

# Innovative Leadership and Change Management in Higher Education

NEWLEAD project key findings and recommendations

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# Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Main activities carried out by NEWLEAD	5
2.1 Institutional transformation and leadership development at universities – a mapping exercise	5
2.2 Leading through disruptive transformation in higher education	7
2.3 Framework for leadership development programmes	10
2.4 HE Transformation Leadership - an analysis of emergent and high potential leadership styles	11
2.5 Case studies	13
3. Conclusions and recommendations	17



## Introduction

The Erasmus+ supported project “Innovative Leadership and Change Management in Higher Education” (NEWLEAD, 2020-2023) focused on capacity building of university leaders to steer change and address new priorities on the institutional transformation agenda. The NEWLEAD consortium was led by Ramon Llull University in partnership with the European University Association, the Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland, ESCP Business School, the University of Iceland, the Flemish Interuniversity Council, and the Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities. The consortium included as associated partners Universities of The Netherlands, the Irish Universities Association, the Conference of Italian University Rectors, and the Polish Rectors Foundation.

The main project outputs consisted of activities such as survey-based mapping exercises, focus groups on leadership development and institutional transformation, and the development of a framework for the design of leadership development programmes (LDPs). In addition, specific case studies on leading change on equity, diversity and inclusion, joint leadership during a crisis, and leadership styles were developed.

Findings from the NEWLEAD project demonstrate that leading and transforming universities is a complex endeavour, requiring a diverse skill set, adaptability, and the ability to navigate through ever-evolving challenges. Leadership and management are also among the many pre-requisites to reaping the benefits of institutional autonomy.

These activities were enriched through the valuable insights of experts, from a diverse range of institutions across the sector, who were invited to share their perspectives on leadership. These insights address specific topics

such as female leadership in higher education, hope-based leadership, and steering transformation through leadership. All of the project results are compiled in the dedicated [NEWLEAD digital repository](#). The repository presents the different outputs per format and per audience. It is available in open access.

Furthermore, the NEWLEAD consortium seized upon a multitude of opportunities to disseminate the project outputs. Notably, successive EUA Annual Conferences in 2022 (Budapest) and 2023 (Gdańsk) featured special sessions on leadership. In addition, the project sought synergies with the Erasmus+ supported Leadership and Organisation for Teaching and Learning at European Universities (LOTUS) project.

Also in 2023, the NEWLEAD partners collaborated with the HUMANE network (Heads of University Management and Administration Network in Europe) for the organisation of the HUMANE Annual Conference on the topic of academic and professional leadership. The project consortium will also organise a final event dedicated to the future of leadership development in universities, featuring NEWLEAD partners and relevant stakeholders. The event will take stock of the current status quo of leadership development in higher education and the role of policy makers in supporting the enhancement of leadership development possibilities across the sector.

This report summarises the main activities and key findings of NEWLEAD and contains recommendations for European and national policy makers and institutions.



## Main activities carried out by NEWLEAD

### 2.1 INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AT UNIVERSITIES – A MAPPING EXERCISE

The [report](#) provides insights into the current state of leadership development and institutional transformation in higher education systems and institutions in Europe. The study is based on two surveys, respectively focused on institutional leaders and national university associations. With 236 valid responses, the institution-level survey covered 27 European Higher Education Area (EHEA) countries, while the system-level survey gathered responses from 21 national university associations. The findings reveal key trends and perspectives on institutional transformation and leadership development across Europe. The study further identifies the drivers and priorities for institutional transformation, (changing) profiles of institutional leaders in higher education, and existing leadership development schemes at universities, as well as the supports available for such initiatives.

The survey identifies several drivers for institutional transformation. Changes in national legislation and national strategies are an important factor in systems where changes are underway. European and international trends take precedence in systems without ongoing national reforms. A third of respondents of the institutional survey deemed peer learning, multilateral cooperation, and digital transformation, particularly in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, to be important. National university associations placed a greater emphasis on financial pressures, as 81 % classed it as an important factor for transformation.

Transformations cover all areas and missions of higher education institutions and are often associated with structural re-organisation. When it comes to areas for improvement, nearly three-quarters of the respondents considered improving efficiency, effectiveness, and value for money as a top priority. Other priority areas mentioned include developing the societal mission of the institution, enhancing equity, diversity, and social inclusion, quality education, research development, internationalisation, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and digitalisation. The survey results also put forward participation in a European university alliance, or more generally, the enhancement of internationalisation strategies and initiatives, as important drivers for change.

The report highlights various support mechanisms for institutional transformation. Universities themselves play a significant role in providing internal funding for transformation initiatives. National funding reserved for institutional development and transformation is also mentioned as a support mechanism in some countries. However, EU funding is not a significant source of support for institutional transformation, with limited visibility and scattered funding opportunities. The absence of a dedicated EU program for institutional transformation or leadership development is seen as a huge gap.

The implementation of institutional transformation is primarily driven by university leadership and management who set strategic direction and identify priority areas. Rectors, vice-rectors and deans are considered

part of the formal leadership teams at higher education institutions. Senior management roles such as heads of administration, director generals and chief operating officers are also considered as part of the leadership team, but this varies across institutions and countries. The study highlights a shift in perceptions of leadership, moving away from purely hierarchical models to embrace a broader concept of distributed leadership, where leadership is expected throughout the institution.

As for the key skills of university leaders, survey respondents considered personal skills such as effective communication, strategic vision, empathy, assertiveness, networking capacity, conflict management and being an inspiring figure as essential for success. Furthermore, they considered project management and financial skills to be essential technical skills. The uptake of various transnational collaboration initiatives may require new leadership skills to tackle the ambitious institutional transformation agendas undertaken by such projects.

The survey also explored the balance and synergies between academic and professional leadership roles in higher education institutions. The results reveal a variety of opinions on this matter, highlighting the increasing prominence of senior management profiles in universities. The roles of academic leaders and non-academic professionals are perceived differently, with academic leaders primarily responsible for setting strategic direction and non-academic professionals ensuring delivery, execution, compliance, and long-term continuity.

The results also indicate that the balance between the two roles varies across institutions and systems, influenced by personal experience and background. Synergies and complementarities between academic and non-academic leadership roles are considered important, as they bring specialised knowledge, different perspectives, and experiences to the strategic development and implementation of institutional goals.

However, tensions can arise due to differing approaches and priorities between academic rigour and economic demands. The responses highlighted several good practices to ensure sustainable synergies between academic and non-academic professionals through a shared mission and vision, collaborative projects, regular joint meetings, good communication, and common leadership development schemes.

Blended professionals, who have both academic and professional expertise, also foster understanding and build bridges between the academic and managerial leadership profiles, although this profile is less common in Europe than in other regions. The report highlights the diversity in terms of leadership development schemes across Europe. The lack of a commonly shared definition of leadership development schemes leads to a wide range of examples, including induction workshops, mentoring schemes, project management courses, MBAs, job shadowing, and general LDPs. The surveys reveal that about 60% of institutional respondents consider leadership development a high priority, and close to 70% view it as essential for driving organisational change. However, there are variations in the importance and discussion of leadership development at the system level, with some systems considering it of low importance.

Institutional respondents confirmed a lack of structured, well-established leadership development programmes within their institutions. Rather occasional professional development events are common. In many cases, leadership development is supported at the institutional level via access to national and/or international professional networks and participation in thematic peer groups. Top management programmes for senior leaders, leadership teams or other university staff are not the norm across Europe. However, 14 of the 21 national university associations stated that there are specific higher education leadership development programmes in their systems. Out of the 21 responding

national university associations, 18 see untapped potential for a leadership development programme in higher education in their respective systems. Even those that have leadership development programmes in place would recommend a more systemic approach to reach a wider audience.

The reasons for implementing leadership development schemes are to increase the diversity, versatility, and preparedness of executive leaders in universities. These schemes also help leaders acquire financial, legal, and entrepreneurial competences, and develop crisis management skills. While 17% of institutional respondents state that leadership development is not supported at their institution, there is a changing perception, with more institutions becoming interested in running LDPs. However, the offer of structured and well-established programmes is still not the norm across Europe.

The target groups for leadership development schemes are primarily current top academic and professional leaders, as well as aspiring leaders preparing for senior positions. Some schemes focus on academic staff. In the UK, there are specialised continuous professional development schemes for various higher education professionals, such as finance staff, registrars, and professional service directors. Additionally, LDPs may also target younger and aspiring leaders.

The most discussed topics in LDPs include leading and managing staff and teams, strategic planning, and technical knowledge in areas such as financial and project management. Soft/transversal skills such as effective communication and emotional intelligence are not prioritised as top subjects in these programmes.

LDPs in higher education can be delivered face-to-face, blended, or entirely online, with varying durations ranging from several days

to one-year. These programmes may be offered to eligible staff of a specific institution, a group of institutions, or any institution within a specific system. They may be organised by higher education institutions themselves, external providers, national university associations, or university alliances, networks, or consortia.

Funding for leadership development primarily comes from institutional sources, while only a few systems report that national funding is available. Institutional budgets specifically reserved for leadership development opportunities are not common, and support from European funding is widely missing.

Evaluation of such programmes is limited, with most institutions not conducting evaluations. However, the feedback from attendees has generally been positive, highlighting the value of face-to-face interactions and the opportunity to network with colleagues. They also consider self-reflection, self-learning, and action learning to be important elements.

Overall, the report emphasises the need for a more systematic approach to leadership development in higher education, with a focus on enhancing diversity, versatility, and preparedness among executive leaders. The findings also suggest the importance of setting up leadership development schemes and increasing awareness of available resources on leadership and expertise in this field.

## **2.2 LEADING THROUGH DISRUPTIVE TRANSFORMATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

The report "[Leading through disruptive transformations in higher education](#)" draws insights from two focus groups conducted in Barcelona from 31 March to 1 April 2022, and in Reykjavik from 1 to 2 June 2022. The groups brought together members of university

executive leadership teams and explored key areas of transformation such as greening and sustainability, female leadership, and international collaboration in higher education. They adopted a peer-learning and a co-creative approach, encouraging participants to actively contribute through reflective conversations.

University leaders face numerous challenges in their roles. This includes issues such as underinvestment in higher education, short-term project-based funding, threats to institutional autonomy, and the need to communicate the importance of higher education and research to society and political leaders. Internal challenges include governance, resistance to change, integration of different missions, technology integration, internationalisation strategies, gender perspectives, and more. The role of leadership has emerged as a crucial factor in effectively navigating through an ambitious transformation agenda and tackling many of the aforementioned challenges. That said, leaders often find themselves balancing long-term strategy implementation and short-term crisis management.

The distinction between leading and managing a university is not always clear, and the two concepts are often used interchangeably. Leadership involves engaging people in a vision, empowering them, and guiding them through challenging periods, while management focuses on processes and tools to achieve concrete goals. The perception of leadership roles varies across Europe, influenced by governance structures and cultural connotations. Leadership is not limited to formal hierarchies but can also be exercised informally by all members of the academic community.

Leadership can be reflected and worked upon at various levels, e.g. self-leadership, team leadership, and 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 it to remain relevant and successful, especially during disruptive times.

Participants identified several essential skills for successful higher education leaders, including formulating and implementing a vision, emotional intelligence, communication, networking, pattern recognition, people management, empowerment, trust, vulnerability, bridging the gap between politics and academia, active listening, integrity, resilience, coordination, optimism, approachability, critical thinking, reliability, and crisis and project management. These skills align with the three sets of skills identified in the first NEWLEAD report: people management, strategic, and technical skills.

Leadership styles vary and are based on various factors, such as experience, personality traits, and social background. While every leader is different, it is important to choose a leadership style that feels authentic. It is essential for leaders to get support in developing their leadership skills and styles. LDPs play a crucial role in this. 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 levels, rather than fully-fledged LDPs. Hence, in Europe, most university leaders grow into their roles gradually.

The focus group highlighted three pressing transformation topics: enhancing female leadership in higher education, greening and sustainability, and international collaboration. Each thematic area was discussed along with a short diagnosis, causes, challenges, and potential ways to successfully steer the relevant transformations.



## **Female leadership in higher education**

While in many institutions and systems, women make up the majority of the academic body, they are significantly underrepresented in leadership positions.

The root of the problem could be the lack of legislation/regulation supporting better access for women to leadership positions, disruption and slowing of career progression due to care responsibilities, gender biases and stereotypes, or selection bias. To address this, participants recommended promoting a values-based institutional approach that considers diversity and empowerment, developing gender equality action plans, enacting equal opportunities and affirmative action policies, changing mindsets around leadership, creating networks and role models, and integrating gender perspectives into LDPs.

## **Greening and sustainability**

Greening and sustainability are relevant to every aspect of the university mission and universities play a crucial role in the green transition.

However, implementing greening measures can be challenging for many universities, with cost remaining the most significant factor. Yet another challenge is integrating greening efforts across various university missions and operations, such as learning and teaching, research and innovation, governance, and campus management. Senior leaders play a vital role in steering and implementing a greener vision for higher education institutions, but many lack experience in managing large-scale institutional transformations. Potential ways to address this includes embedding greening and sustainability into the institutional strategy with clear targets and action plans for implementation. This covers aligning with local, regional, and national sustainability and

greening strategies, fostering responsibility at the top leadership level (i.e. vice-rector for greening and sustainability), and integrating greening into LDPs.

## **International collaboration**

The report listed international collaboration as a fundamental aspect of higher education, with many universities engaging in strategic partnerships beyond specific projects or student exchanges. The European Universities Initiative (EUI) has created a new dimension of institutional approaches to international collaboration. However, it has also brought considerable challenges, leading to disruptive transformations in internationalisation. International collaboration is often a challenge to traditional working cultures and conventional practices at universities; as university leaders involved in alliances must fulfil additional tasks and respond to new governance challenges. An effective approach to facilitate transnational collaborations needs to start with an internal diagnosis and institutional reflection to assess readiness and identify needs.

University leaders play a key role in driving internationalisation efforts and establishing alliances. Given its importance and the challenges it presents, internationalisation, whether through the EUI or other formats, is a crucial topic for LDPs in higher education.

Addressing the challenges related to enhancing female leadership, greening and sustainability, and international collaboration in higher education requires comprehensive approaches that integrate diversity, sustainability, and global perspectives into institutional strategies. Leadership plays a critical role in driving these transformations, and leaders need to develop a wide range of skills and foster an inclusive and supportive environment.

## **2.3 FRAMEWORK FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES**

Various NEWLEAD activities highlighted the importance of leadership development for institutional transformation in the face of constant change and global pressures. The publication "[Implementing leadership development programmes for university leaders - An inspirational guide](#)" provides a framework for designing and implementing LDPs within higher education institutions and systems. It was developed based on insights from NEWLEAD reports, as well as from previous EUA work on the topic and analysis of semi-structured interviews with providers and users of ten national LDPs in higher education currently running in eight European systems including Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden.

The programmes covered by the interviews target either top academic leadership at the central level (rectors and/or vice-rectors) or at decentralised level (deans), professional university management (heads of professional support services), or heads of study programmes. One programme exclusively addresses female professors aspiring to leadership positions at universities in Switzerland.

The guide presents the reasons to develop a programme, the design process and contents, target groups, and selection of applicants. The analysis of these programmes reveals certain topics that are less frequently covered, such as strategic planning, digital transition, equity, diversity and inclusion, and European and international trends. Most programmes are focused on national issues and context.

The development of LDPs requires intensive and professional preparation. Both their development and implementation demand high resources and costs. However, there is generally no or only little

financial support at national or European level for the development of or participation in such programmes. Ireland, where public start-up funding for the first cohorts of a programme is offered, is one notable exception.

Developing new programmes should start with an evaluation existing offers within a system at institutional or sector level, as well as through other providers. This should be followed by a needs analysis and reflection on the target groups the programme will address. The guide provides examples that demonstrate strong ownership by national university associations, either through expertise available within the university system or through specialised providers (developed from within the sector).

The development of a programme should consider the balance of the three pillars of leadership, management, and governance, which target groups should be addressed, which theoretical concepts should be used as a basis, which contents and topics should be conveyed, which formats should be used, and which speakers and experts should be involved. Flexible formats adapted to the global developments and needs of leaders in institutions need to be considered.

Participant selection methods can include open calls, nominations, assessment of motivation letters, and personal invitations. Considerations such as gender balance, diversity, and relevant qualifications should be taken into account to ensure a well-rounded cohort.

Programmes should provide a mix of theory and practice, incorporating higher education concepts, general management, and leadership theories as theoretical underpinnings.

Diverse formats and methods should be employed to deliver content effectively, such as lectures, role-playing, case studies, simulations, action learning, and peer-learning groups. The choice of facilitators and speakers is crucial, and should favour experienced professionals with a deep understanding of leadership dynamics and change management.

Social learning is integral to programmes, as it fosters interaction, collaboration, and the sharing of experiences. Group discussions, peer case consulting, dilemma-based exercises, and networking events facilitate social learning and the formation of lasting connections among participants. Alumni networks also play an important role.

Evaluation is vital to assess the effectiveness of LDPs. Feedback from participants, both quantitative and qualitative, should be collected at various stages to improve program content and delivery. Meta-evaluations at the central level help shape future iterations. The impact of LDPs should be evaluated in terms of skills learning, behavioural change, performance enhancement, and career progression.

The practical organisation and logistics of LDPs vary. The number of participants ranges from 15 to 30 per cohort and fees from €2,000 to €10,000. They can be conducted at a fixed location or involve modules delivered at different venues. The duration varies, often spanning several days or even months. While physical interaction is preferred, some programmes may incorporate hybrid formats. Confidentiality and participant preparation are important considerations in the delivery.

To ensure the long-term sustainability of programmes, leadership development should be considered in institutional strategies and included in existing career progression frameworks and incentive schemes. To ensure this endeavour, institutional autonomy and funding from national and European policy makers is key.

## 2.4 HE TRANSFORMATION LEADERSHIP - AN ANALYSIS OF EMERGENT AND HIGH POTENTIAL LEADERSHIP STYLES

As part of NEWLEAD, the project consortium developed a workbook which examines the leadership of change and transformation in higher education (HE).

The first part of the workbook concerns the changing context of HE leadership, with a focus on sectoral dynamics and the transformation agenda of higher education institutions (HEIs) and their leaders. HEIs, including universities, operate in a global environment that is evolving quickly. New technologies combine with complex political, economic, socio-demographic, and environmental forces to present a multitude of challenges. These include:

- ▶ Improving access, equity, and inclusion for all in education and training
- ▶ Responding to new labour market needs and structures.
- ▶ Making lifelong learning a reality
- ▶ Supporting green and digital transitions
- ▶ Diversifying sources of funding and responding to public funding cuts
- ▶ Maximizing quality and responding to new sources of competition

The second part of the workbook explores the changing character and demands of leadership in this changing context. First, it explores the nature of leadership, i.e. the ability of a person or persons to inspire and guide others towards a common purpose. Then, it seeks to clarify who it is that leads in a HE context and the specificities of their operating and planning environments. The workbook demonstrates that HE is a culturally embedded sector with a relatively high level of specialisation and intellectual capital. Furthermore, it presents leadership in an HE context as a form of servant leadership underscoring the service made to society by HEIs and a mission that bridges the academic, economic, and social realms.

The final part of the workbook turns to the question of which leadership styles or approaches are most evident in an HE context and which are most likely to be effective in assisting leaders and organisations to meet their transition or transformation challenges. What is clear is that the rapid and intense change taking place in our societies and universities requires strong and effective leadership, which counts as a key factor in our ability to adapt. There is a need for HEI leaders and leadership teams to implement effective leadership styles to better handle the extensive changes characterizing HE landscapes and to shape high impact responses. Therefore, the conclusions are based primarily on secondary evidence and on the experience-based commentary of NEWLEAD project participants. However, it is of note that there is relatively little empirical evidence on this subject and further investigation is needed. In the absence of wider empirical evidence, conclusions are entirely provisional. The ten leadership styles proposed and studied are: authoritative (autocratic), participative (democratic), delegative (laissez-faire), transactional, transformational, visionary, decentralised (shared), inclusive, servant and resonant, and the workbook provides a modest literature review.

Whilst each leadership style has its strengths, the broad conclusion is that those with a more directive or controlling quality such as the autocratic and transactional leadership styles have relatively lower appeal and effectiveness in an HE environment characterised by high levels of autonomy. Command-and-control approaches do not align with the organisational culture of universities and should be used sparingly or exceptionally. We see these approaches as generally inferior to those based on the promotion of shared purpose, participation, inclusion, and collaboration. The same can be said for laissez-faire leadership. Though this traditional style of leadership can fit the academic culture, it may also contribute to strategic drift at a time when institutions are facing pressures to align strategy and investment.

Leadership styles that promote engagement, service, collaboration, and inclusion, especially when directed toward shared purpose or intentionality, are potentially a better fit and efficacy. Transformational leadership - with its visionary element - seems particularly well geared to promoting and/or responding to the wave of challenges hitting and preoccupying HE institutions. The same assertion is possible for the so-called visionary style of leadership. Decentralised or shared leadership approaches are a clear and applicable option in HE in the sense that they are collaborative and allow for diverse perspectives and ideas to have voice and impact in a more bottom-up approach. The evidence suggests that they are widespread. HE spaces are blessed with knowledge and expertise throughout their structure. A decentralised model of decision making encourages people to come up with new ideas and solutions and channel them into organisational decision making.

Finally, and considering the organisational culture of universities, effective leadership styles are likely to be those that place a premium on respect for others/followers and their autonomy. The literature on knowledge communities and knowledge workers points to high levels of self-motivation within the workforce and a strong preference for autonomy. The core principles of inclusive, servant and resonant leadership resonate with HE leaders, underscoring the desire and need to develop people and to engage with them in a democratic and empathetic fashion, all with emphasis on shared intentionality and service to others.

A key conclusion is that different leadership styles fit different situations, purposes, people, and cultures. This means that effective leaders will need to move or switch between different leadership styles in an agile and reflexive fashion. No one-size-fits-all approach will work for all scenarios or teams.

## 2.5 CASE STUDIES

In addition to system-wide analyses, NEWLEAD partners conducted specific analyses focusing on leadership issues within their respective higher education system. The following examples highlight the profound impact of collective leadership at system level, both in driving and supporting significant transformation challenges at institutional level, as well as contributing to the overall development of the system.

### 2.5.1 Collective leadership for the emergency management of crises

Resilience has been emphasised as a critical skill for higher education leaders throughout the NEWLEAD project, particularly in navigating challenging situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Poland's

experience offers valuable insights into the power of collaborative action through the national university association (CRASP), where university leaders united to address major transformation challenges.

In 2020, in response to the government restrictions and the shift to remote work during the Covid-19 health crises, CRASP initiated a coordination network among university leaders to align university activities, and to exchange, monitor and collect data on Covid-19. This network has played a pivotal role in influencing public policies, facilitating information exchange, and promoting collaboration among universities. By regularly coordinating data collection efforts, CRASP ensured that decision making was informed by reliable and up-to-date information, enabling safe university operations and swift responses to outbreaks.

The network not only assisted university leaders in addressing pandemic-related challenges but also enhanced their leadership skills in communication, knowledge and data management, engagement, motivation, risk/crisis management, process planning and mapping, organisational assessment, goal orientation, ethical awareness, team building, staff empowerment, societal engagement, and collective leadership. The network's activities further supported the integration of technology and digitalisation into academic processes and culture.

The network was also used by CRASP to address academia's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the resulting migration of refugees. Through collective actions and collaborative statements, CRASP provided unified support to Ukrainian higher education institutions and demonstrated solidarity with those affected by the conflict.

CRASP's collaboration with government agencies during the crisis has been instrumental in shaping policies and providing support. Consultation with the Ministry of Education and Science and other

relevant entities ensured that special measures and special regulations were taken to address the unique challenges posed by the conflict. Furthermore, their expertise in scholarship schemes for Ukraine, shared through national funding agencies, e.g. the National Agency for Academic Exchange, has facilitated educational opportunities for those affected by the crisis. Collective leadership was also demonstrated by EUA in this case through the work of the EUA Ukraine Task Force and several reports that contributed to an analysis of the situation and possible solutions.

CRASP has also supported the Ministry to organise external exams for Ukrainian school-leavers in 2022 in Poland during vacation time as well as in 2023. This was made possible thanks to the regular and effective communication within the CRASP network, centralized data collection and exchange of information.

Moreover, Polish-Ukrainian collaboration at the level of national rectors' conferences (project based, funded by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine), joint studies and regular consultations and dialogue contributes to development of university leaders' skills and knowledge. In addition, it strengthens their collective capacity, which has a direct and indirect impact on agenda setting and policy development in both countries.

The collective leadership demonstrated by CRASP has had a profound impact on the Polish academic community. Through their coordination efforts and internal cooperation, they have guided universities, supported leaders and staff, shaped policies, and fostered integration among stakeholders. CRASP's dedication to effective leadership in terms of crisis and their ability to leverage collective action serve as a valuable model for institutions facing similar challenges.

### 2.5.2 Leading change in diversity and cross-cutting challenges – the Spanish university system

Equity, diversity, and inclusion are increasingly important topics in leadership in higher education institutions. The NEWLEAD report "[Leading change in diversity and cross-cutting challenges](#)", developed by Ramon Llull University and Crue Spanish Universities (Crue), explored the transformational impact of integrating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into universities' missions and activities. It explored the related leadership challenges and the possibilities of shared or collective leadership in advancing institutional transformation in the implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda in the strategy of Spanish universities. The report explores the benefits that collaborative leadership can do to address cross-cutting challenges in the Spanish university system.

The two case studies, one at national level and the other at regional level, shed light on the diverse challenges that arise from implementing the SDGs in universities, which are directly relevant to the overall mission of these institutions. The report explores specific challenges that university leaders face in this context, including governance and coordination, institutional culture, awareness and visibility, training and development, and data collection and analysis.

At the regional level, the Catalan Public University Association committed to contributing to the achievement of the UN's Agenda at sector level. Together with the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency they adopted a general framework to incorporate a gender perspective into higher education, resulting in a guide aimed at fulfilling SDG 5 on gender equality.

Furthermore, the Government of Catalonia implemented the Catalonia 2030 Alliance, which included the university sector through the Interuniversity Council of Catalonia commission. This working group assessed the integration of the SDGs in the Catalan university system. Based on the results an action plan was developed focusing on five key areas: strategy and governance, education and teaching, research and transfer, engagement with society, and campus initiatives.

At the national level, the report addresses how Spanish universities have worked to advance towards a more inclusive and equitable quality education in higher education institutions. While legislative efforts to improve the participation of people with disabilities in the Spanish university education system have made progress, particularly with the introduction of new legislation in 2023, there are still significant challenges to address regarding access, retention, and completion of university studies. Crue Spanish Universities, committing to diversity and disability support, has partnered with various stakeholders to develop studies and guidelines promoting inclusive practices. These efforts have led to the formulation of strategies aimed at enhancing access and progress for students with disabilities.

The role played by Crue shows that institutional collaboration and coordination have been crucial to advancing the inclusion of an increasingly diverse university community. Collective leadership has also been crucial in fostering an inclusive environment within universities and advancing inclusion in the diverse university community. One of the initiatives focused on improving learning, teaching, and student orientation to enable a greater number of young people with disabilities to pursue and successfully complete their university studies. Another project aimed to adapt curricula to train professionals who consider the

impact of disability on society, equipping them to design and provide inclusive services for this group.

Furthermore, in response to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, Crue intensified their efforts for inclusion. Recommendations were issued to ensure that remote teaching did not exclude students with disabilities or special educational needs. Adaptations were made to online formats to ensure equal opportunities for all students. Crue also played a leading role in ensuring universal accessibility, non-discrimination, and equality in university entrance exams.

Implementing SDGs presents significant challenges, necessitating strong leadership and institutional transformations, and the analysis points to important challenges that should be considered for institutional strategies to be effectively implemented. These mainly revolve around governance and interinstitutional coordination; changes in institutional culture, awareness raising and visibility; challenges that derive from the need to appropriately collect and monitor comprehensive data; and the fundamental need to allocate resources and provide training and recognition at universities.

Moreover, the Spanish experience demonstrates that the personal experience of leaders with disabilities improves awareness about equity and inclusion and the way in which these initiatives and practices are prioritised within the institutional strategy and transformation process.

The key takeaways from the report point to the importance of the following leadership dimensions to improve the implementation of transformative processes within HEIs for them to better adapt to current cross-cutting challenges.

1. Institutional transformation in equity and inclusion is highly dependent on leadership traits such as empathy, collaboration, and openness. Changes in leadership teams also determine the pace that transformation occurs.
2. It is fundamental to provide professionals with the necessary skills to become agents of change in their communities, including new capacities and knowledge, as well as new leadership.
3. Collaborative work and networking are key strategies to achieve progress and evolution. Especially when institutions are confronted with disruptive and systemic transformations, it is key to add efforts from all social agents to ensure success.

The examples of both the Catalan system and the entire Spanish system demonstrate the effectiveness of collective leadership within networks and associations in driving significant systemic transformation.





## Conclusions and recommendations

The NEWLEAD project findings highlight the complexity of leading organisations such as universities and the increasingly diverse skill set required to navigate new and evolving challenges. The concept of leadership has also evolved, shifting gradually from a hierarchical model to one that emphasises team leadership and stewardship approaches. Additionally, the project emphasised the role of collective leadership, where university leaders at the system level collaborate to address crises and drive transformative changes in higher education.

Strong leadership is crucial for universities to reap the benefits of institutional autonomy and effectively address big transformative agendas such as the green and digital transitions, and equity, diversity and inclusion, as well as new intensified transnational collaboration formats such as the European university alliances.

To succeed in these endeavours, universities must foster leadership throughout the institution, including academic and professional support leaders. Leadership and staff development should be intrinsically connected to new developments, recognising the need for a multifaceted approach to developing new leadership skills.

Leadership development is an ongoing process that requires continued learning and implementation, addressing various groups within the institution. Institutions need to adopt a strategic approach offering a diversified portfolio of internal and external opportunities, encompassing personal, team, and strategic leadership skills.

Professional leadership development programmes play a vital role in reinforcing the institutions' capacity to tackle challenges and deliver impactful solutions. However, structured LDPs are not yet widespread in Europe, with varying availability across different systems. Therein lies a real opportunity for a European-level offer, that could both complement existing programmes and provide new opportunities where resources or programmes are lacking.

It is important to recognise that no single programme can cover all aspects of leadership development. Programmes should be viewed within the broader context of leadership development opportunities, emphasising the need for integration into career progression frameworks and incentive schemes.

Universities themselves should integrate leadership development into their institutional strategies and operationalise this through the allocation of dedicated budgets and resources to support LDPs. University leaders should actively promote this approach and participate in leadership development programmes to lead by example.

Evidence shows that financial support for LDPs remains limited, particularly at national and European levels. Policy makers should invest significantly in leadership development, providing substantial funding for both programme development and participation costs. At national level, public funders should provide funding and incentives for universities

to develop institutional and system-level leadership development programmes. National university associations can contribute by offering modular programmes at system level.

European funding programmes should establish dedicated streams to address the uneven distribution of leadership programmes across Europe and fund the delivery of European LDPs, as well as participation costs.

European policies should incorporate leadership development as a key condition for successful implementation of the major transformation agendas at universities.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

The NEWLEAD project outputs are consolidated in this report. The following key recommendations capture the essence of the more in-depth and comprehensive recommendations tailored to universities, and their leaders, sector representatives, and European and national policy makers that can be found in each of the published NEWLEAD products:

#### Universities and their leaders should:

1. Design and implement a comprehensive leadership development strategy that addresses the evolving challenges and transformation agendas faced by universities.
2. Foster leadership development throughout the institution, recognising the importance of both academic and professional service leaders.
3. Support and diversify the range of leadership development opportunities available to staff, including peer-learning, mentoring, coaching, and formal leadership development programmes.

4. Provide a varied portfolio of internal and external leadership development programmes, considering opportunities at institutional, system, and European levels.
5. Recognise that no single leadership development programme may cover all relevant aspects and topics to be addressed, considering the diversity of needs.
6. Integrate leadership development in existing career progression frameworks and incentive schemes to ensure its long-term sustainability.

#### National policy makers should:

1. Acknowledge and reward institutions that demonstrate a strategic and diverse range of leadership development opportunities.
2. Provide incentives and targeted financial support to institutions to establish comprehensive and varied leadership development programmes.
3. Offer financial and other support for initiatives that aim to provide leadership development programmes at system level.

#### European policy makers should:

1. Provide dedicated financial support through European funding programmes for the sustainable development and delivery of European leadership development programmes for university leaders.
2. Provide financial support and scholarships for participation in European leadership development programmes, to close the gap in systems and institutions across Europe that do not offer such programmes.
3. Recognise the importance of leadership for the successful implementation of European policies in relation to education and research and include recommendations in related policies.

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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