

SRHE Conference 2010 – where is the wisdom we have lost on knowledge? – exploring meaning, identities and transformation in the academy

Being Player-manager: Exploring the role of Associate Dean in the new HE(0122)

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Our paper will explore the early stages of a study of a group of hereto neglected individuals in the new HE environment: the Associate (or sub) Deans (ADs). These people support the Dean and her/his attempts to interpret and implement corporate strategies and the NPM-influenced policies of recent years. We want to look beyond the challenges for, and leadership styles of, those at the level of Dean and above (Woodfield & Kennie, 2008, Bolden *et al*, 2008 & 2009) and focus our attention on the ADs who support him/her. These individuals are still technically a part of the academic group and are usually required to continue with research and teaching responsibilities. We want to explore the motivations behind their decision to become 'player-manager' and to understand more about the sense making process they employ in dealing with the potential dissonance in their professional identities.

The literature on middle managers over the last 20 years has left a "contradictory, confusing and inconclusive picture" (Thomas & Linstead, 2002: 72). In the new HE sector, "Given the problems of effecting change from the top or the bottom there is then a vital role for leadership from the middle" (Dearlove, 1998:74). Here we define the 'middle' ground that ADs occupy as the interface between senior management (Deans and above and senior administrators) and the group of academics to which they still technically belong. We want to explore how the roles of ADs have been created, developed and supported in recent years. Player –Manager academics, according to Dearlove, are poorly equipped with the right problem solving and interpersonal skills and "inclined to duck the uncomfortable inevitability of organisational conflict" (1998:73). Yet our initial findings suggest that it is these interpersonal skills which are vital to the AD role. Experiences described by our interviewees to date imply a crucial role at the interface between the academic community and senior management; "*a sponge, soaking up all the concerns from below and above.*" If, as Bryman (2007) suggested, the key to effective leadership in universities includes respecting existing culture and fostering a supportive and collaborative environment. And how *not* to do it includes not promoting interests of those you manage and not being involved in the life of the department, then do Deans rely on ADs to provide this essential link?

In our study we want to explore ADs' motivations and the issues they face. They are often the translators and implementers of the corporate strategy without

being the creators of it. Individuals are left to contend with the variety of discourses and demands whilst engaging in a constant process of identity construction. We are interested in how the individuals make sense of their dual professional identities and their emotional responses to being part of the two in-groups (Hogg and Terry, 2002); what Winter (2009) called the 'academic manager' and the 'managed academics'. A recurrent theme in our early data suggests that ADs face the challenges of there being "*too much work, not being able to get deep enough into issues whilst at the same time dealing with confused thinking and lack of management information at university level*". As Universities have struggled to incorporate the changes demanded by increasing bureaucratisation and accountability, strategies are often unclear and contradictory. A one respondent summarised; *it would be helpful if strategies were much clearer. It means that ADs are left wrestling with the problems and handling the concerns of staff; they have to balance all these issues and tensions on top of actually getting the job done.*"

In addition to the role challenges they face, ADs are academics struggling to cope with diminishing professional autonomy and increased bureaucracy within academia (Henkel, 2005, Deem *et al*, 2007, Winter, 2009). We want to explore what motivates people to take on these challenges? Do they do this to further their academic career? Or is it seen as an alternative career trajectory? We plan to surface the decision-making processes involved, e.g. Do they anticipate that moving into a management role could have a negative impact on their academic career, and if so, how do they plan to deal with this? We then want to look at practice. What peer support systems do they draw on? What formal/informal support, development and training do they get/want? And what do they see as the main challenges and problems and issues?

Whilst contending with changes to their substantive role and professional identities as academics, ADs are also contending with an additional and conflicting set of demands and discourses (Beech and Johnson, 2005; Beech, 2008). We are interested in the ADs' cognitive and affective processes that people employ, and use both a professional identity and a social constructivist lens to explore the choices that ADs have made. We hope to "understand individuals as active participants in the restructuring process and analyse the ways that individuals challenge, shape and resist the changes that are affecting them." (Thomas & Linstead, 2002, p.376)

This study addresses the call for research on a greater variety of roles (Bryman, 2007) and adds to the work on teams (Bolden *et al*, 2008, 2009a) and the leadership styles (Middlehurst, 1993, Bryman 2007, Deem *et al.*, 2007) being utilised in taking forward the university as an institution. If dispersed leadership is a more appropriate model in the HE context (Bolden *et al*, 2008), then what role do these middle managers play in it? How are they able to maintain their professional identity as an academic whilst 'being manager'. How do they cope with the "considerable ideological, political and cultural challenge" (Deem *et al*,

2007:189) to their identity and is this different from what we have found out (albeit relatively little) about those doing management at Dean level and above? We hope that exploration of the AD role will meet Bryman's (2007) call for a exploration of a greater variety of roles in HE, help to inform future training and development for individuals at the AD level and offer additional insight into what is happening in the University today.

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