

## Leadership in university merger and collaboration (0120)

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### **Abstract**

As the market and competition takes hold in higher education there will be winners and losers and new organisational forms including variations on merger, acquisition and collaboration. This paper reports on a case study of a joint faculty run for twenty years as a joint venture between Kingston University and St George's, University of London. It will briefly outline the policy context and research literature on leadership related to institutional collaboration in HE. The findings will be explored in terms of the contribution of leadership: leadership in context; leaders as champions; leading across borders and finally leading behind the front line. The paper concludes with offering reflective insights on the impact of leadership on collaborative governance and highlights the tensions of balancing mutual interests, the use of metaphor in making sense of critical incidents and the role of micropolitics in enacting leadership at multiple levels.

### **Leadership in university merger and collaboration**

Up to now, universities in the UK have enjoyed relative stability, compared to the system wide change experienced in some parts of Europe (Privot et al 2015), and constant restructuring in other sectors such as the National Health Service. This may be set to change as the advent of alternative providers and competition for students in the higher education "marketplace" creates uncertainty, particularly for small and specialist institutions. There is a growing academic and policy related literature on mergers in HE, for example (Baird 2010), Cartwright and Schoenberg's (2006) review of mergers and acquisitions in the private sector and case study evaluations for example from HE systems in China (Wan and Peterson 2007) and Finland (Puusa and Kekale 2013). However, there is less published material on other examples of new organisational forms such as collaborations and alliances (Hefce 2012). This paper aims to fill this gap and reports on a case study that takes a "long view". It is a reflective enquiry of the meaning of collaborative governance in a unique HE partnership/joint venture between Kingston University and St George's, University of London (Ross and Woodfield).

### **Aims and methods**

The joint faculty at Kingston/St George's was established in 1995 to run a nursing and midwifery contract. Over the last twenty years turnover has tripled, the portfolio has diversified to include all the health professions, social work, teacher education and health research. The aim of the study was to explore collaborative governance through the perspectives of different participants, who had been involved at the inception and in senior leadership roles at various time points over a twenty year period. The qualitative study design was both exploratory (about future opportunities) and reflective (about past achievements and structural and policy constraints). A total of 28 semi structured interviews were carried out face to face with institutional heads (former and present vice chancellors and principals of Kingston University and St George's), senior leaders and key negotiators on the senior management team, and faculty managers. The interviews were informed by desk research and

data relating to the joint faculty held by the two institutions. The interview data was coded and analysed at a factual level in relation to critical incidents and events over time; at a conceptual level around pre-defined, emergent and explanatory themes and at a theoretical level in relation to the role of governance in partnership working.

### **Leadership in context**

The focus of this presentation is on the findings from an analysis of the research data that specifically focuses on leadership, to explore what it can tell us about leadership in the context of a institutional collaboration. The presenters argue that the enactment of leadership is contextually defined and is both reactive and adaptive as the external environment shifts.

### **The leader as champion**

The Joint Faculty's institutional and faculty leadership has been remarkably stable over its twenty-year history. Respondents strongly suggested that the heads of institutions play an important role personally and strategically in setting the tone for the relationship and also in signifying the importance of, and championing the joint faculty, and their mutual interest in its success, to other parts of their institutions.

### **Leading across borders**

While strong strategic leadership was considered to be vital, the data was more nuanced in terms of what this meant in practice in the context of a collaboration, for example setting the tone and brokering a good working relationship "across the borders" of both institutions. During the twenty year history of the joint faculty there were times of particular tensions in the relationship between institutional heads, expressed in critical incidents, for example when leaders moved on, or when one of the institutions was negotiating merger with another institution that was seen to risk or compromise the business and academic interests of the other partner. At these times the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of leadership emerged strongly through the use of metaphor.

### **Leading behind the front line**

Although formal leadership roles are important, some respondents considered that for collaboration to be successful a different style of leadership was required. The leadership role of the Dean was significant in terms of being a navigator, championing both institutions and often working behind the front line, which we call micropolitics, to manage ambiguity and organisational anxiety on behalf of, and for staff, at times of institutional change and uncertainty.

### **Conclusion**

The findings presented in this paper advance our understanding of the role of leadership in collaborative governance in HE through notions of mutuality, metaphor and micropolitics. The paper offers insights on governance in practice, as it develops over time and the role of leadership in navigating relationships and complexity. The importance of working front of house and behind the scenes, finding pragmatic solutions to organisational challenges, the emotional investment in overcoming challenges and ensuring success of the partnership cannot be underestimated. This case study illuminates the perspectives of leaders on the practice of leadership in collaborative governance and the findings highlight the importance of context, informal brokering, influencing and being a champion as they interact with formal governance structures.

## References

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