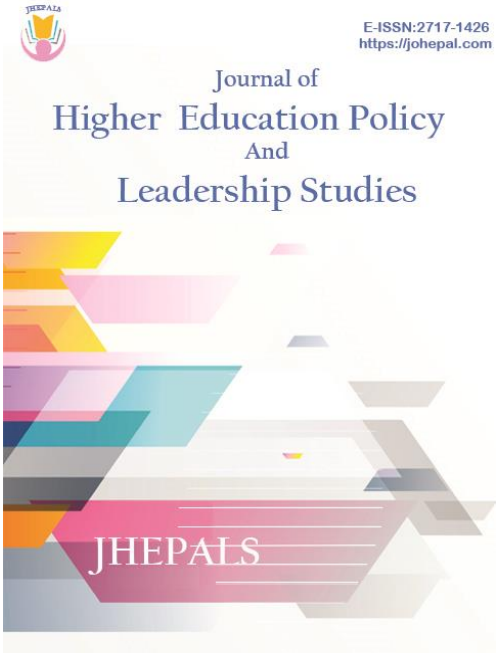
Journal of
Higher Education Policy
And
Leadership Studies

JHEPALS (E-ISSN: 2717-1426)

https://johepal.com



The 'Golden Braid' Model: Courage, Compassion and Resilience in Higher Education Leadership

Fiona Denney
Brunel Business School, Brunel University London, UK

Email: Fiona.denney@brunel.ac.uk

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8557-5836

Article Received **2021/05/16**

Article Accepted **2021/06/28**

Published Online **2021/07/04**

Cite article as:

Denney, F. (2021). The 'golden braid' model: Courage, compassion and resilience in higher education leadership. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies*, *2*(2), 37-49. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.52547/johepal.2.2.37

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.2.2.37]

The 'Golden Braid' Model: Courage, Compassion and Resilience in Higher Education Leadership

Journal of Higher Education Policy And Leadership Studies (JHEPALS)

E-ISSN: 2717-1426
Volume: 2 Issue: 2
pp. 37-49
DOI:
10.52547/johepal.2.2.37

Fiona Denney *

Abstract

This paper explores the state of leadership in UK universities in the face of external pressures and turmoil, and makes the case for a new model of leadership constructed of a 'golden braid' of three threads of courage, compassion and resilience. Each thread is discussed with the intention of developing a framework that can be used to support leadership development to lead our universities effectively through the current chaos. Even before Covid-19 hit the world, UK higher education was perceived as being in a state of huge flux and chaos: the "old order" of a traditionally male-dominated elitist system funded by central government (O'Connor, 2015), has been dismantled and replaced with mass participation and student fees leading to an increase in marketization and government regulation for which academic leadership is generally under-prepared (Deem, 2004; Flückiger, Y. 2021). As such, this is the crucial time for us to embark upon a sector-wide discussion of what we want our universities to look like in this post-pandemic period – how we want to be teaching, researching and working and what we want the core values to be. In this paper, I suggest that the 'values' we had before will no longer be the ones we want to take forwards. For this, therefore, we need the 'golden braid' of courage, compassion and resilience in leadership discussed herewith.

Keywords: Leadership; Higher Education; Courage; Compassion; Resilience; Diversity; Inclusivity

* **Corresponding author's email:** Fiona.denney@brunel.ac.uk

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.2.2.37]

Introduction

This paper explores the state of leadership in UK universities in the face of external pressures and turmoil, and makes the case for a new model of leadership constructed of a 'golden braid' of three threads of courage, compassion and resilience. Each topic is discussed with the intention of developing a framework that can then be used to support leadership development to lead our universities effectively through the current chaos. This paper follows on from, and expands upon, my article last year (Denney, 2020) in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic calling on universities to value and actively demonstrate compassionate leadership, and links with another recent publication by Flückiger (2021) in calling for better universities. As we emerge from the pandemic period, it is crucial that we learn lessons from what we have experienced in order for our universities to become more resilient in the face of increasing turbulence but at the same time to become supportive and compassionate environments within which to work and to study.

Background

Even before Covid-19 hit the world, UK higher education was perceived as being in a state of huge flux and chaos. The "old order" of a traditionally elitist system funded by central government, built by men for men (O'Connor, 2015), has been dismantled and replaced with mass participation and student fees. This has led to an increase in marketization and government regulation for which academic leadership is generally under-prepared (Deem, 2004; Flückiger, 2021). In addition, the introduction of student fees has led to universities becoming the latest in a line of "political footballs", and the pressures of competing in a global environment in both research and teaching have been worsened by Brexit and immigration policies and then further exacerbated by the impact of border closures, lockdowns and travel restrictions due to Covid. In the face of these pressures, the UK's public universities are, in many cases, struggling to survive and cannot be described as thriving environments. As we emerge from the impacts of the 2020-21 Covid pandemic period, a number of UK universities are making compulsory redundancies (see UCU - Home for details), having been impacted substantially by drops in international student numbers. Whilst Covid can be regarded as a Black Swan event (Taleb, 2007) the legacy of the leadership model in UK universities where leadership has traditionally been conferred on those with a successful research background may be considered as being a less than ideal model for circumstances such as these. Too often this approach results in chaotic leadership, poor people management and a sense of confusion which is then only compounded by the turbulent macro-environment.

It is possible therefore to infer that the traditional models of higher education leadership are not working well for the sector at the moment. There is therefore a need to examine critically the models that we do have and potentially to develop a new model which can inspire and develop all future leaders (both academic / faculty and professional services) throughout the organisation. This paper therefore makes the case for a three-legged stool of leadership, consisting of courage, compassion and resilience, to take us through the post-pandemic period and focus universities on sustainability for the longer term.

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.2.2.37]

The Distinction between Management and Leadership

Many people do not differentiate between management and leadership and so there is a tendency for the terms to be used interchangeably. In academia, however, there is a considerable distinction between *academic management* which Bolden *et al* (2012) identify with the carrying out of processes, tasks and systems necessary for academic outcomes to be achieved, and *academic leadership* which Bolden *et al* (2012) claim influences values and identities. Whilst this may be true, management in an academic setting is generally perceived to be largely concerned with the operational aspects of e.g. budgets and people management, and leadership is implied to have a more strategic impact concerning the overall direction of the institution. In the case of this paper, leadership is therefore interpreted as being the domain of the senior team – usually consisting of the Vice Chancellor (or equivalent) and their second-tier colleagues who normally have responsibility for areas such as education, research, international partnerships etc (Shepherd, 2018). In agreement with Bolden *et al*'s (2012) view, this senior leadership team is perceived as having a significant impact on the values and norms of the institution, its overall strategic direction – including important decisions made during the pandemic and after in terms of financial sustainability – and the ethos that is conveyed right from the top throughout. For example, it is very clear very quickly to staff whether senior leaders 'have their backs' or not and this can, in turn, have a significant impact on the daily micro-decisions that are made.

The overall problem is that leadership is difficult, complex and inherently messy and it is usually not what academics set out to do when they enter the academy, which can impact enormously on identity (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011). There is little available in the way of guidance on the path to the top, and there can be little in the way of support once one is there. Recent years have seen a growth in the numbers of senior university leaders accessing executive coaching partly because of the confidential support and reflective space that this offers, but the precarity of the route to the top is something that should concern all universities and their stakeholders. The importance of having good quality leaders is far too great to be left to the chance that it is at the moment. Furthermore, the models of leadership have largely been predicated on what has gone before and the space to be able to consider a new model and for leaders to reflect on their own performance is either limited to coaching, as mentioned above, or is something done in private, if ever. I do not wish to imply that there is only one model of leadership in this paper, but I do wish to encourage a conversation in the higher education sector about the values and motivations that need to play a role as we emerge into a new, post-pandemic world. Building on the important role that we all saw compassion play during the worst of the pandemic period over the past 15 months, the way forwards to a better future requires courage and resilience as well as compassion.

Courage

> *Courage is the quality shown by someone who decides to do something difficult or dangerous, even though they may be afraid.*
> Collins English Dictionary

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.2.2.37]

The 'Golden Braid' Model

The English word "courage" comes from the same Latin stem of the French word "coeur" meaning "heart". Manning and Curtis (2012) state that courage underpins leading by values and that leadership often involves dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty. In those types of situations, leaders require courage to act true to their values and convictions in order to make effective decisions.

History is littered with leaders who we would consider to be courageous: Winston Churchill's leadership during the Second World War; Martin Luther King, Jr.'s leadership against segregation in the US; Nelson Mandela's leadership against apartheid in South Africa. The common thread that ties these together is not only that these people were in the right place at the right time to lead, but that they also stepped up and were courageous in the face of great opposition.

In the face of the current uncertainty in UK universities and wider global instability not just as a result of Covid but certainly exacerbated by it, we now need leaders of great courage to be clear about the directions that they want to take our institutions in – but we also need them to be values-driven leaders. Li and Tong (2021) found that narcissistic leadership was aligned with clarity of direction and a positive enabler for employee motivation and resilience during periods of crisis, but this seems too simplistic and neglects the impact of positive values as facilitating people to join together. Too many projects are undertaken for reasons of narcissistic vanity and not genuine benefit to students and staff. Sadly, the sector has been tainted by media accusations of "fat cat" salaries for the most senior leaders and endemic cultures of bullying and it is now crucial that our most senior leaders behave with courage and integrity in putting their houses in order and setting a different tone in order to move forwards.

Compassion

> *When people hear the word compassion, they tend to think of kindness. But scientific study has found the core of compassion to be courage.*
>
> *A standard definition of compassion is, "a sensitivity to suffering in self and others with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it."*
>
> *The courage to be compassionate lies in the willingness to see into the nature and causes of suffering - be that in ourselves, in others and the human condition. The challenge is to acquire the wisdom we need to address the causes of suffering in ourselves and others.*
>
> The Compassionate Mind Foundation*

* https://compassionatemind.co.uk

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.2.2.37]

As mentioned in my previous paper (Denney, 2020) compassion has been largely ignored by leadership studies, although this is changing partly due to Covid, and particularly those focusing on higher education, barring the work of Waddington (Waddington, 2016, 2018, 2021). As a reminder, compassion is defined as much more than a feeling:

> *"…it is a felt and enacted desire to alleviate suffering."*
> (Worline & Dutton, 2017)

In the face of the challenges described earlier, our universities need leaders who do not just play lip service to compassion, but who actively demonstrate it for themselves, for their colleagues and for students. Nussbaum (1996) remarks that compassion, when used well, creates bridges between individuals and communities – something that would seem to be absolutely key in building back much-needed collegiality post-pandemic. Paul Gilbert's work on compassion-focused-therapy is based on the neuroscience that describes our brains in three sections: "threat", "drive" and "soothe" (Gilbert, 2005). If these are not in balance, then constant perception of threats can cause too much "drive", leading to further perceptions of potential threats, eventually leading to mental ill-health. Compassion should therefore be supported, encouraged and demonstrated right from the very top in order to minimise the perception of ongoing threats. Yet, leadership development has not yet included how to support leaders in understanding the importance of, firstly, balancing their own minds against the constant perceptions of threat – particularly exacerbated by political turmoil and both external and internal uncertainties – and then secondly, understanding how the messages they may send out to their constituents might be perceived. If we are to develop resilient and courageous leaders, then we need to focus on developing compassionate ones – and one starting point is the cultivation and encouragement of self-compassion.

Whilst compassion is important for individuals, there is an emerging strong case for compassion to be much more integrated and promoted in workplaces (Dutton et al, 2016; Simpson et al 2019) and more work has been done in this area over the past 15 years, with a large uptick in publications in 2020, often linked with Covid. Particularly notable is work done by Simpson et al (2019), who propose a useful model to support the embedding of workplace compassion consisting of Noticing, Empathising, Assessing and Responding (the NEAR Mechanisms Model of Organizational Compassion). This also provides an excellent approach for inclusion in leadership development – particularly to encourage discussions around how to prevent bullying in the workplace as the case is increasingly strong that compassion is linked with a reduction in bullying. Not only this, but there is an emerging evidence base which also indicates that compassion is good for business - enhancing employee engagement and retention and facilitating a more rapid recovery after a traumatic experience (Poorkavoos, 2016) – something that would be particularly beneficial for the post-pandemic world.

Resilience

> *"the ability to handle pressure and quickly bounce back from personal and career setbacks"*
> (Manning & Curtis, 2012)

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.2.2.37]

The 'Golden Braid' Model

Resilience is a greatly misunderstood concept in today's universities. Very sadly, resilience has largely become synonymous with a 'suck it up' mentality which does not allow for any challenge when the system itself is punitive. Resilience is not about the ability to absorb more and more hardship without saying anything until one is at breaking point. Rather, resilience is the ability to recognise difficulties in life, to ask for help when necessary, to put in place any required adjustments to improve things and then to learn the lessons on the other side that can help you to build more strongly from there. It is not about accepting inequities of systems and structures silently, absorbing masses of internal stress – rather it is about acknowledging and discussing problems and challenges with a view to learning from those situations, and changing them where possible, but also when one is in them, to be in the painful place, to reach out for help and to receive the compassion of others.

Resilience in the scholarly literature is most often focused on different leadership styles and how they impact on the resilience of employees (Lombardi et al., 2021), although this is a nascent field anyway, and there is therefore relatively little literature on how to support leaders to be resilient themselves. In particular, the extant literature has focused on different leadership styles and organizational resilience to the exclusion of understanding how leaders themselves can be resilient and the impact that this has on employees. There is also little research on resilient leadership in organisations where systems and structures, and not just the macro-environment, are highly challenging.

The bigger problem, however, is how to create courageous, compassionate AND resilient leaders in organisations where the systems and structures have not previously supported this. Indeed, where the culture may have actively prevailed against this. There is an opportunity here to develop a framework whereby organisations could conduct an audit of how supportive the systems, structure and culture are of leadership courage, compassion and resilience in order to be able to address these issues at both macro- and micro-levels as well as developing leaders' abilities in these aspects. In particular, the impact of the enormous changes over the past year due to the pandemic need to be understood in order to create the universities that we want to see.

The Pandemic-Impact and What We Need to Learn

It is impossible to look back over the past year and not feel an enormous sense of loss for the freedoms that we had prior to Covid-19 and how much we took for granted. Covid taught us that we were indeed unprepared for such an event (Heffernan, 2021) and in spite of the rapid 'pivot' of UK universities to provide teaching and support for students online, in reality we were replicating face-to-face teaching practices in an online context rather than rethinking teaching in a more fundamental way. We all learnt to use Zoom, Teams and many other online meeting platforms quickly and greeted the new ways of working initially with some enthusiasm, before the long days of staring at the screen brought 'Zoom fatigue' with it. The fear and anxiety that swept the world was gradually replaced with a sense of reluctant normality, and as a result, the initial wave of compassion that I talked about last year (Denney, 2020) seems to have all but disappeared in the face of the transition to the 'new normal'. It would, however, be a mistake to view this as the 'new normal' as we are not there yet. We are starting to emerge from what I refer to as the 'pandemic-period' and we will at some point, evolve to a position where we are living with Covid but are no longer in a

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.2.2.37]

pandemic situation, obviating some of the extreme responses and limits on our freedoms that we have seen to date.

As such, this is the crucial time for us to embark upon a sector-wide discussion of what we want our universities to look like in this post-pandemic period – how we want to be teaching, researching and working and what we want the core values to be – and I suggest that the 'values' we had before will no longer be the ones we want to take forwards. For this, therefore, we need the 'golden braid' of courage, compassion and resilience in leadership that I talk about herewith.

Pre-Covid University Values

University values are a source of endless fascination because almost every UK university has them on their website somewhere, yet the values on the website are rarely the values that the university actually embodies. Values are lived and not merely published on a website. Every time you interact with students and staff from an institution, you are able to tell what the values are, because values are lived rather than mandated. There is nothing inherently wrong with trying to set a tone of what you might like the values of an organisation to be, but it is a problem when the values statement is written solely by senior management and is a considerably mismatch with the reality of the values as experienced by the staff and students. Instead, values are things that are lived and experienced and speak strongly to the culture of the institution – they tend to be organic and cannot be imposed.

In my previous article, I focused on the need for conversations to open up about suffering and I made the point that Covid had obviated a hierarchy of suffering and placed everyone in a position where we were all suffering. I believe that, for a while, conversations DID open-up and people DID feel more able to acknowledge their suffering, but that as we have progressed throughout the pandemic, there has become a new baseline and it is no longer as okay as it was to acknowledge suffering once again. For this reason, I believe that we need a new model of leadership in higher education which opens up discussions around suffering and seeks to alleviate the preventable forms of suffering and provide compassion for those who are experiencing the inevitable types of suffering (Kanov, 2021). In order to do this, I argue that we need to hold our leaders to higher standards than we do currently and that we need to recognise that leadership requires a special combination of courage, resilience and compassion in order for difficult decisions to be made empathetically and for culture change to be achieved. Flückiger (2021) puts this well when he says:

> *"Excellence and exemplarity must be found at all levels of our institution: in behavior, respect, tolerance and solidarity." (*Flückiger, 2021, p. 125)

It is incumbent upon all those involved with higher education at influential levels – government, funders, boards of governance / council, vice-chancellors and senior teams – to recognise that our institutions are no longer culturally fit for purpose in the post-pandemic world. We may revel in the sense of history attached to their founding and development but we also need to recognise that our universities need to move into the 21st century and develop cultures that are welcoming to our increasingly diverse community of staff as well as students. There has been some considerable progress made in this area with

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.2.2.37]

regards to students, particularly over the past ten years (whilst still acknowledging the journey that still needs to be made) but there has been relatively little progress made in understanding the transition of higher education institutions that were founded by white, middle-class males FOR white, middle-class males into ones that are hugely more diverse in terms of staffing (O'Connor, 2019). We wonder why, for example, so few women make it to the level of Vice-Chancellor (O'Connor, 2019), but we fail to acknowledge the fact that women become trapped at lower levels due to the inability of a workplace to support women appropriately with factors that are unique to biological females – childbirth and menopause – as well as because there is cultural pressure for them to pursue teaching-focused careers with limited access to activities that lead to promotion (Morley, 2014), or because they are unduly harshly judged in student feedback (MacNell et al., 2015) Instead, however, of addressing these issues through overhauls of systems, structures and culture, the judgements about women continue – that they are not good enough or they do not 'fit' somehow - and there is a continuing narrative around trying to 'fix' women through training courses, mentoring or other interventions, rather than fixing the problem systemically. The first step of which is acknowledging that the cultures are normatively masculine and engaging in a debate about what this means and how it could be changed (Bensimon, 1995; Burkinshaw & White, 2017).

The values of the higher education institutions within which we work and study are therefore inherently white and masculine and continue to marginalise those who fall outside of these categories. Covid has laid bare many of the inequalities both in society at large and within our universities – for example, there has been a lot of debate over the burden of childcare and home-schooling continuing to fall on women and that women will, therefore, have not been able to publish as much research, or conduct the research, or participate in other matters, to the same extent as their male peers during this past year. Institutions will certainly need to consider the impact of this for promotion and progression and seek to identify how they will redress this in coming years, but again, this tends to be a sticking plaster instead of a more wholesale cultural adjustment and this is where leadership becomes so very important.

If we focus away from the measurable aspects for a moment and consider instead the messages that come from the top, then we clearly see the need for change. For so long now, our universities have been intense, highly-competitive, stressful places to work and survive and we now need to build them back as places where staff can thrive, without fear of being chopped off at the knees. Covid lifted the lid, initially, on compassion – a shared sense of suffering across the community and a call for us to support each other. Since it became the 'new normal' however, the lid has closed back down again. People are feeling that no-one wants to hear about their suffering anymore because it has gone on for so long. Staff are anxious and scared about returning to campus and in-person teaching, but on a daily basis I hear from colleagues right across the sector that they feel that they are being 'forced' to return. The media continues to emphasise the terrible experiences of students 'trapped' in their bedrooms on online learning, without acknowledging the complexities of teaching in mass-participation, global institutions where classes of over 400 are common and many students may not be able to return to the UK due to restrictions in their home countries. All of these negative narratives and continuing pressures conspire to make staff feel punished,

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.2.2.37]

exhausted and at breaking point – and without any of the compassion that was present earlier in the pandemic. Having gone from a situation where we recognised and saw the complexity of people's lives – kids, cats and caring responsibilities – right there on Zoom or Teams, we now seem to be doing a pretty good job of ignoring those complexities with a terrible risk that we move forwards building back worse, not better. Somehow the narratives around 'forcing staff back' are completely undoing the steps that we took forwards earlier in the pandemic to understand and appreciate staff as human beings with complex lives that hybrid working might actually help.

If, however, we focus on values rather than directives, we might actually manage this better going forwards, and we might manage to build our universities on more secure foundations that don't make everyone unhappy. I think that those values need to be an intertwined 'golden braid' of courage, compassion and resilience, embodied in leadership in our universities and here is how I see those working:

Courage

Genuine courage is about doing the right thing at the right time for the right reasons. Courage requires acting with integrity and authenticity, being open and vulnerable, sharing suffering and making difficult decisions with humanity and compassion. It may mean acting against the grain and resisting some of the things that universities have just accepted over the past few decades. It may mean, for example, identifying the core strengths of the institution and playing to those instead of trying to do everything. It may mean, for example, resisting the lure of the league tables and trying to do the right things for students and staff without regard for where the institution is positioned. It might mean not trying to implement constant change all the time.

What it almost certainly does mean is university leadership standing up for what they genuinely believe to be in the best interests of their staff and students, possibly against the lure of the league tables, and recognising that in order to give students the best experience possible, they must have happy and fulfilled staff. Staff who are constantly stressed, under pressure and at risk of becoming seriously unwell are not going to give the students their best experience – even with the best will in the world. If universities do not take the courage to prioritise the wellbeing of their staff, then they risk losing everything. The greatest asset of any university, as well as its greatest cost, is its staff.

Compassion

The role of compassion as part of courage has been mentioned above, and this really illustrates that these three values intertwine together to create a powerful, values-based model for higher education leadership, and they also create synergy – the total of the three together is greater than the sum of the individual values on their own. Compassion is an action, a value and a philosophy. If you hold the value of compassion, then you are driven to act compassionately in response to other people's suffering. (Kanov, 2021) makes a strong argument for understanding the importance of suffering in order to facilitate acting with compassion, and this is where we have got things wrong in higher education again. The overriding ethos is one of not seeing and not acknowledging suffering. As I emphasised in my paper last year (Denney, 2020), coronavirus allowed us the opportunity to identify and acknowledge our suffering on an equal basis – we were ALL suffering. The problem with

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.2.2.37]

suffering in any 'normal' context is that it has a kind of a hierarchy – they are suffering more than me, so either my suffering isn't genuine suffering or I shouldn't mention it because it doesn't really matter. It would be more helpful if we could all admit to suffering (which, by the way, requires courage!) and understand that a 'return to normal, post-Covid' a) is not going to happen and b) is not going to eliminate suffering. Why do I say this?

Well, a) we are not going to return to a post-Covid world. It just is not possible. We have had Covid, Covid is with us now, probably forever, and we are going to evolve over the next few years into a world where we learn how to live with it through interventions such as vaccinations and also possibly some intermittent restrictions on lifestyles and, in particular, travel, in order to contain sporadic, localised outbreaks and new variants. We are going to move into a post-pandemic world, at least as far as Covid is concerned, but we also need to understand that the likelihood of another pandemic of some kind is actually quite high – Heffernan (2021) refers to the fact that a number of pathogens make the 'jump' from animals to humans each year, and although the circumstances have to align correctly for this to emerge as an epidemic, we have been quite lucky so far with previous pathogens such as SARS and Ebola, that they were relatively contained. Covid has been far more impactful, but it may well not be the last such epidemic in our lifetimes.

Given this, it would then be much better if we could take what we have learnt from Covid and use it to move forwards into a more compassionate world.

With regards to b), suffering will always be with us. As long as we are an imperfect human race, making mistakes, getting sick and taking bad decisions, there will always be suffering. And suffering will occur at various times throughout everyone's lives, it will be of varying nature, extent and duration. In order to be a compassionate community, we need to acknowledge suffering. In higher education, this means that we need senior leadership to take a lead in this and show their suffering and their humanity. And what of the third thread of the 'golden braid', resilience?

Resilience

The current dominant narrative in higher education about needing to be more 'resilient' is not really the right one. Resilience is often used pejoratively to describe a deficit in other people – 'our students need to be more resilient in the face of disappointment'; 'our universities need to be resilient in the face of Covid' and so on. Resilience when used in this context is an attempt to make people put up with destructive and punitive systems and structures that fundamentally need to be addressed. The genuine definition of resilience is not this – it is not resilience to take everything on board and never complain or try to change things so that over a long period this causes mental ill-health. Arguably, this is, in fact what we have all been doing over the past 15 months during Covid – we have been 'sucking things up' for the most part. University staff have all been working extremely hard in less than ideal conditions for the sake of the students and our livelihoods. Many people have been dealing with combinations of pressing caring responsibilities, the anxiety around getting Covid ourselves and the lack of being able to take proper breaks. Boundaries have become blurred between home and work lives, and, to quote a colleague: 'we have gone from being always present to always on' – staff have not switched off properly for over 15 months. If this is resilience, then the majority of people reading this are going to close this article now and go no further. We have had enough, thank you very much!

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.2.2.37]

Fortunately, this is not what is meant by genuine resilience. Resilience is about understanding where our breaking points are, and stopping well before them. Resilience is about experiencing disappointment or failure, reflecting on this and responding to it stronger than before. Resilience, to me, is a collective community responsibility, where all members of a community should come together to understand what is broken in a system and agree ways in which it can be made better – and this is how our university leadership can demonstrate and build resilience in individuals and in the community.

The 'Golden Braid' Model: Courage, Compassion and Resilience in Higher Education Leadership

This is a conceptual model for an ideal vision of higher education leadership. It is not grounded in evidence and I would certainly be interested in hearing from anyone who would be interested in researching measures of the constructs in this context. For now, this section will describe how senior leaders in higher education could use these aspects to their own advantage and to that of their institutions, staff and students.

I think we must start with both courage and resilience. Courage and resilience feed off each other – in order to have the courage to address unpleasant realities and make changes, we must have resilience to deal positively with setbacks. We need our leaders to address the systemic challenges that our higher education institutions are grabbling with and are causing vast amounts of stress. In particular, leaders need to consider whether their institution should be trying to do everything, or whether it should focus on being good in one particular area; issues of social justice – in particular progression for all staff and whether the current promotion and progression systems are fair to all groups; a genuine interest in understanding the complex lives lived by both staff and students and attempts to engage them in constructive discussions about how the systems and structures could be changed for the benefit of everyone.

This would require a great deal of courage – particularly as leaders are dealing with intense sector-pressures and a considerable variety of other issues that staff and students are not usually privy to. Above all, this requires a commitment to wanting to make things better for the key stakeholders in the university – not just to satisfy government and Council.

And this then requires compassion, woven throughout as a third, golden thread into the braid. We need to see compassion from senior leaders to the rest of the community - an understanding that as we emerge this year from the pandemic, battered, bruised and exhausted, that now is not the right time to start working on large-scale projects and strategic plans because the most compassionate thing that senior leaders could do right now would be to encourage everyone to take lots of leave over the summer and spend some time grieving for what we have all lost and experienced over the past year. Only then might we be able to regroup in time for the new academic year in the autumn, a bit more refreshed. Only then, can we attempt to move on with the courage and resilience necessary to build back better.

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.2.2.37]

The 'Golden Braid' Model

References

Bensimon, E. M. (1995). Total quality management in the academy: A rebellious reading. Harvard Educational Review, 65(4), 593-612.

Blackmore, P., & Kandiko, C. B. (2011) Motivation in academic life: A prestige economy. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education, 16*(4), 399-411. https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2011.626971

Bolden, R., Gosling, J., Brien, A., Peters, K., Ryan, M., Haslam, A., Longsworth, L., Davidovic, A., & Winklemann, K. (2012). *Academic Leadership: Changing conceptions, identities and experiences in UK higher education.* London, UK: Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. http://hdl.handle.net/10871/15098

Burkinshaw, P., & White, K. (2017). Fixing the Women or Fixing Universities: Women in HE Leadership. *Administrative Sciences, 7*(3), 30. https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci7030030

Deem, R. (2004). The knowledge worker, the manager-academic and the contemporary UK university: New and old forms of public management? *Financial Accountability & Management, 20*(2), 107-128. Wiley-Blackwell: 107–128. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0408.2004.00189.x

Denney, F. (2020). Compassion in higher education leadership: Casualty or companion during the era of coronavirus? *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies,* 1(2), 41-47. http://dx.doi.org/10.29252/johepal.1.2.41

Dictionary, C. E. (2014). *Collins English dictionary. Complete & Unabridged.* Glasgow, UK: HarperCollins.

Dutton, J. E., Worline, M. C., Frost, P. J., & Lilius, J. (2006). Explaining compassion organizing. Administrative science quarterly, 51(1), 59-96. https://doi.org/10.2189/asqu.51.1.59

Flückiger, Y. (2021). The conditions for higher education institutions to meet the social challenges ahead. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies,* 2(1), 120-129. https://dx.doi.org/10.29252/johepal.2.1.120

Gilbert, P. (Ed.). (2005). Compassion: Conceptualisations, research and use in psychotherapy. London, UK: Routledge.

Heffernan, M. (2021). *Uncharted: How Uncertainty Can Power Change*. London, UK: Simon & Schuster.

Kanov, J. (2021). Why suffering matters! *Journal of Management Inquiry, 30*(1), 85-90. https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492620929766

Li, J., & Tong, Y. (2021). Does narcissistic leadership enhance employee resilience? A moderated mediation model of goal-directed energy and psychological availability. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 42*(5), 819-836. https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-11-2020-0521

Lombardi S, Pina e Cunha, M., & Giustiniano, L. (2021). Improvising resilience: The unfolding of resilient leadership in COVID-19 times. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, *95* (102904). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2021.102904

MacNell, L., Driscoll, A., & Hunt, A. N. (2015). What's in a name: Exposing gender bias in student ratings of teaching. *Innovative Higher Education, 40*(4)*,* 291-303. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-014-9313-4

Manning, G., & Curtis, K. (2012). *The Art of Leadership*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Morley, L. (2014). Lost leaders: Women in the global academy. *Higher Education Research & Development, 33*(1), 114-128. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.864611

Nussbaum, M. (1996) Compassion: The basic social emotion. *Social Philosophy and Policy, 13*(1), 27-58. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052500001515

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.2.2.37]

O'Connor, P. (2015). Good jobs - but places for women? *Gender and Education, 27*(3), 304-319. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2015.1021302

O'Connor, P. (2019). Gender imbalance in senior positions in higher education: What is the problem? What can be done? *Policy Reviews in Higher Education, 3*(1), 28-50. https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2018.1552084

Poorkavoos, M. (2016). *Compassionate leadership: What is it and why do organizations need more of it?* [Research Paper]. Roffey Park Institute. Available online at https://www.roffeypark.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Compassionate-Leadership-Booklet.pdf

Shepherd, S. (2018). Strengthening the university executive: The expanding roles and remit of deputy and pro-vice-chancellors. *Higher Education Quarterly, 72*(1), 40-50. https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12150

Simpson, A., Farr-Wharton, B., & Reddy, P. (2020). Cultivating organizational compassion in healthcare. Journal of Management & Organization, 26(3), 340-354. https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2019.54

Taleb, N. N. (2007). *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. UK: Random House.

Waddington, K. (2016). The compassion gap in UK universities. *International Practice Development Journal,* 6(1), 1-9. https://doi.org/10.19043/ipdj.61.010

Waddington, K. (2018). Developing Compassionate Academic Leadership: The Practice of Kindness. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, 6(3).

Waddington, K. (Ed.). (2021). Towards the compassionate university: From golden thread to global impact. London, UK: Routledge.

Worline, M. C., & Dutton, J. E. (2017). *Awakening Compassion at Work: The Quiet Power That Elevates People and Organizations*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Dr. Fiona Denney is a Professor of Business Education in the Brunel Business School at Brunel University London. In a career spanning nearly 25 years, Fiona has been a business studies academic and has held a number of central university positions. Between 2003 and 2019, Fiona worked in academic staff and researcher development, including being the Assistant Director of the Graduate School at King's College London and heading up the Brunel Educational Excellence Centre at Brunel University London until 2019. Fiona is a former member of the Executive Committee of the UK Council for Graduate Education, a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and a Fellow of the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA). Her research interests are focused on academic leadership in modern universities.

[Downloaded from www.johepal.com on 2026-11-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.2.2.37]

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) which allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator.