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‘I see it as a phase: I don’t see it as the future’: academics as managers in a UK university

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Abstract

This study investigates the experiences of academics who take on temporary, middle management roles within a university faculty. Individuals with titles such as Associate or Sub Dean, Head of Department or Programme Director were interviewed but, for the purposes of this paper, we will refer to all of these as Associate Deans (ADs). We are aware that these titles may mean different things in different Higher Education Institutions and even in different departments, faculties or countries. We purposely focus on individuals working below the level of Dean and look at both their motivations for, and experiences of, taking on a management role whilst at the same time retaining some level of research and teaching responsibility as an academic.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the motivations and experiences of academics who have taken on a temporary, part-time management role below the level of Dean within a university faculty. We were keen to understand why and how academics would get involved as managers particularly if they didn’t see this as a permanent shift in career trajectory but as something they were going to do for 2-3 years and on a part time basis alongside their regular (albeit reduced) teaching and research responsibilities. Such individuals are still members of the academic community and, to use Winter’s (2009) distinction are both managed academics and academic managers as their role often involves managing their existing academic colleagues in some way. They are most certainly at risk of losing what Floyd and Dimmock (2011) refer to as career capital in that doing the part time manager role impacts upon, for example, their research publication record; still the basis of reward within the academic profession. Whilst socialisation frameworks (for example, Inman, 2011) have been used to try and understand the experiences of

managers in the HE sector, this is not always helpful as there is often little formal attempt at socialisation or training academics into their new management roles. In a Higher Education context where academics are already struggling to cope with diminishing professional autonomy and increased bureaucracy (Henkel, 2005, Deem *et al.*, 2007); we are interested in exploring how academics who step into management for a while cope with the ‘considerable ideological, political and cultural challenge’ (Deem *et al.*, 2007:189) to their identity as both an academic and manager. These ‘player-manager’ academics (Dearlove, 1998:73) have the responsibility of supporting the Dean and other senior managers in the faculty and/or university in the process of implementing the many changes being introduced into the HE sector today. We want to look beyond the challenges for, and leadership styles of, those at more senior levels in the university such as PVC and Dean (Woodfield & Kennie, 2008, Bolden *et al.*, 2008 & 2009a) and focus our attention on the ADs who support him/her.

The ever changing HE context

The changes occurring within the Higher Education sector in the UK and elsewhere have been well documented over the past decade (for example, Prichard, 2000, Deem *et al.*, 2007, Winter, 2009, Bolden *et al.*, 2009b) with the focus being on what Pollitt (1995:134) originally called ‘new public management’ (NPM). Whilst Higher Education institutions are not technically part of the UK Public sector, the ‘developmental trajectories and organizational re-imaging and reshaping of UK universities over the last two decades have been fundamentally directed’ by the tenets of this approach (Deem *et al.*, 2007:1). NPM focuses upon cost cutting, transparency in resource allocation and increased performance management of both staff and resources. In several UK universities, this approach has resulted in a fundamental review of organisational infrastructure and the systems of administration and management. The impact on academic roles has been huge (Trowler, 1998, Henkel, 2005, Winter, 2009, McFarlane, 2011) and the changing priorities, reward systems and the organisational culture of academe continue to be challenged (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004; Barry *et al.*, 2006, Bexley *et al.* 2011, Fredman & Doughney, 2011). In short, the discourses and practices of managerialism often sit uncomfortably amidst the more traditional values of academia; Bolden *et al.* (2008) summarise these inherent tensions as being between individual autonomy and collective engagement, collegiality and managerialism, academic versus administrative authority, cultures of informality and formality, the values of

inclusivity encroached upon by professionalism and an overall ethos of stability as opposed to change.

With regard to the HE sector, Dearlove (1998:74) suggested that, 'given the problems of effecting change from the top or the bottom, there is then a vital role for leadership from the middle'. Bryman (1997, p.694) also concluded that the university department 'represents a critical unit of analysis in universities'. The 'reluctant manager' syndrome is now well documented (Goffee & Scase, 1989, Knights & Trowler, 2001, Parker, 2004) yet, as political exigency continues to steer Higher Education policy in terms of both teaching and research issues, it seems logical to suggest that those best positioned to steer this change are those most familiar with both. In addition to the influx of professional managers entering the HE sector and the creation of what Whitchurch (2008) described as 'hybrid roles,' many academics are being persuaded to get involved. Dearlove's assertion was that academics taking on part time management roles are 'poorly equipped with the right problem solving and interpersonal skills' and 'inclined to duck the uncomfortable inevitability of organisational conflict' (1998:74). If academics are generally disinclined and ill equipped to deal with management roles then how can they be supported? Understanding the experience from their point of view should be a key part of informing the design of induction and training programmes. In the literature about temporary employment, low commitment and levels of productivity are central issues (see, for example, De Cuyper *et al*, 2011). Understanding more about academics with additional 'bolt-on' management responsibilities could benefit both the individuals themselves and the Higher Education institutions in which they are being asked to contribute to change processes.

Method

The case study university is a pre-92 university with approx 1200 academic staff and 25000 students around the world. This study is based on interviews with 18 individuals across 4 (of 7) faculties. Interviewees were aged between 40 and 60 with 14 at the level of Senior Lecturer and 4 were professors. The average time in post was 3 years; the average length of service at the university was 15 years. We focused on this one university initially in order to learn more about the participants' experiences - similarities and variance - within the one site.

Within the literature on management and leadership in the HE sector, it has been acknowledged that there is a lack of 'fine grain' studies (Bryman, 1997) and that not enough known about the sheer variety of academic management roles. Middlehurst (2008) for example, emphasizes the need to understand leadership as a *lived* experience and our aim was '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: 376).

We adopted a qualitative approach because we sought to elicit the type of deeply textured data which is often lost when using extracted quantitative measures. Using a semi-structured interview format which asked questions informed by the relevant academic literatures, the intention was to produce a holistic view of what persuades individual academics to take on temporary management roles and what they believe, for example, enables and constrains their effectiveness in these roles. The questions derived from the literature were used to create the thematic spine of the interviews which would then enable the analyses to focus on narrative content under each of the themes. A sequenced random and then snowball sampling method was used as the research sought depth and richness, rather than statistical reliability. Potential respondents were contacted by email (using appropriate distribution lists) to ask them if they would be prepared to take part. Some respondents also suggested colleagues whom they thought would also be willing to be interviewed. Each researcher did nine interviews and all interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed. The data was then subjected to qualitative content analysis, focussing on narratives and narrative trajectories in the form of thematic review (Morphew & Hartley, 2007, Price, 2010) and all transcripts were analysed independently by each researcher. The results of the analyses were brought together to identify emergent themes as well as those consistent or inconsistent with the extant literature. A triangulated approach was used to add depth rather than to prove validity (Hassard & Cox, 2005).

Motivations: *'I guess I was just aware that I needed to - or I wanted to - do a little bit more'*

The primary motivations for academics taking on a temporary management role appeared to be a feeling that someone ought to "*put their head above the parapet*" or if they, as an academic, didn't do it, a(nother) senior manager might be recruited to do so. The academics we spoke to were all, in part, motivated by the desire to contribute to the strategic and operational successes

of their faculty. They felt that they could provide an academic perspective on the changes taking place; changes in both university processes and systems and to the demands placed on themselves and their colleagues. Many felt that it was 'their turn' or that there was nobody else willing to or capable of doing the job; one said, "*The usual message went round, asking people for expressions of interest. Nobody was interested*". It wasn't a move they had jumped at; especially when it involved line management responsibilities. A few had felt coerced into taking up the roles, "*I had my arm wrenched behind my back*" and even though this person felt that they had "*already done my national service*", the sense of obligation was such that they took the role on and "*didn't make a great fuss about it, but I have to say that I was seriously pissed-off*".

For some, however, it presented an opportunity which had an affinity with the stage they were at in their academic career; they "*fancied a change*" or the role fitted in with their family commitments. Almost everyone we spoke to already had an established track record of research publications and could afford to take their 'foot off the pedal' temporarily. Of those who had been given study leave before taking up the post and having been able to "*build up the research fat*", although one AD, coming to the end of the three year secondment to the role, spoke of that fat being "*exceptionally thin*" by then. Some managed to maintain some research activity during their temporary management positions but, for several, this soon became untenable; as one commented, "*I don't think I perceived how all week long, and all year round, the work would be.*" For leading research academics who have previously published widely and brought in substantial research funding, the institutional expectations are that they will resume this level of performance immediately they return to their academic post. Yet people spoke of needing time and space to consider their next big project, to think about where the funding might be and to explore the networks that were needed to create research opportunities, and that none of these things would be done immediately. One made the point that, "*That process of getting back into real intense thought, you can't just jump into it*".

There appeared to be a tension emerging between the drivers which create "a culture of performativity" (Dent and Whitehead, 2002: 2) and the drivers to pare back resource. For one person, this paring back resulted in being summonsed back from sabbatical early in order to take up the management role. Such approaches will do little to generate good will on the part of AD's

who, for the most part, are undertaking this role for the institutional good rather than for any self-aggrandising reasons. Most individuals appeared to take on the role of AD out of a sense of loyalty and a firm belief that they could make a difference. Many felt that they were right in doing this and that, in difficult circumstances, they did a good job.

The main challenge – ‘I am now ‘them’ and not ‘us’

Although ADs play a crucial role at the interface between the academic community and senior management, as one put it, ‘a sponge, soaking up all the concerns from below and above’, most had the feeling that their academic colleagues had no idea what their management roles involved. Some thought their colleagues saw them as having privileged access: ‘they expect you to have access to information that they, in their lowly positions, don’t have, which is often not true’. Others expected them ‘to get everything right...and be terribly wise’. Others were simply not interested in what they were trying to do and many of those interviewed felt that academic colleagues had little appreciation of, or sympathy for, how difficult it was to be ‘in the middle’. One person expressed their frustration thus:

‘When you are seeking engagement and you just kind of think, it’s just not there. And what we should have done 18 months ago we still haven’t done, and I can see the train coming down the tracks, but I can’t get the others to see it, but I know it’s going to hit us and it’s going to hit me first’. They continue: ‘those people down there don’t appreciate what you’ve got coming down from up there, and yet you’re trying to represent that group up there and save their bacon too’.

This idea of having to mediate between the hierarchy above and departmental colleagues below was made all the more difficult because of the lack of authority. Most of the ADs interviewed felt that, whilst they had plenty of responsibility for ensuring that operational processes and systems were *in-situ* and that performance management and work-load planning activities were undertaken in a timely manner, they had no authority to insist that they were done. Instead they had to use all their powers of persuasion to encourage people to conform, but with limited success,

There were still those academic colleagues who saw these activities as intrusive and irrelevant. For this group of colleagues, the AD is seen as “an irritation”, and whilst in the heady, early

days, ADs had hoped that their own experiences and insights as members of the academic communities might help them to perform more effectively in their management roles, the obstructions presented by peers were almost insurmountable. One said, *‘One of the things that I think is most difficult when you are in one of these roles, is the contempt with which some academics treat you’*. Another added: *‘You get an awful lot of crap from people... I do have a significant number of colleagues who lack self control in their communications. And that, I think, is one of the things that adds very significantly to the stress of the role’*.

ADs seem to be being asked to implement strategies but without authority and without respect, and the high levels of personal frustration at not being able to contribute to the development of strategy or to be able to change things for the better for their colleagues was palpable.

For many of the individuals that we spoke to, a significant problem was how to manage their academic colleagues. People with whom they had previously worked, published and shared mutual academic respect reacted very differently towards them once they found themselves ‘becoming manager’ (Parker, 2004: 45). One individual said,

‘I guess the biggest thing for me has been to move from a situation where you are trying to deal with your colleagues on an individual research basis, to suddenly trying to get them to think strategically, and to find the resistance that they have to thinking outside their silo, and how they feel that any change and any commentary on them is regarded as criticism’.

For three of our interviewees the problems were very specifically with the older, more established academics.

‘Generally speaking, younger people understand what workload management involves, and that there is a relationship between that and (appraisal). There are still older people who regard both of these things as an imposition and will send extremely offensive five page emails about how imposed upon they are. If, instead of writing the five page email, they’d just sat down and done the damn form’.

In thinking about what might provoke such reactions, it may be useful to situate these within the wider context. Academics today work in a 'contested terrain of organizational forces and contradictions' (O'Doherty, 2002: 218) which is far more intrusive than has been previously. Pressures to both bring in funding and to publish now jostle for precedence with pressure to account for day to day activities and to manage these in visibly efficient and effective ways (see, for example, Parker & Jary, 1995, Prichard & Wilmott, 1997). The objective is to 'render the academic labour process more visible so that it can be subjected to greater control' (Ogbonna and Harris, 2004:1187).

At least one of the academics we spoke to found the term, 'professional manager' objectionable: *'One of the things that I find a great irritant ... is the phrase, the 'professionalisation' of the management role. It's one that the Pro Vice Chancellors are very keen on; they do not understand ... that if you had wanted to be a professional manager, you would not be in a role that caused you to go back to doing what you were doing before'*.

One interviewee commentated on this as being a situation where *'we are moving from academia being, as it were, conceptualised as a self-governing commonwealth, into something which is more managerial, yet most people who are senior are people who grew up in the Commonwealth of Academia'*. What emerges is a tussle between structure and agency. Academics have previously enjoyed a high degree of occupational freedom, quite necessary, some might argue, if academic success (however characterised) is determined purely by their personal abilities and capabilities. However, as the reins are tightened across the Higher Education sector 'the exclusivity, protection and autonomy which professions such as medicine, academia and law enjoyed, is now replaced by a culture of performativity' (Dent & Whitehead, 2002: 2)(sic). Academics as managers who attempt to mediate between strategies from the top and resistance from the bottom, could well be seen by those that they try to manage as the face of managerial intrusiveness. One commented: *'I think it's very easy for people in departments to think this wicked and evil Deanery is imposing all this rubbish on them, forgetting that the academics and the Deanery actually came from departments and will return to departments presumably'*.

This idea of being frustrated in their roles and having little in the way of cooperation from some of their colleagues provokes consideration of the support structures which these people might draw on.

Support *'All the time I was AD, I was increasingly losing touch with people'.*

Many of the respondents in this initial set of interviews talked about the need for formal and informal support systems to be established. This support, it was suggested, needed to consider the pragmatic issues of managerial skills and competences and moral and social support to help academics doing a management role to deal with what are often difficult and ambiguous situations. Most of those interviewed felt that they had some of the skills of management, but not all. For many there were two issues. The first related to their understanding of what management was. For many interviewees who were not from the Business School, this role was their first exposure to management and practices such as disciplinary and grievance procedures and making sense of a balance sheet were entirely new to them. Many felt that what might be of more use to them was time spent helping them to get to grips with the processes of management. One interviewee spoke about there being a failure to understand how an academic works.

'Because you go into with a set of skills, you've got a, b and c, but you actually needed, e and f.....none of us have all those skills, none of us have trained as managers, we acquire management skills, we have to'.

In support of Dearlove's (1998) assertion that academics lack the necessary interpersonal skills, many interviewees found dealing with people most difficult thing to do not least because the dealings that managers have with people are somewhat different from the dealings that academics have with their peers. These individuals find themselves not only having to tell people what they want them to do but also having to take charge of disciplinary procedures when necessary, something that many felt that they lacked the necessary skills to do. Although a number of interviewees said that they were aware that the institution did offer a range of training and development opportunities (usually related to leadership), they pointed out that nobody had told them what or where these were and that they had to be really quite proactive to work out how to avail themselves of these opportunities. Leadership appeared to be the key focus for the

institution, and at the time of the interviews, a new academic leadership programme had just been launched. Although most of the respondents hadn't yet started the course, those who had attended the first one felt that this *'failed to hit the mark'*, largely because those who designed the course seemed to be unclear as to what the role of the AD actually was. In many ways this can be seen as symptomatic of the disparities between the different roles and the different titles; what constitutes an AD role in one faculty might be totally different to what constitutes the role in another. Also, in line with more generic literature on the often uncomfortable and 'lonely' position of middle managers (Dopson & Stewart, 1990; Fenton O'Creevy, 2001, Thomas & Linstead, 2002, Sims, 2003, Clarke *et al*, 2007), it seems key that any training and development that might be provided for ADs not only acknowledges the inherent tensions in this dual role (Forbes *et al*, 2003) but also the emotionality of the job and the pressures on both individual and professional identity,.

The second area of support considered was personal support for the academic managers. This, we felt, was an important area to investigate as academics taking on management roles find themselves moving from one community of practice (Wenger, 1998) to another. This movement exposes them to new discourses, new networks and thereby new contexts through which to re-negotiate their self, their social, and their professional identities (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Humphreys & Brown, 2002). In addition to which these previously highly competent and confident people were now immersed in a role characterised by 'social opaqueness and status ambiguity' (Watson & Harris, 1999: 62). It would appear that in many cases, ADs are being left to contend with the 'myriad of discourses that are vying for attention as the individual engages in a constant process of identity construction' (Winter 2009:125).

Many of our interviewees spoke about the ways in which they had gone about establishing their own support networks. One respondent in particular gave a good indication as to why support networks are necessary:

'All the time I was AD I was increasingly losing touch with people, most of whom I knew quite well, and most of whom I'd worked with before, so I knew I had their respect. That meant a lot to me, and they would come and tell me things and I genuinely wanted to change it because I knew

what it was like. Having been an academic is really useful in that you know what it's like, and you knew they weren't just moaning about it. But there was this frustration that I didn't seem to be doing anything, or the systems were stopping me, or I didn't have the support to do it, or I didn't have the time to do it. And I think that the feeling that I wasn't able to make a difference made my separation from people even greater, if you know what I mean?'

Some respondents had been assigned mentors with varying degrees of success or had been able to learn from other colleagues who had performed the role. Some informal peer AD networks had been instigated but they tended to see each other 'across a crowded committee room' rather than in any regular structured way. Faced with this situation, many ADs created their own support networks, almost invariably from people in the same situation as them. Some were part of local level support groups within the institution:

'We have mutual support by moaning about things to each other, but I am not sure that we have exploited our strengths of being able to collaborate and share work out because we are just too busy keeping the show on the road'.

Others spoke of these support groups being the place where ADs could be honest with each other, away from the gaze of the Deans and the institutional hierarchy "you can say, 'in the privacy of this room I have got two people who are really not doing any teaching, and I can't do anything about this but this is my work around'- you can't say that in a formal meeting". And some of those interviewed expanded their networks beyond the confines of the institution, drawing on former colleagues or fellow members of academic circles for support. One talked about how, at conferences, she had lots of 'discussions about how ghastly our respective academic colleagues are'.

It was interesting to note that the people we interviewed felt that the people who they gained most from were those people who themselves had been through the academic as manager experience.

Contributing - “I really thought it would be about making and getting involved in strategy and trying to change that strategy”

The perceived lack of opportunity to contribute to strategy at faculty level and the reality of having responsibility but no authority were recurrent themes in the interviews. In the main, any expectations of the role were not supported by the reality; as one interviewee put it, *‘I envisaged that the role would require me to provide some of that strategic insight, some of that administrative know-how, how we’re going to get people to work together, and I think it was felt that those skills, that I had, would be useful to the faculty’*. Instead of engaging with the institution at a strategic level, individuals had found themselves entangled in day-to-day administrative roles; perhaps, as one said, *‘partly a failing of the university management structure’*. Equally, the experience and knowledge gained from having done the AD role does not seem to be being used, adding to the frustration of not feeling they were making a ‘proper contribution’. As one person said of his Dean: *‘I keep saying to him, you’ve got some of the best minds in the faculties as your heads of department. But at the moment you’re just telling them stuff, you’re not actually getting them to engage with problem solving’*. Opportunities for ADs to use the learning, to *‘put something back’*, about the university, wider Higher Education policy and being a manager that is gained during and after doing the AD role would be useful for both the individual, institution and wider academic community given the unique position of the AD returning to ‘the fold’. The extent to which ADs are able to engage with the role and how it affects their research activity is clearly affected by the amount of administrative support they receive and by the demands placed on their faculty at that time. In addition, the type of AD role and which area it was in also appeared to affect the breadth of each AD portfolio and the amount of direct line management they were responsible for. It is clear, however, that for almost all the people we spoke the role was or had been unexpectedly all-consuming. One said, *‘I did think that the role would be more bounded. I also thought it would probably involve more direct links to the University and a more obvious cascading down of strategic discussions from the University through faculties than it seems to have turned out to be’*.

Clarity of AD roles and functions, alongside pre and post appointment induction may help this situation. Of all the managerial skills that the respondents felt they lacked, interpersonal skills, such as having difficult conversations were by far the most often cited. Training and

development in these areas may go some way to helping academics with temporary management roles to better deal with the major challenge to their effectiveness - the attitudes of some of their academic colleagues.

Discussion

The findings outlined in this paper begin to provide a clue as to why many academics might not apply for temporary management roles and why, when they do, they often do not want to continue. It seems to be a missed opportunity that these at first enthusiastic individuals who want to make a difference are frequently left with the feeling that, *'You just do it, grit your teeth, get through three years, accumulate your study leave, pick up where you left off. Keep your head above water for three years and then go back to the real job, which is teaching and research'*. It also is concerning that those academics willing to get involved in taking forward the change agenda within universities are often those who have been persuaded to do so and do not relish the prospect of bringing about change.

Our aim is to add to the literature in this area by exploring the experience of the AD; a particular *type* of academic (that is, still practicing, with continuing research and teaching responsibilities, managing existing peers and colleagues), at a particular *level* in the organisation (importantly, below that of Dean) and from a particular *perspective* (qualitative, as a lived experience). This study addresses the call for research on a greater variety of management roles in HE (Bryman, 2007) and extends the research on the types of management teams (Bolden *et al.*, 2008, 2009a) and leadership styles (Middlehurst, 1993, Bryman, 2007, Deem *et al.*, 2007) that are currently being utilised in taking forward the University to meet the policy demands being placed on the HE sector. This initial study highlights the need for role clarity, appropriate support and an acknowledgement of the emotionality of holding a dual role as an academic and a manager. There is much literature on the tensions inherent in middle management positions across many sectors such as the health service (Forbes *et al.*, 2004) and the challenges of being managed and managing at the same time (Winter, 2009); in short, middle level management roles are often unscripted and unacknowledged (Clarke *et al.*, 2007).

Academics often struggle with what they are being asked to do, as both an existing member of the academic group and because the support structures provided by colleagues and the HEI can often be missing. Rather than being given an opportunity to influence strategy as is often anticipated, they find themselves embroiled in operational issues, dealing with colleagues who, perhaps understandably, treat them with suspicion or indifference. Finally, we have seen how a lack of clarity – both for the individual and organisation – about what the role of the AD is can lead to an under-utilisation of a group of committed and experienced individuals in the development of HE policy. Whilst training and development opportunities are being developed by bodies such as the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education and universities themselves, we feel that the ‘lived experiences’ of academics doing the job ought to provide vital input into the design of such programmes. We hope that this exploration will 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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