Leading with Purpose: Responsible Leadership in an Uncertain World

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Who's she?

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Today's thinking

- Turbulent times and wicked problems

- How are universities responding to this context and what kind of leadership are they showing?

- How can and should universities be led?

Leadership in Turbulent Times

- We are living in a world defined by complexity: geopolitical shifts, climate crisis, digital disruption, AI...all of these affect the Higher Education sector as well as society more generally.

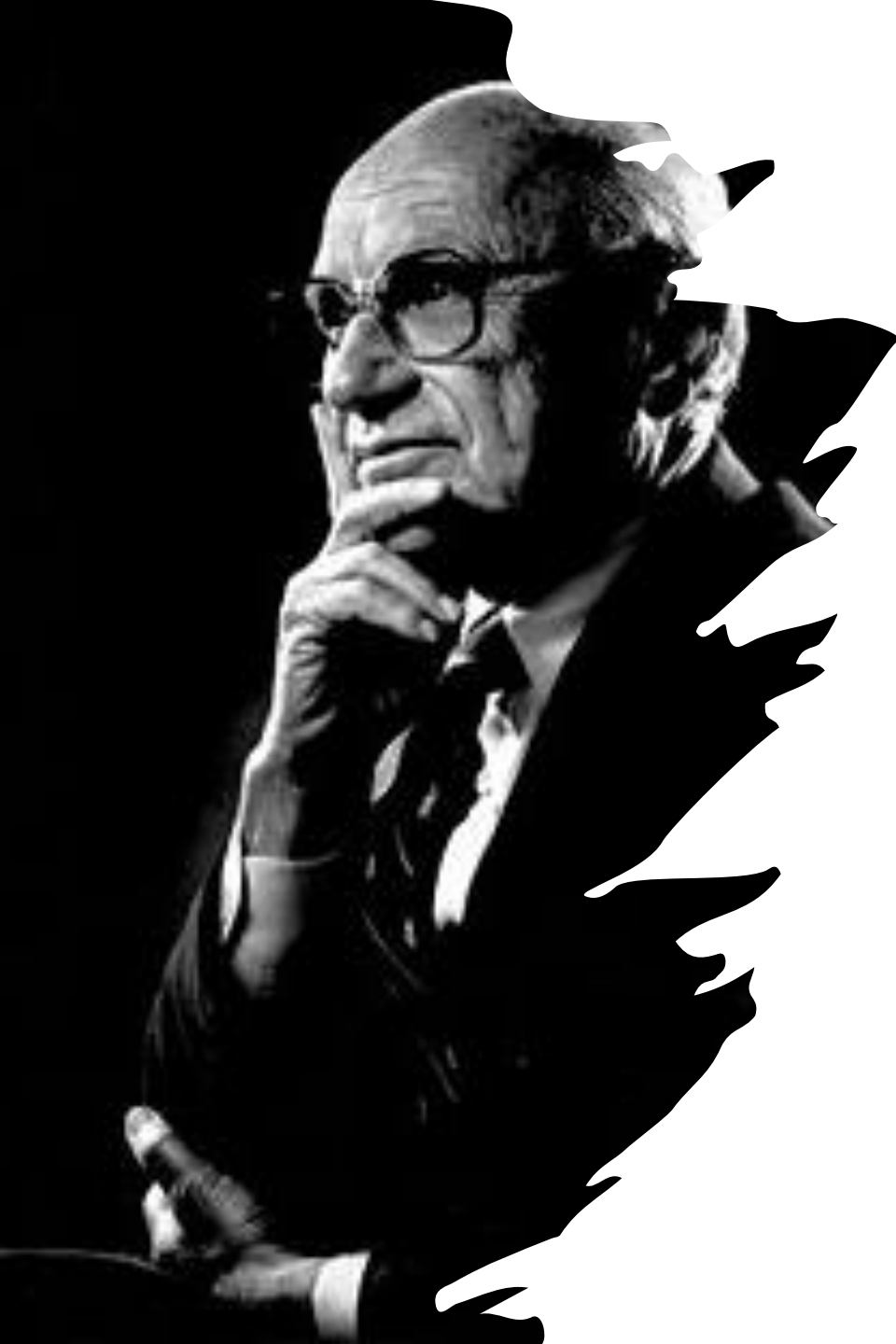- What kind of leadership does this complexity demand?

Wicked problems

Keith Grint argues that **wicked problems** are complex, uncertain, and resistant to definitive solutions, requiring adaptive leadership rather than technical fixes.

Grint emphasises that leaders must **engage collective wisdom**, foster collaboration, and create spaces for shared sense-making rather than imposing top-down answers.

Grint, K. (2010). Wicked Problems and Clumsy Solutions: The Role of Leadership. In: Brookes, S., Grint, K. (eds) The New Public Leadership Challenge. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

A Friedman Doctrine 1970

'There is one and only one social responsibility of business...To use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits.'

But actually…

the notion of responsibility is missing.

Since Friedman's quote, the world has become a more connected and complex place. Today we face what we call 'grand challenges' – the wicked problems of climate change, poverty, educational inequality, global health problems.

Grand challenges are complex problems and opportunities of such enormity that, when addressed, positively impact society.

Such challenges require a combination of transformative, interdisciplinary approaches to solve. They need relational leadership, and collaborative problem-solving.

Universities have their own issues to work on, but have a moral imperative to consider and work on these challenges

What do you think?

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Responsible Leadership

What do I mean by responsible leadership?

- Responsible Leadership is using influence and power to improve the life of everyone rather than simply generating value for the organisation.

- Responsible leadership is about making sustainable decisions which accommodate the interests of the organisation as well as those of the wider community - but also benefit future generations - and the planet.

Responsible Leadership Defined

- Responsible leadership is values-led, future-oriented, and committed to service.
- Contrast responsible and servant leadership with transactional leadership, which is task oriented and emphasises rewards and punishments.

A couple of examples of universities engaging with wicked problems and grand challenges

Global Lessons, Local Action

- **Latin America: Community-first pandemic response**

- **Central Asia: University of Central Asia: Serving mountain communities**

- **Africa: Decolonising while navigating global league tables**

Latin America: Community-first pandemic response

Latin American university leaders rapidly repositioned their institutions as **local crisis hubs.**

Examples:

Peru: The Pontifical Catholic University of Peru pioneered **homemade ventilator production**, with university labs manufacturing respirators to support overwhelmed hospitals

Brazil: Public federal universities ramped up hospital support, reallocating over 3,000 ICU beds and establishing new ones, while deploying hundreds of volunteer initiatives involving staff and students. Many institutions also generated **COVID-19-related research**, launching over 1,000 projects to guide public health and policy.

Community-first leadership

- This period clearly showcased universities as lifelines in societal emergencies — reinforcing public trust, cementing partnerships with government, and proving their essential civic role.

- Many Latin American public universities provided advice to national governments, launched public science communication campaigns; and implemented community-level prevention strategies.

- Thousands of **solidarity actions**—volunteer support, remote learning assistance, mental health aid—were mobilised.

- The pandemic **heightened visibility and legitimacy** of universities' societal roles, reinforcing their mission beyond research and instruction.

Central Asia-serving mountain communities

Central Asia: University of Central Asia: Serving mountain communities

"By creating intellectual space and resources, this University will help turn the mountains that divide the nations and territories of Central Asia into the links that unite its peoples and economies in a shared endeavour to improve their future well-being."

UCA Chancellor, His Late Highness the Aga Khan IV, Chancellor, University of Central Asia, Astana, Kazakhstan, 31 August 2000

University of Central Asia:
Serving mountain communities

The University of Central Asia (UCA) in Kyrgyzstan brought an internationally informed education to isolated mountain communities in Central Asia.

UCA deliberately established its three campuses away from major urban centres, and near mountain ranges like the Tien Shan and Pamir, to promote cultural preservation and the social and economic development of the mountain communities of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan.

As a 'development university', UCA promotes sustainable development through education with an ambitious agenda of mountain region development. Its research, educational and community engagement revolve around the unique characteristics and development of its host communities.

Some popular courses are in English skills, plumbing, brick-laying and automobile engineering with computerised systems – important in regions where long-haul trucks use the new routes with digital systems.

Africa: Decolonising while navigating global league tables

Africa: Decolonising while navigating global league tables

Reclaiming and Embedding Indigenous Knowledge

Many scholars emphasise decolonising the curriculum by replacing colonial content (like nursery rhymes about sheep in non-native contexts) with **geographically-relevant** knowledge such as plant medicine, food systems, and local environmental security

Building Pan-African Alliances Beyond Colonial Legacy

Networks like the **African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA)** pool resources and support inter-university capacity building—from doctoral training to shared Centres of Excellence—enhancing collective research strength across the continent.

Africa: Decolonising while navigating global league tables

Redefining Success Beyond Traditional Rankings

In response to skewed global ranking systems, Times Higher Education launched a Sub-Saharan Africa ranking, incorporating metrics like access, fairness, societal impact, and SDG performance—capturing community value, not just citation counts

In essence, responsible leadership in African universities means moving beyond inherited colonial frameworks— while still engaging with global benchmarks.

It is about **reinventing universities** as spaces that are academically excellent *and* deeply rooted in serving African communities, priorities, and knowledge systems.

A responsible leader's roles....

To be a 'visionary'.

This means being able to communicate the organisational vision and purpose to employees as well as the broader community. Leaders must inspire and have the ability to bring people along with them.

A responsible leader's roles....

A leader needs also to be a servant.

They must assume responsibility for building continuity amid today's complex, fast-moving and volatile situations. They must aim to become a force for positive change - not just today but into the future.

A responsible leader's roles....

Leaders must also be exemplary citizens.

They must take responsibility for environmental and other societal challenges in order to have a positive impact on society.

A responsible leader's roles....
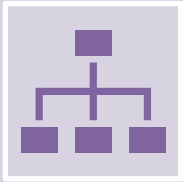
Leaders can act as stewards, leaving the organisation, society, and the environment in a better place than when they found it.

So what about within universities?

What do you think?

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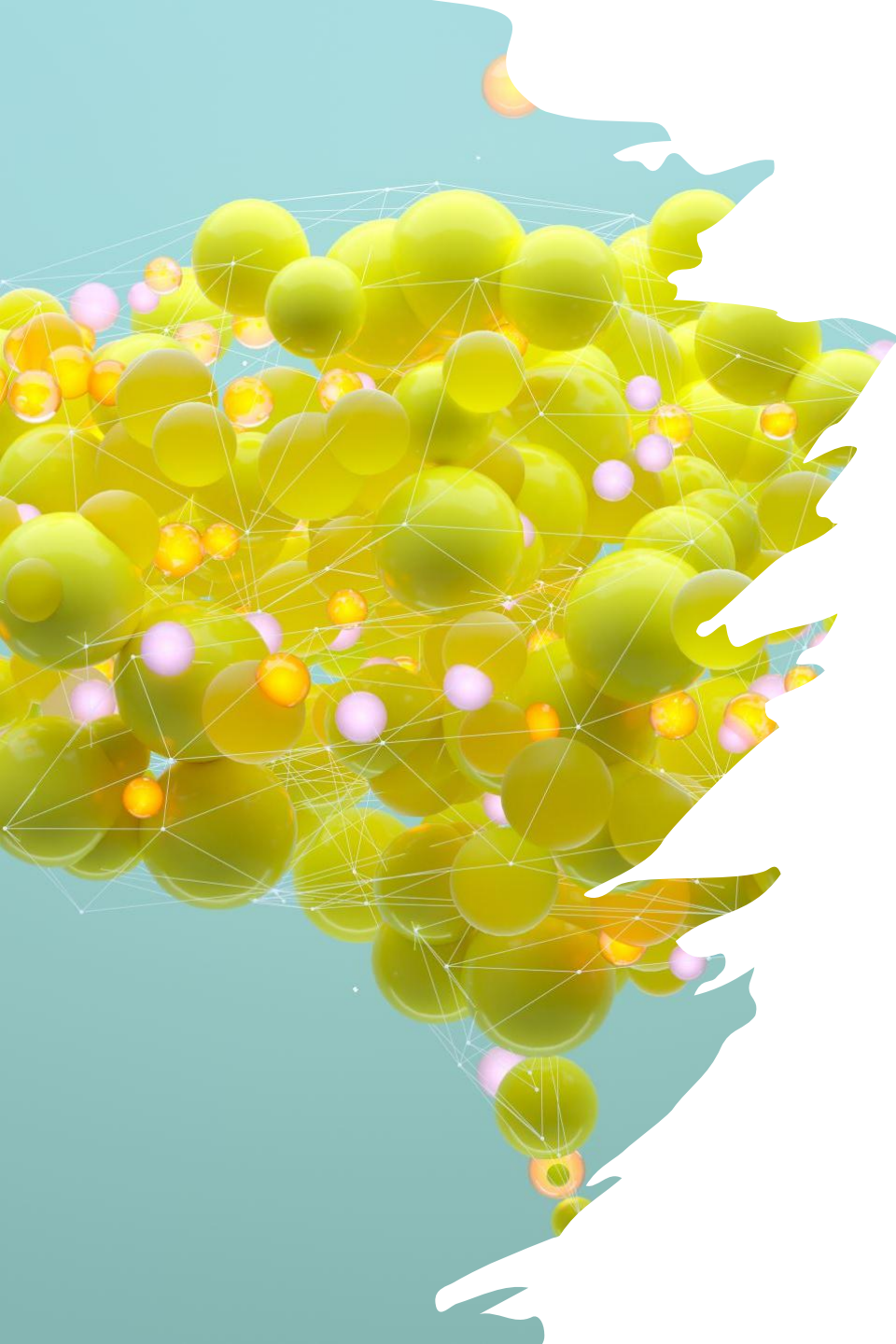

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Some contradictions

- High student numbers, and also well-qualified students.

- High numbers on our courses – but they must all get jobs.

- Make efficiencies, and increase the number of students, and make sure they are all happy- and so are staff.

And….

Do we invest in defence or in education? (power vs. care)

Can you just say anything to any one in defence of free speech, or are there limits? (expression vs. holding back)

I'm a democrat, so therefore I can't agree with anything a republican says, or vice-versa. (identify with vs. be open to something)

Importance of dialectical thinking in leadership

Reality is complex and multifaceted.

Many concepts contain inherent contradictions or tensions.

Instead of seeing these contradictions as mere conflicts to be resolved or ignored, dialectic thinking seeks to understand and integrate these opposing elements to arrive at a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of a given subject.

Some Leadership Tensions

INTEGRITY ↔ EFFICIENCY

INCLUSIVITY ↔ MOMENTUM

CERTAINTY ↔ AMBIGUITY

Cornerstones of responsible leadership

Authenticity

Integrity

Transparency

Why do these matter?
They cultivate cultures of trust, psychological safety, and shared purpose.

Authentic leaders build trust and foster loyalty because people can see they are real and consistent.

Integrity is the foundation of credibility. Without it, leadership collapses under distrust and cynicism. It is essential for influence and respect.

Transparency builds trust. It reduces uncertainty and helps colleagues understand the "why" behind actions, which boosts engagement and morale.

Some Reflections

- What are the functions of a university? What should they be?

- What kind of leaders do and should universities have?

Universities are not just centres of learning; they are crucibles of society. Responsible leadership means stewarding knowledge for the public good.

Ernest Boyer

Mike Apple

'*A position on the balcony may provide a comfortable seat to watch the fray, but answers can best be found by joining in the creative and determined efforts of building a counter-public. There is ...work to be done'.* (2013:166).

Apple, M (2013) Can Education change Society? New York: Routledge.

Please continue the conversation:

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