

Leadership in Higher Education
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Thank you very much for inviting me to speak today. I am honoured to be here.

I confess that when I first considered the prospect of addressing this distinguished audience on the topic of leadership in Higher Education, I was slightly unnerved. And for two different reasons. The first is that when you speak about leadership, as a leader in Higher Education, it can seem self-aggrandising and I have absolutely no intention of blowing my own trumpet in the Top Brass section. The second is that when you stand up to speak, especially as a female leader, there is a sporting chance that a journalist will catch hold of a loose thread in something you mentioned lightly in passing, wind it around their own talking point and pull hard: causing your intended message to unravel. I speak from experience!

I wondered, then, if it might be wiser to refuse the invitation. But, as you see, I am here despite my misgivings. This is partly because, as an out-going Vice-Chancellor I expect this to be the last time I will attend a Times Higher Ed summit. But also because I would like to share some thoughts about how the context of University leadership has changed in recent years; about what the demands of the sector now require from leaders; and about how we can enable better leadership, both from above and from below.

The first thing to say is that the business of University management has changed hugely in scope and scale in recent decades and even in recent years. In the last decade Oxford companies have raised £5.7 billion from investors, £1.6 billion in 2021 alone. This is a step change of remarkable proportions. Oxford has generated 148 spin-out companies since 2016, more than doubling the number formed from 1957 to 2016. To be clear, a Vice-Chancellor does not create this kind of innovation and investment ecosystem: it is generated by multiple talents within and beyond the university. But university leaders must be able to manage economic partnerships, and investments, and building projects, of a size and complexity that were once extremely rare and are now increasingly commonplace.

We have partnered during my tenure as Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, for example, with Novo Nordisk in a new research centre as part of a collaboration on type 2 diabetes; we have partnered with INEOS, a chemical and

manufacturing company, to create a new Institute for Antimicrobial Research to combat the growing problem of antibiotic resistant bacteria. We have joined with GSK to create a joint institute of Molecular and Computational Medicine and with Amazon Web Services to create a test bed for cloud-based research, and with many others. In all, my University has an annual operating budget of about \$3billion, we support over 50,000 jobs and our national economic impact three years ago was independently estimated at £15.7 billion.

The growing number of partnerships between universities, donors and investors to tackle real-world problems, from climate change to cancer, has tremendous potential for good. The Oxford Astra-Zeneca vaccine for Covid-19, which was developed and distributed at cost, has been administered over 3 billion times. It is calculated by the end of 2021 to have saved 6.3 million lives; more than any other Covid vaccine. But the change in the scope and scale of such partnerships does mean that leaders in Higher Education are now required to possess skillsets and to spend their time on managing international projects of a kind that were foreign to our predecessors. They must balance the very real needs and priorities of the day-to-day running of a university – its research, teaching, and administration – with a long-term agenda, that may demand going to the markets to secure bond financing, and form long term financial partnerships to fund projects several decades into the future, beyond the tenure of any individual Vice-Chancellor's position.

For many centuries, University leaders at Oxford were primarily men of the Church, humanists, lawyers, philosophers and historians: from John Owen, the seventeenth-century theologian, to Henry Liddell, author of the monumental Greek-English lexicon, and Benjamin Jowett, the Victorian cleric and translator of Plato: their authority as academic leaders stemmed largely from their long immersion in an academic tradition of letters and – often – of liturgy. It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that scientists, such as Rex Richards, began to be better represented in the role. The Vice-Chancellor of Oxford originally held authority to grant degrees directly from the Church of England.

I mention this because I think we increasingly require university leaders to play multiple different roles simultaneously. We wish them, like Church leaders, to stand above politics. We place them at the symbolic heart of ceremonies that retain their mediaeval rituals. We wish them to create unity, fellowship and a sense of the transcendent ethical value of a University: to provide a public face

for fairness and tolerance. However, we also want university leaders, in certain respects, to behave like CEOs of large companies, with operations in multiple countries. We want them to be conversant with Moody's credit ratings; to oversee IPOs of university spin-outs; to pursue multi-million pound international deals: to be keen-eyed and tough negotiators. As Vice-Chancellors we often have to mediate between worlds whose habits and priorities are imperfectly aligned. It is a diplomatic role, as much as a managerial one.

I strive always to support the humane and inclusive idea of what a University can be: a forum for ideas, a seedbed for research and development, a sanctuary for scholars displaced by war and repression, an institution that sets a moral tone with an educational influence far wider than the individual subjects it teaches. I am fortunate that in my time at Oxford my roles as a financial manager and a humanist have not come into significant tension. But these tensions do exist, particularly in universities pushed to the brink of financial collapse. As a humanist, for example, one will always want to keep the widest range of departments and courses open: to support the study of subjects that recruit students in relatively small numbers but which contribute hugely to the university as a model of intellectual diversity, of knowledge as valuable for its own sake. As a financial manager, one may come under fiscal pressure to submit to the laws of supply and demand and to make cuts.

Modern university leaders, then, need to straddle the different conceptions and functions of their role: to be able to raise money but also to raise spirits, to broker deals but also to break bread regularly with those who teach and learn within their walls; they need to create financial Trusts, and also to be trusted to do the best for colleagues whose careers and identities are more bound up with job security within their institution than those of most employees in other industries.

University leaders must be Janus-faced: always looking to the past and to the future and ready to perform simultaneously a protective and a proactive role – to soften change for institutions with long and noble histories of continuity and to advocate change that will allow those institutions to grow and meet the challenges of the modern world.

One of the happy changes, of course, that Oxford has embraced in the last seven years, is greater access and diversity. I am very glad, as Oxford's first female Vice-Chancellor, to have been part of this welcome and overdue development and to have made it a priority of my tenure. Undergraduate

students today are far more representative of the diverse make-up of British society than they were seven years ago. 23% of those admitted in 2022 came from disadvantaged backgrounds, up from 10% 7 years ago. The number of state school students admitted in the same period rose from 56% to 68%. Black British student numbers more than doubled. The number of BME students rose from 18% to 25%. We have made some progress but at a much slower rate on staff diversity too. There are more BME staff now, particularly in senior roles, they comprise 19% of members of the University Council as against 4% seven years ago. There are also more female statutory professors – now 19% compared to 15% in 2016 – but still far too few. This is a problem that needs to be tackled not only in the UK, but internationally: in the United States: in 2018, women represented 53% of assistant Professors, and 46.% of associate Professors, but accounted for only 34.% of full Professors. Women of colour remain worryingly underrepresented in Academia, though there are signs of positive movement on this issue.

One area in which there has been a discernible change at Oxford is in the appointment of female Heads of House (Wardens and Masters of Oxford's Colleges and Halls). I vividly remember in Hilary term 2016 the female Heads of House invited me to join them at their termly brunch. We were a small group sitting around the kitchen table in Somerville. Today, that same group meets in college dining halls, we are so many. 16 women have been appointed Head of House since 2016, ten of whom were the first woman to hold the position. No fewer than 4 Heads of House are now called Helen. Now that's progress. I like to think that between them they can launch 4000 scholarships! It makes rapid change in the balance of university leadership very visible: to current and prospective students as well as staff. There is no question at all in my mind that future university leaders, in the UK and around the world, will need to be increasingly representative of the diverse constituencies they lead, and that they will bring new and vibrant leadership styles not only to the role of Vice-Chancellor but to the many other leadership roles within the University.

Having worked in both British and American universities, and conscious that I am addressing an international audience, I should mention that I have been struck by different attitudes towards university leadership, particularly in the US and the UK. America is generally thought to be a more egalitarian society than the hierarchical English one from which it seceded. Yet American university leaders, I notice, have far more elaborated structures of bureaucratic support and enjoy far more deference than their British peers. (I really can't speak to other countries.) There are advantages and disadvantages

to both systems. In America, the level of deference and administrative support afforded to leaders may distance them from certain constituencies, but it does help to professionalize the role and give it the authority and weight necessary to tackling big decisions.

In Britain the head of the University is called a Vice-Chancellor. I can't tell you how many times I've met a foreign dignitary who is visibly disappointed to be introduced to the Vice-Chancellor, who by definition must be the second in command, not the real boss. I've always thought that this curious arrangement is a legacy of the historic democratic self-governance of universities. In my own university, for example, for centuries the Vice-Chancellorship was a position that automatically rotated every two years between the heads of colleges. Even to this day there is a small old guard of dons who hanker for a return to the halcyon days of yore and advocate for the position, really only a part-time one, to be divided among a couple of working dons who could spend an afternoon a week on the role.

It has been an extraordinary privilege to serve as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford, which I have found to be a more than full-time position. Yet there are, real challenges in the brave new world of university leadership. One of them is the increasing pressure of social media threats (to harass, assault, even rape), death-wishes, jibes, crude slurs on personal appearance, and other forms of abuse that are disproportionately levelled at women and which can actively dissuade any person – particularly if they come from an underrepresented group -- from voicing strong opinions or being the public face of areas of scholarship, and other initiatives that provoke opposition. Civil discourse has taken a blow in an era of clickbait, where too often, the Media seek to sow division and discord rather than to offer a balanced view of complex intellectual debates. We will not have sufficient women captaining the bridge in Universities (or any other institutions in public life), until we have acted to remove the threatening trolls beneath them. But trolling does not happen in isolation: it is often part of a pattern of pile-ons and jeers that is fed by lazy reportage and provocative political statements about universities. Responsible journalism that engages with the education sector in depth, rather than merely stoking outrage, can enable good leadership, both by giving leaders more time to fight real fires, and by encouraging diverse staff to feel that they can lead, without being the target of inflammatory headlines.

I believe that, to a very great extent, potential University leaders are not born but made: they are enabled by being supported to learn, to listen, and to lead.

In what remains of my talk, I would like to speak about how we enable good leadership: not just by training and nurturing potential leaders and giving them opportunities to grow (though this is vital) but by creating the conditions in which leadership can be fair and effective. I believe that good leadership – as part of a flourishing organisational ecosystem – is enabled both from above and from below.

One way in which good leadership can be enabled within the university is through creating better bureaucratic systems that work smoothly and efficiently. This is a particular challenge in ancient and decentralized institutions where local autonomy is treasured but inevitably leads to duplication and administrative complexity.

Another way in which good leadership can be enabled from within, is by creating university governance structures that are modern, effective, and in which staff are eager and willing to participate. Again, Oxford is not a shining light in this regard. About 9,000 members of our community are eligible for membership of Congregation; about 5,500 choose to join. Meetings are rare and sparsely attended. Like many a church leader, I have come to the conclusion that given the membership of my organisation, the size of each Congregation is far smaller than it ought to be. The solution must surely be a different mode of organising governance: one that is conducted in a mode that encourages participation: connecting junior members regularly with leadership and with their own potential to become leaders.

Beyond the university, there are also many ways of enabling and supporting good leadership from above and from below. Chief among them is better long-term planning and consistent support from government. UK universities in recent times have faced unhelpful uncertainty over matters including (but not limited to) Brexit, the Erasmus scheme, participation in Horizon Europe, the freezing of tuition fees (which, of course, makes them worth less in real terms each year), and the possible government defunding of some Arts and Humanities degrees. There are enough unexpected events for universities to react to in the global field –from pandemics to invasions – without the government weather system lurching from Hurricanes to Tropical Storms: ‘A-Level Fiasco’ to ‘Student Loans Cap’. Policies that aggravate inequalities within the sector and outside it, also pit universities unhelpfully against one another, and leave them to try to even out inequitable distribution of resources that may lie largely beyond their remit to redress. Provocative anti-intellectual rhetoric and emphasis on what graduates are paid as the only meaningful

index of what a good and beneficial education means, also creates unnecessary division that is inimical to the community of learning as a whole. Higher education desperately needs consistent, integrated policies that have the entire sector's long-term needs at their heart. In this sense, good leadership in Higher Education is enabled by good leadership *on* Higher Education. Again my experience here is not auspicious. In my 7 year tenure as Vice-Chancellor I have interacted with 8 Secretaries of State for Education

In a queue you know who the leader is because you can see the back of their head. In a university, you should know who the leader is because you feel that you are at the front of their mind. Ultimately, a good leader keeps in mind the needs, hopes, and priorities of a multitude of different actors (students, research and teaching staff, administrators and technicians, fellow managers, donors, alumni and business partners), and provides a focal point for that community; while always articulating and advancing the University's mission. Like a town square, a market cross, or a church steeple, a good leader is readily identifiable; approachable; ideally inspiring. Leadership, then, is not just about what you give out but what you bring out in others. Its key aim is to inspire people to want to give of their best. To be enabled. To speak out, to act confidently, to move forward, to feel that their organisation is one they can be proud of and identify with and that their own aims and values and projects can be aligned with those of the organisation of which they are part. Leaders are not what make an organisation great, yet good leadership is a powerful stay against chaos: a model and engine of coherence, fairness, and thoughtful, decisive action for the common good.

Managers – in itself a term of abuse in some universities - are not always popular. But, if they are effective, by 'holding the centre' they perform a role that is more than the sum of its parts. The absence of a strong and coherent moral centre in managerial as in political life, like the absence of a plug in a bathtub, can lead very quickly to a downward spiral of confidence and of investment, whether literal or figurative. Whereas good leadership instils confidence and a sense of common ownership amongst stakeholders within an organisation. That is more likely to make both internal and external forces wish to invest –time, money, expertise, passion – in the university.

Enabling good university leadership and valuing it appropriately are thus essential to maintaining a strong and dynamic higher education sector; part and parcel of enabling and valuing universities appropriately. The two are

inseparable. I would like to see a newly positive discourse around the enormous benefits that universities bring to Britain and to global intellectual and cultural life. I would like universities not to be viewed narrowly as factories for the production of useful workers with marketable skills, or as research generators for industry, but as flourishing ecosystems that model interdisciplinary study, humane values, freedoms and responsibilities and nurture citizens who are fully empowered to think for themselves in a complex world. Within that positive discourse, I would like to see a reevaluation of leadership: an emphasis on nurturing it and celebrating it in its many forms and contexts across the university.

Leadership is not a chess game, where one aims to eliminate opponents from the board, but a relay race: The ultimate aim of good leadership is to transfer positive momentum to others to lead when one leaves off: to make oneself dispensable: to have the pleasure of handing over to an excellent successor – something I will do this year, when Oxford appoints its second female Vice-Chancellor, Irene Tracey. In talking about good leadership then, I feel strongly that we should always be talking about the community rather than merely the exceptional individual, about the base rather than the tip. For good leadership grows from strong and connected foundations: we show how to lead when we learn how to listen. Good leaders create a sustainable energy network. We lead best when people look to us not only to drive an organisation but to connect all its vehicles, all its individual drivers, with the grid that will power and sustain their own journeys to their several goals. That is surely a role that all can endorse, and in whose goal of energising the university as a connected system, all can participate.

Thank you for listening.