The Mesopolitics of Middle Management: The Role of Heads of Academic Departments

The role of the head of an academic department is central to the effective strategic and operational management of a university. There is a growing literature on the particular challenges faced by middle managers in higher education ([Branson, Franken, & Penney, 2016](); [Clegg & McAuley, 2005](); [Davis, Jansen van Rensburg, & Venter, 2014](); [Floyd, 2009](), [2016](); [Floyd & Dimmock, 2011]()) which identifies the issues involved in reconciling the expectations of senior management teams with local practices, in managing workloads, in leading through persuasion and in reconciling identity schisms and role conflicts. However, the distinctive dimensions of the Head's role within specific institutions has often been under-explored. Yet, given the highly situated, relational and contingent nature of the role, it is important to focus on the specific departmental, disciplinary and institutional contexts in which heads are located. As [Knight and Trowler (2001]()) have pointed out, universal, generalist approaches to leadership are essentialist and and particularly ill-suited to theorising academic institutional culture. They argue that the cultural complexity and diversity at the departmental level may mean that practices may vary as much within institutions as across institutions. Their conclusion is that "an analytic focus on leading should use a microscope as well as a telescope" (p.44).

This paper explores middle leadership in higher education through the perspectives of twenty heads of department at one teaching focussed university in the UK. Semi-structured interviews carried out between July and September 2015 explored the participants' motivations for taking up the post; the training, preparation and support that they received; and how they managed the different dimensions of the head's role, including managing people, workload, academic work, resources and strategy. There was considerable autonomy in how individual heads structured, managed and led their departments, and as a consequence, the role was performed in significantly different ways across the institution. Most heads had acquired their knowledge and understanding of leadership through the day to day experience of doing the job and their personal, departmental and disciplinary networks appeared more influential than formal institutional structures and processes in shaping how they enacted the role. For all heads, however, there are constant tensions between the operational and strategic elements of the role and between the academic and professional aspects of their identity.

Focussing on specific accounts of what heads of department do - for example, how they organise performance development reviews, how they deal with email and how they manage their working week may, on the surface, may appear less significant than institutional visions, missions or strategies. However, these quotidian leadership and management practices are deeply embedded in, and highly revealing of, wider disciplinary, department and institutional contexts. They are also indicative of a dissonance between the idealised formal role of the head of department represented in job advertisements and university strategy documents and the reality of the working practices, decisions and judgements required by a head.

The paper suggests that a mesopolitical lens, which explores how social practices are shaped by the specific disciplinary and departmental contexts and cultures in which they are located, provides a productive approach to the study of middle leadership and management. It also responds to a call by some authors (Trowler, 2000; Trowler, Fanghanel, & Wareham, 2005) for studies analysing the 'missing meso level' (Trowler et al., 2005, p.15) in educational research. Departmental culture in particular has been relatively neglected by higher education scholarship and there has been little research on how it shapes and is shaped by wider disciplinary and institutional frameworks (Lee, 2007).

This research provides some insight, from the perspective of heads, about how the role is experienced and enacted in one particular institution. By examining the day to day practices of heads this study has enabled theories of agency, structure and the relationship between the two to be theorised more effectively (Clegg, 2005). Paying attention to the "mundane" processes through which heads engage in the practices of leadership and management offers a valuable counterpoint to broader macro sociological accounts which may underplay the importance of individual agency. It has also provided the possibility of developing a mesopolitical explanatory framework which accounts for the situated nature of academic leadership at the departmental level of analysis.

Branson, C. M., Franken, M., & Penney, D. (2016). Middle leadership in higher education: A relational analysis. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 44*(1), 128-145.

Clegg, S. (2005). Theorising the mundane: the significance of agency. *International Studies in Sociology of Education, 15*(2), 149-164.

Clegg, S., & McAuley, J. (2005). Conceptualising middle management in higher education: A multifaceted discourse. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 27*(1), 19-34.

Davis, A., Jansen van Rensburg, M., & Venter, P. (2014). The impact of managerialism on the strategy work of university middle managers. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-15. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2014.981518

Floyd, A. (2009). *Life histories of academics who become Heads of Department: socialisation, identity and career trajectory.* University of Leicester.

Floyd, A. (2016). Supporting academic middle managers in higher education: do we care? *Higher Education Policy, 29*(2), 167-183.

Floyd, A., & Dimmock, C. (2011). 'Jugglers','copers' and 'strugglers': academics' perceptions of being a head of department in a post-1992 UK university and how it influences their future careers. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 33*(4), 387-399.

Knight, P., & Trowler, P. (2001). *Departmental Leadership In Higher Education*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.

Lee, J. J. (2007). The shaping of the departmental culture: Measuring the relative influences of the institution and discipline. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 29*(1), 41-55.

Trowler, P. (2000). Coming to Know in Higher Education: theorising faculty entry to new work contexts. *Higher Education Research and Development, 19*(1), 27-42.

Trowler, P., Fanghanel, J., & Wareham, T. (2005). Freeing the chi of change: the Higher Education Academy and enhancing teaching and learning in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 30*(4), 427-444.