

Title: The Impact of Political Skill and Political Will on Three-Year Appointments of Higher Education Leaders in UK Business Schools

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Introduction

In the complex landscape of higher education, leadership necessitates more than administrative acumen and academic credentials. Higher education leaders, particularly in business schools and similar institutions, must navigate a web of social relationships, organisational dynamics, and external pressures (Macfarlane et al., 2024). The multi-stakeholder environment and the short-terminist nature of leadership appointments are specific to the higher education sector, and in the UK specifically, and create unique challenges especially in times of financial uncertainties and existential viability of this service-based sector. Whilst extant management literature (Munyon et al., 2015; Maher et al., 2018; Wyatt et al., 2022)) investigates two constructs that significantly influence the effectiveness and success of organisational leadership – *political skill* and *political will*, these phenomena are scarce in the leadership research in the context of HE short term leadership appointments. This paper explores the implications of these constructs on HE leadership roles in the UK, assesses the challenges and opportunities posed by short-term appointments for academic leaders and attempts to argue that their interrelationship coupled with motivation is crucial in promoting successful outcomes in higher education leadership.

Political Skill and Political Will: Friends or Foes?

Political skill refers to the ability to understand and navigate complex social environments, enabling leaders to influence others effectively. As Ferris et al. (2005) assert, political skill encompasses four primary dimensions - social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity. Each dimension contributes to a leader's capacity to build relationships, persuade the many stakeholders they engage with, and navigate the political landscape of their institution.

The ability to read social situations and understand interpersonal dynamics is grounded in organisational psychology in the seminal works of Pfeffer (1981) and Mintzberg (1985). Within the multi-faceted HE job, where leaders have to learn navigate in ambiguous and difficult conditions, it is likely that there need to demonstrate core

aspects of political skill. Indeed, empirical work has showcased that individuals high in political skill understand precisely what to do in different situations and disguise their motives (Ammeter et al., 2002) and predicts job performance and career success (Munyon et al., 2015; Todd et al., 2009)

The Importance of Political Skill in Higher Education Leadership

Political skill is instrumental in fostering collaboration, building consensus, and effectively leading change within higher education institutions. Nebel (2020) investigated the relationship between political skill and higher education within administrators, findings a positive relationship between political skill and decision-making ability within this context. This suggests that individuals with higher political skill can leverage their networks,

According to Tyminski and Owens (2024) higher education leaders possess a variety of skills and aptitudes which enable them to effectively negotiate conflicts, motivate faculty and staff and more. For example, leaders with strong communication skills who can communicate their vision clearly and engage various audiences foster a sense of shared purpose. They are more likely to inspire buy-in from faculty, staff, and stakeholders, which is essential for implementing strategic initiatives. As such effective communication is a crucial aspect of political skill. Treadway et al. (2010) emphasize that leaders with strong political skills experience better employee outcomes, such as engagement and job satisfaction, ultimately leading to improved institutional performance

The Role of Political Will in Leadership Effectiveness

Political will is a contested term with multiple conceptualisations and definitions, across disciplines. Within organisational behaviour, it is often defined as the “motivation to engage in strategic, goal-directed behaviour that advances the personal agenda and objectives of the actor that inherently involves the risk of relational or reputational capital” (Treadway, 2012, p533). As Mintzberg (1985) proposed, leaders need political skill and will to successfully navigate their political arena.

Kapoutsis et al., (2017) established the Political Will Scale, which suggested that individuals are either motivated by self-serving or benevolent political will. Still, little is understood about the influence of the context on individuals' motivation to engage politically. Within higher education, with short term defined roles, both the form of motivation i.e. self-serving or benevolent and the level of motivation and commitment are likely to have a significant impact on leadership effectiveness. For example, individuals who are politically motivated and committed to their roles whilst under significant budget constraints, evolving societal expectations and shifts in student

numbers could lead to heightened performance and greater institutional success (Ellen, 2014).

The Interplay Between Political Skill and Political Will

The relationship between political skill and political will is crucial in understanding leadership effectiveness in higher education. Leaders may possess high political skill, enabling them to navigate dynamics; however, without the political will to act decisively, even the most skilled individuals may fail to effect change. Conversely, a leader with strong political will but limited political skill may struggle to rally support and implement initiatives effectively.

Short-Term Appointments of Leadership roles in Higher Education

Within academia, key roles within divisions or schools such as associate deans and director of studies are generally assigned for three years. These short-term leaders often bring fresh perspectives that can disrupt entrenched practices within HE. Whilst extant research has highlighted limited changes in the decisions made by deans given the short-term appointments (Lavigne, 2024), it is very likely that the political skill and will of individuals will play a significant role of the effectiveness of the utilisation of these short term but incredibly important roles.

For example, leaders in short-term roles face compressing timelines to achieve objectives and an urgency to either compel leaders to leverage their political skills effectively for quick buy-in or lead to hasty decisions that may lack comprehensive stakeholder engagement. Further, establishing trust quickly is critical for short-term leaders. Highly developed political skills are necessary for leaders to quickly build relationships and influence diverse stakeholders. Also, short-term leaders must exhibit adaptability, as they often navigate changing priorities and unforeseen challenges. Political skill is essential for understanding the changing landscape and adjusting strategies accordingly. In addition, while long-term vision is important, short-term leaders are likely to prioritize immediate outcomes that demonstrate effectiveness. This can sometimes lead to a short-sighted approach that neglects broader institutional goals. Indeed, the short-term orientation of role, aligned with the political will of individuals, either benevolent or self-serving, will likely have significant impact on the orientation of the institution. For example, individuals that are self-serving may pick strategic directions which are beneficial to themselves, whilst individuals that are benevolent may pick goals that have long-term organisational benefits.

Research Gaps

Despite existing literature on political skill and political will in the management and organisational behaviours literature, several research gaps remain. Firstly, while individual components of political skill have been studied extensively, the interaction between political skill and political will in decision-making processes within higher education settings is less understood. Secondly, there is limited empirical research examining how political skill and political will impact specific outcomes, on one hand those linked to the leaders themselves such as career progression but also others such as faculty engagement, student satisfaction, and institutional performance metrics. This paper aims to focus on this research on the former with further research opportunities for the latter. Thirdly, few studies focus on the development of political skill and political will among emerging leaders in higher education, particularly in the context of short-term appointments. Understanding the mechanisms for enhancing these competencies can inform leadership development programmes. This is especially needed in a sector that is going through a transition.

Hypotheses

Based on the identified research gaps, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: There is a positive relationship between the level of political skill among higher education leaders and faculty engagement.

H2: Political will moderates the relationship between political skill and institutional performance outcomes.

Methodology

Self-Assessment and Measurement of Political Skill and Political Will

Measuring political skill can be accomplished through various methods, including self-assessment surveys, 360-degree feedback, and behavioural assessments. The Political Skill Inventory (PSI) developed by Ferris et al. (2005) provides a validated tool for assessing individual political skills through a series of Likert-scale items that reflect the key dimensions of political skill. Qualitative methods, such as interviews and case studies, also contribute to understanding political skill in specific contexts. For instance, higher education leaders may be interviewed about scenarios requiring political acumen, revealing the dynamic and situational aspects of political skills in action. Political will has often been studied quantitatively using proxies such as the Need for Power (Ferris et al., 2019) and Kapoutsis et al (2017) urged the usage of their Political Will scale, studies have also recognised the importance of qualitative exploration (Doldor, 2017).

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods design to investigate political skill and political will among leaders in UK higher education. The complexity of these constructs, i.e. encompassing both quantifiable traits and situational practices, necessitates a methodological approach that captures both breadth and depth. Prior studies (e.g., Kulikowska-Pawlak & Zatoński, 2024; Lavigne, 2023) demonstrate the value of combining survey data with contextual interpretation, enabling researchers to triangulate patterns and probe the factors shaping political behaviour in leadership roles.

We begin with questionnaire distributed to a minimum of 55 senior leaders across a sample of UK universities, encompassing Russell Group, pre-92, and post-92 institutions. Power analysis using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009) confirmed a minimum of 55 participants is required to detect meaningful effects in a multiple regression model with three predictors (political skill, political will, and their interaction term). The survey includes two instruments: the Political Skill Inventory (Ferris et al., 2005), which measures dimensions such as social astuteness and networking ability, and the Political Will Scale (Kapoutsis et al., 2017), capturing individual motivation to engage in political behaviour. This data allow us to map patterns across institutional type and career stage.

Complementing the survey, we conduct 10–15 semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of leaders within fixed term of 2 months. These interviews explore how political skill and will are enacted, constrained, and perceived in Higher Education. While the survey captures reported tendencies, interviews provide insight into how leaders interpret and rationalise political behaviour, particularly in contexts where formal authority is time-limited or ambiguous. The sample size aligns with interviewing standards (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Dexter, 2006) and is sufficient to reach thematic saturation (Guest et al., 2006; Mason, 2010).

Importantly, this study is not cross-cultural; it is grounded in the specific governance structures, policy pressures, and cultural expectations of the UK system. Future work might explore cross-national comparisons, but our current aim is a contextually informed account of how political competencies are mobilised, and sometimes resisted, by academic leaders.

Conclusion

Understanding the constructs of political skill and political will is vital for leadership effectiveness in higher education. Both dimensions are intertwined, influencing how leaders navigate complex organizational dynamics and advocate for necessary

changes. By fostering these competencies, institutions can enhance their leadership capacity, ultimately leading to improved performance and sustainability in the ever-evolving landscape of higher education. Furthermore, by addressing the identified research gaps and testing the proposed hypotheses, this study aims to provide empirical evidence that enriches current understanding and contributes to the development of effective leadership within higher education. It also opens up opportunities for future research, for instance an investigation into *leadership development programs focused on enhancing political skill and whether it would lead to increased political will among emerging leaders in higher education, particularly in short-term appointments*. At the time of the conference, we will be in a position to present some initial findings, furthering our knowledge of the impact of short-term roles and individual political skill and higher education institutions.

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