

# PhD Opportunity

## School Leaders' Decision-Making in Complex Organisations

### Supervisory team

**Director of Studies:** Professor Alison Kington

**Supervisors:** Dr Neil Gilbride & Dr Marie Stephenson

**Research Group:** [Social Psychology of Education](#)

### The PhD Opportunity:

The proposed project will focus on the complex decision-making which school leaders and leadership teams undertake in their roles and the implications of this for professional development. School leaders and leadership teams are responsible for the healthy functioning of the organisation and the individuals within it (Connolly, James & Fertig, 2019). Much of the enactment of these responsibilities is demonstrated through the decisions leaders make (Biddulph & Gilbride, 2024) which can have a significant influence on a number of processes and outcomes, including student progress (Robinson & Gray, 2019), colleagues experience of the workplace (Day, Sammons & Gorgen, 2020), and staff retention (Urlick, 2016).

In undertaking these decisions, school leaders and leadership teams face challenges. One such challenge is that schools are complex organisations; complex systems are deeply interconnected environments where various components interact in relatively unpredictable ways, leading to emergent behaviours that cannot be easily predicted from the individual parts. These systems are characterized by their dynamic nature, where small changes can have significant impacts, and the relationships between elements are often non-linear (Stacey, 2000; Hawkins & James, 2018). As a result of these features, leaders and leadership teams can encounter problems which can have multiple valid perspectives, no fixed solutions and can make them difficult to predict and resolve (Rittel & Weber, 1973). Working in relative unpredictability, handling multiple perspectives and multiple connections requires much from school leaders – such as collective sense-making, the development of psychological safety and tolerance of ambiguity (Drago-Severson, 2012).

Theory and research at the intersections of complexity sciences, psychology and educational leadership is a new emerging area of discourse. Some have recognised how the demands of school leadership place greater demands on the psychological processes of sense-making (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017). Other approaches have exposed a developing interrelationship between adult ego development and how leaders undertake decisions in complex contexts (Drago-Severson, 2011; Gilbride,

James & Carr, 2021; 2023). However, further empirical research is needed to advance and evolve both the theoretical foundations of this new field and the practical recommendations for working conditions, retention and recruitment, and professional development.

## References

Biddulph, J., & Gilbride, N. (2024). Playful school leadership: being serious about leadership playfully. In *Empowering Play in Primary Education* (pp. 147-166). Routledge.

Connolly, M., James, C., & Fertig, M. (2019). The difference between educational management and educational leadership and the importance of educational responsibility. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 47(4), 504-519.

Day, C, Sammons, P., & Gorgen, K. (2020). *Successful school leadership*. Available online at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED614324.pdf>. Accessed on 7/2/2025

Drago-Severson, E. (2011). School leadership for adult development: The dramatic difference it can make. In *International handbook of leadership for learning* (pp. 757-777). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Drago-Severson, E. (2012). *Helping Educators Grow*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ganon-Shilon, S., & Schechter, C. (2017). Making sense of school leaders' sense-making. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 45(4), 682-698.

Gilbride, N., James, C., & Carr, S. (2021). School principals at different stages of adult ego development: Their sense-making capabilities and how others experience them. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 49(2), 234-250.

Gilbride, N., James, C., & Carr, S. (2023). The ways school headteachers / principals in England at different stages of adult ego development work with organisational complexity. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 17411432231170581.

Hawkins, M. and James, C. (2018). Developing a perspective on schools as complex, evolving, loosely linking systems, *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 46(5), 729-748.

Rittel, H. & Webber, M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Integrating Knowledge and Practice to Advance Human Dignity*, 4(2), 155-169.

Robinson, V., & Gray, E. (2019). What difference does school leadership make to student outcomes?. *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, 49(2), 171-187.

Stacey, R.D. (2000). *Strategic Management and Organisational Dynamics: The Challenge of Complexity*. London: FT Prentice Hall

Urick, A. (2016). The influence of typologies of school leaders on teacher retention: A multilevel latent class analysis. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 54(4), 434-468.

## Application Process

To begin the application process please go to:

<https://www.worc.ac.uk/research/research-degrees/applying-for-a-phd/>.

## The Interview

All successful applicants will be offered an interview with the proposed Supervisory Team. You will be contacted by a member of the Doctoral School Team to find a suitable date. Interviews can be conducted in person or over Microsoft Teams.

## Funding your PhD

For information about Doctoral Loans please visit: <https://www.worc.ac.uk/study/fees-and-finance/doctoral-loans.aspx>

During your PhD you can access the Research Conference Support Scheme to support the costs of presenting your research at an external conference.

## Research at the University of Worcester

Research is central to the University's mission to make a difference in everything that we do. We are committed to delivering excellent research which extends the boundaries of human knowledge but which also improves people's lives by enabling better health outcomes, improving food security, developing environmentally sustainable solutions for crop production and socially sustainable solutions to our ageing population, enhancing public knowledge and understanding of the past and present.

The University hence focuses its research around five high-level challenges facing society, locally, nationally and globally:

- [Human Health and Wellbeing](#)
- [Sustainable Futures](#)
- [Digital Innovation](#)
- [Culture, Identity and Social Exclusion](#)
- [Professional Education](#)

The success of our research is reflected in our continuous improvement in external research assessment processes. In the most recent Research Excellence Framework, REF 2021, the University saw a near 50% increase in the scale of its research and 12% increase in quality, building on its performance in REF 2014 when it was the UK's most improved university in terms of Research Power, a combination of scale and quality.

## Research Degrees at Worcester

Our research students are central to our overall mission for research. They are working at the cutting edge of their disciplines and driving forward the quality of our research whilst enriching our research culture. We are looking to increase our research student numbers as a strategic imperative.

Our commitment to our students is reflected in the results of the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2023 in which we ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> for overall research student satisfaction nationally. Key to our success in this area is the Doctoral School, a focal point for all our research students.

It provides:

- day-to-day support for our students, both administrative and practical, through our dedicated team.
- a Research Student Study Space with both PCs and laptop docking station.
- a comprehensive Researcher Development Programme for students and their supervisors.
- a programme of student-led conferences and seminars.

### **Widening Participation**

As part of its mission statement the University is committed to widening participation for its higher degrees. Although most candidates will have an undergraduate and / or a Masters degree, the University is happy to accept applications from candidates with relevant professional qualifications and work related experience.

**For further information or an informal discussion on this project, please contact Prof Alison Kington: [a.kington@Worc.ac.uk](mailto:a.kington@Worc.ac.uk)**

