



## **Leadership Preparation and Development**

**DECEMBER 2013**

### **An Investigation into the training and development needs of Heads of Department (HsoD) in English Universities**

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#### **1. Background and Theoretical Framework**

There is a wealth of literature relating to leadership roles in schools and colleges. However, the literature relating to the roles of heads of department (HsoD) in universities is rather limited (Bolton, 2000; Knight and Trowler, 2001; Smith, 2002; 2005; 2007; Deem et al, 2007; Macfarlane, 2011; Chad, 2011). Furthermore, there is very little, if any, literature specifically relating to the professional development of university HsoD (Prichard, 2000) and even less which is specific to leadership development which is clearly a significantly under-researched area.

Research (Smith, 2005; Smith, 2007) indicates that many newly-appointed HsoD feel that they are unprepared for the role, the vast majority in the past having received no leadership training at all before their appointments.

Heavy workload seems to be one of the major challenges associated with the head of department role (Smith 2002, Smith 2005, Smith 2007). *Role overload* occurs when

there are multiple tasks to be accomplished within insufficient time, or the situation which occurs when an individual feels overwhelmed by their tasks (Sieber 1974, Elloy and Smith 2003, Glynn, Maclean et al. 2009, Duxbury 2010). Inability to cope with unrealistic demands builds up pressure and leads to excessive working hours, and is linked to deleterious effects on mental health(Hecht 2001). The existing empirical studies propose that most heads commit to over 50 hours of work a week. It not only generates work-family conflict but also has a negative impact on heads' research profiles (Smith 2002, Smith 2007).

Role overload is closely linked to *role conflict*. It implies that different demands of the position are not compatible with each other, or differing expectations of those within a role (Sieber 1974, Van Sell, Brief et al. 1981, Hecht 2001, Elloy and Smith 2003). HsoD serve as mediators between the university and their departments (Smith 2005). At the same time heads have to deal with increasing bureaucracy and carry on their own academic work. While teaching and research seem to be crucial to their academic identities, novice heads experience an identity shift as they set out on their new journey.

Those who intend to continue a management career must begin to prioritize their leadership, management, and administration over and above their academic work, thus acquiring new identities and perhaps slowly relinquishing old ones.

(Deem, Hillyard et al. 2007, 103)

However, conflicting and blurred expectations can potentially have positive outcomes for self-efficacy (Lindberg, Wincent et al. 2013). It is argued that a certain degree of uncertainty maintains enough flexibility to adapt to changing environments (Van Sell, Brief et al. 1981, Savelsbergh, Gevers et al. 2012). It saves organizations from stagnation, challenges norms and embraces change. Smith (2007) echoes the same argument concluding that "*The high workload and role overload experienced by heads*

*is unlikely to diminish in a world which is becoming increasingly complex and where uncertainty is probably the only predictable feature of life” (p. 6).*

More understanding and appreciation from senior management as well as staff should increase heads' job satisfaction. Improved role clarity is claimed to result in higher commitment and productivity (Hassan 2013).

## **2. Objectives and Research Questions**

This short term project, funded by BELMAS, sought to investigate the training and development needs of Heads of Department (HsoD) in English Universities. The specific questions investigated were:

1. To what extent do HsoD feel adequately prepared for their roles on appointment or election?
2. What specific leadership preparation, if any, do HsoD receive prior to appointment?
3. What induction arrangements, if any, are available to HsoD following appointment?
4. What development opportunities are available to HsoD after appointment?
5. How effective is existing provision for leadership development?
6. What aspects of their roles do HsoD find most difficult or challenging?
7. What aspects of their roles give HsoD most satisfaction or do they find most enjoyable?
8. To what extent do existing development opportunities assist HsoD in addressing these aspects?
9. What other development opportunities would HsoD find helpful to enhance their leadership roles?
10. How helpful is networking, for example with peers, in supporting HsoD in their leadership roles?

## **3. Methodology**

This study comprised a wide scale online survey and a series of qualitative interviews with heads of department.

The sample for the interview phase was a series of geographically paired institutions; with one member of each pair being a statutory and the other a chartered university.

The original plan for this project was to work through academic development units (ADUs) at English universities; it was hoped that through this contact, the online questionnaire would be publicised, and respondents for the interview phase would be identified.

The original methodology did not prove successful. Direct contact with HsoD was then attempted for other institutions.

There were two online questionnaires, which were the same in all particulars bar a final question for those in institutions targeted for interviews; in these, respondents were asked if they would consent to interview – if so, they were invited to either leave their contact details, or to contact the research team directly. Twenty six interviews were conducted; 25 reports have been used in the report.

Quantitative data was analysed through the use of Excel spread sheets. Qualitative data was analysed using grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990, Curtis, Geslerb et al. 2000).

This project complied with all the ethical considerations supported by BERA. The questionnaire was anonymous for all those in non-interview institutions. Those in institutions targeted for interview were invited, but not required, to leave contact details; personal details were decoupled from the data before analysis.

Data have\_ been reported anonymously. Interview respondents are referred to as "they" to avoid identification by gender. No subject or institutional information is attached to quotations. "Department" has been used throughout. "School" and "Faculty" have been retained when these terms refer to overarching entities.

Interviews were compiled and subsequently sent to respondents for confirmation. Reports used here have the agreement of the respondents.

#### **4. Key Findings**

Reported according to research questions above

1. The majority of questionnaire and interview respondents felt fairly well prepared for the role. In both sections of the research, more respondents felt very well prepared than not prepared at all, however, the margins between these two were small.
2. Questionnaire respondents had a high proportion of those who reported no training before taking up their posts. Most training reported was formal leadership training. University based training aimed at the role of Head of Department received the highest number of mentions as “very helpful” (but even this number was quite low).

This is echoed by the interview respondents. Shadowing was reported at a much higher rate for interview respondents (13 out of 25) than for questionnaire respondents (12 out of 117): all reports of shadowing are positive.

3. 41 of 117 questionnaire respondents reported no induction arrangements at all, slightly more than half that number reported in-house induction.

Only two interview respondents reported having inductions to their roles (both praised the induction as useful).

4. Both questionnaire and interview respondents reported more instances of formal university based training than any other type of training

5 & 6. Most of the training experienced by respondents was listed as helpful or very helpful, arguing that current provision goes some way to supporting the needs of

those already in post. A very low number of respondents had experienced mentoring/coaching or peer support; however, these forms of training and development received the most enthusiastic support.

7. Issues related to personnel management presented the greatest reported challenge to respondents. At all times, items occurring within the category related to members of staff, and the only category of staff mentioned were academics.

Workload also presented a challenge for heads, more so in the questionnaire. In both sections, heads reported a specific conflict between their work as head of department and their work as active researchers.

Another significant challenge reported by heads is what we have termed, "bureaucracy".

8. For interview respondents, the same category – people – emerged as both the more enjoyable and the most challenging aspect of the role; "managing staff" appeared as an answer to both questions.

Finance appeared as a challenge, but rarely to do with understanding budgets or systems. More often, comments which elaborated on this challenge dealt with either the allocation of scarce resources or lack of funds.

9 and 10. When asked if training could support them in their work, heads tended to respond positively; 54 agreed, while only 9 said no in the questionnaire, with 25 mentions in agreement and only 6 negative mentions in the interview phase, which leads to the conclusion that those in post place a value on training and development.

Heads concentrated on two aspects of training, when asked about its value. The first was that it should cover dealing with people. The second was the mode of delivery, with respondents showing a marked preference for peer support and work with mentors or coaches.

It is perhaps significant (and hopeful) that some respondents were clearly planning how they would induct and support their successors.

## **Other issues**

### Role Dissonance

There are, two strands here, in relation to how respondents view themselves. One group see themselves as Heads of Department, as academic leaders and managers. A second group see themselves as academics, who have – temporarily – taken on an extra role, and one some at least perceive as foreign to their\_day job, as one respondent phrased it, of being an academic. Yet these two roles are not the same, and do not require the same skills and abilities.

This tension was nowhere acknowledged or explored in reported formal training. As one respondent reported, the reasons they were appointed to the role – expertise in teaching and or research – had little or nothing to do with the role itself, which, for respondents here at least, revolves around managing people, and managing relationships with the centre of the university.

### Training and succession

Two interview respondents called for a longer term trajectory for the role of Head of Department and spoke of support for the person they thought would have the role next. Yet even these HsoD, so clearly in support of longer term support and training, were not able to clearly identify who might be in need of that support. “It is good to have fresh eyes but constant change is inefficient. The three-year cycle is too short.” Yet finding candidates for the role, is not easy, partially due to the issue of combining the role with research activity, “A real problem is getting someone to take over – it has an adverse

effect on research which in turn can affect promotion prospects. There is no long term reward for being a Head of Department”.

The role of Head of department seems, on the face of it, to have a number of negative signifiers for those who might take it on as a fixed term post: exacerbated workload (the only reduction in workload mentioned by respondents was to teaching), interruption to research time with no let-up in research expectation, high numbers of difficult conversations, the need to constantly deal with the bureaucracy of the central university and diminished career prospects. Perhaps it is not surprising that few of those who filled the role on a fixed term basis faced a competitive situation for appointment.

Yet no one reported unfilled posts (although there were mentions of hurried appointments, these always resulted from unusual and unforeseen vacancies). The reported benefits of the role – the ability to exercise leadership and interactions with others – would appear to be enough to ensure that candidates come forward. Having said this, a large number of those filling these rotating posts reported having the role suggested to them; some of these saw their tenure as Head of Department as a form of service to the department. It is, perhaps, significant that within the discussion of what Heads of Department would do after their term of office finished, only one mentioned going on to further leadership within the university. It would seem that being Head of Department has not set this group on the road to further university leadership.

No Head of Department reported being asked by Human Resources department or other groups to contribute to training of new heads, in spite of a clear preference for peer work and a valuing of mentoring and coaching as a support mechanism. Only 12 questionnaire respondents reported working with their predecessor.

This leads to a further concept, that of succession planning. It is clear that many incoming heads had little or no introduction to the role. This must be considered

alongside the comments from heads about the confidential nature of much of the work of the role; many issues involve only the head of department and one other person, rather than the larger community of the department or even the leadership team. Therefore, incoming heads have not had access to this presumed or implied knowledge.

For both questionnaire and interview respondents, dealing with staff presented the greatest challenges of the role – by a much larger margin for questionnaire respondents. These challenges often related to issues which may be considered to be performance related, that is, managing the performance of academics.

This is backed by the large number of calls for training in relation to dealing with people with a number of specific requests for training around difficult conversations. Particularly for those in time limited posts, as one respondent said, “I was recruited as an academic because I was tolerably good at teaching and research, not because I had personnel management skills”.

## **5. Implications for Theory and Policy**

- Training and development will be of much greater use to those who receive it if it fits their needs. To this end, and considering the relatively large number of comments about training which was not useful, ill targeted or came at the wrong time, we would recommend that institutions undertake a series of needs analyses:
  - What are the training and development needs of serving heads of department? And when is it most appropriately offered?
  - What are the training and development needs of members of department who might become heads of department in the future? (This recommendation is based on the number of heads who had the post recommended to them).

- Institutions should take seriously the value placed on peer and mentor / coach support by Heads of Department. Providing opportunities for Heads of Department to meet and form networks of support could be fruitful.
  - Institutions which have a rotation among Heads of Department should consider making better (any) use of the skills, expertise and experience of who have fulfilled the role in the past, perhaps as mentors or coaches.
- Institutions should engage in clear, strategic succession planning for Heads of Department. This might entail any of the following:
  - Identification of possible Heads much earlier in their careers to allow focused training, shadowing of current post holder and effective hand over of the role.
  - Training specific to the role in each institution. However, this must be set against the very real value reported by respondents of training such as that offered by external providers such as the ILM. A mixed programme of training, including peer and mentor support, might be most beneficial.
- Post holders, especially those seeking to maintain a research profile, often find a disconnect between the work of being head of department and their work as academics. We would recommend:
  - Recognition of the demands of the role of Head of Department in relation to REF output. (However, this does not address the issues of the effect of diminished research activity on long term career prospects).
  - Address the issue of workload for Heads of Department, particularly in relation to issues covered here under the heading of bureaucracy.

#### 4.1. Recommendations for further research

- Workload mapping for Heads of Department
  - This could be done using a simple diary system, to discover the workload of HsoD and the division of their time among different areas of their role
- Mapping against research output
  - The strong emphasis placed by HsoD in this research on the negative impact of the role on their ability to produce research warrants further investigation. We would suggest some form of mapping of the research activity by those who are in post, against those who are not in post (and

perhaps particularly, those who have been in post and have now relinquished the headship, in those universities which rotate the role). This could then inform institutions about realistic expectations for post holders.

## 6. Related Papers and Presentations

- Paper Presented at Belmas Conference, Nottingham, October 2013
- Paper submitted for Belmas Annual Conference
- Paper in progress, for submission to EMAL

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