

Leading through disruptive transformations in higher education

Key takeaways from the NEWLEAD focus groups on leadership development and institutional transformation in higher education

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Introduction

As part of the EU-funded [NEWLEAD project](#) (2020-2023), two focus groups on leadership development and institutional transformation were organised. They were aimed at higher education (HE) executives, interested in further enhancing their leadership skills. The focus groups primarily targeted members of the executive leadership teams at universities, with both academic and non-academic profiles.

The first focus group was hosted by Ramon Llull University in Barcelona (31 March-1 April 2022), whereas the second one took place at the University of Iceland in Reykjavik (1-2 June 2022).

By addressing disruptive transformation seen through the lens of themes central to higher education today, the focus groups tackled issues that higher education leaders must address in order to ensure the success of their institutions. Participants in the two events worked towards identifying key points for successful implementation of three crucial transformation areas that higher education is currently experiencing:

- ▶ Greening and sustainability in HE
- ▶ Female leadership in HE
- ▶ International collaboration (with a focus on the European University Alliances)

The focus groups also aimed at identifying which sort of leadership training is needed to underpin such transformations.

The groupwork was based on guidance and insights from the [2021 NEWLEAD report](#) on institutional transformation and leadership development at universities in Europe, as well as from previous EUA work on the topic.

The two events were based on a peer-learning and a co-creative approach, where participants actively contributed through reflective conversations to bringing to light leadership challenges that they are confronted with at their universities.



Leading universities and coping with disruption

Today more than ever, universities are expected to fulfil multiple and increasingly challenging roles. Invariably, university leaders must respond to disruptive transformations, ranging from labour market expectations, sustainability pressures, threats towards institutional autonomy, and insufficient funding to imminent public health concerns, to name just a few.

Participants to the focus groups dealt with, among others, the following challenges:

Challenges stemming from an environment external to the institution

- ▶ Underinvestment in HE
- ▶ Increase of short-term project-based funding (both European and national) in comparison to core budget
- ▶ Limited (or threats to) institutional autonomy
- ▶ Communicating to society, but also to political leadership the importance of higher education and research
- ▶ Crises like Corona and the war in Ukraine and the impact that they have had on the university community.

Challenges internal to the institution

- ▶ Preparing the university for an array of challenges related to governance, management, learning and teaching processes, etc.
- ▶ Dealing with internal resistance towards transformation and change processes
- ▶ Integrating the different missions of the university (teaching, research, and service to society)
- ▶ Time and people management
- ▶ Integrating technology and digitalisation into the core university processes and culture
- ▶ Adopting an internationalisation strategy that goes beyond staff and student mobilities
- ▶ Introducing the gender perspective in teaching and research and in the strategic agenda of universities
- ▶ Flexibilisation/personalisation of learning paths

Leading through disruptive transformations in higher education

Key takeaways from the NEWLEAD focus groups

- ▶ Equipping graduates with skills for the future
- ▶ Addressing career progression not solely based on research output
- ▶ Promoting interdisciplinarity
- ▶ Moving from a crisis management perspective to a new form of governance focused on ideas and innovation
- ▶ Efficient collaboration between academic and administrative staff

Many of these challenges need to be addressed simultaneously. Yet often, leaders find themselves caught between long-term strategy implementation and short-term crisis management. They are walking a tightrope, **oscillating between concentrating on managing universities at the expense of leading.**

The NEWLEAD focus groups showed that the differentiation between leading and managing is not clear, and often the two concepts are used interchangeably. This may be because most higher education senior executives have both concepts in their roles. Yet, it seems that there is more dedication and commitment to management and coordination than to the challenge of leadership *per se*.

Leadership involves engaging people in the vision, creating the conditions for transformation and change, empowering people, guiding and coaching them through challenging periods.

Leadership can be reflected and worked upon at various levels:

- ▶ Self-leadership
- ▶ Team leadership
- ▶ Strategic leadership

Whereas self-leadership entails an inward focus to achieve personal mastery, team leadership is about the capacity to motivate and inspire a group of people in achieving a common goal. Strategic leadership implies developing a vision for one's institution that enables the latter to remain relevant and successful, especially during disruptive times.

On the other hand, managing points to a set of well-defined, punctual processes and tools to achieve measurable and concrete goals.

The duality of **leading vs managing a university** is intrinsically linked to different cultures, positions and interpretations given to who constitutes the leadership team at universities. Previous studies exemplified how such perceptions are very diverse across Europe, being also influenced by the sort of governance structures found in the different systems.¹

The 2021 NEWLEAD report² showed that managerial profiles are on the rise across Europe, although with various degrees of recognition of such roles as part of the formal leadership teams at universities. For instance, while in Eastern Europe such administrative and managerial roles are less recognised, the Scandinavian and Nordic countries together with Ireland and the UK universally consider such positions and attributions as part of the formal leadership at their universities.

¹ Bennetot Pruvot, E., Estermann, T. (2017), University Autonomy in Europe III. The Scorecard 2017, European University Association, p. 18, <https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/university%20autonomy%20in%20europe%20iii%20the%20scorecard%202017.pdf>

² Bunescu, L., Estermann, T. (2021), Institutional transformation and leadership development at universities. A mapping exercise. Report from the Innovative Leadership and Change Management in Higher Education project (NEWLEAD), p.15, <https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/newlead%20report.pdf>

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERS TO CREATE CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

- ▶ Create an environment that allows for bottom-up approaches, while ensuring leadership and clear decision-making from the top;
- ▶ Establish a shared vision, understanding and common purpose across the institution before embarking on the change paradigm, for instance by consulting all relevant stakeholders (academic and non-academic staff, students, etc) upstream;
- ▶ Deliver clear communication around the transformation strategy;
- ▶ Pay attention to anxiety and uncertainty among staff in relation to the disruptive transformation; the latter should be paced appropriately, and a structured approach should be ensured so as not to be too disruptive at once;
- ▶ Remember that it takes time to change mindsets and also to have different parts of the institution learn how to work together (e.g., academic and administrative staff), especially if such cooperation has not been the norm;
- ▶ Convey hope throughout the process;
- ▶ Work with incentives;
- ▶ Work on building trust in your leadership;
- ▶ Consider formats and configurations that dilute the sense of hierarchy, as the latter may stifle conversations;
- ▶ Remember that there is need for critical mass to move the institution and the system forward;
- ▶ Consider a holistic, multidimensional approach in leading transformation;
- ▶ Stay resilient and be prepared for resistance to change;
- ▶ Have patience — leading change requires time.

Leadership has also a cultural connotation. While it remains the case that leadership is mostly perceived as something hierarchical and formal, there are more and more accounts of leadership being exercised at an informal level as well, where all members of the academic community are encouraged to demonstrate leadership through their work and in their own departments.

One of the key takeaways from the focus groups was that leaders can manage a university without having a vision, but they cannot lead a university without a vision — **true leadership requires a vision.**

Irrespective of the scope and theme of the disruptive transformation, through their conversations, focus group participants came up with a series of recommendations to successfully lead a large institutional transformation project, ranging from the need to co-create and build a vision and mutual trust within the institution, to staying resilient, patient and hopeful throughout the process.³

³ Correa, Marc (2022), "Hope-based leadership: a new vision for higher education institutions", <https://eua.eu/resources/expert-voices/277-hope-based-leadership-a-new-vision-for-higher-education-institutions.html>. Marc Correa was one of the guest speakers at the first NEWLEAD focus group that took place in Barcelona (31 March-1 April 2022).



Successful higher education leaders: skills and leadership styles

Disruptive transformations imply serious testing boards for the leadership skills of the executive teams and leaders throughout higher education institutions.

Participants to the focus groups pointed to the following skills and competences that, in their opinion, are essential for a successful higher education leader:

- ▶ Formulating and implementing a vision
- ▶ Emotional intelligence
- ▶ Communication
- ▶ Networking skills
- ▶ Pattern recognition
- ▶ People management skills
- ▶ Empowering people
- ▶ Trusting others
- ▶ Showing vulnerability
- ▶ Ability to bridge the gap between politics and the academic sector
- ▶ Active listening
- ▶ Intellectual and behavioural integrity
- ▶ Resilience and capacity to cope with pressure, stress, disruption and hardship
- ▶ Coordination
- ▶ Optimism

- ▶ Being easy to approach
- ▶ Critical thinking
- ▶ Reliability
- ▶ Crisis management
- ▶ Project management

Leaders share at least one trait: They all have a passion for a guiding purpose, a dedication to an overarching vision. Leaders are more than goal-oriented, they are vision-oriented, and they drive these visions to realize powerful results.

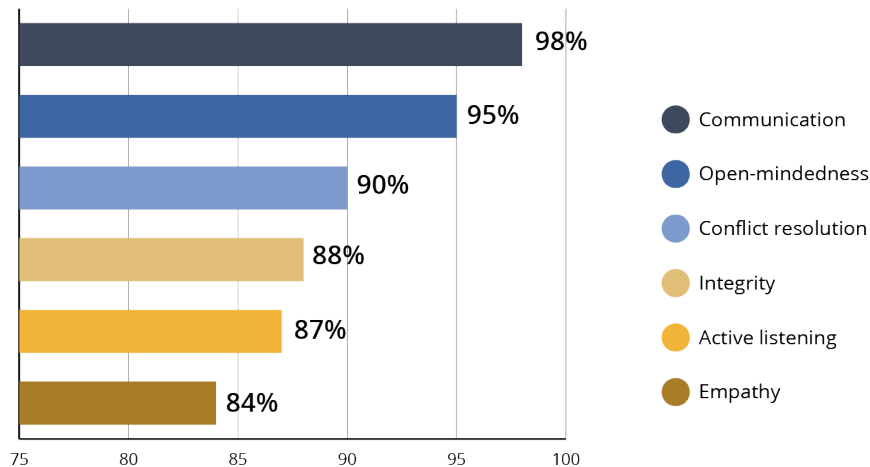
Warren Bennis

The transversal skills of the executive head identified as essential by the focus group participants match those mapped out in [the NEWLEAD report](#), derived from a survey to senior higher education leaders from across Europe. Within this report, three sets of skills for higher education leaders were identified: people management skills, strategic skills and technical skills.

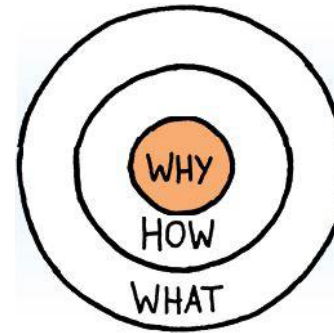
a. People management skills

As per the NEWLEAD survey respondents, **communication** is the most important people management skill for successful higher education leaders.

According to you, how important are the following people management skills for a successful higher education leader? (N=207)



Source: *NEWLEAD report (2021), p.17*



Source: *Simon Sinek, the Golden Circle theory*

According to Simon Sinek and his Golden Circle theory,⁴ inspired leaders think, act and communicate from the inside out, i.e., starting with the “why?”

The “why” is the purpose, cause or belief behind an organisation or behind the vision and drive of a leader. It is the most important message that an organisation or individual can communicate as this is what inspires others to action.

THE DOING OF LEADERSHIP: DEFINING THE VISION AND PATH

- ▶ Have you articulated the **why** (guiding purpose) of your institution or your collective cause and belief?
- ▶ Do you know why your institution matters?
- ▶ Is there a clear vision of a “future state” that you articulate?
- ▶ Are you setting clear goals and objectives for your team and institution?
- ▶ Are you building a sense of shared purpose or intentionality?

Source: *Simon Mercado, ESCP Business School, NEWLEAD focus group, Reykjavik*

⁴ Simon Sinek, *How great leaders inspire action*, https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action?language=en

b. Strategic and technical skills

When it comes to **strategic skills**, all NEWLEAD survey respondents (99%) chose decision-making as an extremely important skill for successful higher education leaders. A high number of respondents (97%) also picked the ability to propose a vision for the institution and implement it, as well as the ability to steer change (96%) and the ability to cope with crisis management (92%).

In terms of **technical skills** identified as important for higher education leaders, the NEWLEAD survey respondents mostly pointed to project management skills.

LEADERSHIP STYLES

While it is clear that higher education leaders need a variety of skill sets, it is also important to reflect on one's leadership style(s). Being aware and mindful of their approach to challenges and change, leaders can steer in a more purposeful way, conscious of their own style, perspectives and attitude.

Leadership styles are based on various factors, such as experience, personality traits and social background. While every leader is different, there are ten leadership styles that are commonly referred to. These styles may evolve and they can also be context dependent. Styles may also combine.

Choosing a leadership style that feels authentic is important for one's leadership path. In trying to define and develop one's leadership style, one should experiment with various approaches in different circumstances, while paying attention to the outcome.

In addition to this experimentation, a leader could also seek a more experienced mentor for insight and advice. The NEWLEAD survey



Source and additional information: [Indeed Career Guide](#)

addressed to higher education leaders showed, however, that mentoring is not much used: only 26% of respondents stated that at their institutions leadership development is supported via mentoring or coaching schemes.

What is certain is that leaders from across the institution should be provided with the knowledge and tools to work on their leadership skills and styles. In turn, HR at universities needs to further expand skill and competence recognition and specifically establish recognition mechanisms for leadership skills. Developing an incentive system for aspiring leaders would be a modality to make more people at universities interested in taking up the leadership challenge.



Leadership development at universities in Europe

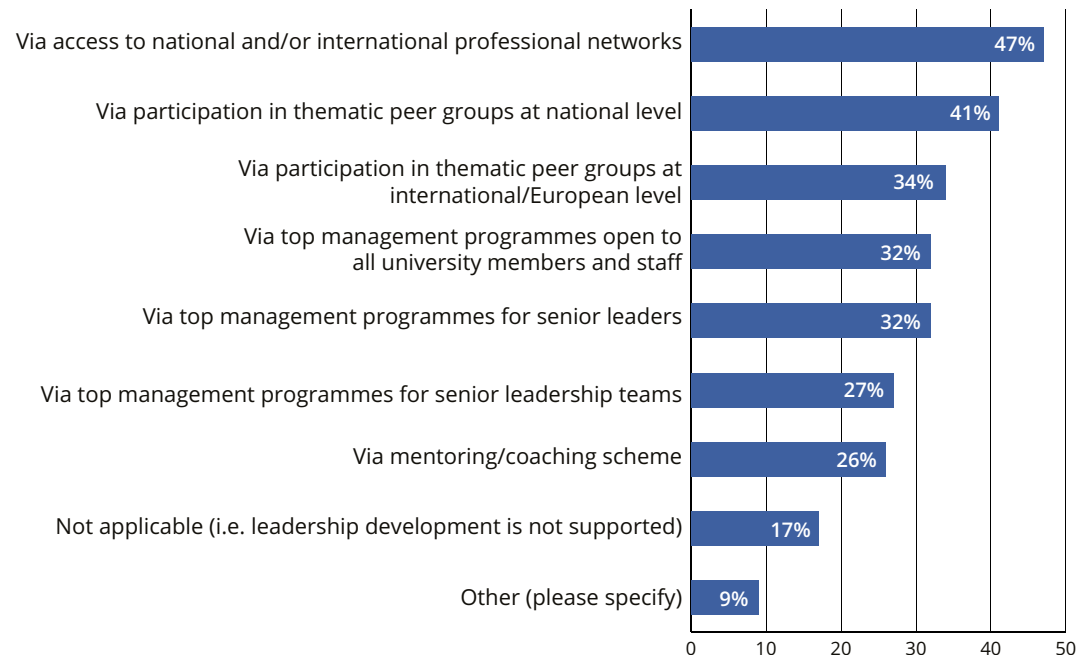
In many cases, leadership development is supported at the institutional level via rather soft mechanisms, such as access to national and/or international professional networks, and via participation in thematic peer groups at national and international/European level, rather than fully-fledged leadership development programmes.

Hence, in Europe, most university leaders do not benefit from specific, fully-fledged leadership development programmes, but grow into their roles gradually. Top management programmes for senior leaders, leadership teams or open to all university members and staff are not the norm across Europe. More generally, there seems to be a **low awareness of resource materials and resource people** on the topics of leadership development (and institutional transformation). Only at very few universities are there counsellors that coach and guide executive leaders when faced with ethical dilemmas or when they are concerned about their mental well-being due to stress and ongoing challenges.

Unsurprisingly, many systems see untapped potential for a leadership development programme in higher education. Even those national university associations that have leadership development programmes in place would recommend a more systemic approach in order to reach a wider audience in a more structured way.

How is leadership development supported at your institution?

Please select all options that apply. (N=229)



Source: [NEWLEAD report](#) (2021), p.24

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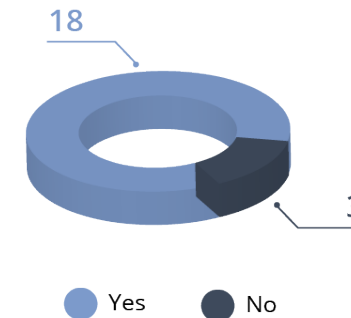
Key takeaways from the NEWLEAD focus groups

A strategic approach to leadership development is needed at both the institutional and sector levels. For instance, in systems such as in Ireland, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, leadership development programmes are offered by both higher education institutions and national level structures (such as national university associations). In the Netherlands, whereas personal and team leadership are delivered through programmes developed by universities themselves, strategic leadership is tackled through a national leadership development scheme set up by the Universities of the Netherlands.⁵

Topics most discussed in existing leadership development programmes in higher education are leading and managing staff and teams and strategic planning. At the conceptual level, the common ground for such programmes is the reflection around the concepts of *governance*, *management* and *leadership*.

According to the NEWLEAD institutional survey respondents, the topic of developing technical knowledge (e.g., financial and project management) has been more discussed in leadership development programmes than developing soft and transversal skills (such as effective communication, emotional intelligence and resilience). In fact, both the NEWLEAD surveys and the focus groups showed that leadership development is culture dependent. In some systems, developing soft skills is still not perceived as something necessary for a leader, whose authority might be seen to derive only from own experience and expertise.

In your system, do you see untapped potential for a leadership development programme in higher education? (N=21)



Source: [NEWLEAD report \(2021\)](#), p.25

⁵ Universiteiten van Nederland, *Program Governing the University in the 21st Century* (UGOV21), <https://www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/programma-governing-the-university-in-the-21st-century.html>

WHEN IT COMES TO LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS WERE DERIVED FROM THE FOCUS GROUP CONVERSATIONS:

- ▶ Promote, develop and fund leadership development programmes for higher education leaders, as currently such programmes remain in scarce supply across Europe, both at institutional and national levels.
- ▶ Nurture leadership development at all levels within the higher education community. Leadership programmes are adequate training opportunities for early-career, aspiring leaders, as they are for senior, more experienced executive leaders.
- ▶ Add an international dimension to any leadership development programme to address and understand the increasingly global crises.
- ▶ Prioritise sustainable funding for leadership development in systems and higher education institutions alike; sometimes, leadership development programmes are project-based, which makes them unsustainable. Once the funding is discontinued, the leadership programme also ends.
- ▶ Provide current and aspiring leaders with networking opportunities with peers, and engage and enable team building outside the usual, professional context.
- ▶ Offer coaching opportunities (both individual and group coaching) and occasional “away days” with people in leading positions, for both academic and administrative staff.

The NEWLEAD project partners are currently undertaking research for drafting a guide on how to set up leadership development programmes at the national level. The guide will be released end of 2022-beginning of 2023 and will be based on, among other things, findings derived from a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with coordinators of existing national leadership programmes. Both methodological and operational considerations will be covered in this guide.



Disruptive transformation topics

Focus group participants were asked to name the most pressing transformation topics that they are currently tackling at their institutions. The analysis showed that the following themes take precedent for institutional leaders:

- ▶ **Enhancing female leadership in higher education**
- ▶ **Greening and sustainability**
- ▶ **International collaboration**

This section mostly focuses on how institutional leaders can address these transformations, starting off with a short diagnosis, going into causes and challenges and finishing with potential ways to successfully steer the transformations.

The two focus groups addressed these three topics in particular by looking at the challenges they bring about in terms of:

- ▶ Effective governance (i.e., how institutional governing bodies and strategic and operational leadership work together to tackle change)
- ▶ Leadership (focusing on senior university representatives, including both academic and non-academic roles and the related possible synergies and tensions)
- ▶ Efficiency, effectiveness and value for money

The following are conclusions from the focus group discussions with, at times some additional data mentioned for complementing the findings.

FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Diagnosis:

There are still very few women in leadership positions in HE, although at many institutions and systems, women make up the majority of the academic body. Women are still strongly outnumbered by men as university leaders, accounting for less than a fifth in all EUA member universities in 2022.⁶ Talent and potential of women are lost across the career pipeline.⁷

Gender segregation is a deeply entrenched feature of higher education systems across Europe and beyond. On the one hand, there is a horizontal segregation, where one gender is concentrated in certain domains and fields of education, and on the other hand there is a visible

⁶ European University Association (2022), [Women in university leadership – some progress but more to do](#)

⁷ See Eagly, A., Carli, L.L. (2007), "Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership", *Harvard Business Review*, <https://hbr.org/2007/09/women-and-the-labyrinth-of-leadership> and Henningsen, L., Eagly, A., Jonas, K. (2021), "Where are the women deans? The importance of gender bias and self-selection processes for the deanship ambition of female and male professors", *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jasp.12780>

vertical segregation, where one gender occupies almost all leadership positions and senior levels of responsibility.⁸

In higher education, fields such as ICT, engineering and mathematics remain mostly dominated by men. And although in many OECD and European countries there are more women than men graduates, this reality already gets inverted at the level of PhD graduates and becomes striking at the level of women full professors.⁹ This is a glass ceiling for women, which prevents them from accessing leadership positions in HE: to become a HE leader there is often the prerequisite of a full professorship,¹⁰ which already entails having fewer women in the pool of candidates. The glass ceiling across certain disciplines (such as STEM) is blatant.

For the few women that make it to top positions, more tends to be expected from them, compared to their male counterparts. They have to prove deserving of the role at every step and with every decision taken.

Causes and challenges:

- ▶ Lack of legislation/regulation supporting better access for women to leadership positions
- ▶ Career progression disrupted and slowed down by care responsibilities at home, mostly taken up by women; caring for children and for the elderly invariably means that women have less time for research, less professional experience and overall less time spent in the academia compared to their peer males
- ▶ Prejudice, stereotypes (men generally considered more suitable to take up leadership roles) and gender biases, especially along discipline lines; successive stereotyping about women in leadership roles, irrespective of the field of activity has led to a lack of trust in women's capacities to live up to executive roles
- ▶ Selection bias by both men and women, hence free elections are no guarantee for women's progression
- ▶ At times, lack of self-confidence by women in their own skills and competences to access leadership positions

⁸ See U-Multirank Gender Monitor 2021: an analysis of the female to male ratio within the higher education ladder, 2021, <https://www.umultirank.org/press-media/umultirank-news/umultirank-gender-monitor-2021/>

⁹ See EUA webinar "Women in academia: breaking the glass ceiling or rebuilding the house?", March 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOYtjqYcqW8&t=1s>

¹⁰ Bunescu, L., Estermann, T. (2021), Institutional transformation and leadership development at universities. A mapping exercise. Report from the Innovative Leadership and Change Management in Higher Education project (NEWLEAD), p.16, <https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/newlead%20report.pdf>

Potential ways to address this:

- ▶ Promote a values-based institutional approach that considers diversity and empowerment, irrespective of one's individual/biological characteristics
- ▶ Make gender part of a wider institutional conversation around equity, diversity and inclusion¹¹
- ▶ Set up an institutional action plan on (gender) equality that can be followed up on by a gender coordinator
- ▶ Enact equal opportunities and affirmative action policies into the law and/or internal regulations, including quotas for women
- ▶ Work in the long run on changing the mindset where leadership is not analysed through the lens of gender
- ▶ Cater also for non-binary gender identification
- ▶ Raise pressure from within the institution for gender balance
- ▶ Push for change in the cultural paradigm
- ▶ Use transparency in governance
- ▶ Check gender pay gap and raise awareness on the issue
- ▶ Have women as role models to sensitise participation
- ▶ Adapt the selection and promotion processes to increase the number of women in leadership positions
- ▶ Make sure the selection teams are diverse to avoid self-selection
- ▶ Include equity, diversity and inclusion as topic in leadership development programmes
- ▶ Remember that change of mindset needs to be based on collective discussions and exchanges, thus gender mixed programmes should be considered
- ▶ Keep in mind that leadership development programmes targeting exclusively women have their merit, as various institutional and national examples show¹²
- ▶ Set up networks of aspiring and current female aspiring and current leaders in higher education
- ▶ Consider international collaboration on this topic central, as it caters for meaningful conversations and sharing of good practice that can be adapted to local and institutional realities
- ▶ Develop funding support, for instance when it comes to covering for maternity leave and support for child-rearing.

¹¹ For an overview on how equity, diversity and inclusion are taken up at HEIs in Europe, see the INVITED study: "Diversity, equity and inclusion in European higher education institutions: results from the INVITED project", 2019, <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/890:diversity,-equity-and-inclusion-in-european-higher-education-institutions-results-from-the-invited-project.html>

¹² See for instance H.I.T programme from Swiss Universities, https://www.gleichstellung.uzh.ch/de/projekte/hit_2/2021-22.html

GREENING AND SUSTAINABILITY

Diagnosis:

Given their education, research and societal missions, universities are key actors in the transition towards carbon neutrality, sustainable societies and economies. Green transition touches on every aspect of the university mission and for the past decade, it has been one of the big transformations higher education leaders had to tackle by working on different areas through which sustainability and greening can be addressed, namely funding, procurement, efficiency and effectiveness, governance and leadership.

Greening represents a challenge for many universities, with cost remaining the most significant factor in implementing greening measures.¹³ Building green is associated with higher upfront costs than conventional building, although the picture changes when one considers the entire building life cycle.

There is also a lack of strategising greening across the institution — that is why senior leaders at universities are key in steering and implementing a greener vision for higher education institutions. The challenge remains that few top leaders have significant experience in managing large-scale institutional transformation of the sort that greening requires.

¹³ Gaebel, M., Stöber, H., Morrisroe, A. (2021), "Greening in European higher education institutions. EUA survey data", *European University Association*, <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/982:greening-in-european-higher-education-institutions.html>

Causes and challenges:

- ▶ Full integration of greening and sustainability in learning & teaching, research & innovation, governance & campus management
- ▶ Adequate funding
- ▶ Co-creation with local communities to achieve a climate neutral ecosystem
- ▶ Assigning a top-level priority and responsibility to greening and sustainability
- ▶ Having a common understanding and approach to greening within the entire academic community (students and staff alike)
- ▶ Energy retrofitting of old buildings owned or rented by universities, which needs considerable investment and for which public funding is lacking
- ▶ Considering the local geography in a greening strategy

Potential ways to address this:

- ▶ Embed greening and sustainability into the institutional strategy, with clear targets and action plan for implementation
- ▶ Engage and align with local/regional/national sustainability and greening strategies

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Key takeaways from the NEWLEAD focus groups

- ▶ Create a responsibility at top leadership level (Vice Rector for Greening & Sustainability) and a green team/department at the university with adequate funding earmarked so as to conduct research on the topic
- ▶ Get the buy-in from all university stakeholders, including students so as to have both a bottom-up and top-down approach
- ▶ Select greening champions across the institution
- ▶ Reserve sufficient and long-term funding for this priority
- ▶ Provide financial incentives for projects and initiatives on greening and sustainability, and promote internal competitions and prizes
- ▶ Analyse investments from the perspective of whole life cycle costing
- ▶ Have an institutional roadmap with clearly defined indicators to evaluate impact of your greening and sustainability measures
- ▶ Move towards green procurement in a systematic way (i.e., across the institution)
- ▶ Start with little, simple actions around greening that do not need major investment but rather aim at changing behaviour and processes (shutting down lights and printers, travel policies, etc.)
- ▶ Establish collaboration, alliances with other universities
- ▶ Integrate greening and sustainability as themes into leadership development programmes for senior university management
- ▶ Organise peer learning opportunities to share good practice on greening and sustainability
- ▶ Consider real estate management in a greening perspective, for instance through energy retrofitting initiatives
- ▶ Consider ways to make travel of staff and students greener
- ▶ Introduce greening and sustainability as transversal topic in learning and teaching, so all students, irrespective of their field of study get exposed to it
- ▶ Consider knowledge about greening and sustainability as one of the graduate attributes that you would like your students to have and offer microcredentials for specific courses on sustainability
- ▶ Ensure that all knowledge and disciplines are brought together to tackle the challenge – tackling greening and sustainability requires an interdisciplinary approach
- ▶ Use tools such as rankings that account for greening at universities to encourage institutional take-up
- ▶ Use science-based evidence and discourse to push ahead with the implementation of greening measures.¹⁴

¹⁴ For additional recommendations on how to embed greening and sustainability at higher education institutions, check Estermann, T., Bunescu, L. (2021), "Greening in European higher education institutions. A governance, funding and efficiency perspective", European University Association, https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/gaf%20greening_final.pdf

INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

Diagnosis:

International collaboration is part of many university activities today and several have moved to a more strategic approach by deepening collaborations with institutions abroad through long-term partnerships.

In early 2020, EUA conducted a survey to map the state of play of universities' international engagement, and to explore in particular the topic of international strategic institutional partnerships and collect views about the European Universities Initiative.

As shown by the survey results,¹⁵ international activities that universities are mostly engaged with are student credit mobility, EU research projects and staff mobility (over 90% of respondents confirmed involvement in those issues).

Many universities have strategic collaborations with partners abroad, which go beyond a specific project or a student exchange programme. Alliances developed under the European Universities Initiative are one example of such strategic collaborations.

The European Universities Initiative has given a new dimension to institutional approaches to international collaboration. However, it has also brought considerable challenges, leading to disruptive transformations in the nature of internationalisation. Respondents to the above-mentioned survey perceived the need to provide additional resources to support the development and implementation of the

¹⁵ Claeys-Kulik, A.L., Jorgensen, T., Stöber, H. et al. (2020), „International strategic institutional partnerships and the European Universities Initiative. Results of the EUA survey”, European University Association, <https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/eua%20international%20partnerships%20survey.pdf>

initiative, considerable amounts of co-funding and ensuring long-term sustainability as the most challenging aspects for being part of a European Alliance.¹⁶ The EUI can have far-reaching consequences; however, the speed of change that it entails makes it hard to be embedded deeply in the institutional ethos.

Given its importance, but also the challenges that it raises, internationalisation both through the European Universities Initiative and through other formats is a crucial topic for leadership development programmes in higher education. Like other large change management processes in higher education, the senior leadership teams of the institutions involved have often been a driving factor for internationalisation and for establishing and consolidating alliances.

Causes and challenges:

- ▶ International collaborations are often a challenge to traditional working cultures and conventional practices at universities
- ▶ International collaborations require a change in mindset
- ▶ EUIs lead to a disruption in the participating HEIs, and also in the sector (two systems running in parallel: those HEIs involved and those not involved in an EUI)
- ▶ The challenge of aligning/bringing together the different [internationalisation] agendas of universities that are part of a European Alliance needs to be addressed

¹⁶ *Idem*, p.23

Leading through disruptive transformations in higher education

Key takeaways from the NEWLEAD focus groups

- ▶ University leaders involved with in an EUI must fulfil additional tasks and respond to new governance challenges
- ▶ There is a challenge in the governance design for EUIs
- ▶ EUIs are resource-intensive and require considerable co-funding for ensuring their implementation and long-term sustainability
- ▶ There are tensions around representation of the HEI in the EUI
- ▶ There are tensions between the EUI format and pre-existing networks

Potential ways to address this:

- ▶ International collaboration should first start with an institutional reflection, an internal diagnosis for readiness to international collaboration and needs surrounding such collaboration. This would lead, in turn to the ability to prioritise and make choices about the internationalisation strategy to follow.

- ▶ Comprehensive internationalisation implies an open and inclusive collective mindset, international recruitment and an international ecosystem with a corresponding educational offer. Hence, university leaders should look beyond student and staff mobilities and the language of instruction when reflecting on internationalisation, and more specifically on international collaboration.
- ▶ Strategic international collaboration relies on building trust among the partners.
- ▶ International meetups and collaboration of university leaders are essential for long-term and sustainable international partnerships.
- ▶ Setting up multilateral networks may support the rollout of European Alliances. Such external structures and partners from outside academia can support the governance and rollout of the initiative.¹⁷

¹⁷ For further insights and reflections on the governance of European University Alliances, see Estermann T., Bennetot Pruvot, E., Stoyanova, H. (2021), "The governance models of the European University Alliances. Evolving models of university governance I", European University Association, <https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/eui%20governance%20paper%20new.pdf>



Key takeaways on leadership for disruptive transformations in higher education

- ▶ Often, higher education leaders find themselves caught between long-term strategy implementation and short-term crisis management. Many of the challenges they are confronted with need to be addressed simultaneously.
- ▶ The NEWLEAD focus groups showed that the differentiation between leading and managing is not clear, and often the two concepts are used interchangeably.
- ▶ The duality of leading vs managing a university is intrinsically linked to different cultures, positions and interpretations given to who constitutes the leadership team at universities.
- ▶ Leadership has a cultural connotation. While it remains the case that leadership is mostly perceived as something hierarchical and formal, there are more and more accounts of leadership being exercised also at an informal level and where all members of the academic community are encouraged to demonstrate leadership through their work and in their own departments.
- ▶ To create conditions for change, higher education leaders should first establish a shared vision, understanding and common purpose across the institution and foster an environment that allows for bottom-up approaches and initiatives.
- ▶ Higher education leaders should also deliver clear communication around the transformation strategy, while working on building trust in their leadership.

- ▶ Conveying hope throughout the transformation process is key, as well as having patience – leading change takes time.
- ▶ To address the manifold and challenging transformations, leaders need a large portfolio of skills, ranging from strategic, to people management and technical skills.
- ▶ While it is clear that higher education leaders need a variety of skill sets, it is also important to reflect on one's leadership style(s).
- ▶ In Europe, most university leaders do not benefit from specific, fully-fledged leadership development programmes, but grow into their roles gradually. Top management programmes for senior leaders, leadership teams or open to all university members and staff are not the norm across Europe. Unsurprisingly, many systems see untapped potential for a leadership development programme in higher education.
- ▶ Leadership development programmes are adequate training opportunities for early-career, aspiring leaders, as they are for senior, more experienced executive leaders.
- ▶ Sustainable funding for leadership development needs to become a priority for systems and higher education institutions alike.
- ▶ Developing an incentive system for aspiring leaders would be a modality to make more people at universities interested in taking up the leadership challenge.

The Innovative Leadership and Change Management in Higher Education (NEWLEAD, 2020-2023) project aims at enabling higher education leaders and university senior managers to successfully steer complex institutional transformation agendas.

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For further information, please contact newlead@eua.eu. For updates on the NEWLEAD project, follow the project website. You can also find us on Twitter at [#unileaders_eu](https://twitter.com/unileaders_eu).



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