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DEVELOPING COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Executive Summary to the Interim Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. **Background:** This report summarises progress and preliminary findings of an 18-month Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) funded research project into collective leadership in Higher Education (HE). The research is being conducted by the Centre for Leadership Studies at the University of Exeter and aims to explore the processes by which leadership and leadership development lead to enhanced organisational capability within UK universities.
2. The **theoretical context** of this work is broadly that of ‘distributed leadership’ whereby the leadership process is conceived of as dispersed across the organisation (within systems and relationships) rather than residing within the traits and capabilities of formally-recognised ‘leaders’. Although the HE sector appears to have embraced the concept it is not at all clear what is actually distributed (in terms of power or accountability), the processes by which it is distributed, or whether the concept itself offers substantial benefits for either analysis or policy-making. We are particularly interested in possible links to effective leadership development, referring to notions of effectiveness that include developing better leaders and better collective leadership effects. These performative judgements are inevitably dependent on what one considers to be good outcomes for each university or the sector as a whole; but making these judgments is itself a function of leadership, so our study is concerned both with who is involved in articulating the values and mission of universities, as well as who is making decisions about how to run them.
3. **Research focus:** The key focus of this research is on the leadership of the academic work of the university including teaching, research and ‘third stream’ (business and community) activities. Within this, we are particularly interested in leadership at the school/department level as this is the main operational unit of universities, the primary source of future senior academic leaders, and the main point of interface between leadership of the institution and leadership of the academic discipline. We are interested both in how leadership is experienced at this level and how it interacts with other parts of the organisation. Notably we are interested to explore how strategic direction emerges and is negotiated between the varying actors.
4. **Methodology:** The study employs a case study approach covering 12 UK universities. Participating institutions have been selected to offer a range of university types (e.g. pre or post-1992), size (medium to large), strategic focus (e.g. teaching, research and/or business/community), location (both geographic and provincial/urban/metropolitan) and disciplinary mix (e.g. sciences, humanities, medicine and arts). Within each institution 10-17 interviews have been conducted with a cross section of academic and administrative staff in a number of different subject areas. Despite varying organisational structures, staff have been included from the central executive level that deals with the strategic and operational functioning of the university as a whole (e.g. Vice Chancellors/Principals, Registrars, Deputy Vice Chancellors/Principals, Pro Vice Chancellors); the faculty, college or school level that are responsible for a group of disciplines (e.g. Deans, Territorial PVCs, Provosts, Heads of School); and the school/department level that are responsible for a single (or limited number of)

disciplines (e.g. Heads and Deputy Heads of Schools and/or Departments). In addition, interviews have been conducted with a number of key support roles such as Director of Human Resources, Faculty and/or School Manager in order to understand how they work alongside academic leaders and the extent to which leadership is embedded within institutional processes and practices. A total of 151 semi-structured interviews (each averaging 45 minutes to one hour) have been completed. Additional documentary information has also been gathered where available, including organisational charts, strategic plans, leadership development portfolio, etc.

5. Prior to the main field work a detailed **literature review** was conducted, covering research and theory relevant to the topic of distributed leadership in HE. Literature can be broadly categorised as coming either from generic leadership and management sources (i.e. national and international work on the nature of distributed and collective leadership) or HE-specific literature (i.e. concerned with the management, governance and leadership of universities in particular). In addition, a significant amount of work on leadership in schools has been included as this incorporates many of the issues of both distributed and educational leadership. The main outcomes of this literature review are included in this report and reveal the challenges of identifying and facilitating distributed leadership, as well as the tension and complex inter-play between different elements of leadership in HE (e.g. managerialism versus collegiality).
6. **Research workshop:** Alongside the literature review the researchers held a one-day workshop for the project to which they invited representatives from the Staff and Management Development functions within participating institutions. The aim of this workshop was to enable participants to become engaged with the topic of the research, to influence research questions and to discuss arrangements and methodology for the field work. In addition to a productive discussion on the nature of leadership in the sector (the outcomes of which are included in this report), this event proved invaluable in securing the support and commitment of representatives of each of the organisations. In each case, the actual work of scheduling and organising interviews within institutions was taken on by these people and their colleagues and greatly facilitated the eventual field work of the research team. Indeed, without this kind of assistance it would have been impossible to have conducted so many interviews in such a short period of time and is evidence of the level of interest amongst participants in the topic of the investigation.
7. **Research aims and questions:** At the outset of the research the key aims were to: explore what is understood by the term 'leadership' by various institutional actors; investigate the processes by which leadership is distributed at different levels within institutions; and find out the way in which leadership development (in its broadest sense) contributes towards enhancement of leadership capability for individuals and the wider organisation. Following the literature review and workshop these were extended to include: exploration of the extent to which (and how) leadership is distributed at different institutional levels; exploration of how collective leadership is sustained at the school/departmental level (i.e. succession planning, leadership pipeline); seeking to identify how collective leadership is linked to organisational systems and processes (e.g. financial management, pay and promotions, committee structure); and exploration of the wider context of HE leadership and the main challenges facing the sector. These aims were captured in

a number of research questions which informed the design of a semi-structured interview schedule covering the following topics: leadership strategy and approach of the department/ school/faculty/institution, taking up a leadership role (including motivations, challenges and developmental support), sharing leadership (how leadership influence and responsibility is distributed across networks of people), and the future (major challenges/issues facing the leaders at different levels). Different variants of this instrument were developed for the key institutional roles (e.g. senior executive, head of school/department, administrative/support) and questions and emphases adapted as required by the interviewees.

8. **Data collection:** The interview schedule was piloted with 10 participants at a range of levels from one of the institutions in order to refine briefing, questions and to enable the research team to develop a consistent approach to interviewing. For these, and subsequent interviews, participants signed an ethical consent form outlining the research protocol and statement of confidentiality. All interviews were electronically recorded (except in two instances where participants requested that only written notes be taken) and subsequently transcribed. Due to only minor changes to interview content and procedure a decision was made to retain the pilot institution within the main body of research findings.
9. **Preliminary findings:** For the purpose of this report findings have been grouped under four main themes that mirror the overall structure of the interviews (i.e. leadership strategy and approach, taking up a leadership role, sharing leadership and the future). As detailed analysis of the research data comprises the next substantial stage of the research leading up to the final report in March 2007, it should be emphasised that findings presented here are only preliminary. No concerted attempt has been made thus far to relate these issues back to the conceptual and practical issues identified during the literature review and it is expected that this will form a significant element of the work over coming months. The following points summarise the most significant preliminary findings for each of the four main themes investigated.
 - a. **Leadership strategy and approach:** Within all of the universities studied both managerial and collegial forms of leadership could be identified. Broadly managerial leadership comes top-down from the executive group and involves putting in place mechanisms for meeting the goals and priorities for the institution, whilst collegial leadership comes bottom-up from within the schools and departments and relates to the operational delivery of teaching, research and third-stream activities and strategic leadership within the discipline (e.g. new teaching and research programmes). The universities in our sample placed differing emphasis on these approaches, with some preferring a more centralised approach to the management of resources and direction setting and others opting for a more dispersed approach, with financial and strategic responsibility devolved to schools/departments and professional service units. For each approach there are advantages and disadvantages, with the former often being perceived as ‘micro-management’, restricting academic autonomy, and the latter being perceived as somewhat weak or ‘laissez-faire’, leading to a somewhat fragmented, ambiguous approach across the institution. What is clear, however, is that all the participating institutions have either recently, or are in the process of, restructuring and/or reviewing their structure to achieve a better balance between the needs of managerialism and collegiality.

b. Taking up a leadership role and leadership development: This constitutes the bulk of the findings and covers motivations for taking on a leadership role, selection criteria, preparation and transition into a leadership role and what is most useful/desirable in terms of leadership development and support. In terms of motivations these vary between individuals but broadly map onto Deem's (1995) three tracks: career-route, reluctant-manager and good citizen. In reality, however, the situation is more complex, with individual motivations changing over time (perhaps from reluctant-manager to career-route as the person finds they enjoy and are good at management and leadership) and often coinciding alongside one another (e.g. the reluctant-manager being persuaded to take on the role out of the urge to be a good-citizen and concern over what would happen to the academic unit if they didn't). In nearly all cases a leadership role such as Head of School (HOS)/Head of Department (HOD) was seen as a major barrier to personal research and either meant that such roles were taken once the incumbent had already reached the peak of their research (often in preparation for retirement), for a limited period of time (with the intention of returning to academic research via a sabbatical period) or as an alternative to a research career (facilitating the research of others rather than oneself). Individual motivations seemed to vary between institutions, with the management career-route being more widely sought in post-1992 universities and those who had spent significant periods of time working outside HE (including, for example, clinical academics in medical schools). In terms of selection and development all universities were beginning to take leadership selection, development and succession planning seriously although there was variability in the degree to which this was integrated into selection and reward structures. It was generally recognised that Heads of School and Department are key leadership roles but that current mechanisms for selecting and supporting candidates were not as effective as they could/should be. With regards to development, practical understanding of university systems and procedures along with networking and peer support were cited as most valuable. Tailored approaches such as action learning sets, one-to-one coaching and mentoring were generally felt more useful than generic programmes.

c. Sharing leadership: Amongst all interviewees there was a sense that leadership was in some way distributed within the university. Thus, both strategic and operational responsibility and influence are taken at all levels within the university, from top-level strategic initiatives to the delivery of programmes and bidding for research funding. Furthermore, the boundary between academic and support functions appears to be increasingly blurred, with all parties influencing strategic and operational direction (although there seems to be more opportunity for this at junior academic than junior administrative levels). The level of autonomy for leadership at the school/department level seems to be closely linked to financial control models, with greater power and influence in those institutions where schools/departments are the primary budget-holding entities. Alongside this distributed leadership, however, there is also a clear desire for strong and inspiring leadership from individuals in key roles. This can help give a sense of common purpose/direction, engender a sense of trust and openness, encourage communication and dialogue and create an innovative and supportive culture in which initiatives can flourish. There is a general sense that this leadership should be facilitative and credible (often determined by prior teaching and/or research performance). Despite a resistance to 'managerialism' there is a widespread acceptance of the need for a more professional and effective management and

leadership approach that builds on the strengths of the organisation. The inter-connection between distributed and individual leadership can mean that certain people (even those not in formal leadership roles – e.g. star researchers) can have a disproportionately large influence within the organisation and stories of their successes and failures constitute a substantial part of the narrative fabric of the organisational culture.

d. **The future:** It was widely acknowledged that the HE sector in the UK is undergoing a considerable period of change. Within the sector as a whole some of the main challenges include: changes in funding, competition over research profile, shifting demographics, and increasing regulation and scrutiny. Many of these issues are inter-connected, such as the introduction of student fees in England as a response to declining central funding leading to greater competition between institutions, increasing emphasis on developing a distinct and desirable university profile, and greater expectations from students and other stakeholders. All in all, the challenges faced by the sector are placing greater demands on institutions and senior figures within them, greater visibility and accountability and increasing emphasis on the importance of effective management and leadership processes. This highlights and reinforces the need for research such as that currently being funded by the LFHE and the provision of professional support to the sector.

10. **Next steps** for this project include running a second workshop for representatives from the participating institutions to disseminate and discuss preliminary findings; completing analysis of research data; disseminating research findings and compiling the final report.