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Developing a University as a community of responsible action and leadership: an action research project

Paul Hopkinson, Sharon Turnbull, Sue Williams

The University of Gloucestershire (UoG) in the UK has had a strong commitment to the sustainability agenda for some time. This commitment has seen the setting up of a research centre, the winning of national awards which recognise its expertise and initiatives in developing curricula, external local, regional and international engagement. One strand of this work has been the perceived need to develop those who set agendas and strategies, who manage and make operational decisions i.e. leaders. The University, given its particular heritage, is also committed to making a difference within its community and social setting. It had already engaged with the nearby Leadership Trust organisation in their Worldly Leadership seminar series and research developments. However, to more effectively meet these aims the Business School at the University chose to join the Global Responsible Leadership Initiative (GRLI) as a more focused way of addressing this issue. UoG was one of the first UK Higher Education Institutes to join the GRLI. In support of this decision the University committed some funding to a research project.

The proposal is to adopt the principles of globally responsible leadership offered by GRLI. For us this will mean

- Creating a university wide impact
- Integrating business and community engagement
- Encouraging staff and student participation in order to develop our knowledge of our perceptions of global responsible leadership leading to action that is relevant to us.

The proposal identified four main strategy areas, transforming the curricula, taking a leadership role in developing community, business and other networks

locally, regionally and nationally, developing knowledge of the concept of GRL encompassing this work with other culture change initiatives within the University at a time of much heightened general UK and particularly English Higher education (HE) sector change. Overarching these is the need to communicate, both internally and externally.



As noted by Uwe Steinwender (Senior Manager DAIMLER Corporate), in discussing the Daimler programme this is a complex topic and presents many paradoxes for individuals especially managers and leaders conditioned to current economic, financial and social models prevalent in business thinking. As a repeated award winning BBC programme, 'Storyville' presented by Charles Ferguson on the 2008 financial crisis, demonstrated that many of the same leaders who were instrumental in policy then are still in power and making policy now. The programme also highlighted the conflict of interests between many academic experts and the financial sectors as it was some members of the academic community that acted as advisors to the financial as well as political communities.

“ ... ”

Having the courage to make tough decisions for the betterment of society, be supportive, inclusive, risk taking, reflect carefully on actions to ensure that GRL is not yet another example of covert western imperialism, challenge government decisions or greed, encourage a commitment to service, reflect on what investment means and more tellingly a desire for leaders who were trustworthy, honourable and reflexive thinkers.

These comments then all point to a need to re-evaluate the role of academics and academic institutions in co-creating a less damaging social, economic, cultural and environmental climate.

One of UoG's major responses to the proposals was to fund a research project led by Dr Paul Hopkinson (Programme Leader Masters in Business Administration), and supported by Professor Sharon Turnbull (Visiting Professor; Leadership Consultant and Research director) and Dr Sue Williams (Senior Lecturer). A small team and with other operational tasks to complete, so our question was how can we engage the UoG community in progressing the principles of GRL and have some impact. Our experiences of research and research approaches pointed very strongly to taking an Action Research approach. Reason and Bradbury (2008:xxii) described AR “as a family of approaches” “A family which sees itself as different from other forms of research” but it has always had a link with social change generally for social justice. It is considered (McNiff & Whitehead 2009:38) to be “widely accepted as a form of professional learning across professions.”



The main purpose for AR is to contribute to new practices (the action) and to new theory (research). Reason & Bradbury (2008) as well as many other authors highlight another significant aspect of AR, which is its strong values-oriented foundation, interested in how humans and their communities can be supported to flourish. It is also a research process that enables complex, often paradoxical concepts to be explored collectively. For us, our research proposal committed us to trying to change UoG's practices: in teaching, in our organisational structures and management or leadership style. Equally we wanted to contribute to the body of knowledge concerning the meaning of global responsible leadership for us and perhaps to a wider world.

The project has only been running for 4 months so it is early days. Our initial activity was to gather a community of senior and middle UoG managers and academics for a half day workshop. The opening welcome from our new Vice Chancellor began the day with a series of challenging questions about what the local, regional and international world might need from a higher education institution like ours, how does GRL concept ‘fit’ with our current sustainability agenda and how can GRL be shaped to be a valuable addition to UoG's strategic plan. The strategic plan being a particularly important plank of the University's development at this moment as a new plan was being developed and is to be launched in the New Year (2012).

GRL's CEO Mark Drewell provided a foundational address as to the rationale for GRL and identified three themes that we might consider in our discussion: Leadership as sense making and sense giving; entrepreneurship for the common good; and corporate statesmanship.

The participants were then asked to respond to two questions

- a) what global responsible leadership means to them individually,
- b) what would a university that embodies those concepts look or feel like.

Responses ranged from "having the courage to make tough decisions for the betterment of society, be supportive, inclusive, risk taking, reflect carefully on actions to ensure that GRL is not yet another example of covert western imperialism, challenge government decisions or greed, encourage a commitment to service, reflect on what investment means and more tellingly a desire for leaders who were trustworthy, honourable and reflexive thinkers". The latter view of the need for reflexivity and reflective practitioners is one that is very much a part of a number of postgraduate programmes within the Business Faculty so providing a springboard for curriculum developments as we move forward. Participants were then requested to consider how we could take these ideas forward in UoG. four themes were suggested: teaching, research, business and community, and culture of UoG. Since our desire is to involve the whole community in the project each grouping was asked if they would be willing to lead a group to investigate these issues further. A number put their names forward and as the research team we are keen to progress as our next steps. However as the research team we are also very conscious of a range of other 'actors' that influence both thinking and action on GRL.

The student body is one very pertinent and diverse group. We began our work within this group through a discussion around the same issues with a small group of our - mostly German - professional students on the Doctorate in Business Administration programme. Their individual views were "that profit optimizing is an outdated concept, that the focus is on sustainable business, respectful cooperation, organisations that are more adaptive, being reflective and a strong wish that this is not another trend or phrase" Their enthusiasm led them to suggest that they form a small AR group to explore these ideas in their own local arenas in order to contribute to the UoG debates. We look forward to developing this cross-border strand. Currently, in terms of curriculum development, the tutors use opportunities within specific leadership modules to discuss the concepts and gain an understanding of how the ideas are perceived by others and what would help to create change. Here the next steps are to engage more widely with other tutors to consider how GRL could if possible be part of their teaching scenarios alongside the initiatives that drive the sustainability agenda (see UoG Sustainability Report 2009-10).

To meet some of the comments about the University being "not nationally focused but internationally open and working for a better world" (GRLI workshop – not clear what this means) we are exploring the possibility of working with other institutions to establish a UK Council for Leadership.

Action Research is often described as an iterative journey of exploration, reflection, learning with sometimes a feeling of one step backwards as well as feelings of going forward in a joint venture (or should that be adventure!). UoG and the research team have only just begun. These are our first pages in this story.

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