

Reflecting on Leadership: Higher Education Academy Recognition and Academics as Effective Leaders

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Part 1: Abstract

This study explores how the process of applying for Senior or Principal Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) supports reflection on leadership practice and development. Such reflection may utilise a number of resources, prompts and artefacts, which support reflection in and reflection on practice. Academics ranging from Programme Leaders to Vice Chancellors with Senior or Principal Fellowship recognition participated in an online survey and a small number were also interviewed face-to-face. The results suggest that the requirement to reflect on one's own leadership strengthens self-awareness and effectiveness as a leader, thus supporting and encouraging excellent education practice at personal, institutional and sector level.

Part 2: Outline

Although there is extensive research on leadership within higher education (HE), there is less into the value and practice of reflecting on one's own style and effectiveness as an HE leader, even though understanding effective leadership at all levels is well-established (e.g. Bryman, 2007; Lumby, 2012; Pepper and Giles, 2015, Bolden et al. 2014). This paper seeks to explore the impact of the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) as a focus for reflection on educational leadership for academics seeking Senior or Principal Fellowship (S/PF) recognition.

The UKPSF provides a nationally-recognised and comprehensive set of professional standards for HE teaching and learning support. It articulates the Dimensions of Professional Practice¹ as the *areas of activity* undertaken by academics, the *core knowledge* needed to carry out those activities and the *professional values* that individuals performing these activities should exemplify. HEA Fellowships provide sector-wide professional recognition and are awarded to applicants who have met and evidenced achievement of the appropriate standards professional. By 2015, 62,828 academics had successfully achieved recognition as HEA Fellows. Of these 366 are Principal Fellows and 2,454 Senior Fellows who are able to demonstrate achievement of the UKPSF dimensions not only in terms of teaching and learning, but in specifically in areas of education strategy and leadership.

The complexity of leadership practice within HE and the tensions between academic leadership (which focuses on culture, identities and values), academic management (tasks and processes) and self-leadership (the accomplishment of academic work by

¹ For full details, go to <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/professional-recognition/uk-professional-standards-framework-ukpsf>

autonomous academic professionals) was explored in a study by Bolden et al. (2012). They acknowledged that 'leadership' can be both informal (from colleagues, mentors, PhD supervisors etc.) as well as formal (Deans, Heads of Department etc.) and that many academics perceive the informal leaders to 'exert substantially greater influence over one's orientation towards academic work than those in formal roles' (p.34). Academic leaders, therefore, are not just those in positional roles, but those who embrace and champion disciplinary identity and collegiality, supporting, mentoring and influencing fellow academics. This breadth of leadership activity potentially means that many academics can and do take on more than one of these leadership roles at any one time. Because of this 'complexity' (Bolden et al., 2012) there is an even greater argument to support, encourage and recognise academics in reflecting on their own leadership style and achievements in order to support institutional, discipline and personal goals.

As Raven (2014) noted, the value of reflecting on work-based experiences in relation to leadership and management has received significant attention over the past few years, providing benefits such as a heightened awareness of 'self', a greater understanding of one's own and others' roles and responsibilities and a broader appreciation of factors such as institutional politics and culture. However, there has been less consideration given to how this could be supported in practice within the HE sector. He suggested that there were three broad methods of reflective practice – interactive (i.e. engaging with others), written (i.e. notebooks, journals) or collation (of files, folders etc.). He concluded that each of these methods was 'subject to continued evolution, as reflective practices were themselves reflected upon' (p.766), noting that these individuals will select and refine effective means reflection as part of an iterative process.

The studies by Bolden et al. (2012) into academic leadership and Raven (2014) into reflection on academic management and leadership practice highlight both complexity and simplicity; complexity in terms of academics performing and/or experiencing a range of different leadership roles and styles, and simplicity in terms of finding ways to reflect on this. The UKPSF and associated HEA recognition provides a framework and process within which applicants can reflect on the breadth and depth of their own academic leadership experiences and effectiveness and this study explored how this happens in practice.

An online questionnaire was sent out to over 800 S/PFHEAs, followed by ten in-depth interviews across five UK universities. All the participants were in a 'leadership' role, either from a positional perspective (Programme Leader, Dean, Vice Chancellor) or in 'informal' leadership roles (the professoriate, senior lecturers). Both the survey and interviews explored the experiences of applying for HEA fellowship (motivations, processes, sources of information etc.) as well as the relationship between HEA recognition and leadership. A key element, explored particularly within the interviews, was how the required reflection on *leadership* had taken place, and what the impact of this reflection had been on subsequent practice.

Several interesting findings emerged around the experience and practice of reflection. Participants used a variety of resources, including their own records, evaluations and materials, discussions with colleagues and mentors and reference to HEA documentation. Whilst it was clear that there was no 'best' way to approach

thinking about and writing the reflective case studies, respondents utilised the three approaches highlighted by Raven (2014). They engaged in interactive activities – talking to mentors, line managers, other applicants, students and colleagues. They referred to or began compiling journal-type diaries or notes, where they jotted down experiences and thoughts, which in turn they reflected on. They revisited online and hard copy material stored over the past few years which structured and became aide memoirs for their reflections. Most participants used more than one of these approaches, suggesting that the reflective process requires utilising a range of facilitators and resources. They reported that their reflections on (previous) action had also encouraged greater reflection in action ('learning to adjust once you are out there' Schön, 1983; p.55) supporting the development of ongoing reflective practice to develop their leadership abilities going forward.

A further finding was that the opportunity to reflect on and demonstrate a range of leadership approaches was recognised as a critical contribution to education. They recognised the complexities of leadership with HE institutions – that effective leadership requires different approaches in different situations and all stressed the importance of 'leading by example'. The process of reflecting on their leadership had strengthened their understandings of their own leadership style and that of colleagues around them. Those in formal leadership roles adopted a more integrated leadership approach (Marks and Printy, 2003), combining transformational and shared instructional leadership which supports innovation, empowerment and creativity across the institution, whilst also providing the leadership to enhance student learning through development of the curriculum, instruction and assessment.

This small-scale study has highlighted the importance of reflection on the complexities of leadership by academics, and suggests that applying to be an HEA Senior or Principal Fellow can provide purposeful means for undertaking such reflection. This, in turn, supports further reflective practice in the future and enhances education practice at all levels.

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