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Meeting new expectations: heads of department as leaders in universities in the Arabian Gulf (0025)

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### **Introduction and Background**

Higher education institutions (HEIs) remain central to the intellectual, economic, cultural, technological and social life for the global community. These obligations create enormous pressure on institutions to position themselves at the leading edge of strategic change and innovation (Taylor & Machado-Taylor, 2010). HEIs are complex organizations. They present particular characteristics related, for example, to decision making processes, professionalism, multiple and ambiguous goals, and the nature of leadership and client service, which may require different styles of leadership and management (Petrov, 2006). Thus, it has been claimed that leading in an academic institution differs from leading in other contexts; what works in one context may not necessarily work in another. It is also clear that the skills and styles of leadership that work in a particular academic institution may not be applicable in another (Middlehurst, 1993) and, similarly, may be viewed simultaneously as both effective and ineffective in the same context (Lumby, 2012). Research into leadership in higher education has identified many characteristics, behaviours and knowledge associated with leadership effectiveness (Nelson, 2003).

Literature contends that leadership behaviour is culturally determined (e.g. Adler, 1991). Cultural values, norms, assumptions and beliefs play a significant role in defining leadership and the role and functions of leaders. Hofstede (1999) argues that values are specific to national cultures and are never universal. The differences in national cultures are reflected in how organizations are structured and managed (Chen, 2001). Robbins (1993) suggests that national culture plays an important role in determining the effectiveness of leadership. The same observations apply to leadership in higher education. Therefore, it is important when conducting a study in the field of leadership to bear in mind differences in type, culture and size of institution (Bryman, 2003).

This paper addresses two gaps in the literature on leadership in higher education. First, the research looks at leadership in higher education in the Arabian Gulf region. Whilst it is accepted that leadership is context and culture-sensitive, in practice most literature draws upon European and North American experience and there is little work on higher education in the Arabic world. Secondly, the research is centred upon leadership at departmental level; most existing work relates to leadership at the level of the President or Vice-Chancellor. What kinds of leadership, leadership characteristics, knowledge and behaviours are the most effective for departmental leadership within universities in the Gulf region, and how, if at all, do these differ from those experienced in Western universities? These questions lie at the heart of this paper. The importance of the work is underlined by the very rapid expansion in higher education in the region, with increasing numbers of universities and students. Successful delivery of this expansion will depend critically on developing good leaders.

Most research into leadership within higher education has focused on the holders of the top and senior academic role such as Vice Chancellors, Pro-Vice-Chancellors and Deans (Breakwell & Tytherleigh, 2008; Middlehurst, 1993; Spendlove, 2007). There has been little focus on middle level leadership, particularly those holding positions of Heads of Department (Bryman & Lilley, 2009). Gomes & Knowles write that “although academic departments have been appointing heads for decades, little research exists concerning exactly how those leaders contribute to departmental culture, collaborative atmosphere, and departmental performance” (Gomes & Knowles, 1999, cited in Bryman & Lilley, 2009, p. 333).

Scholars have also paid little attention to the study of leadership in the Arabian Gulf cultural context. There are several studies of organizational behaviour and management practice in the Arab world and of the Western leadership and management approaches that have been adopted in this context. However, there is a marked absence of empirical data few indications of predictive direction in managerial or leadership styles. Smith et al., (2007) write that “the existing literature thus provides only a partial view of management and leadership from within the Arab region. We currently lack systematic descriptions of the behaviour of Arab leaders.”(p.278). This absence of research into leadership is especially apparent in the field of higher education.

This paper presents initial findings from an exploratory study to investigate the competencies (attitudes, knowledge and behaviours) that are needed for departmental leadership in an Arabian Gulf country based upon the perceptions of the university stakeholders.

### **Research Methods**

This study explores the perceptions of stakeholders in one Gulf region university. The research uses an interpretive research paradigm. A purposive sample of 39 participants was interviewed. The sample reflected a range of perspectives, by disciplinary background and by seniority. The interviewees represented three main groups:

- Leadership at the senior level; the President, three Vice-Presidents and five Deans from five colleges (Engineering, Arts and Sciences, Education, Law, and Business and Economics (9).
- Leadership in the middle-level, the Heads of Department, two from each college (10).
- Faculty members, two from each department (20).

It was believed that interviewing different stakeholders, reflecting disciplinary roots, seniority and background, would provide valuable insights, revealing their own perspectives and experiences about leading academic departments and exploring the leadership skills and competencies to be effective in their roles. It was also believed that their insights could help to construct a better understanding of leadership in the context of higher education in the Arabian Gulf.

### **Preliminary Findings**

The research has highlighted a range of priorities in terms of the knowledge, skills and personal characteristics seen to be necessary for Heads of Department. Differences in emphasis have been identified between the views of senior university leaders, heads of department themselves and faculty; differences have also been identified by disciplinary background. Important issues have also

been identified in terms of career development and training that have received little attention hitherto in the context of universities in the Gulf region. Significantly, the research has also demonstrated some differences of emphasis between leadership in higher education in an Arabic context compared with Western experience. The work has already attracted considerable interest from governments and universities in the region.