

Presidential leadership in higher education: Balancing collaboration and competition in a time of systemic change

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Abstract

Research on senior leadership in higher education systems is urgently needed, particularly in the context of system-wide transformations. This study focuses on a critical juncture in Ireland, during which Institutes of Technology (IoTs) collaborated to undergo 'redesignation' as Technological Universities (TUs). Based on interviews with the fourteen presidents of the IoTs, this research employs the Community of Practice framework to analyse their interactions, strategies, and approaches to a policy-initiated, systemic change. Despite decades of pervasive competition, these senior leaders formed a community of practice as they worked collectively to achieve the common goal of TU status. Four key themes emerged: *Embracing a more expansive external role; Acknowledging obstacles to collective leadership; Forming groups, collaborating and competing; and Leading calmly and fostering unity*. The findings of this study advance our understanding of three interconnected fields: senior leadership practices in higher education, the interplay of collaboration and competition in higher education; and the facilitation of policy-induced systemic change within higher education systems. Our findings have significant implications for institutional leaders, policymakers and scholars aiming to comprehend and improve leadership practices in higher education.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Competition among Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) for prestige, funding, and resources has intensified, necessitating the maintenance or improvement of institutional positions relative to peers (Brankovic, 2018; Krücken, 2021). In an environment of escalating competition and stagnant resources, governments may intervene by mandating strategic restructuring initiatives that compel traditional competitors to collaborate (Pinheiro et al., 2016). Effectively managing this delicate equilibrium amid the diverse complexities accompanying organisational change poses a significant challenge for leaders. However, this role, along with senior leaders' involvement in facilitating change within HEIs and systemic change (Kezar et al., 2020), is often overlooked (Esen et al., 2020). This limited attention may be attributed to a historical emphasis on the academic department as the fundamental unit for delivering the core functions of the university (Brennan, 2010). Critical scholarship has also questioned the role of senior leadership and its complicity in the rise of managerialism, which has had a detrimental impact on the missions and identities of universities as institutions dedicated to the formation and dissemination of academic knowledge. The scarcity of literature can act as a hindrance to all stakeholders seeking to facilitate change (Badillo-Vega & Buendía-Espinosa, 2020; Kligyte & Barrie, 2014; Shattock, 2013).

This study focuses on senior leaders in Irish higher education during a pivotal period of system wide transformation during which Institutes of Technology (IoTs) collaborated to undergo 'redesignation' as Technological Universities (TUs). It is not within the study's scope to evaluate mergers and system changes as such, or their processes and outcomes. Our approach considers the potential for senior leaders in higher education to act as catalysts for meaningful change within HEIs and the broader education system. To explore this perspective, the paper delves into a lesser-known senior leadership practice revolving around collaboration. In doing so, this study examines how institutional leaders collectively grapple with the necessity of redefining their mandates, identities, and missions, which is a crucial adaptation required for becoming TUs. The story of this change is explored from the perspective of the presidents of the IoTs and is interpreted through the theoretical lens of Community of Practice (CoP). After decades of competition, these senior leaders worked collaboratively towards a specific goal, showcasing a significant shift in their approach (at least temporarily). This qualitative study is grounded in a specific setting and aims to extract valuable insights from that particular context, with the intention of offering broader relevance and implications. The dataset comprises of interviews conducted with all fourteen IoT Presidents, making it a unique and irreplaceable resource due to the historical circumstances surrounding the redesignation from IoTs to TUs. This study poses the following question: How does the transformation from IoT to TU impact the president's role, the dynamics of collective activities among presidents, and the potential emergence of a CoP?

2 | IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION IN CONTEXT

The creation of TUs marks a significant milestone in the history of the higher education sector in Ireland. To comprehend the role of senior leadership within the sector, it is essential to take a step back and examine the context. During the 2000s, individual IoTs and their stakeholders began publicly questioning the binary nature of higher education provision in Ireland (Highman, 2020; Hinfelaar, 2011; McCoy & Smyth, 2011; Walsh, 2018). This questioning set the stage for the transformative changes that led to the emergence of TUs. In response to the growing concerns within the sector, the Irish government commissioned the Hunt Report (HEA, 2011). This report set forth recommendations, including the development of inter-institutional partnerships, the exploration of cost-effective forms of delivery, and the expansion of opportunities for learning and research. One of the report's key recommendations was the redesignation of the IoTs, paving the way for the transformative changes that would ultimately lead to the creation of five Technological Universities (TUs). To achieve this, several criteria were set in relation to student profile; staff profile; teaching, learning and curriculum development; research; internationalisation, management, and governance. The aim was to achieve increased economies of scale, more balanced regional

linkages and greater opportunities for student recruitment, especially international students. There was also an expectation that the new TUs would increase business investment, build new infrastructure and increase funded research. Ireland passed the Technological Universities Act in 2018. In response, the IoTs began the process of merging to establish five TUs: Technological University Dublin; Munster Technological University; Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest; Atlantic Technological University; and South-East Technological University.

To fully understand the restructuring of Irish higher education, it is important to place it within the scholarly literature on mergers and structural change observed across international systems of higher education (Ferlie et al., 2008; Nicholson-Crotty & Meier, 2003; Saarinen & Ursin, 2012; Santoalha et al., 2018). This literature stresses the importance of acknowledging and embracing differentiation in higher education. It emphasises how the diverse characteristics and strengths of HEIs are a key factor shaping these transformative processes. The need for diversity originates from the aim of serving the differing needs of students and employers through the provision of a variety of institutions and programmes (Teichler, 2006). In general, two different types of higher education systems prevail world-wide: unitary or binary. Most binary sectors are to some extent affected by mission drift (Lepori, 2022) and 'academic drift' (Tight, 2015). Over time this can lead to a HEI or HEIs requesting redesignation. In the development of higher education, mergers are frequently used to provide the basis for the creation of more efficient HEIs (Pinheiro et al., 2016). Indeed, Harman and Harman (2008, p. 102) explain that 'mergers' have become an increasingly common phenomenon across many higher education systems, particularly as governments look for cost savings and ways to build stronger institutions. However, mergers will inevitably cause significant disruption and controversy (Cai & Yang, 2016; Rowley, 1997; Santoalha et al., 2018; Skodvin, 1999).

Becher and Trowler (2001) provide an excellent overview of the impact of *The Further and Higher Education Act* (1992), which gave Polytechnics in England and Wales the title of Universities but no charter. Sixty-three institutions achieved university title. The outcome expanded access to higher education, built links with business and responded to the changing needs of public services (Boliver, 2015; Huisman, 2000; Kok et al., 2010). In Australia there have been sustained and far-reaching changes to higher education since a major reform process began in the 1980s. These changes removed the binary divide between universities and colleges of advanced education (Blackmore & Sachs, 2000; Drew, 2010). Kirkpatrick (2007) reports that the Australian higher education sector has changed significantly, which has resulted in increased student numbers, a more diverse student population, with varied and markedly different student expectations of the university experience. In contrast, Kyvik (2004) reported that some countries (re)established a two-type structure, for example, the Netherlands (Hogeschole), Finland (Ammattikorkeakoulu), Austria and Switzerland (Fachhochschulen).

3 | SENIOR LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Within HEIs, the senior leadership teams are the key decision-makers. They work on the articulation of vision and direction, priority-setting, and strategy that shape decision-making and policymaking for the institution (Kezar et al., 2020). However, the meanings of leadership in academia are contested, encompassing leadership as position, performance, practice, and professional role model (Juntrasook, 2014). Existing studies on leadership in higher education argue that the context of higher education is distinct, with specific implications for leadership. Bryman and Lilley (2009) contend that many of the leadership approaches from other sectors do not readily apply to higher education. Indeed, Fitch and Brunt (2016) propose that in colleges and universities, leadership addresses larger directional issues, while management typically focuses more on day-to-day needs.

The essence of academic culture and the distinctive goals of universities are underscored by scholars like Barnett (1990, p. 97), who defines academic culture as 'a shared set of meanings, beliefs, understandings, and ideas; in short, a taken-for-granted way of life'. Central to academic leadership literature is the multifaceted and somewhat elusive concept of collegiality, as noted by Kligyte and Barrie (2014, p. 157). Authors including Bush

(2003) and Jarvis (2012) report that HEI structures rely on consensus, decisions being reached through collaboration and collegial structures that are value-driven and normative in orientation. In simple terms, this means that they will only work if everyone involved shares a common set of values (perhaps a community of practice).

Pryor and Henley (2018) propose a decline in the distinctive characteristics and attributes of university leadership. This shift is attributed to a complex blend of external drivers of change which influence internal organisational structures within universities, necessitating a process of adaptation. These broader changes expand the range of leadership skills required in higher education, potentially converging with those found in other sectors. Khoo et al. (2024) argue in a more critical vein that the combination of intense marketisation, massification, and the simultaneous adoption of new public management and managerialist governance forms has transformed university leadership, aligning it with the role and responsibilities of corporate CEOs. One of the consequences is the establishment of prescriptive performance management procedures (Franco-Santos & Doherty, 2017), along with the incorporation of key performance indicators (KPIs) as a method for quantitatively evaluating academic and organisational performance. This has contributed to higher education leaders being increasingly tasked with managerial and administrative duties (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2020, p. 361). Horta and Santos (2020) lament that the introduced culture of measurement and performance undermines traditional academic autonomy. However, Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist (2016) claim that, despite the diffusion of managerial forms resulting from the development of elaborate organisational structures in HEIs, many traditional traits persist. Senior leaders in HEIs have to respond to external demands with business-like efficiency and accountability, while navigating the maze of cultural norms, narratives and work ethos prevailing in academic environments (Klignyte & Barrie, 2014).

Research on presidents and senior leaders within higher education is emerging, albeit on a small scale. Published studies often draw from within a specific jurisdiction, either a country or a part of the higher education sector (as is the case in this paper). Examples include de los Santos and Vega (2008), Michael et al. (2001), Bastedo et al. (2014), and Barringer et al. (2023) from the United States; Wright (2010), Heffernan et al. (2021) from Canada; Bosetti and Walker (2010), Pryor and Henley (2018) from the UK; and Loomes et al. (2019), Jones and Harvey (2017) from Australia. However, the literature lacks studies applying a CoP perspective to understand the interactions between senior leaders. To address this gap, our study explores these interactions using the CoP lens.

4 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK—COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

This article argues for the salience of the CoP concept and the insights it reveals about leadership challenges when engaging in collaborative endeavours mandated or incentivised by legislation, policy and/or funding. Studying a structured group of senior leaders as a social-learning mechanism presents similarities with conceptualisations of a CoP. Senior leaders had the task of leading their institutions through a transformative period in which their organisational missions and identities were changing. Given the scarcity of historical and contemporary examples in Ireland to draw from, these leaders opted for a significant degree of collective learning to navigate this challenging period. The Presidents worked together to understand the complexities of the transformation and develop effective strategies to lead their institutions through it.

Wenger (1998, p. 7) presents a simplified definition of a CoP as 'a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly'. Prior studies have attempted to understand CoPs, their various forms, structures, developments, impacts, and the factors that influence them across varying contexts (Choi et al., 2020; Contu, 2014; Pykro et al., 2019; Stephens & Miller, 2022). Lave and Wenger (1991) proposed the idea of a CoP as a theoretical lens through which we can interpret the activities of groups. Indeed, the language of CoP can be used to explain learning and knowledge generation across a variety of work, organisational, and spatial settings (Aljuwaiber, 2016; Amin & Roberts, 2008; Corso et al., 2009; Yamklin & Igel, 2012). CoPs develop their practice through a variety of methods, including problem solving, shared provision, shared resources, and knowledge transfer (Pykro et al., 2019; Weller, 2020). In the case of the TU

consortia, evidence of an emerging CoP, beyond individual presidential leadership, is in the form of a website, branding, prospectus, programme portfolio, sports teams, industry networks, community networks, and research collaborations.

Wenger et al. (2002) propose that for a CoP to exist there needs to be three components: First, there needs to be a *domain*. A CoP has an identity defined by a shared interest. In this study, the shared interest is designation as a TU. This is achieved by participation in a formal consortium. Although the formation of the consortium is not mandated by the government, it significantly contributes to achieving key metrics that are essential for attaining TU status. The formation of the domain (consortium) is complicated by limited previous experience of collaboration, uneven pattern of mission drift and longstanding competition for resources and students.

Second, there needs to be a *community*. Members must interact and engage in shared activities supported by a degree of trust. In this study the presidents participate in a *Council of Presidents* which is supported by a national representative body, the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA). The presidents document collaboration, knowledge transfer and shared projects. Nonetheless, as highlighted by Miszta (2002), the term 'community' cannot be employed as an idealised vision of harmonious relationships that neglects the existence of conflict and disagreement. Third, and finally, there needs to be a *practice*. A CoP involves people who have a shared portfolio of stories and skills. The IoTs exhibit a considerable degree of similarity in terms of history, programme portfolios, and strategic objectives. Nevertheless, noteworthy differences arise in student numbers, campus size, research activity, leading to key distinctions in mission.

5 | METHODS

In this study, the focus is on the presidents of the IoTs in Ireland's higher education system. Traditionally, the president, working with their senior leadership team, had autonomy concerning strategic planning, key policies, procedures, resources, staff management, programme provision, and student services. Building on the qualitative approach employed in previous research on leadership in higher education (O'Connor et al., 2014; Stephens & Gallagher, 2021; Van Ameijde et al., 2009), this study uniquely focuses on the senior leader of the organisation, the president. What distinguishes this inquiry is the unprecedented participation of all fourteen of the IoT presidents during a historic period of change.

The interviews followed a structured format, covering key issues such as the president's overall role, management structures, communication, leadership styles, external engagement, system change, collaboration and alliances. The approach to interviewing remained flexible, employing open-ended questions to encourage interviewees to express themselves openly and freely. This approach aimed to address concerns of trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, transferability, and authenticity, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). All the interviews were conducted face-to-face. The fieldwork took place over a five-month period in 2019. The first author visited each president's workplace. This ensured a more personalised and in-depth interaction with each participant, with interviews lasting between 90 and 120 min. With a commitment to strict anonymity, participants imposed no restrictions on the findings.

In excess of twenty hours of audio-recording resulted in 400 pages of transcribed text. Detailed notetaking complemented the audio recording and helped to capture the emergent narrative. Thematic Analysis was applied to systematically find patterns of meaning (themes) across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Our focus was on the individual, with a desire through the use of narrative structuring to remain authentic (Aldulaimi & Abdeldayem, 2020; Patten & Stephens, 2023) and aligned with a social constructionist perspective. We adopt this approach because we are interested in how meanings are constructed by individuals at personal and group level (Gill, 2015). Our preliminary analysis generated up to twenty codes for each participant. A process of data reduction led to the identification of four overarching, cross-case themes.

Direct quotes are used to bring the presidents' voice to life. To protect required anonymity, a numbering or coding referencing system is not employed to refer to specific presidents, institutions, or regions. For the same reason, certain examples provided by respondents and details of events had to be redacted. The main limitations of this study revolve around its limited scope, concentrating exclusively on presidents of IoTs in Ireland and lacking a broader transnational or cross higher education sector analysis. However, its exclusive focus on a period of systemic change and the participation of all fourteen IoT presidents provide a unique perspective within this context, offering valuable lessons applicable elsewhere.

6 | FINDINGS

In this section, we present the four cross-case themes identified through thematic analysis, presented sequentially, and supported by extracts from the interviews. These themes are subsequently mapped to the four key characteristics of the CoP conceptual framework in the discussion section. This demonstrates that the CoP lens aptly highlights aspects that thematic analysis alone cannot interpret meaningfully, providing a richer understanding of the trade-offs between collaboration and competition that the IoT presidents are navigating and reconciling. Overall, the presidents faced the challenge of adapting to a change agenda that demanded and incentivised increased involvement regionally and nationally. However, government-backed funding schemes posed impediments to change, as did the diversity of perspectives, goals, and institutional structures that posed a significant barrier to the adoption of a collective approach. To address this challenge, it was deemed crucial to foster collaboration among the presidents, establishing a shared vision and devising effective strategies. The primary incentive was the achievement of TU status. Within this mix of incentives and constraints, the presidents explored new models such as national committees, regional clusters, and formal alliances.

6.1 | Theme 1: Embracing a more expansive external role

As the IoTs aimed for TU designation, the presidents acknowledged the necessity to enhance their external engagement to align with the demands of public-facing activities. The prospects and perceived demands of new institutional missions prompted institutional leaders to consider their roles in various contexts, placing distinct emphasis on regional, national, and to some extent, international dimensions of external engagement. Traditionally, their role had been predominantly internal, focusing on internal leadership while also involving stakeholder engagement, national commitments, and limited international activity.

It was completely internally focused. I have gone from a kind of a 50:50 split to maybe a 20:80 nearly... my message now is ... we are going to be a TU.

Developing the new mission of the TUs required intensified external involvement at a regional level, as well as a stronger national presence. Cumming (2023) underscores the importance of stakeholder buy-in and identity legitimation to successful formation of new institutional identity. This reorientation holds weight given that these new missions were perceived by some as conflicting with the original commitments of the IoTs to serve local stakeholders and communities. Traditionally, the regional role was seen as the most important. Some of the presidents spoke about the role of the institute, as the economic catalyst for their region. Others described the important role in applied research and industrial development.

The regional role ... economic development and a lot of interaction between us and government business support funding coming into the region.

One of the presidents expressed the view that the external role of the president should mainly be at national level, and that the regional role should mainly be for others senior managers. Three of the presidents saw themselves as already playing important roles on the national stage.

I am probably one of the presidents who's most connected to activities at that level, nationally and internationally. A lot of my time will be on the national stage.

The future of our sector is hugely dependent on the ability of the presidents to articulate and shape the mission of the TUs. It is extremely important that our time is mostly spent nationally.

When it comes to shaping sectoral policy, there were various perspectives. While six presidents saw themselves playing a leadership role in the formulation of national policy, others believed it was a matter of collective responsibility.

As presidents, we have a very strong influence. We have to take every opportunity to make our case and to make sure that it's heard and that our sector is heard, it is a constant battle.

You can shape local policy, but national policy should be done through the collective and it is something that I think our sector maybe isn't as good at as the universities.

Additionally, some presidents felt that their influence was more legitimate in the realm of regional policy. Finally, the presidents seldom acknowledged international activities.

6.2 | Theme 2: Acknowledging obstacles to collective leadership

The second theme examines obstacles to collective leadership, including the perspectives of members of Council of Presidents, in relation to the role of the chairperson. There was little evidence of a unified sense of collective leadership as longstanding institutional autonomy and organisational diversity appeared to impede cohesive decision-making and the establishment of a harmonised strategic direction.

It is pretty obvious that we are autonomous institutes. It is a hugely diverse group.

What was interesting was the extent of the acknowledgement of competitive conflicts, or entrenched views and perspectives, and how reaching consensus often implied finding the most basic or universally agreeable elements that can be accepted by all parties involved.

It is the lowest common denominator in the sense of trying to get agreement. The smaller ones seem to always find it more difficult to step back and see that there is a bigger picture.

The pre-existing fragmentation presented substantial challenges and raised significant concerns for eight of the presidents. The situation became even more intricate with the emergence of consortia, adding an additional layer of complexity despite some progress.

I think we are very fragmented. This is hugely problematic. We have made some progress, but it has become more difficult recently because there been a splintering of the group in terms of the development of consortia.

A prevailing belief was that the IoTs must collaborate more effectively as strategic policy issues surfaced. Despite the challenges, there was a recognition of the importance of setting aside differences for the sake of developing cohesion. As one president emphasised, it was imperative that the sector functions as a unified entity in addressing key challenges and advancing shared goals:

It is crucial that we work together, irrespective of differences in institutional strategies.

At the Council of Presidents, the role of chair rotates annually. The presidents held differing views on the significance of the role; some perceived it to entail substantial responsibilities and leadership aspects.

It is a significant role. You are rolled out as the sector representative at national events, meeting with ministers or whatever. You may even end up in a negotiation role on certain issues and you will be leading delegations.

However, five of the presidents viewed the role as that of a chairperson at meetings and did not perceive it to be influential more widely. Their criticism highlighted the challenge of managing overlapping institutional and national responsibilities that impact the way sectoral leadership is exercised. Their commitments to their respective institutions appeared to complicate the objective execution of their collective sectoral duty.

The role does not work because you can never clearly enough differentiate the role as the chair of the council from that of president of an institute. As the president of an institution, you clearly have personal views.

The presidents were asked if there was a leader or leaders among them. The group appeared divided, with half of the presidents perceiving a lack of distinctive leadership. The next quote highlights that there wasn't a clear, standout president who significantly distinguished themselves from the rest.

Most people in this system could name all the presidents of the universities, I do not think they would name the presidents of the IoTs. I do not see anybody that's head and shoulders above ... I know that sounds bad but that is it.

Despite the lack of consensus on this issue, interestingly, there were comments about presidents who perceive themselves to be leaders. This suggests that their influence may stem more from self-confidence than from recognition by their peers.

There is one or two who probably perceive themselves to have more influence than others, whether they may or not be.

Seven of the presidents did identify a leader among leaders. Strength and clarity of thought were two of the characteristics reported.

[President A] is a strong leader. You are always very clear about what [President B] is thinking and you are always very clear as to what [President C] and probably [President D] are thinking.

[President A] comes across as very strong and would not be shy in terms of putting their view across. [President B] is a completely different personality and is very region focused, ... then you have [President C] who has a completely different approach to doing things.

In summary, the views of the presidents do not point to a cohesive collective. Some of the presidents see the role of chairperson as significant, while others viewed it primarily as the chair of the meetings, highlighting the challenge of managing overlapping responsibilities and competing interests. There was no consensus on whether there was a leader or leaders among the group. Seven of the presidents identified colleagues with strength and clarity of thought as leaders. There was a perception that presidents from the IoTs do not have the same level of visibility as their university counterparts.

6.3 | Theme 3: Forming groups, collaborating, and competing

Next, we explored the views of presidents regarding consortia. Significantly, many of the presidents were initially evasive.

There are issues, but that is going away. There are changes, power plays and there are more changes coming down the line.

There was significant emphasis on collaborating through consortia with higher education policy. Yet we know little about the dynamics of collaboration replacing competition. Division emerged when the TU consortia began to move at different speeds and on different developmental trajectories.

There is sort of a splinter group of TU applicants that were meeting separately and one of the presidents at the meeting got up and left and went off to another meeting.

Some of the respondents emphasised the importance of building trust among the presidents in their consortium.

You get to like and trust, well maybe not like, but you certainly must get to trust, the other. At the very beginning you must decide "Well, now who is going to be the president of the new organisation?" I think if you do not sort that one out it's like the ghost it's just hanging around.

Building trust and mutual respect among the presidents led to progress in adopting a more collaborative approach and moving away from a purely competitive mindset focusing on their respective specificities and differences.

My thinking has changed quite a bit. The level of trust has grown hugely. There is respect, there is parity of esteem, and we can work together.

The presidents provided examples of how leaders prioritise the interests of their own organisation above anyone's else. In order for them to fully engage in collaborative efforts, a benefit for them and for their institution needs to be in sight. Eight of the presidents highlighted the importance of incentives for participation in consortia. Without such incentives, presidents may be less inclined to fully engage in collaborative efforts. While the need for incentives to encourage collaboration through consortium building was evident, the presidents also expressed concerns about the potential loss of many of the positive aspects associated with having smaller institutions. Five of the presidents were open about their worries about potential disconnection within a larger organisational structure.

In a TU you could fear becoming far too removed from your own institution. That is something that we need to make sure doesn't happen.

It is going to mean a complete disconnect between the executive management and the people working on the ground.

Two others spoke about their concerns of becoming removed from their region and original ethos and remit of their institute:

We still have to keep an eye on and emphasise the regional remit and the concern I would have is that we might forget that.

The quotes speak to a real uncertainty, reflective of a period of very significant change for the presidents, both personally and professionally. The presidents had mixed perspectives on their capacity to build relationships of trust among the presidents in their consortium. Some saw the potential for positive collaboration, while other presidents emphasised the need for vigilance to prevent detachment from the core functions of the institution. The findings highlight the challenges involved in working collaboratively towards the objective of becoming a TU and the attachment to existing institutional identity and values.

6.4 | Theme 4: Leading calmly and fostering unity

The presidents held varied perceptions of their leadership roles within their consortium. Eight of them discussed the importance of unifying efforts, highlighting their role in maintaining cohesion and progress within the consortium. They elaborated on their strategies for managing diverse stakeholder personalities and expectations, showcasing qualities such as patience, resilience, and calmness during turbulent times.

Patience and resilience and keeping a calmness here while there was so much turmoil elsewhere. It's been challenging.

To try and keep everybody on board. ... It was becoming just a bit frayed now because we were going on too long.

Trying to keep things on the rails in the context of managing the personalities. There were a number of issues along the way which could have caused the breakdown of the alliance.

I have very much steadied heads. I have managed expectations.

I got the people together initially. I've kept things on an even keel and keep people on focus. Yes, so I suppose I play a very leading role in keeping it together.

Despite initially expressing scepticism about the concept of consortia, the presidents highlighted the importance of exercising patience and resilience. They acknowledged the necessity of collaborating with different personalities to uphold unity within the consortium and providing tangible benefits to individual institutions as incentives for participation.

7 | DISCUSSION

Although there have been many changes in the Irish higher education environment, the redesignation of the IoTs as TUs is possibly the most significant senior leadership challenge. In this paper, we explored the effect of the transition from IoT to TU on the president's responsibilities and collaborative interactions among presidents. Specifically, we have worked to answer the following question: How does the transformation from IoT to TUs impact the president's role, the dynamics of collective activities among presidents, and the potential emergence of a CoP?

The Presidents shared the common purpose of securing designation as a TU and developed shared practices in their discussions as well as through their membership in national representative bodies. These efforts were largely taking place within a temporary vacuum as traditional competition was paused to form collaborative consortia. Although the presidents had different individual characteristics and worked in institutions of varying sizes, they were crucially linked by the implications of the creation of the TU sector, which provided a window of opportunity for collaboration. This opportunity promised benefits such as increased status, recognition, and a stronger profile. Despite the proliferation of opportunities for face-to-face and virtual networking, there remained a cautious approach to sharing experiences and knowledge. This reluctance stems from both individual attitudes toward sharing sensitive information and perceived differences in institutional types.

The president is key to the culture in a HEI. They create and shape stories with stakeholders, work to establish norms and values and coordinate rituals. They guide the interactions between staff and external stakeholders. A HEI engages with many agencies and funding supports. Engagement with these agencies by staff can often be predicated on the direction, actions and language of institutional leadership. The activities of the president create a legitimacy for the routines, activities and expectations of the likely outcomes. The presidents must balance their focus on internal on campus activity with the need to promote the institution externally (as part of the TU process).

Table 1 presents the mapping of the collective activities of the presidents to the four key characteristics of a CoP as reported in the literature (Amin & Roberts, 2008; Contu, 2014; Pykro et al., 2019; Yamklin & Igel, 2012). The Presidents' shared experiences included, engaging with stakeholders and tackling challenges

TABLE 1 Mapping the characteristics of a CoP to the activities of the presidents.

Characteristics	Interview themes	Activities of the presidents
Common purpose	Embracing a More Expansive External Role Forming groups, collaborating, and competing	There are differences in terms of the key areas of activity and differences in terms of regional and national focus. However, the presidents work in institutions with very similar organisation structures, management assignments and strategic planning objectives. The presidents are working on behalf of their institutions to secure designation as a TU and as such this is a common purpose
Collective practice	Forming groups, collaborating, and competing Leading calmly and fostering unity	Traditionally the presidents have focused on promoting their institution, in a competitive environment. But during this period of change and the transition to TU the presidents are all involved in some form collaboration. The presidents have shared practice in relation to many if not all aspects of the merger discussions. In addition, they are all members of a national council which, if fully functioning, would provide the basis for collective practice in terms of policy design, development and implementation
Collective action	Forming groups, collaborating, and competing Leading calmly and fostering unity	There is limited evidence of collective practice as a sector or as an outcome of their participation on the Council of Presidents. The institutions are very much embedded in their city or region. Recent efforts at collective action takes place within the consortiums with no indication of knowledge transfer between these groups
Shared experiences	Acknowledging Obstacles to Collective Leadership Embracing a More Expansive External Role	The presidents have many shared experiences. They have seen the IoT sector transformed by both the widening participation agenda and increased spending on infrastructure. They all have a key focus on engagement with local stakeholders and they are all "challenged" by developments in relations to research outputs, facilities, student numbers and the implications for core activities and contracts

related to research outputs, facilities, and student numbers. These experiences were fluid, evolving over time, and the findings captured a snapshot of a unique set of circumstances. Nevertheless, they can offer valuable lessons for the future.

Considering these findings in relation to the three components of a CoP (Wenger et al., 2002) shows that while the presidents traditionally shared interests, such as promoting their institutions and contributing to their regions, these efforts were primarily conducted at the individual institutional level, implying a degree of insularity and competition. However, the formation of consortia, a strategic collaboration, became a significant shared interest. In relation to Community, the presidents interacted and engaged in shared activities, facilitated to some extent by participation in a Council of Presidents. These activities included formal meetings, networking, collective input into policy, external engagement and collective decision-making. In relation to Practice, varying activities took place with an emphasis on knowledge sharing, both in terms of institutional development and regional issues, but also in terms of the day-to-day approach to managing a HEI and dealing with challenges. Pykro et al. (2019) explain that mutual engagement is an essential element of a CoP, contributing to the development and sustenance of an invigorating social practice over time. Therefore, we conclude that a CoP is a useful description of the collaborative *process* but not a stable entity established by interactions among the presidents.

There are several policy and managerial implications which emerge from this study. In relation to policy there are two key implications:

1. The sharing of experiences and the provision of a supportive environment is key to establishing a sense of unity based in a community of TUs as newly created entities. There should be continued coordination of the sharing of experiences, to enhance the development prospects of all the new TUs.
2. Government must not treat the emerging TUs as a homogenous group. They must adopt a flexible approach to communication so that all the institutions (and their presidents) are included. Perhaps showcase events, seminars, and online workshops that support a greater sense of a shared experience and the support the sharing of a greater diversity of experiences, would be beneficial.

In relation to management practice there are two key implications:

1. Traditionally, the presidents have worked to grow a small HEI that benefits students, staff and the local ecosystem (a different CoP). What is desirable, is the formation of new CoPs that extend out beyond the region and the existing stakeholder base. This new CoP can significantly contribute to the identity legitimation required for successfully consolidating a new institutional identity.
2. Government should work to integrate the new TUs into a national system. The development of brand awareness will be key to identity. Key stakeholders must be invited on campus and staff must be supported to engage. The promotion of the TU and its provision must be done in conjunction with the promotion of its teaching and research outputs.

Considerable public funding has and is being directed toward the creation of TUs. The government and public have very high expectations for how the TUs will transform higher education provision.

8 | CONCLUSION

Leadership has been demonstrated to be instrumental in bringing about change in higher education (Badillo-Vega & Buendía-Espinosa, 2020; Jarvis, 2021; Lumby, 2019; Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016). However, we have an incomplete understanding of the strategies leaders employ to effect such changes, particularly when directives to achieve deep-seated reform originate in policy. This study makes a valuable contribution to the relatively limited

literature on senior leadership in higher education by first highlighting the changing role of senior leadership during systemic changes, which include elements of academic drift. Second, it sheds light on collaborative efforts to confront the new challenges posed by new institutional missions. Third, this study makes a scholarly contribution by integrating a CoP perspective into the study of leadership in higher education. It offers novel insights into the conditions that either facilitate or hinder the emergence of a CoP among senior leaders, as well as the challenges they face when engaging in collaborative endeavours. Additionally, the research provides new insights into a major system transformation in Ireland. The study contributes to the global discussion on the complex dynamics of collaborative and competitive interactions. By making these contributions, our findings extend prior research on senior leadership (de los Santos & Vega, 2008; Heffernan et al., 2021; Michael et al., 2001; O'Connor et al., 2014; Wright, 2010).

The findings indicate that the president is fundamental to the culture and development of both individual HEIs and also higher education systems. We found that presidents must possess the skills to balance their focus on internal on campus environment and their region while working to facilitate cross-institutional collaboration, sharing of knowledge and practices, with a view to strengthening not just individual HEIs but also the collective system. We have provided insights into how the activities of presidents can be enablers or constraints to the effective development of a CoP. In doing so, we provide important theoretical contributions which advance the general higher education literature and in particular the literature on senior leadership across higher education systems. Our findings also expand the CoP literature by providing insights into an underexplored context. There is significant learning therein for individual leaders, for HEIs and for the collective. It would be useful to undertake follow-up research to consider how the collaboration and competition dynamics evolve following TU status and also triangulate leaders' perceptions of leadership practices with those of other staff members within the institutions.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Billy Bennett: Conceptualization; investigation; formal analysis; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; methodology. **Vassiliki Papatsiba:** Conceptualization; methodology; formal analysis; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Simon Stephens:** Conceptualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; formal analysis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Open access funding provided by IReL.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There were no conflicts of interest reported with respect to this study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The authors choose not to share the data.

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How to cite this article: Bennett, B., Papatsiba, V., & Stephens, S. (2024). Presidential leadership in higher education: Balancing collaboration and competition in a time of systemic change. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 00, e12527. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12527>