

## **Navigating different worlds and cultures – what are the challenges for leaders of nursing and teacher education?**

### **Title**

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### **Abstract**

In the United Kingdom nursing and teacher education are relatively young academic disciplines in universities, vulnerable to the vagaries of new markets and neglected in the leadership literature.

Commissioned by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, the aim of the study was to explore the scope and meaning of leadership in academic nursing and teacher education. Exploratory interviews were conducted by telephone, and where practical face to face, with a convenience sample of leaders in the UK, Europe and the United States. Framework analysis was used for capturing and identifying themes.

Three core issues emerged from the data: managing the transition to a leadership role, coping with conflicting agendas, and leading change and development. Attributes of leadership were articulated in the advice leaders offered an imaginary successor. The findings highlight the contextual nature of leadership and role complexity as leaders navigate ambiguity between academic expectations and the political world of practice.

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The growth of nurse and teacher education in universities has coincided with the abolition of the binary divide, and expansion of higher education in response to policies to increase participation. In the UK, teacher education entered universities before nursing. Both nursing and teacher education are vocational subjects (we define as practice disciplines), require academic staff to have been high level practitioners (Furlong 2013) and have an uneasy profile within policy and public discourse and the media. Relatively young academic disciplines, compared to some parts of Northern Europe and the United States, they are subject to the vagaries of political interference and control as market ideology takes hold (Ball 2012) and the government encourages a shift away from universities to greater control by employers and delivery within the workplace eg Schools Direct. Given this highly politicised context it is important that there is strong and influential leadership of practice disciplines in universities. This paper provides some insights into the leadership experience and aims to fill the gap of a largely neglected topic in the leadership literature.

### **Aims and methods**

Commissioned by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, this research set out to explore the scope and meaning of leadership of practice disciplines in universities, with a particular focus on how academic leaders of nurses and teachers manage the tension between meeting the needs of employers (to produce graduates ready for the workplace) and satisfy the academic drivers of universities (growth, research excellence and value for money) (Ross et al 2013a). It builds on an interview study of UK Nursing Deans, which found that nursing as a practice discipline is often viewed with ambivalence by senior management and can lack authority and influence in the academic community (Ross et al 2013b). A convenience sample was identified of UK heads of nurse and teacher education and selected individuals from Europe and the US, drawing on professional and personal academic networks. We conducted interviews using open-ended questions, by telephone and, where practical, face to face and used framework analysis to capture and explore themes. In this paper we discuss the experience of the leadership journey and how leaders use influence, respond to challenges and manage ambiguities across boundaries between the political market place (commissioners and employers), the world of practice and the university.

### **Terminology**

We used the more neutral term **practice discipline**, in preference to vocation, which we take it to mean as advancing the practice of nursing and teaching through the academic discipline of learning embedded in practice. We adopted the generic term **academic leader** to overcome the different titles used by different universities and international higher education systems for example head of school, dean of faculty, director.

### **Results**

Three core issues emerged from the data: managing the transition to a leadership role; coping with conflicting agendas; and leading change and development. Leaders articulated what they saw as the attributes of leadership in the advice they offered an imaginary successor. The findings highlight the contextual nature of leadership and role complexity as leaders navigate the dichotomy between research excellence and professional practice, at the same time as believing they have to work harder to be noticed and establish authority within the institution.

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### **Conclusions and key messages**

As universities respond to changing demands and financial uncertainties – good leadership will be needed as never before. The findings from this study suggest that the real world skills of academic leaders of nursing and teacher education are valuable and relevant for universities. The paper will discuss the leadership implications in four areas. Firstly, the policy and organisational context defines the scope and nature of leadership and influences how leaders of practice disciplines craft their roles to manage tensions and ambiguities across the boundaries of the market-place, the work-place (in this case professional practice) and the university. Vice-chancellors could usefully draw on the skills of leaders of vocational subjects to develop others as the sector moves to become more externally facing. Secondly, both nurse and teacher education are under pressure as governments drive locally based and employer-led commissioning within the volatile and politically charged context of market development. Universities will need to decide their response to these changes, to what extent they will support and “defend” the practice disciplines within their portfolios and work with the academic leaders to develop new partnership models with employers. Thirdly, research was seen as crucial to advance the “science” of practice, teaching quality and the currency and vitality of the academic workforce as well as important in establishing recognition and standing within the university. Senior management teams need to be more aware of the specific leadership challenges of the practice disciplines and better understand the tensions in managing, in the words of one of our respondents, the “irreconcilable” “divide” between research teaching and the employer interface. Finally there was more common ground than differences between the leadership challenges of nursing and teacher education. This common platform of communities of practice within national and international networks could be better harnessed to build influence, to inform leadership development and capacity building programmes and to develop a stronger narrative of the role and contribution that universities make to advancing the art and the science of the practice disciplines.

### **References**

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