

Strive Higher

**Sector insights volume three: Culture, context, complexity:
Understanding leadership in higher education**

July 2026

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1.0 Executive summary

When compared to other sectors, UK higher education (HE) is unique in its contrasts: it's simultaneously a public mission and a competitive market; it's an engine of research and innovation and a consumer-facing service; it's a bastion of academic freedom and a tightly regulated environment. Leadership within this complexity requires balancing all these tensions, and doing so with increasingly limited resources, under intensifying scrutiny, and against a financial backdrop that, for many institutions, is no longer sustainable.

This report draws on thirteen in-depth conversations with leaders from across the sector: professional service directors, academic leads at both the institution and school levels, an academic registrar, a technology director, and the leaders of two sector membership bodies. Together, their voices paint a rich and honest picture of what it's really like to lead in higher education today – and what needs to change if the sector is to develop the leaders it will require for the future.

Six themes emerge from our conversations.

- **What makes HE leadership distinctive.** Universities present unique challenges and nuances that set them apart from other sectors. They're part public service, part commercial operation, part scholarly community and that distinctiveness shapes everything about how leadership works within them. Governance is complex and diffuse. Stakeholders are multiple and competing. The relationship between institutional mission and financial sustainability is perpetually in tension. Leadership at its best is understood not as the exercise of power, but as the creation for others to flourish.
- **The cross-sector transition.** HE is increasingly drawing senior leaders from other sectors and those leaders bring genuinely valuable perspectives. But the sector hasn't yet built the infrastructure to help them land well. The cultural codes, the governance landscape, the pace of decision-making, and the specific demands of working alongside and with academic communities all require deliberate onboarding and that onboarding is rarely provided.
- **The accidental leader.** A distinctive feature of academic leadership is the number of people who arrive at it without having sought it out or been formally prepared for it. Academics who become heads of department, course leaders who step up into programme management, practitioners who find themselves running schools — all face a transition that is rarely acknowledged, let alone supported. The cost of leaving this unaddressed is significant, both for individuals and for institutions.
- **The craft of leadership in HE.** In an environment where formal authority is always partial and informal influence is often decisive, getting things done requires credibility, communication, political acumen, and resilience — all built through sustained relational investment rather than positional seniority. These are learnable capabilities, but the sector too rarely develops them deliberately.
- **The diversity challenge.** Senior leadership in higher education, particularly in professional services, remains strikingly non-diverse. The challenge is no longer awareness — it's action. Until the sector addresses the opacity of its career pathways, its reliance on informal networks, and the cultural codes that favour particular styles of leadership, it will continue to lose talented people who cannot find their way through.

- **The transformation imperative.** Universities across the sector are grappling with a financial model under severe pressure. The leaders navigating this most effectively are those that have found a way to hold institutional mission and commercial reality together and who are leading genuine transformation rather than incremental, perpetual managed decline.

2.0 Methodology

Our research approach was deliberately qualitative. We weren't seeking to produce statistically representative findings about leadership in HE; we were seeking to generate rich, reflective insight from people with direct experience of leading within it. We conducted thirteen semi-structured interviews carried out between March and June 2026. All conversations were recorded and transcribed with participants' consent. Transcripts were then analysed thematically, with themes emerging both from our original research framework and from patterns we identified across the conversations themselves.

Our participant group was selected to represent a range of institutional types, portfolio areas, career trajectories, and personal backgrounds. We deliberately sought out leaders who had made transitions into HE from other sectors, as well as those who had progressed entirely within HE. We also sought to include leaders from underrepresented backgrounds, recognising that their experiences of the sector are not identical to those of the majority. We are grateful to all thirteen participants for their time, their openness, and their willingness to reflect on experiences that are sometimes uncomfortable as well as rewarding.

3.0 Introduction: The leadership moment

Higher education in the UK isn't, at present, a comfortable place to work. The financial pressures are real and, in some cases, acute. The regulatory environment has tightened. The media narrative has been relentlessly negative. Student expectations have risen while resources have contracted. And the post-pandemic landscape has left many institutions grappling with fundamental questions about their purpose, their model, and their future.

And yet spend any time talking to the people who lead within universities, and something else comes through just as clearly: a sector still animated by genuine belief in the value of what it does. The leaders we spoke to for this report aren't people who have given up on higher education. They are people working harder than ever to protect and advance it, precisely because they believe the stakes are high.

That combination – real pressure, real commitment – is what makes leadership in HE so distinctive and so demanding. It is also what makes it worth examining closely.

This is the third instalment in our annual Insights series. We spoke to thirteen leaders drawn from academic management, professional services, student-facing directorates, specialist portfolio areas, and cross-sector bodies. Their conversations form the backbone of this report, not as a statistical sample, but as a group of thoughtful people reflecting honestly on what this work actually requires.

Our interviewees work in institutions ranging from a small specialist university to one of the largest universities in the world. They have backgrounds spanning consulting, the civil service, the voluntary sector, the fashion industry, and higher education itself. What they share is a willingness to be candid about what leading in this sector really involves, including the parts that are hard, the parts that are rewarding, and the parts the sector still has not got right.

4.0 What makes higher education leadership different?

Before exploring the particular challenges that shape leadership in HE, it is worth pausing on a question that runs through every conversation in this report: what actually makes HE leadership distinctive? The answer is more layered, and more interesting, than it might first appear.

4.1 A unique governance environment

Who's in charge here? In many other sectors you'll find a relatively clear answer to this question. In HE, that question is more complicated. Universities operate through layered governance structures — councils, senates, academic boards, executive committees, faculty boards — and the result is an environment in which formal authority and informal power are rarely the same thing. Understanding the difference, and learning to work with it rather than against it, is one of the most important things a new leader must do.

Aimie Chapple came to HE after a long career in management consulting and the private sector. She found the governance environment unlike anything she had experienced before.

“In a private sector organisation, you're expected to make the decision — it's your job as the executive to make the decision. Whereas in HE, yes you're still making decisions, but these are influenced by a matrix of council expectations, executive team dynamics, and the academic and student communities, all of which have shared or even ultimate accountabilities.” — Aimie Chapple, Vice President (Operations), UCL

That distinction ripples through every aspect of senior leadership in HE: how change is managed, how resistance is navigated, how leaders communicate upwards and outwards. And it's rarely explained clearly to those who are new to it. Dionne Spencer has worked across both post-92 and Russell Group institutions and offers an illustration of how governance weight can also vary by institutional type. When conducting a review of student regulations, in one provider this took two months, in another it took over six — not because of the task at hand, but because of fundamentally different governance cultures and the weight each placed on academic voice and collective agreement.

“In one institution, the academic voice was very dominant and this negotiation had to be accounted for. You had to really invest in those collegial relationships, and recognise and work through tensions to reach a collective agreement. Whereas in the other institution, this type of scrutiny was less of a requirement, the exercise was seen as an administrative exercise so it progressed more quickly.” — Dr Dionne Spencer, Dean of Students, Buckinghamshire New University (at time of interview)

Beth Beasant has worked across four institutions and sees executive alignment as one of the biggest determinants of whether an institution can change at pace. The best leadership she's seen wasn't characterised by the absence of disagreement, but by the discipline to resolve disagreements at the executive and governance level before they became visible to the wider institution.

“When I think back to that team, when they made a decision, you could not put a piece of paper between them. They definitely didn't always agree, but that tight unit leading from the top, that real cabinet responsibility, meant they could do some really difficult and genuinely groundbreaking things.” — Beth Beasant, Deputy COO (Operations, Change and Innovation), University of Leeds

Ben Vulliamy argues that this governance complexity places a particular premium on political acumen: the ability to read a room, understand where resistance will come from, build coalitions before decisions reach the table, and communicate change in ways that acknowledge competing interests.

“The need for political acumen from senior leaders is greater than ever before. The complexity of the structures, the systems, the communities universities serve — the need to communicate change effectively, to understand points of resistance and how to move them, to coalesce competing expectations. Where we see things go wrong is because the political acumen isn’t there.” — Ben Vulliamy, Executive Director, AHUA

4.2 A multiplicity of stakeholders

If governance is one source of distinctiveness, the complex stakeholder environment is another. Universities must simultaneously serve students as learners, consumers, and community members; academic and professional services staff; government, regulators, and funders; employers; and civic partners. No single group has a monopoly on defining what a good university looks like, and their interests regularly pull in different directions.

Aimie Chapple draws a comparison with financial services to capture the complexity: universities are not simply customer businesses, because the ‘product’ is also shaped by regulators, accreditors, and the employers who will judge whether graduates are work-ready. Managing student needs and expectations, regulators, and the labour market simultaneously, without losing sight of mission, is one of the key challenges of leading in HE.

John Schless’ career started in the charity sector and he joined higher education initially through Student Union leadership before progressing to university professional services leadership. He brings what he calls a ‘beneficiary mindset’ to his work. His team doesn’t own the academic mission, but it is an essential partner to it — and its success depends on maintaining genuine credibility with academic colleagues while remaining anchored to the student experience. For John, the success of business partnerships with Academic Registry at the University of East Anglia validates his sense that partnership is foundational:

“Our job is not to be subordinate to the academic mission. It is to partner with it, to deliver for our students.” — John Schless, Director of Student and Academic Services at University of East Anglia.

4.3 Mission and market in productive tension

Underlying both governance and stakeholder complexity is a third source of distinctiveness: the tension between institutional mission and commercial reality. Beth Beasant puts it plainly.

“It’s fairly clear if you’re working for Apple that your job is to make money. For universities, it’s to be a great teaching institute, a great research institute, to fulfil research and innovation and civic duty — all whilst being financially viable. And those things don’t necessarily always sit easily together.” — Beth Beasant, Deputy COO (Operations, Change and Innovation), University of Leeds

Rathna Ramanathan, Provost at Central Saint Martins and Executive Dean for Global Affairs at UAL, is direct about where she thinks this productive tension can tip into being a problem. She’s been in enough rooms in the past where the financial conversation becomes self-referential, with the student disappearing from the logic. Rathna’s position isn’t that financial reality doesn’t matter. It’s that the moment an institution stops asking where the individual sits in the model, it has already made the wrong call. Learning to hold that tension productively, rather than resolving it prematurely in either direction, is one of the defining capabilities of effective leadership in higher education.

4.4. Leadership as service

Perhaps the most distinctive thing about leadership in HE, as evidenced by several of our interviewees, is its fundamental orientation. In a sector whose core purpose is the education of

students and the advancement of knowledge, leadership is most naturally understood not as the exercise of power but as the creation of conditions for others to flourish.

Rathna draws on the concept of servant leadership to articulate what drew her to academic leadership: the clarity of purpose that comes from always knowing who you are ultimately working for.

“Leadership in higher education has clarity of purpose — who you’re working for and with. And that’s students, really. It sounds simple, but I think it’s quite rare to have that clarity in other sectors. In many sectors, leadership can be abstracted from the people themselves because you’ve got shareholders, metrics and quarterly targets. And yes, we have some of those accountabilities, but the students are always present. You’re not building an empire — you’re creating conditions for others.” — Professor Rathna Ramanathan, Provost, Central Saint Martins / Executive Dean for Global Affairs, UAL

Dionne Spencer articulates a version of the same orientation that has been sharpened, over the course of her career. The lens she now brings to every aspect of her work is one of fairness and accountability: doing what is right by students, even when this may create institutional tension.

“I see it as a privilege that I’ve been able to support the student experience in really difficult, complex areas. The work is about fairness — and this sometimes means holding institutions to account. That’s a really difficult balance to maintain under pressure. But the risk of not doing the right thing, the moral thing, is far greater — financially, reputationally, and legally — if you don’t address it.” — Dr Dionne Spencer, Dean of Students, Buckinghamshire New University (at time of interview)

5.0 Transitioning to higher education

HE is increasingly drawing senior leaders from other sectors. Financial constraint, the need for transformation at pace, and demand for skills in commercial development, technology, HR, and operations have all driven a significant increase in external hiring at director level and above. The leaders who make this transition bring genuine value: different assumptions, different frameworks, different relationships with risk and pace. At their best, they are catalysts for change that institutions struggle to generate from within. But the transition is rarely straightforward, and the sector too often doesn’t do enough to support them to understand the unique challenges of the sector they’re entering.

5.1 The first surprises

Leaders we spoke to who transitioned to HE from other sectors described the same initial experience: a familiar-looking environment that turned out to operate in ways they hadn’t anticipated. The culture shock framing is too simple — these are sophisticated leaders with experience of complex organisations — but the recalibration required is real and significant.

For Aimie Chapple, the biggest adjustment was not the size and scale of the university she joined, but the difference in how decisions are made and how change is managed.

“Understanding the process of change is as important as deciding what the change is and doing it. In business, there’s a very decisive approach that a senior executive learns to take. In higher education, it’s more discursive, more exploratory and more questioning. And I learned early that there’s not a practiced change muscle in universities.” — Aimie Chapple, Vice President (Operations), UCL

Addeel Khan came to HE from the British Red Cross and the Civil Service. What struck him most was not pace but the different, often siloed and territorial cultures.

“In other sectors, collective accountability is easier. There are mechanisms and frameworks that make it very clear: a big part of your role as a leader is how you’re going to lead with collaboration, with goodwill and intent, in bringing things together. In HE, the subcultures are more siloed, more federated. You often have to work hard to generate that collaboration. It doesn’t happen naturally.” — Addeel Khan, Director of Equity, Inclusion and Culture, UCL

Virginia Grose came from the fashion industry and found the difference in pace the most immediately striking.

“Everything has to go through a committee or a working group quite often. You can’t cut through some of that and I genuinely understand why. But in the private sector, no business would survive working like that, especially the industry I came from, which is incredibly fast-moving. You do have to learn to adapt to that.” — Virginia Grose, Head of School of Arts, University of Westminster

5.2 What transfers and what doesn’t

The skills that translate most readily from other sectors are those HE needs most urgently: commercial acumen, project discipline, data-driven decision-making, and a healthy relationship with risk. Sophie Crouchman reflects on this with a caveat: a more commercial mindset can be enormously valuable, but only where the institution’s culture is ready to receive it.

“Sometimes that more commercial mindset can really, really help. But in some organisations, it can be more of a hindrance, because the culture within that organisation may need to change really significantly first.” — Sophie Crouchman, Strategic Projects and Research Manager, UHR

James King, Director of Technology at the Royal College of Art, observes that the leaders who thrive are those who bring private-sector rigour and then embrace HE’s collaborative culture — rather than fighting it.

“If they grasp and continue that collaboration, that openness, they’ll crack it — because they have all of the efficiency and hard-nosed skills of being private sector, but also that curiosity and collaboration that HE brings. Where I’ve seen difficulties is when they come in and say, ‘right, I’m going to shake this university up’ — doing it all on their own without realising what environment they’re operating in.” — James King, Director of Technology, Royal College of Art

Many we spoke to identified clarity of roles, responsibilities and accountabilities as one of the most valuable things the private sector instils — and one of the areas where universities most need to catch up. And along with clarity, different expectations around pace are apparent to new arrivals. Jamel Lee describes the adjustment to HE’s different relationship with pace, urgency and accountability as an early eye-opener for him.

“The slower pace definitely jumped out at me almost immediately. Sometimes it feels like a sense of urgency is lacking. That, and it’s surprising that sometimes there isn’t really a consequence to not meeting a target, or that exceptional effort isn’t rewarded or recognised. Without good leadership, this can leave teams thinking, what’s the point?” — Jamel Lee, Director of Residential and Commercial Services, University of London

5.3 The infrastructure gap

What the sector still lacks, almost uniformly, is a structured approach to helping external leaders make this transition well. Ben Vulliamy noted both the problem and the irony this represents.

“It is painfully ironic that as institutions whose core purpose is about continually learning, we’re a little bit closed down to learning from the outside world or from different backgrounds. The answer is being more purposeful about the transitions that people make, helping them understand the culture, the purpose, the history, the heritage. And then going: ‘and what do you bring me that I haven’t thought about?’” — Ben Vulliamy, Executive Director, AHUA

UHR has begun to address this gap, developing both a cross-sector Introduction to Higher Education programme and an e-learning module specifically on HR in HE. Sophie Crouchman notes the driver for this: “We did realise that this isn’t something that everybody just knows — from what is a governing body to which Unions you’d be dealing with.” Valuable as these resources are, the cultural and relational dimensions of transition — understanding how decisions are really made, how influence works, how to navigate academic communities — are harder to codify. They tend to be learned through experience, ideally with a mentor or sponsor who can provide the orientation that formal induction rarely delivers.

Lessons for employers: Supporting leaders to transition to HE

The leaders who contributed to this report were candid about what the transition into higher education actually demands and how rarely institutions provide the support that would make it easier. Whether arriving from consulting, the civil service, the NHS, or the private sector, experienced leaders consistently described the same challenge: not a lack of capability, but a lack of orientation. The culture, the governance, the pace, the relationship between formal authority and informal influence – none of these can simply be assumed from previous experience. They have to be learned, and that learning takes time.

What our interviewees needed, and in many cases didn’t receive, was structured support to understand the environment they were entering: how decisions are really made, how academic communities work, what credibility looks like in this particular context, and how to adapt a proven leadership style without abandoning what makes it effective. Without that support, even the most capable leaders can find themselves in difficulty – not because they are wrong for the role, but because the transition itself hasn’t been adequately managed.

The implications for employers are clear. Institutions that invest in supporting leadership transitions, not just through induction, but through sustained, contextualised development, see a real return: faster time-to-effectiveness, stronger retention, and leaders who bring the full value of their experience to bear from early on. Those that don’t risk losing talented people who might have thrived with the right support.

What effective transition support looks like:

- Structured orientation to HE culture, governance and ways of working that goes well beyond a standard induction
- Dedicated coaching to support leaders in adapting their style and building credibility in a new context
- Clarity on the informal dynamics of the institution (relationships, alliances, decision-making processes) that are rarely documented but consistently matter
- Space to ask the questions that feel too basic for a senior leader to ask publicly, in a confidential and professionally supported environment
- Ongoing support through the first year, not just the first weeks

How Strive Higher can help: Transitions coaching

Our transitions coaching provides structured, tailored one-to-one support for leaders navigating this step change — whether they're moving into HE from another sector, stepping up within the same institution, or taking on a significantly more senior brief. Through focused coaching conversations, individuals build self-awareness, strengthen resilience, and develop the clarity and tools they need to lead with purpose from the outset. Coaching creates a protected space to think before the pace of the role takes over — to ask the questions that matter most before the urgent ones crowd them out:

- Who do I need to be in this new role?
- What do I most need to understand about this environment, and quickly?
- What parts of my current leadership approach still serve me — and what needs to shift?
- What matters most in the first 30, 60 and 90 days, and where can I add value without moving too fast?

Our coaches bring deep sector knowledge alongside professional accreditation and experience working with leaders who are values-driven and who care deeply about the work they do. We don't rush the transition. We help people understand the context they are stepping into — and arrive in role with the confidence and clarity that enables them to contribute well from the start, and to sustain that contribution over time.

To find out more about our transitions coaching offer, please get in touch.

6.0 Learning to lead in higher education

Entering HE from another sector is one kind of leadership transition. But there is a second, entirely different kind that is less visible and doesn't receive enough attention in the sector's development conversation. It's the transition made by academics who find themselves in leadership roles not because they sought them out, but because it's part of the academic leadership and management structures across a large part of HE.

Heads of department, course leaders, deans, programme directors: a significant proportion of these roles are filled by people who built their careers around disciplinary expertise, research, and teaching — and who moved into management sideways, incrementally, and without formal preparation. They did not set out to be leaders. Leadership found them. And unlike the external hire who at least arrives knowing they are entering unfamiliar territory, the accidental leader often does not realise how significant the transition is until they are already in the middle of it.

6.1 When leadership finds you

Natalie Brown characterises this type of leadership as if you're looking through a kaleidoscope that keeps moving: the colours change, the pattern shifts, but you have to hold the shape even as everything else around evolves. Communicating that kaleidoscopic reality to those who don't have access to the same information is one of the most demanding parts of the role.

“You have to remember not everyone has access to the discussions or the information that you do in these positions, so there's a lot of time spent trying to get colleagues to understand that there's a reason why we're doing this, to sell it to them almost, but also remembering to try to see things from their point of view and understand genuine concerns or valuable feedback.” — Professor Natalie Brown, Deputy Dean, School of Art and Design, Nottingham Trent University

The ‘selling’ metaphor came up in more than one conversation. In most organisations, middle managers are primarily implementers. In HE, they are also translators, negotiators, and advocates required to make institutional strategy intelligible and acceptable to communities whose instinct and training is to question it.

As Jamel Lee puts it:

“You have to be a good salesperson. You have to be able to bring people around. It’s about winning hearts and minds. It’s about saying, ‘This is the thing we need to do and this is how I think you can help me do it.’ You find yourself continuously taking information up and down the chain.”

Virginia Grose benefited from a long career in the fashion industry, which means she transitioned to HE with formal leadership experience that many of her academic peers never had. Having observed the accidental leadership dynamic closely, she identifies the absence of formal development as one of the sector’s most significant unaddressed gaps.

“In this sector, we’re quite willing to progress individuals to leadership positions even though they might have had no previous experience. In general, we’re probably not that good at providing leadership training that isn’t linked to teaching and learning. That’s a gap that needs addressing.” — Virginia Grose, Head of School of Arts, University of Westminster

6.2 Distributed leadership

The accidental leader problem isn’t only about individual preparation — it also points to something deeper about how institutions structure and distribute leadership. If capable people are consistently arriving in significant roles without adequate support, the answer cannot only be better induction. It must also involve asking whether the way leadership is organised is fit for purpose.

Rathna’s work at CSM in developing ‘Schools of Thought’ — a non-hierarchical academic structure organised around shared modes of inquiry rather than traditional disciplines — reflects a broader commitment to distributed leadership: the idea that leadership in an institution doesn’t necessarily reside in one place or with one person or team, but emerges from cooperation across different parts of the community and that this should be made explicit in how roles are defined and valued.

“Distributed leadership is about equity in job families — being really intentional about how leadership roles are defined and valued across different parts of the institution. The question I kept coming back to is: whose leadership counts here? Because if you’re only valuing what sits at the top of a hierarchy, you’re missing most of what’s actually holding the place together. Course leaders, technicians, programme administrators, professional services — they’re leading. Leadership is not held by one person, but comes from cooperation. It’s empowering individuals and sometimes about inverting existing structures.” — Professor Rathna Ramanathan, Provost, Central Saint Martins / Executive Dean for Global Affairs, UAL

This approach deliberately elevates the leadership contribution of professional services staff, technicians, and programme administrators alongside academic staff. It dissolves, rather than manages, the boundary between academic and operational leadership. It’s ambitious, and Rathna is the first to say it is still a work in progress. But it points towards something the sector needs to think about more seriously: not just how to prepare individual leaders better, but how to build organisations in which leadership is genuinely shared.

Implications for leadership development: Building the leadership capability HE needs

One of the clearest findings from our research is that higher education continues to rely heavily on accidental leadership development rather than systematic investment in building leadership

capability. Academics become heads of department without formal preparation. Professional services leaders step up into increasingly complex roles without access to the kind of peer learning, coaching and structured development that those roles demand. The result is a leadership community that is often more capable than it's been given the conditions to realise, and a sector that is leaving significant potential on the table at precisely the moment it can least afford to.

The leaders who make the greatest sustained difference – whether in academic or professional services roles – tend to share certain qualities: a clear sense of institutional purpose, the ability to work effectively across boundaries, and a leadership practice that has been built deliberately. These qualities don't emerge by accident. They're the product of investment: in development programmes that go beyond skills training to address identity, purpose and ways of working; in peer communities that create the conditions for honest reflection; and in coaching that helps individuals understand themselves as leaders, not just as practitioners.

For institutions, the implications are direct. Leadership development can't be treated as a discretionary spend or a reward for high performers. In the current environment, where the pressure on leaders at every level is growing, where cross-boundary working is increasingly essential, and where the pipeline of future leadership talent needs active attention, it's a strategic necessity.

What effective leadership development requires:

- Formal preparation for people taking on leadership roles – not the assumption that capability in a previous role automatically transfers
- Development that is sustained over time, not delivered in a single event, building capability through practice, reflection and peer learning alongside the work itself
- Programmes that address both academic and professional services leaders, recognising distinct needs while also creating shared understanding across institutional boundaries
- Coaching that supports leaders in developing their own identity, style and sense of purpose – not just their technical competence
- Active investment in identifying and developing the next generation of leadership talent, rather than waiting for the pipeline to emerge on its own

How Strive Higher can help: Leadership development programmes

Our leadership development programmes are designed to address exactly these requirements. Structured as year-long journeys, they combine workshops, coaching, psychometrics and peer learning to support participants in developing the clarity, capability and confidence to lead effectively in a complex HE environment. We run tailored programmes for academic heads of department and for heads of professional services – separately, where that better fits institutional needs, or with joint elements that build cross-boundary understanding, where that is the priority.

Participants leave with a stronger leadership identity, a practical toolkit grounded in the real challenges they face in their roles, and a peer network they can draw on long after the formal programme has ended.

To discuss how a leadership development programme could work for your institution, please get in touch.

7.0 The craft of leadership in higher education

Whether you arrived at leadership through a planned career move or whether circumstances were less intentional, the practical question is the same: how do you actually get things done? Across all thirteen conversations, the answer to that question was really consistent. It's not primarily about what formal authority you hold. It's about the quality of the relationships you've built, the credibility

you've accumulated, the way you communicate across different communities, and the resilience you've developed to keep going when the institutional machinery makes progress slow and the pressures are high. These aren't soft skills in the dismissive sense of that phrase. They're a key feature of leadership in this particular environment. And the sector, for the most part, doesn't yet develop them deliberately.

7.1 Building credibility across boundaries

For professional services leaders working alongside academic communities, the foundational task is always the same: demonstrating that you understand what academics are actually trying to do, and that you are genuinely committed to helping them do it. Not as a performance of collegiality, but as an actual orientation. The difference, it turns out, is visible.

Sophie Crouchman argues that the institutions that perform best are those where different services — HR, finance, planning, academic leadership — are genuinely working together rather than operating as parallel tracks that occasionally intersect.

“Where we see the highest performing universities that are doing well, it's because the different services are working together. If they're not working together, you're not going to get optimal outcomes.” — Sophie Crouchman, Strategic Projects and Research Manager, UHR

Karen Omisore describes her approach as being visible and engaged across the institution — offering to support initiatives and working groups beyond her own domain, making herself a present and useful voice rather than a distant administrator. The goodwill and relationships developed in this way, she reflects, tend to prove their value at precisely the moments when you need them most.

“Allies are so important at this level of leadership. Just having one or two allies in key areas can make a huge difference — individuals who understand you, understand your passion for what you do, and are willing to advocate for you even when you're not in the room. I've experienced that time and time again throughout my career.” — Karen Omisore, Academic Registrar, Imperial College London

Addeel Khan's experience developing UCL's EDI strategy illustrates the same principle at institutional scale. Rather than treating consultation as a procedural step, he invested in wide and deep engagement from the start — going to departments, listening to leaders, understanding their priorities before asking them to support his own.

“When it comes to getting things done — implementation — you've already got a starting point for that relationship. You've understood their areas. And many of these leaders are the ones who sit on the boards where decisions are made. They've seen you. That's just human nature — they're going to be a little bit more inclined to say, yeah, I understand that. I support this.” — Addeel Khan, Director of Equity, Inclusion and Culture, UCL

Dionne Spencer also emphasises the importance investing in relationships and working in partnership when navigating academic governance and decision-making. Over time, she has come to appreciate the value of proposing a range of options open for discussion and debate rather than presenting a single recommendation and defending it. It's a small thing, but it shifts the dynamic from compliance to collaboration, giving academic colleagues genuine agency in shaping the outcome rather than the feeling of being managed towards a pre-determined conclusion.

7.2 The art of communication

Credibility is built in part through what you know and how you show up. But it's sustained, day to day, through how you communicate. Across all thirteen conversations, effective communication emerged as one of the most critical — and most under-discussed — leadership capabilities in HE.

Not simply the ability to speak clearly, but the ability to read your audience, understand what they need to hear, and translate your message accordingly.

Jamel Lee describes this as a form of translation that runs through everything he does as a leader.

“You have to talk the language. If I’m presenting to a CFO, I need to talk numbers. The numbers need to shine through — say, ‘This is the risk, if we don’t do it, the income could be reduced by X’. So, you’re always thinking: who am I speaking to and how do I need to communicate this to get the best out of this conversation?” — Jamel Lee, Director of Residential and Commercial Services, University of London

The ability to speak the language of the CFO in one meeting and of a student community in the next without losing your core message in either isn’t taught as a leadership skill, but it is, in the experience of our interviewees, absolutely central to getting anything done. James King makes the same point from a technology perspective: the leaders who fail to build credibility in HE are usually those who communicate in the language of their own function rather than in the language of the people they’re trying to serve.

“What a lot of technology people do is take a corporate ecosystem and try to force the academics into it. That’s the square peg in the round hole. It just destroys any credibility. You have to understand what academics are trying to do and how technology can serve their goals, not override them.” — James King, Director of Technology, Royal College of Art

The relationship between academic and professional services staff has improved markedly over the past decade. Beth Beasant says she finds it noticeable now when she encounters academic colleagues who don’t value professional services, where once it was closer to the norm. But the dynamics have shifted rather than disappeared. For professional services leaders, credibility still has to be built through relationships, through demonstration, and through sustained presence. There is no shortcut.

“Academic excellence is highly measurable. If you’re brilliant, you’ve published loads of papers and someone’s probably told you you’re brilliant for your whole career. There’s no counterpart to that on the professional services side. So it’s got to be based on trust and credibility built over time — and you have to be confident in who you are and what you bring.” — Beth Beasant, Deputy COO (Operations, Change and Innovation), University of Leeds

7.3 Resilience, purpose and what keeps people going

If credibility is the foundation of leadership effectiveness in HE, resilience is what makes it sustainable. Almost every interviewee touched on the subject — often with a directness that suggested it’s something the sector is only really beginning to recognise.

Virginia Grose identifies resilience as most tested not in the big strategic moments, but in the difficult conversations that arrive without warning: the meeting that turns confrontational, the interaction where the emotional temperature rises unexpectedly. Her response is similar to others.

“You’ve not got to feel defeated. Those meetings don’t happen very often, but when they do — people can be quite emotional, quite confrontational — you just have to walk away from it and think: it’s not personal.” — Virginia Grose, Head of School of Arts, University of Westminster

Jamel Lee approaches resilience not as a personal quality to be cultivated in isolation, but as a primary feature of leadership in this environment — something that the role demands and that good leaders develop a practice around.

“You certainly do have to be resilient to be a leader within higher education. It’s being in it for the long haul. You are very rarely going to get the simple answer and away we go. You need to find — if you’re not going to go around it, how do you go underneath it? Can you go above it? And you have to keep clear on the outcome — what does it do to the student experience? Because you can quickly lose sight of what you intended to do as you go through your various committees, subcommittees and business cases. Resilience is key.” — Jamel Lee, Director of Residential and Commercial Services, University of London

What makes resilience more than simply endurance, what actually sustains a leader — is the presence of a clear and personal sense of purpose. This is perhaps the most consistent finding across all thirteen conversations. In a sector where monetary reward is rarely commensurate with responsibility, and where the headwinds are real and sustained, meaning is what keeps people going.

Rathna returns to the question of what she is here to protect. Karen Omisore’s leadership starts from the individual student — from appreciating the unique circumstances of the individual — as the compass point for every decision. Natalie Brown describes why the work continues to feel meaningful even in a difficult moment for the sector: because it matters to the people inside it, in ways that are personal and not easily substituted. And Jamel Lee speaks about a directorate filled with people who are “really passionate about delivering a great service for students and therefore find the resilience to do that against the headwinds.”

The leaders who thrive in HE, in the end, are those who have a clear and personal answer to the question of why the work matters — and who return to that answer when the institutional machinery makes everything else hard to see.

Enabling authentic leadership: Creating the conditions for leaders to lead at their best

The leaders who contributed to this report described credibility, authenticity and the ability to communicate and influence across institutional boundaries as among the most important and most demanding capabilities required of senior leaders in higher education. These aren’t soft skills in the dismissive sense of that phrase. They’re the core craft of leadership in this environment. And yet the sector, for the most part, doesn’t develop them deliberately.

Building credibility in higher education is fundamentally relational. It can’t be conferred by a job title or assumed on the basis of expertise. It has to be earned – through sustained presence in the right conversations, through demonstrated understanding of what academic colleagues are trying to achieve, through the quality of communication across communities of interest, and through a consistency of values and behaviour that others can trust over time. For professional services leaders, in particular, this can require a level of self-awareness, intentionality and resilience that is rarely either expected or supported.

The pressure on senior leaders in higher education to be simultaneously strategic and operational, visible and measured, decisive and collaborative, is real and growing. Without the space to reflect on who they are as leaders – on the values, habits and assumptions that shape their practice – many capable people find themselves reacting to circumstances rather than leading through them. The gap between the leader they want to be and the leader the day-to-day demands of the role allow them to be can, over time, become a significant one.

Institutions that take this seriously, those that create the conditions in which leaders can develop greater self-awareness, build more intentional relationships, and lead with a clearer sense of purpose, see the difference not only in individual performance, but in the health of teams and the quality of cross-boundary working across the institution. The investment pays back at every level.

What universities need to provide:

- Dedicated time and space for senior leaders to reflect on their leadership – not as a luxury, but as a genuine professional development priority
- Confidential, professionally supported environments in which leaders can explore questions of identity, values and purpose without the constraints of institutional hierarchy
- Development that addresses the relational and communication dimensions of leadership – building political acumen, cross-boundary influence and the ability to lead authentically in a complex stakeholder environment
- Support for leaders navigating the tension between authentic self-expression and institutional conformity – enabling people to adapt their style without losing themselves in doing so
- A culture that values and models reflective leadership practice at the most senior levels

How Strive Higher can help: Executive coaching

Our executive coaching supports leaders at all levels in higher education – from those stepping into senior roles for the first time to experienced leaders navigating complex institutional change. In a confidential, professionally supported environment, we work with leaders to explore the identity, values and patterns that shape how they lead – and from that deeper understanding, more genuine and more sustainable development can emerge.

Our coaches are professionally accredited and experienced across both academic and professional services leadership in higher education. We create a space for reflection, curiosity and constructive challenge and we ensure that every engagement ends with a focused set of priorities and the confidence to maintain momentum over time.

To explore whether executive coaching is right for you or your institution, please get in touch.

8.0 The diversity challenge: a leadership pipeline still too narrow

HE invests significantly in its commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion. Universities teach it, research it, and publish strategies about it. And yet when it comes to the diversity of senior leadership — particularly in professional services — the evidence tells a more complicated story. The leaders we spoke to are consistent in their diagnosis: the barriers to progression for people from underrepresented backgrounds are real, structural, and insufficiently addressed. They aren't reducible to individual bias, though that exists. They're embedded in the sector's culture, its career structures, its informal networks, and in the tendency — rarely conscious, often consequential — to define leadership capability in terms that favour particular kinds of people. What follows draws on a wide range of voices across our interviewee group to sketch a structural picture, rather than to define any individual by their experience of it.

8.1 Opaque pathways and invisible rules

Ben Vulliamy and AHUA have invested in investigating the specific barriers facing people from ethnic minority backgrounds in senior professional services roles. While the research is ongoing, early feedback indicates a sector that has made progress in diversifying its academic community but has largely failed to extend that progress to professional services leadership.

“Universities are really bad at explaining our cultural structures, systems and practices. The way to succeed tends to be by behaving in the way the community around you expects, rather than bringing your whole self. That means we lose good people who don't understand our language.” — Ben Vulliamy, Executive Director, AHUA

Sophie Crouchman points to evidence-based inclusion work as the necessary next step for institutions serious about making change. Moving beyond anecdotal approaches — and putting real data behind questions of accessibility, participation, and equitable engagement — is what distinguishes institutions that are genuinely progressing from those that are not.

The way informal networks operate as a sorting mechanism in HE is a theme several interviewees return to. One participant, speaking anonymously, describes the moment she realised how much of the sector's opportunity landscape is conducted in conversations she had no ordinary access to.

“There is this unspoken narrative. The system wasn't built for diverse people — there is just a way to navigate it that is understood in particular circles. I've realised there is a correlation about visibility and what visibility might look like to particular people at senior level, who might not necessarily understand that actually the work is getting done, but you're not so visible.” - Anonymous

Rathna Ramanathan identifies the same problem from a different angle: the opacity of the networks that shape careers, and the particular difficulty this creates for people who didn't start with an existing presence in them.

“The informal networks that shape careers need to be made visible and opened up. It ends up being a known network — somebody knows you and recommends you. But what if you don't have that? How do we create a system where people have advocates who will put their names forward?” — Professor Rathna Ramanathan, Provost, Central Saint Martins / Executive Dean for Global Affairs, UAL

Sophie Crouchman points to increased fluidity as a small sign of change — more people moving in and out of the sector than a decade ago, more varied career paths and points of entry. But she's clear that fluidity doesn't in itself address the structural issues. The question isn't only who gets in, but who gets to stay, to progress, and to lead.

8.2 The weight of navigating the system

Beyond the structural barriers lies something harder to quantify: the emotional labour required of people from underrepresented backgrounds who are navigating institutions that weren't designed with them in mind. Dionne Spencer is candid about the experience of staying in roles longer than she should have, and what she discovered only after leaving.

“I have always felt that I needed more. I mean, even now, I still feel like I need more to progress. I stayed in positions longer than I probably should have in other institutions — not because I didn't want to progress, but because I felt there were barriers to my progression in that institution. So I had to leave, it wasn't until I left that I realised, oh, actually, I have a lot of value and a lot of self-worth that another institution was willing to recognise.” — Dr Dionne Spencer, Dean of Students, Buckinghamshire New University (at time of interview)

The recognition that comes too late — after someone has already left — is a loss the sector can ill afford. And it points to something structural: not individual failings of perception or confidence, but an environment that doesn't make the value of people from underrepresented backgrounds visible until they're gone.

There is also a need to challenge traditional ideas of what effective leadership looks like. Dionne also speaks directly to the way leadership potential can go unrecognised when decision-makers have a narrow view of what effective leadership looks like.

“If people at the top table don't recognise the different ways people perform, how they show up, and ultimately still deliver — then this is problematic. What happens is they replicate their

own idea of what success looks like. And that's where it starts to get challenging as you try to progress.” — Dr Dionne Spencer, Dean of Students, Buckinghamshire New University (at time of interview)

Rathna raises a related point about the expectation placed on leaders whose identity is more visible than many of their peers: the quiet, accumulated burden of representing, explaining, and advocating for an entire community on top of an already demanding role.

“Identities get hidden in leadership, which is very hard. And then sometimes it's easier to remind people that you're human. But it's much harder for some colleagues to say that they've come from backgrounds or lived experiences that shaped why they want to be in a university. How do we find ways to bring that forward without people feeling personally exposed?” — Professor Rathna Ramanathan, Provost, Central Saint Martins / Executive Dean for Global Affairs, UAL

Karen Omisore's response to this is grounded in the same principle she brings to all her leadership: authenticity. In a sector where the pressure to conform can be considerable, she has found that showing up fully as yourself is not a liability. It is a foundation.

“Take me, this is Karen. This is her true authentic self. You have to adapt your style to context — but you should never lose yourself in doing so.” — Karen Omisore, Academic Registrar, Imperial College London

8.3 What needs to change

The direction of travel, across our interviewee group, is clear. The changes that matter most are structural rather than cosmetic — and they require coordination across institutions, sector bodies, and the individuals who hold power and influence within both.

Rathna identifies the need to open up informal networks and make visible the processes by which careers actually advance: who gets hired, how roles are defined, where they are advertised, what criteria are being applied. Addeel Khan's experience developing UCL's EDI strategy offers a useful model: wide and deep engagement before action, building shared ownership rather than transmitting a pre-formed plan, and investing in relationships with the leaders who will ultimately determine whether implementation happens.

Ben Vulliamy focuses on coordination: bringing institutions, sector bodies, recruitment consultancies, chairs and governors into the same conversation, rather than allowing well-intentioned activity to remain fragmented. Sophie Crouchman points to data as both a diagnostic and accountability tool — institutions serious about change need to measure what is actually happening, not only what they intend.

Across multiple conversations, the value of mentoring, sponsorship and peer networks comes through clearly — not as substitutes for structural change, but as real and practical support for individuals navigating structures that have not yet changed enough. The sector's most effective interventions tend to operate at both levels simultaneously: changing the system and supporting people through it while the change takes hold.

Case study: Space to Lead: A coaching programme for leaders from underrepresented groups

Developing diverse leadership pipelines in higher education requires more than good intentions and well-crafted strategy documents. It requires deliberate investment in creating the conditions in which talented people from underrepresented backgrounds can develop, grow and progress — with the confidence, the support, and the sense of community that too many leaders have simply never had access to.

Space to Lead was born from that conviction. Strive Higher convened a group of senior leaders from across the sector to explore a challenge that recurred consistently in our work: how do we enable people from underrepresented backgrounds to progress into senior roles where their perspectives and experience are urgently needed? The answer that emerged was coaching — not as a remedial intervention, but as a proactive and powerful tool for unlocking leadership potential that institutional structures can all too easily obscure.

The programme is built around three interlocking components, designed to create change at both the individual and the organisational level.

1. Individual coaching sessions give participants dedicated time with a qualified, sector-experienced coach to reflect on their leadership style, values and goals, and to develop concrete strategies for moving forward.
2. Peer network sessions bring the cohort together to explore shared challenges, celebrate progress, and build a community of connection that extends beyond any single institution.
3. And a parallel strand for sponsoring managers focuses on how senior leaders can better support underrepresented talent, advocate for more diverse pipelines, and ensure that the learning from the programme is embedded in the workplace rather than left at the door.

While the programme has been delivered to date across professional services communities, the model is designed to work wherever developing diverse leadership talent is a genuine institutional priority.

The outcomes we have seen are consistent: significant increases in confidence and self-belief; greater clarity about leadership style and goals; the ability to recognise and address the patterns and barriers that have previously held people back; and, in a number of cases, direct progression into new or more senior roles. Sponsoring managers have reported visible and meaningful changes in the people they put forward — increased proactivity, stronger strategic perspective, and a greater capacity to advocate for themselves and for others.

Leadership development, at its best, does not deliver confidence to people. It creates the conditions in which people can uncover it for themselves. That is what Space to Lead is designed to do — and what, in participants' experiences, it has helped achieve.

To explore how Space to Lead could work for your institution or professional community, please get in touch.

9.0 The transformation imperative

There is a conversation taking place in HE that rarely surfaces in public, but that runs through almost every strategic discussion happening behind closed doors. It's the conversation about whether universities, as they've operated for decades, remain fit for purpose in a world that's changed beyond recognition.

The financial model on which most UK universities have depended — anchored principally to undergraduate tuition fees and international student recruitment — is under severe pressure. The tuition fee hasn't kept pace with inflation. International student numbers have fallen sharply following visa policy changes. Cost pressures have mounted. The political environment has been unpredictable. And against this backdrop, leaders are grappling with a question that is as much philosophical as operational: how do you protect what's genuinely valuable about higher education while making the hard decisions that institutional survival requires?

9.1 Beyond salami-slicing

Ben Vulliamy describes a sector trying, with difficulty, to shift from reactive cost-cutting to genuine transformation. The danger of remaining in efficiency mode — what he calls salami-slicing — is that it produces managed decline rather than a real response to structural challenge.

“Universities are trying to move beyond salami-slicing, which everyone knows is perpetual managed decline rather than an actual response to a broken business model. So leaders are trying to move from efficiency and change projects to genuine transformation. And that’s a bigger gear shift than I think people originally anticipated — particularly because they’re trying to deliver transformation in ways that are faithful to the history and heritage of the sector and to the public need.” — Ben Vulliamy, Executive Director, AHUA

Transformation of this kind requires a different quality of leadership from operational efficiency. It requires the ability to hold a compelling vision across a sceptical community, to manage risk in new ways, and to make difficult decisions at pace while bringing people with you. It also requires what Ben describes as a reinvented risk appetite — not recklessness, but a willingness to move beyond the cautious incrementalism that has characterised too much of the sector’s response to its financial challenges.

Natalie Brown’s approach in her school — asking heads of department to project ten years forward and imagine their discipline redesigned from scratch — is one example of what it looks like to create genuine strategic space rather than simply managing the present. *“If you could start again — if you could set up higher education with a blank page, universities didn’t exist, how would you design that? It wouldn’t be how it is.”* The exercise is deliberately ambitious, suspending operational constraints to make room for thinking that circumstances rarely permit.

Rathna brings the same instinct to the specific context of creative education, where the arrival of artificial intelligence is not a threat. She thinks it’s the sector with the most to say about it.

“What does it mean to educate thinkers and makers when the tools of making are being fundamentally reimaged? I don’t see it as a crisis — I see it as an invitation. There’s a chance for us to step up and be bold about what creative education is and what its potential can be, and take this as an opportunity to be explicit about it.” — Professor Rathna Ramanathan, Provost, Central Saint Martins / Executive Dean for Global Affairs, UAL

9.2 People leadership at the strategic centre

One of the clearest themes in discussions about transformation is the growing strategic importance of HR and people leadership. Sophie Crouchman reflects on data from UHR’s most recent remit survey: systems, processes and automation came first as an anticipated driver of change over the next three years, by a significant margin, with restructuring second. Both reflect the scale of operational change now underway across the sector.

But Sophie’s most forceful argument is not about the content of HR’s work, it’s about its position. Almost every challenge currently facing universities is, at its root, a people challenge.

“All of the things that we’re seeing in the sector come back to people. It’s caused by people. It affects people. HR needs to have a seat at the most senior level.” — Sophie Crouchman, Strategic Projects and Research Manager, UHR

Closely tied to this is the question of data literacy — a capability she identifies as an increasingly important mark of effective leadership. Leaders don’t need to become technical specialists, but they do need to understand the importance of evidence-based decision-making and know how to draw on people who can provide it.

“They need to understand the importance of having someone who understands data and who can help you make those decisions. Workforce analytics, evidence-based planning, organisational transparency — these are not optional extras. They are increasingly the language of serious strategic leadership.” — Sophie Crouchman, Strategic Projects and Research Manager, UHR

The ambition to see HR as a strategic enabler rather than a procedural gatekeeper — the function that says ‘yes, and here’s how we’ll help’ rather than ‘no’ — comes through strongly across the interviews. Institutions that have achieved this tend to be those where HR leadership has built the relational credibility and organisational reach to make it possible. One interviewee, speaking anonymously, offers a counterpoint the sector would be unwise to ignore: that in some institutions, despite this ambition, HR processes remain frustratingly slow, hands-off, and disconnected from operational realities. *“With the challenges HE faces at the moment, we need real, strategic and hands-on HR support to support the kind of change we need.”* The gap between aspiration and daily practice, in some contexts, remains significant.

For Beth Beasant, who holds a transformation brief alongside her operational responsibilities at Leeds, the practical challenge is ensuring that structural change is genuinely coherent — that academic and professional services restructuring are aligned rather than sequential, and that the people implications of change are built in from the start rather than managed afterwards.

9.3 Collective leadership under pressure

The institutions navigating this period most effectively are those where the executive team is genuinely aligned: not in the sense of having resolved all disagreements, but in the sense of having built sufficient trust and discipline to present a coherent direction even when internal views differ. John Schless captures this from the interface of academic and professional services leadership: the moments when those two tracks are genuinely in step are the moments when an institution can move with real momentum. Jamel Lee is equally direct: what sustains his team through the financial headwinds of the current moment is passion for the mission, channelled through clear structures, honest communication, and a leadership team that knows where it’s going.

Leadership under pressure, in other words, is not primarily a strategic question. It is a relational one. The institutions best placed to transform are those whose leaders have done the work — long before the crisis landed — of building the trust that makes collective action possible.

Breaking down siloes: Establishing a connected mindset

Higher education has a deep cultural and organisational legacy of siloed, atomised working. Departments protect their boundaries. Professional services functions operate as parallel tracks. Academic and administrative communities can spend years in the same institution without developing genuine mutual understanding. These aren’t new problems — they’re the accumulated product of institutional cultures, governance structures and career incentives that have, for generations, rewarded expertise within domains rather than leadership across them.

In an environment of growing financial pressure and the urgent need for institutional transformation, that legacy is now a direct obstacle to progress. The decisions that matter most — about strategic direction, resource allocation, cross-cutting change — can no longer be made effectively within silos. They require leaders who are willing to act in counter-cultural ways: to reach across their spans of control, to subordinate functional interest to institutional interest, to have the honest and sometimes difficult conversations that produce the best outcomes rather than the lowest common denominator.

The symptoms of this challenge are visible in institutions across the sector. When they’re present, they slow everything down and cost far more — in friction, in workarounds, in decisions that unravel because the people who needed to own them together never quite did.

What the symptoms look like:

- Academic and professional services leaders operating as separate communities with limited shared understanding or mutual trust
- Misalignment between institutional strategy and the operational decisions made across the senior team
- Executive teams that achieve surface agreement in meetings but act independently – and sometimes inconsistently – in their own areas
- Leaders who think primarily within their own domain rather than with an institution-wide perspective
- Internal friction, resource competition and a tendency towards workarounds rather than joined-up solutions
- Decisions that reflect the path of least resistance rather than the best available thinking

Addressing this isn't simply a matter of goodwill or better communication. It requires deliberate, sustained investment in building the shared culture, mutual trust and collective decision-making capacity that makes genuine cross-boundary leadership possible. It requires institutions to be honest about where the interference between portfolios is costing them – and to create the conditions in which leaders can act differently.

How Strive Higher can help: Connected Mindset

Connected Mindset is our executive team development programme, designed to help senior leaders move from specialist silos to institution-wide thinking and genuine collective stewardship. It isn't traditional leadership training. It's a facilitated, sustained process – typically delivered over six to twelve months, aligned to governance and planning cycles – that uses your own strategy, real decisions and live institutional challenges as the vehicle for development. Leaders develop capability by doing the work together, with skilled external facilitation and structured frameworks that create the space for the difficult cross-boundary conversations that institutions too rarely have.

The outcomes include a genuinely unified senior leadership community with shared purpose and mutual trust; clearer and more coherent institutional decision-making; stronger productive challenge across academic and professional services boundaries; and leaders who think and act in the institution's collective interest rather than primarily within their own domain.

Over time, Connected Mindset builds the leadership maturity that the current moment in higher education requires: the capacity to hold difficult conversations, make hard decisions collectively, and lead transformation in ways that are faithful to the institution's identity and to the communities it serves.

To explore how Connected Mindset could work for your executive team, please get in touch.

10. Implications

The conversations at the heart of this report point towards a set of clear implications — for institutions, for sector bodies, and for individual leaders and aspiring leaders. We offer these as invitations to conversation rather than prescriptions. The sector is large, varied, and complex, and what works in one institution won't work in all. But the themes are consistent enough to suggest that some things need to change at a level that goes beyond individual institutions acting alone.

10.1 For institutions

- **Build structured transition support for leaders arriving from other sectors.** The sector is increasingly hiring externally, but too rarely providing the support that external hires need to land well. A structured onboarding programme — going beyond induction to address the cultural, relational, and governance dimensions of leading in HE — would pay for itself many times over in reduced attrition and faster time-to-effectiveness.
- **Create explicit leadership development pathways in professional services.** The opacity of professional services career progression is one of the sector's most persistent problems. Institutions that have introduced clearer frameworks — with explicit criteria, transparent processes, and active sponsorship of high-potential people — report dividends in both retention and the quality of the leadership pipeline.
- **Take academic leadership seriously as a developmental challenge.** The accidental leader problem won't be solved by occasional workshops. It requires sustained investment: in formal preparation for academics taking on leadership roles, in peer support networks, and in the kind of coaching and mentoring that helps people build the relational and political capabilities that academic training does not provide.
- **Elevate HR and people leadership to the strategic centre.** Every significant challenge currently facing universities is, at its root, a people challenge. Institutions where HR leadership has a genuine seat at the table — contributing to strategic decisions rather than implementing them downstream — are better placed to navigate the transformation that the moment requires.
- **Strengthen collective leadership at the top.** The best institutional leadership, in the experience of our interviewees, is characterised by genuine alignment at executive level: not the absence of disagreement, but the presence of the trust and discipline to present a coherent direction. Building that culture of collective leadership is one of the most important things an executive team can do — and one of the hardest.

10.2 For sector bodies

- **Extend diversity and inclusion frameworks explicitly to professional services.** The sector's most developed EDI frameworks have been built around the academic pathway. Professional services needs its own frameworks, its own metrics, and its own infrastructure of support.
- **Convene, rather than simply advocate.** The most valuable thing sector bodies can do on the diversity challenge is to bring different stakeholders into the same room and create shared accountability for change. Individual institutions acting alone, and sector bodies advocating from the outside, have not moved the dial fast enough.
- **Use data as an accountability tool.** The shift from anecdotal to evidence-based diversity work is underway but uneven. Sector bodies can support institutions in developing the workforce analytics and transparency mechanisms that make genuine progress possible.
- **Develop richer cross-sector transition resources.** Existing Introduction to Higher Education programmes are a valuable start, but the cultural and relational dimensions of transition need to be addressed more directly — through peer mentoring, cohort-based learning, and longer-term support.

10.3 For individual leaders and aspiring leaders

- **Invest in relationships before you need them.** In HE, the relationships you build in good times sustain you in difficult ones. This is particularly true for those new to the sector, and for those from underrepresented backgrounds who may need to invest more deliberately in building the networks that others access more informally.
- **Learn to communicate across communities.** The ability to speak the language of academic colleagues in one meeting and of a CFO in the next, without losing your core message in either, is one of the most valuable capabilities a leader in HE can develop. It can be learned, practised, and refined.
- **Develop your political antennae.** Political acumen — the ability to read a room, understand where resistance will come from, communicate in ways that acknowledge competing interests — is not a natural gift for everyone. It can be learned. And in HE, it's essential.
- **Cultivate resilience as a practice, not just a quality.** Resilience in HE isn't simply about bouncing back from difficult moments. It's about knowing what you're here to protect, staying anchored to purpose when the institutional machinery makes it hard to see, and not taking the hard conversations personally.
- **Define your values.** Knowing who you are and what you stand for gives you something to return to when the pressures of the role are at their most intense. Several of our interviewees describe this — in different language, from different experiences — as the single most important thing they have learned.
- **Be willing to ask for help.** Several of our interviewees speak, with evident feeling, about the importance of vulnerability in leadership — the willingness to say when things are hard, to ask colleagues to hold something with you rather than carrying it alone. In a sector as demanding as this one, that's not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of wisdom.
- **Build for those who come after you.** Creating the succession you never had, giving people genuine insight into what more senior roles involve, enabling confidence through candid relationship — these are forms of leadership that compound across careers and, ultimately, across the sector.

11. Conclusion

Higher education is, in many respects, a sector under pressure. The financial challenges are real, the regulatory environment is demanding, and the business model that has sustained most institutions for the past two decades is straining in ways that incremental adjustment cannot fix. These are not small problems.

But this report is not, in the end, about the problems. It is about the people who are leading through them and about what the sector needs to do to develop, support, and diversify the leaders it will require for a genuinely uncertain future.

The thirteen conversations that animate these pages stand out for two things. The first is their honesty: these are not people offering polished narratives about leadership success, but people reflecting carefully on what this work actually requires, what they've found hard, and what they've learned. The second is their commitment: to their institutions, their students, their colleagues, and to the wider mission of HE itself.

What their testimonies advocate for, in different ways and from different perspectives, is a sector that takes leadership as seriously as it takes research and teaching. That invests in the development of its leaders — at every level, at every career stage, and from every background — with the same rigour it invests in the development of its students. That is honest about the barriers it's placed in the way of talented people, and committed to removing them. And that understands collective leadership not as a nice idea, but as the practical condition for getting anything done.

What unites the leaders in this report isn't a shared background, or a shared institutional context, or even a shared set of challenges. It's a shared orientation: towards the people they serve, towards the institutions they hold in trust, and towards the colleagues and students who will still be here long after their own tenure has ended.

That orientation — leadership as stewardship rather than ownership, as service rather than status — isn't unique to HE. But it's particularly powerful here, in a sector whose purpose is the development of other people. The sector already has the leaders it needs. What it needs now is the conditions, the investment, and the institutional will to help them flourish.

12. Acknowledgements

We're grateful to all thirteen participants who gave their time and their candour to this project. Their willingness to reflect honestly on the challenges and rewards of leading in higher education is what makes this report possible.

Participants

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Virginia Grose, Head of School of Arts, University of Westminster

Addeel Khan, Director of Equity, Inclusion and Culture, UCL

James King, Director of Technology, Royal College of Art

Jamel Lee, Director of Residential and Commercial Services, University of London

Karen Omisore, Academic Registrar, Imperial College London

Professor Rathna Ramanathan, Provost, Central Saint Martins / Executive Dean for Global Affairs, UAL

John Schless, Director of Student and Academic Services, University of East Anglia

Dr Dionne Spencer, Dean of Students, Buckinghamshire New University (at time of interview)

Ben Vulliamy, Executive Director, AHUA

13. About Strive Higher

Strive Higher is a consultancy working exclusively to support UK higher education. We support institutions and individuals through consulting, executive coaching, and leadership and organisational development. Since our founding in 2021, we have published an annual Insights report drawing on conversations with leaders across the sector. Our previous reports examined the burden of regulation and innovation in higher education. This year's report turns the lens on leadership itself.

If you're interested in discussing how we can support you or your organisation, please get in touch: info@strivehigher.co.uk