

## Becoming a leader in higher education as an identity project

### Introduction

There has been an “emerging interest in leadership” in higher education over the past decade or more (O'Mullane, 2011), as there has been in other sectors of education and public services (Currie and Lockett, 2011). Such interest is likely to increase under emerging conditions under which higher education will exist in the foreseeable future. However, interest in leadership in higher education is often framed in terms of senior management personnel. This reflects the tendency in the field of management and organisation studies, where the study of leadership is mainly conceptualised in terms of formal management and supervisory roles. In contrast, the focus has shifted more recently to examine leadership more broadly, in processual terms of mutual influence within a social system, often separate from any formal role or hierarchical structure (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). This would seem to connect more with the pattern in higher education for various leadership roles to be allocated across teams, at departmental, subject group or programme levels.

The emphasis in leadership studies, and on organisational efforts to ensure effective leadership, has typically focussed on issues of the purported qualities, attributes and competencies deemed to be required by leaders and the practices and/ or styles of leadership in which they engage. Less attention has been paid to issues relating to the processes by which individuals selected for leadership positions make sense of their initial transitional experiences (Parker and Lewis, 1981, Wood and Borga, 2010, DeRue and Ashford, 2010). Moreover, leadership is both an organisational/ institutional and an interpersonal/ interactional phenomenon (Morley and Hosking, 2003). Any newly-appointed leader must seek to gain acceptance as such by those amongst whom they are required to exercise leadership: leadership can only exist where there is followership (Collinson, 2005).

Yet little is known about this process of ‘becoming a leader’ in higher education, how those moving into such positions view their own rationales or motivations for doing so, how they seek to gain acceptance as leader and their understanding of the process as they experience it. This paper will argue that an *identity* perspective affords useful insights into such process of ‘becoming a leader’. The paper will present findings from a small-scale study of individuals in leadership positions in higher education, concerned with the process of ‘becoming a leader’ as they experienced it.

### Identity and leadership

The term ‘identity’ is deployed with a diverse, rather fragmented, range of conceptualisations within differing fields of social enquiry (Wetherell and Mohanty, 2010). This discussion will be limited to an identity perspective which draws upon a well-established body of social theory and research that seeks to explore the processes that emerge through social interactions within institutional settings (Jenkins, 1996).

Interactionist approaches to the conceptualisation of identity purposefully avoid privileging *either* the personal/ private *or* the social/ public. As Jenkins (1996) puts it, the model is that of “the internal-external dialectic of identification as the process whereby all identities - individual and collective - are constituted”. This requires attention to be paid to the interaction between social and biographical significance, the social and biographical

*consequence* of ongoing processes of identifying, by self and by others. At any moment and in any context, whatever configuration that has emerged within such an interaction is essentially unstable, and any stabilisation that has appeared is essentially fragile.

An identity perspective has been adopted in recent leadership studies (eg Lord and Hall, 2004, DeRue and Ashford, 2010{ Guillen, 2011 #925). Viewing leadership as essentially and inescapably relational (Collinson, 2005) draws our attention to the social process “involved in coming to see oneself, and being seen by others, as a leader or a follower” (DeRue and Ashford, 2010: 627). DeRue and Ashford present a model based on identity claiming and identity granting, or grant-withholding. Leadership in this sense thus arises in the relationship, the “reciprocal and mutually reinforcing identities as leaders and followers” (ibid.).

### **Adopting an identity perspective**

This perspective formed the basis of a small-scale investigation, based on semi-structured interviews with 11 individuals in academic leadership positions in UK universities. In most cases the individuals hold non-managerial leadership roles, eg for undergraduate programmes in a department or school, for developmental work on employability, for engagement with employers and so on. The mode of appointment varies, some being ‘invited’ to take on the role, others applying for an (internally) advertised post open to competition with other candidates.

The interviews aimed to:

- explore how new leaders articulate their motivations for seeking leadership roles
- compare expectations with their actual experiences;
- identify critical events and/or stages in their early experience;
- explore how such new leaders responded to perceived challenges to their right that role;
- identify sources of support on which new leaders draw to warrant their claim to be effective leaders.

Interviews were transcribed and analysed using NVivo.

The full findings will be presented at the conference, following final report approval by the funding body. Initial findings raise interesting issues in relation to some of the pronouncements of politicians and other public figures, particularly those suggesting that academic staff have insufficient care for students and their educational outcomes. They also indicate strongly an orientation to ‘collegial’ styles of leadership, persuasion by rational debate rather than enforcement of acquiescence through positional authority.

The motivations for applying for/ accepting such leadership positions are generally expressed as a ‘vision’ for higher education, the desire to make a positive difference. This is usually accompanied with expressions of concern for the ‘student experience’ and for the outcomes for students. There is little evidence, albeit from a small sample, that individuals seek such leadership positions as steps in a career trajectory into more senior management.

Collegiality is strongly affirmed by these leaders, both as preferred style *and* as the most appropriate or *only* effective style in an academic context. The leaders interviewed in this project express admiration, concern and support for their colleagues, as they are subjected to increasing work intensification. They indicate that the effectiveness of themselves and their colleagues, in providing what they value as important for students, is often undermined by poorly-managed initiatives imposed by senior management and/or government agencies.

The presentation paper will also include discussion of the extent to which the identity approach adopted provided useful insights into leadership and leadership development.

## References

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