

Universities, Leaders and Causality

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A question about university leadership has been circulating across many countries for a number of years: should research universities be led by good scholars? Given the importance of academic research to the mission of universities this seems logical to ask. An alternative question, one that has been aired particularly in the UK, asks: is it more important that university presidents are good managers? Search committees from Beijing to Budapest have to grapple with these issues.

New research is showing that a university led by a good scholar will improve its future performance. Correspondingly, those universities led by weaker scholars will go on to decline relative to the average. There seems, in other words, to be a causal link between a leader's research ability and how well his or her university does in the future. The evidence for causality comes from timing and goes beyond a simple cross-section correlation.

In the 2006 Winter issue of IHE (42) an article by the author on 'The Leaders of the World's Top 100 Universities' helped begin the process of empirically addressing these questions. The article reported that a strong correlation exists between the individual lifetime citations of a university president and the position of their university in a global ranking. In other words, the top universities are being led by better scholars. A follow-up study was completed by the author. This time the focus was on deans of business schools. Again a strong correlation was found between the position of a business school in the Financial Times Global MBA ranking and the lifetime citations of its dean.

These cross-sectional studies are useful in identifying that a relationship exists but they cannot explain causality. For example, better universities may be led by better researchers because of the culture of an institution or its wealth. Thus it was not possible to argue that the long-term performance of a university might be improved if led by a scholar. To address the question of causality requires longitudinal research, which explores whether the characteristics of a leader in position today can tell us about the performance of a university in the future.

A Longitudinal Study of Leadership and University Performance

The issue of causality has been the focus of recent work that follows the performance of 55 United Kingdom (UK) research universities over a nine-year period. By drawing upon longitudinal information, the study attempts to go beyond cross-section patterns. It uses regression analysis, with university performance as the dependent variable, and the lifetime citations of presidents as the key independent variable. It also controls for university income, presidential age and the academic discipline of presidents.

An established measure of performance is used, one that has existed in the UK since 1986 – the so-called Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Unlike league tables the RAE is based on a more objective system of peer review. It provides quality ratings for research across all disciplines. The data in the study come from 55 universities, namely, those institutions that competed in the RAE in 1992 and also 1996 and 2001.

The sample includes 165 British university presidents, those who have led the 55 institutions over, approximately, a 20 year period. Again the focus is on presidents' lifetime citations that are normalized for discipline and used as a proxy measure of each individual leader's past research productivity.

The Better the Scholar, the Better the University Performs

Using statistical tests the work uncovers evidence that is consistent with the existence of a causal relationship, between the research ability of a leader, and the future performance of their university. In other words, across the nine years, those universities that were led by better scholars went on to perform better in future Research Assessment Exercises. The data show that the top performing institutions were disproportionately led by presidents with higher lifetime citations. Put simply, of the total 55 universities in the sample, the ten percent that made the greatest improvement were led by presidents with average lifetime citations that were four and a half times higher than those of presidents who led the ten percent of universities that made the least improvement.

Scholarship or Management?

It is important to note that scholarship is not merely a proxy for either management experience or leadership skills. Of the 165 presidents in this study most were either deputy-heads or had led major centers and laboratories before their step to the top position. Maybe a different question to ask is, does management matter more than scholarship?

As part of the analysis, 23 leaders in UK and US research universities were interviewed. The majority of those consulted stressed that leadership not management was their most important role. Leadership was commonly defined as setting the overall direction, and planning the execution of strategy. Interestingly, the leaders interviewed overwhelmingly saw themselves as being responsible for developing university strategy, albeit they reported that a process of consultation followed.

Increasingly UK university presidents are trying to centralise decision-making, which is customary in the US. Many reported that they found making decisions by committee both inefficient and untenable. Common, also, was an expression of frustration at not being able to appoint members of their own top management team. Deputies, deans and even heads of departments were traditionally appointed by committees of academics, with numbers sometimes reaching up to 100. Most of those interviewed had successfully changed the process of appointing top teams in their organization allowing leaders greater powers of selection.

On the specific question of management, while most agreed that it was essential for presidents to have had some experience, when it came to many areas of managerial expertise they were clear that it was something that could be bought in. There was little disagreement about the crucial role of management and administration, just that they, as university leaders, did not have to be experts at everything.

Why Might Scholarship Matter to Leadership?

The root of this question is about context. Is leading a university very different from leading any other organization? Of the 165 presidents in this study only eight were not career academics. Therefore the norm among UK research universities is overwhelmingly for faculty to lead. In the interviews, when university presidents were asked why it might be important for scholars to be leaders, three general themes were raised. The first was about the importance of gaining credibility and respect from peers. It was suggested that a good scholar will appear more credible which enhanced a leader's influence. The second recurring theme from the interviews emphasises the need for leaders to act as the arbiters of quality – to set the institutions academic standards. Therefore, in the words of one leader, 'the standard bearer has to first bear the standard'. Finally, to lead a university one must fully understand its business and culture, which they felt was not easily achieved by non-academics, nor to a lesser degree, those who gave up research a decade earlier. It was also suggested that being a scholar signals that a leader is likely to be sympathetic to the needs of other scholars.

Conclusion

Earlier research has uncovered a pattern showing that top universities and business schools are led by top scholars. A recent longitudinal study has started to uncover that there may be a causal relationship between the former research success of a university president and the future performance of their university. This evidence suggests that research universities need more than managers to lead them, specifically, that universities are organizations that require leaders to have expertise from within the academy. The appropriate level of scholarship for a leader may, ultimately, depend on the ambitions of a university.

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