

A Systematic Literature Review on Change and Leadership in Higher Education

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Abstract: This paper presents a systematic literature review that focuses on the topics of change and leadership in Higher Education, in order to synthesis existing research in this key emerging area and provide some direction for future research. A review framework and method are outlined, in order to clarify the type and source of literature to be reviewed and the focus of this review process. Then, findings are analysed and presented, and thematic areas identified and analysed. Gaps in research are then explored followed by a conclusion and recommendations. Initially, 80 relevant articles were identified from Scopus and Academic Search Complete since 2010. Through abstract review, articles, which did not adequately relate to change and leadership were removed. The final number of papers reviewed and thematically analysed in detail were 23. This research confirms that there has been a steady output of peer-reviewed journal articles published that focused on both leadership and change in Higher Education. Through thematic analysis, several key themes emerged. These included an array of change drivers and the internal and external context associated with politics, culture and traditions and the developmental stage of the higher educational system. Staff utilisation, collaboration and development were additional themes identified that set the scene to determine effective leadership approaches and characteristics. The final theme identified was leadership recruitment and development. Many knowledge gaps from an instrumental, humanistic, critical, and philosophical perspective were identified. It is hoped that this literature review will aid further scholars in their research and develop new knowledge so that convergent views on this important topic will surface.

Keywords: Literature Review, Change, Leadership, Higher Education

1. Introduction

Change is unavoidable across all industries and is crucial for growth so leaders must be able to react to new trends, developments, and attitudes to enable them to be effective and allow their organisations to thrive (Fullan, 2020). In addition to dramatic disruptions because of Covid 19, significant issues currently face Higher Educational Institute's (HEIs) including increased workload, reduced staff development opportunities and concerns over investment in information technology, which lead to inefficiencies (QQI 2016). In the context of most Irish Institutes of technology (ITs) merging to become Technological Universities (TUs), the topics of change and leadership have never been as important in higher education.

This systematic literature review focuses on the topics of change and leadership in Higher Education to provide some direction for future research in this area. A suitable framework and method are initially outlined, to clarify the type and source of literature to be reviewed and the focus of this review process. Then, findings are analysed and presented, and thematic areas identified and critiqued. Gaps in research will then be explored followed by a conclusion and recommendations.

2. Review framework and method

An effective way of initiating a literature review is to determine its fit with the Taxonomy of Literature Reviews which incorporates five characteristics- focus, goal, perspective, coverage, organisation, and audience (Randolph 2019, cited in Cooper 1988). The focus of this literature was primarily on the research outcomes or findings. The goal was to integrate the knowledge gained and identify the main themes. After completing some preliminary literature searches, the search criteria were tailored so that the quality and relevance of literature were high, and the volume had a critical mass for reviewing. Targeting an academic audience, analysis was then undertaken to identify the most common sources, trends and type of knowledge domains used.

Search strategies typically use an index such as Scopus for keyword searches or search within relevant journals (Kovacevic and Hallinger, 2019). Initially, a general library search was conducted (Maynooth University) in addition to Google Scholar, to get an appreciation of the literature in this niche area. Given the large volume identified, it was decided to limit the literature review to peer- reviewed academic articles only and utilise Scopus and Academic Search Complete (EBSCO) to identify the best sources. To get an optimum number of articles to review within the time available, the search was limited to those in the English language, published

between April 2010 to April 2020. The following search words were used and needed to be contained in the article title:

(Change or transform) and (Leadership or management) and (Higher Education or university or post-secondary school).

When these search criteria were used, Scopus and Academic Search Complete (EBSCO) identified 80 articles. Another filter was applied by performing an abstract review to remove non relevant articles. Articles specific to data management, hospitality management and diversity were removed. This reduced the article count to 43. In order to rationalise down further to the core research area, another filter was applied that required each article to include the word 'Leadership' as well as 'Change' in its title. This filter removed articles focused on general change management but did not have the reference to leadership. The resulting final article count was 23 peer reviewed articles that matched the core area of focus for this literature review. Figure 1 shows a summary of this filtering process.

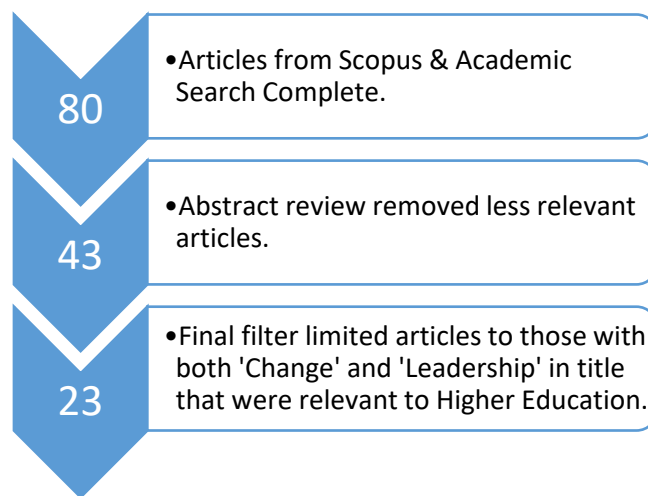


Figure 1: Main Literature Filtering Steps

The next step involved sourcing these full articles in various sites including Scopus, Academic Search Complete, Library Search, Google Scholar, and Google. The articles were then read to get an overall appreciation of the content as well as identify each article source, output or findings, research methodology and its knowledge domain.

3. Findings and analysis

Figure 2 demonstrates that within the 10-year period, there has been a steady output of peer reviewed journal articles published that focused on both leadership and change in Higher Education. The largest number of published articles occurred in 2018 with a total of three and the overall trend is positive in output. (Note 2020 has one article to date but was omitted from the diagram as it was not a complete year for this exercise.)

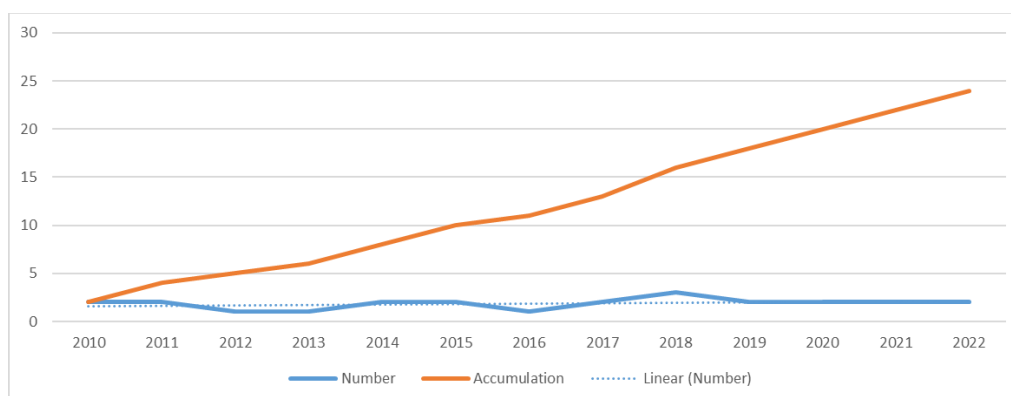


Figure 2: Distribution of literature from 2010-2020

Two main academic journals were identified as the most common sources of relevant literature: Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management as well as the International Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Change Management. 13 other sources were identified, each with one article indicating quite a diverse and fragmented range of sources overall.

With regards to leadership research in education, Gunter (2016) created four knowledge domains as field position outcomes to view how change is engaged with. Each piece of literature was reviewed and aligned to these domains and presented in Figure 3. Most of the research in this area has been carried out mainly from a humanistic knowledge domain perspective (eight papers). Five papers were from the critical Domain, 3 philosophical and finally three articles took an instrumental perspective.

Figure 4 shows that a qualitative approach was taken by most researchers in this area such as interviews of various leaders or stakeholders. A small number of researchers utilised quantitative approaches. These included Waisy (2020) who gathered survey data from 611 lecturing staff to show the relationship between transformational leadership and affective commitment to change of staff. Dobi's (2012) 89 survey respondents in academia provided evidence to support distributed leadership. However, there was no article identified which utilised a mixed methods of both quantitative and qualitative techniques to support their research findings.

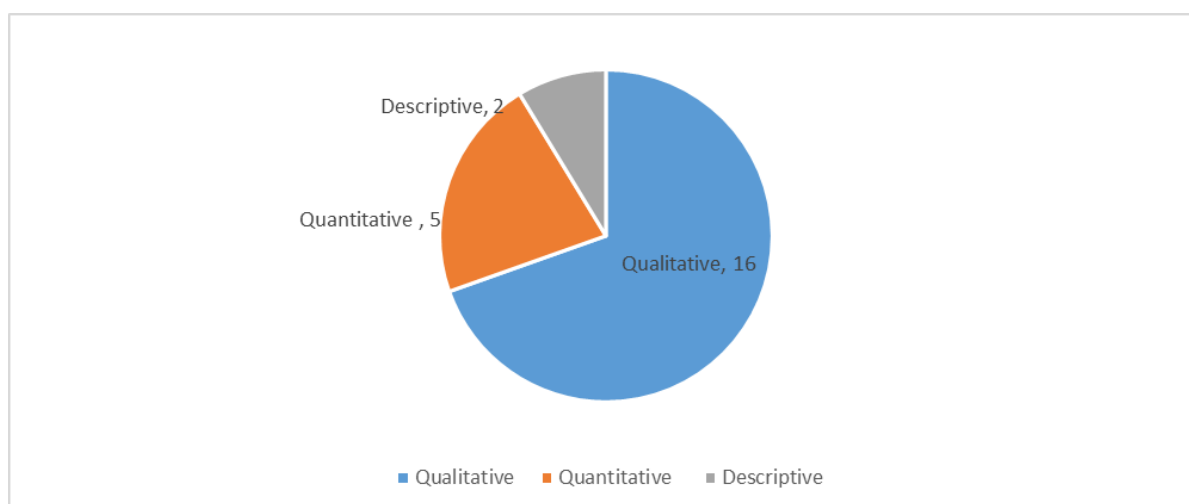


Figure 3: Research Methodology of Literature

3.1 Change drivers

The first theme, which emerged from this literature review was the articulation of the need for change and its drivers. Many change drivers were identified, that need to be considered when establishing the best form of leadership to be deployed.

Globalisation and technology drivers are forcing organisations to change, in order to remain competitive and survive (Geraiden et al, 2018). Finances for HEIs are in a state of disruption as state funding for education will more than likely continue to decline for the foreseeable future (Collins, 2014). With ongoing technology advancement throughout all levels of higher education, systems thinking is important, but it is “applied within a complex, imperfect social and organizational cultural context that requires compromise, consensus building, patience and a willingness to proceed slowly” (Chow, 2013 p 64).

Many structural governance and institutional changes are occurring in Higher Education across Europe, Australasia and North America, associated with achieving greater productivity and economic performance. This new managerialism can be described as New Public Management (NPM) and is having a significant impact on higher education (Howells et al, 2014). Waring (2017) believes that such change has transformed academic departments to focus on corporate targets but with tight budgets. Higher Education is increasingly decentralised, due to devolved agency of the state, and more fragmentation, due to an increasing number of actors in the higher education field such as ranking agencies and funding agencies (Howells et al, 2014). In Finland for example, universities underwent reform in 2010 to transform from state agencies to a more responsive market focused independent entity (Kohtamaki, 2019).

Internationalisation is a key driver of change as it is an important component to the experience of learners living in a globalised world (Said et al, 2015). HEIs must deal with increasingly diverse students who engage differently with higher education (Kezar, 2014). In addition, Dahlvig (2018) states that as a result of marketization and globalisation, institutions are aiming to reach broader markets by recruiting international students. In addition to standard full-time face to face programmes, many other types of educational programmes have been developed to cater for diverse requirements including apprenticeships, part time online programmes and work-based learning programmes.

Climate change and environmental sustainability are highlighted as the most pressing issues facing mankind, but the focus of Higher education has become more aligned to the private benefit of students than to build a civil society and that rebalancing this will take expert leadership (Dahlvig, 2018). A case study embedding this philosophy into curriculum at Plymouth University was published by Warwick (2016), which shows how curriculum can consider three dimensions- concern for people and planet, from local to global geography and from present to future.

More recently, research is emerging in relation to how HEI's have coped with Covid-19 (Makaram et al, 2021) and how they are addressing the gender balance issue (Gebretsadik, 2021; Lagesen and Suboticki, 2022).

Most change drivers found in this research could be potentially related. For example, with increased globalisation and associated competition, countries are decentralising educational governance and performance management is being used. In addition, HEIs seek to diversify income streams through international and diversified recruitment, which also benefits the experience of learners.

3.2 Change context

The influence of HEI's internal and external context was found to be another theme from this research. Human Resource Management practices, politics, culture, traditions, and the developmental stage of the higher educational system were identified by researchers as being important. Contextual factors are important when researching change (Ben et al, 2013) and educational leaders need to take these into account when determining their approach to change leadership.

Human Resource Management was identified as a management ideology, but Waring (2017) believes it must be abandoned and a judgemental approach to performance management replaced by one that is employee centred. In some institutes, the pressure to publish or perish may leave little time or energy for other activities as faculty and institutions typically focus on research identity (Dahlvig, 2018). However, as a result of performance management initiatives, recruitment in a Norwegian University was focused on research performance, which led to recruitment of highly published staff who could not teach (Rasmussen, 2015).

It is suggested that the western world has four different types of HEI models, which influence leadership structures and operations (Tjeldvoll, 2011). In this particular research, contrasts in internal factors are formed between HEIs made up of self-governing community of scholars, driven by internal dynamics to those which have representative democracy where change depends on bargaining and conflict resolution. External influencing factors are also contrasted between HEI's that are modelled as instruments of national policies and deliver political objectives, to HEIs that are more geared towards addressing globalisation by being a service to the community and adapting to changing circumstances and customers. However, some countries have less developed educational systems such as that in Albania, where twenty years after the collapse of communism, their centralised and public education systems have not evolved like others across the world (Dobi, 2012).

Cultural influences and traditions may also have a significant impact on leadership and the performance of higher education (Tjeldvoll, 2011). Universities in East Asia with strong Confucian traditions of knowledge importance, have not evolved like Anglo- American universities and retain hierarchical structures, as their culture accepts leaders to lead and give instruction. In addition, learners in these universities have a hunger for knowledge, work hard and expect to complete (Tjeldvoll, 2011). Collins (2014) argues that effective leadership in any organization especially not for profit ones, relies on persuasion and any effort to encourage and teach leadership will fail unless it is sensitive to the distinctive challenges of higher education's individualistic culture.

3.3 Academic staff

To deal with issues and challenges facing HEI's, building and maintaining the team and developing the individual is necessary (Drew, 2010). However, Collins (2014) states that as a result of the culture of individual scholarship, HEIs do not encourage academics to develop as academic leaders and many lack leadership training programmes for academics. Several key staff attributes that support change were identified in this literature review, but little emphasis on the need for staff training was present. Drew (2010) suggests that academics as independent thinkers, find collaborating a challenge. Geraiden et al (2018) believes emotional intelligent employees are more open to change. Additional research suggests that staff mind set (growth or fixed) influence people's choices in approaching or avoiding risk, as well as their willingness to exert effort (Dahlvig, 2018). Therefore, leaders need to source and retain suitable academic staff with the right skill sets, and further research to support staff development in areas such as collaboration, mind-set and emotional intelligence would strengthen the case for this type of training and possibly lead to HEIs being more open and proactive to change.

Another important area identified in this research is that leaders need to be aware of the academic context and expertise of staff who have increasing demands and form complex social organisations. Drew (2010) points out that HEI tensions exist at an academic level, between pedagogy and research versus creating efficiencies. In the context of resource reduction, academics have higher academic workloads and increased administration associated with managerialism (Drew, 2010). Chow (2013) highlights that HEIs are complex, imperfect social organisations that require compromise and consensus building and this leads to proceeding slowly with changes and that challenges were less technological and more related to relationships between different stakeholders and differing expectations and that getting consensus on the vision at the initial stages of change prevented future barriers. The human dimension is critical in issues and challenges to do with leadership (Drew, 2010). In the context of merging two public sector institutions, Choi et al (2011) argues that top-down management carries a lot of risk as the clash between professionalism and managerialism is a bigger issue for leadership than differences in organisational cultures and that inter and intra-organisational dynamics are critical in change processes. Edwards et al (2018) believes that most HEIs should have a systematic approach to strategies by utilising staff expertise to appreciate thinking, improve ownership and identify solutions. Research provides evidence that leaders influence readiness for change at both the individual and organizational level and such leaders may be positional leaders or opinion leaders (Dahlvig, 2018).

3.4 Leadership approaches and characteristics

In order to address the implementation of change in the context of Higher Education, many different approaches to leadership have been revealed through this research and vary in terms of the degree to which control is dispersed or distributed (Lazaridou, 2019). As well as leadership approaches, various leadership characteristics emerge from this research, which are important to reflect on so that we can get a deeper insight into leaders as individuals.

Burrell and Rahim (2010) recommend that a strategic thinking approach is taken for higher education leadership, one that utilises strategic planning and change frameworks, which encourages support for change and creative organisational structures. However, due to the complexity involved, they highlight that higher education has not operated in this way previously. In addition, Choi et al (2011) warns through a research case study, that a top-down leadership approach leads to a limited sense of organisational complexity as well as the impact that the professionalism of staff can have on resisting change. Therefore, this approach does not carry much support from scholars in this research.

A more collegial approach to leadership is supported in this research. Bolden et al. (2009) supports an emergent leadership style, which is characterised as an unplanned, bottom-up informal approach and does not adhere to clear lines of hierarchy and command but emerges from staff interaction and initiative. This approach resonates with the concept of adhocracy that promotes inclusivity, flexibility and devolution of power, which are being seen as the best means of engaging staff in a time of rapid change and increasing competition (Waring, 2017). Distributed leadership is another term found in this research, which has similarities to emergent leadership and was seen to counteract the negative effects of managerialism and performance management (Jones and Harvey 2017; Waring, 2017). Apart from better staff engagement, research indicates that a more decentralised organisational model has many other benefits including enhanced student communication and involvement (Dobi, 2012). In the context of Covid-19, Mukaram (2021) suggests that adaptive leadership contributes to organisational readiness for change. However, given that distributed and adaptive leadership approaches involve extensive consultation which takes time, some critical research in this area would be worthwhile.

Many personal leadership characteristics were threaded through this research. Although these characteristics are fragmented and diverse, they enable a deeper understanding of leaders as individuals, and identifies several personal traits needed to successfully lead change in HEIs. Kohtamaki (2019) believes that leaders have three roles- symbolic, responsive and discretionary (focusing their direction based on their interpretations) and by applying resource dependent theory, crucial resource types sought by leaders were identified, which drive their action and effort; these are financial, power and human resources. The topics of finance and human resources have been previously unpacked in other themes, but further research on the topic of leadership power through relationship networks would be very useful. When incorporating new performance mechanisms, Kohtamaki (2019) also discovered that leaders worked with people to develop trust, and this is also supported by Waisy and Wei (2020). Finally, Kohtamaki (2019) provides evidence that leaders use a positive spirit, which resonates with positive leadership research by Dahlig (2018). The benefits of positive leadership are well documented during times of change and utilises positive psychology to improve staff efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience (Dahlgvig (2018). This resonates with the previous theme of staff and the development of teams as well as everyone (Drew, 2010). The area of positive psychology is not well developed in this literature review and requires further research to determine its influencing potential on change and associated leadership.

Elsewhere, research by Howells et al (2014) characterises leadership agency into four themes of vision, alignment, strategic collaboration and innovation. Having a vision, while aligning the direction of departments was seen as important as well as strategic collaboration with other institutions and innovative approaches underpinning the institute (Howells et al, 2014). Murphy (2010) also highlights the importance of innovation by outlining practical rules for effective leadership which include a search for solutions and creative thinking. Creativity and innovation are important factors for change management and facilitates organic change (Buller, 2014). However, these topics require further research to determine their potential strategic impact to HEIs.

Another key leadership characteristic found in this research is the ability to understand the type of change being made and the appropriate timescale. Laxaridou (2019) distinguishes between technical and adaptive changes in order to have appropriate and effective leadership responses, but elsewhere the types of changes and their influence on leadership was absent. In relation to timelines, Waring (2017) makes a case for incrementalism by making small shifts and building commitment gradually and argues that resistance is minimised as people come to accept new methods of working or behaviour over time. Kohtamaki (2019) reinforces this approach through a research case study that implemented a new management culture. In addition, Gerarden et al, (2018) provide evidence that organizational readiness for change is usually supported by making change gradually. However, as previously stated, some changes may need to be implemented quickly so this incremental approach many not always be feasible, so additional research is required to examine this area.

To enable effective leadership, Murphy (2010) argues that leaders need have full commitment, be able to act with others (teams) and act alone (uniqueness), manage risks, learn to lead, and be able to sell ideas and have perseverance and passion. However, Howell et al (2014) argues that leadership qualities need to be closely aligned with the nature and types of institutional work in which the leaders should be engaged. Leadership qualities identified include ensuring internal integration, creating formal structures and frameworks, linking past and present actions, making the hard choices and being self-aware (Howell et al, 2014).

3.5 Leadership recruitment and development

With regards to leadership recruitment, it is recommended that HEIs think now about what sort of leadership their institutions need, then recruit people who will be effective in that environment (Collins, 2014). However, concerns in relation to recruitment processes for staff have previously been highlighted, which are also applicable for leaders (Waring 2017; Rasmussen 2015). Gender balance is still a concern in higher education and leaders have a key part to play in addressing this key issue which is experiencing a slow pace of change (Lagesen and Suboticki, 2022; O'Connor, 2020). In addition, Collins (2014) believes that staff recruited for their individual scholarship may not have the leadership skillsets to inspire and persuade. Management roles are very different and Waring (2017) stresses that departments are being transformed into business units run by management teams focused on corporate targets, working within tight budgetary constraints.

This research identifies an alternative to specific recruitment of leaders which is upskilling and development of existing academic staff. Patton (2021) argues that academic leadership expertise is developmental and evolutionary and requires continuous refinement. However, Collins (2014) maintains that faculty members are seldom facilitated to develop as academic leaders and there is a lack of leadership training programs for the

average faculty member, as there seems to be an assumption that good scholars make good leaders, but this is not always the case. As a result, there is the need for appropriate and ongoing leadership training and development (Field, 2015; Waring, 2013). Many potential benefits have been identified in this research, from developing local leaders on the first stage of their career trajectory (Irving, 2015) to developing a more inclusive approach to leadership that enables universities to respond to opportunities with greater agility (Waring, 2017).

With regards to leadership training and development, which compliments the previous topic of developing staff as individuals, Kohtamaki (2019) suggests that leaders benefit from courses in business administration, human resources/leadership and psychology and that mid-level managers' professional development has been shown to involve three phases: learning, function development and institutional projection and transmission of management tasks. Waring (2017) believes that HEIs already have the Academic specialists in these relevant areas to develop such programmes and that the involvement of trade union representatives would prepare leaders for dealing with individual grievances, disputes and conflict. Gebretsadik (2022) highlights that leaders need to also be committed to change tools and provide resources such as training for smooth implementation of change at universities. However, evidence of appropriate training courses is absent in the literature.

3.6 Gaps and limitations in literature reviewed

Although this literature review focused solely on peer reviewed journal articles, a methodical approach was taken, and a critical mass of articles was uncovered. Therefore, there is merit in identifying the gaps in research. Although themes were identified from the 19 articles, the research appears to be very fragmented with little consensus overall. This may be related to the variety of journal sources from around the world. In addition, there is a lack of empirical and quantitative data to support the predominantly qualitative research undertaken to date. Although the change drivers and staff profile are well documented and the context is well developed, many gaps have emerged.

The first major gap appears to be the lack of research in the instrumental knowledge domain, which is associated with tangible models, processes and tools for effective change leadership implementation. Although creating a vision is referenced (Howells et al, 2014) as well as strategic thinking positioned by Edwards et al (2018), little exploration has been done to demonstrate successful models of strategic plan development and implementation. In addition, this literature review did not identify the various weaknesses of strategic management or alternative approaches of scenario planning or a strategic compass, which are described in detail in a book by Buller (2014). Research is required to develop the concept of multiple approaches or types of leadership being required simultaneously at different levels of the organisation (Kohtamaki, 2019). In the context of increasing financial and time constraints, there is also no reference to how technology can assist in change leadership efficiency or any reference to quality or project management for productivity improvement and how they relate to change leadership. Innovation is introduced by Howells et al (2014) and could lead to emergent/organic leadership, but further research is needed to integrate its influence on leadership. Regarding change management, Ben et al (2013) states that researchers should examine context, content, process and outcomes when studying change. From this literature review, context is reasonable well addressed. However, the content, scale or type of change is not always clarified, and the presence and outcomes of change processes are absent, even though they are significant for change leadership (Buller, 2014). It must be noted that many theoretical change management models have been developed in literature but only two are referenced in this research by Dahlvig (2018) and Gerarden et al (2018). Exploring how various change management models relate to leadership is not established and it would be interesting to examine how each stage may influence the leadership approaches used and how leaders balance their time between the softer people development skills and harder process related skills, two key areas vital for successful change leadership identified by Buller (2014).

From a humanistic perspective, there is a reasonable coverage of knowledge in change leadership and its interactions with staff, leaders and organisations overall. However, there is further opportunity for research relating to change drivers and contextual factors, and their impact on staff and leaders. Also, there is no analysis done to demonstrate the different change leadership skills, activities and relationships required by key academic roles such as Programme Chair/Director, Head of Department or Head of School/Faculty. Gerarden et al (2018) suggests future research is needed to investigate the effects of factors such as training, motivation, culture, and recognition. Training and development of both staff and leaders was found to be important to enable effective and successful change and skills required were identified and the potential of positive psychology touched upon. However, further research to support staff and leader development in areas such as innovation, collaboration, positive psychology (including mind-set and emotional intelligence), would strengthen the case for this type of

training and possibly lead to HEIs being more proactive to investment in this area, which could result in more agile organisations.

Finally, there are gaps in research from a critical and philosophical perspective. The topic of distributed/emergent leadership was a frequent occurrence, but further research from a critical viewpoint would balance this topic. The fundamental question of why changes are required, and what changes should be implemented can be further explored. In addition, we see globalisation as a major influencer of change but additional research to see how this can be counterbalanced with ethical demands from a civil society perspective would be worthwhile.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

This literature review is the first of its kind on these topics and is very timely in the context of Covid-19. An array of change drivers was identified, and the internal and external context associated with politics, culture and traditions and the developmental stage of the higher educational system were found to be important influencers to change and leadership. Staff utilisation, collaboration and development were additional themes identified that set the scene to determine effective leadership approaches and characteristics. The final theme identified was leadership recruitment and development.

Many knowledge gaps from an instrumental, humanistic, critical and philosophical perspective have been presented. These gaps as well as the themes identified, resonate and build on previous literature reviews completed in the fields of higher education change management by Ben et al (2013) as well as leadership by Dobson et al (2018). It is evident that there is little consensus emerging from this literature review and further research to address the gaps outlined is required to further develop knowledge and provide a critical mass to enable consolidation. It would also be interesting to broaden the research sources to include books, dissertations, and conference papers as well as policy documents to get a deeper insight into exist knowledge in this field, which is growing in importance.

This research has outlined the complexities and challenges associated with change in Higher Education and provided an analysis of leadership. Having identified many areas of future research opportunities, it is hoped that this literature review will aid further scholars in their research and develop new knowledge so that convergent views on this important topic will surface.

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