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Focusing the kaleidoscope: Investigating the newly formed role of “Academic Lead” at a research-led University

Research Domain: Management, leadership, governance and quality

Introduction

Now, more than ever, higher education institutions in the UK and elsewhere are reflecting on the need for flexible leadership models to help adapt and react to the fast changing academic environment (Flumerfelt & Banachowski, 2011; Osseo-Asare, Longbottom, & Chourides, 2007; Randall & Coakley, 2007). Rapid shifts in the higher education sector are contributing to a kaleidoscopic ‘supercomplexity’ (Barnett, 2000) of challenges, structures, processes and value frameworks for academics who lead and for those who are led. In particular, with the introduction of increased student fees in 2012/13 following the publication of the Browne Report (Browne, 2010), teaching quality and the student experience are receiving much more attention than has been the case in the past, especially in research-led institutions also under increasing pressure to perform well in the upcoming Research Excellence Framework. How are such institutions’ leadership structures and roles developing in response to these changes? And how do these responses affect academic staff in relation to their identity, status and career trajectory? These are the key questions that this paper seeks to address. By drawing on initial data from an on-going Leadership Foundation funded project exploring the newly formed role of “Academic Lead” at a research-led institution in the UK, the paper explores how one institution has implemented a new “distributed” leadership model. Crucially, this paper, which looks at the impact of the model on both those who are leaders *and* those being led, highlights the importance of academic leadership which effects genuine opportunities for open, critical dialogue in relation to identities, values and goals.

Theoretical frameworks

Theoretically, the study is framed at two levels. Firstly, at the institutional level, we draw on ideas of distributed leadership (see Gronn, 2008 for an excellent discussion on this concept) to explore the model that has been introduced. While the concept of distributed leadership has been widely used in school leadership research (Mayrowetz, 2008; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2007; Woods, Bennett, Harvey, & Wise, 2004), it has been less widely applied to research exploring the higher education sector (Bryman, 2009). Secondly, at the level of the individual academic, we draw on a conceptual framework based on the interplay between the three related concepts of socialisation, identity and career trajectory. This framework has been successfully used by one of the authors in previous research investigating the role of the academic department head in both pre and post 1992 Universities (3 references removed for blind review).

Methods

The study used a two staged, mixed-methods approach (Bryman, 2008). In stage one, we conducted qualitative research undertaking interviews with 15 Academic Leads (ALs) and 15 Assigned Academics. The sample contained male and female staff with a range of ages and levels of experience. Following ethical approval, participants were identified and invited to take part via

email. Each participant was interviewed for approx 1 hour and interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interview data were analysed using Nvivo and thematic analysis techniques outlined by Charmaz (2006) and Lichtman (2006). These data were supplemented with the analysis of key strategic documents linked to governance arrangements and working practices which helped in determining what management systems are in place to support the AL role and exploring how useful, or otherwise, they are. It was also used to determine the overall culture and working practices at the Case Study University, and the individual College culture within which each participant works.

In order to examine whether the findings from stage one were indicative across the case study University, in the second stage of the project we undertook a survey of all ALs using an online questionnaire which was based on themes and issues emanating from the first stage of the project.

Initial findings

Common themes arising initially from the interviews of both Academic Leads and Assigned Academics include:

- The complex nature of the power dynamic in the Academic Lead-Assigned Academic relationship in this “distributed leadership” model, stemming especially from the tensions between its supportive, ‘coaching’ ethos on the one hand and the ‘performance management’ strand of the Academic Lead’s role on the other;
- The need for the role of the Performance and Development Review (PDR) to be more fully understood by both academic leads and assigned academics, particularly in terms of the frequency and timing of PDR-related meetings, the underlying purposes of the review itself and the ultimate destination of the associated paperwork.

In addition, Academic Leads highlighted in particular:

- the perception of being given responsibility without the role having any real power;
- the mixed/competing agendas of research and teaching to manage;
- the diverse needs of colleagues in different job families and at different stages of their careers.

For Assigned Academics, there was a significant emphasis on communication-related issues, including:

- the high value placed on opportunities to develop a mutually respectful relationship, and to share in productive dialogue, with their Academic Lead throughout the year - not just in the formal PDR-related meetings;
- the perceived need for a form of dialogue whose tone enables the Assigned Academic to be heard and indeed to take the initiative in conversations with their Academic Lead;
- the value placed upon open discussion, whereby the Assigned Academic’s own perspectives and experiences can be shared safely, in an intellectually rich atmosphere. Such an ethos acknowledges and even explicitly explores possible tensions and incongruities between the

goals and values of the Assigned Academic, those of his or her Academic Lead *and* those espoused (declared and/or enacted) by the institution itself.

Discussion questions

Key questions arise from this work: How do we develop a devolved leadership model in the HE sector which is both collegial and accountable? Can institutions create spaces – times, places and psychological environments – whereby academic leaders and those who are assigned to them can communicate with one another openly and critically in relation to the kaleidoscopic complexity of their roles, identities and goals, and so find a shared focus which is productive for both individual academics and for their institutions?

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