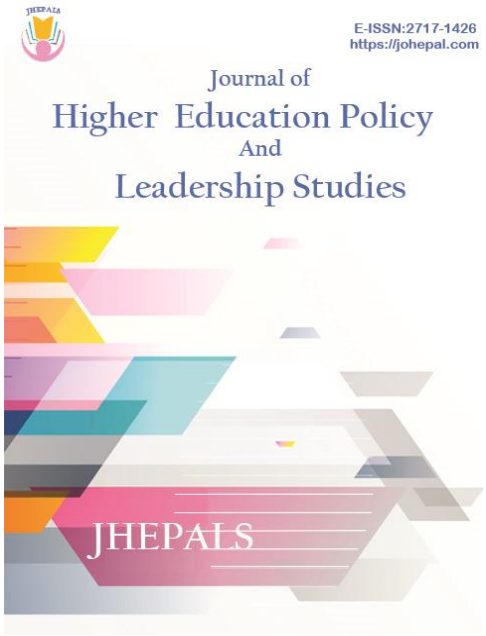
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The Losses of Leadership? Masks, Mirrors and Meaning when Leading in Higher Education

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Abstract

Leadership – as a noun, trope, imperative, directive and proxy - is used repetitively in higher education. It is an empty signifier. While noting this lack of definitional clarity, leadership roles in universities remain competitive and coveted. Titles, salaries and profile follow. Within universities, the attributes of successful leaders are rarely studied. Instead, Goffmanesque frontstages are assembled that construct a seamless story of promotion and achievement. This positional power subverts accountability, transparency and scrutiny. These frontstages mask, minimize and decentre failures, inconsistencies and detours that deflect from a crisp narrative of success. There are also losses in and from leadership. This theoretical article deploys distinctive and provocative literature from outside of the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada. Activating the leadership research from Aotearoa / New Zealand, the Philippines, China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, this article investigates the consequences of marginalizing academic success in teaching and research as a requirement for leadership roles and positions. This article shows that communication skills are more significant in creating organizational success than neoliberal-framed financial 'management.' With little attention to followership or failures, what is lost from leadership?

Keywords: Higher Education; Leadership; Universities; Knowledge Economy; STEMM

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Introduction

What is the point, meaning and purpose of a university? This question is neither flippant nor rhetorical. Platitudes and mantras from Newman (1996) or C.S. Lewis (Myers, 1994) can be summoned. Present academics can nod in amazement, realizing that J.R.R. Tolkien was an academic while writing *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (Pearce, 2001). The Inklings transcended the impact of even the most productive research centre (Khoddam, Hall & Fisher, 2012). The *Oppenheimer* motion picture opened a window into the role of universities in war and peace, survival and destruction (Nolan, 2023). The meeting of Einstein and Oppenheimer on a US college campus was potent, even if fictionalized (Slaughter, 2024). These great minds spoke of knowledge, ethics, and consequences. Significantly, none of these archetypal scholars were presidents, vice chancellors, rectors, deputy vice chancellors, pro-rectors or deans of their universities. While these esteemed scholars have travelled through time via popular literature and popular culture, the people who occupied leadership roles during the tenure of Lewis and Tolkien, Einstein and Oppenheimer, have been lost to contemporary narratives.

This is an ironic inversion, as are most inversions. This invisibility and visibility summons the "dialectics of the same and the other, of the inside and the outside" (Derrida & Houdebine, 1972, p. 36). While living and working in a university – in the present – vice chancellors, rectors, deputy vice chancellors, pro-rectors, pro vice chancellors, directors and deans are ubiquitous, permeating press releases, public relations, and earnest photographs on LinkedIn. When opening an email inbox, academics bump into leaders offering views, determinations, mantras or imperatives. They restructure, fire and hire. They comment and critique. Their confidence is not contagious. It is inappropriate.

Awkward choreography dances in the space between academics and their leadership. Stanley Aronowitz offered a humorous, if horrific, diagnostic on this complex relationship between academics and university leadership. In 2001, he published *The Knowledge Factory*. He argued that there were three pathways in higher education: teaching, research, and administration.

> Over the past thirty years, administration has become a separate career in academic life ... What are the consequences of administration as a career? First and perhaps foremost, career administrators tend to lose touch with the educational enterprise. Their allegiances and self-conception becomes increasingly corporate as they gradually surrender any pretence of doing consistent writing and teaching … It doesn't take long before he views himself as a member of a separate social layer within the academic system and sees the faculty and students as adversaries (Aronowitz, 2001, pp. 164-165).

Aronowitz argues scholars disconnect from teaching and research to build a career, profile and credibility through entering university administration. They then lead the scholars who have succeeded in the fields in which they have failed or underperformed. *The Knowledge Factory* was a theoretical dystopia when it was released. In the subsequent twenty-four years since the monograph was published, the hyperbolic argument has become true. Senior managers in universities are rarely outstanding teachers and researchers. Indeed, there are two Vice Chancellors in Australia that do not hold PhDs or

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professional doctorates: Professor Renee Leon from Charles Sturt University and Professor Mark Scott from Sydney University. Indeed, on Professor Scott's profile, he lists an honorary doctorate, a Doctor of Letters, from the University of Sydney (Scott, 2024). An honorary doctorate is not a Doctor of Philosophy or a professional doctorate. It is a prize for service. It is not a degree that is achieved after examination and confirmation of international research standards. Further, it is unclear how either Professors Leon or Scott gained their professorships. There are no publications, teaching awards or qualifications listed in their profiles. It is significant to note that a third Vice Chancellor has been appointed in Australia, at the University of Canberra and commencing in 2024, who does not hold a doctorate. Bill Shorten resigned from federal politics and was appointed a Vice Chancellor. He holds a Bachelor of Arts / Laws and a Masters of Business Administration. He has never taught or worked in a university in any capacity beyond that of a student. Yet he has been appointed Vice Chancellor.

How is credibility to be gained and sustained without achieving the foundational skills and knowledge sets required in a university? How can university leaders speak to research excellence while never having achieved it? How can a university leader offer expertise in governance and quality assurance if they have never constructed a curriculum, selected educational technology and multimodal platforms, delivered learning experiences each day, while managing assessment and backward mapping? This is not (only) a question of experience, but expertise. This is not (only) a question of credibility, but authenticity. The meta-question that is the focus of this article is what is lost from leadership and universities through hypocrisy, inelegant proxies and career narratives disconnected from core academic functions?

This is a theoretical paper. Therefore, unobtrusive research methods (Brabazon, 2021) are deployed. These methods are appropriate when studying leadership, as the consequences of neoliberalism and the injustices that now punctuate universities result in highly ideological and subjective responses to surveys and interviews. While these views are powerful and important, there is value in deploying the approaches of Kellehear (2020) for these "delicate situations" (Kellehear, 2018, p. 97). This article has selected under-cited research perspectives to reveal the gulf between bestowed titles and earned expertise. Through unobtrusive research methods, Goffmanesque frontstages are revealed (Brabazon, 2021). We offer a theoretical paper – a thought experiment – about what is lost from an academic life through the selection of a leadership stream. While an alternative focus can be constructed on benefits such as titles, salaries and profile (Quinton and Brabazon, 2022), this article offers an interpretation of what is parked, marginalized and lost through the arc of university leadership.

Higher Education: The Privilege and the Problem

The products of a university are clear: teaching the next generation of professionals, scholars and citizens, pursuing new knowledge, developing and valuing verified expertise, and understanding how the applications of methodologies, ontologies and epistemologies underpin and sustain the knowledge economy. Considerable privilege is situated within academia, but there is also great responsibility in being a thought-leader, influencing how

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communities, governments, commercial enterprises and educational institutes operate and evolve.

Neoliberalism has transformed the university sector, creating a corporatised education industry, focused on commodifying all aspects of knowledge production, and then oversimplifying the operational paradigm to minimise costs with no perceived loss of productivity. The public university is now a public-subsidized university, and must balance its finances through the fees paid by international students, and industry partnerships. Universities are now the cut price research and development department for an array of industries, from the GLAMs (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) through to defence. Noting the scope and scale of these changes, what characteristics are required for successful academic leadership? How does respect and responsibility, the privilege and the problems, duel in the (metaphoric) Red Wedding of university leadership?

The writers of this article have both fulfilled middle management roles in our careers, while remaining research active and continuing to teach. This is a difficult balance to achieve, and requires the loss of leisure and family time. We continued to teach and research so that our leadership is not undergirded by hypocrisy, inauthenticity and pretence. We also span the disciplines, with one graduating from the experimental sciences, and the other from the humanities. Similarly, one has gained leadership posts in schools, faculties and colleges. The other has held leadership roles in the central portfolios. This diversity of experience creates a more expansive lens on higher education leadership. Further, we are both Australians who have worked throughout the world, ensuring that our vista is neither dominated nor framed by North America and Europe.

Whether caused by governmental under-funding or mismanagement, in the last decade - and intensified through the pandemic - universities have had their moorings cut and are adrift. As strategic plans and vision statements have proliferated, increasingly inelegant Key Performance Indicators and 'stretch targets' have parked the core functions of research and teaching. Instead, these activities are assumed to occur without preparation, expertise or support. The casualized workforce is paid for the delivery of 'content' rather than the preparation – and marking – of assessable knowledge. Resource management is now the core activity. Desperation dominates. Short-term budget cycles are frequently incompatible with the development of high-quality curricula design or research that does not hold an immediate 'industry' focus, noting that 'industry' is narrowly funnelled into engineering, defence, and the applied and medical sciences.

As an academic, particularly in the fundamental sciences and the humanities, it is now difficult to latch onto an interesting idea and have the time to develop it. Pressures to attract external revenue, increase student enrolments, continually 'working smarter, not harder' while also delivering teaching and research outcomes from these diminishing resources means that long-term commitments are displaced to survive a panicked, ever-present budget crisis (Brabazon, Hunter & Quinton, 2020). Instead of quality assurance and governance implemented by academic experts and validated by external assessors and examiners, increased bureaucratic hurdles and administrative requirements require 'tick a box' compliance, rather than scholarly review. 'Academic freedom' – while valuable and important – can also be used as a blunt weapon to create a culture of equivalence between opinion and expertise, feelings and peer-reviewed research. Under-resourced institutions focus on small targets and fast outcomes, lessening the capacity to invest in long-term

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strategies and research programmes. The economic determinants are understandable, noting the governmental neglect of universities. In all businesses and enterprises, the focus on a singular, financial bottom-line results in challenges such as staff turnover, health and safety shortcuts, and questionable product quality. In Aronowitz's *The Knowledge Factory* (2001), economic determinism undermined the core project of higher education. Indeed, teaching and learning are not economically efficient. The fundamental sciences and the high humanities are not economically efficient. They provide the foundational expertise that enables an array of social, scientific, and economic initiatives through applied knowledge and the translation of learning. Such a context makes unique and profound demands on higher education leadership. Therefore, to interpret these demands, we focus on the outlier leadership literature to provide connection and meaning.

Courageous Literature in Challenging Times

There is a considerable scholarly literature that details the state of universities and the contemporary challenges that are faced by university leadership, and the systemic issues that have arisen because of the funding landscape and political influences and pressures (Dobson, 2018; Dodd, 2020; Harman & Treadgold, 2007). In disciplinary terms, this literature is clustered around the phrase Critical University Studies. This is a powerful and strong field, but is dominated by scholars in the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Canada. Therefore, to shape our argument, we deploy the research of a scholar from Aotearoa / New Zealand.

A pioneer in this field, aligning Critical University Studies and Leadership Studies, was Glenys Patterson from the Faculty of Business Studies at Massey University. Patterson began her research into university leadership in the 1980s, during a time of 'reform' of the country's entire economy, including the university system.

> This economic revolution was driven by the strong ideological commitment to market-based economics of Finance Minister Roger Douglas and a group of highly influential officials at the New Zealand Treasury. The 'more-market' doctrines were vigorously endorsed and promulgated by business leaders in the politically influential New Zealand Business Roundtable. It was the views on education of these economic theorists and ideologues of the libertarian right which were to set the policy agenda for change in the tertiary sector (Patterson, 1991, p. 56).

Patterson studied how universities developed from Ancient Greece to her (then) current context, probing how the alignment between social and political environments facilitated or inhibited that development. This research was published through her department and became a scholarly monograph (Patterson, 1997). Her interest in universities from an organisational and management perspective was a clear passion that drove her career, as she continued to probe the socio-political dynamics of higher education during the expansion – internationally – of the libertarian right.

Her research trajectory is important to continue. At an organisational level, universities are not generalizable to other institutions. They award three or four-year degrees, academic standards must be periodically reviewed or assessed within a nation and

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– with doctoral education – international examination and quality assurance are required. These standards are not agile, disruptive or adaptive, because they cannot be. The Newton cliché of 'standing on the shoulders of giants' has many interpretations, particularly when remembering its context in relation to his conflicts and correspondence with Robert Hooke (Newton et al., 1959). However, the importance of professional stability and long-term planning is crucial for curricula design and the development of a research portfolio. The advancement of knowledge requires predictability, rigour, repeatability and transparency, as so many scholars sacrificed time, family relationships and – in the case of Marie Sklodowska-Curie – their lives to provide the ethics and care required to maintain the standards of scholarship. Knowledge development is not agile. Knowledge applications can be dynamic and disruptive, but they must be based on tested and verifiable research design, data collection and analysis, robust interpretations, academic integrity, research integrity, and the dissemination of results for diverse audiences and stakeholders.

It takes time for universities to respond to external drivers (Godkin, 2010). In the latter half of the 1990s, there was alarmism around the potential irreversible damage that could arise with devolutionary elements in an evolutionary organisation (Smith & Saint-Onge, 1996). Once research integrity is questioned and peer review mistrusted, the foundations of academic life crumble. Patterson noted that the stability of universities is vulnerable to governmental policy changes and she focused on empowering the tertiary sector with tools to communicate to government about resourcing and improving higher education policies (Patterson & Massey University. Department of Management, 1996). For the experimental sciences, most of which are equipment-led sciences, researchers are reliant on the purchase of – and the maintenance of – expensive apparatus. Therefore, when research funding is reduced, the experimental sciences are the first to suffer. Specifically, those institutions outside of the 'elite' universities no longer have the resources to complete their research. Regional universities suffer from the lack of infrastructure. For example, the Australian Synchrotron, run by the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO) is in suburban Melbourne, geographically close to Monash University (Ansto, 2024). The same mode of research infrastructure is differently organized in Canada, with the Canadian Light Source, their national synchrotron, situated in the province of Saskatchewan, in the middle of the country, and based at the University of Saskatchewan (Canadian Light Source, 2024). Regional development - widening access to infrastructure, and a more even distribution of research materials - was a priority.

In contrast, the high humanities – like history, literature and philosophy and the newer interdisciplinary formations such as cultural studies and media studies – are not anchored to public funding in the same way. As the open access movement for journals and articles has intensified, including guides such as the Directory of Open Access Journals (2024) and the Directory of Open Access Books (2024), the financial limitations of a local university library are no longer an inhibitor for research. It is for this reason that the best scholars in the humanities and theoretical social sciences are not (only) found in the elite institutions. The economic determinant for equipment and facilities is not required, and the capacity of an institutional library does not limit the reading and research of international scholars. The priorities of publishers based in North America and Europe can be transcended, with a vigorous growth of open access journals in Indonesia, Turkey and Algeria.

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The Losses of Leadership in Higher Education

Educational policy matters, as does the building of a communication system between academics and academic leadership, and universities and government. Patterson described universities as 'learning organisations' (1999, p. 9), meaning not only that they are locations for learning, but that each organisation behaves as if it were an organism, capable of developing tacit knowledge in a manner akin to an artificial intelligence system. In continuing her work of studying how socio-political interactions facilitate and inhibit tertiary organisational growth, Patterson noted issues with university governance and the challenges it faces with economies of scale. She described the conditions for optimal efficacy based on the size of an institution, to identify when mergers or alliances were the best strategic choices (Patterson, 2000). Her research was prescient. The trope (and cliché) of 'economies of scale' remains at the foreground of the higher education sector, as institutions grapple with post-pandemic challenges, battling to balance diminishing budgets and meet their internal operating costs while attempting to minimise their workforces and still achieve their productivity targets. The results of these cascading crises are restructures, outsourcing, arbitrary targets, and casualization of academic and professional staff.

Working through times of challenge and change is not novel in universities. Change particularly buffets the smaller institutions and those in regional and rural locations. Disconnected from the large urban populations, fighting for student enrolments remains a constant battle. In the Australian and New Zealand context, New Zealand's eight universities educate a national population of 5.16M (645k people per university), compared with Australia's 41 Universities and 26.58M people (648k people per university). Even though the number of people in the nation's population per university is similar between the two nations, NZ's smaller overall population means that the government has less revenue to respond to budgetary needs. The tertiary sector in New Zealand is more sensitive to overall funding policy changes as it has fewer 'whole of sector' resources. To make this point, Aotearoa / New Zealand does not have national synchrotron. The infrastructure is simply not available to researchers. This context of absence, few resources and marginalization granted both a stark and bleak vista for Patterson to develop her theorizations of university leadership.

As the socio-political landscape of universities has changed in response to governments adopting neoliberal economic management tools and models, the leadership and governance of universities has also transformed to respond to and enact these changes. This was highlighted by Harman and Treadgold (2007) who noted that academic leadership and governance have shifted away from academic policies and procedures and towards trustee-style models. This has influenced the skill set and background of individuals who are approached, vetted and selected for senior leadership roles. Senior leaders are increasingly hired from outside the higher education sector (Quinton & Brabazon, 2022). The combination of a lack of academic background and expertise in research and teaching, means that there is no understanding of the time required to develop research questions, research design, data collection and analysis, and ethical dissemination protocols. The development of a curriculum responsive to a widening participation agenda and activating an abundance model of teaching and learning rather than a deficit model (Brabazon, 2018), is beyond their personal or professional experience. Plug in and play leadership, scaffolded

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by metrics rather than meaning, displaces the core activities of higher education to short term 'outputs.' These are profound losses to the institution, to staff and to students.

The personal and professional values of the Chief Technical Officer (CTO) are not essential to the success of a corporation. The personal and professional values of a Chief Financial Officer (CFO) are not essential to the success of a corporation. Conversely, Chancellors, Vice Chancellors, Rectors, Deputy Vice Chancellors, Deputy Rectors and Deans hold views that mitigate the success of an institution. Chancellors are crucial, maintaining a key role in the appointment of Vice Chancellors (Brabazon, 2020), and fulfilling a gatekeeping role in terms of public scrutiny and transparency. Therefore, the expertise of Vice Chancellors matters. Their experience matters. Both shape the priorities and framing discourses for five years (at least) of a university. There is much attention to these personal infusions on institutional priorities in the leadership literature, with the ideology of managerialism causing irreversible damage to universities (Hill, 2023; Jones, 2023). It is an understandable argument from a neoliberal perspective that academics are a 'problem' because we do not adapt to the vagaries of national governments or the changing 'markets' for the fundamental sciences, particularly through medicine and health. However, it is important to recognize the imperatives of universities. The priorities of operational management may not be the priorities of teaching, learning and research. The challenge is when operational procedures for budgeting, staffing and risk erode the capacity to write and deliver curriculum or ensure the maintenance of international standards and the development and delivery of high-quality research.

Resonating within Patterson's frame that universities are learning organisations means that specific components of the socio-political landscape are emphasized. Therefore, particular leadership skills are valued and validated. This results in corporatisation and managerialism, delivering learning 'products' to address, value and accept national priorities and industry needs. Therefore, universities focus on graduate attributes and employability as decontextualized tropes. Such a priority marginalizes academic literacies and learning that may not be tethered to a particular government's rendering of 'work,' 'value' and 'importance.' Developing new knowledge is not efficient. The financial constraints in which universities find themselves ensures that fewer academics are teaching high quality courses and producing fundamental research. Casualization results in academics who are paid by the hour 'delivering' course materials, often developed by others. Research is squeezed into corporate-defined tiering of journals, with Scopus and Elsevier generating private profit from the unpaid labour of academics, and the public-subsidised equipment required in many of the experimental sciences.

Commodification and commercialisation are the dominant lenses of leadership in universities. The under-resourced institution is formed through precarious employment conditions and a casualised and adjunct/emeritus workforce where people are removed from employment in the organization and then continue to work for free to ensure a continuity of care for their students, or a life raft to their identity as an academic. This unpaid or underpaid workforce is depersonalised and commodified, expected to perform until they are replaced because of wear, burnout or sickness. Collegiality and consultation are absent, replaced by fear and frustration.

When staff are undervalued and precariously employed, it leads to poor behaviour including bullying (Meriläinen et al, 2019), quiet quitting (Morrison-Beedy, 2022), name

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calling (Hansen, 2022), jealousy (Bayar & Koca, 2021), poaching of research students (Kiley & Austin, 2008), and appropriating authorship on papers (Khezr & Mohan, 2022). With security and predictable promotion pathways erased, recalcitrance and insularity emerge. A recent article by Oliviera et al (2021) revealed the behaviour of knowledge hiding to ensure that individuals with a key research innovation maintain an advantage. In their systematic review, they highlight practices to deal with this scholarly masking. This research must be extended because - for institutions that are based on knowledge sharing – these actions constitute not only post-disciplinarity when a system fails, but anti-disciplinary behaviour that impedes any attempt to enable the development of knowledge. With all the attention on knowledge exchange and industry partnerships, the loss of collegiality is blocking the capacity for important research to emerge, move and improve.

These challenges, where academic leadership is configured as disconnected from the workforce, are not limited to Australia and New Zealand but manifest in various ways across the globe. While logging the dominance of the United Kingdom, United States and Canada in the Critical University Studies and Leadership Studies literature, profound interventions in this field are also emerging in Asia. For example, Siason Jr and Tangco-Siason investigated the extent of "flexible leadership" in a Philippines state university. They surveyed eight College Deans and 143 faculty members. The key outcomes from their research was that"flexibility was high, with actions taken to build commitment to core ideology; capable leadership; involvement and empowerment; keeping communication lines open; using reward systems to support multiple objectives; and encouraging and exemplifying leadership by example" (Siason Jr & Tangco-Siason, 2023, p. 52). A similarly important result emerged from the University of Manitoba by Lui et al, investigated Deanships in Chinese Universities. They recognised the importance of communication skills well ahead of business acumen. The cultural values of cooperation and harmony are valued (Lui & Ruan, 2023). This difference in ideological foundation is also being extended to determine if this shift is advantageous or an impediment to a nation's educational mission for its citizens. A 2024 article by Feng discussed how contemporary Chinese educational institutions are enabling excellence initiatives to better situate themselves in the international higher education community, discussing and debating the most effective policies, strategies, and ranking systems (Feng et al., 2024). In such contexts, neoliberalism is one ideology of many to be considered when assessing the development of the higher education sector and infrastructure.

Middle Eastern scholars are also exhibiting innovative research agendas when building institutions that facilitate new research and teaching and learning strategies. Once more, the key leadership trope is open communication. For example, Alattiq (2024) performed a qualitative ethnographic study surveying Saudi Arabian leaders, to gauge their awareness of the elements in leadership development that are needed to be successful in a knowledge economy (Alattiq, 2024). The capacity to communicate to and for diverse communities was a key finding. Another article by Nazarzadeh Zare et al. discusses the importance of the commitment that Iran's Farhangian University has to a dialogical leadership style and how it facilitates organisational success (Nazarzadeh Zare et al., 2023). These two studies are important as they show how universities in two nations – Saudi Arabia and Iran – are creating new systems for communicating in, with and through leaders and leadership. While

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recognizing that academic freedom – as an ideology – operates differently in these nations, particularly for humanities and philosophy scholars (Mesbahian, 2023), the focus on building openness in leadership dialogues is profound and important.

This research in Iranian and Saudi Arabian universities sharpens the lack of attention to organic, engaged and responsive communication systems amongst academic leadership in other nations. There is a disconnection between senior leadership in universities and academics. Understandably, academics recognize the incongruity of leaders without expertise in teaching and research offering a commentary and shaping policy in areas in which they have little or no expertise. In sociological terms, senior leaders are making decisions after communicating with other senior leaders, resonating with Sykes and Matza's research into "techniques of neutralization" (1957). They argued extreme views become more extreme when discussed by an isolated or separated group and are not mitigated or moderated by consensus-based conversations. It is a mantra of information literacy that we do not know what we do not know (Brabazon, 2023). If leadership has been granted in universities based on previous leadership roles, rather than excellence in teaching and research, then simulacrum quality assurance and governance is enacted (Baudrillard, 1996). This is a re-representation of quality assurance, disconnected from the realities of higher education. This is what Baudrillard described as the 'double refusal.' That is, the refusal of leaders to lead, and the refusal of workers to be lead (Baudrillard, 2020). This analysis first appeared in *Carnival and Cannibal* (2010).

> it is power itself that has to be abolished – and not just in the refusal to be dominated, which is the essence of all traditional struggles, but equally and as violently in the refusal to dominate. For domination implies both these things, and if there were the same violence or energy in the refusal to dominate, we would long ago have stopped dreaming of revolution. And this tells us why intelligence cannot - and never will be able to – be in power: because it consists precisely in this twofold refusal (2010, pp. 17-18).

If leadership is not held with credibility, accountability, experience, expertise and porous communication systems, then the outcomes are structural disconnection, daily disrespect and quiet quitting. These tendencies have now been studied throughout the university sector, including amongst university librarians (Phillips et al., 2024). With the Phillips study, they revealed that the burnout in higher education is so severe that librarians are struggling – metaphorically – to keep the light on in academic libraries. Libraries are the cranium of universities. Librarians are the singular profession enabling information literacy in these difficult times. Their double refusal of leadership priorities is a proxy for the wider health of the organization.

(Beyond) STEMM

In our recent research, we discussed the prevalence of individuals with STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine) backgrounds entering leadership (Quinton & Brabazon, 2022). Within the results, we noticed that 55% of the then Vice Chancellor data set were from STEMM backgrounds. In this earlier research, we speculated the phenomenon was possibly because Vice Chancellors typically have a Deputy Vice

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Chancellor (Research) role prior to becoming a VC, and that this position is typically held by people with STEMM academic backgrounds. This disciplinary pathway is naturalized because the proxies of research 'quality' are funding, citations and H indices. These three variables are neither reliable nor important in humanities research. Often in university settings, an individual is appointed to leadership through seniority and proximity to senior roles. In STEMM circles, a leader's credibility is frequently perceived to be strong because they have had a successful scientific career. However, Caruana and Damilakis have showed in a recent review article of the medical physics profession that being an excellent scientist is far from sufficient for being successful in leadership (Caruana & Damilakis, 2022). Conversely, the skills needed to be a successful leader differ from those that make a successful scientist. Yet our research shows that science qualifications are read by appointment panels as proxies for leadership.

What is both gained and lost in terms of knowledge and skills for STEMM scholars entering leadership positions? Indeed, the lack of law academics and specialists in jurisprudence in leadership positions is odd. Why is expertise in governance, legislation, policies and procedures not valued by Australian and New Zealand appointment panels? Similarly, economics, commerce, business and management academics are in the minority of senior leadership roles. In a 'Business University' (Thompson, 1970), why are the researchers who work in these disciplines not promoted into leadership? There is 'something' in STEMM that aligns with the contemporary definitions of leadership. Yet what are these attributes? The skills needed and adopted in the laboratory are quite different to those deployed the boardroom. The disciplines and scholars with expertise in governance, education, quality assurance, policies and procedures are not Vice Chancellors in Australia and New Zealand. Indeed, the discipline best suited to leadership in higher education – Education – is unrepresented in Vice Chancellors.

The leadership capacity of Senior University personnel is challenging to measure. However, there are basic leadership characteristics that one would hope to observe, such as an understanding of the differences between transactional and transformational leadership, and when it is appropriate to summon each model (Bass, 1990). Such expertise would be expected for all levels of senior leadership. However it is not an expectation or reality, as shown by O'Meara and Petzall in their examination of the selection criteria used in the appointment of Australian Vice-Chancellors (VCs) (O'Meara & Petzall, 2009). These results were expected, if disturbing. The focus was on 'fit' into the organization. 'New' leaders must slot into the already established system. This means that homology is in place, with structures sustained through what O'Meara and Petzall (2009) confirmed as "informal criteria". Past power asymmetries in leadership selection – regarding gender, age, race, sexuality and disciplinary background – are perpetuated. Put another way, 'we' continue to hire leaders that are just like 'us.'

What is significant is how university leaders control the interpretation of their careers to demonstrate credibility beyond such informal criteria and 'fit' with the organization. The public profiles of senior university leaders exist to establish them as a credible leader. This is an Erving Goffman 'front stage,' with a singular purpose of declaring who they are and how their background empowers them to be effective in their role (Brabazon, 2021). If excellence emerges where time and effort are placed, and ongoing growth in expertise

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requires continual development, then some of an individual's skills must necessarily decline in favour of developing others in areas that may be lacking. Credibility as a scientist may align with credibility as a leader. In some areas of higher education, this alignment makes sense. In STEMM, many commercialisation opportunities are identified. Over the past 20 years, technology-enabled innovation has been the focus of research and attracted an injection of governmental support, primarily to enhance the nation's manufacturing and export capability and grow gross domestic product. Some of the clearest pathways from Bench to Boardroom are present in the literature for Biotechnology SMEs, as evidenced by Jennifer Van Brunt who highlighted some of the skill set differences between scientists and entrepreneurial managers, noting that value-based distinctions are the most serious. Scientists work for a 'greater cause' that extends beyond the goals of the business (Van Brunt, 1991). Other leadership research focuses on the applied sciences, particularly medicine and health, and the specific transitions from bench to boardroom. O'Hanlon et al. focused on the improvement of patient outcomes when leadership transitions and models are appropriate and meaningful (O'Hanlon et al., 2014). Kang et al. discover different priorities, with patient satisfaction directly correlating with psychological safety/trust and engagement. This empowering leadership from medical practitioners fosters the same connectivity and safety for employees (Kang et al., 2020).

Through these disparate disciplines and inelegant proxies, Leadership Studies remains important. It is a field of research that is burgeoning, globalizing and diversifying. It is not locked into its home disciplines of Business or Management. Yet Leadership Studies – as a qualification – is not required in selection criteria for senior posts in higher education. Other proxies for competence are validated, particularly holding other leadership positions. Leadership in Australian and New Zealand universities is like a party with a revolving door. The same people move through the system and are recognized for their 'fit.' The impact of this homology is a problematic relationship between conservative (small or capital C) backgrounds and neoliberal imperatives. This paradox can result in institutional paralysis.

There is a solution to this ideological mismatch. Kellerman (2018) described the importance of "Professionalizing Leadership". Her research focusses on the two great absences in leadership that have resulted in Baudrillard's "double refusal," and losing vision and purpose in universities. She logged these two failures as a lack of engagement, discussion and professional development in followership (2018, p. 39), and an ability to disclose, discuss and learn from failure (2018, p. 97). With bad leadership "ubiquitous" (Kellerman, 2018, p. 39), there is no intervention in homological business as usual. 'The fit' may make current leaders comfortable but offers no intervention or consciousness about the consequences not only of their failures, but masking and minimizing these failures.

Conclusion

Leadership requires learning, particularly ongoing learning. Our article has shown that the skills, knowledge, experience and expertise of an academic are not valued for university leadership. 'Fit' in the institution is more important that expertise in teaching and learning. Continued research into the characteristics of senior leaders in our institutions is paramount, to gain a deeper understanding of the constitution and socialisation of

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leadership. What are the parameters of success in university leadership, and how are they patrolled? More significantly, are interventions possible in this leadership culture?

This article has discussed leadership. Followership has been neglected. As shown by Kellerman (2018), this is a problematic absence. But as the old joke confirmed, if a leader looks around and no one is following them, then they are not leaders. They are simply taking a walk. A university workplace – and university workers – are a very distinct occupational group. They have mortgaged much of their lives to gain qualifications. Family and housing commitments have been delayed. A work and life balance has been lost. This socialization and sacrifice are respected by other academics. But as Aronowitz (2001) confirmed, the leaders in our universities have taken a third path – administration – because they have not demonstrated this commitment to teaching and research. Lacking authenticity and credibility, how well prepared is the university leader in engaging and enabling followers? Put another way, what structures and communication systems exist to build an effective working environment between leaders and followers, particularly when followers are better qualified, research active and successful teachers and higher degree supervisors? This is an important question, as its interpretation and answers will reveal the consequences of how hypocritical leadership behaviours affect the higher education workforce culture, and quality teaching and research.

The nodes of expertise, achievement and credibility that render a person qualified and credible to begin leadership are important to locate and disseminate. Instead of this important research, leadership discussions are atomized to the positional power held by individuals. Leadership is an ongoing developmental challenge. It requires ongoing professional development. A leader cannot effectively foster the capacity of those that they lead if they are not developing their own. In a post-Covid environment, where energy is focused on the recovery of enrolment numbers and budget repair, the reliance on leaders to enact responsible, accountable and sensible actions is heightened.

Leading a university differs from other leadership functions. Leaders must demonstrate information literacy skills and wide-ranging expertise for decision making. Taleb demonstrated that Black Swan events are unpredictable and have an enormous impact. The value of Black Swan events is that leadership is improved by activating interpretation and reflection after the crisis (Taleb, 2007). This is not the construction of justifications or platitudes or frontstages, but an understanding of the fear, danger and unpredictability, and evaluating the decisions made during this time. For example, the pandemic tested higher education leadership. Many leaders failed. This failure has not been acknowledged. Noting the restructures, casualization, budget corrections in regional universities, and increasing dependence on international students, university leadership remains reactive, looking in the rear-view mirror to create a generalizable data set from events without a precedence or trajectory.

After the pandemic, teaching and research are more difficult to assess, evaluate, and deliver. These challenges were neither triggered nor caused by COVID-19 or even Generative AI, but by universities that have mortgaged academic professional development for an investment in educational technology (Brabazon, 2002, 2007, 2013). Platforms were funded ahead of people. The proxies of 'Rate My Professor' and the Scopus-fuelled ranking of journals are inelegant at best and misleading at worst. Therefore, serious questions must be

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asked about the purpose of higher education, beyond vision statements and strategic plans. This must be an international discussion, arching away from the publishing priorities of North America and Europe. Understanding how leaders become leaders and how they maintain leadership is important. Understanding what is lost in the movement from a teaching and research focus and into leadership is crucial to the survival of a brittle higher education sector. This research also matters – deeply – to the future of academic life.

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