

# The importance of moral leadership at universities

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Universities must stand up for ethical behaviour because they are the teachers of future leaders. To do so they must have courageous leaders who understand the importance of ethics in a world where they can be held to account in a way that is unprecedented. I once discovered that an article published by my student had been plagiarised by two professors at a university in Azerbaijan. They had stolen the text and simply put their names on it. I wrote to the rector of their university. I received a reply saying that the two professors were to have a hearing. The professors would have the opportunity to defend themselves.



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About two weeks later I received a summary of the proceedings. The two professors had been found guilty and had been dismissed from the university.

The prestige of that particular university was raised significantly because, contrary to the norms of the wider community, it had acted in a courageous manner. It acted on the principle of honesty and professionalism even in an environment where few other institutions could claim such principles or act on them. This university would not have acted with such courage had the university leadership been cowardly.

Universities have two broad functions. One is to pass on the knowledge and skills drawn from human endeavour since the beginning of time. A second is to seek the truth. It is the only institution charged with that responsibility. Universities have no army; they do not make laws that pertain to the wider society; and they do not manage economies. But what they do is of equal importance to any of those functions.

They are honour-bound to seek the truth and to explain it. They are honour-bound to treat all participants, students and faculty, fairly, without prejudice based on characteristics of birth or background. By their actions they demonstrate the manner in which difficult, even unpopular, subjects can be debated without recourse to violence or intolerance.

Because they choose the knowledge most worth knowing, higher education institutions play a deciding factor in the development of future leadership and national social cohesion. The leadership of a great university must represent these principles. They must embody them. Great leaders in higher education are spokespersons for a civilised world. To the extent that they do their job with courage, they are worth every cent they earn in their salaries.

## **Corrupt leaders and neutral administrators**

But the opposite is also true. Similar to an immoral priest who preys on defenceless youth, a

corrupt leader in higher education plays a particularly pernicious role. A corrupt leader in higher education demonstrates that cynicism and cheating can be an acceptable attitude of the university graduate. A corrupt leader in higher education will poison the nation's wells by demonstrating that the law does not apply to them.

But the problem cannot be divided easily into two clear categories, courageous versus corrupt leadership. The fact is that most higher education leaders see themselves simply as administrators, much like the director of a public bus station might. To them the institution itself should be judged solely by whether it runs on time, not by whether it plays a leading role in generating model citizens or leaders with character attributable to their higher education experience.

While this 'neutral administrator' tradition is common, one of the benefits of the competition for world-class status is the universalisation of higher education leadership goals. To be sure, there are many negative ramifications of this competition; but these negative ramifications may be offset by the need for competitive institutions to behave honourably and with common definitions of excellence.

### **Promoting ethical codes**

The question may be asked as to how a leader can demonstrate a standard of honesty. The answer must begin with an unusual proposition: a higher education institution that does not advertise its honour codes and does not openly discuss the efforts it makes to hold itself to standards of integrity can be assumed to be corrupt.

Higher education ethics is not like a court case in which a defendant is assumed innocent until proven guilty. It is the opposite: an institution can be assumed to be guilty unless it demonstrates that it is free of corruption.

And here higher education leaders play a critical role. They speak publicly about the ethics of their institution; they explain the details of how their institution manages ethical transgressions on the part of administrators, faculty and students; and they are the first to admit when there has been a failure. Leaders of ethical institutions today can be held to account in a way that is unprecedented.

In essence, the role higher education leaders play is delicate because all will be watching their actions – students, political leaders and the wider public, both locally and globally.

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