

N1 Beaumaris Lounge Thursday 6 December 16.00 - 16.30

Leading through networks: the benefits of informal networks to academic heads of departments (0346)

John Deane¹ *College of World Sport Holdings, London, United Kingdom*

Abstract

In the last decade or so there has been an increasing understanding of the value of academic heads of department (HoD) operating as boundary spanners. HoD have used boundary spanning as a mechanism to further development their informal networks of support. Many of these HoD have undertaken internal and external training programmes that have not addressed the issue of how to become boundary spanners and develop effective informal networks of support. The purpose of this article is to draw on data from a doctoral study that addressed these issues through interviews with 14 academic heads of department.

Introduction

Discussion of the role of the academic Head of Department (HoD) has been ongoing for a considerable period in the academic literature. Within the last decade there has been increasing interest in the literature as to how well prepared HoDs are for the diversity of roles they undertake (Bolden et al., 2012; Bryman, 2007; Tysome, 2014). Surprisingly, few articles have been published about the support offered to HoDs in higher education (HE) (Floyd, 2016). This aspect of support for HoDs in English HE has not been given much attention. The key issues identified by Floyd in the study are that a collegial model in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Departments is more valued by HoDs and any support needs to be focused on what he terms 'authentic academic value systems'. There has been some discussion in recent literature about the value HoDs place on establishing networks as something they feel is important in enabling them to undertake their role (Davis et al., 2016; Floyd & Preston, 2014;). The research question addressed here is:

What forms of support do HoDs obtain to undertake their role?

Theoretical Underpinnings

Boundary Spanning

There is much discussion in the literature regarding the many differing roles undertaken by HoDs, including operating as boundary spanners (Bolden et al., 2012; Gentle & Forman, 2014; Ramaley, 2014). It has been argued that boundary spanners in the academy are:

Administrators, faculty members, staff, students, and community to design solutions to the problems we face as a society and as a global community. These people who can help create new opportunities for different disciplines to work together and for all parts of a campus community and members of the broader society to form new working relationships are boundary spanners. (Ramaley, 2014, p. 7–8)

Many of these issues were also picked up by Bolden et al. (2012), who also identified three key features of leadership demonstrated by HoDs that are responsible for motivating staff. Bolden included: establishing and defending a working culture and environment that allows academics to work effectively; building jointly owned academic values and identity; and achieving 'boundary spanning' for both individuals and work teams.

Methods

This study adopts an interpretative design in line with social constructivism, examining the perceptions, beliefs and feelings of HoDs. The interpretive approach "means attaching significance to what is found, making sense of findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions..." (Patton, 2015, p. 570). 14 Academic Heads of Department were interviewed using semi-structured interviews from 2 different HEIs

Findings and Discussion

This study indicates that in the absence of formal mechanisms to encourage external support systems for HoDs they will source their own through disciplinary networks, outside bodies and opportunities to work across the university. 10 of the 14 Heads of Department were members for disciplinary networks and valued the informal opportunities this exposed them to. Furthermore, the majority of Heads of Department greatly valued the informal networking opportunity to meet with other Heads of Department across their institutions.

In essence, what is being argued for here is the equipping of academic middle managers – through any training that may be provided – with the essential processes and stages in bringing about organisational change. As has been argued, these middle managers often feel that they have had little in the way of staff development to prepare them for the role of middle manager (Marshall et al., 2011).

Marshall et al. (2011) argue that academic middle managers have strong professional networks across the organisation. This raises the issue of what forms of informal support such as this exist for academic HoDs. (Floyd, 2016). In their 2011 study, Marshall et al. (2011, p. 522) identified that academic middle managers understood that in bringing about the change they needed, an “understanding of the negotiated processes and relationships that develop between leader and group in the change situation.”

It is recognised that the findings from this study cannot be extrapolated to all HoDs in post-1992 HEIs. However, a better awareness of how HoDs can be prepared for their challenging and complex role is of value on some levels and to a range of individuals and stakeholders (Tysome, 2013).

References

- Bolden, R., Gosling, J., O'Brien, A., Peters, K., Ryan, M. K., Haslam, S. A., ... Winkleman, K. (2012). *Academic leadership: Changing conceptions, identities and experiences in UK higher education*. London: Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.
- Bryman, A. (2007). Effective leadership in higher education: A literature review. *Studies in Higher Education, 32*(6), 693-710.
- Davis, A., Jansen van Rensburg, M., & Venter, P. (2016). The impact of managerialism on the strategy work of university middle managers. *Studies in Higher Education, 41*(8), 1480-1494. doi:10.1080/03075079.2014.981518
- Floyd, A., & Preston, D. (2014). *Exploring The Role Of Associate Deans In UK Universities - end of project report*. The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, London. (Submitted).
- Floyd, A. (2016). Supporting Academic Middle Managers in Higher Education: Do We Care? *Higher Education Policy, 29*(2), 167-183.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (2011), *Designing Qualitative Research*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA
- Ramaley, J. A. (2014). The changing role of higher education: Learning to deal with wicked problems. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 18*(3), 7-22.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). Designing qualitative studies [excerpt: Purposeful sampling]. In *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed., pp. 230-247). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Tysome, T. (2014). *Leading academic staff to a successful future: interviews with leaders managers and academics*. Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.

