leadership in universities at all levels. These three perspectives provide important insights into the culture, values and competences of university leadership reflecting the distinctive culture of higher education (traditionalist), its values as a reflection of wider society (reformist) and how best to practically manage and achieve positive change in such an environment (pragmatist). An appreciation of these perspectives and the skills, values and knowledge embedded in the literature will facilitate the evolution of leadership development and practice in alignment with contemporary organisational needs and societal expectations.

Keywords Higher education leadership · Literature review · Culture · Values · Competence

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Introduction

The literature on leadership in higher education (hereafter to be referred synonymously as 'university' or 'academic' leadership) is both complex and derivative, reflecting the fact that higher education studies is itself fragmented, drawing theoretically on a range of basic disciplines including sociology, psychology, history and philosophy. Researchers' writing about university leadership are drawn from many disciplines and academic fields although management studies has been particularly influential in terms of both theory and practice. A range of terms have been imported into the modern university lexicon as a result of this influence such as quality management, performance indicators, workload allocation systems and transformational leadership. An added complexity is that those writing and researching about university leadership and management do not necessarily self-identify as authorities in this area but variously as social philosophers, policy sociologists, political sociologists, historians and gender and equity specialists. It is therefore hardly surprising that Bryman and Lilley (2009, p.331) describe university leadership as 'a strange field' since, whilst leadership is a growing field of scholarship, relatively few academics focus their attention on the sector which employs them.

Perhaps, due in part to the neglect of academic leadership for so long by theoreticians, many influential contributors to the literature are former (or current) senior leaders in the sector, such as Eric Ashby, Robin Middlehurst, Peter Scott, Michael Shattock and David Watson. This is indicative of the way in which such writing and research have emerged out of experience and practice rather than empirical research. In recent years though, as the number of those possessing a PhD in higher education studies has grown, researchers studying university leadership are now more likely to be empirical investigators or theoreticians from a variety of academic fields rather than scholar-leaders. Consequently, literature about leadership in universities is spread across a wide range of journals since contributors are drawn from many different cognate fields. This bewildering variety of outlets inevitably means that many researchers in the leadership arena do not belong to the same disciplinary networks and societies and that research tends to be replicated or ignored as a result. This paper will seek to unpack this complexity by identifying three key perspectives, or ways of interpreting meaning and fostering understanding, and their underlying assumptions and agendas, based on a substantial literature review.

The 'leaderist turn' in higher education

It has been observed that over the last twenty to twenty-five years, there has been a notable growth in the use of the term 'leadership' in public services (e.g. Newman, 2005). It follows that the use of this term to describe those holding senior, formal roles within universities has become the dominant noun. Whilst the term 'leader' is now in common parlance, its previous iterations, 'administrator' and 'manager', respectively, are indicative of changing demands and expectations based on an action and change-oriented approach (e.g. Kennie & Middlehurst, 2021). This is a matter of self-description since historically academic 'leaders', as they have become known today, were formerly more likely to describe themselves as 'administrators' and to define their role as an act of service to the university (e.g. Ashby, 1970). However, since the mid 1990s (e.g. Neumann, 1993), it has become less common to see the word 'administrator' used to describe academic leaders except in some

international contexts beyond the UK, such as the USA and Turkey (e.g. Balyer & Özcan, 2017). In common with other public services, academic leadership culture has shifted from a focus on governance and administrative processes to leadership or executive management (Middlehurst et al., 2009).

This has led to the rise of the so-called 'career track' route into university leadership and the relative decline of what Deem referred to as the 'good citizen' and the 'reluctant manager' (Deem, 2003, np). Whilst all three routes remain in evidence (Bolden et al., 2008), growing expectations and responsibilities mean that senior university leadership roles are now almost exclusively conceived in terms of a career choice. The term 'manager', as in 'academic manager' (see Winter, 2009), became more widely used in the 1990s but has since been largely displaced by that of 'leader' (Arntzen, 2016) interpreted as a deliberate attempt to shift the function of those charged with administrative responsibility in the public sector to bring about change and reform as part of a new policy discourse (O'Reilly & Reed, 2010). This 'leaderist turn' (Morley, 2013a, p.116) conveys the sense of a powerful and dynamic individual capable of bringing about change rather than the more passive sounding language of 'administrators' or even 'managers' suggesting a transformational rather than transactional style. Semantically, the terms 'management' and 'managers' have pejorative implications especially in contexts strongly influenced by new managerialism, such as Britain, Australia and New Zealand (see Deem & Brehony, 2005).

Methodology

This paper provides a substantial review of the literature drawing on 266 sources (books, book chapters, reports, doctoral theses and journal papers) drawn from 99 different academic journals. These sources variously offer empirical, conceptual, theoretical and practice-based reflections on leadership and derive from searches across a range of online databases including the Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC), Scopus databases, Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar and the discovery engine *ResearchRabbit*. The key search terms used were 'leadership', 'higher education' and 'universities'. Literature searches were mainly confined to the thirty-year period between 1991 and 2021 although the review contains reference to some historical literature which is important in explaining the evolution of university leadership as a sub-field of research. The literature was sorted using thematic analysis that identified 28 different topics such as neo-liberalism, new public management, digital leadership, women and leadership, effective leadership and the role of the dean as leader. These topics were then sorted into three contrasting perspectives associated with academic leadership. Further details on this process are available from the authors on request.

It needs to be stressed that this literature review is not intended as comprehensive or systematic but as a snapshot view in respect to its principal strands of research, thought and argument with a specific focus on the literature about leadership *in* and *of* universities. In this regard, academic leadership is defined as a function accomplished by academics and professional support staff, in collaboration with others, rather than something done *by* the institution as an entity itself. Whilst consideration is given to wider processes and outcomes of academic leadership, the role and impact of universities in 'leading' social change more generally (e.g. in respect to climate change) will be excluded, as will the role of students as leaders of which there is now a substantial literature. Whilst the bulk of the literature stems from the Anglosphere, especially the UK, the USA and Australia, there

are an increasing number of papers and doctoral theses now appearing from authors based in East Asia, Africa, South America and the Middle East on topics such as women's lived experiences in attaining leadership positions in a Saudi Arabian context (e.g. Alhoian, 2020) and management competencies in Turkish universities (Balyer & Özcan, 2017). The underrepresentation of the global south is broadly similar to the wider field of higher education studies although the situation is gradually improving in terms of relevant literature published in English.

Three perspectives on leadership

In reviewing a broad range of literature, it is possible to differentiate three main approaches to understanding and exploring academic leadership. The 'traditionalist' perspective is concerned primarily with the cultural context and the extent to which this influences the perceived desirability or effectiveness of approaches imported from other sectors. The 'reformist' perspective focuses on how values and purposes shape and inform leadership within the sector, with the aim of promoting more ethical and inclusive approaches. The 'pragmatist' perspective is predominantly concerned with identifying the skills, competences and behaviours associated with 'effective' leadership in universities. We consider these as complementary, and occasionally competing, perspectives that are associated with different assumptions and agendas around the nature and purpose(s) of university leadership (e.g. Western, 2019) (see Table 1).

Traditionalist perspective

Any review of the literature cannot ignore that a significant and growing strand of work about university leadership focuses on a critique of its contemporary practices in the sector, a perspective we shall label 'traditionalist'. Authors from this perspective argue that the adoption of management practices from other sectors is problematic given the distinctive cultural context of higher education. This, according to a very wide range of academic critics, has eroded 'collegiality' (e.g. Kligyte & Barrie, 2014) and 'traditional' forms of academic self-governance (see Palfreyman & Tapper, 2013). So-called 'new managerialism' (Deem & Brehony, 2005), marketisation and the student-as-consumer (Furedi, 2011), neoliberalism (Giroux, 2002), new public management (Askling & Stensaker, 2002), performance management (Waring, 2017) and audit culture (Power, 1994), especially in relation to the quality assurance function, are all regarded as unwelcome influences in this respect. The erosion of academic autonomy resulting from these changes is described by Burnes and colleagues (Burnes et al., 2014, p.905) as amounting to a 'dysfunctional centralism' where academics are told 'what to teach, how to teach, what research to conduct and where to publish'.

There is a long history of the idea that universities are in a state of 'crisis' (Tight, 1994) from *The Crisis in the University* (Moberly, 1949) to more recent titles such as *English Universities in Crisis* (Frank et al., 2019). This 'crisis' literature continues with renewed vigour evidenced by the publication of recent books and papers using dystopian terms in relation to the contemporary university such as 'hopeless', 'die' and 'death' (Fleming, 2021; Hall, 2020; Wright & Shore, 2017). It is not the purpose of this review to evaluate the accuracy of this or any of the other perspectives, but to highlight the somewhat siloed nature of discussions and the differing assumptions and agendas on which they are based.

Table 1 Themes and illustrative literature

	Illustrative literature
Traditionalist perspective	
Audit, marketisation performance	Deem and Brehony (2005); Furedi; management, and new managerialism (2011) Jameson (2019); Power (1994); Shore (2008); Spiller (2010); Waring (2017); Waitere et al. (2011)
Neo-liberalism	Fleming (2021); Giroux (2002, 2007, 2014); Collini (2012); Smyth (2017); Hall (2020)
New public management	Askling & Stensaker, 2002; Olssen and Peters (2005)
Loss of a collegial culture	Dearlove (1995); Kligyte and Barrie (2014); McNay (1995); Palfreyman and Tapper (2013); Winter (2009)
Advance of a corporate/executive model	Burnes et al. (2014); Craig et al. (1999); Erickson et al. (2021); Henkel (2007); McNay (1995); Oleksiyenko (2018); Shepherd (2018)
Incivility, bullying and microaggressions	Erickson et al. (2021); Fleming (2021); Heffernan and Bosetti (2020); Milley & Dulude, 2021; Young et al. (2015)
Vice chancellor pay	Bachan and Reilly (2015); Boden and Rowlands (2022); Heffernan (2021); Hollis (2019); Walker et al. (2019)
Reformist perspective	
Authentic leadership	Abbas et al. (2020); Ahmad et al. (2015); Buller (2013; 2018)
Collective leadership	Bolden et al. (2008); Gentle with Forman (2014)
Disability and leadership	Martin (2017, 2020)
Digital leadership	Arnold and Sangrà (2018); Beetham (2015a, b); Evans & Morris, 2016; Laufer et al. (2021); Newland and Handley (2016); Sharpe et al. (2022); Watermeyer et al. (2021a)
Distributed leadership	Bolden et al. (2009); Bento (2011); Gosling et al. (2009); Goksoy (2016); Hempsall (2014); Jones et al. (2014); Van Ameijde et al. (2009); Sewerin and Holmberg (2017)
Intellectual leadership	Macfarlane (2012); Evans et al. (2013); Oleksiyenko and Ruan (2019); Uslu and Welch (2018)
Sexuality and leadership	Bullard (2013); Pryor (2017, 2020); Sumara (2021)
Race and leadership	Aguirre and Martinez (2002); Arday (2018); Gasman et al. (2015); Jansen (2015); Williams (2013)
Servant leadership	Abbas et al. (2020); Harris et al. (2016); Hays (2008); Iken (2005); Wheeler (2012)
Shared leadership	Bolden et al. (2015); Goksoy (2016); Kezar and Holcombe (2017)
Women and leadership	Aiston and Yang (2017); Ballenger (2010); Blackmore and Sachs (2000); Blackmore (2014); Burkinshaw (2015); Burkinshaw and White (2019); Eddy and Van Der Linden (2006); Johnson (2017); Knipfer et al. (2017); Longman and Madsen (2014); Longman and Anderson (2016); Macfarlane& Burg (2019); Madsen (2012); Madsen and Longman (2020); Maheshwari and Nayak (2020); Misra et al. (2011); Morley (2013a, b); Morley and Crossouard (2015); Morley et al. (2017); Odhiambo (2011)
Pragmatist perspective	
Crisis leadership	Fernandez and Shaw (2020); Fortunato et al. (2018); Gigliotti (2019); Marshall et al. (2020); Samoilovich (2020)

Table 1 (continued)

	Illustrative literature
Deans (of faculty)	Alabi and Alabi (2014); Bright and Richards (2001); Christiansen et al. (2004); De Boer and Goedegebuure (2009); Goodall (2006); Johnson and Cross (2004); Karimi et al. (2017); Meek et al. (2010); Simala (2014); Wepner and Henk (2020)
General and contextual challenges	Braun et al. (2016); Raelin (1995); Rowley and Sherman (2003); Scott (2011); Trow (1994)
Effective leadership/competences	Balyer and Özcan (2017); Black (2015); Bryman (2007); Gallos and Bolman (2021); Goodall (2009); Harris et al. (2016); Lumby (2012); McCaffery (2018); McDaniel (2002); Smith and Wolverton (2010); Ramsden (1989); Spendlove (2007); Thompson and Miller (2018); Warner and Palfreyman (1996); Zhu and Zayim-Kurtay (2018)
Heads of department/department chairs	Armstrong and Woloshyn (2017); Brown and Moshavi (2002); Creswell and Brown (1992); Creswell et al. (1990); Gordon et al. (1991); Hecht et al. (1999); Knight and Holen (1985); Knight and Trowler (2001); Mahdinezhad et al. (2018); Mitchell (1987); Moses and Roe (1990); Murry and Stauffacher (2001); Smith (2005); Stark et al. (2002); Wald and Golding (2020)
Leadership of teaching and research	Ball (2007); Evans (2014); Marshall et al. (2011); Locke (2005); Martin et al. (2003); Quinlan (2014); Palmer et al. (2011)
Motivation	Lindholm (2003); Ramsden (1998); Ward and Sloane (2000); Winter and Sarros (2002)
Professional service leadership	Ayman et al. (2003); Blackmore and Blackwell (2006); Burgoyne et al. (2009); Burnette (2015); Green and Ridenour, (2004); Khan et al. (2019); Papanthymou and Darra (2018); Trocchia and Andrus (2003)
Strategy and vision	Davies (2001); McBride (2010); Taylor and Machado (2006)
Vice chancellors/presidents	Goodall (2009); Harper et al. (2017); Satterwhite and Cedja (2005), Liu et al. (2020); Rabovsky & Rutherford, 2016; Sturgis (2006); Trachtenberg (2009)

It is important though in analysing this strand of literature to clearly identify what is being lamented as 'lost' or 'under threat', and why. At the heart of traditionalist assertions is the perception that academic self-governance has been supplanted by corporate power. A generation ago, McNay (1995) argued that collegial culture had been largely replaced by a managerial or corporate culture. More recently, it has been argued that these processes have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Watermeyer et al, 2021a, b) with university leaders also demonstrating a lack of compassion (Denney, 2020). Regardless of the historical accuracy of perceptions and claims in respect to the loss of academic self-governance and collegiality (see Tight, 2014), this is, nonetheless, a persistent critique of university leadership.

Ashby's description of academic governance as 'a sort of inverted hierarchy' conforms with the golden age beliefs of traditionalists (Ashby, 1958, p.71) in which policymaking is initiated at departmental level and then rises via the Faculty and the Senate. He saw the role of the vice chancellor as one of chairing discussions about policy rather than personally initiating change. The Jarratt Report (1985) symbolised one of the first major

challenges to this type of culture recommending the adoption of management practices from the business sector, labelling students as 'customers' and the vice chancellor as a university's chief executive. The perception that a change in the style of academic leadership has taken place has largely taken root since the late 1980s and continues to this day conveyed by a substantial literature (e.g. Burnes et al, 2014). Academic leadership is now seen as squarely aligned with the ideology of management threatening academic autonomy both at the most senior level and in relation to other roles such as the deanship (e.g. Johnson & Cross, 2004). Smyth (2017) describes 'zombie leadership' in the 'toxic university' whilst Jameson (2019, p.279) advocates 'dialogic resistance' to performance management and 'managerial instrumentalism'. In a British context, it is argued that pre-1992 universities have followed post-1992 institutions in adopting a more corporate and executive style of leadership and management (Shepherd, 2018). The effect of what is perceived as more corporate forms of leadership is seen to have altered the nature of key university functions, such as academic development, shifting the approach to one focused on a managerial agenda rather than being practitioner-led (Land, 2001).

A traditionalist perspective is evident in a range of writing by social philosophers (e.g. Ronald Barnett and Stefan Collini), cultural critics (e.g. Henry Giroux), sociologists (e.g. John Holmwood) and media scholars (e.g. Des Freedman). Whilst this perspective can be dismissed as 'golden ageism' evidence suggests that a sense of 'them' (i.e. academic leaders) and 'us' (i.e. academic faculty) is firmly entrenched across the sector. A large-scale survey of 5888 British academic staff by Erickson et al., (2021, p.7), for example, found that 'the led' have a negative opinion of their leaders, with major themes including 'the dominance and brutality of metrics; excessive workload; governance and accountability; perpetual change; vanity projects; the silenced academic; work and mental health'. The rise of corporate objectives in university management has, according to some researchers, caused an identity schism for academics (Winter, 2009). Recent literature indicates a hardening sense of a 'them' and 'us' attitude. The university workplace is characterised as 'toxic' and academics work in what Fleming (2021) describes as 'darkocracies'. Here, bullying is one of the notable, emerging themes within the traditionalist literature (e.g. Hollis, 2019). Milley and Dulude (2021, p.1) accuse leaders of committing 'troubling acts' whilst the qualitative work from the large-scale study of Erickson et al., (2021, p.15) reveals 'endemic bullying and harassment'. Here, there is a close connection with so-called 'microaggressions', involving daily indignities and slights which are often linked to the strong role of hierarchy in universities and broader intersectionalities that exist in all organisations including race, gender, disability and sexual orientation (Young et al, 2015).

From a different perspective, Heffernan and Bosetti (2020) explore bullying and acts of incivility experienced by those working at the level of a dean, from both below and above, with anger and frustration at re-structuring and performance management important factors in their analysis. Incivility provides a broader way of thinking about workplace behaviour involving acts of anger, abuse and intimidation beyond more narrowly constructed notions of bullying where the same person is the victim of repeated acts of intimidation (Hodgins & Mannix McNamara, 2017).

Vice-chancellor pay, especially in the UK and Australia, has come under increasing scrutiny too in recent years as a symbol of the discontent of those who regard their reward levels as out of kilter with university performance (Bachan & Reilly, 2015). Most analyses are predictably uncomplimentary and indicate that internal governance structures do not exercise sufficient control over the pay of senior management (Walker et al, 2019, p. 450). Boden and Rowlands (2022) come to a relatively similar conclusion, urging the need for governance reform. Aside from academic interest, the topic has attracted considerable and

unfavourable press attention, as catalogued by Heffernan (2021) who analyses 190 press and online articles published in a five-year period between 2013 and 2018.

Reformist perspective

Another significant strand of the literature pertains to what might be characterised as a 'reformist' perspective. Authors from this perspective are focused on what needs to change to make leadership more progressive and inclusive. The conceptualisation of leadership style here has tended to focus on people in senior management roles, notably senior university leaders (e.g. Bargh et al., 2000). Such work continues to be common (e.g. Drew, 2010) and includes scholarship concerning other managerial levels, such as the deanship of academic faculties (e.g. Seale & Cross, 2018) and departmental leadership (e.g. Knight & Trowler, 2001). Instead, as Davis and Jones (2014, p.367) contend, 'there is a need to move beyond focus just on "the leader" as control agent, to leading which opens up spaces to consider more shared, creative and collaborative approaches to the field'. This alternative conceptualisation involves de-emphasising the 'hero' leader (Eddy & Van Der Linden, 2006) and framing leadership in more inclusive terms as taking place at all levels within the university, approaches labelled as collective (e.g. Bolden et al., 2008), distributed (e.g. Van Ameijde et al., 2009), shared (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017) and based on systems leadership development (Bolden et al., 2019), respectively. Here, it has been suggested that shared leadership and distributed leadership are terms which are closely connected and are sometimes used inter-changeably and that 'collective leadership' is an umbrella term which can incorporate both sets of ideas and avoid unnecessary conceptual confusion (e.g. Goksoy, 2016).

The notion of 'servant leadership' based on the work of Greenleaf (1970) has attracted the interest and attention of researchers (e.g. Wheeler, 2012). Here, leadership is about service and not about the leader pursuing their own self-interest. Given the pressures on contemporary academics to research and publish in order to advance their careers, leadership responsibilities may sometimes be perceived as unwelcome reinforcing a separation between academic and administrative work (Rich, 2006). The idea of servant leadership is about fulfilling a service duty to others and is closely related to the concept of academic citizenship (Macfarlane, 2007) and approaches to teaching which promote student autonomy and self-direction rather than dependence and compliance (Hays, 2008). Servant leaders think of themselves as fellow professionals who attain a position with authority and responsibilities but are willing to accept that they have limited power in the context of a university culture that respects academic autonomy. In many respects, servant leadership is linked with the tradition of rotating the head of department role amongst full professors, a practice that still exists in some institutions. Another closely connected and strongly values-driven position is that of 'authentic leadership' (e.g. Buller, 2018) where the ethical values and beliefs of leaders are congruent with those of their followers. They are self-aware and do not separate their home or life values from those that guide them in the workplace (George, 2003). In a higher education context, there is room for this concept to be explored in more depth, although it should be noted that there is growing critique of this approach and the extent to which true authenticity is either desirable or possible (e.g. Iszatt-White et al., 2021).

These various nomenclatures (distributed, collective, servant, authentic, etc.) have a common goal of moving away from the idea of leadership by the few and towards the idea that leadership is performed by people at all levels—trends reflected in leadership

theory and practice beyond higher education. They seek to empower a wider range of people within the organisation to think of themselves and act as leaders. The notion of leadership is conventionally associated with those who hold formal roles, such as vice chancellors, deans, heads of department and programme directors. However, leadership may be exercised in practice by many academics and professional support staff who do not necessarily hold a formal leadership role. This is sometimes termed non-positional leadership (Juntrasook et al., 2013). Further, for example, a professor, or other influential academic, may offer intellectual leadership without necessarily being appointed to any formal management role (e.g. Macfarlane, 2012). Part of this democratisation of the notion of leadership (Woods, 2004) is linked to the methodology of leadership researchers. Analysing the perspectives of the 'led' (Evans et al, 2013) provides an alternative to relying on interviewing senior leaders (e.g. Martin & Marion, 2005) which is a more commonplace method.

The reformist agenda interrelates closely with equality themes and the tensions between excellence and diversity (Deem, 2009). There is now a substantial body of work critiquing the 'absence' of women from leadership roles both at middle and senior academic levels (e.g. Aiston & Yang, 2017; Morley, 2013b). This literature is often written from a gendered and feminist perspective by researchers who are committed to the advocacy of change. The so-called 'pipeline theory'—that increasing numbers of women in male-dominated occupations will lead to more equality as women get promoted to the top jobs—is regularly critiqued. Instead, the phrase 'leaky pipeline' (e.g. Berryman, 1983) is a metaphor that has become something of a cliché over the last thirty to forty years and a focus of research attributed to both direct and indirect forms of discrimination including the disproportionate commitment of women to service and the way the lower status of 'academic housework' compared with research can hold back the progression of women into senior leadership roles and even as full professors (e.g. Misra et al., 2011). The concept of the 'glass ceiling', where women do not make their way into leadership positions as fast as their male counterparts, originates from analysis in the business sector (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986) and is now a phrase regularly invoked in the literature about women and leadership (e.g. Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Another related term, which provides a more concrete explanation of direct discrimination, is the so-called 'glass cliff' phenomenon (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). This identifies the way that women are more likely to be appointed as leaders of companies that are failing financially or during institutional crises compared to their male counterparts, thereby making it more difficult for them to succeed in post and more likely to be dismissed—a phenomenon also observed in universities (e.g. Peterson, 2016).

Diversity leadership, as it is termed, is frequently invoked in the North American leadership literature (e.g. Gasman et al., 2015) and is now penetrating the UK literature too (e.g. Singh & Kwhali, 2015). This term represents structured attempts to make universities more diverse and overcome barriers that have conventionally limited the participation of black and minority ethnic staff and students. Here, there are conceptual links with the notion of transformational or 'turnaround' leadership (see Fullan & Scott, 2009) as opposed to transactional leadership further reinforcing the language of leaderism as a change agent, noted earlier (e.g. Aguirre & Martinez, 2002). Further, there has been a growing consciousness about the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer communities on campus (Bullard, 2013). Much of the emerging literature in this area is from North America with Pryor (2017) coining the expression 'queer leadership' whilst Sumara (2021, p.7) has used the term 'queer outsiders' in explaining how individual identity can adversely impact academic career prospects.

A literature that considers disabled leadership is far less developed and difficult to identify. In fact, some suggest that 'disability has been almost totally ignored in the leadership literature' (Boucher, 2017, p.1005). Disability as it pertains specifically to a university context is even less apparent with only a few examples (e.g. Martin, 2017, 2020) that discuss experiences of being disabled and the challenges associated with a culture of ableism endemic to universities. A nascent strand of a reformist literature considers leadership in the milieu of technological and specifically digital disruption resulting from greater use of education technology (EdTech) associated with the pandemic experience and transitioning work practices. This strand focuses predominantly on the acquisition of digital capabilities (Beetham, 2015a, b) and digital literacies in higher education (e.g. Newland & Handley, 2016), leadership perspectives on the use of EdTech (e.g. Laufer et al., 2021), e-leadership (e.g. Arnold & Sangrà 2018), leadership for technology enhanced learning (e.g. Evans & Morris, 2016) and the role of digital leadership (e.g. Sharpe et al., 2022).

Pragmatist perspective

The final major strand of the leadership literature relates to what might be termed a 'pragmatist' perspective. Here, the focus is on the practicalities of leading in academe, and the skills and competences needed to be an effective leader (e.g. Lumby, 2012). Bryman (2007) produced a review of the literature on effective leadership that is closely connected to this strand that still provides a helpful basis for understanding the range of perspectives albeit limited to the UK, the USA and Australia. While this study is now dated much of relevance has been published since and from authors working in an international context beyond the Anglosphere. Major themes within the effectiveness literature include the identification of attributes, capabilities, competences, skills and behaviours necessary to be an effective leader. An Australian national study drawing on substantial primary data identified personal capabilities (e.g. decisiveness), interpersonal capabilities (e.g. influencing), cognitive capabilities (e.g. diagnosis) and leadership competence (e.g. self-organisation) (Scott et al., 2008). Other recurring and familiar themes in the literature include credibility and acting as a role model (e.g. Mahdinezhad et al., 2018). Leadership 'agility', or being flexible when facing complex dilemmas, is recommended by Thompson and Miller (2018) writing in the context of nurse leaders along with fostering civility and inclusiveness in a high-pressure environment.

There is a literature around contextual challenges which seeks to identify those pertinent to the academic leader. Raelin (1995) recommends striking a balance between administrative control and academic freedom in the management of academics whilst Braun and colleagues (Braun et al., 2016) express a similar challenge in terms of tension between the desire for individual creativity and innovation as opposed to the need for control of activities via appropriate structures, procedures and (legal) regulations. Within the pragmatist strand, there is a further well-established literature about the leadership challenges that face heads of department (or departmental chairs), deans and presidents working at different 'levels' within the university. Much of this position-specific literature stems from a North American perspective and includes themes which are well-established, especially in a US context, such as the role of the president in fund raising (Satterwhite & Cedja, 2005) as well as other perennial concerns such as networking (Rabovsky & Rutherford, 2016).

Goodall's (2009) study of what makes for a successful president in a research-intensive university provides findings that resonate with the traditionalist argument, whereby leading researchers rather than professional, career-track administrators make the best institutional

leaders. This may, however, be because research active staff are more willing to follow them, or simply that such institutions are more likely to attract such candidates, rather than because their research skills equip them for the top jobs. Some of the literature focused on top leaders illustrates the disconnect between the pragmatists and the reformists especially the unreconstructed male chauvinist title of Stephen Trachtenberg's (2009) book, *Big Man on Campus*, about his time as a university president. Aside from literature about the various formal levels of leadership in the university, there is further coverage in relation to the main conventional functions of the university in respect to how to lead teaching (e.g. Marshall et al., 2011) and research (Evans, 2014) and how best to achieve an integration of them both from a management perspective (Locke, 2005).

The literature about the leadership of professional services is an important element of the pragmatist perspective providing insights into the challenges of being a head of marketing (Trocchia & Andrus, 2003), administrating online learning (Burnette, 2015), linking HR practices to job satisfaction (Khan et al., 2019) and faculty or educational development (e.g. Blackmore & Blackwell, 2006). Whitchurch (2008) uses the term 'third space' professional to refer to those roles that span both academic and professional services domains. Despite the growing significance of such roles, there remains little explicit research in this area and what there is highlights the paradoxes and shifting terrains (White et al., 2021) they need to navigate.

In terms of what is new or recent, the advent of COVID-19 has brought crisis leadership very much to the fore (e.g. Samoilovich, 2020), with other foci for crisis leadership including racial incidents on campus (Fortunato et al., 2018). The role of digital leadership has come into prominence lately and has been accelerated by the pandemic (e.g. Watermeyer et al., 2021a).

Discussion

The three perspectives identified in this review—traditionalist, reformist and pragmatist—represent important alternative points of departure and foci of analysis. Existing or budding academic leaders would benefit from an understanding of each of these perspectives in order to fully appreciate the challenges they face and the environment in which they are leading. A triangulation of these three perspectives is especially recommended in terms of compensating for the potential myopia and inherent bias that comes from privileging any of them (see Fig. 1). Each of these perspectives manifests limitations in terms both of their range of vision and capacity to accommodate and/or respond to other outlooks and orientations shaped for instance by disciplinary orientation that might offer a wider lens to the various contextualisations of leadership.

Criticism of literature about university teaching often centres on its collective lack of relevance and sensitivity to different disciplinary traditions. Much the same criticism has been applied to university leadership that makes little reference to disciplinarity (Blackmore, 2007) although there is some work indicating styles and types of challenges for leadership both within and between disciplines (Lawson, 2016; Martin et al., 2003). The absence of a disciplinary context is most evident in relation to the pragmatist literature although some relevant pragmatist work can be found in subject-specific journals. This does not guarantee however that disciplinary context will be sufficiently addressed. A stronger emphasis in the literature concerning leadership in different disciplinary settings would be helpful, especially for practitioners but the specialist nature of such work makes it unlikely to emerge.
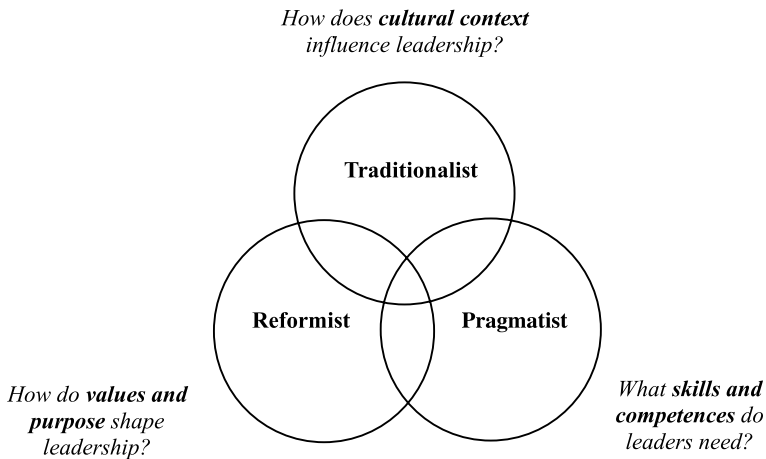
How does **cultural context**
influence leadership?

Traditionalist

Reformist   **Pragmatist**

How do **values and**   What **skills and**
purpose *shape*   **competences** *do*
leadership?   *leaders need?*

Fig. 1 Scoping the leadership literature

The ability to understand culture and context—disciplinary, departmental, institutional, national and global—is central to any successful leader too. The university leadership literature has drawn extensively on work in other sectors, both public and private, and there are especially strong parallels with the entry of new public management into education settings as a result of public sector reform in the UK and elsewhere (e.g. Hall, 2020). Furthermore, the generic leadership literature is substantially focused on the corporate or private sector, and here, influential work on motivation (e.g. Maslow, 1954), change management (e.g. Kotter, 1996) and servant leadership (e.g. Greenleaf, 1970) has had a powerful effect on thinking. Moreover, contingency theory, with its emphasis on cultural and situational attenuation, is at the heart of any real understanding of leadership, especially on an international and cross-cultural basis influenced by Geert Hofstede (2001) amongst others.

In terms of context, the traditionalist perspective also offers some important insights as it focuses on what is perceived to have been lost or is considered currently imperilled. Kligyte and Barrie (2014) comment that collegiality represents an interface between leaders and the led. This tells us that an attenuation to the themes and concerns expressed in the traditionalist literature is important to understand even if the dystopian premise of these perspectives is open to question. There is a wider issue in respect to the extent to which the pragmatist literature is sufficiently tailored to an institutional context. Here, it is common to see lists of attributes, qualities, competencies and behaviours in relation to leadership identified by writers and researchers, but these can sometimes appear to be largely undifferentiated from generic leadership dispositions. Spendlove (2007), for example, identifies 23 competencies for effective leadership just four of which appear to be specific to universities. Similar criticisms might be levelled at other influential work connected with effective leadership in the sector (e.g. Bryman, 2007) although some authors from a pragmatist perspective offer a more nuanced approach emphasising university contexts and cultures (e.g. McDaniel, 2002). There are clearly tensions between traditionalist and reformist standpoints particularly in respect to claims about values and purpose(s). The traditionalist perspective largely highlights values associated with academic freedom and autonomy whilst the reformist perspective is primarily concerned about issues of social justice and equality. Yet there are areas in which a traditionalist perspective, with respect to the effects of neo-liberalism, can align with a reformist agenda focused on justice and equity issues

on campus (e.g. Museus & LePeau, 2019). The pragmatist literature provides an important counter-balance to the arguments and concerns of the traditionalist and the reformist perspectives, respectively. Combining the two perspectives, Wald and Golding (2020) acknowledge the negative perceptions of academic leadership but also emphasise its positive benefits, such as the opportunity to improve and develop the department.

It is perhaps more accurate to speak of academic leadership literatures rather than a single and cohesive body of work since the disciplinary, methodological and ideological influences on this field of thought and empirical work are so disparate. In this respect, the literatures reflect the heterogenous identity narratives of various academic 'tribes and territories' (Becher & Trowler, 2001). Another way of understanding this disparate body of work is by reference to a distinction between a literature *about* leadership, drawing on critical sociological perspectives, and literature *for* leadership that is more empirically driven and derived from a mix of socio-psychological theory as well as an amateur tradition of reflection and anecdote from serving and former university leaders. The former perspective advocates the view that university leadership is characterised by a loss of trust between academics and managers and that this represents a crisis. The focus of the latter perspective is on the practical possibilities of improving leadership practice equipping leaders with the knowledge and tools they need to make a positive contribution. It is vital therefore that development programmes and interventions incorporate insights from *all* three perspectives outlined above to address the fragmentation and division that characterises this field.

The need for leaders to variously anticipate, recognise and respond to the disruptions of continuing organisational and ideological transformations affecting universities and how these are experienced by its various 'tribes and territories' (Becher & Trowler, 2001) makes the case for boundary-spanning across these discursive enclaves ever more important. This is not to suggest that it is possible, or even desirable, to develop an 'integrated' approach to academic leadership, but to develop greater sensitivity to the competing demands, expectations and sources of legitimacy and influence within the academic environment. Sewerin and Holmberg (2017) provide an analogy of four 'rooms' of university leadership—where people may fail to notice that they are speaking at cross purposes or that important spaces for debate and discussion about academic priorities are drowned out by dominant (usually managerialist) agendas. This analogy aligns with our hope that in outlining these three perspectives, academic leaders remember to allow opportunities for people to voice and consider alternative perspectives. Such an approach would suggest the need to firmly embed critical thinking, reflection and experience as the cornerstones of academic leadership learning and development as in other sectors where context is an important factor in determining what is regarded as 'good' leadership (e.g. Ciulla, 2011).

Conclusion

This analysis of the university leadership literature has sought to explore key perspectives on understanding the challenges facing leaders across the sector. Traditionalist, reformist and pragmatist perspectives are distinct but not hermetically sealed off from one another. Some researchers and writers have contributed to more than one of these strands since a traditionalist point of view does not preclude reformist beliefs or, indeed, an ability to identify pragmatic measures by which to implement change. An understanding of all three perspectives is vital for those charged with leadership responsibilities, especially at a senior level, as well as helping to make the perspectives of the led more informed. The traditionalist literature provides an insight into the

cultural norms and traditions of higher education, highlighting the perceived mismatch between the principle of academic self-rule and the growing corporate authority of contemporary leadership practice. This is an important message for any leader working in a university to understand, whether they agree with its veracity or not. The reformist perspective identifies the degree to which the values of leadership are aligned with societal and political aspirations and expectations whilst writing from a pragmatist point of view explores the range of skills and competencies that leaders need in practice, and how this links to organisational performance.

The core messages of the three strands of the literature represent perspectives that cannot necessarily (and should not) be integrated or aligned but which leaders need to be cognisant of. Here, it is important to respect the special culture of higher education (traditionalist), its values as a reflection of wider society (reformist) and how best to practically manage and achieve positive change in such an environment (pragmatist). An understanding of the ways in which higher education is evolving—from the perspective of different stakeholders—should enable a more pluralistic appreciation of academic leadership and recognition of how different bodies of literature and evidence can constructively inform leadership development and practice to meet changing organisational needs and societal expectations.

Declarations

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