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Senior Professional Leaders: Prestige, Credibility and Advancement in Higher Education (0291)

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Abstract

The identification of 'third space professionals' in academia has illuminated key changes in how universities are led and managed. In this study we explored third space professionals who have made it to the top levels of their institutions. The management of contemporary universities requires institution-wide strategic leadership, and this is increasingly the role of senior leaders with backgrounds that differ from colleagues with traditional academic backgrounds. In this research, funded by the Society for Research in Higher Education, we report on interviews with a purposive sample of 30 high-profile, senior professional leaders. In exploring the types of leadership skills that those from a 'non-academic' background described, it was clear to see that there is quite a big cultural gap between traditional academic pathways to senior leadership, and 'non-academic' pathways, which increasingly include leaders who have non-HE backgrounds.

Background

Much of the literature on higher education management in the UK context notes the rise of 'managerialism' and the corresponding move away from collegial forms of management (e.g. Deem et al 2007; Shattock 2013). What is clear is that senior managers at the highest levels of the university are often required to be strategic leaders managing complex institutional change. The core activities of universities - teaching and research - are now managed at an institutional level in response to external regulatory and market demands. Additional compliance demands require new processes to be put in place in complex environments (e.g. immigration, visa compliance, terrorism prevention). Many of these demands require decision-making on high-stakes issues that could land the university in legal or financial difficulties.

In this context, senior teams are increasingly making decisions that stray into long-established, academic territory (e.g. policies on attendance monitoring). Some of these decisions would traditionally have been the preserve of collegial decision-making by academic staff. This increased erosion between the academic-professional services divide has generated much literature over the past decade (e.g. Gordon and Whitchurch's 2010 edited volume on academic and professional services staff in universities). Of particular interest has been the identification of 'third space professionals' (Whitchurch 2008) who cross academic and professional services boundaries. A decade on from Whitchurch's initial research project, we can see that these professionals are now moving into senior management (e.g. Registrars, Chief Operating Officers and Secretaries), often with high levels of credibility and influence.

The identification of new, boundary-crossing professional services staff in the contemporary higher education context has been insightful in terms of understanding changes in how universities are managed (e.g. Middlehurst 2010). However, for those progressing through 'non-academic' routes into senior, blended roles, there are interesting questions to be explored about how these leaders have developed their credibility, particularly when leading change within and making decisions within the historically academic-dominated space. Furthermore, although Whitchurch's research has brought some visibility to how senior professional leaders position and advance their careers, over the past decade a clear professional identity of this group has not visibly emerged.

This project, which was funded by the SRHE, focused on senior professional leaders who are leading contemporary universities in this complex context. We posed the following research questions:

- What are the career trajectories of senior professional leaders in contemporary universities and how do they describe their professional identities, expertise and capabilities?
- How do gender, ethnicity, age and other characteristics influence the careers of senior professional leaders, and how do these intra-act with networks and indicators of esteem?
- How do the values of senior professional leaders fit higher education organisational cultures and structures?
- What are senior professional leaders' perceptions of the value placed on these indicators of esteem by institutional and professional colleagues?

Methodology

We focused in this project on the professionals who have made it to the top levels of their institutions by interviewing 30 senior professional staff at Chief Operating Officer/Registrar/Secretary level across England and Scotland. We asked them about their career trajectories, how they gained credibility in their roles, and the crossing of academic/administrative boundaries at the level of senior professional leaders. The interviews lasted between half an hour to nearly two hours, and most took place in the interviewee's own office. We also invited them to draw concept maps that illustrated how they would describe the key characteristics of their roles. We conducted thematic analysis working iteratively between the interview transcripts and maps. Research ethic procedures were followed, with careful attention to anonymity given the unique pathways and roles of the interviewees.

Findings and discussion

Most interviewees came from 'non-academic' backgrounds (we use scare quotes as it is increasingly a contested term (Szekeres 2011) but one many interviewees used themselves). In exploring the types of leadership skills that those from a 'non-academic' background described, it was clear to see that there is quite a big cultural gap between traditional academic pathways to senior leadership, and 'non-academic' pathways, which increasingly include leaders who have non-HE backgrounds. Although it is widely noted in the literature (see Whitchurch 2017) that academic and professional services staff are working more in partnership with each other than ever before, the very large differences between their identity formation, career trajectories and motivations are very apparent, and were often discussed in the interviews. At the most senior levels of the university, with very high stakes decision-making taking place in fairly small leadership teams, it seems worthy of note that one of the key aspects of the job of these 'non-academic' leaders is to manage their relationships with academics, and we illustrate in this presentation how they describe this part of their role.

We started the research with an interest in prestige, given previous research on prestige in academic careers (Coate, Kandiko Howson 2016; Kandiko Howson, Coate, and de St Croix, 2017). However, we quickly found that this is not a term that has currency amongst non-academic leaders (at least not in the way it does for academic staff). We therefore began to use the term 'credibility' more than 'prestige', although in fact it was clear that some of our interviewees were quite prestigious professionals.

One of the key themes that emerged is that credibility comes through the abilities to see the 'big picture' (the whole institution and beyond) and to 'get things done'. Often, participants described how

they accrued, over time, recognition for having solved particularly intractable problems. These 'markers of esteem' would include making decisions that saved the university substantial sums of money, 'sorting out' a particularly problematic area of the institution, and in general 'fixing things' (which was a very commonly used term).

We will therefore explore the extent to which traditional forms of academic 'capital' (e.g. prestige) still have currency, but at the most senior levels of management there are new forms of 'capital' which bring credibility to those making high stakes decisions in a complex and uncertain HE context.

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