Developing mid-level leadership to build capacity for strategic change

Advance HE and Wonkhe

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1 About the project

This is the fourth joint research report focused on leadership of higher education in challenging times, from Advance HE and Wonkhe. Since 2023 we have been talking to and bringing together higher education leaders to work through shared leadership challenges for the sector.

A recurring theme has been the development of "mid-level" leadership in higher education – the recognition that higher education institutions require talented and capable leadership of schools and faculties, and of professional services to allow them to be more sustainable and efficient, execute strategic agendas, and manage the complex web of relationships and stakeholders that higher education institutions hold.

Our 2023 report Looking outward: the changing people needs of higher education identified "distributed leadership" as a key objective for heads of institution globally, reflecting an increasing emphasis on more visible leadership of organisational culture and values in the service of ambitious strategic agendas.

Our 2024 report Leading strategic change in higher education in challenging times found heads of school reporting the challenge of their lived realities of executing strategic change while managing pressures of recruitment and resourcing, revealing the degree to which colleagues in these roles can find themselves at the pointy end of institutional change agendas.

And our 2025 report Securing educational excellence in higher education at a time of change reflected on a shift from a certain singularity of purpose in higher education to a more multifaceted system of responsibilities and stakeholders, and the associated value and importance of engaging in inclusive co-creation of strategic institutional agendas that respond to external pressures and changes.

We felt it was appropriate, as the sector continues to deal with significant financial pressure and the imperative to transform – both to secure its public value and impact for the future and to become financially sustainable – to explore in more depth the experiences and views of mid-level leaders in the context of strategic change and transformation. We hoped, in designing this project, to understand more about the opportunities and challenges associated with these roles, and what support mid-level leaders need to thrive and be effective.

Underpinning this intent is the conviction that today's "mid-level" leaders of disciplinary clusters or professional service areas, are also emerging leaders (as we refer to them throughout the report) – future senior leaders and heads of institution. Their experience now will shape their future approach to leadership and their perceptions about change and transformation.

As a sector, we should be concerned about the lessons colleagues that sit at the rung below senior leadership are absorbing from their experiences, and be collectively invested in fostering a pipeline of leaders who can execute a strategic vision with authority, and gain the trust and confidence of colleagues, while exercising compassion and empathy in the execution of challenging strategic decisions.

The findings reported here derive from online round tables held in June and July 2026, hosted by the authors:

+ Two round table discussions with 35 emerging leaders, a mixture of academic and professional services leaders, supported by a survey distributed ahead of the session. Participants signed up voluntarily via a Wonkhe-facilitated open recruitment process, and were vetted by job title for suitability for the project.
+ Two further round table discussions with 21 senior leaders (members of executive teams) to discuss the themes arising from the sessions with emerging leaders, triangulate the perceptions and solicit reflections.

1.1 Key findings and implications

Change may be understood in incompatible ways, and the framing determines what leadership is for. Our pre-session survey for emerging leaders presented change as an intentional process that can be planned, resourced and evaluated. Emerging leaders more often described something relentless and externally imposed – regulatory requirements arriving faster than planning cycles can absorb, financial constraint, and technological disruption that “isn't changing in academic years, it's changing in months.”

Senior leaders questioned the vocabulary itself, arguing that framing work as “change” implies a beginning, a middle and an end that never arrives, and noting that “innovation” and “enhancement” carry agency and credit where “change” often carries neither. The key distinction is not between change and stability, but between responsive change – cost control, restructuring, regulatory compliance – and the generative change the sector needs if it is to secure its mission. Institutions cannot assume a shared tacit understanding of which they are doing, or why.

Emerging leaders are confident in themselves and sceptical of their institutions. Our survey found a stark gap between emerging leaders’ assessment of their own change capabilities and those of their institutions. 96 per cent thought managing the impact of change initiatives important; 14 per cent thought their institution did it well. 93 per cent valued credible strategic goal-setting; 21 per cent recognised it in practice. Yet most reported confidence in their own capabilities. That gap is not primarily a skills deficit; it reflects the absence of visible change infrastructure – governance that is designed for the purpose, managed sequencing of competing initiatives, defined and rewarded change expertise and impact, and the involvement of those who will operationalise a change at the point it is designed rather than after.

Emerging leaders carry responsibility for change they do not have full authority to execute, in conditions that can suppress capability. Emerging leaders influence without budgets or line management authority, absorb pressure from above and below, and are held to account for decisions taken elsewhere. Senior leaders recognised this as a structural failure rather than an individual one – a higher education sector that has relied on non-positional power without designing the roles, rewards or support to make it work. As one put it, leaders judged ineffective in one environment proved "magnificent" once the constraints were lifted. Successful emerging leaders are those that can navigate, and even thrive, in conditions of ambiguity – but their operating environment, how they are perceived (including the influence of bias and stereotype in leadership models), and their relationship with senior managers are significant variables in their likelihood of success.

Trust is paramount to executing change successfully, and it is built through visible follow-through. Institutional politics, churn at the top, and a changing external environment can confound efforts to execute and learn from change. Well-designed change fails against a remembered legacy of initiatives launched and abandoned, and lessons never acknowledged. Successful change is not always logged and reflected in institutional narratives. The consequence is that change is contested, failure is either exposed mercilessly or hidden away, and trust in the possibility of change erodes.

A strong shared leadership culture is part of the solution. The qualities of institutional leadership most valued are vision and authority, combined with compassion, honesty and empathy. These are hard to unite and display consistently in a single individual, but can act as the touchstones of a collective leadership culture. Collective leadership, founded on shared values and strong interpersonal relationships, can act as a space for learning, coaching, deliberation, and mutual support. All are fundamental to being an institution that is able to achieve inclusive change.

2 Conceptualising change and the impact on leadership

Change is dynamic – when the external landscape changes higher education institutions have to respond, as with funding or regulatory change, but change can also be driven from inside institutions through formal strategy, innovation, or the slow evolution of culture and practice. How you imagine and conceptualise change, and your experience of it, shapes how you frame the role of leaders in a changing environment.

In this project change surfaces in multiple ways. Our survey of emerging leaders imagines change as an intentional process that can be managed, and asked emerging leaders to reflect on their own and their institution's capabilities in doing so. The discussions with emerging leaders tended towards a sense of change as overwhelming, and relentless, creating unpredictability and uncertainty about the future.

> **"Change at the moment within HE feels relentless, and there's a lot of pressure, there's a lot of change, and it's, in a way, some of it is quite unprecedented. We can't make decisions based on historical data anymore." (emerging leader)**

Emerging leaders were also highly conscious of the legacy of change in their institutions, and how this would shape perceptions of individual leaders and the role of leadership more generally:

> **"You know, some leaders are seen as kind of getting the job done. Others, kind of, might be bringing the legacy of… of previous badly done change with them. Which kind of affects confidence and credibility in the change to come." (emerging leader)**

Senior leaders acknowledged that traditional methods of developing institutional strategy and responding to the changing environment can be insufficient, or feel insufficient, to meet the demands of the current moment:

> **"Collectively, the combined strategies of the HE sector are not adequate to the set of problems that are in front of us. We'll hit 2030, we'll get demographic dips, we're experiencing financial difficulty. That's the unvarnished reality that we're in." (senior leader)**

> **"It does feel almost existential in some cases… generative AI is coming and changing the entire world around us, and it's pressurising universities in ways that we've never experienced before. It's clear that we have to change, but it's not clear exactly how we have to change. These things aren't changing in academic years. They're changing in months." (senior leader)**

The consequence is that leadership of change can be understood as primarily responsive change – coping with financial pressure, against a backdrop of "debate around the value proposition of higher education" in the public discourse – and that might not be an especially appealing prospect for aspiring leaders:

> **"It's kind of, and maybe it is, managed decline, but if it is, how do we frame that such that being a leader in the sector has a clear, positive direction and element to it?" (senior leader)**

As a corrective, one senior leader offered the provocation that the discourse of change itself creates a false sense that the current times are distinctive in some way:

> **"If I had a wish, it would be that we stop using the C word. Because when we think about change, we've got that notion that there is a beginning, a middle, and an end. And it's just work…work evolves and changes every day. Why is constant change perceived as a bad thing? We all know that we need to iterate and develop – and if we want our students to iterate and develop, then why do we not think that's a good thing for a university to do, if we say we're learning organisations?" (senior leader)**

And another senior leader expressed very clearly the different effects that different conceptions of change can have:

> **"Change is often negative. Innovation and enhancement are often positive, aren't they? And what's the difference between the two? Maybe it's about agency, maybe it's about who drives it and how much control you feel you've got over it. And what you're going to get out of it. You can put an innovative project on your CV, can't you? Not some of the other things we ask people to do." (senior leader)**

While "responsive" change executed in challenging times – tightening financial controls, reducing staff numbers, and managing the impacts of those difficult decisions – is certainly necessary in the current higher education policy landscape, it is insufficient. The higher education sector needs generative change – strategic transformation and innovation, at some scale – if it is to secure its mission and impact for the future.

That means that comfort with, and critical orientation towards, change in all its guises and manifestations needs to manifest in leadership at every level, and the nature of and approach to change is a necessary conversation topic among leadership networks – even if you decide to call it something else like continuous enhancement, innovation, co-creation, or simply problem solving!

3 Leading change through personal and institutional change capability

The survey we asked emerging leaders to complete ahead of the round tables produced a notable gap between individuals' assessment of their own change competence and capability compared to their assessment of their institutional capability.

The generic "change capabilities" we selected seemed to resonate with emerging leaders – most agreed these were important for effective execution of change or that they need to be skilled in these capabilities to execute their roles, respectively, and one group requested that the survey questions be circulated to aid in their personal reflections on leadership and change.

However, it's worth noting that capabilities are exercised in context, and a key theme from our invitation to tell us what we had missed focused not on a missing broad capability, but on appreciation of context. At institutional level the effect of "change fatigue," the context of "political threat," and the culture of "continuous improvement" in higher education were cited as missing from our list. For individuals, social dynamics and identity characteristics such as age, gender, and ethnicity were picked up, as well as the impact of personal uncertainty and job insecurity – these variables inevitably affect how effective an individual can be as a "change agent" and the degree of difficulty that they face in executing change.

There is no sense that the findings are in any way representative of the wider sector – attendees may have chosen to volunteer to be part of the conversation because they were particularly underwhelmed by their institutional ability to execute change. However, exploration of the perceived gap in the round table allowed us to explore the specifics of why these emerging leaders are sceptical of institutional change capability.

28 emerging leaders responded to the survey, of which 17 were academic leaders, 9 were professional leaders and one was hybrid.

Institutional change capabilities

	This is important in executing change (number and % agree)	It's something we do well as an institution (number and % agree)	It's something I contribute to as part of my current leadership role (number and % agree)
Understanding the external landscape and its impact (policy environment, market conditions, socio-political and technological trends etc)	25 (89%)	19 (68%)	24 (86%)
Setting and planning credible strategic change goals – defining what looks different as a result of the change and steps to get there	26 (93%)	6 (21%)	21 (75%)
Making decisions about what to prioritise for change, and directing resources to those areas to enable the change	26 (93%)	5 (18%)	18 (64%)
Consulting, engaging and communicating about change with the institutional community and external stakeholders, ensuring people understand why it matters and what their role is	25 (89%)	9 (32%)	23 (82%)
Designing change processes and putting support in place to help people execute them	25 (89%)	10 (36%)	20 (71%)
Managing the impact of change initiatives – prioritising, ordering, balancing pace and capacity	27 (96%)	4 (14%)	17 (61%)
Evaluating the impact of change over time, whether it is embedded and making a meaningful difference to practice, outcomes and experience	26 (93%)	6 (21%)	16 (57%)

Personal change capabilities

	I need to be skilled at doing this in my role (number and % agree)	I feel confident about my capability to do this (number and % agree)	I would welcome more support in developing my capability to do this (number and % agree)
Making sense of strategy and translating it downward – grasping the macro "why" and the implications/interpretation for a given part of the organisation, or strategic project	24 (86%)	23 (82%)	10 (36%)
Managing uncertainty and ambiguity – explaining what is known and what not, convening thinking around open questions, facilitating testing and experimentation	25 (89%)	20 (71%)	12 (43%)
Influencing without formal authority – working across institutional organisational silos to persuade others and build coalitions	25 (89%)	18 (64%)	16 (57%)
Balancing competing priorities and demands within your area – deciding where to focus attention, effort and resource	23 (82%)	18 (64%)	15 (54%)
Reading and working with resistance – showing empathy and addressing resistance constructively	25 (89%)	24 (86%)	15 (54%)
Fostering psychological safety and team resilience – making space for people to ask questions, flag issues and express their feelings about the situation	26 (93%)	24 (86%)	9 (32%)
Upward communication and challenge – being prepared to constructively challenge and offer insight about what is happening on the ground to more senior leaders	26 (93%)	19 (68%)	16 (57%)

Self-awareness and personal resilience – recognising the pressures bearing down on you and their impact, seeking insight and support as appropriate	24 (86%)	21 (75%)	16 (57%)
Working with different interests, perspectives and degrees of change readiness – navigating tensions and building alignment across teams and stakeholders	25 (89%)	21 (75%)	13 (46%)

What struck us about these results was that while the majority of emerging leaders professed themselves to be confident in their personal change capabilities, with some variation, the collective confidence in the institutional change capabilities was almost universally low. This distinction is important. In particular, participants were much less confident in the institutional conditions that enable change to happen. Their reflections focused less on individual capability and more on issues such as trust, prioritisation, governance, involvement in decision-making and organisational capacity.

We asked survey respondents to comment on their broad level of confidence in the institutional capacity to execute change. Those with higher confidence in their institution cited evidence of change capability and a track record of successful change:

> **"We should be okay as we have done well in the past and are proactive with change – seeing problems coming rather than trying to pretend there is no problem." (emerging leader survey respondent)**

> **"We have just had an effectiveness review which confirmed internally and externally that our trajectory is in the right direction." (emerging leader survey respondent)**

Those with lower confidence in the institution described a context of financial constraint limiting capacity, exacerbated by cultural issues including too many competing priorities, a governance culture characterised by devolved decision-making, pursuit of consensus at the expense of progress, and low tolerance of risk, as well as a lack of change expertise among senior leadership.

> **"I think the institution (like many others), is so worried about finances and balancing the books, that there's no capacity for these changes on top of the day to day." (emerging leader survey respondent)**

> **"Universities try to achieve consensus in decision-making and that makes change harder… Project meetings are run like an academic board of studies, not with the agility required to deliver change at pace." (emerging leader survey respondent)**

Personal confidence came from bounded change – discrete projects in areas where leaders had influence rather than large-scale institutional transformation:

> **"Individual leaders are more agile than institutions." (emerging leader survey respondent)**

> **"I feel like I'm in a strong position… to nudge senior leaders towards what needs to change, and capable of operationalising it if they do push for change, but it's up to them if they do." (emerging leader survey respondent)**

When we discussed these findings in more depth at the round tables, emerging leaders focused on the importance of a proper infrastructure to deliver change. This had multiple facets: ensuring the right people are in the room to design the change, working through governance processes and incentives in implementing change, and ensuring there is a clear rationale and justification for change.

> **"Making sure that there's really strong infrastructure in place to support change, because often change, doesn't happen most effectively because you know, it's not a great idea [or] it hasn't been well thought through, but because the institutional infrastructure isn't what it is, whether that's in terms of the governance piece, accountability and leadership piece." (emerging leader)**

There was a sense that in higher education settings great ideas can sometimes trump effective operations and, simultaneously, those with the most insight into operationalising ideas can sometimes be excluded from the ideation process. Bringing in the colleagues who will be operationalising the change at design stage can help ensure the ideas are deliverable in practice.

> **"Sometimes we bring the wrong collection of people together and the projects/changes are doomed to fail. Most changes are forced to have an academic lead. Why?" (emerging leader)**

> **"I think we've got the capabilities. I think colleagues in this space, clearly, from the conversations, have really got the capabilities that university needs to be successful. So often, we're not in the room. We're not in the room, or we're asked after they've decided what's going to be implemented, and then we're the people saying, actually, that's not going to work." (emerging leader)**

> **"There seems to be a disconnect of what actually happens at ground level, ideas sound great and lots of time is spent on them, less time spent on communication strategies and the logistics of the implementation of these changes." (emerging leader)**

One senior leader comment summed up the problem and articulated the takeaway:

> **“They want to be part of the design of the difficult decisions that have to be made, and the architects of it, not simply the deliverers of it – I call that critical by design. They're in at the design stage, not in the cascading stage." (senior leader)**

Emerging leaders also pointed out that specific professional development around leading and managing change, and recognition for successful change, can be absent or patchy:

> **“It's really difficult to actually give that recognition to the vast amount of colleagues that actually do the grind to realise the strategic change. So I don't have an answer to that, but I think it is something that I've witnessed, is that the people that are actually doing the change to result in the good outcomes don't get the recognition for the work that they've done.” (emerging leader)**

> **“I think what we're really bad at doing at universities is that we take people who are really good at one thing, it might be research or it might be education, say, you're fantastic at that, here's a completely different job as a leader, get on with it. And I think we need to be better about providing them with the tools they need. Like, if you want to implement a change, this is how you go about it, here's a template, here's a thing, or some resource, project management resource you can bring in to help you achieve that. Or train people how to do it, and provide them with the skills if they don't have them already.” (emerging leader)**

However, critically, emerging leaders emphasised, it’s not just about operations, process, and skills, but about culture – a lack of institutional cohesion around a shared narrative was seen as an issue for leaders to proactively manage.

> **"In the film [Finding Nemo] there's a part where they're trapped in a fishnet, and whoever it is says, if we all swim in the same direction, then we're going to achieve our goals, and so I think that… there was a really interesting analogy about change management there, and about our ability to influence, rather than having sort of splattergun different department heads, or academics, or whoever, pulling in different directions, so is there institutional cohesion, and buy-in, and how is that well managed?" (emerging leader)**

> **"The message has to be consistent right throughout the organisation, and we all have to move together. And again, that all comes down to communication, really, and making sure that's effective." (emerging leader)**

> **"Change is frustrated where leadership distribution is confused or contested. Too many university units (believe they) hold too much autonomy." (emerging leader)**

Senior leaders accepted elements of the analysis, particularly the challenge of persisting with change in complex environments.

> **“One of the first things I heard was just about initiative overload… one of the most helpful things we can do is have a coherent programme of what we're trying to do, and minimise that sense of multiple change projects that don't fit together.” (senior leader)**

> **"We're often okay at intent, we're usually really good at talking up our implementation, and then we just forget to report on impact… what we'll do is say on our CV what we did. Worry about the impact later, that'll happen years down the line." (senior leader)**

> **"The persistence of change longitudinally over time is actually harder than coming up with the rationale for the change itself… The rationale for change usually comes quite quickly, but the reality check is that it's a lot harder to land. Every HEI I've ever worked in struggles with the completer-finisher, closing-the-loop type stuff." (senior leader)**

One senior leader offered an anecdotal corrective to the blanket perception that any given institution is bad at change.

> **"I remember one town hall where somebody said, in the usual fashion, 'Oh, we are not very good at change.' I, almost on the back of an envelope, thought about how many projects I'd been involved in over the last 10, 20 years that really worked. Inside 15 minutes, I came up with 40 projects that really delivered. Proper change, really change for good, sometimes sector leading at the time. Getting that into the institutional narrative – that seems to be a big challenge." (senior leader)**

The anecdote – perhaps counter-intuitively – illustrates some of the issues identified by the emerging leaders groups. Where change is contested, where it is contained in one part of an institution, or where it happens over a long period of time, it is harder to achieve cut-through for a positive story about change and the impact that change has brought.

A recurring theme in the emerging leaders round tables was the high value they placed on institutional learning from the experience of managing change. By building collective understanding of what has been successful about past change efforts, and where things have not had the impact, what the barriers have been, individuals and teams can better understand "what works" when it comes to change. But it was notable that emerging leaders talked about learning in the context of building trust through taking a reflective approach to evaluating change experiences; neither overly negative nor excessively positive.

> **"We're really good at highlighting when change has gone badly. We're not always as good at evaluating change that went well, and then sharing that back to build trust. A really important thing around confidence is saying what you're going to do, doing it, and then saying we did it, and here's how it went, and here's what we learned from it. And how that helps build trust and resilience in future change." (emerging leader)**

Change agendas don't take place in a vacuum. The best formulated idea backed up by the most professional processes executed by the most skilled individuals can run aground if people are working against a backdrop of a perceived legacy of change failure, and low confidence in institutional (and leadership) change capability. Visibly learning from change – including modelling tolerance for failure and learning from what has not worked – is a necessary element of creating the trust that supports buy-in to future change.

The reverse is also true: a lack of acknowledgement of lessons learned where things have not gone as planned erodes trust in the next initiative:

> **"I think trust is key. Colleagues have seen repeated initiatives implemented poorly that haven't helped the challenges.....so they question the validity of the next rash of initiatives coming from senior teams who haven't acknowledged the difficulties authentically." (emerging leader)**

For senior leaders, that includes learning from the experiences of emerging leaders – and actively showing that institutional learning is heard and valued, as this anecdote illustrates:

> **"I led a staff development initiative to support institutional curriculum change, at scale and at pace, which was, I think, by all slices, really successful…I got staff on board with it. We had positive feedback from academic staff across the institution about this project. And so I and my colleague that led this staff development project were incredibly proud of the work that we had put in and the feedback that we got from colleagues, and the operational outcomes from it, and we wrote this recommendation report because it was a time-bound project on lessons learned positively from this process. How can we continue this learning of what worked from this project? And we fed it up to SLT, and it went nowhere – and they actually completely changed everything. It's almost like they read all of our recommendations and did the exact opposite. And so that was incredibly frustrating, and it then resulted in a lot of eroded trust in staff." (emerging leader)**

The issue here is, arguably, not that the senior leaders should have adopted the recommendations of the report uncritically, but that the emerging leader never received any validation from the senior leaders, or evidence of serious consideration of the work that had been put in and the learning and insight that had resulted. It's that failure to visibly acknowledge and integrate learning into leadership decision-making that erodes trust, not the decision itself.

Exploration of why emerging leaders can be sceptical of institutional change capabilities points to a mixture of issues. There are specific aspects of higher education that can mean that change can rarely be executed "cleanly" – there is usually a need for negotiation, and internal collaboration across disparate parts of a complex structure.

But emerging leaders also identified a notable absence of visible charge infrastructure and ways of working that are well-defined, proven, and iterated through collective learning. The skills involved are not always defined, developed, or recognised or rewarded when exercised effectively. There may be little investment in change capacity, or management and sequencing of the various change agendas that are in play at any given time. That means that – particularly against a backdrop of considerable political and financial turbulence – there can be a lack of trust that change agendas will make a positive difference.

From an emerging leader perspective, a lack of formal change architecture can leave individual leaders very exposed, because successful change depends on the skills of people to simultaneously manage change in the technical sense, and also to take responsibility for the cultural element – convincing others of the value of the change, and influencing behaviours outside their direct sphere of authority. The next section explores the experiences of emerging leaders in executing change, and the contexts and personal qualities that enable them to do that effectively.

4 Thriving on ambiguity – the role of mid-level emerging leaders in change

Structurally, emerging leaders occupy an enormously important position, acting as a bridge between the strategies, agendas and conversations owned and enacted at senior leader level, and the staff who execute the various elements of the institutional mission.

Emerging leaders need to be able to interpret strategy for their context, and work with their teams to update processes and practice in light of institution-wide change agendas. They need to lead their – often quite extensive – patch, managing people and budgets in pursuit of particular performance goals, and sustain relationships with peers and external stakeholders. And they need to keep senior leaders apprised of what's going on on the ground, including sometimes letting senior leaders know where a policy or idea might be ill-conceived or not land as anticipated.

In higher education, the locus of power and authority are frequently ambiguous, thanks to long standing traditions of academic, quasi-democratic, governance, and to the complexity of the endeavour itself. Few can claim to have a monopoly on the correct course of action in any given situation or the authority to enforce a particular course of action. The consequence can be that the route to action requires exercising influence and persuasion rather than authority, even for those who are formally designated leaders.

As one senior leader commented: **"I love it when you interview new managers who respond to the question 'why do you want this job' with 'because being a manager will give me the power to get things done.' I try to let them down gently."**

One senior group discussed in particular the impact of the tradition of rotating fixed-term head of department roles, still common in pre-92 universities:

> **"Our heads of academic units are on a fixed-term contract, and then they're going to step back into the department that they are the leader of. And so they don't want to make those significant changes… Because actually, when they go back, they'll have to do it." (senior leader)**

> **"They know they're going back into the department, and if it's something that's not palatable from a disciplinary lens, they're just going to step down — and I've seen that happen. So it's a combination of trying to bring them along in terms of hearts and minds, but it's also really practical training around how to have difficult conversations. Because otherwise we're really landing them in it, and then it can be incredibly acrimonious when they have to step back into their department." (senior leader)**

At their best, emerging leaders can thrive on being effective at influencing others and operating within an environment when they cannot readily fall back on positional authority:

> **"[Our roles are] very much about influencing…and I mean, sometimes that can be really fun if you actually manage to do it well. When you succeed, it's incredibly rewarding, because you know that that person didn't do that thing because you told them to. They did it because they wanted to." (emerging leader)**

However, emerging leaders can also feel very exposed in being held to account for change they cannot command:

> **"In my role, I am (in)directly responsible for the success of change in processes, procedures, educational offer, research, professional services, KPIs. and so on. Most of the decisions about change are taken outside of my control or influence but I am expected to sell change and implement it while ultimately being held to account when it fails." (emerging leader)**

> **"Staff in the layer responsible for operationalising change/policy have formal authority but are not always fully consulted/"sold" on the change, so in the middle getting heat from both sides." (emerging leader)**

Senior leaders endorsed this assessment among emerging leaders of being "stuck in the middle" receiving pressure from above and below without necessarily the positional authority to effect change:

> **"They're receiving the questions on a day-to-day from the staff within their departments, they're receiving the pressure from senior leaders to make things work – and they're doing that a lot through influence, without the budgets, without the line management responsibilities." (senior leader)**

> **"In education we often rely on non-positional power, don't we? We put people in really key roles and ask them to use influence to make really big changes happen, and I think that's kind of our fault as a sector, for not thinking through the structures better, and the support and training people need to do that." (senior leader)**

For emerging leaders, the decision to take up an agenda and try to make it work can feel high-stakes – when colleagues are sceptical the decision to sign up to any given institutional agenda, especially when it is controversial or contested, requires the investment of

significant personal capital. And leaders at the middle level often feel that they are learning on the job. One emerging leader offered a memorable metaphor:

> **"Often you're an effective teacher, you're an effective researcher, they give you a management, a leadership role, and there's no guarantee that you're going to be good at that either, and there's a lot of sink or swim, you know? And that coupled with, if you fail too many times, suddenly you're the wounded buffalo at the watering hole who's about to get eaten by a lion." (emerging leader)**

The emerging leader round tables, as well as the pre-session survey, also raised the critical point that "leadership" remains a cultural construct that is inflected with biases about gender, ethnicity, class, and disability. One's ability to influence and shape behaviour is not only a personal attribute, it is also inflected with others' views about whether you fit their internal model of what a leader ought to be or how they ought to behave. Emerging leaders felt that higher education can be a conservative space in this regard.

> **"We were talking about other challenges, challenges of being a woman in leadership, for example, let alone being a black woman in leadership, and the issues of fit and the hierarchy, that really influences what happens and what doesn't." (emerging leader)**

Arising from this reflection was the insight that the context may actually demand different, or more diverse modes of leadership – these do not map neatly on to personal characteristics, of course, but emerging leaders reflected on the value of institutions being alert to the intersection of leadership stereotypes with personal characteristics, and open to more varied ways of leading.

> **"Given how much the sector and its needs have changed, I think institutions need to recognise that different approaches and types of leader are what is needed now. At times, hierarchical views means there is a recycling of leadership between institutions – arguably recycling a style of leadership that is not necessarily right for 'now'. There needs to be some bravery and less reliance of what 'fits' existing models." (emerging leader)**

As a corollary, senior leaders reflected that they had some accountability for being able to spot diverse emerging leadership talent, and for creating an environment in which those individuals are set up for success:

> **"We have to take some responsibility for perpetuating it, because we're still tapping leaders on the shoulder, and some people don't even know what the tap looks like, because they don't get it. And yet they could be incredibly talented and powerful." (senior leader)**

> **"Some of the best leaders I've worked with, when delivering projects, I was told were not good leaders. And it was the environment they were in that changed. It's very difficult to know what someone's skill set is when they haven't been allowed to lead or demonstrate their own skill set… Once you relieve that pressure and allow them to express themselves, they turned out to be magnificent." (senior leader)**

In this context, the consistent support and commitment of senior leaders to key agendas and priorities feels essential for emerging leaders – but it is not always available. There is a sense among emerging leaders that behind the scenes lobbying or mysterious shifts in the political winds can result in a change in priorities, leaving them feeling betrayed. More mundanely, emerging leaders shared experiences of senior leaders launching initiatives, but either moving institution, or changing their focus to a different area before the original change had been fully seen through.

> **"Where there is pushback or challenge in a change process, for us as leaders, it was quite important that our senior leaders held those rather than crumbled under pressure." (emerging leader)**

> **"[The] idea of people going around the back doors to kind of others in positions of influence to redirect change processes. So there was something about having the courage of conviction being quite important, and actually seeing things through to evaluation." (emerging leader)**

> **"Senior people often like to start projects, and they're less good at either, one, stopping projects, or two, seeing projects through. Because there's this sense, and this might be unfair, that people want to get a line on their CV, and we have seen evidence of that, where people, you know, they come in and they do a big thing that looks really impressive on paper, but didn't actually deliver anything, and then they've gone to the next job." (emerging leader)**

Senior leaders, reflecting on this dynamic, accepted that there is some truth in it – but observed that sometimes priorities genuinely do change or new information comes to light. The issue can be less about whether an initiative is pushed through to completion than about the degree of willingness to be honest about why it has not been.

> **"It's how leaders take responsibility not just for the big launch – and I think especially mid-level leaders see it as their responsibility to see it out, and see it through. Even if that means close it down. But don't just let it dribble away and then launch something new, because that's what staff get so frustrated by. The kind of, we're going to have the pillars, and then we're going to have the manifestos… and you constantly just go, we feel like we've heard this before." (senior leader)**

> **"You get pushback from academics, you get pushback from professional services, you get pushback from all areas, and some people crumble, some people don't. Sometimes it would have been better to crumble – the change actually hurts more than crumbling would have done. But all of that leaves a legacy, and it leaves a memory in the institution… you've got to work through that human system as well as the process." (senior leader)**

Rather than arguing that emerging leaders should enjoy greater clarity about the role and the authority they wield, or that senior leaders should always stick by their strategies even when the situation changes, we posit that an effective emerging leader is one who can operate under conditions of ambiguity and complexity.

In this context the relational dynamic and trust between emerging and senior leadership becomes critically important – a dynamic for which both parties are accountable. The spirit of this is captured on one senior leader's comment about what they look for in effective emerging leaders:

> **"It's really useful to have people who are comfortable with risk and uncertainty… There aren't, where we are in the sector now, simple questions, simple answers, tried and tested solutions. And thoughtfulness – people in the team who will stop and think and take some time to consider a problem, because they are wicked problems." (Senior leader)**

As a practical manifestation of this quality, when we asked senior leaders what their view of a high-performing emerging leader is and what qualities do they recruit to and look for in their direct reports, the answers tended to focus on practical judgement, orientation towards problem-solving, and honesty.

> **"I'm less concerned about them needing to get up to speed with the landscape of legislation. I'm more concerned about whether they're going to have credibility with the community, whether they're going to work collaboratively with me, and whether they're going to tell me honestly when things aren't going well… One of the things I find the most useful is when people tell me things that I hadn't thought of." (senior leader)**

> **"It's the people that can tell the difference between a supporting wall and a partition wall… The very best people I can think of are the ones that will just go, 'we could knock that wall through, there's nothing above it, the wall doesn't need to be there, and the wall is the problem.' While at the same time recognising that there are other walls that you absolutely shouldn't be knocking out. My frustration with leaders at all levels is when we're looking at a problem, we're all agreeing what the problem is, but we're unwilling to have the difficult conversation about stuff that might need to change in order to fix it. So we tie ourselves in knots trying to protect the stuff that we think we can't possibly question." (senior leader)**

> **"E words came to mind: enthusiasm, empathy – hugely important and undervalued – the ability to be empowering, ethical… but also having expertise and being very efficient. And the ability to give me moments of enlightenment. You need someone to reflect things back for you, because when we're all busy, we always think that we're right, and the ability for someone to go, 'hang on a minute,' and sense-check you, is hugely important." (senior leader)**

> **"First, people who will convert strategy into reality – what does the strategy mean for my faculty, for my department? Second, leading people rather than processes, keeping the focus on people, and the development of trust. And thirdly, honest intelligence upwards. And finding solutions for things rather than just coming with problems all the time." (senior leader)**

The other critical quality senior leaders valued was the ability to lead with humanity, work with teams, listen with empathy, and empower others rather than trying to do everything themselves – as one commented, **"Remember, you're not doing the doing, you're doing the leading."**

> **"Someone who can communicate calmly with their teams, not sharing that sense of panic amongst the team… someone who can absorb some of that change anxiety, but then relay it in a very calm, considered and measured way." (senior leader)**

> **"Managing multi-generational workforces that have got very different expectations… and then be able to feed up, down, back, and across. That's a skill, and that's quite challenging." (senior leader)**

> **"They all tend to have a lot of energy, they tend to have a compassionate approach, but balanced with pragmatism – that you're not going to take everyone with you, and you're going to upset some people as you change things, because that's the nature of the job." (senior leader)**

That balance between orientation towards being collaborative, listening and building trust, while also being highly pragmatic and prepared to think outside the cultural hive-mind to solve problems and remove barriers is a challenging one in any organisation, but emerges from the discussion as absolutely critical to leadership in higher education.

However, for emerging leaders to be able to build the confidence, motivation, and skills required to maintain that balance, they need the support and engagement of senior leaders. One senior leader suggested in particular that senior leaders in general could be useful in supporting emerging leaders to find the limits of their capacity, rather than expecting them to go beyond it:

> **“People don't need more priorities, they need greater clarity on what it is they need to do… What I'm finding for middle managers is giving them permission on what it is okay to stop doing. That's often a pinch point – people don't feel that they have permission to stop, or they don't want to stop doing the stuff that they love doing when we want them to focus on other things.” (senior leader)**

5 A shared leadership culture that fosters trust

The uncertainties and turbulence of the current historical moment feeds a sense of insecurity, which can readily coalesce around scepticism towards leadership. Pair that with the complexity of implementing change in a complicated organisation like a higher education institution, especially one in which the locus of power is ambiguous, and where there is a perception of a legacy of past change failures, and it's not surprising that there can be a level of cynicism about the capability of higher education to change.

While our conversations surfaced some practical and operational ideas about implementing change, all our conversations returned repeatedly to the human and cultural side of change. This makes sense. The sector cannot change its external environment (though lobbying efforts may bring some relief) nor can it readily unpick its governance structures and history. The sphere of influence of higher education leaders is in the interpersonal relationships that are forged between individuals and across their organisation, and the degree of trust that is fostered through behaviours, values, and cultural practices.

Similarly, trust, psychological safety, and the exercising of compassion and empathy, are preconditions for the kind of robust, challenging conversations and even, at times, conflict, that change and transformation require. They are the foundation for the willingness of colleagues to assume collective responsibility for executing change. Actively fostering "trustful spaces" as one senior leader put it, is a critical change capability for leadership.

We discussed in the last section the qualities that senior leaders value in emerging leaders in the current moment. Emerging leaders also discussed the qualities that they would wish to see from senior leaders, focusing on honesty, empathy, and compassion.

> **"We talked about being an empathetic and compassionate leader, and how important that was in managing change and leading and role modeling…I know for myself that sometimes I have to remind myself to be compassionate, and you can get a bit frustrated when you've got something to be done, but I think it's key to how you bring a team along with you, and how you make change by understanding where they are as well." (emerging leader)**

One emerging leader offered this analysis, explaining why even when senior leaders are effective in day to management and decision-making, a loss of trust can rapidly undermine any efforts to effect change:

> **"We now live in a low-trust society. I think for many of our institutions, it's not low trust, it's no trust. And I think that gets exacerbated when colleagues look up, and in their eyes, rightly or wrongly, see senior management teams who have brought institutions to the brink of existential crisis now making decisions about how to get out. And it doesn't matter how good those decisions are, it doesn't matter how evidence-based, it doesn't matter what kind of consultation takes place, they just don't trust**

> **what's coming out the other side. And I think senior management teams haven't helped themselves in not being open and honest about mistakes they've made and open and honest about the impact that has had on staff, and not the kind of management speak about 'it's been a challenging time,' and 'we know that's been hard.' It's things like, 'I know this has made people anxious, I know this has made people upset, I know there are people who aren't looking at their relationship to their work the same way any more.' And until there's that acknowledgement of how this has made people feel, it's going to be really difficult for institutions to sort themselves out." (emerging leader)**

One group discussed the leadership challenge of balancing vision and conviction with compassion and empathy – ultimately agreeing that leaders (or leadership teams) need to be comfortable with both.

> **"I'm all for compassion. I like a bit of compassion. But I think it would be really important that we don't kind of get into that soft, kind of, you know, 'be nice to everyone' territory. We need vision at the moment. We need vision and conviction from people. That there's a sense of what the sector might look like at a certain point in the future, and where our institution fits into that, how we're going to get there. And then you've got to be compassionate about how you take people with you, but I just think you have to balance the conviction thing with a recognition that people leading organisations at the moment are gonna have to – it's really tough. It's really tough to pick a course, go for it, and take an institution that isn't particularly up for being a very different thing to what it is now on the journey. So how you do compassion in that space is a real art. And helping senior leaders to get into that kind of balance between conviction and compassion, I think, is really important. You can't lean too far one way or the other." (emerging leader)**

Conviction, no matter how well-founded, without compassion, means leaders cannot lead, because their followers will lose trust in their leadership. Compassion without conviction leads to dodging the tough decisions or failing to decide on priorities. As one emerging leader put it **"Clarity is kind."**

Senior leaders reflected further on their own effort to balance compassion with authority:

> **"We have to model softness with authority, we have to model trust. And that means delegating, giving people space to develop. We haven't heard the word kindness here, which I think is really important. What's wrong with being kind? There are difficult decisions that we have to make every day, but we can do them with respect and kindness." (senior leader)**

> **"Compassion and accountability have to sit side by side. Compassion is not about lowering expectations — it's about recognising people are working in increasingly complex environments, and how we then support them to succeed. How we combine kindness with clarity, empathy, accountability, and challenge and support." (senior leader)**

Other emerging leaders observed a sense of distance between senior leaders and institutional staff, which was seen as eroding trust and confidence in leadership:

> **"There's a perception that leadership teams are going further and further away from the lived experiences of staff, fairly or unfairly, and then it's much easier to attribute problematic attitudes, or whatever it might be, kind of in both directions, and people don't feel like they're communicating enormously well." (emerging leader)**

> **"You know, in some institutions, there's a very hard line between the executive and the wider leadership team and the wider institutional and academic community, and that distance can help in terms of delivering change, but it could also hinder." (emerging leader)**

> **"If executives felt more like 'one of us', I suspect they would find it much easier to buy a bit of trust." (emerging leader)**

It is, perhaps, not entirely surprising that some senior leaders might "retreat" when under pressure, faced with tough decisions, and unable to offer the degree of clarity or reassurance staff may wish from them. Some may be protecting their own boundaries and mental health (and some may be dispositionally inclined to distance). But, again, if the balance is off, and the distance presents as disconnect, trust becomes an issue.

Senior leaders agreed strongly on the centrality of trust to executing change, and readily took a level of accountability for fostering that trust in their institutions:

> **"Trust is the currency of change. How do we build this through consistency, honesty and follow-through? It means trusting people to exercise judgment, rather than requiring permission for every decision. It also means trusting that those closest to the work often have a better understanding of how change can be implemented successfully." (senior leader)**

> **"Trust is earned. And we need to acknowledge our own cultural and social capital that we bring into spaces… trust is hard to build, and it's really easy to destroy it. And we know within all of our relationships, once you've destroyed it, it's almost impossible to build it back." (senior leader)**

> **"Psychological safety [is] hugely important in the change agenda, where people can question you back… and challenge what you're doing without fear of being shut down or disadvantaged in some way. Reflecting back on some of the all-colleague surveys that we've done, psychological safety is often one of the lowest scoring points." (senior leader)**

Applying this to the dynamic between emerging and senior leaders, broadly there was agreement that there needs to be active relationship management on both sides, with space for challenge, in a context of trust and support. An open conversation about goals, success criteria, and personal development in leadership can help to calibrate expectations and frame requests for help or insight.

> **"We need to talk more about what the criteria for success are… and we also need to talk more about failure. Senior leaders can fail as well, and if middle managers are expecting that senior leaders always have all the answers, or at some point will have all the answers, and that they can't sometimes get things wrong, that's quite difficult." (senior leader)**

> **"We can't think about [emerging leader development] in isolation. There's that question of what's the symbiotic relationship with the senior leaders… what are we doing to support emerging leaders to challenge senior leaders back if they're not sure about the direction of travel? … Maybe senior leaders are giving too much, or expecting too much, or not giving clarity on what the priorities actually are, and leaving it to emerging leaders to work that bit out." (senior leader)**

Senior leaders also acknowledged that expectations on emerging leaders can be much more complicated in the current moment than in the past:

> **"People management has never been harder than it is today, and we're expecting so much more from managers than we used to… managers are almost going to have to be GPs, counsellors — we're expecting them to be therapists and performance manage people. And as a sector we're very paternalistic. Then we're trying to get people to be innovative, and there's so many contradictions." (senior leader)**

Some senior leaders explained how they were trying to embed a "coaching culture" across their institutions, drawing on the discipline of coaching to establish a developmental dynamic between leaders and between leaders and teams. One senior leader suggested that showing ongoing learning is an important quality for leaders to model:

> **"Often we assume that when somebody steps into leadership, they've finished their learning. Actually, the opposite's true. The best leaders are the ones who continue to learn." (senior leader)**

Having this supportive, constructive relationship could help emerging leaders feel confident to try new things and manage the risks of failure. Where leadership culture doesn't consciously model discussing and learning from failure the perception is that there is low tolerance for failure.

> **"The culture should enable us to deliver what will help to achieve the strategy. That sometimes means being trusted to take a risk but also it being acceptable to fail. Sometimes the approach to governance can hinder confidence to innovate." (emerging leader)**

Leaders at the middle level should be in a strong position to learn to experiment and take risks, but they need to know that failure will not leave them in the position of the "wounded buffalo at the watering hole" – that they will be supported to adjust, iterate, and try again.

> **"How do you create an innovation culture – talking a bit more about a minimum viable product, rather than success being 'we've got everything right, waterfall style, we're ready to launch it, and we'll have covered everything.' And we've got to caution against that culture of blame, where it only takes one incident where some middle manager is bawled out in a group of their peers, and that story resonates for weeks or months or even years afterwards." (senior leader)**

> **"Replacing blame with learning… instead of 'what's gone wrong,' 'what have we learned that we can do to make it better?' Pilots rather than institution-wide approaches, so we can refine and learn as we scale. It can create safe spaces for innovation while building confidence for middle managers." (senior leader)**

These conversations coalesced around the question of culture – whose "job" it is to build the cultures that enable inclusive change, and the mechanisms for doing so. While it's a truism to say that culture is "everybody's job" leaders set the cultural standards through their own behaviour and practice. Doing this consciously, consistently, and in dialogue with an extended network of organisational leadership means that culture can be (re)shaped.

Emerging leaders felt that senior leaders should spearhead the process of gripping and changing culture:

> **"They do talk about culture but I don't think there's a shared recognition that the culture change needs to start from the top or that some aspects of the current culture at other levels of the organisation aren't inevitable/something we should just accept." (emerging leader)**

Senior leaders agreed, but added thoughtful nuance:

> **"Usually the leadership culture is set from the top – but this is not always the case. We all have the ability to shape the culture within our leadership areas." (senior leader)**

> **"When it comes to who owns the culture, it is collective, so how do you enable collective ownership of the culture? Owning it and having accountability or responsibility for it might be two slightly different things. When there are clearly problematic dimensions going on in the institution, people in leadership roles have to take responsibility for addressing that." (senior leader)**

This, what might be termed leaders' cultural competency, can be built through a positive leadership dynamic that is consciously extended throughout institutional networks. Leaders having an understanding of the formal and informal institutional relational networks, and noticing gaps where there may be a need for additional efforts to bring people together, is a powerful tool to build culture.

> **“Leadership culture has to be owned by leadership (starting with senior leadership) and supported by trust and a properly close working relationship that allows for open, respectful, conversations that accept we might not always agree but that we are happy to share collective responsibility for our decisions (otherwise we should leave). This requires mutual trust and proper challenge (which is not simply disagreeing on principle) and time spent together without too many agendas and probably no minutes.” (senior leader)**

> **"I've tried to think about building up an education and students leadership team across the institution that connects people laterally, and also connects people through the faculties and the professional services divisions… at its most maxed-out version it's also all of the course convenors and academic personal tutors, so it becomes almost its own school of people within the institution, but it connects to all of the different parts. Activating networks through purposeful meetings and sharing practice is one way of doing that." (senior leader)**

A shared leadership culture is central to building an organisation that has the cultural capability to deal with change. Leadership capacity for strategic change then sits across institutions rather than solely within formal leadership roles. Building the relationships, behaviours and networks that enable leadership to be exercised collectively is as important as developing individual leaders. These two areas are interrelated. These findings reinforce the principles reflected in Advance HE's Framework for Leading in Higher Education: that leadership is a collective and relational practice, exercised across institutions rather than solely through formal leadership roles. They also highlight the importance of context, illustrating how organisational culture, structures, relationships and institutional conditions can both enable and constrain leadership practice

Within a strong and networked leadership culture it is possible to make visible the day to day challenges of leadership, induct emerging leaders and collectively learn, test, and plan – as well as support each other in difficult moments.

> **"I wonder if there's a development need for whole leadership teams about really high-quality conversations. How do we, as a leadership team, have inclusive, diverse conversations where people feel able to bring their views to the table, ready to contribute to the big picture rather than their own immediate area? And what does it mean to chair and convene those discussions to get the best out of people? That's lots of layers of leadership needing to have collective development, rather than separating out emerging versus senior managers." (senior leader)**

A shared leadership culture and strong interpersonal relationships and coaching dynamics between the layers of leadership doesn't substitute for a formal programme of leadership development, but it does create the conditions for formal learning to be applied and for informal learning to continue beyond the confines of structured knowledge acquisition. Moreover, it was the cultural and collective element of leadership emerging leaders expressed a lack of, more so than formal training.

A final note on collective leadership: the issue of "churn" at the top of institutions surfaced several times in our discussion. While the sector cannot insist that leaders stay in post, the disruptive effect of leadership churn was noted:

> **"Part of the problem in the sector is the shortened tenure in leadership roles. People get started, they do the job for two, maybe three years, and then they're off to the next role… every time you get that, you have to rebuild the executive team and rebuild those ways of working, and that extends the gap to the level below, because the focus goes up rather than down." (senior leader)**

One senior leader suggested that some leadership roles are simply too large for one person to do alone, and suggested group leadership as a possible solution:

> **"Wouldn't it be great if we didn't have one leader or one vice-chancellor? I don't mean job share – actual shared leadership, where two or three people came together to manage a faculty, a department, or a university. No one person is going to have all of those things, but if you had a combination of those things, just imagine how powerful that could be." (senior leader)**

While group leadership may be a more radical solution, we reflect that a shared and collective leadership network could create a level of institutional resilience to leadership churn, by ensuring that priorities were collectively held, strategic agendas collectively shared, and culture collectively owned, such that none of these things depend on any one individual's vision, energy, or presence.

6 Conclusion and recommendations

At the start of this project the basis for our inquiry was not only "what support do leaders at mid-level need now to be effective agents of change and transformation" but "what are emerging leaders learning about leadership and change right now, and what are the implications for the sector's future?"

The answer to the second question is, arguably, uncomfortable. Emerging leaders are learning that change is something largely done to them; that the people who will make a change work are often consulted after it has been decided; that the risks of leading are carried personally while the rewards accrue elsewhere; and that failure is more likely to be remembered than success is to be recognised.

In a sector that needs generative change, that is a problem, and it signals a risk to the leadership pipeline. As one senior leader put it:

> **"There is something to be said about ensuring that we have future leaders who want to step up, who want to engage – and we nurture and we value them." (senior leader)**

But there is also much to be hopeful about. The emerging leaders we spoke to have a sophisticated grasp of what makes change work, considerable appetite to do it well, and – where the relationship with senior leadership is honest and supported – real satisfaction in the work. One senior leader described their role as the best job they have ever had. The positive framing of leadership in difficult times is itself a leadership act.

The findings suggest that developing emerging leaders is not simply a matter of succession planning. The experiences of these leaders are shaping institutions' current capacity to deliver strategic change, as well as influencing who chooses to pursue more senior leadership roles in the future. Investment in emerging leaders should therefore be understood as both a present and future strategic priority, alongside investment in the cultures, systems and organisational conditions that enable strategic change to succeed.

There are formal systems institutions can put in place – leadership development and success criteria for emerging leaders, an infrastructure for delivering change into which emerging leaders can "plug" when tasked with overseeing change, and an effectively sequenced programme of change that is attentive to capacity. But the real work is cultural, and requires leaders to take ownership of changing culture, focused on personal behaviours, relationships, communication and the building of trust.

7 Reflections for institutions to consider

Bring the people who will deliver a change into its design, not its cascade. “Critical by design,” not critical after the fact.

Articulate what success looks like for emerging leaders, and give clarity and permission to stop and delegate. Where leadership roles carry real responsibility, give them substantive status, time to develop, and reward.

Ensure leadership development is connected to the institution's strategic priorities and change agendas, enabling emerging leaders to develop through meaningful, recognised participation across the lifecycle of institutional transformation.

Make change processes an explicit subject of leadership conversation: what the approach is and why, what has worked and not worked, what is being learned from elsewhere. Consider whether “change” is the right framing at all.

Build trust deliberately, through consistency, follow-through and honest acknowledgement of what has not worked, as well as celebration and recognition for impact. This is not soft work: it requires accountability and difficult conversations.

Look harder at promotion criteria and who is being “tapped on the shoulder.” Recycling a familiar leadership style through familiar structures will reproduce the system institutions say they want to change.

Convene an extended leadership group that meets informally as well as formally, connecting laterally across academic and professional services boundaries.

8 Reflections for the sector to consider

Create structured opportunities for senior leaders to share practice on developing the next generation. This is not a competitive space, and too many institutions are solving it alone.

Reassess the rotational and fixed-term model for heads of academic units in some institutions, and the wider treatment of leadership as an add-on.

Develop emerging leaders across academic and professional services together, and resist fragmenting provision by professional function. Strategic change can only be delivered through collaboration across institutional boundaries and leadership development should reflect this reality.

Protect low-cost, high-quality development as institutional non-pay budgets contract.

Begin the conversation about impact, influence and followership far earlier in careers than first appointment to a leadership role – start the leadership pipeline earlier.

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