Open Research Online

Exploring The Role Of Associate Deans In UK Universities - end of project report

Other

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/research-resources/small-development-projects/sdp2013/reading-po.cfm

oro.open.ac.uk

Exploring the Role of Associate Dean in UK Universities

Dr Alan Floyd, University of Reading
Dr Diane Preston, Open University

University of Reading

The Open University

Small Development Projects

Small development projects (SDPs) were first launched in 2004 - shortly after the creation of the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. Since then they have proven to be very popular and have introduced a range of innovative activities of benefit to higher education.

Dr Alan Floyd, **University of Reading** Dr Diane Preston, **Open University**

Contents

01 Introduction

This paper reports on a research project, funded by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, which explored the under-researched role of associate dean in UK universities. Specifically, the project aimed to explore how the role was defined, perceived and experienced across a range of pre- and post-1992 universities.

The report is organised into eight sections. Following this introduction, we provide the rationale for the study. Next, we outline the research project's key aims, research questions and the theoretical framework that guided the study. Then, we describe the study's methods, present the findings and highlight the key implications of our study for practice and research. In the final section, we list the dissemination activities that we have undertaken to date. ■

02 Rationale

Changes occurring within the higher education sector in the UK and elsewhere have been well documented over the past decade (see, for example, Bolden et al., 2012; Deem et al., 2007), with the focus being on what Pollitt (1995:134) originally called 'new public management' (NPM). Whilst higher education institutions (HEIs) are not technically part of the UK's public sector, the 'developmental trajectories and organizational re-imaging and reshaping of UK universities over the last two decades have been fundamentally directed' by the tenets of this approach (Deem et al., 2007:1). NPM focuses on cost-cutting, transparency in resource allocation and increased performance management of both staff and resources. In several UK universities, this approach has resulted in a fundamental review of organisational infrastructure and the systems of administration and management. Consequently, middle leadership roles such as associate dean have gained in complexity and importance (Bryman, 2009; Preston and Price, 2012; Winter, 2009).

Below the level of dean, but above the level of department head, associate deans are perceived to be involved in largely strategic as opposed to operational duties. In supporting the dean, they can have a critical effect on success and provide a link between the academic voice and the ever-changing demands being placed upon university faculties. However, we would argue that it remains a role within higher education that is not well understood, with previous research tending to look at more clearly defined positions such as the department head (Floyd, 2012; 2013; Floyd and Dimmock, 2011), the dean (Harvey et al., 2013) or the vice-chancellor (Bosetti and Walker, 2010). Thus the research presented here appears timely and warranted. An exploratory study into the role undertaken by one of the authors of this report (Preston and Price, 2012) suggests that very few academics view moving into the role as permanent; rather, they see it as a temporary diversion from their real career. Yet, they seemed motivated by the desire to contribute to the strategic and operational successes of their departments by providing an academic perspective on the changes that they could see taking place and the demands placed on themselves and their colleagues. This study aims to build on this work and explore the role across a wider number of HEIs, comparing and contrasting data between pre- and post-1992 universities.

Intended benefits to project partners and the higher education community

The study is directly related to the remit of the Leadership Foundation and specifically aligns with a number of the eight key strategic objectives outlined in its 2011–2014 strategy document (www.lfhe.ac.uk/lfstrategy). In evaluating this crucial but under-researched role, it is hoped that a more thorough understanding of the role of associate dean will emerge, which is important for policymakers, managers and researchers. Such research, for example, could help in the selection processes for new associate deans, allow for more informed career advice for associate deans (potential and in post), and help tailor specific training, development and support for academics who aspire to, or who are in, associate dean roles. It is also hoped that individual participants will benefit from the opportunity to reflect in detail on their experiences of being in the role, which has considerable potential for their personal and professional development. ■

03 Aims and research questions

The aim of this project was to explore how the role of associate dean was defined, perceived and experienced across a range of pre- and post-1992 universities in order to highlight and disseminate models of good practice, identify challenges and make recommendations for improved policy and practice. To achieve these aims, the following research questions were posed:

1. How is the role of associate dean defined and positioned in relation to university leadership structures?

2. What are the circumstances that lead to academics becoming associate deans?

3. How do academics describe and understand their experiences of being an associate dean?

4. How do academics see their position as associate dean influencing their career? ■

04 Theoretical framework

We use a framework based on the interplay between the three related concepts of socialisation, identity and career trajectory, which in turn are underpinned by the theories of structuration (Giddens, 1984); academic identity formation, maintenance and change (Henkel, 2005; Nixon, 1996; Winter, 2009); and internal and external academic career capital (Floyd and Dimmock, 2011). It is hoped that by applying this framework it will give rise to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by policymakers and vice-chancellors in moving academics into key middle manager positions, and that we may be able to better understand the role of associate dean and how it impacts on these three important, inter-related concepts in the life of an academic. ■

05 Methods

To answer our research questions, the study used a two-stage, mixed-methods approach (Bryman, 2008). In doing so, we adopted an embedded mixed-methods design (Cresswell, 2014), where the whole study is framed within a social constructivist framework (Flick, 2006). Underpinning this framework is an understanding that experiences are socially constructed and perceived differently by individuals depending on a range of cultural, historical and situational factors. Specifically, we used an exploratory, sequential mixed-methods design (Cresswell, 2014) where qualitative data are gathered and analysed first, before quantitative data are collected from a larger sample size.

Thus, in stage one, we conducted qualitative research undertaking interviews with 15 associate deans from five different institutions. The original aim was to interview four associate deans from four different universities (two pre- and two post-1992 institutions). However, we were only able to access three participants from each of the two pre-1992 universities chosen in the original sample. Fortunately, we were able to recruit one more participant from another pre-1992 university within the timescales of the project, so ended up with 15 participants overall (seven from pre- and eight from post-1992 institutions). The sample contained male (n=11) and female (n=4) staff with a range of ages, levels of experience and discipline backgrounds. Table 1 shows the interview participants together with the institution type and role focus. To ensure anonymity for respondents, pseudonyms have been used throughout.

Following ethical approval, participants were invited to take part via email. Originally, we wanted to interview a similar number of associate deans in each institution covering a range of topics; however, in the end our sample consisted of those associate deans who agreed to be interviewed. This meant that we interviewed fewer associate deans with responsibility for research than we would have liked. In fact, as can be seen from Table 1, we only managed to recruit two participants with this particular focus and they were both from pre-1992 institutions.

Each participant was interviewed for approximately one hour and interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were based on a semi-structured schedule, linked to our research questions and developed from a literature review, and included questions on each participant's career background, how the role related to their institution's management structures, their experiences of being in the role including opportunities and challenges, and how they perceived the role in relation to their career pathway. The schedule was peer reviewed before use. The interview data collected were analysed using thematic analysis techniques outlined by Lichtman (2010) and Bryman (2008).

Table 1: Interview participants

Pseudonym	Pseudonym	Role focus
Bruce	Post-1992	Strategy and development
Isobel	Post-1992	Quality enhancement
Laura	Post-1992	Student experience
Michael	Post-1992	Student experience
Richard	Post-1992	Quality enhancement
Steven	Post-1992	Student experience
Tony	Post-1992	Operation and performance management
William	Post-1992	Quality enhancement
Alex	Pre-1992	Teaching and learning
Chris	Pre-1992	Teaching and learning
Claire	Pre-1992	Research
David	Pre-1992	Teaching and learning
Peter	Pre-1992	Teaching and learning
Phil	Pre-1992	Research
Whitney	Pre-1992	Teaching and learning

In order to examine whether the findings from stage one were indicative of associate deans' perceptions and experiences in a wider range of universities and to compare and contrast data between pre- and post-1992 institutions, in the second stage of the project we undertook a survey of associate deans using an online questionnaire (SurveyMonkey) which was based on themes and issues emanating from the first stage of the project. The questionnaire was developed and subject to an initial peer review followed by a full piloting exercise involving associate deans in the two researchers' own universities. Subsequently, an invitation and link to the survey were emailed to 472 associate deans across the UK (England, Scotland and Wales only). Participant names were gleaned from websites and phone calls to HR departments.

In total, 172 associate deans completed the survey giving a response rate of 36%, although not all of these respondents answered every question. The results of the survey were analysed and cross-tabulated to compare data from those who were associate deans in pre-1992 universities with those from post-1992 universities. As shown in Figure 1, the survey was completed by 71 female associate deans (42%) and 97 male associate deans (58%) with 101 (59%) coming from pre-1992 universities and 70 (41%) coming from post-1992 universities.

Figure 1: Survey participants by gender and university type

Gender Breakdown

Legend: Pre-1992 University | Post-1992 University

Male: Pre-1992 University 65, Post-1992 University 32
Female: Pre-1992 University 36, Post-1992 University 35

Figure 2: Survey participants by faculty area

Which faculty description best describes where you work?

Physical/natural Sciences: 13 / 8
Life sciences/Medicines: 27 / 8
Humanities: 13 / 3
Social Sciences: 19 / 10
Arts: 5 / 3
Business: 12 / 20

Legend: Pre-1992 University | Post-1992 University

Figure 2 shows that the survey participants came from a range of faculty areas and academic disciplines with 21 (15%) representing physical and natural sciences, 35 (25%) representing life sciences and medicine, 16 (11%) representing humanities, 29 (21%) representing social sciences, eight (6%) representing arts, and 32 (23%) representing business. 141 people completed this question with 31 participants ticking 'other' in response. These participants tended to work in large faculties that had more than one distinct focus, for example, education, arts and business, and arts, humanities and social sciences.

As can be seen in Figure 3, 111 survey respondents (65%) had been in the role between one and five years with 63 (37%) having been in the role between three and five years.

The findings from both stages of the study have been combined and organised thematically, using the study's research questions as headings, and are presented in the Section 6. ■

Figure 3: Length of time in post

How long have you been in your current position?

Less than a year: 28 / 8
1-2 years: 31 / 17
3-5 years: 33 / 30
Over 5 years: 9 / 15

Legend: Pre-1992 University | Post-1992 University

06 Findings

RQ1: How is the role of associate dean defined and positioned in relation to university leadership structures?

Focus and purpose of the role

The interview and survey data suggest that associate deans perform a range of functions within UK universities, each with a particular focus. As shown in Table 1, five of the 16 intervi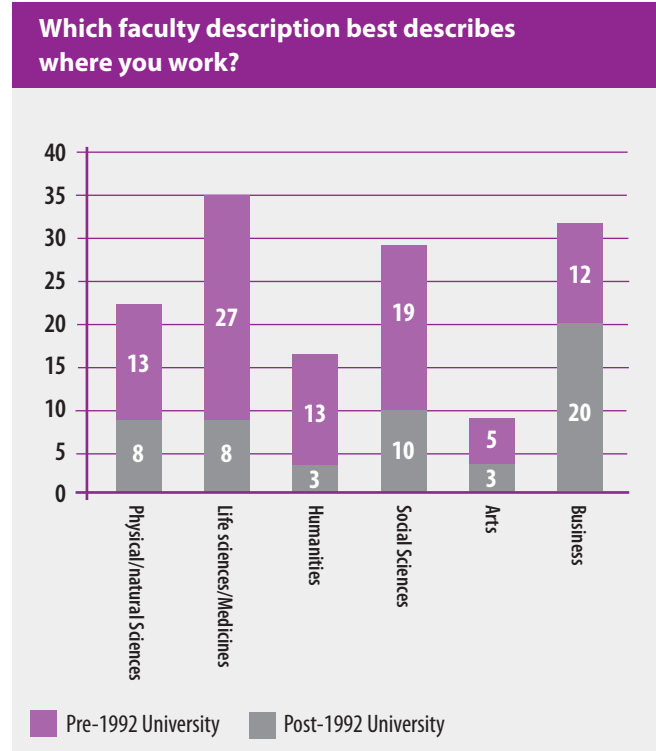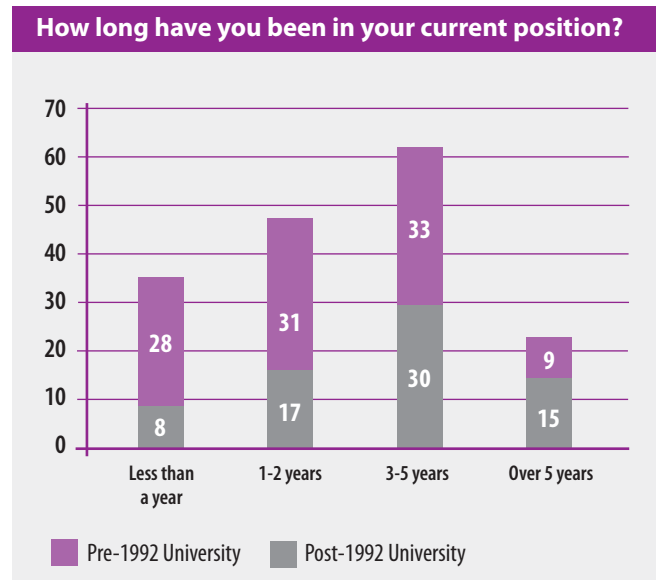ewees were associate deans with responsibility for teaching and learning, three were responsible for quality enhancement, three for student experience, two for research, one for operation and performance management, and one for strategy and development. The majority of survey respondents were associate deans with responsibility for teaching and learning (51%, n=68) while 39 (29%) were associate deans for research, 17 (13%) associate deans for external relations and 10 (8%) associate deans with responsibility for strategy. This detail is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Participants' main focus

What is the main focus of your role as Associate Dean (or equivalent title)?

Pre-1992 University · Post-1992 University
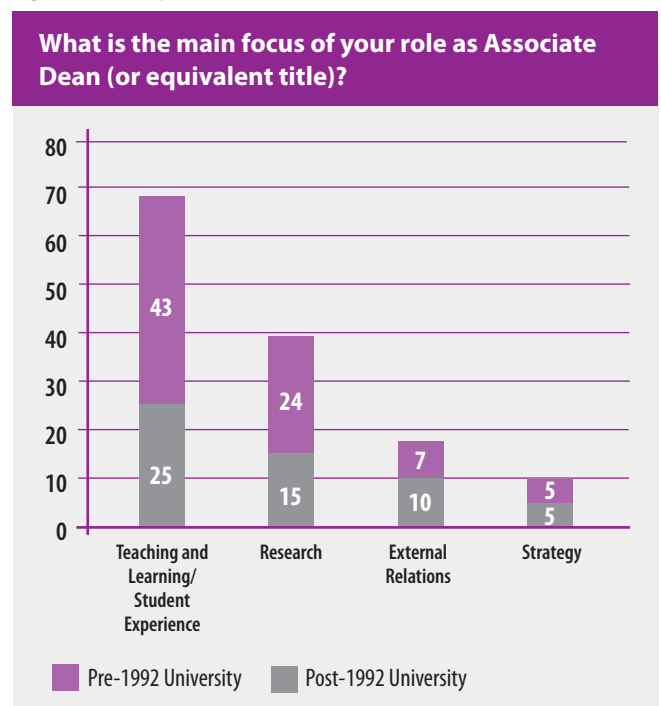
What was clear from the responses to this question, however, was that a number of associate deans had responsibilities that were not easily defined within these umbrella terms, with 42 respondents identifying other areas that they were responsible for including finance and planning, processing systems, postgraduate research, business development, admissions, marketing and recruitment, regulations and policy, student employability, enterprise, internationalisation, infrastructure, and social responsibility. The survey data also suggested that the majority of associate deans work both within their faculty and across the university as a whole. For example, 98 respondents (60%) said that their position was a joint faculty/university role.

In answer to the question, 'to what extent have you been able to define the associate dean role?', the consensus amongst the associate deans interviewed appeared to be that they were given some scope to define what they might do; for example, how they might operationalise strategic demands and projects, but that was within the parameters of what was possible and what actually needed doing, as the following examples show:

Not quite as much [flexibility] as I would like to because I think things are often overtaken by events and I think people ask you this occasionally, 'what are you going to do with the role?'

There's a job description that lays out responsibilities, but I suppose how you define it is as what you give, how you divide up your time between those roles they seem to have equal hierarchy status in [the] job description. And to some extent you're not free to do that, because there are certain things that need doing.

Two respondents commented that perhaps it wasn't so much him-/herself or senior management defining the associate dean role within the faculty but that it was the faculty that defined them – for example one explained:

You're a successful associate dean only insofar as your faculty is successful.

Even if respondents felt they had relatively little scope in defining what the associate dean role might be, there was some room in, as one put it, 'defining how you are going to make that role work'. However, both the definition and actual undertaking of the role were felt to be 'often taken over by events'. It appeared that the role required flexibility and some degree of autonomy from the dean to make decisions if it was to work well.

An interesting theme that emerged from the interview data was a sense that in some cases it was only members of the associate dean group themselves who had a clear sense of what they did: to others, it was not always clear. Indeed, several associate deans felt that their role was not fully understood by their colleagues. One associate dean lamented:

I'm still not sure everybody throughout the university understands what the role is… it's fairly easy to latch onto what a department head is… this other bloke [the assistant dean] does all sorts of different things and if it's not specifically research or teaching, then it must be his fault. And then there's the question, 'what do you do then?'

Other comments in the interviews suggested that the associate dean position may need clarification in some cases and that it was important for an institution to firmly establish, for administrators and other academics, the scope and purpose of the role:

So we often say amongst ourselves that other people outside the role don't understand it.

The dean really has very little concept of what our roles are about, which is a bit tricky for someone who is supposed to be your line manager.

I'm still not sure everybody throughout the university understands what the role is.

I sometimes think the work of a deputy dean often is quite invisible because sometimes you are the instigator, sometimes you are not. You are often not at the delivery end of things so it comes through somebody else but you have shaped it along its path, whatever it is, we have taken an idea through to fruition and you are in the background of somebody doing that rather than demonstrating that you have taken the lead.

Some of these issues were also reflected in the survey data. For example, when survey participants were asked how well-defined the role was within their institutions, 40 (24%) indicated that their role was loosely or not at all well-defined.

Notwithstanding these issues, there was recognition by some associate deans that, collectively, they are quite a powerful group within their institutions; one said:

Certainly, if I was the associate dean not connected with my other associate deans and not tied in with them, then I would have much less power.

Another associate dean said:

Without blowing our own trumpet, we do wield quite a large amount of power. The deans are not around all the time to sort of represent faculties... Really anything, including research and teaching, we can have a say and have some influence over the direction in which it goes.

It is worth noting here that there wasn't a sense from the data that associate deans were motivated by power as such, either in their ongoing roles or in terms of agreeing to take on the role. Rather, it was more a realisation that, together especially, they could direct policy to some degree.

Contracts and remuneration

The interviewees were all on different contracts depending on which type of institution they worked in. For example, the majority of those in post-1992 universities were on permanent contracts and in a promoted senior post with an associated enhanced salary. In contrast, the majority of interviewees in pre-1992 universities were on fixed-term contracts and were receiving some sort of annual allowance. These differences were also reflected in the survey data. As shown in Figure 5, the contractual nature of the role differed both between and within post- and pre-1992 universities, with 50 participants (29%) from post-1992 universities stating that their role was permanent alongside only 16 (9%) from pre-1992 institutions. In contrast, 85 participants (50%) from pre-1992 universities were on a fixed-term contract alongside only 19 (11%) from post-1992 institutions.

Figure 5: Contract type
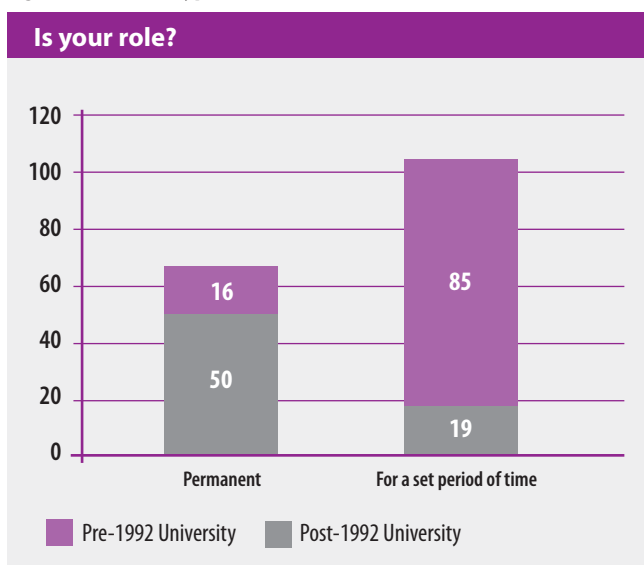
Of those that were on a fixed-term contract, 59 (66%) were on a three-year contract with five (6%) being on a two-year contract, nine (10%) being on a four-year contract and 17 (19%) being on a five-year contract. These results are shown in Figure 6.

As shown in Table 2, there were differences between how associate deans were remunerated for their role, with 19 participants (13%) from pre-1992 universities and 59 (39%) from post-1992 universities being in a paid, promoted senior post. Of those who received an allowance, 14 (9%) received up to £3,000, 38 (25%)

received between £4,000 and £6,000, 11 (7%) receiving between £7,000 and £10,000 and 9 (6%) receiving over £10,000. The latter group were all from pre-1992 universities. From those that had ticked 'other' as an option here, there were 19 associate deans (11%) who did not receive any remuneration for their role. These participants all worked in pre-1992 universities.

Figure 6 : Contract length
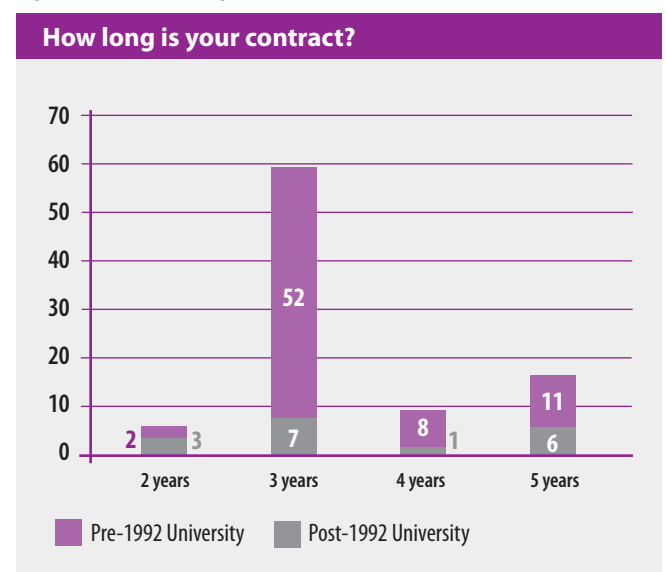
Table 2: Remuneration

How is your role remunerated?				
Answer options	Pre-92	Post-92	%	No.
It is a promoted senior post and is reflected in my normal salary level.	19	59	52.0%	78
I receive an annual allowance of up to £3k per annum (over and above my normal salary).	13	1	9.3%	14
I receive an annual allowance of between £4k and £6k (over and above my normal salary).	33	5	25.3%	38
I receive an annual allowance of between £7k and 10k (over and above my normal salary).	9	2	7.3%	11
I receive an annual allowance of over 10k (over and above my normal salary).	9	0	6.0%	9
Other (please specify)				25
Answered question				**150**

Staff management

The majority of interviewees did not line manage any academic members of staff although most had responsibility for an administrator or administrative team. As set out in Table 3, the majority of those surveyed (58%) also did not manage any academic staff directly. Of those that did, 30 (18%) managed between one and five, 20 (12%) managing between six and 10, four (2%) managing between 11 and 15 and 16 (10%) line managing over 16 academic staff. The majority of those (11) were working in post-1992 universities.

Table 3: Academic staff management

How many academics do you line manage?				
Answer options	Pre-92	Post-92	%	No.
None	67	29	57.8%	96
1-5	15	15	18.1%	30
6-10	10	10	12.0%	20
11-15	1	3	2.4%	4
16+	5	11	9.6%	16
Answered question				**166**

Similar results were found in relation to managing administrative staff, with 100 participants (60%) having no line-management responsibilities over administrative staff. Of those that did, the vast majority (53) were responsible for between one and five staff members. These results are detailed in Table 4.

Table 4: Administration staff management

How many admin staff do you line manage?				
Answer options	Pre-92	Post-92	%	No.
None	66	34	59.9%	100
1-5	27	26	31.7%	53
6-10	2	4	3.6%	6
11-15	1	0	0.6%	1
16+	3	4	4.2%	7
Answered question				**167**

Budgetary management

There were mixed responses as to whether the associate deans interviewed were responsible for a budget, with approximately half the sample saying that they were in charge of one. As shown in Table 5, 105 of the associate deans surveyed (63%) were budget-holders.

Table 5: Budgetary management

Are you a budget-holder?				
Answer options	Pre-92	Post-92	%	No.
Yes	56	49	62.5%	105
No	43	20	37.5%	63
Answered question				**168**

The detail of the amount of budget managed is shown in Figure 7, which shows 60% of respondents managing a budget of £50,000 or over, evenly split between pre- and post-1992 institutions. This finding has implications for the training and development needs for associate deans, as will be discussed in the final section.

Figure 7: Budget details

Figure 7: Budget details — How much is the budget that you have control over?
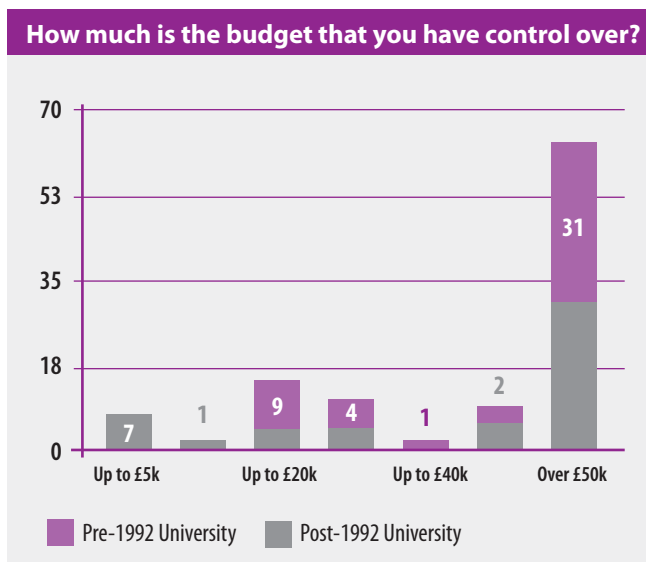
RQ2: What are the circumstances that lead to academics becoming associate deans?

Reasons for taking on the role

From the interviews, there were a variety of reasons given as to why individuals took on the role of associate dean, which tended to fall into four key areas:

l being asked to take the role on by a senior member of staff

l looking for the challenge of working across the university

l wanting to make a difference for staff and students

l developing a specific career path (away from a traditional academic career).

As well as being asked to take on the role by senior leaders, several interviewees were keen to take on a new challenge. For example, one said:

And so I decided to go for it, because I think by then, I'd been here for a very long time, possibly about 10 years at that point. And I wanted something new to do really, different sorts of challenges, and I was also very aware that while my discipline was always very vibrant and interesting and changing and therefore very challenging, that it was a very small sector of higher education… So going into the associate dean role I was aware would give me a broader opportunity.

Another associate dean said that he wanted to make a real difference to as many students as possible:

I think I always, and this sounds trite it really does, but I always put the students at the centre. Their experience is crucial, their experience is for life.

Two interviewees had decided that they would follow a managerial career route as they felt that they were not going to be successful enough as researchers. They said:

Partly what I said before, which is although I am research active I don't really think I can build a stellar career around research, I don't really see myself as a world leader in research. I mean I am known nationally and internationally and I do get invitations to go to conferences and write books and things like that, but I don't actually think I will ever go all the way as a researcher. So if I want to advance my career I need to think about what else I can do.

But then as I mentioned earlier on, sort of managerialism that has crept into higher education I found my niche there, rather than the research angle. So it's been the managerial side, organisation, quality, all those aspects.

The reasons given by survey participants for taking on the role are shown in Table 6 and include 44 from pre-1992 and 19 from post-1992 universities (39% overall) who were asked to take it on by a senior member of staff, 80 (50%) who wanted a more university-wide role, 87 (54%) who wanted a new challenge and 86 (53% in total) who wanted to make a wider impact at their institution. In contrast to the interviews, only one associate dean said that they took up the role to move away from research, with three (2%) saying that wanted to move away from teaching. All these participants were from pre-1992 universities.

In relation to career ambitions, which will be discussed further in Section 6.4, 23 associate deans from pre-1992 institutions and 17 from post-1992 institutions (25% in total) had ambitions for taking on a more senior leadership position in the future.

Table 6: Reasons for taking on the role

Why did you take on the role of associate dean (or equivalent title)? (please tick all that apply)				
Answer options	Pre-92	Post-92	%	No.
I was asked to take it on by a senior member of staff.	44	19	38.9%	63
I wanted a more university-wide role.	48	32	49.4%	80
I wanted a new challenge.	55	32	53.7%	87
I wanted to make a wider impact at the institution.	50	36	53.1%	86
I wanted to move away from research.	1	0	0.6%	1
I wanted to move away from teaching.	3	0	1.9%	3
I have ambitions of taking on a senior leadership position in the future.	23	17	24.7%	40
I wanted to give something back to the institution.	19	11	18.5%	30
Other (please specify)				15
Answered question				**162**

Prior leadership experience

All the interviewees had held prior leadership roles before taking on the position of associate dean. These leadership roles included head of department, director of teaching and learning and director of research. The survey results (Table 7) also showed that the participants had held a variety of previous leadership and management roles including 107 (72%) who had been a programme leader, 67 (45%) who had been a head of department, and 24 (16%) who had been a head of school. Thirty-two (22%) of those surveyed said that they had been a former director of research, with 51 indicating that they had been a director of teaching and learning (34%) and seven (5%) who had been directors of enterprise. Twenty-five (17%) had formerly held a senior leadership position outside the higher education sector. Other former roles held included school director of admissions, director of undergraduate recruitment, director of undergraduate studies, associate head of department, associate head of school, commercial project manager, deputy head of school, director of postgraduate taught programmes, research group head, and one former pro-vice-chancellor.

Table 7: Former leadership and management roles

What leadership and management roles have you held previously (either in this institution or elsewhere)? Please tick all that apply.				
Answer options	Pre-92	Post-92	%	No.
Programme leader	61	46	71.8%	107
Head of department	31	36	45.0%	67
Head of school	9	15	16.1%	24
School/department director of research	18	14	21.5%	32
School/department director of teaching and learning	36	15	34.2%	51
School/department director of enterprise	3	4	4.7%	7
Senior management position in organisation outside HE sector	14	11	16.8%	25
Other (please specify)				31
Answered question				**149**

RQ3: How do academics describe and understand their experiences of being an associate dean?

Training and development

Interviewees had mixed experiences of training and role preparation, with some participants having received no formal preparation before they took the position on, while others had attended a range of leadership and management courses. What was clear from the data was that informal support networks with other associate deans across the university were seen as very important, as one associate dean explained:

Well, we deliberately meet as a group very regularly, but also… there will not be a week passes where I don't meet up with the other associate deans because we're on the same committee, two or three times a week usually… So there's a regular interchange of ideas and we co-author things together and that sort of thing. So that's a great support.

As a group, associate deans seemed to work together and stay together, often working on the same   committees and/or projects and forming a social group where they could meet and discuss work matters. One explained how:

With the group, you have a richer experience, you are testing it out a bit more with a much wider community of the university and you are probably arriving at solutions and proposals that are really going to work well because of all that background. So I would say that they are definitely the people that help most.

One of the universities had instigated regular meetings of associate deans and the members had kept it going. The moral support, sharing of problems and being able to ask someone in the same position what they would do were very important forms of support for associate deans. For example, one said:

Often, in confidence, emails will go around, what are you doing about widening participation? What grade is your learning and teaching co-ordinator at? So, rather than be picked off individually we try to have a cohesive response to things. We also enjoy each other's company and if you don't laugh then you'd cry really, wouldn't you?

The notion of being 'picked off' is interesting and perhaps points to the relatively undefined nature of the role of associate dean (see above). One associate dean said he would advise newcomers to the associate dean role to:

… work with your peers. Don't do it on your own. I think it's absolutely invaluable working with people doing the same role, really, really amazing. Because it can be quite a lonely role, because you're at the top.

Another acknowledged how:

…the deputy deans I know work extremely hard. There are times when we feel on our knees but we've all got the same sort of generic problems and we've got a similar sense of vision, I think, and we all get on really well. We don't agree on all sorts of things but generally we have … it's like a support network, as it were, which has arisen out of the confusion.

From the interview data, there appeared to be a need for a programme of training and support about the role itself, working with others doing the same job, rather than generic management skills. As one participant said by way of advice for someone considering the associate dean role:

As part of it, negotiate an appropriate lengthy programme of staff development, personal staff development, because it is isolating, it is lonely, it is very challenging and so having that I think is very important. And get yourself networked with the others at the same level. If formal networks don't exist within your institution, create them. Get that regular contact with people doing the same job as yourself, some of whom will be more experienced, some of whom will be new like you and find out how they deal with situations and learn from it.

Networking with senior colleagues around the university was also considered by most interviewees to be crucial to success. One associate dean advised:

Exploit the networks that are being presented to you because it's really the only way that you can keep the faculty fully integrated with the university.

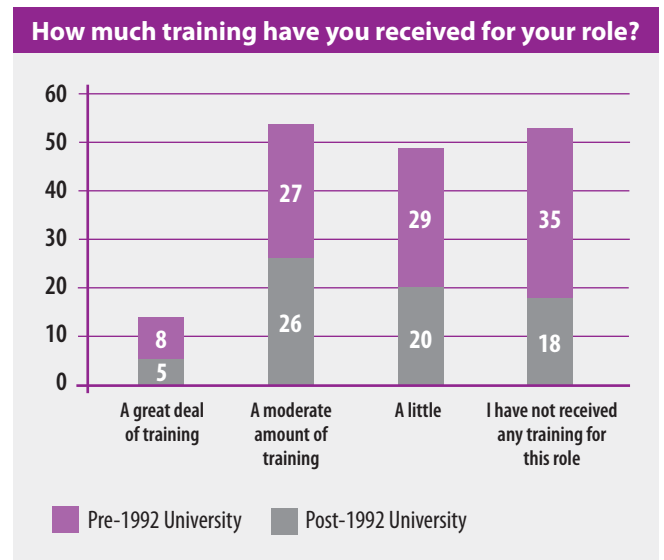One associate dean talked about networking with others from other institutions:

It's the security of knowing that you're not the only one who got a Bunsen burner underneath you. So that sense of a problem and difficulty shared... There is a still a common thread that informs the task to be done... So that sort of forum, preferably face to face, is invaluable. Absolutely invaluable, and it doesn't solve problems but it allows for a more insightful reflection on individual institutional-related problems.

And another said:

Make absolutely the most of staff development opportunities; coaching, leadership development, every aspect… Not just happenstance but a carefully time-lined, properly developed coaching and/or development and there's nothing better than actually mixing with other people from different institutions.

The survey results also showed mixed responses as to whether the associate deans had received training for their role with 102 (60%) saying they had received little or no training for their role. The details of these results are shown in Figure 8 top right.

Figure 8: Role preparation

How much training have you received for your role?

Legend: Pre-1992 University, Post-1992 University

Of those that had received training, 30% had experienced training on budgets, 68% on leading and managing staff, 58% on university procedures, 48% on HR procedures, 66% on strategic leadership, with 18% on time management and 25% on chairing meetings (Table 8). Other role preparation identified included mentoring and coaching, internationalisation-related training, health and safety training, and one associate dean who had been supported by their institution to undertake an MBA.

Table 8: Training focus

What was the focus of the training that you had?				
Answer options	Pre-92	Post-92	%	No.
Budgetary training	13	20	30.0%	33
Leading and managing staff	42	33	68.2%	75
University procedures and systems knowledge	36	28	58.2%	64
HR procedures and knowledge	24	29	48.2%	53
Strategic leadership	40	32	65.5%	72
Time management	10	10	18.2%	20
Chairing meetings	13	14	24.5%	27
Other (please specify)				11
Answered question				**110**

Figure 9 shows how useful the survey participants who had experienced training felt that it was, with 20% perceiving it to be extremely useful, 52% perceiving it to be quite useful, 19% perceiving that it was only moderately useful and 10% feeling that it was of little or no use.

Figure 9 : Usefulness of training
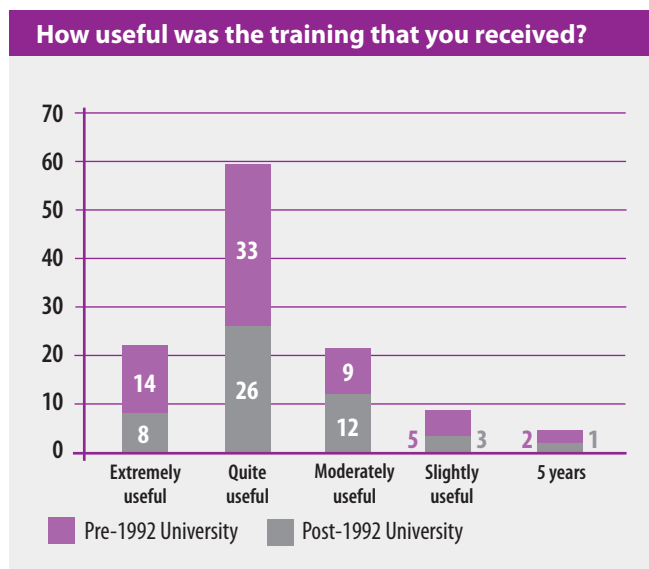
When asked what training would help them in their role, the most popular choice that associate deans identified with was that of strategic leadership, with 45 in pre-1992 universities and 32 in post-1992 universities (51% overall) ticking this option. Other popular choices were coaching and mentoring (32%), working across different academic disciplines (32%), budgetary training (25%), university procedures and systems knowledge training (24%), and

leading and managing staff (23%). These results are shown in Table 9. Other needs identified included learning how to influence without having any power, networking with associate deans elsewhere in the sector, attending update meetings (on a national basis) to determine national trends in UK higher education, and project management. Seventeen associate deans in pre-1992 sector and four in the post-1992 sector (14% in total) stated that they did not need any training with one adding:

Most 'leadership' training in higher education creates drones who are not able to think outside of the box.

And another who said:

I am sceptical about training in these domains – I am leading an academic mission, it is a particular nuance that is distinct from general management and I believe we don't have enough of this nuance in universities.

Table 9: Training needs

What training would help you in your role?				
Answer options	Pre-92	Post-92	%	No.
Budgetary training	14	24	25.0%	38
Leading and managing staff	19	16	23.0%	35
University procedures and systems knowledge	25	11	23.7%	36
HR procedures and knowledge	15	12	17.8%	27
Strategic leadership	45	32	50.7%	77
Time management	17	5	14.5%	22
Chairing meetings	17	6	15.1%	23
Working across different academic disciplines	28	20	31.6%	48
Coaching and mentoring	25	23	31.6%	48
I don't need training	17	4	13.8%	21
Other (please specify)				24
Answered question				**152**

The implications of these findings are discussed in Section 7.

Enjoyable aspects of the associate dean role

When asked what aspects of the associate dean role they found to be the most enjoyable, the two main themes from the interviews were, firstly, working with other people and, secondly, being involved in university projects. One interviewee said:

I mean, I am very much a people person, before you came in I had a one-to-one with one of my direct reports and it was about helping her through some staffing issues… and it is just being that sounding board, not giving a solution but helping people reach a solution and just being a bit of a sounding board about what we are going to do. I like that, I think I am experienced enough now to have been through most of these things myself at one point or other in my career so that is what I like.

Working with different (academic and administrative) colleagues in lots of different areas was often cited as being very satisfying and interesting by interviewees. Helping people, being able to advise and putting things into motion were also often mentioned. The enjoyment came from working with individuals and being involved in projects and communications within their own faculty and across other faculties, and being on committees and working groups set up by PVCs. Generally, associate deans

felt there were a lot of meetings within the role and that email inboxes were full and the 'torrent of requests' high. One said:

On good days just the exhilarating process of going from meeting to meeting and talking in one meeting about a particular topic to do with internationalisation and the next thing about student representation, it is going from topic to topic and just the variety is fantastic, I really enjoy that. The bad days of course is when your diary is so crammed and you go back to your desk in the evening and there are 50 unanswered emails and a backlog of work, that is pretty grim sometimes.

The fact that many associate deans did feel that they were helping people and/or 'making a difference' was a consistent answer to what the most enjoyable part of the role was. Two associate deans also mentioned students and graduation ceremonies as highlights of their work; one made the point that 'these students pay our salaries'.

We were struck by the degree to which associate deans seemed to have the opportunity to get involved in university projects, as previous research undertaken in a pre-1992 university by one of the authors had found that associate deans felt frustrated because they perceived they were stuck at an operational level when their motivation to become involved was to have a say in decision-making and strategic thinking at the wider university, strategic level (Preston and Price, 2012). In contrast, the majority of associate deans interviewed in this study appreciated that this aspect of their work gave them a greater understanding of the university as a whole.

For example, one said:

I really like, in terms of benefit to the individual and to the institution, this opportunity to work with others from other faculties.

And another:

I quite enjoy the formal committee stuff – we are discussing quite major university initiatives that are going to impact on 20,000 people so that is very satisfying.

Three interviewees in one of the post-1992 institutions had felt they had not been allowed to get involved at a strategic level as much as they would have liked. When this had happened, one interviewee described how they had found it both enjoyable and beneficial:

It didn't happen very often but when we were included in some strategic work it was good. I think when we were discussing, for example, one of the strategic themes for student experience – actually we could make a significant contribution to that because we were closer to the student experience than anybody else in the room because most of us still had some teaching responsibilities or student groups and things we were taking through.

Being involved in university projects was cited by almost all respondents as being one of the enjoyable parts of the job and also the most beneficial in terms of developing knowledge and understanding of higher education 'as a business'. One associate dean described it as follows:

The most enjoyable aspects? Hmmm, well, for me personally I like the big-picture stuff. I like to see how things are joining up and making an attempt to help them join up. So I like the strategic aspect of it at university level.

Another said:

I also enjoy the sense that I can advise and help people come to a decision, because my role is so broad I can see a wider range of implications for decisions.

To be involved in decisions that affected the university as a whole business and 'impacting on thousands of people' was felt by many to be very satisfying. One said:

I get to see the macrocosm, the whole context of the business of higher education.

Another said the most enjoyable part of their role was:

Being successful. Not personally successful, but seeing that the faculty is being successful, and the students in the faculty. Because it's kind of success on success, and I've learnt once

you can get on a roll, there's almost nothing stopping you, so that's really amazing.

Several interviewees mentioned how they had realised how limited their previous knowledge had been of what senior management in the university did, what major decisions were made and how many people – staff and students – it affected. One associate dean commented:

… there is a bewildering amount of activity that takes place at management level which is probably a level above where I am among the university executive board and their acolytes. It is quite extraordinary. I mean if you go to the university board for teaching and learning, which I do every month, the amount of business that goes through is just breath-taking… So yeah, actually I am impressed with the job that I see people doing on the whole, I think the single biggest management issue that I can see for universities has to do with the size of the organisation. How can somebody at or near the top make a decision that will affect people on the ground when they don't really understand what is going on at the ground. And how do you keep the lines of communication open? It is a really hard balancing act.

Three of our interviewees felt strongly that it was important that the associate dean role was rotated in order to give other people the opportunity for personal and professional development by gaining this wider insight into how a university operates. One said:

I think in some ways the more people that get the opportunity to move in and out of these roles the better because there are probably too many people at the moment in the departments who can only see the narrow view. I don't mean that in an unkind way, they have genuine concerns about things and do they complain quite a lot, often to me in fact. But that sense of perspective is immensely valuable, so actually I am quite old-fashioned about this and I think being able to rotate the role is a good thing.

Many acknowledged that the higher education landscape had completely changed in recent years. One associate dean explained how doing the role had:

… helped me a lot put into context the business of higher education and particularly at a time with the markets being so turbulent and the problems of student recruitment.

Another felt that their colleagues didn't always appreciate the broader picture:
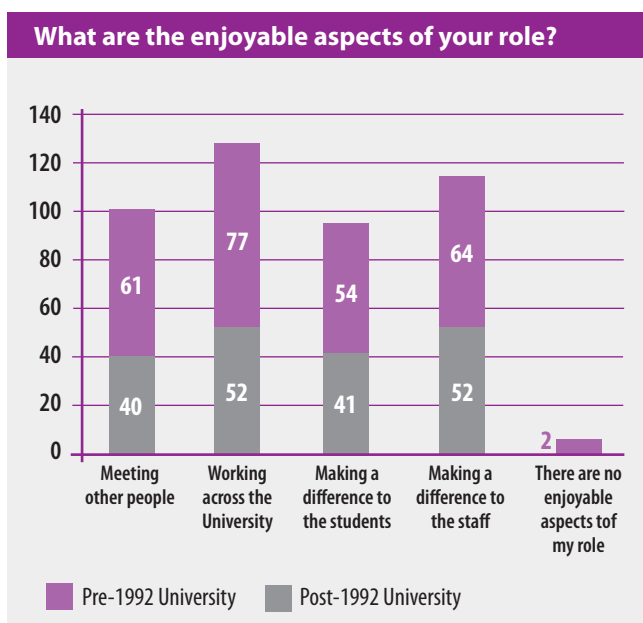
And we have diehard people here who say, 'this is over-managerialistic, we don't need people like you in your role. It was perfectly good when we used to have professors running all this sort of thing and everything operated really smoothly

then'. And that might have been the case. I would hold that the environment has changed and I know it's not very palatable in some institutions, including this one, to say that I do think because of the environment we're operating in, you do need professional managers in to help run it. I mean in our case, it's knocking on for a £20 million business in a £150 million university. That's big money we're talking about. It's not something that you could look after as a sort of hobby when you've spent the day teaching and researching and doing all those other things that you're expected to do to try and run an enterprise this size.

The sheer variety of the role was also a consistent answer to our question about the most enjoyable aspect from interviewees. Working with 'interesting and diverse colleagues', 'helping them reach a solution' and 'working with people to try and bring about change' were all mentioned.

When asked what the enjoyable aspects of the role were, 101 (64%) respondents said meeting other people, 129 (81%) said working across the university, 95 (60%) said making a difference to students and 116 (73%) said making a difference to staff. Rather worryingly, two associate deans from pre-1992 universities and one from a post-1992 university said that there were no enjoyable aspects of their role! These results are shown in Figure 10. Other enjoyable aspects identified through the survey included strategic thinking and developing strategy, working with people outside the university, working with external organisations and other HEIs, and international travel and working.

Figure 10: Enjoyable aspects of the role of associate dean

What are the enjoyable aspects of your role?

Pre-1992 University, Post-1992 University

Category	Pre-1992	Post-1992
Meeting other people	61	40
Working across the University	77	52
Making a difference to the students	54	41
Making a difference to the staff	64	52
There are no enjoyable aspects tof my role	2	

Challenging aspects of the associate dean role

It was clear from all our interviewees that the associate dean role was an extremely busy one. The variety and breath of the role, which many found to be enjoyable, were also acknowledged by many to be, at the same time, the most stressful. Associate dean roles were often felt to take up more time than had been anticipated with multiple demands, often out-of-hours working and catching up and, regrettably for most, this meant that they had lost touch with their previous teaching and/ or research activities as academics. One representative comment was:

I mean time is one of the key challenges I think in terms of managing it effectively, not working all hours, not knowing when to stop. There are some challenging people to work with as well… I think then there are the broader challenges, the pressures on recruitment at the moment and that type of thing.

Another said:

I would say probably 95 per cent of what I do is as associate dean and the other five per cent is as a subject academic… This is a tension for associate dean of student experience because you have got to keep abreast [of] what has been written about learning and teaching and what is happening nationally.

Similarly, two interviewees' advice to others thinking of taking on an associate dean role was about:

… having very modest expectations of myself in terms of publications. And forcing myself to do it.

And:

If you are research active and are thinking of becoming an associate dean… it is not a job to take on, as I actually did, when you are in the middle of a large project.

Some associate deans were exclusively working as an associate dean (mainly in post-1992 institutions), while others were meant to still retain teaching and research responsibilities. However, most respondents felt that the associate dean role always took more time than the formal allocations given to the role which meant that they lost touch with these activities. One associate dean said:

Until I felt I was on top of this role, I'd be compromising the teaching because I wouldn't be able to put enough into it. But I can see that it's dangerous because it pulls me further away from grass-roots experience.

Working across the university and with many different colleagues, another often cited enjoyable aspect, was also seen as one of the most challenging. One associate dean explained:

It's probably back to this thing about the interface, it's not the interface between the dean, me and the internal staff and that has some challenge… the most challenging is the interface between the school as a unit, or the faculty, whatever you want to call it, the college, and the university. And being bounced between either individuals and other support administrative departments.

Several interviewees referred to another aspect of their role which was also challenging: having to make unpopular and/or difficult decisions. One said:

But you're never going to come up with solutions or strategic kind of directions, not directions, but initiatives that everybody loves. And that's quite a hard lesson, because everybody likes to be liked, and you feel, in a strategic management position having run university-wide projects, you know you've done your best and you know what you're proposing is arguably the best solution. And then people… you'll always get kicked down, and that's hard. And the art is, how do you persuade people that it's worth them buying into something, even if it's not what they want, because it's for the greater good? … that's such a hard thing to do, really difficult to deal with.

The biggest challenges identified from the survey data were keeping research going (71%) and leading and managing people (51%). Trying to keep teaching going was also a major issue for 32% of respondents. These results are shown in detail in Table 10. Other challenging aspects identified included having responsibility without authority and leading by influence rather than having line-management power, the changing nature of the role, managing all other aspects of the role, dealing with systems to the exclusion of supporting staff and dealing with poor systems, dealing with external contracts, not being able to give as much support to students as in the past, dealing with an ever-increasing number of student complaints and academic appeals, dealing with the conflicts between compliance with quality assurance processes, dealing with the pressures to develop new and existing programmes to respond to the market, leading others who don't want to be led, and being micro-managed by members of the university's senior management team.

Table 10: Challenging aspects of the role

XXXXXX				
Answer options	Pre-92	Post-92	%	No.
Budgetary management	6	7	8.3%	13
Leading and managing people	52	29	51.6%	81
Programme management	13	5	11.5%	18
Time management	41	18	37.6%	59
Working with the dean (or equivalent role)	24	17	26.1%	41
University procedures and systems knowledge	34	21	35.0%	55
HR procedures and knowledge	9	10	12.1%	19
Chairing meetings	11	3	8.9%	14
Working across different academic disciplines	21	15	22.9%	36
Keeping my research going	76	36	71.3%	112
Keeping my teaching going	30	20	31.8%	50
Other (please specify)				33
Answered question				**157**

RQ4: How do academics see their position as associate dean influencing their career?

From the interviews, there were a range of responses to the question of 'what next?' in relation to participants' careers and how being an associate dean had influenced these decisions. Several talked about the fact that there was not a clearly defined career path for the role. For example, one said:

That's a question that people often ask associate deans, and it'll be interesting what your research turns up about that, because it's very unclear what the career trajectory is from the role.

For those participants who were on a fixed-term contract and expected to return to their departments, several commented that returning to being a 'normal' academic would be 'very difficult' because they had not kept up with their research or teaching. They also mentioned that it would be potentially problematic to return to 'the ranks' having made some difficult decisions in their role as associate dean. As one said:

I suppose when I accepted the king's shilling and took this role, as indeed any of my other colleagues on the executive did, there is this sort of snakes and ladders thing where you might find yourself back as a senior lecturer in the classroom.

Another commented:

The next move is either up or out really, because I think I'm so far divorced from teaching and research now, it would be unfair to say to colleagues, 'just absorb me back into the department as a principle lecturer'. It would take me three years to get back up to speed again... So I think that's where you find yourself.

One interviewee highlighted how important it was to think in career terms beyond the tenure of the role:

… the most crucial thing is to work out what you're not going to do for that period and the implications of that for when you stop being associate dean.

Another offered similar advice to anyone thinking of taking on the role:

I would say to them that there is this huge black hole at the end of the time when you might stop being an associate dean and I don't know anybody who feels like they've done that right, exiting and going on to something else. So keep your options open.

In contrast, of those who were in full-time promoted posts, several talked about applying for promotion. However, there was a feeling from some that applying for a dean's role (arguably the most logical step) would be hard because they felt that they did not have enough financial experience. For example, one associate dean commented:

Well it's interesting. I mean, the problem with applying for a dean's role is it's hard to demonstrate you've had financial responsibility and control. So I think you would probably be a bit pushed to get one.

Another said that applying for a pro-vice-chancellor role may be more appropriate:

If you'd asked me three years ago I'd have said I expect to be a dean. I'm now not convinced that that is the right post for me. I think [laughter] given that this is a dean's job more or less in not quite the name, I'm not sure that an appropriate next step would be moving into a job that is labelled dean just for the sake of maybe a few percentage points in salary… I think in the right institution it's possible that I could be a pro-vice-chancellor or equivalent role in a small institution, again that deputising role to the leader may be a better fit for my skills and my personality but it would have to be… right – it would probably need to be a relatively small institution for me to stand a chance of that, but I think ultimately that's probably the most likely.

Finally, some of those interviewed talked about staying in the role. For one, this would allow them to consolidate their personal and professional life:

I think it depends on you personally and your drive and what your drive is. You know I thought about using it as an opportunity to prepare myself for going for a PVC role… But I thought, well I have to look at my life… and I thought given two small children, not actually that old yet, actually that's rushing it. I thought I'm content to stay where I am, do things that I'm interested in doing, in the role, making the difference in the role and trying to balance my family life alongside that.

Another felt that they were not much of a career person and were quite happy to stay where they were for the moment:

I'm not very good at career planning. I tend to go with the opportunities that come my way. But I'm very much not a career person, you know I don't have a goal in mind, some people do… but I don't. I don't feel that I have to get to a certain point to feel successful, as long as I'm enjoying what I do on a day-to-day basis then I'm happy.

Survey respondents identified a range of career plans within the next five years (Table 11). Twenty-seven associate deans (18%) are hoping to remain in their current post, 16 (17%) are seeking a higher leadership and management post in their current institution, 27 (18%) are seeking a higher leadership and management post in a different institution, 27 from pre-1992 universities and four from post-1992 universities (20% in total) are hoping to return to their previous academic role, 17 (11%) are planning to retire and 19 (13%) are undecided. Other plans included taking a year's sabbatical and applying for promotion to chair.

The implications of these results will be discussed in Section 7.

Table 11: Career plans

What are your career plans within the next five years?				
Answer options	Pre-92	Post-92	%	No.
Remain in my current post	15	12	17.8%	27
Seek a higher leadership and management post in my current institution	15	11	17.1%	26
Seek a higher leadership and management post in a different institution	10	17	17.8%	27
Return to my previous academic role	27	4	20.4%	31
Seek another role within higher education	3	0	2.0%	3
Retire	6	11	11.2%	17
Leave higher education for another profession	1	1	1.3%	2
Undecided	12	7	12.5%	19
Other (please specify)				13
Answered question				**152**

07 Conclusions and recommendations

The aim of this project was to explore how the role of associate dean was defined, perceived and experienced across a range of pre- and post-1992 universities in order to highlight and disseminate models of good practice, identify challenges, and make recommendations for improved policy and practice. In line with these aims, we have identified six main recommendations from our study about the role and experiences of associate deans; we list and expand on these below.

Recommendation 1: The associate dean role needs to be clearly defined. Our data suggests that the role of associate dean is not clearly defined across all faculties and universities and this could be problematic for the sector's future success. As an important senior role in the leadership and management of universities, the associate dean can make significant, positive contributions to teaching and learning, research and external engagement activities. Therefore, our recommendation would be to establish a clearer definition of the associate dean role within HEIs so that everyone (including senior leaders and administrative staff) is clear about what and how associate deans can contribute successfully to different areas across the university.

Recommendation 2: Associate deans need other associate deans. One of the most powerful forms of support and development cited by associate deans in this study is that of other associate deans within their own institutions and also from other universities. In terms of the advice they would give to others taking up the role, nearly all respondents mentioned the importance of finding others in the same position, to get moral support but also to be able to compare experiences, share problems and find out what they have done or do in similar situations.

In short, our recommendations in this area are to:

I formalise the creation of the group of associate deans across the institution

I try and tie this to a network of associate deans at other institutions so that comparisons can be made regarding developments in the sector both in terms of general and specific problems

I ensure that any development activity based on associate deans working together also has an element of continuity, a social group and/or network to draw on and communication afterwards. This is very important in terms of moral support and coping with the job, both in terms of understanding the job and dealing with its breath and complexity and also to propagate good and consistent practice regarding change across the sector.

Recommendation 3: Associate deans need training and development support focused specifically on their roles, which includes the participation of other associate deans. The support of other associate deans on a day-to-day basis is crucial, but another recommendation from this study is that any training and development provided for associate deans should include others from other parts of the higher education sector to allow key issues to be compared and contrasted. There also appears to be a need for a programme of training about the role itself, rather than solely generic leadership and management skills, and with the participation of others doing the same job.

Our additional conclusions with regard to training and development would be to:

I acknowledge that the move to an associate dean role involves learning and using a whole new set of competencies. At best, it requires an involvement in, and knowledge of, not only one's own university but of the higher education sector in general and the changes within it. As reported earlier, the majority of our survey respondents (51%) identified the need for training in strategic leadership

I provide training for associate deans before taking on the role, which should help them to understand more about what the role entails, particularly from other current or previous incumbents

I promote the individual and organisational benefits of taking on the role and find practical ways of supporting individuals doing the job

I give appropriate financial training, guidance and support for associate deans who are going to manage large budgets (60% of participants in this survey who were budget-holders were responsible for more than £50,000)

I give appropriate training, guidance and support for associate deans who are going to be managing staff (both academic and administrative). It should not be assumed that just because an associate dean has held a previous leadership and management position in the past, they will be automatically successful in this role (52% of survey respondents cited leading and managing people as one of their major challenges).

Importantly, it must always be remembered that any training and development programme should be individually tailored to each person, as people come to the role from a range of backgrounds and with a range of experiences as an academic, leader and/or manger.

Recommendation 4: Associate deans need the opportunity (if desired) to remain connected to teaching and/or research. Whether this is as a promise of study leave or a proportion of the workload allowance, it seems that across the board associate deans:

I lament losing touch with these activities

I almost never find the time in their busy associate dean roles to remain involved

I feel that they cannot undertake these additional roles properly and are letting colleagues down

I know that losing touch with these areas will have a negative impact on their long-term career

I enjoy teaching and/or research; it is usually the role they have come from and the reason why they entered higher education in the first place

I recognise that the students are extremely important and a major part of what they are doing in their roles as associate deans

I enjoy working with research students.

As outlined earlier in this report, 71% of our survey respondents said that keeping research going was the most challenging aspects of their role, with 32% citing keeping teaching going. However, despite losing touch with these roles, many respondents in the survey were satisfied in that they felt they were 'making a difference' to students (95 respondents). Associate deans are experienced academics who have the teaching and/or research background to bring credibility and experience to the role. In defining the associate dean role, it would seem that thought should be given as to how to get the best contribution from individuals as leaders and managers but also, if appropriate, maintaining a contribution from them as teachers and/or researchers and allowing at least some time for that. Perhaps the introduction of deputy associate deans (see below) and a clear demarcation of responsibilities – limiting line management and appraisal responsibilities, for example – might be helpful in this respect.

Recommendation 5: Associate deans need a clearer career path. From our data, it appears that the career path of the associate dean is not too clear at many universities, especially for those who take on the post temporarily, and this may deter talented people from taking on the role in the future. We suggest that institutions need to recognise the breadth of the role and find innovative ways of allowing associate deans (who want to) to maintain a small role in other activities so that their transition back into an academic role is easier.

There also appears to be a need to create a clearer career path for successful leaders and managers within universities so that the time and learning gained in the associate dean role are recognised and counted as invaluable contributions to the faculty and institution as a whole. It seems important to recognise that undertaking a term as an associate dean for an academic can be, at best, a very positive learning and development opportunity. Better planning and definition of the role and more thought as to how to socialise and exit individuals into and out of associate dean roles appear to be needed here. The insight into wider university policies and the business of higher education that the role brings is considered invaluable, and so finding ways of formally capturing this experience and feeding this learning back into the faculty is important.

Finally, we also suggest that, given the importance of the role, people who take it on are rewarded appropriately and that any fixed-term appointment has a clear job description and timescale.

Recommendation 6: Deputy associate deans need to be introduced or, at least, there needs to be some form of succession planning. The data shows that 61% of the associate deans surveyed were on some sort of temporary or fixed-term contract for the role, with 20% expecting to return to their academic roles within the department and 35% aspiring to move onto higher level management roles within their own or other universities. In this context, it seems sensible to have in place not only a clear programme of training and induction so that associate deans can get into their new roles relatively swiftly, but also to have some sort of succession planning. This could be done in the form of appointing deputy associate deans who could be involved in some aspects of the associate dean's work, perhaps lessening some of the workload. As it may become more difficult to motivate academics to step into associate dean positions, given the current higher education climate, framing it as a positive – seeing the role as forming part of a clear career or development plan – could incentivise people. Academics could gain insight into the role as deputies and then be in a position to know whether they would want to carry on or whether (for them or the institution) this would not be a good idea.

Having a deputy associate dean role might also go some way towards addressing the isolation of the job felt by the individuals in the role. Furthermore, it might also help engender trust from other colleagues who, not always knowing exactly what the role entails, see associate deans as just another member of the senior management team rather than – what it is at best – a crucial link between academics, senior managers and administrators. ■

Final thoughts…

During our data collection, we asked all our participants to outline what advice they would give someone who was about to take on the role of associate dean. To conclude this report, we include some of these comments here. We hope that these may offer some words of encouragement to those who are thinking about taking on this crucial role, as well as helping to highlight some of the real challenges the role will bring, especially in the early days and months of tenure.

I think what you do have to be able to do is to be able to juggle a lot of things at once. There are a lot of balls to keep in the air. So that's quite important. Number two I think is … don't panic. And that's quite serious, because I think the scope of the operation is very large.

I would say, 'Expect hard work'. I advise you that if you concentrate on this, expect it to be hard work. You know sort of physically, intellectually, all those sorts of things. I advise you to take a long view; there will be bad days, bad weeks, and maybe bad months. But try and take a long view of things.

In the past, if something came down from on top and people didn't like it, I'd just say 'well it's not me, it's them', but now I've found that I am part of them and can't blame them anymore! And I've now realised that when you're making high-level decisions about policy direction or regulation you can't please everybody… But you give it your best judgement. And often that's compromised.

The first year was particularly difficult and I suspect that, like many others, I was working very, very long hours because I still had big research grants, lots of research students… The second year got to be a little bit better in that I'd made some structural changes and had started on certain initiatives and ultimately I concluded that in order to have any life outside work, something had to give.

My general advice to people who I think will be good at it and will enjoy it, is why not apply? It is a great thing to be able to do.

Clear your decks first.

Build up a strong research pipeline beforehand.

Think carefully about why you want to do it, and the impact it will have on your personal research time.

Re-imagine the role in a way that works for you. Keep teaching and researching as that's where your credibility comes from. And make good allegiances with your counterparts both in faculty and across the university. Think carefully about how to manage and stick to your values [and] principles.

Be reflective, see the big picture, support colleagues and know your areas of strength and weakness.

Check out what the actual role is – don't rely on the job description.

Have access to a coach [or] mentor (other than the dean) as this has proved extremely valuable to me.

Listen and take people with you.

This is a role with huge responsibility, but no authority. Try to focus on one or two key activities [or] outcomes rather than spreading yourself too thinly.

You have lots of responsibility but no power (or admin support!), so you can only achieve what is expected by winning friends and influencing people.

A lot of people are going to expect you to do a lot of things, only a few of which are what you thought you'd be expected to do! Try to work out what are really associate dean roles and only do those (but this is much easier said than done!).

Talk to existing associate deans, be prepared to be solving fairly significant problems every week and get to know as many of the people in the school and wider university as possible.

Be aware that the demands can be great and that means it becomes hard to do things properly. Core functional roles are very hard to fulfil.

Do it if you believe you can effect change and move the institution beyond the bureaucratic nonsense common across the UK higher education sector. Do it if you want to generally make the lives of your academic colleagues better and the university a better place for them to work.

Go for it! Enjoy the crossover from research, learning and teaching to leading and managing research, learning and teaching. ■

08 Dissemination and outputs

- Floyd, A. and Preston, D. (2014). Doing some good? Exploring the role of Associate Dean in UK Universities. Paper presented at the British Educational Leadership Management and Administration Society Annual Conference, Stratford-upon-Avon, 11–13 July.

- Floyd, A. and Preston, D. (2013). Exploring the role of Associate Dean in UK Universities – Initial Findings. Paper presented at the Society for Research into Higher Education Annual Conference, Celtic Manor Resort, Wales, 11–13 December.

- Floyd, A. and Preston, D. (forthcoming). Exploring the role of Associate Dean in UK Universities – End of Project Findings. Paper submitted to the Society for Research into Higher Education Annual Conference, Celtic Manor Resort, Wales, December 2014.

- Floyd, A. and Preston, D. (forthcoming). Exploring the role of Associate Deans in UK Universities – End of Project Report. London, Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.

- Dissemination will also take place at the Open University and the University of Reading in the form of two seminar events.

- It is planned that three academic articles will be submitted to international peer-reviewed journals in due course. ■

References

Bolden, R. J., Gosling, J., O'Brien, A., Peters, K., Ryan, M. and Haslam, A. (2012). Academic leadership: Changing conceptions, identities and experiences in UK higher education. London, Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.

Bosetti, L. and Walker, K. (2010). Perspectives of UK vice-chancellors on leading universities in a knowledge-based economy. Higher Education Quarterly 64(1): 4–21.

Bryman, A. (2008). Social research methods. (3rd ed). Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Bryman, A. (2009). Effective leadership in higher education. London, Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.

Cresswell, J. (2014). Research design. (4th ed). London, Sage.

Deem, R., Hillyard, S. and Reed, M. (2007). Knowledge, higher education, and the new managerialism : The changing management of UK universities. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Flick, U. (2006). An introduction to qualitative research. (3rd ed). London, Sage.

Floyd, A. (2012). 'Turning points': The personal and professional circumstances that lead academics to become middle managers. Educational Management Administration and Leadership 40(2): 272–84.

Floyd, A. (2013). Narrative of academics who become department heads in a UK university, in Gornall, L., Cook, C., Daunton, L., Salisbury, J. and Thomas, B. (eds), Academic working lives: Experience, practice and change pp86-93. London, Bloomsbury.

Floyd, A. and Dimmock, C. (2011). 'Jugglers', 'copers' and 'strugglers': Academics' perceptions of being a HoD in a post-1992 UK university and how it influences their future careers. Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management 33(4): 387–99.

Giddens, A. (1984). The constitution of society. Cambridge, Polity Press.

Harvey, M., Shaw, J.B., Mcphail, R. and Erickson, A. (2013). The selection of a dean in an academic environment: Are we getting what we deserve? International Journal of Educational Management 27(1): 19–37.

Henkel, M. (2005). Academic identity and autonomy in a changing policy environment. Higher Education 49(1–2):155–76.

Nixon, J. (1996). Professional identity and the restructuring of higher education. Studies in Higher Education 21(1):5–15.

Pollit, C. (1995). Justification by works or by faith? Evaluating the new public management Evaluation 1(2): 133–54.

Preston, D. and Price. D. (2012). 'I see it as a phase: I don't see it as the future': Academics as managers in a UK university. Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management 34(4):409–19.

Winter, R. (2009). Academic manager or managed academic? Academic identity schisms in higher education. Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management 31(2):121–31.

Notes

Dr Alan Floyd, **University of Reading** Dr Diane Preston, **Open University**

Contact us at

info@lfhe.ac.uk

or connect with us

@LFHEMarketing

LFFacebook

LFHELinkedIn

www.lfhe.ac.uk

Inspiring Leadership

Leadership Foundation
for Higher Education