

Received: 03 April 2024 | Revised: 17 April 2024 | Accepted: 19 April 2024

University leadership in the digital age: challenges, opportunities, and critical actions

Ross H. Paul^{1,2}

¹ Acsenda School of Management, Canada

² University of British Columbia, Canada

Correspondence:

Ross H. Paul | e-mail: rpaul@uwindsor.ca

Abstract

In the context of universities with Western traditions in democratic countries, a former Canadian university president offers a critical perspective on university leadership today, outlining a tsunami of new challenges that have rendered the job both more daunting and more important than ever and suggesting strategies for meeting them. The digital age has brought not only a bewildering array of information and communication technologies to choose from, but new expectations for equality of opportunity, equity, diversity and inclusion that have a direct impact on leadership roles. The analysis pertains as much to conventional universities as to ODDE institutions as changing social norms and rapid technological innovations blur the distinctions between them. These developments have critical implications for the success or failure of university leaders, seriously challenging prevailing university models in the process.

Keywords

Artificial intelligence (AI), equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI), information and communication technologies (ICT), leadership, social media



1 Introduction

Whether for a presidency, vice-presidency, deanship, or department head position, the challenges of university leadership have multiplied and intensified in the past decade. The focus here is on the position of president but almost all of the examples, concerns and potential solutions apply equally to other leadership positions in the institution. The primary context is Canadian, but examples are cited from elsewhere to underline the universality of the central concerns, at least for institutions in democratic countries with long traditions of independent academic governance and faculty autonomy. It is also argued that the challenges and responses to them are as applicable to Open, Distance, and Digital (ODDE) institutions as they are to more traditional universities as the distinctions between them are increasingly blurred.

In the above context, such leadership has always been challenging. A university is a decentralized institution with multi-stakeholders and strong, even independent, pockets of influence and power among its faculties. Consequently, and perhaps appropriately, leaders usually have less ascribed authority than is the case for corporate and government leaders. In contrast to service companies, sports teams or corporations, universities hierarchical have multiple, diffuse and even ambiguous goals that do not readily lend themselves to leadership and a straightforward assessment of results. There is an inherent contradiction between everyone's collaborative effort and a university's prime purpose of seeking the truth in a climate unfettered by ideology or political interference. Working through an embedded academic culture to initiate change requires patient and respectful leadership that persuades and seeks collaboration, what I have often termed "leading from behind" (Paul, 2015, p. 236).

Until quite recently, most universities were relatively homogeneous institutions serving a much narrower band of the population. Higher education was more of a privilege than a right, and university graduates were almost guaranteed employment in their chosen field. Its leaders came primarily from inside the academy with skills and experience in teaching, research and academic governance. Universities tended to run under the radar of public accountability and most of the populace had only a vague notion of how they operated.

Recent history, especially over the past decade, has seen a tsunami of new challenges to universities that have dramatically increased workloads and priorities and magnified the pressures on leaders to respond. The sheer number and intensity of these challenges are not only testing institutional leaders to the hilt but their cumulative impact is to challenge the very purpose and organization of universities in unprecedented ways. The new challenges are presented below, followed by a discussion of their implications for leadership success and for the evolving role of the institutions they serve.

2 The challenges for leadership in the digital age

The rapid development of information and communications technologies (ICT), spurred by the sudden pivot to emergency remote teaching (ERT) and the very recent and rapid evolution of artificial intelligence (AI), have conspired to magnify dramatically the importance of university leadership. Also, almost every year brings a major new issue to the forefront of university consideration and responsibility. Recent examples include the pandemic, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policies, reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, issues of gender and censorship, student mental health, and climate change.

Today's institutions face a multiplicity of roles and expectations and, combined with colleges, serve the majority of the population in more and more countries. Their leaders are increasingly publicly accountable for meeting a broader range of social, political and economic goals. The

following trends and events demonstrate just how dramatically the pressures on university leadership have escalated in very recent years.

2.1 Impact of Covid-19

The universal and incredibly disruptive Covid-19 pandemic challenged the very heart of our universities and colleges in terms of how professors teach and students learn. For traditional on-campus universities, the sudden pivot to ERT forced faculty and students alike into a world of online learning for which many were significantly unprepared and untutored. While it greatly enhanced the profile of distance education and online learning, it was a mixed blessing for the ODDE sector, both demonstrating its value and often undermining its reputation through poor implementation and a failure to understand the importance of course design and student support in teaching at a distance. As Nichols (2023, p. 641) noted, using online learning synchronously, which was the norm during this phase, was out-of-step with classic distance education theory based on the accessibility advantage of asynchronous delivery.

The challenges are even greater in less developed countries. For example, as Jha and Ghatak (2023) have shown for India, the pandemic-driven lockdown had a devastating impact on student persistence as both teachers and students were woefully unprepared for the demands of online education and the forced move to it actually exacerbated existing inequalities in educational access such as availability of communications devices and infrastructure and even a place to study for many impoverished students.

A key component of higher learning for undergraduate students is the on-campus experience but exposure to the convenience and flexibility of distance education has increasingly led students to demand multiple options, from face-to-face classes and online learning to hybrid and hyperflex courses. In short, COVID-19 significantly whetted students' appetites for digital teaching and services with huge implications for the variety of teaching and learning modes across an institution and the related infrastructure and training needs that can dramatically increase costs and force tough decisions about what modes and supports the university does or does not provide.

2.2 The digital age

The rapid and ongoing development of information and communication technologies (ICT) provides amazing opportunities for the improvement and personalization of student learning. At the same time, the bewildering array of choices and the infrastructure and training requirements pose a whole new set of challenges for university leaders, especially given the entrenched face-to-face lecture and seminar system that prevails in most universities. While there may be a significant change on the horizon, Nichols (2023, p. 649) contrasts the impact of the digital revolution on so many industries (banking, travel agencies, taxi and consumer goods services, government systems) with the "remarkably unchanged" higher education sector.

Influential writers in distance education, notably Daniel (1996) and Bates (1995, 2008), have long underlined the importance and impact of choosing and supporting specific knowledge technologies for a given institution. This is a crucial concern for institutional leaders seeking competitive advantage through technology. The stakes are high as they seek the best options for their institution, often with very high incremental costs and at significant financial risk.

This challenge is increasingly pertinent to campus-based universities as they struggle to incorporate new technologies and distance education into their conventional modes of course delivery. It is hard enough learning which technologies are most appropriate in such a fast-changing environment and working through the cost implications (infrastructure, training) and

yet another level of challenge is persuading academics that new modes of course delivery are in everyone's best interests.

Traditionally, university leaders have left most decisions about teaching and learning to the faculty, but the digital revolution is in the process of forcing major changes in traditional models which conventional university leaders will ignore at their peril. In these endeavors, they would be well served by lessons learned from the experience of the ODDE sector.¹

Writing from his experience as Chair of Digital Learning at the unique Dublin City University, Brown (2023) underlines the complexity of trying to find the most effective technologies and approaches to teaching and learning in higher education. He sees a false binary between online and campus-based teaching and learning and finding the best way through requires what he calls "a multifocal view of leadership".

While artificial intelligence has been around since Alan Turing wrote about it in 1947 (Alan Turing and the beginning of AI, n.d.), it is only very recently that it has risen to the fore as both a major opportunity and a major challenge to teaching and research in higher education. It is interesting to note, for example, that a 2005 gathering of world experts on emerging technologies (Atkins, 2005) made no mention of AI whereas the concept has since emerged as the most prominent disrupting technology since ChatGPT was launched by OpenAI in November 2022. The explosion of ICT and AI developments offers both exciting opportunities for efficiency and student success and a bewildering array of choices and expenses that will tax even the best prepared institutional leader. As Steele reminds us, these technologies can take us to new levels, but the most important consideration, especially in considering both the positive and negative powers of AI, will be what he terms "the human advantage":

Machine learning and artificial intelligence will increasingly outperform humans at narrow technical and specialized tasks over the next few decades. The human advantage will lie in interpersonal and social skills, creative and strategic thinking, the ability to apply a broad interdisciplinary context, ethical and cross-cultural competencies and an entrepreneurial mindset – the very skills instilled by humanities and interdisciplinary programs. (Steele, cited in Macdonald, 2019, p. 14).

The impact of technology is changing management practice as well. Based on my experience at Athabasca University in overseeing its regional offices in the 1980s, I have long believed that managing at a distance was even harder than teaching at a distance. However, new technologies have helped to facilitate remote management, data-driven decision-making and performance tracking. Artificial intelligence will increasingly take over routine tasks, thus providing opportunities for cost savings (although the repercussions will require a whole new set of management skills). Given these trends, it is increasingly evident that a fundamental leadership skill today is technological literacy.

2.3 Social media

Senior management in any organization requires leaders who are attuned to trends and the need to respond effectively to changing environments but the sheer pace of change in the digital age has rendered it increasingly difficult for them to keep abreast of important technologies, social

¹ I have long been concerned that conventional university leaders were moving into the world of distance education without any awareness of the rich body of literature and experience of ODDE institutions over the past 50 years. (Paul, 2014).

issues, political trends and management techniques. Furthermore, they are being held accountable for developments that are increasingly out of their control and even their influence.

Social media have had a huge impact on the daily life of academic leaders. They provide unprecedented opportunities for them to manage, especially remotely, but they also have negative impacts. Leaders are bombarded daily with e-mail and text messages on a huge range of issues with an expectation of immediate and effective responses. This brings a host of new issues to the fore, many of which are political and even incidental to the priority goals of the institution, but they impose a whole new set of expectations for leaders and can deflect their attention away from more important and fundamental issues at the heart of a university's mission and mandate. They may also contribute to shorter term perspectives and firefighting among leaders who are supposed to be overseeing the institution's long-term interests. Finally, they tend to personalize issues, pushing for individual reactions on an endless range of topics, raising levels of conflict, personal stress and political polarization.

These pressures also raise public awareness of institutional performance, increasing competition and discouraging collective and collaborative responses to the challenges, even though these are increasingly universal. While competition between institutions can encourage excellence and productivity, many of our most prominent social and political issues are better served by collaboration and inclusion, especially in research and scholarship. This double-barreled challenge is central to the performance of every institutional leader today.

2.4 Academic freedom and world events

At least in Western democracies, where politics have become increasingly polarized in the 21st century, the issue of academic freedom, at the very heart of a university, has screamed to the forefront. The most recent catalyst has been the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel and the latter's response to it, exacerbating conflicts between right and left factions of academia over which side has committed genocide.

University leaders the world over are being held to account for how they have responded to demands for clear institutional positions on the Middle East conflict. Most dramatically, the US Congress questioning of the presidents of Harvard, Pennsylvania and MIT and significant dissatisfaction with their cautious and legal-driven responses led to the resignation of the first two. (Gambino, 2023). The Middle East imbroglio has yielded similar issues for Canadian university presidents who have been challenged by media sources to be explicit about their institutional policies on freedom of speech and academic freedom, both for Israelis and Palestinians (Ramzy, 2024). They have had to deal with student groups supporting one side or the other and some are facing class-action lawsuits claiming failure to deal with anti-Semitism on campus (Freisen, 2024). There are obvious dangers in an excessively prompt response to any such event, but leaders can equally be castigated for obfuscation or silence.

At the deadline for submission of this chapter, the situation on campuses around the world had escalated significantly, posing new challenges for university presidents as students emulated Vietnam War protestors of a much earlier era by physically occupying campus grounds or buildings to protest the war in Gaza and, in many cases, to refuse to leave until their institution divested itself of investments in Israel or defence companies (Montpetit, 2024). Notably in the USA and Canada, university leaders faced difficult decisions between upholding free speech and calling in police forces to clear their campuses.

The catalytic issues go well beyond those involving war and genocide. For example, there are increasing conflicts between right and left factions of academia on gender politics, epitomized by a recent case at the UK Open University where faculty member Jo Phoenix was subject to a

“targeted campaign of harassment” from over 300 colleagues that rendered her unable to work, leading a judge to rule that she had been constructively dismissed. The case is a graphic example of how internal politics, often ironically in the name of academic freedom for some, constrained it for others.

...this case of harassment on the basis of a protected belief happened in a university, where the free exchange of ideas is supposed to be sacrosanct (Sodha, 2024, para. 7)

The above cases illustrate how social media and political polarization have sometimes undermined the prestige and reputation of universities by showing them to be subject to relatively petty politics with leaders too often appearing unwilling or unable to deal with such direct challenges to the institutional mission.

2.5 Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI)

No longer just serving privileged elites, today’s universities are a microcosm of their societies with an ever-increasing mix of ethnicities, cultures, and ways of looking at the world. They have taken on many new roles and sets of expectations, many of which have made them much more visible and publicly accountable.

A key indicator of this evolution is the growing attention to matters of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). The expansion and democratization of higher education has not only dramatically increased educational opportunities, it has also forced institutions to rethink their traditional approaches to teaching and learning and student support. The ODDE sector has played a particularly important role in demonstrating how open admissions and distance delivery can provide unprecedented opportunity and success for those previously denied access.

In Canada, at least, the past decade has seen most institutions of higher education adopting EDI policies intended to address past inequities in opportunity and treatment and to capitalize on the skills and talents of those previously denied such opportunities. The importance of EDI goes beyond simply extending opportunity and inclusion to fundamental challenges to past practices and prejudices that have limited the university’s effectiveness in living up to its highest ideals. Diversity brings new talents and new perspectives that must be integrated into all approaches to resolving social issues and ensuring integrity in the search for truth.

Rather than treating Canada’s burgeoning super-diversity as a problem to be managed, universities should enthusiastically seize the opportunities diversity offers through its potential to generate novel perspectives, enhance critical thinking, and fuel creativity and innovation. (Smith, cited in Macdonald, 2019)

Intensifying diversity in an institution inevitably leads to more conflict and dissent as faculty, staff and students bring new perspectives and new power relationships to the issues of the day. Effective leaders find ways both to acknowledge such dissonance and to capitalize on the related fresh approaches to the institution’s organization and practice.

2.6 Displacement of goals

It is logical to measure the impact of a president’s or dean’s performance on such key institutional indicators as student success, research productivity and financial health. While it has always been difficult to assess an individual’s impact on such indicators, the scope and diversity of expectations for such roles have been dramatically magnified in recent years.

Public pressures for accountability, especially on high profile and often ideologically charged issues, can easily become preoccupations as leaders struggle to protect institutional and personal reputations. Their attention may too often be deflected towards the more immediate and evident

“big media” issues at the expense of their core business and long-term planning. Furthermore, most university leaders are much better prepared to address the latter concerns through their academic training and on-the-job experiences than they are to deal with the media and government relations that are usually central to the hot issues of the day.

It is thus critical that presidents devise techniques that help them stay focused on their longer-term goals in the face of daily pressures to respond to the latest crisis or issue. Given the volatility and extent of pressures pushing universities in so many directions, the ability to ensure the primacy of an institution’s fundamental goals is obviously critical to effective leadership.

2.7 Workload issues and faculty resistance

The speed and intensity of changes resulting from the pandemic significantly increased faculty and staff workloads as they struggled to cope with new teaching and communications practices on very short notice with almost no training or guidance. At a time when new and more professional development for faculty and administrators was a pronounced exigency, too many were preoccupied with just coping in a rapidly changing environment, often to the detriment of their own research and other professional interests.

Like their students, many faculty are intrigued by the possibilities offered by new online technologies and artificial intelligence but need expansive training and support if there are to be significant changes in the traditional modes of teaching and learning. New technologies are often disruptive and require leadership that is not only sensitive to the uncertainty that such change breeds among faculty, staff and students but also ensures ongoing consultation that respects traditional practice and seeks to find consensus as to the best way forward in teaching and learning,

2.8 Increased costs and declining government assistance

In Canada and in many other countries, these changes have come after an extended period of reductions in government financial support for public universities.

...across the English-speaking world, the former Soviet bloc, and much of Eastern Asia and Latin America, per-capita public funding of higher education is declining as participation grows. (Marginson, 2016, p. 10)

In Canada, where each province has jurisdiction over education, government grants in nine of the 10 provinces were significantly less in 2019-20 than they had been a decade earlier. (CAUT, 2023). In many cases, there were significant freezes or caps on tuition fee levels as well.

These trends are particularly threatening to university budgets at a time when institutional leaders are facing rising costs with the need to create new positions and to invest in expensive new infrastructure to deal with the escalating challenges and opportunities. One of the offshoots of this is a percentage increase in the number and costs of “non-academic” staff (Baltaru & Soysal, 2018) which can quickly become a labour relations issue within an institution for faculty members concerned about the consequent rising bureaucracy.

In response to diminishing government grants and restrictions on tuition fee levels over the past decade and, as elsewhere, Canadian colleges and universities turned to the relatively unregulated international student market for revenues. There are few or no restrictions on international tuition fees, and institutions across the country dramatically expanded international student enrolments to offset funding shortfalls.

However, the recent cuts in higher education funding have come at a time when there is burgeoning national concern about housing affordability and supply, with many seeing

unprecedented levels of international student enrolment, doubled in the past decade (StatCan, 2023), as exacerbating both the cost and availability of housing, especially on the rental market.

The international student issue has now come to a head in 2024 with a federal government announcement of significant cuts in the number of student visas to be issued in a given year, resulting in dramatic financial repercussions for those colleges and universities most dependent on international student revenues. However, these cuts can only go so far. Canada will continue to rely on talented international students as a key component of its economic future as ever smaller domestic cohorts bear the costs of health, housing, and other financial needs of the larger group of retiring baby boomers.

3 Shifting views of the purposes of higher education

Both independent of and magnified by the above, there are important implications for views of the purposes of higher education across the country. Canada has a particularly strong community college sector and a growing investment in polytechnic institutions as governments and employers push for a more materialistic approach to post-secondary education. The emphasis is increasingly on job preparation, STEM disciplines and micro-credentials with concomitant declines in enrolments in the humanities and social sciences.

The trend towards education as job preparation is being reinforced by the rise of political populism in many countries, including Canada. This is characterized by an increasing distrust of traditional elites which can undermine the prestige of the university in particular and, hence, its appeal to potential leaders. This is particularly evident in America where the richest and most prestigious universities are suddenly under the gun for elitism and the dominance in academia of liberal thinkers who are increasingly being portrayed as complacent and out-of-touch by conservative critics (George, 2024).

The only valid leadership response to these pressures is to uphold academic freedom and open debate rather than to try to placate a given partisan position, notwithstanding that this will be very unpopular in some quarters. In extreme cases, the very notion of democracy itself is threatened. And it is the humanities and social sciences that most contribute to the basic tenets of open and free debate which are central to the university's role as a key pillar of a democratic society. We will continue to cut such programs at our peril!

4 Impact on recruitment and success of university leaders

A key byproduct of this proliferation of roles and issues for universities is its impact on the pool and preparation of potential university leaders and how they perform on the job.

University leaders have traditionally been recruited almost exclusively from within academia, with a premium given to those skilled in matters of shared governance – leading committees, consulting widely, keeping an open-door policy and making collaborative decisions.

Contrast this approach with today's world of social media, clashing ideologies and instant communications, in the face of which, traditional governance mechanisms appear increasingly ponderous. It also means that issues are more personalized, echoing political trends around the world (as in the case of Jo Phoenix, above), all of which can really take a toll on individual leaders.

As well, many people are paying attention to an appropriate work/life balance, led notably by women in leadership positions who are still expected to play disproportionate roles in child

rearing and family affairs. It is not surprising that fewer people are willing to embrace so all-consuming a career as a university presidency or deanship.

One of the key sustaining elements of university leadership is the satisfaction that comes with celebrating student success at Convocation or from major research or community impact achievements. For leaders buffeted by social media criticism for failing to deliver on issues that may be beyond their control, the job can seem less attractive and less fulfilling. It is consequently more difficult to count on a step-by-step promotion from one academic administrative job to the next when many of the new challenges require skills and orientations well beyond previous academic experience.

The challenge starts with the selection process for the top jobs. This is often cumbersome, with overly large search committees reflecting a campus culture that gives priority to safer and more conservative candidates who may put their own popularity ahead of what really needs to be done. And yet, understanding a campus culture is a critical issue for institutional leadership.

While individual institutions have their own particular idiosyncrasies, there are common aspects of academic culture prevalent in universities the world over. This is why university leaders overwhelmingly come from within the academy. Given the range and extent of challenges to universities which parallel those in the private sector and government, one might expect an increasing tendency to bring in successful leaders from outside the academy to shake up traditional cultures and to breed a more entrepreneurial institution.

There is a good case to be made for changing some aspects of traditional campus cultures, but parachuting in an external leader from the private sector or government is unlikely to succeed unless that individual thoroughly understands the importance of academic freedom and dissent and works hard to understand the prevailing institutional culture before making any efforts to change it.

It follows that recruitment to such high-profile leadership positions is more difficult than ever. As these jobs become less attractive to academics, there may be a trend to recruit executives from outside the university sector. However, prevailing academic cultures in all institutions will doubtless continue to militate against too many appointments from outside the academy.

5 Impact on presidential performance

The above concerns are more than theoretical - these increasing pressures and the accompanying enhanced accountability are taking a toll on the success and tenure of university leaders.

The author's own research across 47 public Canadian universities (Paul, 2017) and more extensive studies by Turpin et. al. (2014) and Cafley (2015) found that more than a quarter of Canadian university presidents appointed since 2000 left their position prematurely, either by personal choice or through the actions of their boards. This trend contrasts significantly with previous decades when the "failure" rate was below 10%. It is highly likely that very recent major impacts on the job described above will further or at least sustain this trend to failed presidencies².

² It is important to recognize that "failed presidency" refers to the whole institution and not necessarily to the incumbent in the position. Whatever the case, any such failure is often that of the institution as a whole, either for selecting someone ultimately inappropriate to the task and/or failing to provide the individual with the requisite mentorship and support.

The issue of failed presidencies has become increasingly recognized in the United States as well. The seminal work by Tractenburg et.al. (2013) was written before Covid-19, AI and the issues around the war in the Middle East have further complicated the presidential role. A report from Hunt Scanlon Media underlines the recent complications and quotes executive search consultant, Mike Wheless:

Social media and technology platforms have made a president role more of fishbowl than ever. There are so many dynamics that can tank a presidency today. Many great presidents are too tired of trying to stay ahead of it all (Wheless, cited in Hunt Scanlon, 2021, p. 4).

The impact of a failed presidency can be huge, not only in the ensuing confusion about priorities and direction for the institution during the inevitable interim period following a derailment but also in the accompanying damages to an institution's profile and reputation and its compromised ability to recruit a more successful successor.

6 Finding and developing university leaders for the digital age

Leadership is most important when times are difficult, but the university poses a particular set of challenges in executive recruitment. In particular, finding consensus on key issues may be increasingly difficult, sometimes threatening traditional modes of academic governance. Leadership in such a complex cultural environment makes significant-demands on a president. While there is no mold for such a position (Paul, 2023b, p. 55), there are compelling reasons for seeking a team builder, someone who consults and delegates well, who has high energy and patience, and who always looks to the long-term best interests of the institution.

It is much easier to describe the myriad challenges facing today's university leaders than it is to prescribe what needs to be done in response. Many of the challenges cited above are beyond the immediate control of presidents and there is often a legitimate question as to whether a given issue is even within the prerogative of a university. That said, it is usually very difficult to avoid pressures for a position or opinion on such very public issues.

Advertisements for senior leadership positions in colleges and universities have long been mocked for their descriptions of the ideal candidate as someone who can walk on water. However, independent of the needs of a given institution and in addition to the usual array of desirable experience, knowledge and skills, dealing with the above range of universal challenges requires leaders who:

- thoroughly understand and know how to work through an embedded academic culture, respecting its best characteristics and working to change it where it gets in the way of institutional success,
- have a high tolerance for ambiguity, especially for burning social issues over which they have very little control,
- are open and consultative but have the self-confidence to take the tough decisions in the long-term best interests of the institution,
- sees their role as change agent, but also appreciates the importance of allowing time for consolidation after the more frenetic transformative periods,
- understand the critical importance of building a skilled and diverse leadership team and delegating authority and responsibility in a manner that reinforces the effectiveness of the entire team,
- are technologically literate and fearless in realizing the right technological mix for their institution,

- are lifelong learners who embrace continuous professional development for themselves and everyone else in the institution.

It is all very well to set out these and similar characteristics of the ideal leader, but the crucial questions are how one finds such a person in the first place and then what is done within the institution to help ensure the success of their successor.

I have written elsewhere about the challenges of selecting a president (Paul, 2015, pp. 23-37), noting the notorious unreliability of interviews, the importance of a given candidate's track record in past leadership positions and a tendency to underestimate internal candidates who may be better prepared to work through their institutional culture. The selection process is about a lot more than just finding the right candidate, however, for the naming of a new president is the start, not the culmination of the job.

Once an appointee has been identified, the real work begins, not only for the Board of Governors but also for the entire institutional community, all of whom have a huge, vested interest in the success of the appointee. In today's age of volatile politics and rapid technological change, this starts with a broad recognition and understanding of just how difficult university leadership is today. This means that everyone needs to do whatever they can to ensure the new president's success.

We tend to have very high and even unrealistic expectations for new leaders, whether in politics, the private or public sector. Aiming high is to be lauded but if it is not accompanied by widespread recognition of the difficulties of the challenges facing appointees and their needs for strong support, it can all too quickly lead to disillusionment and disappointment.

Independent of all the suggestions for finding the best university leaders for a challenging future is the need to build trust and focus on the positives and the opportunities that our fast changing world presents. The best hope for the future lies in the energy and talent of new generations of students and faculty who bring new skills and insights that will help transform our institutions into less elitist and more productive engines of essential social change.

I'm excited to watch new generations of students unsettle and transform my own thinking. They're thinking differently about community, about our ecological futures, about the implications of artificial intelligence for social life. They are multilingual, culturally fluid and they are anxious to find solutions to the 21st century's unique challenges. This will help them be even more innovative than previous generations. They can speak back to the world because they are part of the world. They are the transformation that we need to see everywhere (Smith, cited in Macdonald, 2019, p. 16).

This means that leaders need to spend a lot of time in their respective communities – visiting labs and classrooms, participating with student government leaders and meeting informally, in person and online, with students and faculty as much as possible within their demanding schedules, a great antidote to the pessimism that the foregoing analysis might breed. We are not looking for global superstars but for dedicated individuals who are fascinated by the evolving world and recognize the value of diversity and collaboration in all that they do.

While there have long been concerns that university professors are perhaps the only profession whereby practitioners have little or no training in one of their core activities (teaching), it is increasingly being recognized that university leaders need professional development well beyond their experience in teaching, research and academic governance. We can no longer assume that the latest appointee is completely prepared for his or her new challenges, and we

need to pay much more attention to on-boarding and sustained programs of leadership development throughout a new president's tenure.

7 Conclusion and suggestions for further research

Today's universities must be led by change agents, those who are sensitive to the values and strengths of traditional academia but work through these to forge institutions better suited to the multiple challenges set out in this paper. Effective leaders develop strong leadership teams and through consultation, collaboration and seeking consensus, rally their institutional communities to new goals, new missions and new successes, never forgetting the core missions of student and research success. They also recognize the rhythm of effective change, taking bold steps but accompanying them with periods of consolidation and always subjecting initiatives to tested accountability and effectiveness.

Perhaps the most important response is to work closely with the top team to develop an atmosphere of respect and support, one that shares common values but is not afraid to take strong action where warranted. And a key byproduct of this is something that has not always been done in universities – breeding future leaders from their internal ranks who are best positioned to understand its culture, challenges and strengths. In my experience of working alongside senior leaders and executive teams, those who build the inclusive coalitions to get things done are more likely to succeed than those who rely on command, control, and the manipulation of power dynamics to achieve compliance. The ability of leaders to create power in others, by valuing and harnessing difference, is the best response to the political challenge, and to organisational success. (Sharpe, 2023).

Finally, given the development of a strong top team, effective leaders will take bold steps to produce the best possible long-term outcomes for their institution. There are many internal forces that can breed caution and conservatism in approaches to management. Leaders confronted with complex and very public “hot” issues may try to duck taking a clear stand through obfuscation or procrastination. Recognizing that the university is one of the world's longest surviving institutions, they may be complacent in their approach by assuming that things will somehow work out. As Gagnon reminds us, this may not only be ineffective, but it also belies the very purpose of what a university is and can be.

Developing a risk-averse approach in times of uncertainty may seem reasonable in the short term, but it impedes our ultimate mission: to foster respectful environments where inspired students are encouraged to have bold ideas, where researchers tackle problems no one else can, and where difficult conversations are respectfully examined through many different lenses. Complacency should not be an option (Gagnon, cited in Macdonald, 2019). Given the explosion of pressures on university leadership in the past decade, one of the last responses we can afford today is complacency. The job is still rewarding but ever more difficult. I have empathy for those in leadership positions and admiration for those who are performing well. Their ability to transform our institutions of higher learning to meet today's never-ending challenges while preserving their fundamental strengths is more important than ever.

As noted at the outset, this paper is set in the context of universities in the Western tradition with democratic forms of governance and some of its arguments may be less applicable in more autocratic settings. The paper has also attempted to provide a broad overview of all the challenges and pressures facing university leaders today and some possible responses to these. In this respect, it sets the stage for more specific and detailed analysis of specific challenges in specific contexts which may then confirm and/or deny some of the allegations and suggestions in this paper.

References

- Alan Turing and the Beginning of AI. (n.d.). In *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
<https://www.britannica.com/technology/artificial-intelligence/Alan-Turing-and-the-beginning-of-AI>
- Atkins, D. E. (2005, January 12). University futures and new technologies: possibilities and issues. Discussion paper. OECD/CERI experts meetings on university futures and new technologies. <https://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/36758866.pdf>
- Baltaru, R. D., & Soysal, Y. N. (2018). Administrators in higher education: Organizational expansion in a transforming institution. *Higher Education*, 76(2), 213–229.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0204-3>
- Bates, A.W. (1995). *Technology, Open Learning and Distance Education*. Routledge.
- Bates, A.W. (2008). *Managing Technological Change: Strategies for College and University Leaders*. Jossey Bass/John Wiley.
- Brown, M. (2023). Leading in Changing Times. In O. Zawacki-Richter & I. Jung (Eds.), *Handbook of Open, Distance and Digital Education* (pp. 509–525). Springer Nature Singapore.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-2080-6_28
- Cafley, J. M. (2015). Leadership in Higher Education: Case Study Research of Canadian University Presidents with Unfinished Mandates [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Ottawa: Ottawa, Ontario.
- CAUT, (2023). Canada and the Provinces, 2.3. Almanac of Post-Secondary Education.
<https://www.caut.ca/resources/almanac/2-canada-provinces>
- Daniel, John S. (1996). *Mega-universities and the Knowledge Media: Technology Strategies for Higher Education*. Routledge.
- Freisen, J. (2024, January 8). Universities face lawsuits accusing them of failing to protect Jewish students from anti-Semitism. The Globe and Mail. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-universities-face-lawsuits-accusing-them-of-failing-to-protect-jewish/>
- Gambino, L. (2023, December 8). US university presidents face firestorm over ‘evasive’ answers on anti-Semitism. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/dec/07/university-presidents-antisemitism-congress-testimony#:~:text=The%20presidents%20of%20three%20of,the%20schools'%20codes%20of%20conduct>
- George, R. (2024, March 4). America’s elite universities are bloated, complacent and illiberal. The Economist. <https://www.economist.com/international/2024/03/04/americas-elite-universities-are-bloated-complacent-and-illiberal>
- Hunt Scanlon Media. (2021, June 29). Universities facing growing demand and big challenges, recruiting new leaders. <https://huntscanlon.com/universities-facing-growing-demand-and-big-challenges-recruiting-new-leaders/>
- Jha, J. and Ghatak, N. (2023). Open schools in developing countries. In O. Zawacki-Richter & I. Jung (Eds.), *Handbook of Open, Distance and Digital Education* (pp. 493–508). Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-2080-6_27

- Macdonald, M. (2019, September 25). 7 University leaders contemplate the future of higher education in Canada. *University Affairs*. <https://universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/7-university-leaders-contemplate-the-future-of-higher-education-in-canada/>
- Marginson, S. (2016, January). Higher education and growing inequality. *Academic Matters*. OCUFA. <https://academicmatters.ca/higher-education-and-growing-inequality/>
- Montpetit, J. (2024, May 10). How rallying around divestments helped unify Canada's pro-Palestinian movement. *CBC news*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/pro-palestinian-protests-canada-campus-bds-1.7198959>
- Nichols, M. (2023). Transforming conventional education through ODDE. In O. Zawacki-Richter & I. Jung (Eds.), *Handbook of Open, Distance and Digital Education* (pp. 641–657). Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-2080-6_35
- Paul, R. H. (2012). University governance and institutional culture in Canada: A President's perspective. In H- G. Schuetze, W. Bruneau & G. Grosjean (Eds.), *University Governance and Reform - Policy, Fads, and Experience in International Perspective* (pp. 63–76). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Paul, R. H. (2014). Organization and management of online and distance learning. In O. Zawacki-Richter and T. Anderson (Eds.), *Online Distance Education: Towards a research agenda* (pp. 175–196). Athabasca University Press.
- Paul, R. H. (2015). *Leadership Under Fire: The Challenging Role of the Canadian University President* (2nd Edition). McGill Queen's University Press.
- Paul, R. H. (2017). Increasing failure rates in Canadian university leadership: causes and solutions. In S. Mukerji & P. Tripathi (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Administration, Policy and Leadership in Higher Education* (pp. 63-80). IGI Global.
- Paul, R. H. (2023a). Introduction to organization, leadership and change in ODDE – the critical importance of institutional leadership. In O. Zawacki-Richter & I. Jung (Eds.), *Handbook of Open, Distance and Digital Education* (pp. 463–474). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-2080-6_86
- Paul, R. H. (2023b). Leadership through lifelong learning. In S. P. Ferris & K. Waldron (Eds.), *Thriving in Academic Leadership* (pp. 43–56). Emerald Publishing.
- Ramzy, M. (2024, February 6). MPs want to know how Canadian universities are protecting Palestinian supporters. *Toronto Star*. https://www.thestar.com/politics/federal/mps-want-to-know-how-canadian-universities-are-protecting-palestinian-supporters/article_3c127780-c50e-11ee-9b4d-73f0deb04e0c.html
- Sharpe, R. (2023, June 9). Four challenges facing senior leaders in higher education. *Elementa Leadership*. <https://www.elementaleadership.co.uk/four-challenges-facing-senior-leaders-in-universities/>
- Sodha, S. (2024, January 28). Vindictive, cowardly leaders bowed to the gender bullies and failed Jo Phoenix. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/jan/28/jo-phoenix-open-university-court-victory-gender-sex-based-womens-rights>
- StatsCan Plus. (2024, January 22). <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/o1/en/plus/5435-recent-spike-international-students-affecting-domestic-university-enrolment-canadian>
- Tractenberg, S. J., Kauvar, G. B., & Bogue, E. G. (2013). *Presidencies derailed: Why university leaders fail and how to prevent it*. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Turpin, D. H., De Decker, L., & Boyd, B. (2014, December). Historical changes in the Canadian university presidency: An empirical analysis of changes in length of service and experience since 1840. *Canadian Journal of Public Administration*, 57(4), 573–588.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/capa.12087>