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## Do Academics' Views on Leadership Align with the Literature, and How Does This Impact Their Teaching of Widening Participation Students?

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### Abstract

This article offers an interpretative reading of research interview data gathered with seven academics in a small English university that caters predominantly to widening participation students. The original interviews aimed to explore the most effective ways academics can support students in developing leadership capability. For this article, the author revisited the digital recordings of those original interviews and conducted an interpretive reanalysis of the data. This reanalysis aimed to ascertain the extent to which the conceptions of leadership that the academics hold align with the academic literature on the concept. Leadership is notoriously an ill-defined concept, and so, for this article, the author used Yukl's (2012) taxonomy of leadership behaviours drawn from a systematic review of the literature as the basis for comparative analysis. The literature indicates that developing students' leadership capability is a desirable educational outcome, but this presupposes that academics understand what the term leadership means. This article explores this by evaluating how well the academics' understanding of the concept of leadership aligned with the literature presented in Yukl's (2012) taxonomy and considers the implications of this for their teaching. The article concludes with recommendations for adopting a coherent framework for academics to work within, especially for institutions that serve widening participation students. This article contributes to the knowledge of teaching practice by evaluating how well academics understand a concept they are (implicitly or explicitly) expected to teach and recommends further research to develop the scholarship.

**Keywords/key phrases:** leadership, widening participation, attribute development, employability, data reinterpretation.

### 1. Introduction

This study analysed the approaches academic staff adopt to developing leadership capability in the students of a post-1992 English university. Leadership is a notoriously ill-defined topic (Benmira & Agboola, 2021; Jackson & Parry, 2018; Rost, 1993; Bass, 1990) that is subjective and context-dependent (Taran, 2023). Widening participation students tend to experience more challenging educational journeys and systemic barriers to success in higher education, resulting in lower levels of confidence and social capital (Jones, 2021) as well as valuable employability

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attributes such as grit and resilience that may make them highly employable individuals (Fellows, 2024). Therefore, facilitating leadership capability is a broader topic than merely developing skills but must also consider those students' particular circumstances and disadvantages (Haque et al., 2021; Thomas, 2020; Howieson & Minty, 2019).

While there is no universally agreed definition of leadership, this study draws on a comprehensive review of the literature that produced a hierarchical taxonomy of leadership behaviours comprised of four meta-categories (“*task-oriented, relations-oriented, change-oriented, external*”) encompassing fifteen specific leadership behaviours (Yukl, 2012, p. 68).

This study analysed how academics working specifically with widening participation students understand the term leadership and explored the approaches they adopted (or chose not to adopt) to support students in developing leadership capability. The study evaluated a series of semi-structured interviews with a range of academic staff members in a small English university that predominantly serves widening participation students. The interviews analysed here originally formed part of a master's degree research project on the teaching of leadership, and this study is a re-evaluation of the recordings from those interviews.

This study explores the following questions:

Research Question 1: Are the definitions of 'leadership' held by academics working with widening participation students congruent with the literature?

Research Question 2: How does their understanding of leadership impact their teaching practice?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. The educational context in which these data were gathered**

Higher education in the United Kingdom has undergone radical change in recent decades with the introduction of significantly increased numbers of students in a process termed 'widening participation' (Thomas, 2020). Widening participation, in the UK was introduced alongside a change in the way the Higher Education sector is funded, passing the cost burden from the state to individual students creating the 'consumer-student' (Molesworth et al., 2009), and the introduction of specific institutional attainment and progression targets (Cunningham & Samson, 2021) like those impacting tertiary education (Burgess & Thomson, 2023). Many of these changes met considerable academic resistance (Fellows, 2023) and are regarded as symptoms of unwelcome neoliberal interference in student education (Giroux, 2014). However, widening participation is generally considered a positive development (Hodge, 2024; Thomas, 2020; Reddy & Moores, 2008).

### **2.2. The political leadership context in which these data were gathered**

The period during which these interviews were conducted saw the UK experience a 'national emergency' (O'Grady & Fairbairn, 2019) owing to disputes over the nature of its exit from the European Union. During the fourteen-day period over which these research interviews happened, the sitting government lost three significant Parliamentary votes, and two further rounds of indicative voting resulted in none of the presented options securing majority support (UK Parliament, 2019) creating a 'major constitutional crisis' (Rayner et al., 2019). In addition,

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a 'People's March' against the government's policy attracted an estimated one million protestors (Marsh & Quinn, 2019) and an online petition reached six million signatories (Mee, 2019).

### **2.3. Leadership as a desirable graduate attribute**

The desirability of leadership as a graduate attribute appears consistently in the literature. A meta-analysis of thirty-nine peer-reviewed articles by Osmani et al. (2015) found eight widely identified graduate attributes, including motivation and leadership. However, Matsuoka and Mihail (2016) found that fewer than 7% of graduate employers felt that graduates possessed leadership skills upon completing their courses. Stuart et al. (2011) found that extracurricular activities that enabled students to develop and evidence their leadership capability gave better access to more desirable graduate job opportunities (see also Surendran et al., 2023), but these opportunities are also more readily available to those students whose social capital already conferred considerable labour market advantages. This distinction makes the development of leadership capability in widening participation students a significant issue.

When adopting the initial position that universities should seek to develop graduates with leadership capability, one must first understand leadership. Jackson and Parry (2018) sum up the problem of finding an adequate definition of leadership by saying that 'leadership is a phenomenon that everyone has an opinion on, but few of us seem to agree on exactly what it is', and Bass (1990; p.87) contends that 'there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define it'.

### **2.4. Leadership traits and behaviours**

Although 'the study of leadership can be traced back to Aristotle' (Northouse, 2018, p. 9), most scholars agree that Carlyle's Great Man Theory (1841) was the first attempt to define leadership. The premise of Carlyle's theory is that some are destined from birth to be great leaders because of their genetically inherited traits. Stogdill's ground-breaking research of 1948 offered the first challenge to the trait theory (Stogdill, 1948). For Stogdill, leadership is what a person does rather than who they are, and this informed subsequent leadership theories that focused on the behaviour of leaders. Stogdill shifted the focus from the internal (innate characteristics) to the external (things said and done). Theorists began to ask if, since leadership qualities are not innate but rather emerge over time, people could learn to become leaders (Jackson & Parry, 2018; Johnson et al., 1998; Benne, 1948).

In 1967, Fiedler shifted the focus again when he introduced his 'contingency theory of leadership effectiveness', which looked beyond the individual to the situation in which a leader operates to assess their appropriateness and effectiveness. Consequently, just as Stogdill had moved from thinking about internal traits to external behaviours, Fiedler placed those behaviours in a situational context. One commonly cited example of this is the research of Hersey and Blanchard (1969), which found that a significant determinant of success or failure was the leader's performance readiness level or position in the 'life cycle of leadership' (the life cycle theory of leadership was renamed the 'Situational Leadership Model' in 1977).

## 2.5. Differing models of leadership

In 1978, Burns offered a further perspective on the debate with his Transactional or Transformational Leadership theory. Transactional leadership occurs when followers are rewarded for performing a task, for example, by financial recognition. Transformational leadership, however, occurs when a leader encourages or persuades a follower to maximise his or her potential in a way which also serves the organisation's needs. Other significant, though less pivotal, leadership theories include 'servant leadership' in which the leader serves the follower by empowering them and supporting their development (Greenleaf, 1970; Graham, 1991; van Dierendonck, 2011), the theory of Leader-Member Exchange (also known as LMX Theory) in which the quality of the interpersonal relationship between the leader and follower is a critical determinant in the success of the leader (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Schriesheim et al., 1999), and System Leadership, in which success is dependent upon the leader's attitude and aptitude to collaboration to meet the challenges of our connected and interdependent world (Senge et al., 2015; Caldwell, 2012).

Conceptualisations of leadership have significantly evolved from the immediate post-war era when behaviours were central to academic thought, but behavioural theories remain prevalent. Indeed, new theories that are related to behaviours as a determinant of leadership success continue to be published: for example, Smith and Lewis's Paradoxical Leadership Theory (2011), which focuses on how leaders respond to the contradictory tensions in organisational life and Rock's (2008) Neuroscience Leadership which explores how five important domains inform leadership behaviours of the brain – status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness.

## 2.6. Yukl's (2012) hierarchical taxonomy of leadership behaviours

For both the labour market and higher education institutions, a graduate's possession of leadership attributes is identified through an assessment of their behaviours (Oliver, 2013). Leadership behaviours, then, are both a measurement and, for educators, a set of development objectives.

In a comprehensive factor analysis review of 'more than half a century of research' on leadership behaviour, Yukl (2012; p.78) identified four meta-categories of leadership. The four meta-categories encompass fifteen specific behaviours that were commonly found in the literature, as represented in Table 1:

TABLE 1. A PRESENTATION OF YUKL'S (2012) HIERARCHICAL TAXONOMY OF LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOURS

Task-oriented	Relations-oriented	Change-oriented	External
Clarifying Planning Monitoring operations Problem-solving	Supporting Developing Recognising Empowering	Advocating change Envisioning change Encouraging innovation Facilitating collective learning	Networking External monitoring Representing

Source: own compilation, based on Yukl, 2012.

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For this research, the participants' interview responses were analysed with reference to this taxonomy. There have been more recent systematic reviews of leadership literature (for example, see Mehrad et al., 2020; Deshwal & Ali, 2020; Gumus et al., 2018), but none of these more recent publications offer a taxonomy against which the data under review may be analysed, nor do their findings differ significantly than Yukl's (2012) findings.

### **3. Method and Methodology**

#### **3.1. Methodology**

This research involves a reinterpretation of qualitative data (interview recordings) initially gathered as part of a master's degree research project. That project sought to understand how to 'teach' leadership skills and took a positivist approach to analyse the data generated. In this way, the participants were presented in the original analysis of these data as impartial, self-aware actors offering reliable accounts of their practice (Yin, 2016). The original interviewer has subsequently re-examined those data through an interpretive lens for this research. Interpretivism allows for a more subjective reading of the data that considers contextual factors to deliver a richer, though less definitive, account of the data (Silverman, 2015).

The reinterpretation of existing data, either by different researchers (Fielding & Fielding, 2008) or by the same researcher at a different point in time (Åkerström et al., 2004), allows for the reconsideration of nuance and for greater objectivity to emerge. For this study, the data generated during that project is being reappraised by the original researcher who is both a more experienced practitioner and has been liberated from the terms of the original research (Wästerfors, 2013).

#### **3.2. Method**

These data were generated as part of a master's degree research thesis. The research design mitigated the constraints inherent in a project of this type, including the time-limited nature of the project and the researcher's developing competence (Cassell, 2015). Qualitative data were generated through eight semi-structured interviews conducted in short succession to generate sufficient depth of the data set without expecting data saturation (Morgan, 2014). Each interview lasted at least an hour, but the varied nature of semi-structured interviewing meant there was no uniformity of length, and the cumulative total of the eight interviews was more than eighteen hours. Interviews were conducted in person with the intention that participant cues, such as pauses, corrections, and changes in body language or tone, might prompt further exploratory questioning, taking advantage of the semi-structured interview process to fully understand the strength of feelings or any anxieties or enthusiasm for a particular point (Cassell, 2015). Each interview included six set questions, with further dialogue and probing questions emerging naturally from the participants' answers (Collis & Hussey, 2021). The six standard questions which each participant was asked were: 1) what, to you, is leadership; 2) should universities be teaching students to be leaders; 3) what are the most effective ways to teach students; 4) what are the barriers to teaching students; 5) how do you know when your teaching has been effective?; and, 6) what is the most important thing that students can take away from their time here. Contemporaneous notes were made solely as a prompt to explore an issue more deeply or return to it later in the interview (Yin, 2016) and do not form a part of the data set.

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### **3.3. Instrumentation and data collection procedures**

With the informed consent of the participants, each interview was digitally recorded. Recordings were repeatedly listened to before new transcriptions of the recordings were generated and subjected to coding to generate themes and categories for further analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2017). The slow and laborious process of manual transcription offers a distinct perspective on the language selected and the intonation of the participants by immersing the author entirely within each conversation (Yin, 2016). In re-evaluating the data, the new transcriptions and original recordings were contextualised by the author's understanding of references to events, people, or circumstances that are not explicitly referenced in the recording (for example, references to the change of the Vice-Chancellor as 'the current situation').

### **3.4. Population and sample**

For an insider researcher, many consequential biases are present in recruiting interviewees, such as prejudicial assumptions, pre-existing personal relations, affinity, intra-office politics, and ease of access (Cassell, 2015). The researcher employed a 'snowball' method to identify interview participants to eliminate conscious or unconscious bias. Snowball sampling is a nonprobability method of survey sample selection that requires each participant to select or propose the next participant, whom the researcher will approach directly. While this method has flaws, such as relying on each participant's subjective judgement and network of relationships, it eliminates the researcher from the decision-making process following the initial selection(s) (Johnson, 2014). The snowball method requires the researcher to select only the first participant. In this research, two initial participants were purposively selected from different faculties to develop two referral lines. This approach was selected to ensure time efficiency and manufacture a more diverse group of participants and a broader range of subject specialisms than a single referral line within a faculty would (Johnson, 2014). During the original research, the final recommendation by a participant was for one of the senior leadership team to be interviewed. For the purposes of reinterpreting the data, the researcher removed the interview with the senior leader from the data set. The nominated participant was neither an academic (either current or historic) nor a professional supporting student learning and, therefore, not an appropriate participant for this subsequent project. Inappropriate nominations are one of the disadvantages of snowball sampling identified by Johnson (2014) and thus, the reduction in the data set is methodologically sound.

As a mechanism to ensure consistency of experience for the participants, the interviews happened in the same small meeting room. The choice of a neutral room was a deliberate strategy to avoid any implications of power assertion implied by hosting or visiting colleagues (Perera, 2021), which can be a factor in insider research (Greene, 2014). The neutral interview venue eliminated the potential for the distractions of email notifications, ringing telephones, unexpected visitors, and visible noticeboard items which may have interrupted or informed the participants' answers (Rog, 2012).

### **3.5. Data Analysis**

Repeated listening to the digital recording was conducted for each participant before the transcription process happened. This two-step process was conducted in full for each participant in chronological order. In the listening phase of this iterative process, the intention was to

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recognise the relative salience of the points made, with this then being identified in the transcripts by the addition of bold text (heavy emphasis) and italics (suggestive of hesitancy or of usage that was not necessarily literal). The purpose of completing the process in full and sequentially was to ensure that each data set was considered holistically during the analysis process (Silverman, 2015).

The coding process began following the manual transcription of all seven interviews. The reviewer did not revisit the literature on leadership before or during the coding process to avoid the possibility of preconceived categories influencing the analysis (Grix, 2004). Each interview was analysed as a whole and as a distinct entity, including responses to questions that do not, on the surface, relate directly to leadership (for example, the closing set question, "What is the one thing you would like students to remember from their time studying here?"). This process allowed themes to emerge and added crucial contextual information, facilitating an interpretive data analysis (Miles et al., 2018). A code was assigned to every statement across the entire data set, allowing for a thorough and comprehensive reading of the data (Silverman, 2015). By assigning those codes to broader categories, common themes emerged, and by referring those themes back to the original data, the significance of each to the participants collectively and individually was carefully re-examined (Miles et al., 2018). The final stage of the process, the themes emergent from the data was compared to Yukl's (2012) taxonomy to identify the areas of salience and discrepancy which are outlined in the findings section below.

### **3.6. Limitations**

Collis and Hussey (2021; p.100) define limitations as "a weakness or deficiency in the research" and there are several weaknesses in this paper which must be clearly understood by readers.

#### *3.6.1. Age of the data*

These data were gathered in 2019 and, as such, are representative of a global and local context which has since evolved. For example, the impact of the Covid pandemic on our understanding of leadership and relevant pedagogies, including subsequent literature on the topic (for example, on Leadership: Shtaltovna, 2024; Turnbull & Murphy; Pierog, 2023; Franzen-Waschke, 2022; and on pedagogical considerations: Bicchi, 2024; Jenei et al., 2024; White, 2024; Fellows, 2023) would not be a factor for the participants and has accordingly been eliminated from the analysis of this data.

#### *3.6.2. Specific circumstances of the data*

The highly unusual local, national and global circumstances which form the contextual backdrop to this research have now expired and the findings and analysis of these data should be read through that paradigm, but the impact of these circumstances on the research is intrinsically instructive (Silverman, 2015).

#### *3.6.3. Limited number of participants*

This study is based on an analysis of data from just seven participants and, therefore, extreme care should be taken not to extrapolate results beyond what may reasonably be inferred (Yin, 2016).

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### 3.6.4. Participant anonymity

Given the potential sensitivity of the topics discussed in insider research (Cassell, 2015), participants were assured that their names, roles and any other potentially identifying information would not be included in any future publications (Breen, 2018). Regrettably, therefore, participant data which might have been beneficial contextual information for this reinterpretation of the data was eliminated from the analysis and presentation of findings.

## 4. Findings

The findings from the data analysis are presented with illustrative quotes from the interviews with the participants. The quotes have been fully anonymised and attributed to a participant number indicating their position in the order in which the interviews happened. The selection of each quote is based on its salience and illustrative quality. Unless expressly stated otherwise, these illustrative quotes represent a common theme or concept expressed by all participants. The inclusion or absence of specific participants should not indicate disagreement unless clearly stated. By comparing the findings to Yukl's (2012) taxonomy, the data has been compared to a summative review of the leadership scholarship over a long period of time and, as such, incorporates a representative body of knowledge on the topic.

### 4.1. Lack of a formal framework or definition of leadership

While all participants agreed that it is both necessary and ideal to support the development of leadership capability in students, there was a lack of unanimity about what leadership is. All participants confirmed that leadership development is not an explicit expectation or routinely mentioned in the documentation created during curriculum development or routine meetings among faculty. All participants confirmed that there is no formal framework or definition of leadership made available to them within the university, exemplified here by Participant 3: *"Higher education is increasingly facing this accountability, metric-driven culture... therefore we look to outcomes that are measurable... those become what are of value. And the problem there is that leadership skills are the kind of skills that are often not measurable or agreed upon."*

The participants demonstrated how they were operating to their own definitions of leadership. Some described seeking informal opportunities to support the development of behaviours that they identify as essential in a leader as with this comment from Participant 4: *"We do a lot of stuff on leadership already, but we don't call it that. So sometimes, because it's not called something, people think it isn't really happening."* Some participants, however, were more reticent to attempt to facilitate the development of leadership behaviours as they doubted the capability of their students to respond effectively with Participant 1 commenting: *"If we're trying to embed leadership qualities in them... I think you have to be very mindful of what knowledge base and emotional base are they coming from."* Participant 6 warned that academics simply may not see leadership development as a part of their role: *"I'm aware that there are parts of the university where the staff just want nothing to do with this. And then they will lean back on 'there isn't enough time, I have to get through all this material'. And it's a very difficult thing to teach formally."*

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## 4.2. Task-oriented

Turning to the comparison between these data and the taxonomy proposed by Yukl (2012), the first significant finding is that task-oriented behaviours are dismissed by the participants as not being associated with leadership at all. Instead, the participants almost uniformly saw those behaviours as *management*, which they consider a distinct and lesser concept. Each participant made the point at least once that, although leadership takes different forms, it is definitively not the planning and monitoring of operations that Yukl (2012) identified, for example, contrast these statements from Participant 6: "*Management skills are the things to do with organisation and delegation, and who is doing what task, and when, which is not the same as leadership.*" and Participant 5: "*Managing is, I suppose, more the coordination of resources, and finances, and rooms*" with Participant 4: "*Leadership is ... more about values and relationships than anything else.*"

## 4.3. Relations-oriented

In stark contrast to the absence of task-oriented behaviours from Yukl's (2012) taxonomy, all participants mentioned relations-oriented behaviours, and those mentions were frequent and with significant emphasis, except for the fourth behaviour, *empowering*. Only Participant 4 mentioned the expectation of a leader to be able to empower their followers: "*Good leadership is being able to genuinely distribute the leadership... distributing the leadership says 'you're leading this, so lead it. It's empowerment.*" The remaining participants' conception of leadership was more directive, based on follower subordination and related to a concrete means of achieving a desired outcome. According to Participant 5, Relations-oriented leadership amounted to "*...being able to take people with you. Saying "this is the way, and you need to buy into it", kind of thing.*", while Participant 3 emphasised the inequitable dynamics of the relationship: "*Their first steps to leadership are to learn to be led in a more power-structured way.*" and Participant 2 characterised leader-follower relations as being nonreciprocal: "*A leader needs the ability to sit people down and talk them through things and tell them the what and the why and the how, without there being any tension.*"

## 4.4. Change-oriented

In discussing leadership as a concept and set of behaviours, the participants spoke repeatedly about two change-oriented behaviours identified by Yukl (2012). *Envisioning change* and *advocating change* were heavily emphasised themes, exemplified here by Participant 7: "*To have a vision about what you want to do and then to be able to bring people along with you.*" and Participant 2: "*Leadership is about identifying a direction and then getting people to come along with you because you've chosen the right thing to do.*". The two other themes categorised by Yukl (2012) as Change-oriented, *encouraging innovation and facilitating collective learning* are also present in the data, though less frequently or emphatically.

## 4.5. External

Yukl's (2012) taxonomy identifies three outward-facing leadership behaviours as consistently present in the literature: *networking, external monitoring, and representing*. None of these three behaviours appear in any of the participants' conceptions of leadership other than, tangentially,

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a discursive mention of the current political turmoil "*torpedoing our reputation on the world stage*" from Participant 4.

#### 4.6. Widening Participation students

When asked directly, each participant concurred that the facilitation of developing leadership behaviours *should* happen. At the same time, each expressed the opinion (either directly or by implication) that this was unlikely to be successful with some or all students. Participant 1 offered the opinion that: "*To get students to think about leading is quite tricky... they just look like 16-year-olds at sixth-form college. You could ask different departments to nominate students they've seen good leadership skills in.*", while Participant 7 was rather blunter in their assessment: "*Are they going to go on to be leaders? In the majority of cases, probably not.*"

These observations were emblematic of broader concerns about the metrics-driven culture of compulsory schooling and the impact of marketized higher education on recruiting students whom several participants perceived to be unprepared and ill-equipped for undergraduate-level study. Participant 2 offered a pessimistic view of the student cohort: "*They arrive having learned to repeat information to pass exams, and we then say to them, 'You're not as good as you think you are'. It's incredibly disempowering. But, at the same time, some of them won't move beyond that, and we have to understand that. Not everyone who gets here belongs here.*" while Participant 1 offered a kinder perspective, but one which more directly attached the responsibility to individual students: "*some of them come in, you know, bless them, with their cap on backwards, looking at their phone, eating a panini. They aren't coming in ready to learn*". This negative judgement of the students was echoed by Participant 5: "*There are some students it is nigh-on impossible to engage with*" and Participant 7: "*these students are weak, not necessarily intellectually, but they're in the wrong place*". Participant 3, however, offered a more introspective view: "*I'm sitting here quietly grumbling about schools feeding us students who aren't prepared for higher education because they've been too mollycoddled, too overprotected and protected [sic] from failure. We're all complaining about that, and then we're fulfilling that same legacy and presenting them out to employers ill-prepared for failure*". Stuart et al (2011) proposed that leadership is developed most effectively in extracurricular activities, however the participants made no reference to the students' capacity or tendency to engage in such activities.

#### 4.7. Widening Participation institutions

The nature of working in an institution that caters predominantly to Widening Participation students suffused the data generated, whether by comparison with the students of a neighbouring redbrick university, Participant 1: "*they're all walking around with their university branded tracksuits and they always have their textbooks*", in the context of the students' personal circumstances, Participant 6: "*The nature of our students is that they tend to have really busy, complicated lives*), or fatalistic accounts of the students' future prospects, Participant 7: "*these students are going into careers where they're never going to be the highest earners*. While the participants are actively aware of the additional challenges that supporting Widening Participation students entails, only rarely did they reflect on how those frustrations impacted on teaching practice and even then the critique was abstracted to their colleagues as with Participant 7: "*One student told me that his group was told in the first year 'we know fifty per cent of you won't pass'. I mean we'll take your nine grand but then turn round and say that*

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to them. Imagine!" and Participant 6: "When you're adding on these nice-to-haves, they're always the first things to go. People simply say, 'I've got enough to get through already'".

#### 4.8. The participants' own institution

In addition to the nature of the institution, the specific circumstances that the participants had experienced in their institution was a common topic, exemplified by Participant 3 here; "You have one faculty with what might be termed 'over-authoritarian leadership' and another where the leader has been asleep at the wheel. Neither is good. Neither should have been allowed to go on for this long."

### 5. Discussion

This study explored the following research questions:

RQ1: Are the definitions of 'leadership' held by academics working with widening participation students congruent with the literature?

RQ2: How does their understanding of leadership impact their teaching practice?

This research was conducted in a small English university where widening participation students form a significant majority. At the time of these interviews, the university prospectus (no longer available online or in print) stated, "Our graduates will go on to be leaders in their careers and their communities", indicating that there is an appreciation within the institution of the necessity of supporting students to develop the attributes and behaviours of leadership. It is also apparent from these data that there is a broad consensus among the participants that developing leadership capability in their students is desirable. The participants articulated that leadership is a nebulous and contested concept, though they had not necessarily realised this beforehand. Consequently, there is a dissonance in these data: How can leadership be universally desirable and yet, at the same time, ill-understood and the subject of disagreement? The working definitions that the participants offered were broadly consistent with one another, but when placed in context with the literature, they are limited and, tellingly, appear overwhelmingly reflective of the participants' current professional and societal experiences. None of the participants referred to or indicated familiarity with any of the academic literature on leadership.

Revisiting these data at some distance clarifies how contemporaneous local, national, and global events influenced the participants' perspectives. All the participants described leadership as the product of just two of Yukl's (2012) four meta-categories: *relations-oriented* and *change-oriented*. These data were gathered in an institution that was and had been, for some time, in stasis due to the transition of the Vice-Chancellor. The professional situation the participants were experiencing at the time of the interviews clearly informs the interpretation of leadership that they offer. The participants in these interviews were largely disdainful of the *task-oriented* behaviours that Yukl (2012) identified. Task-oriented, managerial behaviours were the elements of leadership that the participants had continued to experience in their daily responsibilities. At the same time, the participants reified the relational and visionary behaviours that they keenly felt the current absence of. The participants similarly disregarded *external* leadership behaviours that Yukl (2012) identified but would not have significantly impacted their professional experience in any meaningful way. Analysing these data through

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an interpretive lens shows that the participants' characterisation of leadership was limited to the leadership behaviours that they felt were missing in their professional lives and that seemed to be absent in the national government.

The approach to teaching taken by the participants, including supporting the development of leadership capability, may also have influenced the participants' characterisations of what leadership is. While the participants were keenly aware of the barriers facing their students, it would be an overstatement to ascribe to the participants a deficit view of their students. Indeed, warmth and care suffused even their negative depictions. What is undeniable, however, is that the participants were consistently apprehensive about the capability or readiness of some of their students to engage with the concept of leadership or successfully develop relevant behaviours. Aside from one mention, any indication that the participants were preparing the students to empower others was absent from these data. Instead, the participants saw leadership as a process of cajoling and shepherding followers, perhaps reflecting how they saw themselves leading their students.

There is a resignation and frustration apparent throughout these data that is occasionally made bluntly explicit. In this context, it is reasonable to question the extent to which the desirable but challenging and un-mandated development of leadership capability is maintained. Each of the participants said that they believed the development of leadership is desirable; five of them explicitly stated that they try to achieve this, but, as Participant 6 identified, when the process isn't mandated, it becomes a negotiable and, therefore, vulnerable additional extra.

The findings from these data suggest that the lack of an agreed framework or definition of leadership for the participants to work toward creates a vacuum. If a university aspires to develop the leadership capability of its students, whether this is motivated by its values or simply to improve its position in national league tables, this research indicates that introducing a guiding framework or definition is imperative. There is no cohesiveness in the approach to developing leadership capability among the participants. Indeed, there is an underlying sense that attempts may be rationed or abandoned based on a student or cohort's perceived responsiveness and projected capabilities. One of the participants even proposed implementing a two-tiered system distinguishing between those '*born to lead*' and those who may be '*taught to lead*'.

This research aimed to identify the extent to which the conception of leadership that the study participants have is in alignment with the literature. Yukl's (2012) taxonomy of leadership identified four meta-categories and fifteen specific behaviours. In these data, the participants presented an understanding of leadership that narrowly focuses upon two meta-categories and almost entirely elides the other two. This relatively narrow conception of leadership lacks any element of task orientation or external presentation. In the absence of any defined framework for developing leadership capability, defaulting to this condensed model for leadership would likely limit graduates' understanding of and efficacy in performing the elided tasks. The implication for these graduates' ongoing employability and leadership potential is that they would be less well-equipped than contemporaries who had experienced a more well-rounded education.

The professional and sociopolitical context in which the participants were interviewed has been discussed above. The other contextual consideration that impacted the discussions was the nature of teaching in an institution that caters predominantly to widening participation students. From unfavourable comparisons to the students of a nearby redbrick institution to external

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factors commonly impacting their likelihood of success to disempowering readings of performance data and blunt assessments of the inequities of the labour market. There is a common theme in the data that attempts to develop leadership capability in students will not result in many of those students going on to become leaders. One can only speculate how this might impact teaching practice.

## **6. Conclusion**

The findings of this research suggest that the participants' understanding of leadership is partial when compared with the academic literature, according to Yukl's (2012) systematic review. Following an interpretative qualitative analysis, critical contextual factors were identified that may partially or fully explain the specific leadership behaviours upon which the participants focused. This analysis identifies important considerations and challenges related to and following on from the central and predictable outcome that academics cannot expect to teach something they do not fully understand.

### **6.1. To develop leadership capacity in their students, institutions should implement a guiding framework**

The findings from this research indicate that, without a guiding definition or framework, academics will generate their own definitions of leadership, informed by mutable external influences and not necessarily in alignment with the literature. Implementing a framework for teaching might offer high-level principles towards which academics can work when designing their programmes. For example, using the Yukl (2012) taxonomy, a framework might require that each of the four meta-categories of behaviours be present in a student's learning objectives at least once each academic year. This requirement would provide a degree of rigour by aligning the activity to the literature while allowing staff to embed this activity within their teaching creatively. Without a framework, these data indicate that the possibility of misunderstanding, de-prioritisation or inequities of opportunity significantly increases.

### **6.2. A framework is particularly necessary when working with widening participation students**

The topic of inequities also speaks to a broader question of how to effectively support students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Each participant in this research spoke passionately and with an admirable commitment to students' success but with an underlying subtext that their hard work might be futile for various non-pedagogic reasons. This subtext sometimes sounded like resentment or resignation, implying that this may manifest itself in their teaching practice. The nature of widening participation students is that there are challenges in providing the forms of education that will allow them to prosper in the same way as more materially advantaged students. Facilitating the development of such students as leaders, even when some perceive that those students may never actually become leaders, should be no less of a priority than it is for more privileged students. The implementation of a guiding framework would help to realise this aspiration.

### **6.3. Recommendations for further research**

Though rich in content, these data were gathered from a limited number of participants working in a small institution during an atypical period of professional and social turbulence. Therefore,

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the findings and conclusions drawn from these data should not be considered for direct extrapolation but may nevertheless be instructive and worthy of further consideration. Therefore, it is recommended that further research is undertaken in a range of higher education settings to ascertain just how well academics' understanding of leadership aligns with the literature and what consequential impact any discrepancies or incongruities may have on the experience of their students.

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