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Introduction

This study investigates the role of the Head of Department (HoD) in research-intensive universities, with a particular focus on how HoDs are navigating their multiple priorities within rapidly changing national and institutional contexts. What insights can be drawn from the particular perspectives and experiences of HoDs positioned at the interface between senior leadership and traditional disciplinary domains for the higher education sector as a whole?

The role of the Head of Department has become increasingly complex in recent years as HoDs seek to steer a path through multiple pressures. As well as dealing with local challenges and changes within their institution, they are increasingly faced with responding to multiple expectations associated with both the Research Excellence Framework and the Teaching Excellence Framework, which includes data from the annual National Student Survey. In addition, their work may be affected by changes to higher education funding arrangements and by the imminent prospect of Brexit, which raises concerns about barriers to the recruitment of European staff and students and a loss of funding for research and innovation (UUK 2017, Corbett and Gordon 2016). The demands on HoDs to achieve certain measures of success, while continuing to champion the distinctiveness of their disciplines and nurture and promote academics at all stages of their career, appear to be increasing.

There is some evidence that in research-intensive institutions the HoD role, that of 'middle leader', carries its own internal weight of expectations and, arguably, contradictions. Individuals whose careers have flourished based on research excellence often assume the position of Head of Department as 'reluctant' leaders. Distributed leadership models adopted by institutions carry tensions between the role of line manager and that of mentor (Floyd and Fung 2017). So too does the challenge of implementing new policy directions set by the institution's leadership, while balancing specific departmental interests. Moreover, the very notion of leadership in academia can be fraught with difficulty in an era in which so-called 'management' and 'administration' are not necessarily seen as valued academic work, may not carry respect or prestige and may even be seen as adversely affecting an individual's own career (Bolden et al. 2008).

Departments typically comprise individuals employed in different and changing academic 'job families', and in many research-intensive institutions there have been recent changes to job families and promotion criteria in the wake of national policy changes (Fung and Gordon 2016). Institutions compete in global

rankings; across Europe there is a new focus on developing truly distinctive types of research-based student education (Fung et al. 2017) and on the need to maximise the synergies between research and education through changing curricula (Fung 2017). Each of these developments and drivers has the potential to add another layer of complexity to the role of the HoD.

The study

The first phase of our study focuses on heads of arts, humanities and social science departments in research-intensive institutions in the UK. HoDs in these disciplines may be additionally affected by the perceived threat to their sustainability at a time when public discourse and national funding appear to place a higher value on natural and applied science subjects.

Research questions

1. How do Heads of Department conceptualise the different dimensions of their role at a time of change in the sector?
2. How far do Heads of Department see their aims for their department and their discipline aligning with what the institution appears to be trying to do?
3. What do they see as their main challenges and opportunities?
4. What place does research and the development of the departmental research culture occupy in their work and their thinking about the development of the department?
5. What place does student education and the wider student experience occupy in their work and thinking about the development of the department?

Methodology

In phase one (2017), ten semi-structured interviews with Heads of Department from three Russell Group universities are being conducted. The interviews are professionally transcribed, and the transcripts analysed by both researchers individually and then collaboratively. This approach is enabling us to produce both a nuanced, thematic analysis and a series of illustrative first-person narratives, providing rich qualitative insights into the lived experiences of individual academics. In the second phase we turn our attention to those in the sciences, architecture and engineering, and in the third and final phase of the project (2018) we will conduct a comparative analysis of the two sets of data.

Emergent findings

Our interviews are still underway, but early themes include:

- Pressure on time and lack of clarity with respect to what should be prioritized;
- The challenge of changing embedded assumptions, held by department members, that research will always be more highly rewarded than contribution to student education, even where the senior leadership team is overtly promoting parity of esteem between research and education;
- Pressure from senior leadership to improve NSS ratings but limited direct engagement with TEF to date;

- Uncertainty about the potential impact of internal changes and external political and policy changes on funding streams;
- The need for better channels of communication within the institution, at all levels, through times of change;
- 'Managing' awkward colleagues in the absence of either carrots or sticks, particularly where the colleagues are members of the professoriat;
- The challenge of sustaining one's own career development and prospects while juggling the HoD role, because of loss of research time.

Preliminary conclusions are that HoDs are now having to play to multiple stakeholders, regularly adapting their language, task orientation and focus; they might be likened to musicians who repeatedly have to transpose a song from one key to another. We argue that more attention needs to be given to this crucial role and its contribution to the success of institutions and the sector as a whole, and that institutions need explicitly to a) develop the HoD role and those who take it on, and b) work on improving their institutional ecosystem so that their multiple strategies and activities can be clearly articulated as one overarching mission, which includes very clearly articulated priorities for departments.

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