'Inspiring leadership – personal reflections on leadership in higher education'

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1.   This piece offers my personal reflections on nine very stimulating years establishing and running the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) spanning one of the most challenging periods of change which the HE sector has faced in recent times. It is a story of 'mission accomplished ' (or at least base camp secured!) but also throws up some key issues that the sector has still got to address if it is to be sufficiently agile and competitive in a very challenging future for HE. My title is based on the new LFHE strap-line – readers can judge whether 'inspiring' is a description of the leadership or a call to action!

2.   My first encounter with Vice Chancellors as the Chief Executive of the newly created LFHE was at the Universities UK members meeting on 13 December 2003. It was a pivotal day. The Blair government was in the process of steering through the 'controversial' £3000 top up fees formula for English Universities. Richard Lambert's imminent report on universities and business[1] was expected to add to government concern about the quality of leadership in HE. Professor Sir Ivor Crewe, then President of UUK, was chairing the meeting in the face of growing rifts amongst the various mission groups over the position to adopt on fees.

3.   The way Ivor Crewe steered through the complex set of skilful compromises and formulae can only be described as masterly. The delicate consensus of VC's was held together. The Blair Government survived one of its closest votes. The £3000 fees formula subsequently passed through into law. The Lambert review ended up making very encouraging statements about the leadership of universities' endeavours to build relationships with business. The £3000 top-up fee seamlessly became the norm for almost all English institutions. The era of plenty that Tony Blair's regime had introduced to HE continued for a few more years.

4.   This incident, coinciding with my first week in the role of CEO of the LFHE, was just the beginning of one of the most intense and uncertain periods of HE for the last 50 years. It was co-terminal with the 9 years I was then to spend setting up processes to strengthen the capacity of university leadership. And that period of uncertainty and transformation continues as the diverse narratives around funding, competition, the market, governance and reconfiguration continue to roll out across the various parts of the UK.

5.   In this piece, I certainly do not intend to make the claim that, in such a turbulent period, the LFHE's leadership development investment 'saved the day'. That would be an unjustified hubris. We were however very fortunate to be established at a time which many recognised as a watershed in the sector's development, where the ability to offer the right kind of leadership would be a key distinguishing factor in an increasingly

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[1] Richard Lambert. Review of Business University Collaboration. HM Treasury 2003

competitive and fragmenting sector. In telling this story, what I would therefore like to cover is

- How these events related to the wider context of public sector reform and New Public Management
- Lessons about engaging with the sector
- The critical role of top leaders and senior teams
- Managing the change processes
- Equipping governing bodies to handle these new pressures
- Leadership challenges for the future.

The case for the LF - New Public Management or Laura Spence?

6.   It was perhaps no surprise that 10 years ago politicians were raising questions about the quality of university leadership. For many years the main political parties had been espousing variants of New Public Management (NPM). I had witnessed it in my previous leadership roles in local and central government. From compulsory competitive tendering to witheringly onerous public sector targets, the hunt was on to apply various iterations of private sector performance management in the public services. In the Cabinet Office running the Civil Service College, I was involved in supporting the roll-out of Modernisation and Civil Service Reform, responding to the superhuman ambitions of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (whose name always reminded me of a nationwide maternity ward giving birth to the future!).

7.   Higher Education was still viewed as part of the public sector at that time, and its leadership was in the frame for reform. But seen from both inside and outside Government, I do not think HE was seen as NPM territory. It needed a strong story to act as a catalyst for change, and this came in the form of Laura Spence.

8.   Laura Spence was a state school student from North Tyneside who applied to read medicine at Magdalen College Oxford, with top GCSE and A Level grades. She was not offered a place because, it was claimed, other candidates had performed better at interview. Some observers argued that she had been discriminated against because she had come from a 'working class' region. Whilst Oxford firmly rebutted all the allegations, the Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown pursued the matter. It seemed to heighten his own resolve to progress the agendas both of widening participation (WP) and improved leadership in HE.

9.   The momentum built up around the theme that 'something had to be done to develop higher education leadership'. There was already talk in government of a management development centre for HE and FE – not favoured by VC's! In 2002, a UUK task group was set up under the leadership of Professor Adrian Smith VC of QMUL, a business plan put together by Professor Robin Middlehurst and John Fielden, and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education was born with strong support from HEFCE. A shadow Board was created and I was appointed during

2003. Gordon Brown enthusiastically endorsed the role of the Leadership Foundation when he spoke at its formal launch on 24 March 2004.

Establishing an 'adult' relationship with the sector

10.   I had been running the Civil Service College, later the National School of Government, in a very proactive Government context of the 'Blair project' of Modernisation and Civil Service Reform. There was no ambiguity about our role. Working within the Cabinet Office and with the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit, we were an integral part of top down change processes, underpinning the reforms with leadership and organisational development. Similar bodies were at work in other parts of the public services, such as the Improvement and Development Agency in Local Government and the NHS Leadership Centre. We were starting to create the improvement frameworks which were the pre-cursors of Civil Service Capability Reviews.

11.   Life was very different in HE. There may have been changes afoot (such as the top up fees), but funding was getting better, student numbers (domestic and international) were rising, and many universities had survived very well for hundreds of years without the need for leadership and organisational development. There was no 'burning platform'. Using the terminology of Transactional Analysis, if the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education was going to work, it needed something very different from a 'parent/child' pedagogical relationship. This was not to be about leadership training or courses, but an 'adult/adult dialogue', based on creating learning networks, fostering professional relationships and building development experiences where working and learning were inextricably linked.

12.   There was also the need to encourage dialogues across traditional boundaries - between academics and professionals, between personal and institutional leadership, between universities and other sectors, between governance and executive, across mission groups, and between the different HE systems developing across the UK.

13.   For those reasons we chose an inclusive and supportive strap line of "Engaging with leaders in higher education ". This placed the emphasis on a collaborative, co-created process of leadership learning. It was only in the last 12 months that we took the bold step of a more assertive strap line of " Inspiring leadership".

14.   So let's now look at the substance of the learning and the issues we have tackled so far, through a mixture of personal development, institutional consultancy, commissioned research and investment in sector projects.

How do top teams work in HE?

15.   We inherited the high quality Top Management Programme led by Dr Tom Kennie and Professor Robin Middlehurst which had been running once a year for a couple of years or so. It was familiar territory to me because it drew in part from the Cabinet Office Top Management

Programme which I ran at the Civil Service College. It offered a very adult, trusted space for leaders at the level of DVC, PVC, Executive Dean and Director of Services to learn by sharing experiences, interspersed with action learning and coaching.

16.   In 2005, Tom Kennie wrote a highly influential report for the LFHE on top teams in higher education[2]. It opened up for the first time the most revealing perceptions of what it was like to be a member of a senior management team in the sector. There were some great stories, and some more challenging ones as this particular description from a new SMT member demonstrates::

> " I *thought of myself as quite a good team worker. Using a football analogy, I saw myself as a strong mid-field player. Pick up the ball - move It on to someone who was in a better position - help move things forward. But it didn't seem to work like that. Increasingly I kept being asked ' why are you giving me the ball? Can you give it to someone else? Or why not do it yourself? Increasingly I recognised that my metaphor for team working was wrong. Then it struck me. It wasn't a football team I was in - I suddenly noticed that 'one of the 'team players' was running faster and faster around the track, another was trying to jump higher and higher - and another was throwing a long pointed instrument as far as he could (trying not to hit the others, but I wasn't always so sure)"*

17.   Tom Kennie's report established the important point, not unique to higher education, that many SMT's were never intended to be teams. Much grief could be avoided if such 'teams' were clearer and more honest about it from the outset. He categorised them as follows, plotting function against style:

- Vice Chancellor's Advisory Group
- The Chief Executive Officer's Board
- The Executive Board
- The Academic / Administrative Committee

18.   In my experience of visiting almost every university in the country over the last 9 years, all of these variants can still be found. Many teams that are felt to be dysfunctional could probably operate more effectively if they spent some time establishing a shared understanding of which of the four categories they intended to fit into.

19.   The messages to me from this research and my own experiences were:

- Top leaders needed to be clear which type of senior leadership group and culture they wanted and assess how to reach that point quickly

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[2] Tom Kennie and Steve Woodfield. Compositions,Challenges and Changes in Top Team Structures of UK Higher Education Institutions. 2008 LFHE.

- Some form of 360 degree feedback process could underpin the new culture by increasing individual and team self-awareness.

- Enhancing the relationship between the SMT and the rest of the wider management and leadership group was critical priority.

- There were also wider and equally critical issues about the relationship between the senior team and the governing body. (These are dealt with below).

- LFHE's TMP needed to be underpinned by a comprehensive range of leadership programmes for academic and professional leaders at other levels – something we able to set in place fairly early on.

So what do Vice Chancellors do?

20.   The short answer in many cases is probably 'too much'!

21.   If the effective functioning of the senior leadership group is critical, so also is the perception and behaviour of the Vice Chancellor her/himself. The LFHE has come to bear quite a heavy responsibility in this regard when it quickly became clear that the TMP had become a vital 'rite of passage' to the position of Vice Chancellor. Today 80 VC's have passed through TMP and there is an alumni group from TMP alone of over 600 senior HE leaders.

22.   We commissioned Professor Glynis Breakwell, VC of the University of Bath, to lead a key research project for us on the role, characteristics and selection processes of VC's[3]. Her report provided a rich and unique set of insights into this pivotal role in HE.

23.   The research talks about the role being 'multi-layered'. Particularly interesting are the views of those senior leaders interviewed who had experience outside higher education. They spoke of it being more 'messy' than in other sectors, offering more power, but requiring them to be more answerable to internal governance and consultative processes. Needing to play a large role in the leadership of change was perhaps axiomatic, but surprising was the extent to which they felt they needed to be 'hands on'. External lobbying and stakeholder engagement were vital roles. She also noted a key issue we have picked up in our programmes that the tenure of a VC can go through a series of distinct phases and roles as their institution confronts different challenges.

24.   It may be that the UK HE tradition does indeed expect them to do 'too much'. VC's invariably described an extremely busy life combining internal management/relationships, academic leadership, external engagement with government, business local and regional authorities, and with sector agencies. They increasingly also had a major advocacy role, particularly in relation to institutional fund-raising. They could easily end up as Chief Academic Officer, Chief Executive, Director of Public Relations

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[3] Professor Glynis Breakwell and Dr Michelle Tytherleigh. The Characteristics, Roles and Selection of Vice Chancellors. 2008 LFHE

and Head of Fundraising. And if they had major international partnerships and/or remote campuses overseas, they could end up spending substantial parts of the year at 30,000 feet travelling from one international partner to another.

25.   Her research also focused on the appointments process for VC's. She identified some serious concerns to be addressed about the relationship between Nomination Committees and executive search agencies (i.e. head hunters). One of the key issues was about equality and diversity in relation to governing bodies and her research led to a rewriting of the UUK guidance on senior appointments in HE.

26.   So what are some of the key issues for top leaders in HE?

- Being clear what kind of relationship they want on their top team and how this colours the engagement with the wider leadership and academic community
- Placing even greater importance on the personal relationship with the Chair and the whole governing body
- Assessing how many different roles they want to have internally and externally and the implications of this for overload
- Achieving the right balance between chief executive of a business and focal point of an academic community.

Academics and professionals in a changing world - conflict or collaboration?

27.   I came into the role from outside HE and had much to learn very quickly. I naturally knew about the traditional jousting between academics and administrators. I was soon to discover something I had not encountered in any of the wide range of sectors in which I had worked. I found that in most institutions there were two domains - that of the "academics" and the rest - described as some kind of underclass - the "non-academics". I have worked in many sectors but have never encountered this phenomenon of staff being described only by what they did not do - almost a breach of human rights! I banned the use of "non-academics" by my staff!

28.   Another key LFHE research project[4] was conducted around this contested territory of the academic/administrator divide by Dr Celia Whitchurch of the Institute of Education, University of London. It is of course difficult to find the right terms to use. 'Administrator' has outdated connotations of the civil servant/permanent secretary model, and I encountered other quaint terms such as 'academic related' suggesting that there were some who had no relationship to the work of academics at all! What I will use for the rest of this piece is ' professional' and/or 'support staff'. In truth, there is no perfect term for this critical group who usually make up more than 50% of a university's workforce.

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[4] Celia Whitchurch. Professional Managers in UK Higher Education - Preparing for Complex Futures: Final report. 2008 LFHE

29. Celia Whitchurch's research took us firmly into the domain of professional leadership and offered a categorisation of approaches and mind sets in that area that had not really been explored before. In a non-judgmental way, she described different self perceptions of these professional staff as:

- *Bounded* - very much focused within their professional discipline

- *Cross boundary* - engaging effectively on cross institutional projects

- *Unbounded* - working enthusiastically and freely across boundaries with academic colleagues on collaborative projects

- *Blended or Hybrid* – occupying roles that were structured to combine academic and professional disciplines.

30. What this typology opened up was a very insightful model of the relationship between the professional and academic domains. Celia called it the 'third space' which represented what appears to be a generally expanding area of collaborative working between academic and professional staff. The main drivers for this shared domain would seem to be externally generated agendas for public/business engagement, enterprise and knowledge exchange activity and the impact agendas including the REF.

31. Another defining piece of LFHE research was published in the last 12 months. Entitled 'Academic Leadership', the project was led by Dr Richard Bolden and Professor Jonathan Gosling of Exeter University[5.] In some ways it was a wake-up call for those who were expecting to find a transformation in the perceptions of academic leaders as a consequence of the pioneering leadership development work which the LFHE had done in the sector. Although many academics who had been through our programmes were now in senior institutional leadership roles, the core perceptions that academics themselves had of leadership were largely unchanged. The academics interviewed tended to draw a distinction between institutional leadership (which they perceived as 'management') and academic leadership which was about shared values, shaping thinking, and defining their identity. It was fundamentally about their relationship with their peers and colleagues.

32. My reflections on both pieces of research are that :

- We need to move on from the traditional stereotypical stand-off between academics and administrators/management

- External drivers are changing the territory anyway as new government and funders' agendas in the different parts of the UK bring with them more instrumental and top down agendas - reconfiguration around government priorities in Wales and

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[5] Dr Richard Bolden, Professor Jonathan Gosling et al. Academic Leadership - Changing Conceptions, Identities and Experiences in UK HE.2012 LFHE

'Outcome Agreements' in Scotland are good examples of this, as well as the REF with its focus on impact, and indeed the fees regime in England

- The concept of the 'third space' in Celia Whitchurch's analysis is a valuable reminder that seeking a more collaborative domain for the two main tribes in HE may be one of the key determinants of capacity to adapt to a fast changing environment in HE

- There is something unique about academic leadership which is different from leadership in almost every other sector, and we need to construct a positive narrative around it (based around academic freedom and institutional autonomy) that will counter the cynicism and scepticism from politicians and other external observers

- Leadership development in HE is most effective when the academic and professional leaders are in the same learning space, as in the Leadership Foundation's TMP and other main executive leadership programmes - one of the best opportunities for fostering the 'third space'.

Leading change in HE

33. The first 9 years of the LF coincided with a period of major change in UK HE, and there is ample evidence that this period of uncertainty and change is set to continue for many years. Nine years to the day when I first spoke to Vice Chancellors, I again addressed the December UUK members meeting at the end of 2012. One of the other speakers was Sir Michael Barber, Chief Education Adviser to Pearson, one of the largest learning and education companies in the world and one example of the direction of change in terms of the growing role of the private sector in HE. His subject was: "The Avalanche (of yet more change) is coming" to the world of higher education. His themes were identical to the substance of the LF leadership programmes. To be best placed to withstand this threat, universities had to re-examine their value proposition to students, parents, staff, society and stakeholders. The critical characteristics were about quality, distinctiveness, efficiency innovation and agility - and being local and global. All should be asking the fundamental question: "what is the intrinsic value of our HE institution - how can we deliver it?".

34. So what are the change management issues? Many of them are about fostering the right culture to embrace change. Achieving a sufficient sense of alignment across the institution is vital - in some cases across the senior leadership group itself. Critical factors are the balance between the centre and strongly devolved sources of power at faculty and college level - an issue most interestingly explored in the LF research report on "Collective Leadership in HE" by Richard Bolden and Jonathan Gosling[6]. Often beset by strong silos, innovation to stimulate change can be very hard to achieve. Sometimes the challenge is to find a shared language for change that avoids all the pitfalls of managerialism rhetoric. At other times the rhetoric is clear, but the capacity to turn rhetoric into the reality of changing behaviour defeats the best of institutional change initiatives.

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[6] Bolden, Petrov and Gosling, Developing Collective Leadership in Higher Education. 2008 LFHE

35.   A whole book could be written on the techniques of change leadership which work for the unique culture of higher education. For me, there are four well established theories that seem to touch the spot in HE.

36.   Firstly there is Peter Senge's really helpful typology of the three responses to change - reactive, adaptive and generative[7]. The first two are the ones we are really familiar with - reactive typically involving all the cost cutting and efficiency measures that every university in the land has gone through in the last 5 years, to the real benefit of the bottom line, and adaptive representing the much more fundamental measures of organisational restructuring, process redesign and contractual change. The progress made by UK HEI's in both these areas is well illustrated in the UUK report on Modernisation and Efficiency led by Professor Ian Diamond[8.] However the third - generative - is much harder to pull off, and it's about game changing. It involves HEI's creating a fresh field of play for the institution - regionally, nationally or internationally - and being among the first winners on that new pitch, whilst not losing the core values of the institution. We are now seeing a number of universities breaking through in this area now.

37.   Secondly I have always found really helpful Kurt Lewin's very powerful statement of the three phases of making change happen successfully: un-freeze, change, re-freeze [9].Unfreezing is about creating the right environment for change - usually a mixture of external and internal drivers, events and persuasive rhetoric, underpinned hopefully by some sound organisational and leadership development. The next phase is about making the change happen - and this requires a lot of skill and determination. It's the failure to re- freeze that usually sinks the change programme, and in HE there will be many queuing up to ensure re-freezing does not occur!

38.   Thirdly, there is that elegant phrase from John Kotter's[10] Eight Steps for Leading Change - the need to create a Guiding Coalition. It is about bringing together from different parts of the institution the group of people representing a wide spectrum of interests and positions who will hold the whole change process together. Having this in place (I often call it the benevolent conspiracy!) is crucial to creating the famous 'tipping point' and in my experience, many HEI's find this difficult to do.

39.   Fourthly, there is Charles Handy's concept of organisations having to run 'tight / loose '[11]. I learnt the value of this concept from 15 years of working in the arts, media and culture sector, where it was vital to balance extreme creativity with a sound business bottom line. My best experience of this was when I worked in Granada Television for much of the 1980's - that hugely rich period that produced Brideshead Revisited, the Jewel in the Crown and World in Action. At the end of 2012, the

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[7] Peter Senge. The Fifth Discipline - the Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation. 1990 Century Business

[8] Efficiency and Effectiveness in Higher Education. 2011 Universities UK.

[9] K. Lewin (G W Lewin Ed.) Resolving Social Conflicts: Selected papers on Group Dynamics. New York. Harper & Row.

[10] John Kotter. Leading Change. 1996. Harvard Business School Press

[11] Charles Handy The Age of Paradox. 1994 Harvard Business School Press.

Guardian interviewed the then inspirational chairman of Granada, Sir Denis Forman. Here are just a couple of extracts: "We had an instinct for combining art with commerce" and "we had a community and an organisation that was unique. I loved it. There was a bit of magic about it". That sense of the heart of the organisation being a community resonates with what is so important to hold on to in higher education as the commercial imperative becomes ever stronger. It also fits with the very latest leadership book by Professor Gary Hamel called "What Matters Now"[12]. One of his main themes is how companies should be run more along the lines of a university - values-led, collegial and driven by a passion for learning. In this way, companies may rediscover the magic that Denis Forman was referring to.

40.   In short, for the kind of change challenges we have now in HE, we need leaders who:

- Understand how to make 'tight / loose' work in balancing the academic and business domains

- Can discover the 'game changing' generative domain and make it happen, and

- Can build the kind of 'guiding coalitions' that really embed the changes behaviourally.

Governance and leadership in HE

41.   One of the strongest partnerships for the LF from the outset was with the Committee of University Chairs (CUC). Working closely with them and HEFCE, we reconfigured and ran the Governor Development Programme, created a framework for assessing the effectiveness of university governing bodies[13], undertook research and published a large number of practical guidance booklets for governors called 'Getting to Grips'. All these continue today, including unique retreats for a number of pairs of Chairs and their Vice Chancellors to explore the leadership/governance relationship which is the backbone of running the institution.

42.   My experience is that the increased pressures of competition, internationalisation and uncertainty, all of which heighten the risks surrounding institutional effectiveness, are placing a dramatically increased responsibility on university governing bodies They are undergoing a quiet revolution, with the need for greater focus engagement with the business coinciding with a reduction in size. Governors can no longer offer their high quality experience at arms' length. There are issues around the relationship with academic governance (Senate) and maybe opportunities to look at models from other sectors. Also, do sufficient numbers of governors really understand how universities work, as opposed to being sources of critical business expertise working more by remote control?

43.   The retreats I have run for Chairs and VC's are very revealing about the sometimes mismatched reciprocal expectations of the executive and

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[12] Gary Hamel. What Matters Now. 2012 Jossey-Bass.
[13] Allan Schofield. A Framework for Identifying Governing Body Effectiveness. 2010 LFHE.

the governing body and the sheer gaps in knowledge. This list of issues that Chairs typically feel the need to work through offers a good checklist for any governing body away day:

- Benchmarking - reassessing our comparators in a fast changing world
- Managing reputational risk
- Redefining the boundaries between management and governance in higher education
- Succession planning - handling senior appointments in a very different climate
- Assessing success 'beyond the bottom line' - making sense of league tables
- Balancing institutional and public interest
- Handling a divided Board.

44.   These are tough and complex issues for governors who are busy senior people in other fields and who may only engage with their institution twice a term on average.

45.   In Scotland and Wales, there is the added dimension of governments with an enhanced – and legitimate - desire to influence more directly the contribution of universities to their economic and social agendas, and whose policies may raise challenging governance issues about institutional autonomy, academic freedom - and indeed the very processes of governance itself.

Some reflections for the future

46.   Generally speaking, the sector remains in remarkably good financial shape in such a complex transitional phase, if judged by the report given by Sir Alan Langlands, Chief Executive of HEFCE, at their Annual Meeting in November 2012[14]. But there are many serious uncertainties, and quite a lot of 'unknown unknowns', wherever you are in the UK system.

47.   The key requirements of leadership seem to be agility, distinctiveness and the capacity to spot the right kind of collaboration or alliance (nationally or internationally), to build resilience in the face of competition and uncertainty. But something else is happening - the elements of the traditional psychological contract between universities and their students, staff, governors, stakeholders, local communities, funders and governments are all changing. Funding sources have shifted, students are demanding more of a consumer/customer relationship, staff will demand a higher level of engagement as the landscape changes, and local communities and governments have a higher expectation of the economic and social impact of a sector of such importance to the UK.

48.   This needs a new repertoire of leadership skills, in which I would include:

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[14] Report of HEFCE Annual Meeting November 2012.(www.hefce.ac.uk/news/events/2012)

- **Sense making** – able to interpret the complex external and internal agendas and turn them into a narrative that will motivate academic and professional colleagues

- **Entrepreneurship** – seizing the business opportunities in the new environment without compromising the values of the institution

- **Challenging colleagues** more vigorously of the need for change as well as **supporting** them

- **Building confidence** in the face of serious uncertainty and ambiguity

- **Fostering new collaborations and alliances** – internally and externally

- **Energising** staff in the face of almost perpetual change

49. Higher Education has been a wonderful world to have worked in with some of the most inspiring examples of leadership, but there are still plenty of challenges, of which I would highlight just three:

- There is still a residuum of the 'heroic' leadership culture that the LFHE research on top leadership uncovered. The more engaging and inclusive style which we have seen develop seems critical for the new era of HE

- We need to challenge the sector on the diversity of its leadership and governance bodies so that they reflect much more the gender and ethnicity of the communities they serve

- We need to do more development work inside Celia Whitchurch's collaborative "third space" between academic and professional cultures which is rich in possibilities.