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Exploring the role of Associate Dean in UK Universities – Initial Findings (0094)

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Abstract

Fundamental changes to the HE sector over recent years have forced universities to review their organisational management structures. Consequently, middle leadership roles such as the Associate Dean (AD) have gained in importance. Below the level of Dean, but above the level of department head, ADs are 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, it is a role that is not well understood with previous research tending to look at more clearly defined positions. The purpose of this paper is to report on initial data from an on-going Leadership Foundation funded project investigating the role of Associate Dean in UK universities. To answer the study's research questions, an embedded, sequential mixed methods design has been adopted.

Introduction

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, Hillyard, & Reed, 2007) with the focus being on what Pollitt (1995, p. 134) originally called 'new public management' (NPM). Whilst HE institutions are not technically part of the UK 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, p. 1). NPM focuses upon 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 the Associate Dean (AD) have gained in complexity and importance (reference removed for blind review; Bryman, 2009; Winter, 2009).

Below the level of Dean, but above the level of department head, ADs are 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 HE that is not well understood with previous research tending to look at more clearly defined positions such as the department head (reference removed for blind review), the Dean (Harvey, Shaw, McPhail, & Erickson, 2013) or the Vice Chancellor (Bosetti & Walker, 2010). An exploratory study into the role undertaken by one of the authors of this paper (reference removed for blind review) 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.

The purpose of this paper is to build on these findings by reporting on initial data from an on-going Leadership Foundation funded project investigating the role of Associate Dean in UK universities. The study's research questions are as follows:

RQ1.   How is the role of Associate Dean defined and positioned in relation to University leadership structures?
RQ2.   What are the professional and personal circumstances that lead to academics becoming Associate Deans?
RQ3.   How do academics describe and understand their experiences of being an Associate Dean?
RQ4.   How do academics see their position as Associate Dean influencing their career in the short and longer term?

Theoretical framework

Theoretically, 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 notions of structuration (Giddens, 1984); academic identity formation, maintenance and change (Henkel, 2005; Nixon, 1996; Winter, 2009); and internal and external academic career capital (reference removed for blind review). It is hoped that by applying this framework it will give rise to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by policy makers and VCs 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.

Methods

To answer our research questions, we use a two staged, mixed methods approach (Bryman, 2008) utilising an embedded design (Cresswell, 2014), where the whole study is framed within a Humanistic philosophical framework (Newby, 2010). Underpinning this framework is an understanding of the value of human experience as central to data collection and analysis, and that experiences are socially constructed and experienced differently by individuals depending on a range of cultural, historical and situational factors. Specifically, we have used an exploratory, sequential mixed methods design (Cresswell, 2014) where qualitative data are gathered and analysed first (stage 1), before quantitative data are collected from a larger sample size (stage 2).

In stage one, we conducted interviews with 16 Associate Deans from 4 different institutions (4 in each). These institutions included 2 post and 2 pre 1992 Universities. The sample included a range of age, gender and experience. Following ethical approval, participants were identified and invited to take part via email. Each participant was interviewed for approx 1 hour and interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interview data were analysed using Nvivo and thematic analysis techniques outlined by Charmaz (2006) and Lichtman (2006). These data were supplemented with the analysis of key strategic documents linked to governance arrangements and working practices at each of the institutions, which helped in determining what management systems are in place to support the AD role and exploring how useful, or otherwise, they are. These data were also used to determine the overall culture within which each participant works.

In stage two (to be undertaken in 2014), we will survey Associate Deans across the UK (n=100) using an online questionnaire (Survey Monkey) which will be based on themes and issues emanating from the first stage of the project.

Discussion questions

Key questions arise from this work that will be raised through this presentation:

- Given the increase in managerialism across the HE sector, are there two distinct career routes emerging for academics – one in leadership and management and one in research and teaching?
  - If so, what are the problems with this model for the future of the profession?
  - If an individual is in the position of holding these two roles at once, how do they experiences the challenges therein?
- How do we best prepare academics for the role of Associate Dean and further leadership roles?
- How does managerialism affect notions of academic identity within HE?
  - Does it, for example, produce an identity schism between the 'academic managers' and the 'managed academic' as argued by Winter (2009)?

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