

University Leadership

The future belongs to institutions that advance impact and prepare minds for lifelong learning.



In a time of global uncertainty, shifting geopolitical dynamics, and rising scrutiny of academia, university leadership is under renewed pressure to define institutional purpose with clarity and conviction. As higher education expands across borders, the challenge lies not only in maintaining academic excellence but also demonstrating meaningful impact beyond just rankings and reputational metrics. Dr Andrew Hamilton, President Emeritus of New York University (NYU) and former Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, reflects on the responsibilities of modern academic leadership: to steward global engagement, safeguard intellectual integrity, and equip learners for a future defined by complexity and change.

How beneficial has the globalisation of higher education been, especially the growing partnerships between Western and Asian universities?

There has indeed been an increasing level of engagement between universities in the West and their counterparts in other regions. That, of course, takes many different forms and each university approaches these things in different ways, considering its cultural setting and history, as well as its academic strengths and weaknesses. Such collaborations are an extremely good thing that is very important for the future, as it gives students the opportunity to travel and learn about different cultures and countries, while academics have the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues who have a different perspective.

Now when we address issues like the globalisation of higher education, it is important to put things in perspective, to put it in the long-term frame. If I look at my own career, I had the privilege to be the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University. Oxford was founded in the 11th century, so it is almost 900 years old. So while I was the 16th president of NYU, I was the 262nd Vice-Chancellor of Oxford! I have seen first-hand that different universities approach things in different ways. Oxford, for example, does not have an overseas campus of any kind, but there are few universities in the world that are more international than Oxford. It is just that in the case of Oxford, international engagement tends to take the form of intense research collaborations. For instance, Oxford has a number of major research institutes dotted around the world in Thailand, Vietnam, Kenya and so on, which are focused on research around tropical diseases such as malaria. So Oxford took one approach, which is to focus on important research issues that arguably can only be studied in depth in those environments when one's looking at drug-resistant malaria.

NYU has taken a different approach, which is one that reflects its history, culture, and experience, and that has been to establish a physical presence in different countries around the world. Some of those are relatively small but others are quite large like NYU Shanghai and NYU Abu Dhabi. Those are full-fledged campuses that confer four-year degrees, offering a full range of academic subjects, with their own standing faculty focused on teaching and research. NYU Shanghai has been in existence for nearly 15 years and, I would say, it has been a great success.

We are now living in a period where, particularly in the US, some of these global initiatives are receiving increased scrutiny. For example, people question whether we should be involved so deeply in China. To that I say, surely you are not suggesting that we should have fewer people who can speak Mandarin, that we should have fewer people who are familiar with Chinese culture, economics, and politics. Because that is what NYU Shanghai, and indeed the other NYU sites in their respective countries are doing – contributing to a better understanding across borders and cultures.

People do also often worry that there is an excessive Western influence in these examples of campuses that have been created. And again, I can speak of NYU Shanghai. It is a very specific type of institution. It is not an American institution; it is a Sino-American university. It is deliberately constructed to be a joint academic institution constitutionally in terms of not only its governance, but also educationally in terms of courses and the exposure to different cultures that students receive. Of the students, particularly the undergraduate students who are there, half come from China and the remaining half are from overseas. When the first-year students arrive, we always try to ensure that they have double rooms, and a Chinese student will have an international student as a roommate. All international students are required to study Mandarin, and all Chinese students need to study English. In such a manner, we are seeking to create a truly

multicultural environment where there is deep engagement between the cultures, not the imposition of one culture on another.

How should universities measure their success in making an impact? To what extent have university rankings captured such assessments? How should stakeholders such as students and policymakers approach rankings?

This is a perennial question, and one that leads me to reflect on why universities exist. I believe one of the key reasons for their existence is to ensure that those who study at a university become comfortable with complexity. The world is complex, science and the humanities are complex, and we engage with different parts of our world in complex ways. That means that we are very often forced to keep two sometimes contradictory views in our head at the same time. In that vein, I am going to make two statements – one, that rankings don’t matter, and the other, that rankings do matter – and both of those statements are correct.

Rankings should not determine the key strategic priorities of a university. Many of the rankings are the creation of newspapers and magazines whose sole purpose is to sell copies or clicks on their website. And it is in their interest to create drama, so they are constantly changing criteria in order to shuffle the rankings. Now, that being said, rankings are a part of the information stream used by students to determine which university

to attend, and for parents to help guide their children in their choice. Faculty and the members of the board of trustees of a university also pay attention to rankings, so one cannot ignore them. In other words, I am trying to frame my response to state that yes, they matter, but they also shouldn’t matter too much!

Now coming to the question about impact. While rankings from different sources use different criteria, impact is the one I find particularly interesting. For 30 years, the UK has done a very detailed assessment of the quality of research in British universities every seven years. It was called the REF, or the Research Excellence Framework, and when I was the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, the REF of 2014 brought in impact for the first time as a criterion. Of course, it led to an intense debate among British academics. While impact in engineering, or say even the social sciences’ immediate consequences in wider society, can be measured easily, how does one measure the impact of, say, philosophy, ancient history or even pure mathematics? It was a fascinating debate, and I am not sure that rankings can capture that.

But when looking for measures of impact, one needs a wide variety of inputs on the metrics involved. Are we talking about the university’s impact on its city, or on the country, region, or world? Are we talking about immediate impact, or impact in 200 years’ time? All of these factors are relevant when seeking to define the significance and impact of a particular piece of academic work.

If you had to create a checklist for what constitutes an effective impact agenda for a university, what would be the top three priorities?

To begin with, there will be no impact without academic excellence, academic productivity, and academic achievement. And so a university should not deviate from seeking to have the highest quality of academic work both in research and in teaching being carried out within its walls. That is the starting point – it should be seeking to achieve academic excellence, but that is quite intangible and extremely hard to define. Just as with all issues in university life, it is complex, and has different nuances and perspectives.

Now, within that framework, a strong argument can be made that in order to enhance impact, the university should not spread itself too thin. It should have clusters of academic excellence focused on specific areas, whatever those may be. So rather than having every field covered, strategic concentration ought to be the way to go.

Another extremely important criterion for enhancing impact is maximising engagement with the larger community – the educational ecosystem, as well as the world of business, economics, politics, architecture, social causes, and others. Because it is only through that engagement that academics and universities can truly understand the issues that society is wrestling with, and where a difference can be made in the short or long term. Hence committing to deep

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engagement with the community at every level to truly understand where the problems lie is a must for creating impact.

The third recommendation I have is to develop a very strong communications team that can effectively tell the story of impact and where the university’s research is going to make a difference. Having good storytellers is a must, because ultimately there will be no appreciation for the impact made outside or inside the university if the ability to tell the story of that impact is not there in the first place.

How do the challenges faced by university leaders today compare to those you’ve encountered in the past? What advice would you offer to current university leadership navigating these tough times?

We’re experiencing tough times today, but there have been many such instances in the past too. COVID-19 particularly was very difficult for a university like NYU. We have 65,000 students in the

very crowded and dense city of New York, so the issue of disease transmission was highly pertinent. The decision to close the university campus was easy, but the tougher decision was choosing when to reopen it, which we did in the fall of 2020 when many universities still kept their campuses closed. We felt it was important not only for the health of the university community, but also for the welfare of our students and faculty to have at least the option of in-person research and education going on. Going back even further, it couldn’t have been easy being a president of an American university at the height of the Vietnam War with demonstrations and violence far worse than anything we’ve seen in recent years. In fact, look at the history of Oxford; in the 14th century, when there was something called the St. Scholastica Day Riot, in which more than 60 students were killed. My point is that universities have existed over long periods. And so while I am not seeking to trivialise the tough times we are going through, we can look back and see

that each era has its own crises, and university leaders do not get to choose their crisis. In fact, each crisis is unique and presents often unprecedented issues.

What I do think is important is that, whatever the crisis, universities need to remain constant in their commitment to their core mission. But is that happening? No, we do see universities being asked by their students, their faculty, and their host governments to play different roles, and promote different views or social perspectives. But universities are not vehicles of advocacy. At their heart, they exist to create knowledge through their research, to disseminate knowledge through their teaching, and to preserve knowledge for future generations through their libraries, museums and the like. So when things get bumpy, holding firm to those core principles of creation, dissemination, and preservation of knowledge, and of why we exist, is an important anchor for any university. We are going through a difficult phase right now, but we

need to hold fast to our commitment to those core principles and the associated foundations that underlie them like academic freedom and freedom of speech.

You have held leadership roles at prestigious universities. How would you define that role and how has your leadership style as an academic leader evolved over time?

I like to think I have a collaborative, consultative style. Universities, particularly those like Oxford, NYU, and Yale, have quite long histories. They tend to have built engagement into the way they function. At Oxford, it is called shared governance among the leadership, the faculty, and the community. When decisions are made, they are done in consultation and with input from a wide range of constituencies – but, of course, that tends to be slow. I have found that the older the university, the slower it tends to be. Its governance structure is such that consultation and debate are built into the process and decision-making

is slower. But in times of crisis, say during the pandemic, we had to be flexible. Consultation could not be conducted through the normal slow and measured process. It had to be very fast, but still demonstrating to people that consultation had been sought, and inputs had come from a wide range of people. Adjusting the speed of decision-making depending on the circumstances is hence an important part of leadership.

One of my favourite T-shirts reads, “Academic leadership is the art of letting other people have your way”! And so being a university leader to me is the art of having a clear idea of where you want to get to and what the university needs, and then taking the people there along with you. It is in recognising that universities are wonderfully traditional – we wear gowns that originated from the Middle Ages for graduation ceremonies – but that they are also boldly innovative by doing things that have never been done before. So this idea of having conflicting ideas in our head at the same time is, to me, what university leadership is about.

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Given the current geopolitical climate, what advice would you give to students, whether youth or adults, navigating their education and career paths?

While these may appear to be platitudes, they also happen to be true just like many cliches.

Be bold. Also, be careful what you listen to. For instance, a lot of people are saying today that a university education doesn’t matter anymore. We have people like [PayPal co-founder] Peter Thiel arguing that people should drop out of universities. I will point out that Thiel himself has a degree from Stanford that has served him extremely well. In my view, it has never mattered more than now that you have an advanced education. I would even argue that in this global marketplace, it is especially important to get an education that makes you distinctive and helps you stand out. So I would say: don’t listen to those who would argue otherwise.

And quite frankly, the world has become more complex. As the impact of technology on all of our lives has become greater and we begin to see artificial intelligence (AI) changing the world of business, science, and education, it has never been more important that we have the tools, the skills, and the education to enhance whatever impact AI is having on our chosen field. So don’t listen to those who argue that college education is no longer necessary; they could not be more wrong.

I have always believed strongly that universities have

a responsibility to prepare students for their first job and the world of work. But at the same time, universities also have a responsibility to prepare them for their fifth or sixth job, which may not actually happen for another 20 years, in an environment that we can’t possibly predict. And so, while being focussed on employability and skills that are immediately transferable to the workplace is important, as universities we have a responsibility to cultivate other skills that are harder to define, such as those of critical thinking, creativity, effective expression, and teamworking that will be relevant 20 years from now. The vast majority of our students graduating today will hopefully have very long lives ahead of them. And so, just instilling in young people that lifelong love of learning is also a responsibility of the universities they attend. [AMU](#)