Democratic states distribute authority among public institutions chartered to balance the interests of citizens and protect them against the excesses of more powerful social actors, including the state itself. Democracies assume an active civil sphere where public organizations can emerge to represent sectoral interests by advocating policy that may differ from that administered by state authorities. This wide dispersal of administrative and representative authority across public institutions and community, professional, industry, media, and other non-government organizations is a feature of democracies. Collectively they inform, enable, and constrain the operation of executive government, and support a wide range of voices in pursuit of the self-guiding society.

Some non-government organizations are membership based. They use democratic methods to settle aims and choose leaders. Most public institutions are not ‘democratic’ in this sense, with their aims and senior offices set by legislation, and their leaders selected by a governing body. This chapter considers leadership in a university setting, with a particular emphasis on large, public sector universities. Such institutions draw on a long tradition in which, since the early nineteenth century at least, intellectual freedom and considerable institutional autonomy are recognized as preconditions for the advance of knowledge and the benefits higher learning can bring to society. They claim a measure of autonomy from the state, particularly on the issue of intellectual freedom, but often depend on government funding, a favourable regulatory environment, and widespread acceptance of their value and relevance. To sustain the scholarly enterprise university leadership must explain the institution’s work to the world, and speak to the university about societal demands. Endless judgements are required to balance these internal and external worlds, yet authority to make substantive decisions is widely dispersed, and often contested.

In this chapter we argue that university leadership is best understood as a portfolio of tasks performed on behalf of an institutional community devoted to an evolving set of public purposes, framed by a long tradition, and required
Dispersed Democratic Leadership

to respond to competing demands from within and without. All this creates strategic ambiguity; and even where direction seems clear, leadership tasks are typically constrained by limited resources, government regulation, institutional governance processes, collegial norms of decision-making, and legacy systems and cultures. Indeed, a subtext of any discussion of leadership and the self-governing university is whether much unitary leadership is possible at all in this context. To speak of ‘executive’ leadership in a public university may be to presume too much.

Leadership of public institutions

Leadership is a fluid social construct. Conceptions of leadership and its acceptable forms turn in part on the nature and purpose of the organization. Much of the recent literature on leadership has focused on private enterprise rather than on public institutions. Here the leadership task is often framed around centralized authority and executive decision-making rather than the task of mediating the demands and constraints of different constituencies. The archetypes of leadership, often featuring heroic levels of wisdom, skill, and virtue on the part of exceptional individuals, are drawn from a limited number of spheres – typically political, military, and business leadership roles. Yet even this narrow set of studies generates a long and incoherent list of possible ways to understand leadership. These include:

- **trait theories** (leaders are people with *innate qualities* such as intelligence or resilience that equip them for the role);
- **behavioural theories** (leadership is a *set of stances and practices* that leaders adopt to balance the accomplishment of group tasks with the psychic needs of followers);
- **power-influence theories** (leadership is a social *influence* process, affected by the way power and authority are acquired and used);
- **situational theories** (leaders require a repertoire of *different styles* that allow them to take account of the type of problem being tackled, the abilities of follower groups, the organizational culture, and the risk environment);
- **transformational theories** (leaders are people who *articulate and exemplify* a set of compelling aspirations and attributes that mobilize follower groups to achieve great things); and
- **functional theories** (leaders are those people who play a focal role in meeting the needs of an organization, its purposes, and its people at any given moment).

Some leaders can be described using all these frames, while others appear *sui generis*. Many scholars in the field (e.g. Craig and Yetton [1995]; Yukl [1998])
see little prospect of reaching a grand unifying theory of leadership. Recognizing that ideas of leadership are likely to remain ambiguous and contested, our pragmatic view sees a leader as anyone with a constituency willing to trust the leader to make wise choices on their behalf, in ways that support their aims, hopes, and interests.

The idea that leaders exist primarily to serve the aims of those led rather than be supported in pursuit of an executive vision is of course a very democratic notion but, again, for public institutions the relationship is not so simple. When democratically structured organizations – clubs, societies, nations – elect leaders, there remains a clear relationship between leaders and led. Most public institutions, though, do not elect their leader, instead relying on the governance structure to select a leader. It is in the nature of public institutions that the leader must attend to several constituencies, at a minimum the governing board, those who appointed them and the colleagues they work with, as well as staff groups, clients, partners, and other interested parties outside the institution. Leaders thus face several sets of claims, all potentially in conflict, wherever thorny issues are delegated upwards for resolution.

This situation creates a paradox for leadership in public but internally non-democratic institutions. To perform the role effectively, leaders require authority. Along with formal power to make decisions, authority derives from wide acceptance of their legitimacy as credible occupants of the office, with the confidence of most constituencies. But on complex social issues, the problems presented to leaders for resolution may not be soluble. The centrifugal forces brought to bear on the issue by different constituencies will drag leaders in more than one direction, so that any solution will represent some form of compromise. To impose any solution at all is to undermine confidence among any constituency which feels its interests have been compromised. Yet failure to act on a social problem that lies within the institution’s ambit and make at least some visible progress with it, may signify a complete lack of leadership rather than merely inadequate leadership. To decide or not to decide therefore brings the risk of diminishing credibility, and therefore legitimacy and requisite authority to act responsibly on other matters.

Hence whatever the formal powers of office and the process that appoints a person to the role, leadership legitimacy (as distinct from legal authority) must rely to some degree on personal credibility. Clearly, the charter and character of the organization defines credible images of its leadership. Credibility turns in part on the moral and ethical character of the leader’s actions (the perceived integrity of her or his conduct), judged against the values and purposes that the institution and office are supposed to uphold. It also turns on perceptions of effectiveness, namely the leader’s ability to fulfil the tasks and rituals of office capably and respond to the challenges that confront the institution. In this sense leadership in a public institution shades simultaneously towards both the representative and the instrumental – ‘a person we are glad to recognize as
one of us, who shares our aims and hopes, and who can somehow deal with all of that, and all of them'.

In sum, constituents want leaders they regard as good, who will also produce good results. The risk with this definition of leadership legitimacy is that in practice it may cast the leader in too passive a role. During moments of change or crisis, active leadership is both sought and feared by constituents, since the impetus to alter the settings, however unworkable they have become, means reaching decisions with larger than usual consequences, often not fully predictable. Endless conformity with accumulated protocols, and energetic pursuit of approval by every constituent, may leave a representative leader too little scope to stand apart at the boundary of the institution, look beyond its familiar routines and parochial interests, and minimize long-term risks, respond to emerging opportunities, or devise strategies so the institution can fulfil an evolving mission in a sustainable way.

This more instrumental mode of leadership exists in tension with the representative mode. In periods of crisis or reform, leaders in public institutions often find themselves trying to modify the status or practice of collegial constituents who, in more stable settings, normally expect to identify them as 'one of us', more readily attuned to their own concerns than to those of other constituents. Institutional change is usually painful and often unpopular, even when the circumstances require it. Indeed, since public institutions by definition serve interests beyond the private interests of their inhabitants, failure to prevent a looming crisis or initiate a necessary reform is a failure to meet public purpose, and has consequences beyond the institution and its internal constituencies.

By challenging what they judge to be a damaging or ineffectual or unsustainable status quo, leaders risk violating the norms and expectations of the institutional community itself, on which much of their 'representative' legitimacy otherwise depends. Authority therefore is always tenuous, since it rests on an unstable accommodation across contending interests.

Powerful constituents or factions may simply not recognize the urgency or import of the problem the leader is seeking to solve; or they may define and diagnose it differently, conveniently shifting the burdens of adjustment elsewhere. When leadership requires unwelcome change, the leader must balance authority against legitimacy and long-term interests.

The university tradition and leadership legitimacy

Universities illustrate, and often accentuate, the dilemmas of leading a public institution. In an ideal world, universities might have developed a different approach to leadership. It would be refreshing to discover that, given the value such institutions place on the dispassionate sifting of logic and evidence, scholarly communities had found ways to govern their affairs in more
enlightened and exemplary ways than (say) business or government enterprises. Such an ideal approach, of course, would leave universities immune to office politics, palace intrigue, or factional antagonism.

Yet, by most insider accounts, university leadership remains a risky business, as fraught in every way as leadership in institutions not so obviously committed to evidence and dispassionate debate. Examples abound of university leaders caught in the cross-fire between the demands of student activists, the grievances of faculty members, the sensitivities of government authorities and corporate sponsors, and public displays of wrangling among colleagues in the media. In this sense it is never lonely at the top in a university, and Machiavelli's advice remains ever relevant.

What are the tasks of university leadership, in what context are they performed, and what skills and qualities and strategies do leaders require to succeed in the role? Leadership practitioners in such settings have found these questions hard to answer:

There's no easy way to describe a college president's job....It involves so many often conflicting roles, played in relation to so many different constituencies, frequently constituencies with directly opposed points of view, that the result is an often laughably complex set of responsibilities...in any one day (one) must be teacher, manager, financial and investment expert, entrepreneur of knowledge, strategist, magistrate, and builder of warm and collaborative relationships with faculty, students, alumnæ, trustees, media and government regulators... (Jill Ker Conway 2003: 59–61).

Clark Kerr, architect of the University of California system, summed up his leadership experience in similar terms:

The university president...is expected to be a friend of the students, a colleague of the faculty, a good fellow with the alumni, a sound administrator with the trustees, a good speaker with the public, an astute bargainer with the foundations and the federal agencies, a politician with the state legislature, a friend of industry, labour and agriculture, a persuasive diplomat with donors, a champion of education generally, a supporter of the professions...a spokesman to the press, a scholar in his own right, a public servant at the state and national levels, a devotee of opera and football equally....No one can be all of these things. Some succeed at being none (Clark Kerr 2001: 22).

This practitioner view emphasizes that the university leadership role has no obvious practical boundaries, mainly because the institution has so many constituencies. As Kerr stresses, the university leader must look out as well as in – building and holding external coalitions of supporters, particularly within government, is imperative. At the same time, a host of internal issues demand attention. University leaders typically attest to the centrifugal pressures which work against central authority. Like Hamlet, they seem destined forever to uncertainty about what is required if they are finally to set things right.
Dispersed Democratic Leadership

Yet once accepted, the very ambiguity surrounding the ambit of leadership allows university leaders scope to select and attend to a particular dimension of the work of the institution, hopefully one that matches their style and skills with the hopes and challenges of their university. No two university leaders are alike because each must make a personal choice about which parts of an impossibly wide role to pursue, and which issues can be safely parked, deferred, or delegated. If all political careers end in failure, as Enoch Powell claimed, then all university administrative careers must conclude with a sense of issues not addressed, constituencies not worked with effectively, opportunities let slip because time and energy proved elusive.

Of course, there are some elements of the role difficult to ignore. These expectations, which look continuously outwards and within, can be understood in functional terms:

- As political leaders, university leaders must reflect, respond to and shape community expectations, and therefore must take care to justify their institution’s policy stance on matters of higher learning and its social and economic consequences. Here, the relations with government and other institutions are usually diplomatic. The leadership stance is to represent institutional values and purposes in an open way, while remaining attentive to social and official attitudes: being willing to listen, open to dialogue, able to debate, and reserving all judgement except at the point of decision.

- As bureaucratic officials, university leaders authorize administrative decisions that affect many individuals, most visibly by determining who may enrol, what they may study and how they may qualify for certain kinds of work. Here, relations with government and other institutions may be symbiotic and heavily negotiated and formalized. The leadership stance is to create strong alignment between the institution’s profile of programmes and the various needs of employers, professional bodies, and schools.

- As advocates, university leaders represent the interests of their institutional constituencies, make cases for causes, form alliances, stir up debates, and pressure authorities in policy domains beyond their own administrative reach. Here, the relationship with government and other institutions may be catalytic. The leadership stance is activist, intervening in wider social and economic contexts, promoting an institutional agenda, and provoking realignments among other institutions. This involves making judgements with social policy implications beyond the institution’s internal domain of decision-making.

None of these modes necessarily implies a single-minded or autocratic approach on the part of a leader (let alone a coherent set of actions). By long tradition and by virtue of the nature of their work, university communities
resist unitary leadership. Beyond those governance structures which limit central authority and distribute decision-making, there are cultural reasons to resist ‘executive’ styles of leadership. Bensimon, Neumann, and Birnbaum (1989: 19–20), for example, suggest that in a university context, both task-oriented and relationship-oriented authority figures:

...will find it difficult to exert influence when organisational participants need independence, have a professional orientation, or are indifferent to organisational rewards; when the task is intrinsically satisfying; when the organisation includes closely knit and cohesive work groups; when rewards are outside the leader’s control...

There have been notable exceptions to this view in the university tradition. President Abbott Lawrence Lowell described Harvard administration as ‘tyranny tempered by assassination’ (Keller and Keller 2001: 17), while Clark Kerr (2001: 24) characterized management in nineteenth century Oxford as follows:

Benjamin Jowett as Master of Balliol could set as his rule: Never retract, never explain. Get it done and let them howl.

Leadership is most visible during crisis or reform, when the difficulty of balancing divergent expectations becomes extreme, ‘crucifying’ the leadership figure on impossible dilemmas of policy or strategy. After protracted student protests on campus, Clark Kerr was dismissed in 1967 by the Board of Regents as the first Chancellor of the University of California Berkeley. Kerr had found himself under attack from students and Regents alike, from opposite ends of the argument. He could satisfy neither, but announced he would leave Berkeley as he arrived, ‘fired with enthusiasm’.

In less dramatic circumstances a president may survive a clash, but the Kerr example highlights the constant risk of differing constituencies – in this case students and their supporters within, and politically appointed Regents in governance roles representing the external world.

In such circumstances, university leaders often move carefully, building consensus. Even so, the leader may struggle to convey any sense of urgency to match the circumstances. Practitioners intent on institutional reform remark on the glacial pace of consultative and consensus-oriented processes as the accepted mode of decision-making in a large complex institution. Former University of Michigan President J. J. Duderstadt (2007: 127), observes, for example:

Not surprisingly, I had my share of critics. Many believed I pushed too hard, not respecting or using the traditional university process of consultation and collegiality – or, perhaps more appropriately, delay and procrastination.

Some practitioners experience a sharp disparity between the breadth of responsibilities expected of the office, and the ambit of the office-holder’s authority
to act. Paradoxically, this situation may be accompanied by an inflated view of a leader’s authority among certain constituents, who imagine the quickest path to a policy change is direct persuasion of the person ostensibly in charge.

Many presidents describe an amusing disjuncture as those outside expect instant responses to requests, while those within know even simple tasks can become points of contention and non-cooperation. A famous debate at Cambridge in 1902 over introducing the study of Economics saw one bemused observer list thirty opposition arguments advanced, beginning with the propositions:

- That the proposal is a new one.
- That it is therefore a bad one.
- That it is asked for by people outside.
- That it is not asked by people outside.
- That if it were, that would be all the more reason why they should not have it.

And so on, until the final but familiar argument that while scholars welcome the proposal, the process by which it has been introduced requires people of principle to vote it down. As Gordon Johnson notes (1994: 74–5), ‘Such a litany of impossible, though perversely plausible, arguments blights the hopes of any would-be reformer; it seems so unfair that while there is only one reason for doing something (namely that it is right to do it), there should be so many reasons for not doing it.’

The reply to this, of course, is ‘Right, in whose judgement?’ Judgements must be made since every worthwhile reform is actually a replacement of an unfair or unsustainable set of compromises with a better (but less familiar and comfortable) set of compromises. Meanwhile, implicit in the expectation of problem-solving and institutional progress – by internal or external constituencies – is the idea that effective leadership in a university requires centralized authority to make final judgements and decisions. There is something in this, but it is primarily a power-oriented perspective of leadership. Such a view departs from, or at least tests, the underpinnings of legitimacy in a university setting, where dispersed authority and shared decision-making are central to institutional self-image.

Such images are shaped by a long accumulation of ideas about the work of the institution, the kind of people it attracts, and the norms which constitute academic culture. The most enduring notion of the university is a self-governing community of scholars, committed to the pursuit of knowledge. By convention university leaders, whether elected or appointed, are drawn from the scholarly community rather than from other spheres. While a leader’s style and range of activities may vary widely, this requirement of scholarly expertise reflects an important source of leadership legitimacy, beyond the
formal power and status of the office. Hence the widespread suspicion that putting administrators in charge rather than academics will soon derail the mission. As Selznick (1957: 27) argued half a century ago:

A university led by administrators without a clear sense of values to be achieved may fail dismally while steadily growing larger and more secure…

The pattern of leadership appointments has changed little since Selznick’s comment. Scholarly credentials signify prior membership of the scholarly community, and imply that a leader’s decisions and conduct will be informed by a strong and nuanced sense of the scholarly mission and associated norms. Even leadership practitioners critical of the potentially dysfunctional aspects of collegial norms and democratic processes – such as interminable delay and indecision – confirm the importance of this. Duderstadt (2007: 119), for example, suggests that a key leadership attribute must be ‘a deep understanding of the fundamental values and nature of an academic community’.

On closer examination, however, even such a self-evident principle may falter in practice. While scholars often invoke a common understanding of the nature of an academic community, in reality universities contain a spectrum of such understandings among scholars themselves, with unresolved differences about the relative priority of several distinct sets of aims and practices. The common threads are that, in every field of scholarship, intellectual freedom and intellectual honesty are accepted as essential prerequisites for contributing to the discipline, and thus the work of the institution. As two sides of the coin of academic responsibility, these guiding values inform certain institutional codes of behaviour for members of scholarly communities. In turn they have implications for the way authority relations are construed, goals defined, decisions made and tasks performed, so setting limits and shaping expectations of leadership conduct. An act of scholarly plagiarism, for example, may be more damaging to a leader’s authority than an act of marital infidelity, while in a different sort of institution the converse might apply.

As in many professions, for many scholarly communities, being guided and represented by ‘one of us’ is a minimum condition for leadership legitimacy. Whether elected by peers or selected by an external governing body, a suitable candidate for university president, rector or vice-chancellor is typically a professor who is respected as a scholar, has enough administrative experience and political skill to meet the demands of role, and whose views and character align with prevailing rules and norms. This ‘archetypal’ source of legitimacy may go beyond the institution’s governance structure, the powers conferred by the office, the process of office-holder selection, or even the diplomatic and organizational skills of the individual who assumes the role. All these factors may contribute to a leader’s legitimacy, yet they vary widely between institutions. Rectors, university presidents, and vice-chancellors are employed in
Dispersed Democratic Leadership

different ways and perform a different mix of functions, choosing among the menu of chief custodian, administrator, and executive responsibilities.

The nexus between institutional identity and the leader's own identity accords with Selznick's view that institutions form when commitments are made to a particular set of values, purposes, and practices. This helps define expectations about the proper tasks of leadership, and the criteria for leadership success:

The formation of an institution is marked by the making of value-commitments, that is, choices which fix the assumptions of policy makers as to the nature of the enterprise, its distinctive aims, methods, and roles...The institutional leader is primarily an expert in the promotion and protection of values...Leadership falls when it concentrates on sheer survival. Institutional survival, properly understood, is a matter of maintaining values and distinctive identity (Selznick 1957: 28).

The university leader archetype, usually unstated but widely shared, takes its logic from the image of a university as a self-governing community of scholars. Though the leader must represent the institution to the external world, the emphasis remains on selecting someone acceptable within the university. This reveals something interesting about the perceived constituency of a university leader, and the propensity of scholarly communities to construct expectations of leadership in their own image. University leadership in this sense is co-constitutive, reflecting a largely self-referential social contract that implies mutual obligations and common frames of reference within the scholarly community. It looks inwards, even though the role must engage with numerous constituencies beyond the campus.

These tacit understandings are reinforced in longstanding structures and practices. They include, for example, the scholarly norms of wide consultation, collegial consent, and limited central authority in decision-making. As former York University (in Canada) President Murray Ross (1976: 160-1) notes:

The importance of consultation, on both large and minor matters, with all colleagues, both old and young, became standard practice in the monastery during the Middle Ages. It was from this period that there emerged the belief that 'all legitimate authority is derived from the consent of the governed'. The university adopted this idea and practice. But consultation, with the exception of the Italian universities, meant consultation with the masters, and 'consultation' came to mean formal councils in which binding votes were taken to limit the freedom and the authority of the rector or chancellor...Thus the idea of self-government by the masters...emerged as the proper form of university organization.

These legacy practices of self-government by a scholarly community, derived from a tradition where scholars lived and worked in residence, are often invoked today as a value-commitment to 'democratic' principles. But this view underplays the pre-democratic origins of the modern university and its contemporary status as a public rather than democratic institution, supported
Leadership of the Modern University

by society in exchange for the many services it can provide. Like universities themselves, university leadership only looks generic from a distance, and leadership stances are shaped as much by particular relationships to funding bodies and other institutions, as by the internal normative order. Publicly funded universities especially, which assert relative autonomy by drawing their rhetoric from a long ‘community of scholars’ tradition, often appear to belong to a membership based, ‘democratic’ category of community organizations. In reality they are more usually in a distinct category of their own, set up under legislation and funded to serve a government-prescribed mission, which their governing councils are bound to observe when making decisions. This reality becomes most apparent whenever governments shift funding levels or policy setting, or when institutions respond to new conditions with painful decisions to cut valued programmes, or remove individual scholars from the institutional payroll. Neither move sits well with the idea of a fully autonomous community of scholars.

University autonomy and democratic projects

As public institutions, universities are expected to play a number of social and economic roles, and their leaders to embody values beyond the local and the scholarly. These roles are not integrated into a cogent and logical framework; on the contrary, there are overlapping differences in expectation, which play out in the public domain and internal management controversies.

The familiar touchstones of academic communities are independent inquiry and free speech, intellectual honesty, respect for logic and evidence, tolerance for diverse points of view, and formal open-mindedness on questions apparently settled. To the extent that a university community can live up to these values and standards and promote them as wider social norms, its work aligns well with democratic projects and processes. Universities train future political leaders in democratic disciplines by helping ensure that free speech in the form of public dissent remains an accepted social norm.

But universities perform these important tasks for the democratic project using an institutional form that arises from a pre-democratic tradition, organized around a hierarchy of knowledge reflected in academic rank. Indeed, former Harvard Dean Henry Rosovsky (1990: 262) lists as his first principle of effective governance in a university ‘Not everything is improved by making it more democratic’. The hierarchy built into university organization sets expectations of leadership by academic seniors. It values some voices, and some advice, over others. It expects the elders of the institution to preserve the values and character of the university – even if this means resisting claims by students and others for change. Neither truth nor knowledge is ever settled by a vote.
Dispersed Democratic Leadership

Since medieval times, universities have built their niche as self-governing communities, supported by grants and earnings in return for the kinds of service that learning can offer a society. Self-governing, though, meant neither democratic nor independent. Universities have never been entirely autonomous, relying instead on a negotiated compact with the relevant authorities who fund them or at least, allow them to operate. Reflecting on Humboldt's reforms in early nineteenth century Germany and the Dawkins reforms in Australia in the 1980s, Huppau (1988: 150–1) remarks that:

The autonomy of the modern university was never an absolute one, but determined by a delicate ambivalence based on a careful balancing of dependence on, and a simultaneous critical distance from, society. From the early phase onwards the modern university was granted the liberty to perform this tight-rope act with the understanding that this fragile construction would eventually be much more to the benefit of the whole of society than a more clearly and narrowly defined area of performance.

Such patterns of negotiation and compromise with governments and other authorities have a long history. When in dispute with local authorities, the early scholarly communities might go on strike, or depart for another town that offered a better deal. The medieval universities engaged in active diplomacy and forum-shopping to gain privileges such as tax exemption, facilities, and funding. They appealed variously to ‘king or council against pope, to pope against king or bishop, and to kings and popes alike against truculent town governments’ (Ross 1976; see also Grendler [2002], Clark [2006]).

As Western universities have evolved, their ambitions and capacities have expanded, along with their resource requirements and a widening array of obligations under their compact with government. Despite periods of benign neglect by authorities, universities have always been seen by governments as instruments of public policy. This sits uncomfortably with those university presidents inclined to invoke Cardinal Newman about purity of purpose, and Einstein about the overriding value of intellectual freedom, when they address scholarly communities, but compelled to rely on other arguments when pleading to governments, legislatures, and corporations for funding and support.

The central task of the medieval university was to rediscover classical knowledge and produce trained professionals (doctors, lawyers, and clergy) to meet emerging social needs within a framework of doctrine determined by church and state. The modern nineteenth-century university took up liberal learning and fundamental inquiry as defining features, to reproduce culture and progress through scientific endeavour. Institutional processes such as Kant's 'conflict of the faculties' were supposed to allow philosophers the freedom to challenge official doctrine, as taught to and administered by doctors, lawyers, and clergy, in the name of progress.
In the twentieth century, governments (not least Australian governments) harnessed higher learning directly to national economic and industrial development. University systems expanded to deliver mass higher education and technical skills, while their research programmes were directed towards advances in techno-science, industry development, and policy innovation. With the emergence of 'big science', universities have become more dependent than ever on public investment, even if delivered through quasi-independent research funding bodies. In return, governments expect universities to be reliable sources of industrial innovation, producing inventions, graduates, and start-up companies that will yield economic growth.

Given this long evolutionary history, it is not surprising that contemporary universities often seem unfocused – a loose bundle of activities overlaid one on the other, rather than an enterprise with a coherent set of purposes. What we call tradition is a long accumulation of ideas, structures, and practices, as institutions reinvent and reorient themselves. Clark Kerr famously observed that several ideas of the university now coexisted in uneasy tension as:

ideal types which still constitute the illusions of some of its inhabitants…Ne\-\v{e}m\-\v{e}n\-\v{e}m's 'Idea of a University' still has its devotees - chiefly the humanists and the generalists and the undergraduates. Flexner's 'Idea of a Modern University' still has its supporters - chiefly the scientists and the specialists and the graduate students. The 'Idea of a Multiversity' has its practitioners - chiefly the administrators…These several competing visions of true purpose...cause much of the malaise in the university communities today. The university is so many things to so many different people that it must of necessity be partially at war with itself (Kerr 2001: 1-6).

As knowledge proliferates, and the social demands on the institution multiply, the task of reconciling several streams of demand becomes ever more complex. Scholarly communities pursue and promote knowledge as a good in itself. Students might want short and clear pathways to valued qualifications, businesses expect graduates ready to start work, and government demands a steady stream of practical inventions from campus. One institution, itself divided over purpose and priorities, must somehow mediate all these expectations, and perhaps disappoint all.

Nearly half a century after Clark Kerr's insightful account, none of the institutional tensions he described has been resolved. In times of stability, competing visions of the university are merely contained within a loosely coupled system that glosses over deep unresolved differences. In periods of crisis, a university community that aspires to be a model of a 'rational and just' community may suffer occasional bouts of multipolar disorder, and indulge in what Selznick (1957: 147) described as 'avoiding hard choices by a flight to abstractions'.

223
Dispersed Democratic Leadership

This more ambiguous view of the university as both a collection of communities staking claims for support, and a public institution with external obligations, raises difficult questions about the leadership task. Whose interests should a self-governing community serve to remain a credible public institution? When universities aspire, as some do, to a more democratic form, they must decide which of the university's many constituencies should prevail. Should students have a veto on curriculum, or should the hierarchy of knowledge and authority based on scholarly excellence, so deeply encoded in academic values, trump the egalitarian impulses of a democratic structure? And even with internal consensus, how does a purportedly autonomous community in a public institution deal with the expectations of external supporters, including government, whose funding makes the enterprise possible?

Continuing tensions about legitimacy and authority, about the need for patronage amid the claim to autonomy, confront every university. The scholarly vocation provides one path to integrity – the 'Polonius principle' of being true 'to thine own self'. For those drawn into internal governance, as a head of school or dean, the challenge of managing others who are committed to their own independence adds a layer of complexity. They must balance respect for personal judgement with the collective choices required in an institution which speaks to, and is supported by, numerous constituencies; someone outside the university, after all, is paying the bills. For the institutional leader, this burden of balance becomes even more acute. The leader must translate traditional ideas of how academia works into new forms to meet new external conditions (not least the digitization, commodification, and democratization of knowledge itself). The university leader must seek support externally in a world often sceptical about the value of scholarly work, while holding together the multiple and sometimes feuding groups that collectively live under the shared rubric of a university. All this must be accomplished through an office which commands respect but not necessarily obedience. Little wonder the memoirs of former presidents hint at surprise and relief in surviving for their term in such challenging circumstances.

Confronting global challenges

The constraints on university leadership described so far – external expectations, internal contests – still allow some scope for strategic choice. Between state and institution, there is room for agreements about how public money will be applied to the work of the university, and how much practical autonomy will reside within the institution. For public universities, as for their private counterparts, though, a further dimension looms – the influence of external markets.
Leadership of the Modern University

Public universities have always managed – found ways to marshal resources towards agreed goals. At least in the Australian setting, this has occurred within a public sector context where close regulation of institutions has been accompanied by guaranteed minimum income. As this familiar world fades, universities find themselves operating in a mixed economy setting, more alone and more dependent on their own judgement than ever before. For publicly funded institutions, a fall in government funding relative to growth now places a sharper institutional focus on raising revenue, resource management, quality assurance, innovation, and market responsiveness.

The new emphasis in universities on managing is often decried as a displacement of collegial-democratic values by business ideology. It is better understood as perhaps the only rational response available to new challenges facing institutions in an era of mass higher learning, growth in enterprise scale and complexity, and the need for multiple income streams from public and private sources. Nonetheless, the risks of relying on commercial income evoke worry at even the most wealthy institutions. As former Harvard President Derek Bok (2003: x) observed, “if more and more “products” of the university were sold at a profit, might the lure of the marketplace alter the behaviour of professors and university officials in subtle ways that would change the character of Harvard for the worse?”

Yet facing the markets for higher learning proves just the first challenge. As markets develop they create space for other types of institutions to emerge, grow, and challenge the pre-eminent position of universities as credentialing agencies and knowledge gatekeepers. In an era of global online providers, open source knowledge production and research consultancies, universities cannot assume their traditional public standing will endure (see Waks [2007]).

No wonder the times seem out of joint. Such shifts threaten a major break with the tradition in which the archetypal community of scholars acts as society’s keeper of knowledge, enabler of learning, certifier of competence, and source of expert advice. For much of its history, the university’s compact with government was shaped by the relative scarcity of texts and expertise, its capacity to regulate access to higher learning, and the leverage this gave scholarly communities to set terms and conditions conducive to their aims and interests. Governments accepted claims of university autonomy, at least in part, because they had few alternative sources of training and expertise. The producer was able to define the terms on which knowledge would be made available.

In a global knowledge economy, universities no longer exercise this degree of leverage. With so many enterprises now in the knowledge business, the archetype is being reconfigured. Once an island of knowledge in a sea of ignorance, the university now competes with an archipelago of choice. Knowledge is instantly available and skilfully packaged by suppliers not burdened by the formidable overheads of libraries, lecture rooms, gargoyles, and tenured
staff (Davis 2006). As universities learn to manage in a new market context by adapting the disciplines of business enterprises to their own operations, they face the kinds of dilemmas familiar to smaller nation states. The rising tide of globalism may leave universities culturally swamped or economically stranded.

Scholarly authority, identity, and practice also come under threat. While time-poor students Google first and ask later, librarians worry about how quickly to digitize their physical collections, and professors debate what policy to adopt on the uses of Wikipedia. Meanwhile unions contend that while universities are central to the nation’s capacity to innovate, as older academics retire they will take their institution’s knowledge and ‘intellectual infrastructure’ with them (National Tertiary Education Union 2008). Once grounded in tradition and localism, scholarly communities now meet new knowledge players from other spheres, alien invaders of the territory they once called their own. Marginson (2007: xii) remarks that:

Global convergence means that processes conducted in isolation in localities and nations no longer absorb us as they once did... Direct cross-border relations subvert the old distinctions between national and international, and remake the relations between government and higher education institutions... Amid the first open information environment in history, national policy and local culture can no longer be isolated.

For public universities, the most pressing contemporary strategic dilemma is whether to seek exemption from market conditions by constructing and defending a separate sphere (much as they had done in the past, to gain relative independence from church and state), or to opt for greater interdependence as other kinds of knowledge enterprises emerge across society.

To some this may seem a choice between learning how to surf and holding back the tide. To the extent that higher learning and knowledge production are subject to global flows of information, expertise, students, and knowledge projects, attempts to reclaim the institution as an island of expertise, supported by governments while standing apart from the social and economic mainstream, seem risky indeed. The pattern of interdependence is likely to continue, with universities mediating their position through constant negotiation with government, private supporters, students, and staff. Projects such as the recently launched ‘iTunes U’ ‘transforming learning on campus, off campus and where there’s no campus at all’ illustrate the new consumer power – and with it, the threat to traditional forms of provision – of the digitization of scholarly knowledge, where texts can be browsed and expert lectures watched or heard from leading universities ‘in session 24/7’.

Such developments harness technology to extend the university mission of pursuing and promoting knowledge as a public good to be shared as widely and freely as possible. The irony of course is the ‘boomerang effect’ (Sharrock
2007), whereby traditional universities democratize knowledge and in doing so, diminish the competitive advantage that scholarly communities historically relied on in their dealings with other social actors. Strategic dilemmas, and the need to make difficult institutional choices, present new challenges for university leadership. In a context of flux and uncertainty leadership may be understood as an essentially supplementary and makeshift activity, one that improvises when a social system encounters novel, urgent, or intractable problems for which no ready solution is apparent. Considine (2006: 265) suggests that university leadership is needed to help guide the social system through transitions, finding ways to translate potentially dysfunctional relations into productive ones:

Surely, the diversity of actor positions inside the university makes any individual or group claim unstable. Paradoxically, it is precisely because actors will disagree and will promote different projects that translation must occur and, once in motion, can produce new actions. Occasional failures to agree, conflicts over projects, and the expression of different values are part of this process of diplomacy. When systems engage in such interaction but fail to reach new positions, they find themselves in a state of emergency...Leaders...cannot shift this burden onto the process of legislation or rule making because the whole point of emergencies is that they are exceptional.

This contemporary dilemma for university leaders, accentuated by markets and global competition, only underlines an old and unavoidable challenge. The 'community of scholars' tradition – the cultural DNA of most Western universities – is at odds with the emerging strategic context for universities. The central institutional leadership task described by Selznick – protecting a set of values, assumptions, methods, and identities from forces that threaten to subvert them – may need to be recast as a process for supporting considered adaptation in response to new conditions, required to sustain an evolving mission. This task cannot be delegated to the decision-making routines of the institution. A central task of leadership is to enable successful transitions from older forms of organization and identity into new ones.

Exceptional circumstances bring leaders into the spotlight. At points of institutional transition, staff communities turn to authority figures to contain uncertainty, ambiguity, and anxiety, until adaptation to a new situation can occur. Finding a way to handle the novel within inherited patterns of decision-making becomes the challenge. New kinds of problems usually fall outside the routines and repertoires of institutional governance, management, and administration structures. Somehow they must be accommodated by the leadership, and communicated back to the organization in language which connects them to tradition cogently enough to resonate within a community of scholars. Walking forward while looking backwards is a difficult skill to acquire.
Tasks and styles of university leadership: what is to be done, and how?

The task of leading a university has always been complicated by the institution's sheer range of public purposes – teacher, trainer, library, laboratory, economic catalyst, social critic, site of innovation – and the different relationships each creates with other social institutions.

Internally matters are no less complex. A defining feature of the university has always been the diversity of viewpoints its communities express, since much fundamental inquiry proceeds by constructive dissensus, largely unconstrained by administrative authority. Developing an expert opinion, distinct from the opinions of others, is a powerful source of scholarly identity. This aspect of academic culture, combined with the institution's protean external relations, creates a multiplying series of strategic and policy dilemmas for institutional leadership.

A university leader can offer only provisional and contestable answers to these challenges. Leaders of earlier generations lamented an already impossible array of tasks. Contemporary circumstances add still more: to the familiar tasks of sustaining the enterprise, developing its mission, dealing with its beneficiaries, engaging with staff communities, representing the institution to external constituencies, various forms of cross-border partnering and entrepreneurship now require leadership attention. 'Global knowledge economy strategist' has now been added to the list.

Distributing institutional authority widely in the hope that all parties and projects will somehow muddle through may help sift some of the issues. But as practitioners have experienced it, this may also amplify the prospect of distress, paralysis, and stalemate. The distinct repertoire of tasks and styles and strategies required can never fully be defined. Leadership in a public university will always be makeshift, responding to events and creating agendas that require endless adjustment.

Perhaps the most useful task any leader can perform in a context of change is educative, naming the issues and extending the vocabulary of the institution to deal with them. Preparing for change means making it clear to people there are risks and costs associated with deflecting hard realities, delegating problems, or vetoing every solution. To procrastinate is to surrender to fate; in the memorable phrase attributed to British Prime Minister Harold Wilson, 'a decision deferred is a decision made'.

Leaders presiding over disruptive change who run ahead of expectations, or step too quickly into the unknown, soon find themselves at odds with their constituents. Universities are full of clever people, and argument is prized, sometimes above logic or evidence. Persuading people in a successful institution that change is required is difficult, particularly when the change proposed responds to external change. A critical task for university leaders
is to find ways to encourage like-minded allies into the debate, and engage directly with the views of dissidents and critics, not to quell but to clarify. On new policy or strategy proposals, dissidents and critics help ‘ripen the issue’ (Heifetz 1994) and reality-test solutions that have been too narrowly conceived.

Hence university leadership groups spend considerable time framing institutional problems and designing engagement processes to work through the issues. Once defined as projects, the work of engagement can be distributed, by selecting what to do directly, what to delegate, what to refer to working parties and committees, and what to outsource entirely. Such sharing of responsibility helps prepare the ground for decisions. An engagement process on seemingly intractable issues can be educative for all concerned. While such a process typically aims to consult with people and hear their views, making people conversant with the details of a problem is one way to develop leadership capability close to the constituencies affected, and build adaptive capacity across an institution.

This dispersed and decidedly unheroic view of leadership in a public university conceives of it as a portfolio of roles and tasks performed by a group of people in key institutional positions. The leadership task is not a personal solitary matter but a shared responsibility. The leadership team needs to include active membership of key constituencies, an extensive repertoire of skills and resources, a common vocabulary for the leadership agenda, and a wide informal network. This group in turn may be supported by informal coalitions of contributors, inside and outside the institution.

The weakness of such an approach is the need for greater central effort to keep every group member well-informed and able to respond in a consistent way to the various constituencies as issues develop, an emerging strategy is refined, and engagement processes are conducted on several fronts at once. Leaders who stand at the centre have far greater information and advice at their fingertips, but also far less time to process it. Email helps, but also swamps. Traffic control via Blackberry becomes a vital skill but invites endless distraction from the more reflective tasks of thinking and planning ahead.

Despite its manifest advantages, a common problem for a widely dispersed leadership group with an agenda for change is that engagement processes designed to glean what afflicts each constituency soon take the agents of leadership into unscripted and unrehearsed territory. An otherwise well-planned consultation process on a sensitive matter can easily spread confusion and distress, due to unscripted answers to thorny questions in public discussions. An incoherent message or undiplomatic response to questioning may soon be relayed beyond the forum, or amplified by the media. At best, constituents receive mixed signals about the intentions of the leadership group. At worst, it appears to an increasingly suspicious audience that the leadership group is
Dispersed Democratic Leadership

merely pretending to have answers when it has none, or has solutions in mind so unthinkable they cannot be declared openly.

This may be why university leaders are sometimes cast as overly powerful but tragically misguided figures, fixed on strategies that reflect either flawed ideology or a failure to grasp the essential nature of their institution. The reality may be more prosaic – leaders who see the complexity of the choices required, but struggle to create recognition of problems and consent around solutions.

Conclusion: the subjectivity of university leadership

Leadership of a public university, we have suggested, places an individual at the uncomfortable point where external pressures for change meet familiar internal stances and unresolved debates. It requires a leader to explain the institution’s mission and methods to the world, and the world’s expectations to the university. This cannot be done alone. Leadership in a public university requires a collective effort, and so subverts the usual notions of a single person making brave calls about institutional direction. Inherited traditions about the role of a university, the dignified arrangements of autonomy, the contrasting demands of governance, students, and scholars – all constrain choice, while demanding attention. Nothing is simple, at least in the world of academe. Agreement across constituencies is negotiated constantly, and may fail – as Clark Kerr found, there may be no middle path between warring expectations.

What is it like to play a leadership role, and survive to tell the tale? Most personal accounts stress the difficulties: lack of time, lack of shared understanding, inflated expectations of what is possible, self-interested policy positions, irrational resistance to change, and occasional public abuse. Meanwhile, practical prescriptions for good leadership rarely rise above platitudes worthy of Polonius.

There is agreement that the span of a university leadership role is now very wide, and certainly beyond the capacity of any individual. This requires some humility for leaders once valued by peers primarily for their expertise. In this kind of role, leaders inevitably will lack sufficient knowledge to offer authoritative judgements on most of the complex issues confronting their institution.

There is no science of university leadership, no set of reliable, empirically tested practices. Any list of suggestions communicates an important underlying message – that an impossible role can only be handled by sharing the task, accepting fallibility, and recognizing limits to authority and control.

Neither the idea of the public university nor the idea of leadership can be readily defined, much less settled. With so many purposes and constituencies in need of attention, no single leader can deal with all successfully. The factors
that keep such institutions in a state of flux demand flexible leadership. The
team – and not just the individual with the formal title of leader – must draw
on extensive informal networks to deal with constituents, structure problems,
and get things done.

Meanwhile the leadership process involves translation of new institutional
problems into the vocabularies of purpose and value at play within the institu-
tion. In Aristotelian terms, good leadership becomes a blend of praxis with
poiesis, channelling culture while negotiating change, and translating old into
new. As Hamlet learned, sadly too late, ‘the readiness is all’.

In a sense universities have learned to accommodate intellectual pluralism,
and create space for the voices of unheard minorities. But for the university
and for society it is precisely their embrace of pluralism as a social virtue, as
much as their acceptance of external conditions, that brings them to this pass.
The attempt to contain competing value sets derived from different traditions,
cultures, and belief systems creates space for endless ambiguity and anxiety
as each faction pursues its projects and worries about its status and prospects.
No leader can embody all the virtues and priorities required by all constitu-
encies, let alone an identity that would somehow mirror their diversity. Since
pluralism cuts both ways, the socially desirable characteristics of credible and
legitimate leaders (‘one of us, who can somehow deal with all of them’) are all
too clearly a mirage.

The portfolio of activities we label leadership can, and must, be widely dis-
tributed to have any hope of achieving connection with disparate constitu-
encies. The ultimate task of leaders in a public institution, beyond leading
adaptive change to meet new circumstances, is to make central monolithic
authority increasingly redundant, a routine reassurance that wise choices are
being made as close to the people and the problem as possible, and that these
are visible enough to inform the choices of other groups.

We have suggested that this less visible form of distributed leadership is
more prosaic than heroic, and we should add that it is not new:

A leader is best/When people barely know that/he exists,
Not so good when people obey and/acclaim him,
Worst when they despise him.
Fail to honor people/they fail to honor you;
But of a good leader, who talks little/When his work is done,/his aim fulfilled,
They will say/‘We did this ourselves.’
(Lao Tzu)

Perhaps it is time to call for a new academic field and training ground to
emerge, focused on combining leadership with management in contemporary
tertiary institutions. After all, a similar process of globalization, technological
change, and new markets encouraged widespread interest in the study of lead-
ership in business enterprises from the 1980s (Kotter 1996). Strong corporate
Dispersed Democratic Leadership

governance and capable management of enterprise systems and routines, while still needed, were no longer deemed sufficient in the business world. Such now seem the circumstances of public universities. There are now many personal accounts and case studies to illustrate the kinds of challenges leaders face in this arena, but structured programmes of inquiry and leadership training are still rare.

Notes

1. While our principal focus in preparing this article has been publicly chartered universities, we suspect the argument offered applies more widely to modern universities. Indeed, some of the supporting material produced derives from significant private institutions in the United States. It is likely the shared characteristics among universities are more significant than differences arising from ownership.

Bibliography


Johnson, G., University Politics: F. M. Cornford’s Cambridge and His Advice to the Young Academic Politician (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
Leadership of the Modern University


Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:
Davis, G; Sharrock, G

Title:
Leadership of the Modern University

Date:
2011-10-03

Citation:
Davis, G; Sharrock, G, Leadership of the Modern University, Dispersed Democratic Leadership: Origins, Dynamics, and Implications, 2011

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/31394

File Description:
Leadership of the Modern University