



The Challenge of Leadership in Higher Education in An Age of Disruption

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June 2025

Keywords

Leadership; renaissance leadership; disruption.

Abstract

This paper explores the challenging role of leadership in higher education. It seeks to understand the challenges faced at a time of volatility and uncertainty, especially given the financial and operational challenges faced by higher education systems around the world. It suggests that there are five major challenges for our understanding of leadership in this sector: (a) leadership is reactive rather than anticipatory; (b) higher education has been captured by neo-liberal new public management; (c) leadership lacks the courage to be inspirational and innovative; (d) that “business as usual” is no longer a viable strategy, especially given changes in the nature of academic work; and (e) leaders show a failure of imagination. The paper suggests that it is time to seek a new understanding of what a higher education institution is and that this will require a new kind of leader for a new age.

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To quote this article: Murgatroyd, S., 2025. “The Challenge of Leadership in Higher Education in an Age of Disruption”. *Journal of Ethics in Higher Education* 1(6): 163–181. DOI: 10.26034/fr.jehe.2025.8348 © the Author. CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Visit <https://jehe.globethics.net>

1. Introduction

That this is an age of brittleness, anxiety, non-linear development, uncertainty, volatility, and complexity is unquestionable. Political, social, economic, ideological and environmental change and challenges abound (Harari, 2024). Leaders are expected to help their colleagues not only make sense of what is happening but also help them navigate the changing world in ways that enable them to fully leverage their skills and capabilities to deliver their organization's purpose. This is challenging work. But then, leadership always has been.

In higher education, leadership is incredibly demanding at this time. The sector around the world is facing a perfect storm. Five issues dominate discussions amongst leaders of our colleges and universities:

1. Money: Across the world, governments expect universities and colleges to continuously expand access to learning and skills development without providing either adequate levels of capital funding or adequate per capita investment. Colleges and universities across the Northern Hemisphere, especially in Canada and the UK, are facing a fiscal cliff that is forcing them to close programs, lay off staff, and reimagine their base operations.

- 2 Purpose: Several Governments are challenging the purpose of higher education, especially universities, in the face of significant challenges faced by employers seeking to hire skilled labour. For example, in the UK, the Office for Students (a government agency) has repeatedly challenged universities and colleges that offer degrees that produce graduates whose subsequent income is too low to trigger student loan repayments - courses and programs which also have high drop-out rates. This UK regulator has threatened to fine universities that offer such programs up to £500,000 (or up to 2% of a university's qualifying income). In part, this is about strengthening the connection between learning and skills in demand in the labour force, but it is also part of a quality assurance paradigm in which quality is assessed in terms of the subsequent earning power of graduates.

This in itself is a major shift in the idea of a university as outlined by Cardinal Saint Newman (Newman, 1852), who saw higher education as about the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and as a form of character building. The link between learning and skills in demand is also a concern for employers. A growing number of employers no longer trust higher education qualifications as an indicator of the potential capability of employees and are instead hiring based on demonstrable skills and competencies, not qualifications (Fuller et al., 2022). Given the extent to which students use debt to fund their studies, many are now looking at the return on capital and beginning to think that the investment in a college or university long-program is not producing the return needed to fund the lifestyle they desire, with a few exceptions (medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine) and are looking at alternatives¹.

3. Trust: Globally, there is an unprecedented decline in trust in leaders, institutions, media and authority (Edelman, 2025). Business leaders - not government or institutional leaders - are seen as trustworthy and ethical alongside scientists and teachers. But this trust is fragile and needs to be reinforced and strengthened. In higher education. Issues of academic freedom, academic misconduct, research retraction and value are beginning to erode hard-won trust, though scientists continue to be seen as highly trusted in the Edelman analysis. As academic freedom is being systematically attacked, especially but not only in the United States, it is increasingly important that academic freedom is championed, not just by the academic community.

4. A Changing Business Model: Some colleges and universities are realizing that the business model that has stood them in good stead for several centuries is no longer fit for purpose, and they are making significant changes to how they teach, learn, assess, engage in research

¹ See an analysis of value for money: Office for Students (2018): Value for money – The student perspective. Office for Students. Available at <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/3105/value-for-money-the-student-perspective-final-final-final.pdf>

and impact the community. Whether it is the Technological University of Monterrey, Ontario Tech University, or the SMART University of Dubai, they are reimagining how they operate and how they secure the support of rightsholders in doing so. They are redesigning programs and learning to reflect the principles of design and social justice and regenerative thinking, while demanding more of students in terms of project-based learning, community involvement and work-based learning. Others seem to be struggling to operate from a “business as usual” framework, despite recognizing that these are unusual times. They do so because rightsholders are not yet ready to see organizational transformation as key to their future.

5. Technology: On top of the previous four challenges, leaders now need to address the present and future impact of emerging technologies – artificial intelligence, humanoid robotics and quantum computing. Most avoid doing so. A recent study of faculty around the world (Digital Education Council, 2025) shows that only 43% of college and universities had developed policies related to the use of AI. Worse, 78% of faculty said that they were largely unfamiliar with the range of functionalities AI is capable of, with 39% saying that they had never used any AI tools or systems (McMurtie, 2025). Most see that AI and related technologies will have a significant and lasting impact on how they teach and assess and how they engage in research, but are unclear what change might look like. They lack institutional support, leadership and clarity.

Given these five significant challenges – each of which has its own dynamic and complexity – it is not surprising that turnover in colleges and universities is increasing. These data show just how serious this issue is:

- In Australia, leadership turnover quadrupled during the pandemic, with half of the country's 40 universities either appointing or seeking new leaders - a dramatic increase from the pre-pandemic average of five institutions per year recruiting new permanent leaders.
- In the United States, university presidents' average tenure has steadily declined from 8.5 years in 2006 to 6.5 years in 2016 and

then dropped to 5.9 years in 2023, with nine of the US' top 20 institutions having presidents who have been in post for less than two years.

- In South Africa, half of the country's top eight universities have experienced leadership changes since January 2023, with several high-profile departures, including forced resignations and sudden exits.
- At least 20% of UK universities experienced leadership changes in 2024, with Oxford and Cambridge gaining new vice-chancellors in 2023. The turnover has been particularly notable following institutional restructuring programs, the collapse of international student registrations and challenges to the purpose of the institution coming from both government and civil society.
- Across the EU, turnover of college and university leadership is increasing. Most dramatically in Germany (from 15% turnover in 2010 to 25% in 2025) and the Netherlands (from 12% in 2010 to 22% in 2025). In the remaining EU member states, turnover increased by 8% over the last fifteen years.

As Paul (2024) observed, leadership of collegiate and collectivist institutions has always been difficult. Now it appears more complex and demanding, with challenges increasing rather than declining, especially given the emergence of anti-intellectual governments in Europe and the Americas.

2. Five Challenges for Leadership in Higher Education

When we look critically at the work of leading a college or university, especially a large ones like the Universities of Toronto and Melbourne (US\$2.5 billion), Tsinghua University in China (US\$5.6 billion), Harvard (\$5.25 billion), Stanford (\$4.8 billion), Oxford (\$2.3 billion) – which parallel some significant medium-sized corporations (e.g. Moderna, Footlocker, WestJet the Canadian airline, Burberry, Yamaha) we can

discern some specific challenges beyond the operational and logistical challenges of managing shifting demographics, budgets and people. Here we identify five, but some scholars have suggested that each of these harbours sub-categories and related issues (Paul, 2024). The five are:

1. Reactive rather than Anticipatory Governance

Anticipatory governance in the context of colleges and universities involves preparing and adapting to future challenges and opportunities through strategic foresight and innovative governance models. Typically, this will involve current trends analysis, a rigorous review of possibilities and scenario planning (Murgatroyd, 2015). This approach is crucial for institutions to remain relevant and effective in a rapidly changing world characterized by technological advancements and evolving societal needs (Reibenstein, 2022; Guston, 2014).

These are the key aspects of anticipatory governance and their implications for the future of colleges and university governance:

Strategic Foresight and Temporal Strategies

- Universities and colleges are increasingly adopting strategic foresight to navigate future uncertainties. This involves using temporal strategies that consider the present's past, the present's future, the future's present, and the future's future. Such strategies enable institutions to transform indeterminate futures into developmental resources, fostering a potentializing organization that is responsive to unexpected conditions (Tuunainen et al., 2023).
- The concept of anticipatory innovation governance, as proposed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), amongst others, emphasizes the need for structures and mechanisms that promote proactive policymaking in complex and uncertain contexts. This approach supports colleges and universities in anticipating and innovating in response to fast-moving changes (Tönurist & Hanson, 2020),

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especially as they relate to emerging technologies, such as AI and quantum computing.

Governance Models and “Fourth Generation” Colleges and Universities

- The development of fourth-generation colleges and universities committed to sustainable development and the circular economy highlights the importance of governance models that integrate future foresight. These models focus on creating entrepreneurial and knowledge-based environments that are adaptable to future demands. In Babol (Iran), for example, university governance approaches are being tailored to enhance future foresight, thereby improving educational and research outcomes (Hosseini et al., 2023).
- Higher education governance is expected to evolve with each industrial revolution, emphasizing partnerships with industries and socio-economic sectors. This shift aims to create flexible, target-oriented, and semi-individually designed programs that equip students with entrepreneurial and critical thinking skills (Badran, 2019).

Global and Institutional Perspectives

- Anticipatory governance involves international organizations like UNESCO and the OECD playing a significant role in shaping education futures. These organizations use anticipatory practices to coordinate and govern education futures, often competing to dominate future-making in education (Robertson, 2022).
- The future of institutions will likely involve increased pressures from regulators, market actors, and scrutinizers. This dynamic will necessitate a balance between public and private interests, with universities leveraging their historical resilience and reputation to navigate these challenges (Engwall, 2019).

Leadership and Cross-Sector Partnerships

- Effective institutional governance in the future will require strong, purpose-driven, and courageous leadership that emphasizes social responsibility, transparency, accountability, and democracy (Rodgers, 2021). Building and sustaining cross-sector partnerships will be crucial for universities to maintain and grow their leadership positions in society (Castillo-Villar, 2020).
- Integrating organizational leadership into anticipatory governance models will help colleges and universities address the challenges of on-campus and off-campus student life, ensuring that they remain relevant and effective in meeting the needs of their communities (Castillo-Villar, 2020).

A shift to anticipatory governance involves a shift from thinking of governors as government agents, ensuring compliance and conformity to the idea of governance as stewardship of people, resources and facilities for the public good – a significant shift in perspective, requiring foresight and skill. This shift is not helped by the fact that some governance bodies are exceptionally large – e.g. the University of Toronto has fifty members, and many have twenty to thirty. For context, Apple and Walmart have boards of between 8 and 11 persons and provide governance and oversight for much more complex organizations.

2. The Capture of the College and University by the Ideology of “New Public Management”

Good governance has been the focus of a great deal of research, which has tended to focus on (a) program and course quality assurance, (b) practical human resource and talent management, (c) reputational risk and performance management, (d) research and risk management, and (e) prudent fiscal management. What has not been the focus of attention is the quality of anticipatory stewardship governance and the ability of institutions to move ahead of the change curve. This is partly because colleges and universities have been captured by what is known as “new public management” since the early 1980s, emphasizing accountability and performance (Jeffers, 2022; Yates et al., 2016). As Giddens (1998) suggested, boards act as “agents” of

the funders and seek to curry favour with the policy perspectives of government. The key elements of this approach to governance as an agent are:

- A focus on efficiency and effectiveness
- Decentralized management held accountable for performance metrics
- An emphasis on “customer” choice – seeing students as customers engaged in essentially a commercial transaction
- A relentless focus on cost reduction and the pursuit of growth opportunities often requires the closure of “inefficient” and “underperforming” programs and courses.
- Performance management
- Risk management and risk reduction

The literature refers to this as governance as “agency” – acting as an agent for the government or major rightsholders (Wu, Zhang & Carrol, 2024) – a point emphasized by one of the apostles of new public management, Sir Michael Barber in his work on “deliverology” (Barber, et al., 2015). Others suggest that this brand of neo-liberal thinking essentially means that the government (the state) has become “the powerful overlord of higher education” and the main driver of change and development in colleges or organizations – something that hitherto was driven by the institutions themselves (Shattock & Horvath, 2020).

The adoption of these features of governance has led to significant disconnects between the interests of faculty and management and the interests of governments and institutions (Fleming, 2021; Ginsberg, 2011; MacKinnon, 2018). They are locked into a permanent dance in which one group seeks to exert agency and the other resist, especially where the issues are linked to employment, freedom of speech and curriculum (Ashari, 2024).

A second reason for the failure to adopt anticipatory stewardship governance is the reluctance of institutional leaders to challenge existing rightsholder assumptions and move the university beyond its captured governance into new territory for innovation, risk-taking and technology-enabled possibilities. Rightsholders are locked into well-established positions, which makes

transformational change difficult, if not impossible. The stalemate between rightsholder views holds the institution captive and leads it to be a permanently failing organization (Myer & Zucker, 1989; Rouleau et al, 2008).

3. The Need for Courageous Change Management and Inspirational Leadership

As financial concerns amongst college and university administrators grow and as governments continue to either freeze or reduce per capita funding (Usher & Balfour, 2023), leaders in colleges and universities are beginning to imagine a different future. For some, this could mean “rightsizing” through program closures and staff reduction; for others, it may mean re-purposing; for others, it may mean full or partial closure. The next decade will be difficult and demanding for leaders and policymakers (Murgatroyd, 2024a; Paul, 2024). The key here is that change is inevitable, so are some failures: business as usual is no longer an option.

Five key possibilities appear to be emerging:

- Mergers and acquisitions. This is already becoming a discernible development with acquisitions in the US (e.g., the University of Arizona purchase of Ashford University) and mergers in South Australia, the UK, Finland, and Singapore. Reducing duplication, securing economies of scale and rationalizing program delivery (Georgieva & Abdelazim, 2020).
- A reimagining of the college or university as an accreditor of learning, no matter where or when that learning took place. Leveraging three decades of experience in prior learning assessment and competency-based assessment for credit at Western Governors University, The Open University UK and Athabasca University in Canada, as well as India's National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning, this approach gives emphasis to what students can do rather than to time-based learning and instruction. This also aligns with a significant

growth in skills-based hiring by some of the largest companies in the world (Fuller et al., 2022).

- A Collaboratory between industries with the need for highly qualified people and colleges and universities able to meet needs and expectations. We see this in the collaboration between IMB and community colleges, Siemens mechatronics programming in colleges and universities worldwide, and the Singapore Skills Future initiative.
- A global network of like-minded institutions which share learning and assessment so as to reduce operational costs and increase access – MOOCs on steroids. These began to emerge following the first phase of MOOC development – e.g. the MIT and Harvard partnership with edX – and are now gaining new momentum. For example, the Asian Universities Alliance involves fifteen universities from fourteen countries seeking to strengthen collaboration, faculty development and the co-creation of courses. Open Universities Australia and OntarioLearn are similar operational collaborations in which online courses are pooled and shared across institutions, with recruitment and support centralized to lower costs.
- AI-enabled centres for personalized learning and skills development are available. Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI and Sal Khan, founder of the Khan Academy, have both advocated for a new model for education from Kindergarten to PhD. They see generative AI as able to offer all levels of learning, expert and peer support and assessment through adaptive individualized instruction and intend to launch a range of services aimed at making learning available at low or no cost in multimedia formats with support networks worldwide (Khan, 2024). Some private providers are exploring the potential of these developments for new approaches to accredited learning.

When taken together, these five developments pose challenges to the existing paradigm but do not yet constitute a new paradigm that is either operationally or financially viable. Change is a work in progress.

The challenge for leaders is that most major change projects, no matter what their scope or focus, fail. A study by Price Waterhouse Coopers (2014) shows that just 2.5% of all major change projects succeed and are sustained over time, with large numbers of initiatives experiencing cost overruns or a complete failure due to lack of courageous leadership, communication and effective project management. This work is echoed in other studies (Hidalgo, 2015).

Murgatroyd (2024, 2025) points to the lack of courage at the senior levels of higher education institutions. With some exceptions, leaders seek reconciliation and conciliation rather than pushing rightsholders to enable change and innovation. Colleges and universities can be complicated places, with some rightsholders (especially faculty) clinging to the mythology of the institution being autonomous and enabling of resistance to change.

4. A Failure to Recognize that the Nature of Academic Work Is Changing and Will Continue to Do So

The hiring, assessment and reward of faculty in a university is based on traditions that appear no longer fit for purpose. Two aspects in particular are problematic. The first is the use of publication and citation counts for promotion to tenure and tenure track positions. This is problematic for two reasons: (a) there are very few tenured and tenure-track positions within universities - just 32% of US academics are tenured or on tenure-track – down from 57% in 1987, and this number will fall further as several US states intend to follow the UKs lead and abolish tenure – but the human resource systems in use assume that this does not require significant changes to their hiring and evaluation practices; and (b) academics and their peers now game the system effectively, making a mockery of the evidence-informed and peer review strategies used by universities around the world (Caufield, 2025).

The second is the fact that most teaching in universities and colleges is undertaken by precarious sessional (“gig”) workers hired just to teach with few health, vacation or other benefits. In the US, contingent instructors account for 70% of all instruction for undergraduate degrees and 58% of college instruction. This new precariat (Standing, 2011) is assessed using

simple systems of student feedback, but no investment is made in developing the capacity of these precarious workers to teach, innovate in learning design, and reimagine assessment or otherwise adopt innovative practices in teaching, learning and assessment. The result is that they replicate ineffective and inefficient teaching (e.g. lectures) and assessments (e.g. exams and multiple-choice tests). Students make extensive use of AI, peer learning and other networks to overcome the paucity of their learning experiences.

Bates (2025) has explored these issues from a position that the higher education system is broken and needs rethinking. He suggests two kinds of hiring for academics – teacher-researchers and teachers who are not expected to undertake research – and that these two forms of employment require different methods of performance review and evaluation. This, he suggests, needs to be accompanied by a radical rethinking of what instruction, learning and student engagement look like. Others have shared similar views (Cormier, 2024).

5. A Failure of Imagination

When faced with significant financial challenges of reduced income and rising costs, the instincts of college and university leadership is to cut people and programs. Cardiff University, for example, announced in January 2025 that it will lay off four hundred academic staff, close its schools of nursing and music – the leading schools for these subjects in Wales – together with low-enrolment programs “so as to preserve their core business.” Rather than engaging in a re-imagining of what a university can be in an age of artificial intelligence, collaboration and globalization, the Cardiff leadership team chose “business as usual with less” as their strategy. This has also been seen across Canada and England, as institutions adjust to fiscal realities and a declining in demand from international students coupled with government-imposed constraints on student visas.

Others have taken a very different view. Tec de Monterrey in Mexico² has moved to challenge-based programs which build specific competencies and capabilities for their students to be agents of change in their communities. No more lectures as we know them: project-based learning in real-world settings are driving what students and teachers do. In Dubai, the Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University³ has created a suite of competency-driven learning programs that offer anytime, anywhere flexibility. The Open University (UK) offers a range of free-to-learn courses which can lead to credit transfer. MOOCs are alive and well.

3. A New Kind of Leader for a New Age

College and university leadership is a daunting and demanding role – one that is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit to. As we begin the work of reimagining what these institutions need to become in an age in which access to information and knowledge is ubiquitous but discernment, truth-seeking, ethical behaviour, compassion and trust are becoming scarce commodities, we need to reimagine just what a college and university is and what it needs to become. This requires leaders who display what Murgatroyd & Simpson (2024) call renaissance leadership. There are several key characteristics of such leaders, but four are key to the work described in this paper: (a) they show courage and passion and drive change; (b) they live and practice ubuntu – they understand that they are a community member and that their success is based on the success of all; (c) they think globally but act locally; and (d) they are not afraid of challenges, uncertainty or risk. They show the kind of grit needed to turn around a ship in a dry dock.

Few of these kinds of leaders will come from the academic community or from the existing new public management bureaucracies within our colleges,

² For more details about Tec21 and the operation of these programs, see <https://www.ifc.org/en/insights-reports/2019/tec-de-monterrey>

³ For information about HBMSUs innovative approach to lifelong learning, see <https://www.hbmsu.ac.ac/about/academics/learning-at-hbmsu>

universities and government. They are more likely to come from the vibrant non-profit sector or from successful enterprises.

A failure to secure a new kind of leadership will lead to the entry into the market of new players driven by such leaders who are not incumbered by the weight of the past or daunted by the challenges of the future. They will understand that the future is not what it used to be.

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5. Short biography

Dr Stephen Murgatroyd is a writer, broadcaster, and consultant. Educated at University College Cardiff (BSc, 1972) and the Open University (MPhil, 1983; PhD 1987), he began as a special needs teacher before joining the Open University as a research fellow and senior counsellor. Author of 25 books and 49 peer-reviewed papers, he is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society

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