

CPHC 2026 Conference: World Cafe Themes and Conclusions

Context

This briefing paper synthesises discussion notes from a World Café session involving CPHC members, focused on **leading under uncertainty**. The themes reflect current sector pressures, discipline-specific challenges, and the lived experience of departmental leadership in a period of structural change, declining student numbers, and increased centralisation.

The analysis aims to:

- Surface shared concerns and patterns
 - Articulate where Heads perceive agency and constraint
 - Identify practical actions that can be taken forward individually, departmentally, and collectively
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Key Themes

1. Responsibility Without Power

A dominant theme was the tension between **high responsibility and diminishing authority**. Heads are accountable for student numbers, staff morale, quality, complaints, and financial sustainability, yet report reduced control due to institutional centralisation and slow decision-making processes.

Heads often experience themselves as positioned between command-and-control systems above them and the day-to-day realities of staff and students below them, absorbing risk while lacking corresponding levers of power.

Implication: Leadership effort is increasingly spent managing expectations and consequences rather than shaping conditions.

2. Sustainability Anxiety: Discipline, Jobs, and Identity

There is significant concern about the **long-term sustainability of Computer Science** as a discipline in its current form.

Key aspects include:

- Falling student numbers and competition with other subjects
- Pressure to generate income and protect jobs
- Anxiety about staff morale, retention, and turnover
- Uncertainty about what is appealing to 16–18 year olds and how CS should evolve

Declining recruitment was seen not only as a financial threat, but as an **existential challenge** affecting staff identity and confidence.

3. People, Culture, and Mental Health

Despite structural pressures, discussions repeatedly returned to **people**.

Heads highlighted:

- Staff culture, morale, and retention
- Student engagement and mental health
- Rising numbers of student complaints (with questions about AI-assisted complaints)
- The importance of rebuilding departmental community and physical presence

Frustration was expressed that institutional processes often feel misaligned with the relational and emotional labour required to sustain healthy departments.

4. Overwhelm and Sense-Making

Heads described a sense of **constant overload**, driven by targets, metrics, surveys, and competing priorities.

A key leadership function identified was not decision-making alone, but **filtering, translating, and buffering** information from the centre to reduce overwhelm for staff.

Heads see themselves increasingly as sense-makers: deciding what matters now, what can wait, and how institutional demands should be interpreted locally.

5. Control Through Culture Rather Than Structure

While acknowledging constrained formal power, Heads were clear about where they *do* retain agency.

Areas of control include:

- Departmental culture and norms
- Staff engagement and communication
- Recruitment selectivity and role design
- Curriculum and portfolio shaping
- Teaching quality and assessment practices (within constraints)
- Setting and enforcing clear expectations and red lines around professional behaviour

Soft power (culture, clarity, and consistency) was identified as the primary leadership lever.

6. Relational and Sustainable Leadership

Advice offered to new Heads strongly rejected heroic or sacrificial leadership models.

Key messages included:

- Build strong internal and external networks
- Invest in relationships and trust
- Use data, but remember you are managing people
- Be transparent about strategy and constraints
- Pick battles carefully
- Offload concerns to safe peer networks
- Take switching-off seriously
- Accept that it is not possible (or necessary) to be liked by everyone

Leadership sustainability was framed as essential, not optional.

Tangible Actions and Takeaways

For Heads of Department

- Explicitly distinguish **what you control vs what you influence**, and communicate this clearly to staff
- Actively curate and filter institutional communications
- Invest deliberately in departmental culture and presence
- Protect time for strategic reflection on the future of CS education
- Build peer support networks and seek mentoring or training

For Departments

- Re-examine curriculum and portfolio appeal to future students

- Align recruitment and performance management with cultural values
- Use light-touch mechanisms to monitor morale and engagement
- Establish and reinforce clear behavioural expectations

For Institutions and CPHC

- Recognise the responsibility–power imbalance experienced by Heads
 - Support Heads as interpreters and sense-makers, not just implementers
 - Create space for cross-institutional sharing of practice around recruitment, culture, and sustainability
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Concluding Observation

Leading Computer Science departments under uncertainty is less about control and certainty, and more about **holding ambiguity, protecting people, and shaping culture**. Heads are acting as buffers, translators, and nurturers within complex systems. Recognising and supporting this reality is critical to the future sustainability of the discipline.

AI use disclaimer: these notes were generated by Co-Pilot from notes taken on the fly during the feedback session and may contain inaccuracies.

Kate Hone, Brunel University of London

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