

Leadership in UK Universities – Towards a New Model

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“Students are the only respite from a miserable, bullying and uncertain workplace.”

theguardian.com

Higher education staff suffer 'epidemic' of poor mental health

Research shows steep increase in referrals to counselling and occupational health services



▲ The University and College Union called on institutions to deal with the causes of rising stress levels for lecturers. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

The number of university workers accessing counselling and occupational health services has shot up, according to research which describes “an epidemic” of poor mental health among higher education staff.

Freedom of information requests revealed that at one university, staff referrals to counselling services went up more than 300% over a six-year period up to 2015 while, at another, referrals to occupational health soared by more than 400%.

Overworked and undervalued: The crippling stress university lecturers face

Staff have described the situation months after a lecturer took his own life

Matthew Hedges: universities fail to protect staff working abroad

Researcher held in UAE for five months suggests commercial relationships may trump concern for researchers' well-being

October 3, 2019

By [Ellie Bothwell](#)

Twitter: [@elliebothwell](#)

Universities may be failing to properly assess the risks of academics visiting repressive regimes because of their close relationships with these countries, according to a British researcher who was sentenced to life in prison on spying charges in the United Arab Emirates.



Source: Shutterstock

“Senior leadership is turning the university into a corporate-style degree factory.”

The introduction of higher tuition fees has affected students and academics both in practical terms and in mindset. Students are often seen, and are beginning to see themselves, as customers who are owed the goods they have paid for.

Half of UK academics 'suffer stress-linked mental health problems'

Scholars at greater risk of stress-related illness than police, medics and local authority staff, research suggests

July 6, 2018

By [Jack Grove](#)

Twitter: [@jgro_the](#)

About half of all UK academics have suffered depression, anxiety or other types of mental health problems related to stress – one of the highest rates of any sector, a conference has heard.



Source: Getty

The logo for the Office for Students is contained within a large, light blue circular graphic that has a textured, watercolor-like edge. The text "Office for Students" is written in a dark blue, sans-serif font. To the right of the text is a dark blue square with a yellow square inside it, and the letters "ofs" are written in yellow on the dark blue background.

Office for
Students



Background to UK Universities

- A time of unprecedented change and uncertainty
- Challenges of massification and globalisation
- New government regulatory body - the Office for Students
- Landscape of increased regulation and measurement
- Rising workloads, poor student-staff ratios, challenging working conditions
- Old systems of leadership based on elitism are no longer relevant

From a study on decline and performance in US universities in 1998 (Cameron and Smart 1998)...

- *Two decades ago, Richard Cyert (1978, p. 345), former president of Carnegie Mellon University, characterized the challenge this way:*

“The major problems that will face the managers of colleges and universities in the coming decades can be put quite simply: How can the attention of faculties and administrators be kept focused on maintaining excellence in the face of overwhelming forces pulling their attention to mere survival?”

(Cameron and Smart, 1998, p.79)



Towards a New Model of Leadership

- Where I think we are failing:
 - Policies instead of people
 - KPIs resulting in “ends justifying the means” approaches
 - Measuring outputs instead of evaluating processes
- For example:
 - Student mental health is, rightly so, a major concern for UK universities
 - So we’ve put in place policies
 - But what happens to the one lecturer who spends hours with a student, ensuring they get the right help and as a result misses the deadline for an important grant application?
- We don’t get to have everything – we need to prioritize what’s important
- People are important!

“The Dirty Dozen” and Leadership

Cameron and Smart 1998

Institutions with low levels of effectiveness likely to result from poor leadership

Attribute	Explanation
Centralization	Decision-making pulled towards the top of the organization
Short term crisis mentality	Long-term planning neglected; focus on immediacy
Loss of innovativeness	Less tolerance for risk and failure associated with creative activity
Resistance to change	Protectionist stance and “hunkering down”
Decreasing morale	Infighting infects the organization
Politicized interest groups	Climate becomes politicized and special interest groups become more vocal
Nonprioritized cutbacks	Across the board cutbacks used – priorities are not obvious
Loss of trust	Leaders lose the confidence of subordinates and distrust increases
Increasing conflict	Fewer resources result in internal competition and fighting for a smaller pie
Restricted communication	Only good news is passed upwards. Information not widely shared due to fear and distrust
Lack of teamwork	Individuals resist cooperation and individualism and disconnectedness make teamwork difficult
Scapegoating leaders	Leaders scapegoated, priorities are unclear, siege mentality prevails

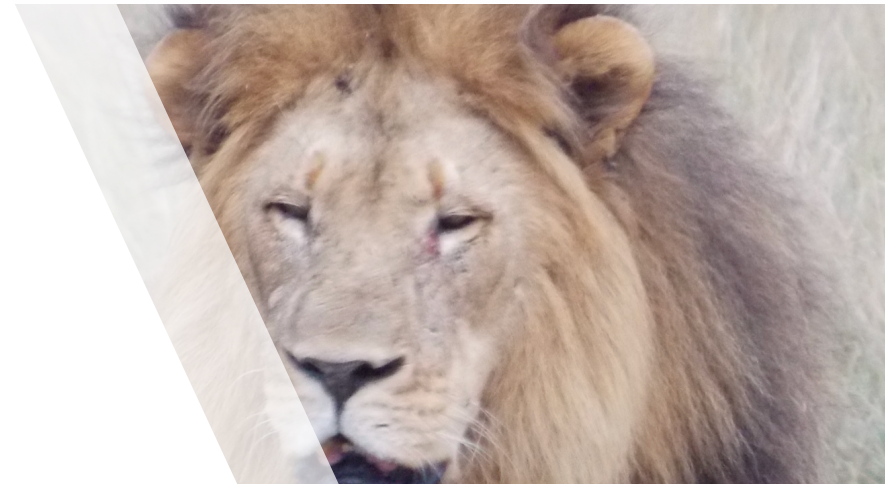
A New Model of Leadership

- Courage
- Compassion
- Resilience

- But the core is compassion – people centred



RESILIENCE



Courage



From the French “Coeur” – “heart”



Leaders require courage to act true to values and convictions to make effective decisions



Core of values-centred leadership



Stepping up and being courageous even in the face of great opposition



Leaders not acting with courage and integrity makes it more difficult for those further down in the organisation

Resilience



What is resilience?



The ability to come back from failure and find a way through uncertainty, change, crisis and threat



Resilience results from culture change to support courage and compassion

Compassion – Martha Nussbaum



Nussbaum (1996) views compassion as a bridge “...between the individual and the community” (p.28)



Most importantly, it is a “...sort of thought about the well-being of others” (p.28)



Compassion is often rooted in early moral development and is therefore a form of reasoning



Awareness of our own vulnerability is key for compassion

Self- Compassion



The core of compassion is courage




“The courage to be compassionate lies in the willingness to see into the nature and causes of suffering – be that in ourselves, in others and the human condition.” The Compassionate Mind Foundation



But the great challenge is then to do something about it



Leadership development needs to work with potential and current leaders to help them balance their minds against constant perceptions of threat – so that they can help others in their organisations



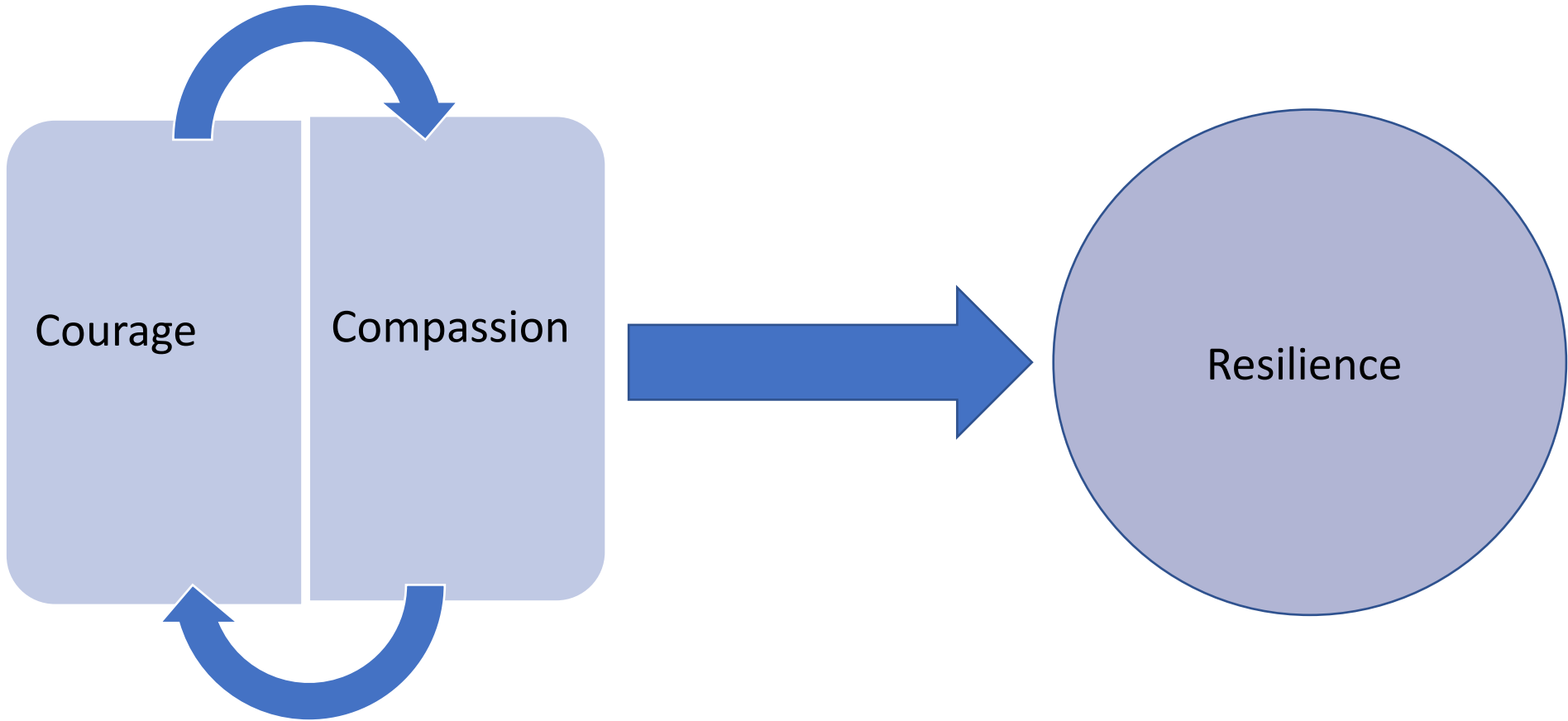
What does
compassionate
leadership look
like in reality?

- Humane response to tragedy:
 - Visible leadership demonstrating personal emotions and vulnerability
 - Authentic understanding of what was important to staff and students
 - Taking time to understand the symbols that were important
 - Strong action on improving campus safety
 - Doing what was right was prioritized over rankings and the reputation of the university
- *"Compassion is about recognizing the difficulty of the other's position and doing something about it...she acknowledged the pain in the community and did something about it."*



- *“The important thing about compassion in higher education is that we might not always know how it feels for someone else but we can recognize that it is difficult and act on that.”*
- *“Compassion builds trust and you have to be able to trust your leaders.”*

Towards a New Model of Leadership





Where Next?

- Questions for you:
 - Are these three the right elements?
 - Where do I go from here?
 - What am I missing?



References

- Cameron, K. and Smart, J. (1998) 'Maintaining effectiveness amid downsizing and decline in institutions of higher education', *Research in Higher Education*. Kluwer Academic/Human Sciences Press Inc., 39(1), pp. 65–86. doi: 10.1023/A:1018704428790.
- Nussbaum, M. (1996) 'Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion', *Social Philosophy and Policy*. Cambridge University Press (CUP), 13(1), pp. 27–58. doi: 10.1017/s0265052500001515.