

Learning-Centred Leadership in Higher Education: Sustainable Approaches to the Challenges and Responsibilities

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BOOK REVIEW

LEARNING-CENTRED LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION: SUSTAINABLE APPROACHES TO THE CHALLENGES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

REVIEWED BY

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St. Clair, R. (2020). *Learning-Centred Leadership in Higher Education: Sustainable Approaches to the Challenges and Responsibilities*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. Pages: 229. Price: USD 24.99 (paper).

What should the role of learning be in higher education leadership? In this well-written book, Ralf St. Clair, an active researcher and long-time higher education leader, calls for positioning learning at the core of university leadership. While reflecting on the pull to climb rankings, which we all face if we are to grow institutional reputation, he brings a new idea forward, that “Universities can choose to brand themselves as knowledge providers or learning partners.” (Löfvall & Nygaard, 2013, p. 148). While universities seek to promote their top researchers, students are often attracted to institutions that develop networks between students and faculty members, and embrace the notion of constructivism, thus creating learning partners

This leads to an alternative way of creating and sustaining excellence in university life. St. Clair suggests that “If the ability of a university to serve as a learning partner were considered as a mark of excellence, it would take us away from a hyper-competitive paradigm assigning failure to most and towards a broader view of the post-secondary landscape where our institutions could claim success in many different ways.” (p. 3).

While seeking to find balance between continuity and change, he points us in the direction of learning-centred leadership. This is a type of leadership that is not dependent upon individual activity, but rather an understanding that leadership is a shared enterprise.

He begins by putting higher education into a historical context by describing some of the major develop-

ments regarding the development of universities since the establishment of the University of Bologna and the University of Paris, with stops at the early Scottish universities and Oxford. He then writes about the dichotomy between the humanities approach, led by Cardinal John Newman, and the sciences approach, introduced by Wilhelm von Humboldt. The context modern universities face is described through a discussion of access, accountability, and quality, along with the importance of finding a common vision to guide our institutions into the future.

While St. Clair agrees that teaching and research create considerable value in higher education, he presents leadership as something that matters, and which is best achieved when it is “shared and distributed.” That is to say that leadership is not about leaders. It is something that emerges when organizational members engage thoughtfully, with reflection and assessment, as they work collaboratively to sustain and move their institutions forward.

A connection is built between learning and leadership. The author posits three requirements for university-based learning. It must be generalizable, framed in an observable way, and assessable. He describes several models for framing learning. First, learning is a process that varies significantly in different contexts. Second, learning involves creation because there are no limits regarding how it can be approached. Third, it involves building effective mental models. Fourth, learning mod-

els need to be assessed to determine effectiveness. Learning is then put into perspective by discussing socio-cultural learning, transformative learning, and double-loop learning. Research described shows a significant relationship between learning and organizational performance.

He explores these ideas by looking at where universities are, in terms of their institutional development, and presenting three case studies. The case studies focus on one of the following themes: developing learning-centred strategies, structuring the learning-centred institution, and connecting knowledge and leadership. By delving into these topics individually, in an applied way, the reader gains a deeper understanding of how learning-centred leadership plays out in contemporary university settings.

Strategy is described, not as a top-down set of instructions, but rather the ongoing activity of everybody in the institution, both in terms of their actions and their thinking about the meaning of those actions. Mintzberg (1990) put this well when he called for blending thinking and doing, thus learning our way into strategy. For St. Clair, this includes broad acceptance of learning as a pervasive and multi-dimensional imperative, promotion of an experimental mindset, development of distributed leadership, focus on holistic perspectives, and commitment to diversification.

Discussion regarding structuring the learning-centred institution, according to St. Clair, should involve thinking through capacity, organizational flexibility, transparency, and a critical vision. This should focus on people, faculty professional development, building a leadership team, and communications and development.

Recognizing the holistic orientation of learning-centred leadership, St. Clair explores the common ways in which research, teaching, and service create knowledge. He suggests that learning-centred leadership takes knowledge and “scatters its legitimacy” across the university community. Or, put another way, institutional progress runs through learning, whether it is produced through research, teaching or service.

We engage in evaluation to maximize the benefits of change. This is done by “reflecting upon experience and building experimentation upon those reflections” and involves inputs, outputs, and outcomes. A rubric, focusing on the resources used in learning-centred leadership, is presented to help determine what matters and what can be changed. The author asks, as a way of integrating

themes discussed, for the reader to engage in a thought experiment regarding what accountability for universities would look like if learning were the central mission of the institution.

The book ends with the realization that learning-centred leadership is achievable, but there are some challenges. A key challenge is when the perspectives and priorities of the people in the organization do not match the current leadership approach. A way forward, according to St. Clair, involves understanding which characteristics or values are assigned to people in leadership roles, appreciating the non-compleatability of tasks, developing succession planning, and practicing patience and humility.

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