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Swimming with 'academic piranhas': the transition experiences of senior professional services managers entering HE from other sectors (0171)

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## **Outline**

### **Background**

The Jarratt report (1985) stimulated a growth interest in developing leadership and management capacity in higher education (HE). Although there is limited data on the profile of senior managers in HE, anecdotal evidence suggests that HEIs regularly recruit senior staff from other sectors - especially in professional services areas such as HR, Marketing and Finance - as the sector seeks to learn from other forms of practice and expertise. Little is known about the motivations of senior managers in HE that have made such transitions, nor about how the expertise and experience of this group of staff is being utilised by their employers.

Research into the theory and practice of institutional management remains one of the main themes of HE research (Tight 2012, Middlehurst et al 2009). Recent research has largely focused on the nature of 'academic leadership' (e.g. Bryman 2007, Bolden et al 2008, 2012), and senior academic roles (Smith and Adams 2008, Breakwell & Tytherleigh 2008). However, other research has highlighted the increasing role of professional staff in both 'core' academic and academic-related activities (Whitchurch and Gordon 2011) and in top management teams (Woodfield & Kennie 2008). Some of this research mentions 'non-academic' managers in passing but no research literature directly focuses on this group, in particular the apparent tension between the assumption that they can potentially bring fresh skills and vision to the existing organisational culture, and job descriptions and person specifications that often state that prior HE experience is essential for potential candidates and thus implicitly a prerequisite for success as a leader and senior manager in a HE context. Researchers have found that senior academic leadership roles usually require an academic expertise and experience (Goodall 2009, Spendlove 2007) but have not sought evidence on whether such a background is important for senior professional services managers.

### **Approach**

This qualitative study funded by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) built on the emerging findings from a questionnaire-based study focused on the characteristics and potential contribution of the growing cadre of non-HE leaders and managers, the challenges that such staff face in making the transition between sectors, and their associated career and professional development needs. (Harper 2008). Through semi-structured interviews with 37 senior managers, 3 representatives from Executive Search Agencies and 4 'sector experts' it explored the key themes from the earlier study in more detail, whilst also seeking respondents' perspectives on the nature of organisational and management 'culture' they found in their HEIs. The interviews were not representative of the whole sector, but the sample was designed to be gender-balanced and to include respondents from all types of HEIs and UK regions, with a range of professional backgrounds, and with and without direct HE experience. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and analysed thematically based on pre-defined themes and additional themes arising from the initial analysis.

### **Results**

Most HE senior managers from other sectors were recruited to key professional services roles (mainly HR and Finance) where there was a desire for increased 'professionalisation' and organisational change. There remains a relatively low 'risk appetite' for recruiting from outside the sector and appointments to more 'academic facing' roles (e.g. marketing) are often less successful. The concept of institutional 'fit' was articulated as a need to engage with both institutional culture and a broader HE culture which prioritises collegiality and consultation (including across the sector), whilst recognising and adapting to clear hierarchies and codes of conduct. Some respondents were employed as PVCs or DVCs but considered themselves as administrative rather than academic leaders, and focused on demonstrating their professional rather than academic 'credibility' (Goodall, *op cit.*). Most experienced of 'culture shock' during their transition and highlighted a need for mentoring and support to help non-HE recruits to adapt to academic governance structures in which 'academic piranhas' are happy to deconstruct ideas and whilst avoiding making clear and rapid decisions. Over time many respondents learnt to value this level of academic input and challenge whilst finding ways to navigate institutional structures and engage with the 'academic heartland' (Clark 1998) to achieve impact.

There was clear respect for academic leadership and the complexity of the 'business' of HEIs, and many non-HE managers sought ways to add value to the 'core business' of teaching and research through improving administrative practices and procedures. Non-HE senior managers tended to be recruited with a strong management background gained in a range of sectors, but valued HE-focused management and leadership development at both sector and institutional levels. Clear academic and professional 'silos' clearly persist, and many respondents took time to understand the role of academics in decision-making, the language used in HE, and how academic and non-academic structures are aligned and work together. To benefit from the expertise and experience of non-HE senior managers, it is important that they are engaged with highest-level strategic decision-making groups as 'business partners', as they would be outside academia. Although wider communication and relationship-building are important skills in HE, hierarchical structures and the persistent paradigm of the 'heroic individual' mean that strong links with the 'top team' – and particularly the head of institution - are important if they are to make a significant impact.

## **Implications**

These findings provide important empirically-based insights into the experiences and perspectives of a range of senior-managers recruited from outside HE. Although the sample is unrepresentative, its size and diversity suggests that the emergent themes will have sector-wide resonance. However, there is a need for further research that focuses on the interface between academic and professional leadership, the realities of top team working, and how the combination of academic and professional leadership contributes to organisational performance. Senior leaders and governors in higher education institutions, executive search agencies and sector agencies such as HEFCE and UHR will be interested in the particular benefits or challenges related to the recruitment, integration and development of staff from outside the HE sector. Senior managers considering working in the sector will also appreciate the articulation of issues such as 'culture shock' and 'collegiality' based on the lived experiences of those who have made the transition.

This study highlights the growing contribution of non-HE senior managers, and suggests that an increase in outside recruitment – in professional services areas at least – can improve professionalization rather than simply increase levels of 'managerialism' (Deem et al. 2007), but only if this group of senior managers are supported by heads of institutions and their top teams. This support needs to be articulated in the recruitment process and followed through via improved induction processes and ongoing support and mentoring. It is clear that non-HE senior managers value the challenges and opportunities offered by working in HE, and also feel valued by the sector, particularly those in more senior roles. Many recent recruits are in mid-career rather than 'winding down' and wish to continue working in the sector, but may be limited by career development opportunities. There is now a small pool of VCs and Principals who have been recruited from outside the HE sector and investigating this group further will be important to help

better understand the changing nature of institutional leadership and the future opportunities for senior professional staff.

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