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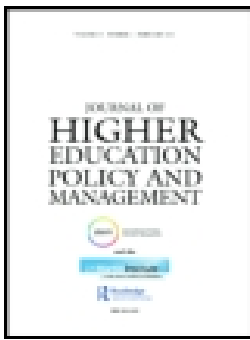
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Perspectives of Australian higher education leadership: convergent or divergent views and implications for the future?

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ABSTRACT

Leadership matters for the success of large enterprises and this is also the case for higher education institutions and universities. Yet, the public nature of universities and of academia means these institutions are usually highly dependent on external actors, in particular government. Viewed through a lens of distributed leadership, this paper explores how leaders in universities, national academies and government view and rate key changes associated with this pervasive reorientation and reorganisation of public higher education. It asks where do the views of leaders within universities and those outside universities converge and diverge and what patterns are evident in the differences between leaders? Drawing on 116 in-depth interviews and 114 follow-up surveys with senior higher education leaders in Australia, of which just over half were university senior executives, this paper concludes that all leaders surveyed are largely aligned in their views of most issues.

KEYWORDS

Leadership; management; vice-chancellor

Introduction

Leadership matters for the success of large enterprises and this is equally the case for higher education institutions and universities as much as other organisations where its role and influence has been extensively examined from multiple perspectives. The importance of leadership to institutional success has been well documented in different countries and contexts (Bolden, 2011; Duderstadt, 2009; Gumpert, 2000; Pounder, 2001; Spendlove, 2007). How successful universities are with making strategic choices while dealing with external pressures and a changing public policy environment can be ‘highly dependent on leadership, decision-making procedures, communication, and evaluation’ (Stensaker et al., 2014, p. 193). Leadership affects administrative effectiveness and academic efficiency (De Boer & Goedegebuure, 2009; Gumpert, 2000; Ramsden, 1998). Some scholars suggest that leaders’ background and experience counts and that ‘better scholars lead better universities’ (Goodall, 2009, p. 55). The preferences of leaders, as

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much as their aptitude in decision-making, especially when developing partnerships and engaging communities and other stakeholders, can influence institutional success (Scott & Hart, 1991). This is argued for leaders across institutions (Middlehurst, 2010) and for social and operational effectiveness (Spendlove, 2007).

Leadership across institutions not just of senior managers is important for success (Davis & Jones, 2014). In recent decades, scholars examining leadership have explored the importance and possibilities of ‘shared’ and ‘distributed’ leadership (Bolden, 2011). This situates leadership as a group quality, and which is as much about group processes, networks and structures as about the qualities of individual leaders. This view emphasises that while position is important, so too is process and collaborations, that leadership is ‘a group process rather than as a set of individual traits, competencies or behaviours’ (Bolden et al, 2015: 5; Bolden, 2011). As a quality and practice that emerges out of group interaction, understanding the nature of the group’s actors has analytical utility. A meta-analysis by Bennett, Wise, Woods, and Harvey (2003) shows that researchers commonly find distributed leadership as an emergent property of networks, where there is an ‘openness to the boundaries of leadership’ and that there is a distribution of expertise. The practice and possibilities of distributed and shared leadership as the collective contribution of all actors alongside those in position of authority to institutional success has been well examined (Bolden, 2011). The community of leaders and their perspectives and values are core to this model of leadership.

The public nature of universities and of academia means these institutions are usually highly dependent on external actors, in particular government. Taking a systemwide standpoint of distributed leadership, it is not just those inside but also outside universities whose perspectives matter. Leaders in bureaucracies and legislatures, learned academies and other academic organisations can be as significant to institutional success as leadership within universities. This paper examines distributed leadership inside and outside of universities, rather than within a single institution. Through a distributed leadership lens, this paper examines how the perspectives of leaders across the system converge and diverge and asks whether we should expect alignment of priorities between university leaders and leaders outside universities?

How leaders inside and outside universities align on key issues is significant because external environments university confronting universities have become more complex in recent decades, not least through an increase in the scale, roles and scope of higher education in many countries. The worldwide Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education, which is the ratio of the number of students who live in that country to those who could enrol, neared 40% in 2017. This was due to the dramatic growth in enrolments in many developing economies, especially in Asia (UNESCO, 2019). China GER passed 50% in 2017, increasing from near 10% only a decade earlier. This dramatic growth in the number of students brings great benefits but has brought international competition, changing expectations of what universities deliver and requires significant ongoing investment by governments around the world. Government officials and university leaders ask whether the outcomes of higher education justify the costs. Therefore, the views of leaders outside universities are as important as those inside.

A common ethos of funders and regulators, that seek to ‘steer at a distance’, requires university leaders to be more responsive than in the past to prescribed government agendas. Alongside greater public funds are invested in universities in many countries,

there has been a transformation in recent decades that has shaped organisational practices, processes and culture for all public institutions, as well as universities (Busch, 2017; Gaffikin & Perry, 2009; Giroux, 2002; Levin & Aliyeva, 2015; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Rhoads & Rhoades, 2005; Saunders & Ramirez, 2017; Taylor, 2017). Trends such as ‘marketisation’ of public universities, where leadership has become highly attuned to market structures and a commercial focus informs much institutional activity, amplifying competition between institutions over resources. A commodification of teaching and research has followed the massification of higher education systems after the long post Second World War boom (Furedi, 2010). At a national-system, the liberalisation of ‘market entry’ to higher education has fostered competition for students between public and private universities through explicit policies to ensure the latter is not at a perceived disadvantage (Brown, 2011; Marginson, 2007, p. 42). Tuition fees have been introduced in many public systems and in some, such as Australia, account for as much as public grants for teaching and education (OCED, 2016). In many OECD countries there is now widespread use of performance metrics to allocate funding, often using narrow quantitative indicators (Dougherty et al., 2014; Letizia, 2016; Ziskin, Rabourn, & Hossler, 2018).

The ascendance of marketisation logics has not occurred in isolation. Rather this logic has emerged alongside distinct modes of governance and management of universities. This has occurred together with the rise of New Public Management (NPM) throughout the anglosphere (Hood, 1991) and the adoption by public universities of management approaches born in the private sector (Birnbaum, 2000). These external changes have had a direct influence on how universities are managed and led. For example, this process has occurred through the use of quantitative data for internal allocation of resources, the establishment of offices for institutional research, and the shift of administration from secrecy to publicity under the pressure of accountability and efficiency (Rourke & Brooks, 1964; Woelert & McKenzie, 2018). Tensions between ‘managerial’ practices and professional autonomy have escalated through increasingly comprehensive and complex performance metrics (Stromquist, 2017). Universities have embraced forms of academic capitalism through the creation of technology transfer and commercialisation offices, senior positions tasked with university-industry relations, and development offices tasked with growing revenue from sources other than fees and government grants (Lacy, et al, 2020).

The case of Australian higher education

The Australian higher education system provides a useful case to study the interplay of distributed leadership across a single higher education system, and provides evidence of the convergence and divergence of the views of leaders inside and outside universities. All 39 public Australian universities are comprehensive, offering undergraduate and graduate studies, as well as supporting basic and applied research across the major disciplines and professions (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018). This relative homogeneity is largely a result of the policy architecture established in the late 1980 s (Croucher, Marginson, Norton, & Wells, 2013; Dawkins, 1987; Marginson, 1993). As the domestic higher education system has expanded in Australia, so too have international student enrolments, which the government has allowed universities to enrol international students in

a largely unregulated market, with enrolment growth rates consistently being in the double-digits. This has transformed the Australian system into a highly internationalised one and has provided revenue that has cross-subsidised research and domestic teaching. University leaders in Australia find themselves managing multifaceted businesses, with different revenue streams and models. As a consequence, Australian universities are now well conditioned to the vicissitudes of market dynamics in attracting and educating international students. The growth of the international education market, and the resulting institutional character and focus, has largely guided a transformation driven by market principles which have informed universities' approach to learning, teaching, research and outreach (Marginson, 1997; Davis, 2017; Currie & Vidovich, 2000; Thornton, 2014; Pitman, 2016). Many scholars argue that there has been an associated shift away from traditional forms of public service and collegial management to what is termed a 'corporate approach' (e.g., Lafferty & Fleming, 2000; Martin-Sardesai, et al., 2019; Christopher & Leung, 2015; Christopher, 2014; Collyer, 2015; Gray, 2015).

The origin of many of these changes in Australian universities can be traced back to the 1960 s and the adoption of government policy that were expected to improve efficiency, and responsiveness to governmental control, and asking more from institutional leaders (Croucher and Waghorne, 2020; Marginson, 1997; Marshall, 1992). From the late 1980s this was reinforced in two notable aspects. First, a change in government policy influencing the way universities were managed, such as requiring production of strategic plans and governance and industrial relations requirements (Croucher et al., 2013; Marginson & Considine, 2000). Second, there were efforts to monitor and align universities' activities to achieve national goals and priorities through the negotiation of educational profiles.

As leadership in Australian universities evolved from the 1980 s onward, there came operational level consequences, with a growing separation of academic and administrative-management activities in Australian universities. Many financial management responsibilities have been shifted to a 'core' of non-academic professionals divorced from academic structures (Gray, 2015; Guthrie & Neumann, 2007; Lafferty & Fleming, 2000; Rowlands, 2013). Australian universities have adopted internal performance measurement systems for formal and informal processes and mechanisms, shown prominently through the use of audit techniques for monitoring and resource distribution. Universities have been enthusiastic in their replication of government funding logics in their internal systems (Woelert & McKenzie, 2018). Since the 1980 s more academic staff are on short term or session contracts (Ryan, Connell, & Burgess, 2017; Welch, 2016). The trajectory of these developments has been dependent on leaders both inside and outside universities.

Study design

To gain insight into how the views of leaders within universities and those outside universities converge and diverge, the study draws on the data from a project that undertook 116 in-depth interviews and 114 follow-up surveys with senior higher education leaders in Australia (see Lacy, Croucher, Brett, & Mueller, 2017). Australia is small enough that this study is able to capture the views from senior leaders from most of the 39

public universities, and the system's relative institutional homogeneity means most students are at comprehensive universities.

As noted previously, what leaders think is critical because they can have a strong influence on the future course of the higher education system in Australia. Control over budgets, staff and resources means their opinion and assessments matter, even where their actions are subject to organisational and legal constraints. Their capacity to publicise institutional approaches and shape norms is a powerful instrument to influence action. Half the participants in this study were from the senior university leadership group, either university vice-chancellors, or those who were part of their senior leadership team. There were 21 Vice-Chancellors, as well as 45 Deputy and Pro Vice-Chancellors, Vice-Principals and Deans. The other half of the participants were leaders outside universities that were part of the system, including in government (and in charge of budgets or policy), in national institutions (such as the national academies for humanities, social science, science, and engineering), or other non-government organisations. The government respondents included leaders in the Australian Parliament, the Australian Research Council, the Australian Office of the Chief Scientist, the Commonwealth Science and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Department of Education, Department of Industry, Innovation and Science, and the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). The group of respondents outside university leadership included chief executives of five university representative associations, the Australian Fulbright Foundation, the National Tertiary Educational Union and the International Education Association of Australia, as well as a small number of Australian higher education policy experts.

Participants for the study were initially recruited through an approach to all Australian vice-chancellors of public universities to participate in the study, of which 21 of the 39 accepted, as well as an approach to the leaders of organisations listed above. Other participants were then recruited following the initial approach to CEOs using a snowballing technique. A two-tiered purposeful sampling technique was utilised, one for selecting the organisations and a second for selecting the leaders to be interviewed at each institution. During interviews with the leaders a snowball technique was employed for identifying additional leaders for possible interviews. Purposeful sampling refers to the effort to select subjects for in-depth interviews based on their unique experiences or specialised knowledge (Patton, 2002).

Each respondent completed a survey addressing 32 issues or components of higher education. The second author generated the 32 items from his work experience in multiple US universities, membership in three university centres for the study of higher education, active participation in national and global higher education associations (including the Association of Public and Land Universities, American Council of Education, Association of Pacific Rim Universities, Universities Australia, Fulbright Foundation, German Academic Exchange Service-DADD and other higher education organisations), and several preliminary discussions with higher education professors and administrators in Australia. The list of these issues appears in appendix 1. Issues were selected during the scoping phase of the study to reflect a suite of major changes, components and challenges seen in higher education systems around the world, as well as some more specific to Australia. Issues were categorised along the three major university functions of knowledge generation through research and scholarship (seven issues), knowledge dissemination or teaching and learning (eight issues), knowledge

application or outreach and engagement (four issues); issues that cut across all three functions (five issues), and key administrative issues and challenges facing the Australian universities (eight issues). To ensure the list represented a comprehensive suite of major issues, interviewees were asked to indicate whether any additions should be made; however, no major additional issues were identified.

Participants were asked to assess how critical the issues would be for the future of Australian higher education in the next 10 to 20 years by rating each on a Likert scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (extremely important). Comparing the average rank for all issues provides insight into the relative priorities of leaders. While caution needs to be exercised comparing Likert scales (ordinal) in this way, for the purposes of the analysis here it is a robust approach to ranking attitudes systematically (e.g., Norman, 2010; Landrum & Garza, 2015). To compare the views of senior leaders inside universities with those in government and other organisations and roles, ANOVA was used to ascertain for which issues there was a statistically significant divergence. While there are limitations to what can be inferred from this use of descriptive statistics and there are limitations as to how parametric methods can be applied to data derived from Likert scales, for the of this study it does provide a useful insight into how leaders view different issues (Norman, 2010).

More generally, due to the use of a summated rating method there are limits to what can be inferred from the responses. For example, the survey and interviews provide limited scope to systematically assess why particular issues were viewed as important or not. It cannot reveal, for instance, whether a respondent viewed an issue as a problem to be solved or a fruitful opportunity. For additional insight on the leaders' interpretations of the issues, see the report on the in-depth-interviews (Lacy et al., 2017). Nonetheless, through ranking mean responses, the survey data does provide a robust tool to compare a wide variety of issues and offers insight into leadership priorities. It is a powerful approach to assessing patterns in leadership priorities and foci. Together the interviews and survey data provide a substantial and comprehensive catalogue of changes, components and issues, as well as those likely to arise in the future. Examining the responses offers an overall picture of how leaders situate these issues for Australia higher education. In this way, the survey provides novel evidence as to the future direction of managerial and government attention.

Survey findings

Table 1 shows how the issues were ranked based on their average mean scores for each item by the groups of university senior executive respondents as compared to those leaders outside universities.

For university senior executives *Internationalisation of universities*, *student learning outcomes*, *universities addressing the needs of society*, *the role of university-industry joint research* and *university strategic planning* were on average rated by the as most important for the future of the system. These are issues that have emerged in higher education in many countries. That *internationalisation* was graded highest by leaders is perhaps unsurprising given the increasing recognition of its importance for all university functions. This is particularly the case with undergraduate education of international students, the fees from which help the financial stability of many Australian universities.

Table 1. Ranking of key issues facing universities by university leaders and leaders outside universities.

University leaders		Leaders outside universities	
Rank	Issue	Rank	Issue
1	Internationalisation of universities	1	Student learning outcomes
2	Student learning outcomes	2	Internationalisation of universities
3	Universities addressing the needs of society	3	Universities addressing the needs of society
4	The role of university-industry joint research	4	University strategic planning
5	University strategic planning	5	Developing and supporting research infrastructure
6	Workforce planning and the balance between tenured, part-time, contract academics	6	The role of university-industry joint research
7	Partnerships with other organisations	7	Partnerships with other organisations
8	Federal government funding	8	Addressing grand challenges facing humanity
9	Addressing grand challenges facing humanity	9	Federal government funding
10	Ensuring student accessibility to higher education	10	Accountability within universities
11	Developing and supporting research infrastructure	11	Diversity of university missions
12	Educational technology and online learning	12	Developing and supporting big data research infrastructure
13	Accountability within universities	13	Workforce planning and the balance between tenured, part-time, contract academics
14	Diversity of university missions	14	Educational technology and online learning
15	Developing and supporting big data research infrastructure	15	Ensuring student accessibility to higher education
16	Competition for student enrolments	16	Universities promoting technology transfer
17	International university rankings	17	The balance between basic-applied-develop research
18	Universities promoting technology transfer	18	Developing and supporting interdisciplinary research centres
19	Universities contributing to international development	19	Lifelong learning/continuing education
20	Student debt	20	Student debt
21	Philanthropy, advancement and fund raising	21	Universities contributing to international development
22	Lifelong learning/continuing education	22	Supporting new academic researchers with a start-up research package
23	The balance between basic-applied-develop research	23	Competition for student enrolments
24	Developing and supporting interdisciplinary research centres	24	Philanthropy, advancement and fund raising
25	Government regulations and standards	25	Government regulations and standards
26	Deregulation of tuition fees for public universities	26	International university rankings
27	Shared and collegial governance	27	Balance between liberal education and professional education
28	Universities addressing government agendas	28	Universities addressing government agendas
29	Supporting new academic researchers with a start-up research package	29	Shared and collegial governance
30	Balance between liberal education and professional education	30	Deregulation of tuition fees for public universities
31	State government funding	31	Superannuation and pension costs
32	Superannuation and pension costs	32	State government funding

Ranked highly were issues relating to accountability in serving students (e.g., *student learning outcomes* and *ensuring student accessibility to higher education*) and the broader society and communities outside their gates (e.g., *addressing the needs of society* and *addressing grand challenges facing humanity*). Engagement with industry was rated highly, specifically the *role of university-industry joint research*, as was *partnerships with other organisations*. This broadening of the university agendas and increasing complexity of higher education and the global environment likely requires more thoughtful and informed strategic planning which the leaders identified important for the future. Also highly ranked was *developing and supporting research infrastructure*.

The second group of higher education leaders, those working outside university senior leadership in government roles, in the academic national academies and other organisations, rated issues in a similar order to the university senior leadership. These leaders emphasised the importance of university accountability to students, and they on average rated *student learning outcomes* the most important issue, just above issues relating to university engagement with communities and how they address the needs of society. Nine of the top ten ranked issues were the same as those of university leadership, and on only one did they differ. One top ten issue that this group ranked several places higher than the university leaders was *developing and supporting research infrastructure*. This reflects the status given to research output by leaders outside the university leadership, which the interviews indicated was a significant concern for leaders across the higher education system (Lacy et al., 2017).

Despite some diversity of opinion on several topics, all leaders generally shared similar perceptions of the major issues facing the future of Australian universities and higher education based on their average mean scores for each item. Included in Table 2 is the mean score and standard deviation of each issue based on the 114 valid survey responses. There was a significant convergence of views between the different leaders, especially for those higher ranked items which had smaller standard deviations than those less highly ranked.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations leaders' ratings of key issues.

Issue	University leaders	Outside universities	Sig.
Internationalisation of universities	4.60 (0.68)	4.59 (0.57)	
Student learning outcomes	4.49 (0.74)	4.61 (0.67)	
Universities addressing the needs of society	4.48 (0.64)	4.49 (0.64)	
The role of university-industry joint research	4.44 (0.64)	4.25 (0.80)	
University strategic planning	4.43 (0.69)	4.31 (0.76)	
Workforce planning and the balance between tenured, part-time, contract academics	4.41 (0.71)	4.00 (0.92)	*
Partnerships with other organisations	4.40 (0.75)	4.22 (0.73)	
Federal government funding	4.38 (0.75)	4.02 (0.88)	*
Addressing grand challenges facing humanity	4.35 (0.72)	4.16 (0.88)	
Ensuring student accessibility to higher education	4.30 (0.80)	3.94 (0.99)	*
Developing and supporting research infrastructure	4.22 (0.66)	4.27 (0.75)	
Educational technology and online learning	4.22 (0.75)	3.94 (0.86)	**
Accountability within universities	4.17 (0.77)	4.02 (0.84)	
Diversity of university missions	4.17 (0.64)	4.00 (0.94)	
Developing and supporting big data research infrastructure	4.14 (0.78)	4.00 (0.80)	
Competition for student enrolments	4.00 (0.90)	3.71 (0.92)	**
International university rankings	4.00 (0.98)	3.59 (1.10)	*
Universities promoting technology transfer	3.94 (0.76)	3.94 (0.86)	
Universities contributing to international development	3.86 (0.93)	3.76 (0.96)	
Student debt	3.85 (0.90)	3.78 (0.92)	
Philanthropy, advancement and fund raising	3.83 (1.02)	3.71 (1.01)	
Lifelong learning/continuing education	3.78 (0.79)	3.82 (0.94)	
The balance between basic-applied-develop research	3.76 (0.93)	3.88 (0.89)	
Developing and supporting interdisciplinary research centres	3.73 (0.90)	3.84 (0.90)	
Government regulations and standards	3.67 (0.97)	3.61 (0.96)	
Deregulation of tuition fees for public universities	3.63 (1.21)	3.22 (1.15)	**
Shared and collegial governance	3.48 (0.82)	3.27 (0.98)	
Universities addressing government agendas	3.44 (0.86)	3.29 (0.88)	
Supporting new academic researchers with a start-up research package	3.35 (0.97)	3.73 (0.80)	*
Balance between liberal education and professional education	3.27 (0.83)	3.43 (0.94)	
State government funding	3.08 (1.10)	2.67 (1.16)	**
Superannuation and pension costs	2.56 (0.92)	2.69 (1.01)	

A 5 point scale was used: 1=not important, 2=slightly important, 3=moderately important, 4=very important, 5=extremely important. For ANOVA * indicates $p < 0.05$, ** indicates $p < 0.10$. The issues are listed in the order of importance ranked by university leaders.

Between groups there was a Kendall rank correlation coefficient of 0.748 and a Spearman's rank correlation coefficient of 0.913, both significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). For the majority of the issues there was no statistically significant difference (ANOVA $p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.10$) for mean answers between the two groups, however, there were significant differences on several issues among the university, academic organisations and government respondents existed.

Of the nine issues for which means showed a statistical difference, only five showed a difference at a confidence at $p < 0.05$, and four at $p < 0.10$. *Workforce planning and the balance between tenured, part-time, contract academics, federal government funding, supporting new academic researchers with a start-up research package, ensuring student accessibility to higher education* and, *international university rankings* all showed at difference at $p < 0.05$. *State government funding, educational technology and online learning, deregulation of tuition fees for public universities* and, *competition for student enrolments*, all showed at difference at $p < 0.10$. University leaders ranked eight of these nine issues higher than those outside universities.

Discussion and policy implications

Comparison of the views of the two groups on issues facing the future of the Australian higher education system revealed substantial agreement. Three issues—State government funding, federal government funding and competition for students—for which there was a difference between groups perhaps not surprising relate to funding. These were all seen as more significant for university leaders as they deal with resource and quality issues and increasing dependence on students for support of the institution. In many ways, this is expected given that these issues are a central concern to the continued financial sustainable of many Australian universities. Much of the public debate in Australia over university education in the last two decades has been dominated by what government and students pay for higher education. Nonetheless, for all the changes that have led to a greater commodification of higher education, the core elements of financialization appear to be a low priority for many university leaders.

Another issue where there was a statistically significant difference was ensuring student accessibility to higher education, where again the university leaders rated it more highly. Despite the perception that university leadership are often largely concerned with research prestige, in general the university leaders ranked those issues relating to research often several positions lower on the list than the other leaders in higher education, such as developing and supporting research infrastructure, which university leaders rated on at position 11, while other leaders placed it at position 5 on average. It is significant, if perhaps again expected, that there was a difference between leaders in how they rated the issue of international rankings. Many Australian universities have embraced international rankings, and many commentators claim that it is shaping institutional strategy and action (Rauhvargers, 2011) and having highly ranked universities at one point was Australian government policy (Hockey, 2013).

One area where there was alignment, and the survey results show no statistical difference in the mean answers, was in issues largely related to the management and organisational changes within universities that are associated with managerialism,

such as mechanisms of accountability (see also Howes, 2018). This included shared governance and strategic planning. For academic staff, greater involvement in the administrative and academic decisions shaping the goals and mission of the institution has been an ongoing controversy in Australian higher education. When governance is not shared it likely means academic staff are not a meaningful partner in many academic, administrative, resource and budgetary decisions, which is reflected in the prioritisation of leadership. Embedded in this is the vocal concern of many academic staff of the increasing managerialism in administration and a loss of collegiality (Harman, 2002).

While quality of leadership in universities can affect all aspects of their operation, from organisational culture to programme viability, so too does the quality of leadership outside their walls in the wider higher education system in which they exist. The public nature of universities and of academia means these institutions are usually highly dependent on external actors, in particular government. Leadership outside universities – including in bureaucracies and legislatures, learned academies and other academic organisations – can be as significant to institutional success. This study has shown an example of significant alignment between university senior leaders and those outside universities. That they generally shared similar perceptions of the major matters facing the future of Australian universities is perhaps to be expected. On one level there is a demonstrable ‘group think’ that can be seen to be an expression of the tendency towards isomorphism in Australian higher education (Croucher & Woelert, 2016; Marginson & Considine, 2000). On another, the senior leaders surveyed have varying interaction with the broader policy communities and networks that exist around higher education, as they do around other public enterprises (Marsh & Rhodes, 1992). Given the survey focused on senior leaders, this is unsurprising as those in more senior ranks are usually in contact with leadership outside universities. This link is important as senior leadership have a significant influence on institutional success, especially where they are prime champions of processes and practices. Senior leaders can set budgets and internal policy, as well as send signals to faculty and staff about the core ethos of their institution.

This paper examined data on key components of and issues facing the Australian university system through a unique data set that captures a large proportion of leaders. The analysis explored the perceptions both within the system and the Australian government. Significantly, the two groups university senior executive and other sector leaders, including government leaders, revealed they share similar priorities and perceptions of the major matters issues facing the future of Australian universities. Despite the different incentives and responsibilities of leaders across higher education, they have similar assessments of the priority and ranking of issues. This finding is significant, given that many key changes to higher education in recent years, such as its marketisation and the rise of New Public Management, are often claimed to be driven government and those outside universities. That there is such a level of leadership alignment gives pause when thinking about the capacity for universities to adapt to ongoing and emerging issues. In the often rapidly changing and dynamic environment faced by universities, addressing emerging issues likely requires strong leadership

across the system.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix 1

Thirty-two issues for the future of Australian higher education (alphabetical order)

Accountability within universities⁵
 Addressing grand challenges facing humanity¹
 Balance between liberal education and professional education²
 Competition for student enrolments²
 Deregulation of tuition fees for public universities²
 Developing and supporting big data research infrastructure¹
 Developing and supporting interdisciplinary research centers¹
 Developing and supporting research infrastructure¹
 Diversity of university missions⁵
 Educational technology and online learning²
 Ensuring student accessibility to higher education²
 Federal government funding⁴
 Government regulations and standards⁴
 International university rankings⁵
 Internationalisation of universities⁵
 Lifelong learning/continuing education²
 Partnerships with other organisations⁵
 Philanthropy, advancement and fund raising⁵
 Shared and collegial governance⁴
 State government funding⁴
 Student debt²
 Student learning outcomes²
 Superannuation and pension costs⁴
 Supporting new academic researchers with a start-up research package¹
 The balance between basic-applied-develop research¹
 The role of university-industry joint research¹
 Universities addressing government agendas³
 Universities addressing the needs of society³
 Universities contributing to international development³
 Universities promoting technology transfer²
 University strategic planning⁴
 Workforce planning and the balance between tenured, part-time, contract academics⁴

1. Generation of Knowledge, 2. Dissemination of Knowledge, 3. Application of Knowledge, 4. Infrastructure, Human Capital, Resources & Administration, 5. General Issues Encompassing all Functions.