

Leadership Ambitions: discovering and developing academic leader and manager 'identity' and ability in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper explores the issue of leadership succession in HE. Rather than waiting for leadership talent to emerge of its own accord, as has largely been the case in the past, universities have started to address leadership capability gaps by having a proactive approach to spotting and nurturing a 'pool' of internal leadership talent. To this end they have developed organisational support for potential leaders through design and provision of specific development programmes for those with interest in and potential for formal leadership. The paper will focus on individual stories of past and current participants on these programmes in a number universities and explore the question of *what makes academics who are interested or might be interested in leadership think positively about taking on formal leadership roles now and in the future, i.e. to see themselves as 'leaders' and 'managers' and how they discover and develop this 'identity' and ability.*

Outline

This paper will be based on an ongoing research and explore the issue of the succession planning in Higher Education (HE). In our previous research on collective leadership in HE (Bolden et al., 2008b, 2009), senior and middle managers in 12 UK universities highlighted the pressing need for succession planning through the identification and development of future academic leaders. Rather than waiting for leadership talent to emerge of its own accord, as has largely been the case in the past, a number of these universities have started to address leadership capability gaps by having a proactive approach to spotting and nurturing a 'pool' of internal leadership talent. To this end they have developed organisational support for potential leaders through design and provision of specific development initiatives (often referred to as future leadership programmes) for those with interest in and potential for formal leadership.

Existing research on the topic suggests that the main challenge for institutions, particularly pre-1992 universities, is recruiting to and filling the posts of Head of Department (HOD) and Head of School (HOS) (see, for example, Deem, 2008). The reasons frequently identified for this state of affairs are the reluctance among academics to take up headship, the detrimental effect headship may have on research and teaching, the rotating leadership role and lack of exit strategies, the relatively low status of leadership and management in universities, unpreparedness for the role, and limited recognition and incentives (Bryman,

2007). Moreover, from the organisational perspective, increasing devolution (including planning and strategy, finance, HR) raises the profile of such roles and the risks of getting the 'wrong person' (Bolden et al., 2008b).

Thus, it could be argued, that the main priority for recognising and developing leaders in HE appears to lie at the level immediately prior to that of HOD and/or HOS from where it is a large (and often undesirable) step to move into a more formal academic leadership role. Most HODs and HOSs do not undergo any leadership development prior to taking up the role and if they have any formal development this is normally offered and taken up only after having taken the role. They are often reluctant to invest time in improving their leadership skills or are over-confident that they can become leaders without developing the necessary skills (Fielden, 2009). Most heads develop their leadership and management skills 'on the job', through experience and often through trial and error (Bolden et al., 2008b; Inman, 2009).

Currently, although there does appear to be an increasing shift in focus towards developing people for these roles the greatest part of internal and external development provision continues to be aimed at the more senior institutional level (Burgoyne et al., 2009). At the same time, ever increasing internal and external demands on leaders (in terms of the breadth of responsibility and accountability), larger and more complex organisational structures and objectives, greater levels of change, devolved and bigger budgets, greater competition within and between universities, and increasing tensions between 'collegial' and 'managerial' forms of leadership and the need to foster an approach that draws together 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' processes call for leadership capability and capacity at every level and across the whole university and require formal leaders to acquire higher level leadership and management skills than ever before (Gosling et al., 2009; Kubler and Sayers, 2010; Middlehurst, 2008; Rayner et al., 2010).

Despite the pivotal role of HODs and HOSs in HE, the motivations and rewards for taking such roles remain relatively unclear, as do the necessary attributes/factors for success. The rather ad hoc approach to recruiting in headship used in the past, with Heads 'emerging' within schools and departments and largely taking on the role out of 'good will' or 'buggins turn', is increasingly recognised as unsustainable and that a more pro-active organisational response is required (Bolen et al., 2008a). Even the most appropriate candidates often feel reluctant in applying for headship partly because they feel unprepared and partly because of the negative impact on other aspects of their academic career (Bryman, 2007). Universities are now realising, therefore, that they need to ensure not only that these people have the necessary skills, knowledge and confidence, but they are given opportunities to develop their aspiration to take on leadership roles and to see it as part of a meaningful career trajectory.

Byham et al. (2002, cited in Bisbee and Miller, 2006) argue that succession planning can save organisational resources and time in the long term as it reduces the likelihood of needing to replace poor leaders or suffer the

detrimental consequences of their behaviour. Similarly, Bolden et al. (2008b) conclude that one significant benefit of development for academics prior to their appointment to a formal role is to enable them to take a more informed decision, even if this means they decide the job is not for them. Poor leadership and decision making can lead to a loss of morale driving many to leave the institution or fail to perform their duties. Thus, a lack of effective leaders can create a huge cost in human and capital resources.

In the light of the above, the aim of this paper will be to explore the question of *what makes academics who are interested or might be interested in leadership think positively about taking on formal leadership roles now and in the future, i.e. to see themselves as 'leaders' and 'managers' and how they discover and develop this 'identity' and ability.*

The paper will explore the following questions by focusing on individual stories of past and current participants on 'future leadership programmes' in a number of universities:

- Why do these people choose to be involved in formal leadership and management and what are the motivations for this?
- What does being a formal leader and manager mean to these people and how does it sit aside their role as an academic?
- How do they see their formal leadership and management career progressing in the future and how do they see it impacting their research and teaching?
- What has been (or will be), in their view, the value and impact of various forms of leadership development on their personal development, career and organisation?

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