



ETHICS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

VALUES-DRIVEN LEADERS FOR THE FUTURE

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GOVERNANCE FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Heather Davis and Leo Goedegebuure

“We are in the race between tipping points in nature and our political systems”

Lester R. Brown (in Prugh & Renner, 2014)

12.1 Discussion

One way to consider responsible leadership in higher education is as necessary rapprochement of economic, social and environmental systems in every layer of society. These kinds of dilemmas for the planet and its people are contributing to the complexities for higher education institutions across the world. Responsible leadership in this context aligns with Badaracco (2013) who argues that leading responsibly is crucial in uncertain, high-pressure times where the “new invisible hand” of powerful, pervasive markets touch and shape almost everything. Therefore, becoming attuned to these contexts epitomises responsible leadership and governance for the sector. The aim of this chapter is to unpack and discuss how these kinds of dilemmas affect leadership and

governance understandings by reviewing how the sector perceives the idea of sustainability.

Rapprochement of economic, social and environmental systems opens up considerations of accountability within the sector to more than those identified within the narrow bounds of new public management (NPM) (Cox, 2011; Evans, 2008). This expands conceptions for sustainable operations to include human and ecological responsibilities, signalling an epistemological shift towards more expansive and intentional standpoints that see economic obligations in the service of societal responsibilities. If such an epistemological shift is occurring, and we argue that it is, sustainability will likely be its zeitgeist (Davis, 2010). This view is further encouraged by Rotmans (2014) who argues that we no longer “live in an era of change but in a change of eras”.

Whilst the idea of sustainability is generally newsworthy, regarding for example, what we can do to recycle or calling on institutions to do more to be sustainable, much of this attention is ad hoc or aimed at ‘low hanging fruit’. It is noteworthy therefore in the 30th year of the *State of the World* report, that the focus for sustainability has been elevated to higher order governance responsibilities (Prugh & Renner, 2014). Horwitz (2015:387) succinctly argues why this is so:

“Using the global addiction to the unsustainable fossil fuel industry and its consequences for climate change and human well-being as the exemplar, the message is clear: we do not have the right decision-making structures, or at least they are not yet influential enough, to alter our global course.”

Once past trying to order and tame such “externalities” we can see that taking responsibility for these challenges broadens the scope for responsible leadership and governance in higher education. From this standpoint we can, and must, find ways to work with the kinds of ‘super wicked problems’ that Levin, Cashore, Bernstein and Auld (2010:2) describe as having:

“...four key features: time is running out; the central authority needed to address it is weak or non-existent; those who cause the problem also seek to create a solution; and hyperbolic discounting occurs that pushes responses irrationally into the future.”

Sustainability is an emotive issue that teases out contested and underlying mindsets and values. Such mindsets generally range from denial, to those who think aiming just for sustainability is not going far enough. There are no easy or certain solutions for these complex issues, yet holistic lines of inquiry from the domains of ecologies and the environment are useful sense-making frames to further thinking and actions.

The higher education sector has long been involved in this work shown, for example, through the Talloires Declaration (1990), the recently concluded *Decade for Education for Sustainability Development* (DESD)—2005-2014 (UNESCO, 2005), and ongoing commitments to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015). Gestures toward leading sustainably and planning for sustainability development are evident in higher education, if not yet mainstream (Adams, Martin & Boom, 2015; Freeman, 2015; Leal Filho, 2011; Leal Filho, Platje, Gerstlberger, Ciegis, Kääriä, Klavins & Kliucininkas, 2016; Meek & Goedegebuure, 2008; Shriberg, 2002; Toakley, 2004).

The inherent message for this chapter is to escalate the discourse to the systems level as quickly and in as many ways as possible and consider sustainability as a key governance responsibility for institutions and governments. Within this context, the roles for responsible leadership of higher education institutions are threefold: governing for sustainability commitment; educating the next generation of leaders to take sustainability seriously; and, leading scientific discovery. There are

already specific sustainability principles and models to draw upon for this work in higher education (Disterheft, Caeiro, Leal Filho & Azeiteiro, 2016) and more generally (Dunphy, Griffiths & Benn, 2007; Pintér, Hardi, Martinuzzi & Hall, 2012). Given that standpoints about sustainability illuminate underlying mindsets an exploration of sustainability development within higher education is timely. This is a necessary step to make time and space for conversations and actions to elicit commitment to more sustainable and responsible leadership and governance practices for higher education.

One way to explore these concepts is with a case study. The case presented in this chapter uses an Australian lens, in terms of theory and location, to explore the signs of sustainability development in universities. The framework used for sense-making and analysis for this case was developed in Australia by Dunphy et al. (2007). This Corporate Sustainability Development Model (CDSM) was chosen because it was one of the few anywhere to consider sustainability development in both human and ecological terms, using a continuum ranging from rejection, non-responsiveness, compliance, efficiency, strategic proactivity to sustained and integrated positions (pp. 24-28).

The case is drawn from a wider qualitative study exploring university leadership for the knowledge era from which a set of leadership understandings for professional staff were named as worldly, sustaining, “leadingful” (Davis, 2014; Davis & Jones, 2014), relational and “learningful” leadership literacies. This case, unsurprisingly, is drawn from the exploration of the sustaining leadership literacy and is one of the “evidence based images” (Ragin, 1994) derived by the interpretive process as a way to elicit meaning from both the socially complex contexts for tertiary education management and the lived experiences of participants. It makes no claims of generalisation or of statistical significance.

12.2 Case Study: Testing a Corporate Sustainability Development Model (CSDM) in Australian Universities

A study of the lived experience of work and leadership drawn from 226 staff working in Australian universities (Davis, 2012) is drawn upon to present a snapshot of observations about sustainability development in universities. All participants were members of the Association for Tertiary Education Management (ATEM), employed in professional staff roles in administration, management, senior management or executive level appointments, and with representation from all universities in Australia. The CSDM (Dunphy et al., 2007) lens was used as a sense-making for analysis. Given there were no particular models or frameworks developed for higher education that considered both human and ecological sustainability this broader corporate framework developed in Australian was selected.

The details to follow show how respondents viewed their institution's sustainability levels of engagement at that time (and where they wanted their institutions to be five years hence) in relation to human and ecological sustainability. Given that participants were asked as 'lay' observers drawn from a broad range of areas within Australian universities, they were provided with full descriptions of the CSDM¹ for both human and ecological sustainability development indicators. The CDSM is conceptualised in three waves of sustainability development: i) resistance to the notion of sustainability as indicated by rejection or non-responsiveness; ii) that the issue of sustainability is acknowledged as indicated by compliance, efficiency or strategic proactivity; iii) higher order institutional engagement is indicated in a transformative stage

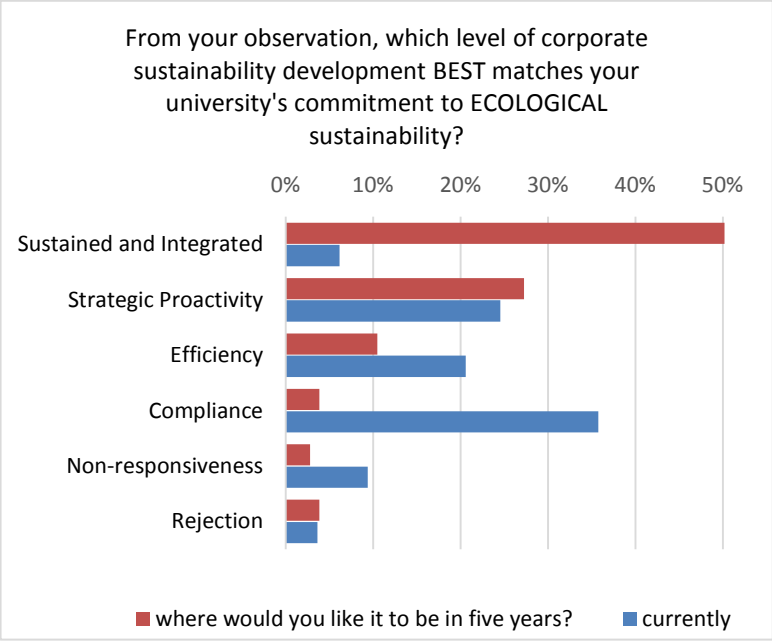
¹See <https://leadershipliteraciesresearch.wordpress.com/definitions-of-the-phases-in-the-development-of-corporate-sustainability>

called “the sustaining corporation” and shown as sustained and integrated.

12.2.1 Ecological Sustainability

Figure 1 below provides an image of corporate ecological sustainability development levels observed by respondents in 2012 (in blue) and also where they would prefer these levels of engagement to be five years hence (in orange).

Figure 1: Corporate Ecological Sustainability Development Indicators



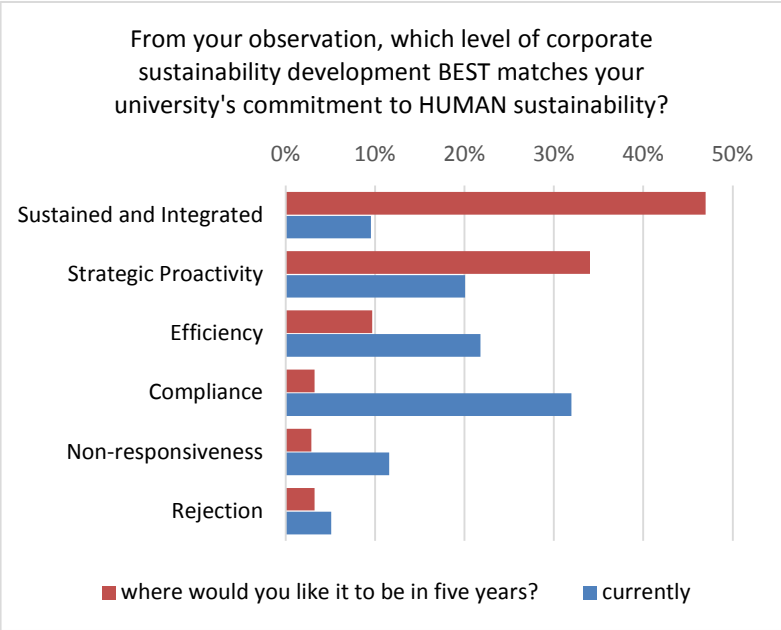
As indicated by these patterns, future engagement preferences for ecological sustainability levels were primarily for “sustaining and integrated” ecologically sustainable commitments, followed by “strategic proactivity”. Compared to where respondents identified current practice, these are clearly aspirational goals. Respondents observed that most institutions are currently engaging in second wave levels of “compliance”, “strategic proactivity”, and “efficiency” stages of development. A small number also recorded observations of third wave “sustaining and integrated” levels of current engagement.

The overwhelming aspirations towards transformation and the sustaining corporation that respondents provided regarding institutional engagement with ecological sustainability has strategic implications for responsible leadership in higher education and provides operational cues for staff recruitment and retainment.

12.2.2 Human Sustainability

The CSDM was also used to elicit observations of institutional engagement with human sustainability development which Dunphy et al (2007) perceive “as engagement with corporate social responsibility” (p. 12). *Figure 2* below shows current corporate human sustainability development levels observed by respondents, as well as preferences for where they would like to see levels of corporate human sustainability development by their institutions five years hence.

Figure 2: Corporate Human Sustainability Development Indicators



Similar to the responses concerning ecological sustainability development, the patterns of responses indicate preferences for future human sustainability development engagement by their institutions primarily at the “sustaining and integrated” development stage, followed by “strategic proactivity” levels of human sustainability engagement.

Compared to where respondents identified their institution’s current practice for ecological sustainability, a wider range of indicators was given for human sustainability. This included more observations at the first wave of sustainability development for human sustainability than with ecological sustainability. Like the ecological indicators, current engagement levels with corporate human sustainability development remain at the “compliance” stage, followed by an equal split between “efficiency” and “strategic proactivity”. The third wave of the “sustaining and integrated” indicator then followed. More respondents

indicated that their institutions were currently engaging in human sustainability at the level of “sustaining and integrated” than they did for ecological sustainability. However, like ecological indicators, there was a wide gap between current practice and where respondents preferred their institutions to be regarding human sustainability development in the future.

This case provides a snapshot of views from professional staff working in Australian universities that indicate that human and ecological sustainability are concerns for them; indeed, they would clearly like to see more done in this area. More importantly for this discussion is that this case suggests that responsible leadership in higher education will need to find ways to explore understandings of the often hard to measure and intangible dilemmas that governance for sustainability elicits. Responsible leaders must pay attention to and encourage critical conversations with stakeholders within and outside the sector, even in the face of contestations and denial by those invested in keeping the status quo.

12.3 Conclusion

There is an increasing body of evidence that our societies are transitioning to a new economy, based on renewable energy and away from fossil fuels. Such an economy differs fundamentally in its principles of decentralisation and radical innovation from the old world order of the industrial era. Indeed, as the history of transitions over many centuries suggest, this kind of economic change will likely come with burst and halts, much like punctuated equilibrium theory as developed by Eldredge and Gould (see, Gould, 2007) that acknowledge these kinds of mindset shifts to be very uncomfortable. Sustainability will be at the heart of such mindset shifts.

Responsible leadership in higher education is vital and has a core three-fold role to play: leading by example through institutional governance, educating and preparing the next generation for the unknown, and making sure we come to terms with sustainable practices for the planet and its people through concerted research efforts. Such responsibilities fit with Wilson's (2016) argument that "creating and implementing indicators of societal and environmental health—the greater good – is central to the work of leadership" (p. 162).

We argue that the idea of ecologies is an appropriate governance and leadership metaphor for higher education so to encompass deeper understandings of sustainability and societal transformation. This is congruent with the necessary privileging of learning, unlearning and relearning in times of rapid change, turbulence and wicked problems. The imperative to do so is articulated by Nobel Laureate, Peter Doherty:

"the myriad of challenges and problems thrown up by climate change has forced the human race to confront the future [...] humanity never before has been forced to face its long-term future. This is not factored in to how humans think. And it is not immediately clear to me that humanity is as yet up to the challenge. The fact that our very fate depends upon successfully managing a future that is already inconveniently impinging on our present lends a new urgency to the research that will harness the wisdom and unleash the insights necessary to make the future a time of hope rather than fear" (Doherty in Cahill, 2010:1).

Governance for sustainability, like other examples of responsible leadership in higher education, is about hope and taking responsibility for our future in new ways that emphasise participation, collaboration and collectivities. Responsible leadership in these terms, is about being facilitative rather than directive in order to allow everyone, staff *and* students, to take responsibility to lead, accept risk and find ways to innovate. Governance in these terms is setting conditions for agility so

that institutions can be clear and firm on ends and more flexible on means.

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