Focusing The Kaleidoscope: Investigating The Newly Formed Role Of "Academic Lead" At A Research-Led University

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Focusing the kaleidoscope:
Investigating the newly formed role of ‘Academic Lead’ at a research-led University

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01/08/15
Small Development Projects

Small development projects (SDPs) were first launched in 2004 - shortly after the creation of the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. Since then they have proven to be very popular and have introduced a range of innovative activities of benefit to higher education.
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Introduction

This paper reports on a research project, funded by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, exploring the ways in which one UK institution has implemented a new ‘distributed’ leadership model. Crucially, the project examines the impact of the model on both those who are leaders and those being led. The report is organised over seven sections. First, we provide the rationale for the study. Second, we give contextual background to the model being examined. Third, we outline the research project’s key aims and research questions. Next, we outline the theoretical framework that guided the study. Then, we describe the study’s methods, present the findings and, in the final section, highlight a range of questions which have arisen from our research for the case study institution to consider.
Rationale

Now, more than ever, higher education institutions in the UK and elsewhere are reflecting on the need for flexible leadership models to help adapt and react to the fast changing academic environment (Flumerfelt & Banachowski, 2011; Osseo-Asare, Longbottom, & Chourides, 2007; Randall & Coakley, 2007). Rapid shifts in the higher education sector are contributing to a kaleidoscopic ‘supercomplexity’ (Barnett, 2000) of challenges, structures, processes and value frameworks for academics who lead and for those who are led. In particular, with the introduction of increased student fees in 2012/13 following the publication of the Browne Report (2010), teaching quality and the student experience are receiving much more attention than has been the case in the past, especially in research-led institutions also under increasing pressure to perform well in the upcoming Research Excellence Framework. How are such institutions’ leadership structures and roles developing in response to these changes? And how do these responses affect academic staff in relation to their identity, status and career trajectory? These are the key questions that this project sought to address by exploring how one UK institution has implemented a new ‘distributed’ leadership model and looking at the impact of the model on both those who are leaders and those being led. The following contextual information on the Case Study University (hereafter called Sunnyside) has been gained through documentary analysis and conversations with senior Human Resources (HR) personnel at the University.
Context

Sunnyside is a research-led University in the UK with approximately 18,500 students and 1,100 academic staff. In 2010, as part of Sunnyside’s restructuring from subject-based Schools into larger Colleges, a new Academic Lead (AL) role was introduced in an attempt to build leadership capacity in the newly formed Colleges. Figure 1 below shows the generic leadership and management structure that each College had in place.

Figure 1: Generic College Management Structure at Sunnyside
It was envisaged that, at a discipline level, ALs would work closely with Directors of Education and Directors of Research to provide leadership, guidance, support and advice to a group of individual academic colleagues in their discipline or subject grouping (normally a group of about eight staff), as well as contributing to the decision making processes around resource allocation. ALs would also be members of the ‘senior management group’ of the College so that they were kept well informed about College priorities and strategies and able to engage with College wide decision-making. Alongside the introduction of the AL role, a new Performance and Development Review (PDR) system was launched to facilitate the translation of College and discipline strategies into individual objectives, while at the same time accommodating personal goals and ambitions. One of the key ideas underpinning distributed leadership and the PDR process at Sunnyside was that ALs, Directors of Research and Directors of Education would co-ordinate their actions so that personal goals agreed through the PDR process were holistic and proportionate, and that individual academics were well supported. Since 2010, more than 130 academic staff have been appointed to the AL role.

It is worth noting that when the initial College structures were implemented, a Head of Discipline (HoD) role was also created. This role was mainly envisaged as providing a point of reference for external interactions; indeed, the Head of Discipline did not have formal budget or HR responsibilities. In practice, however, Heads of Discipline, together with the Directors of Research (DoR) and Education (DoE), have become an important part of the College governance arrangements and this role has recently been formalised across Sunnyside.

An important point to make here is that at Sunnyside there are two different job ‘families’: Education and Research and Education and Scholarship, with each having their own contracts and slightly different focus within the Institution. Academics in the Education and Research group, who are actively researching in their field and required to meet targets in relationship to research income and academic publications, outnumber their more education-focused academic colleagues by approximately 3:1, although this proportion varies considerably in different parts of the institution. The Education and Scholarship academics are typically not (currently) actively researching in their field, but have a significant teaching load. They may take on Director of Education roles as they progress in their career, although DoE roles are also taken up by the ‘research active’ academics. It is possible in principle at Sunnyside for all academics to gain promotion to full Professor, if they meet certain criteria in relation to research, success and impact in their field and/or the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education.
The main aim of this project was to explore how one UK institution has implemented a new ‘distributed’ leadership model (that of the Academic Lead) and look at the impact of the model on both those who are leaders and those being led (who we have termed Assigned Academics).

To achieve these aims, the following specific research questions (RQs) were posed:

**RQ1:** How do Assigned Academics perceive and experience being ‘led’?

**RQ2:** How do Academic Leads describe and understand their experiences of being ALs?

**RQ3:** How do Assigned Academics perceive and experience the new PDR process?

**RQ4:** How do Academic Leads perceive and experience the new PDR process?
05 Theoretical framework

Theoretically, the study is framed at two levels. First, at the institutional level, we draw on ideas of distributed leadership (see Gronn, 2008 for an excellent discussion on this concept) to explore the model that has been introduced. While the concept of distributed leadership has been widely used in school leadership research (Mayrowetz, 2008; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2007; Woods, Bennett, Harvey, & Wise, 2004), it has been less widely applied to research exploring the higher education sector (Bryman, 2009). Second, at the level of the individual academic, we draw on a conceptual framework based on the interplay between the three related concepts of socialisation, identity and career trajectory. This framework has been successfully used by one of the authors in previous research investigating the role of the academic department head in both pre and post 1992 Universities (Floyd, 2012, 2013 Floyd & Dimmock, 2011).
To answer our research questions, the study used a two staged, mixed methods approach (Bryman, 2008). In doing so, we used an embedded mixed methods design (Cresswell, 2014), where the whole study was framed within a Humanistic philosophical framework (Newby, 2010). Underpinning this framework is an understanding of the value of human experience as central to data collection and analysis, and that experiences are socially constructed and experienced differently by individuals depending on a range of cultural, historical and situational factors. This approach is congruent with the principles of philosophical hermeneutics espoused by Gadamer (2003), which seek not to objectify human experiences but to create opportunities for dialogue and the shared constructions and explorations of meanings in order to enhance understanding.

Specifically, we used an exploratory, sequential mixed methods design (Cresswell, 2014) where qualitative data are gathered and analysed first, before quantitative data are collected from a larger sample size. Thus, in stage one, we conducted qualitative research undertaking interviews with 15 Academic Leads (ALs) and 15 Assigned Academics (AAs) about their experiences and perceptions of the role (3 from each College). The sample contained male (ALs = 9; AAs =8) and female (ALs = 6; AAs= 7) staff with a range of ages, levels of experience and discipline backgrounds. Table 1 shows the participants from each interview group (ALs and AAs), together with their ages and broad academic domain areas. To ensure anonymity for respondents, pseudonyms have been used throughout and all disciplines have been grouped into the umbrella terms of natural sciences, social sciences and humanities.

Table 1: Interview participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Leads</th>
<th>Assigned Academics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthur</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandon</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Francis</td>
<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Howard</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ian</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendra</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nel</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver</td>
<td>64</td>
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Following ethical approval, participants were identified and invited to take part via email. Each participant was interviewed for approximately one hour and interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis techniques outlined by Lichtman (2010). These data were supplemented with the analysis of key strategic documents linked to governance arrangements and working practices which helped in determining what management systems are in place to support the Academic Lead role and exploring how useful, or otherwise, they are. They were also used to determine the overall culture and working practices at Sunnyside, and the individual College culture within which each participant worked.

In order to examine whether the findings from stage one were indicative of staff perceptions and experiences across Sunnyside, in the second stage of the project we undertook a survey of all academic staff (n=1034) using an online questionnaire (Bristol On-Line Surveys) which was based on themes and issues emanating from the first stage of the project. The questionnaire was developed and subject to an initial peer review, followed by a full piloting exercise. Subsequently, an invitation and link to the survey and was sent out via email to all staff with one reminder email sent two weeks later.

In total 177 people completed the survey giving a response rate of 17.1%. As shown in figure 2 below, the survey was completed by 42 academic leads (17 female and 25 male) and 135 assigned academics (69 female and 66 male). The results of the survey were analysed and cross tabulated to compare data from those who were academic leads with those who were assigned academics.

Figure 3 shows the survey breakdown by age. As can be seen, there were 46 out of 135 AAs (34%) aged between 30-39, 49 (36%) aged between 40-49 and 32 (24%) aged between 50-59. The ALs were represented by older staff on the whole, with only 4 out of 42 (10%) being in the 30-39 age group. In contrast, 21 (50%) were in the 40-49 age group and 13 (31%) in the 50-59 age band.

Finally, figure 4 shows the survey breakdown by job title. The bar graph shows, not surprisingly, that the ALs included a large percentage of senior staff with the majority (41 out of 42 respondents) being Professors, Associate Professors or Senior Lecturers. In contrast, the AAs were represented by 47 staff members (35%) at Lecturer level.
Findings

The findings from both stages of the study have been combined and organised thematically, using the study’s research questions as headings.

**RQ1: How do Assigned Academics perceive and experience being ‘led’?**

**Assigned academics’ perceptions of the purpose of Sunnyside’s new Academic Lead role**

From the interview data, most of the early career academics express a sense of having deduced what an Academic Lead (AL) at Sunnyside must be, and must be for, from assorted informal communications, typically from immediate colleagues. Few are able to say that they had been given a clear account of why the role had been introduced and exactly how the relationship was supposed to operate. In addition, very few have any knowledge of how ALs within their own department had been selected. Some admit that there had probably been formal communications (emails from University management or presentations in College meeting), but that they are unable to recall details of the communication. Clare’s comment is fairly typical:

‘I don’t recall a very clear introduction to [the AL role]. I’m aware that there are Academic Leads and I know who my Academic Lead is, but it seems that was communicated … rather than an explanation of what the role would entail.’

Harold’s experience is similar:

‘Someone will have said, ‘oh, there’s this new system and we have to do it.’ I remember being much less freaked out by it than everybody else because I had had a real world job … I can see the point of it.’

Katherine recalls learning about the Academic Lead role in a departmental meeting:

‘I was told they did exist, I would have one …They will undertake your personal development reviews and they will become your god for promotion! [Laughter]’

James’s recollection was somewhat less benign as he reflected on what he considered to be lack of prior engagement with the academic community:

‘We had no session to explain what was the point of having academic leads. There was no discussion, no say, no consultation.’

The interview data suggest that there is a great deal of **variability in perceptions** of the purpose of the AL. Many assigned academics saw the role as a function of the ‘new managerialist’ era of higher education, where, as John puts it, leaders are ‘balancing many strategic priorities while still being responsible for their own academic work’. Jane, like others, talks of an environment in which there are multiple administrative demands in relation to teaching and a new emphasis on quality assurance alongside increasing ‘research demands’: for her, the AL role has been introduced to help deal with the ‘complex requirements of the academic role’.

Nick reflects on the way in which his own perception of the purpose of the AL role has changed since it was introduced:

‘My first impression was that this figure was a way to control … at the micro level. Of course I was also thinking it was a way to enhance, to help staff to develop their academic career. … But after two years … I perceive this figure more as someone who has to implement the policy from above [and] to help the individual staff member to develop his or her career. I feel it should be fifty-fifty [but] it’s not so fifty-fifty: it’s much more about what you should do for the university, rather than your own personal development.’
Amy talks about the variability of the ways in which the AL role plays out in practice; she has an informal and friendly relationship with her AL, who ‘quite often comes in here for a chat’, while the academic colleague with whom she shares a room has a very different experience: ‘She only ever comes into contact with [her AL] specifically for the PDR [Professional Development and Review] process.’ So for Amy and her colleague, located in the same room, the purpose of the AL role is interpreted very differently.

Jane, although recalling a time when colleagues were talking about the AL role as being ‘a surveillance tool’ for the organization, has not experienced working with her AL in that way: ‘That has not been the case in my experience.’ For Jane, as for most of the assigned academics, the increased number of academic leaders in the new Academic Lead system, as a distributed leadership model, is ‘good’, and she describes her understanding of the purpose of the role as being ‘probably based less on reading documents about what an academic lead is, and more on my gut feeling and the ways in which they carry themselves.’ Based on her own experience, she describes the AL in terms of ‘a mentoring role rather than a … surveillance tool’. Bert, however, recalls a college meeting where the idea of the new role was introduced where there was talk of ‘an increased desire for the university to monitor what we do’, and interprets the purpose of the role in that light. John interprets the AL role from what he confidently and approvingly sees as the university’s perspective:

‘The university needs certain things from us; you know, the targets which have been put there for us in terms of getting research funding and developing ourselves as teachers and so are all things which the university needs to survive and thrive, and [the AL role] is a way of making sure that I’m heading towards those things that they need me to do. Because it’s not something which happens naturally, we do need further guidance.’

Other functions and purposes of the role are observed by a number of interviewees. For Bert, the AL role has a group leadership function:

‘obviously to communicate information about a myriad different things, like teaching loads, or future jobs coming up. To basically look at the wellbeing of the group, so to make sure that everyone is happy and everyone performs to their ability.’

For Ruth, who is on the ‘education and scholarship’ academic track, the AL has a representative function:

‘Now we have academic leads it is a little easier for us, because [teaching-focused academics] are having a more defined role. [My AL] is really good, he knows what we need and he is really good at making our points heard, which I think is important at the moment in this transition.’

Harold also reflects on the role as representative, which Academic Leads have:

‘It’s almost as if an academic lead is saying, if I have to bat for you on some committee and defend your record so you can get promoted, what evidence can I have? Which makes it sound a bit adversarial between the academic and the University, but I suppose it’s the way it is.’

The assigned academics’ understandings of the purpose of the AL role are clearly influenced by their prior understandings of the nature and purpose of other leadership roles which operate alongside it. Jane remembers the new AL role being talked about in a staff meeting, and recalls trying with some difficulty to make sense of the relationship between the new Academic Lead role and that of the existing Director of Education and Director of Research. Nick also has difficulty differentiating between the purpose of the different leadership roles, and this is played out in practice when there is confusion about the purpose of meetings, if an academic leader is holding more than one type of leadership role:

‘My AL was also holding another major role in the department, so sometimes the meetings for the PDR, I didn’t really know if they were meetings on my PDR, on the policy from the University or on the organization of teaching, which is part of the PDR, or not. So I didn’t know whether I was meeting my Academic Lead or the Head or Director of something. So that’s very important, too: the ability to be able to keep your roles separated.’

Jane also experiences some discomfort caused by what appear to be overlapping line management functions:

‘There is management from the research side [and] management from the teaching side, and that has sometimes created some confusion as to what is expected of me.’

Harold considers the purpose of the AL role at a more philosophical level, reflecting on an inherent tension in any such purpose. He feels that the university wants the AL to ‘get the best out of the person they’re leading’, but recognizes that the institution is also trying to manage itself and reach its own goals. He elucidates:
‘Of course it depends on what is meant by the best, because the University’s idea of the best might be different from the person’s own idea. That’s the key point, isn’t it – the University has what it wants people to do and people have what they want to do themselves. And mostly they align.’

To sum up, although most of the assigned academics interviewed do not have a clear recollection of being told about the purpose of the AL role, they are able to articulate a general sense of its purposes and almost all are in favour of the more distributed leadership model implied by it.

In relation to the purpose of the role of Academic Lead, mixed results were found from the survey data as shown in figure 5. From the chart, it can be seen that although 80 AAs (59%) felt they were clear about the purpose, 37 assigned academics (27%) were unsure of the key focus of the role.

A similar split can be seen in figure 7 in relation to whether Assigned Academics understand how the role fits into the management structure of the college, with 47 AAs (35%) believing that they do versus 60 AAs (44%) believing that they do not. Clearly, these data suggest that there is work to be done at Sunnyside to ensure that everyone is clear about the role and purpose of the Academic Lead within the College structure.

The survey data also suggests that assigned academics have differing views on whether the role boundaries are clearly defined or not. For example, figure 6 shows a clear split between 46 AAs (34%) who think that the boundaries are clearly defined and 57 AAs (42%) who do not.
Assigned academics’ positive experiences of working with an Academic Lead

The predominant response by the early career academics interviewed in relation to the experience of working with colleagues designated as Academic Leads at Sunnyside is certainly positive. Quite a high degree of variability of experience is evidenced; this is seen, for example, in the degree of involvement with an AL and the number of interactions with her or him, in that a few assigned academics only see their AL once a year for the PDR meeting while others encounter or work with their AL on an almost daily basis. However, the predominant view is that relationships between assigned academics and their Academic Leads have been good natured, purposeful and, in some cases, extremely beneficial to the early career academics.

Many of the assigned academics interviewed for the study describe specific ways in which they have been supported and encouraged by their Academic Lead. Interviewees use words such as ‘space’, ‘focus’, ‘encouragement’ and ‘influence’, which connote the kinds of respect and dialogue wished for in the ‘good’ leadership described in the previous section. Nick describes his relationship with his AL as ‘very good’:

‘There was space for me to develop and for discussion… It’s not just that you work, you want also to develop your own career.’

Amy describes how as a result of working with her AL she has become ‘more focused – it’s validated my choices a little bit more’. Amy goes on to express the experience of having her own sense of academic purpose confirmed by her AL:

‘She has influenced me … although maybe that was just confirming what I probably knew deep down…’

Sylvia is also very positive and speaks at length about the impact her AL has made upon her personally:

‘I have a very high respect for [my Academic Lead]… She is really a very encouraging person and really pointed out the cases where you can improve. … I feel somehow as if I’ve been recognized. She really makes you feel as if you have done something and can be proud of yourself … so you feel as if you have been recharged.’

The suggestion here is that Sylvia has both gathered energy and also felt personally affirmed through the relationship. She appreciates the ways in which her AL has ‘opened herself up to say how she had got a helping hand’. Sylvia says her own teaching has benefited from her AL’s insight into teaching as ‘she has very good teaching evaluations, and I was asking her how she did that and then she exchanged her experiences and advice. So that’s great, I think’. Ruth, too, talks of how her AL has ‘modelled different teaching methods, including use of new technologies in teaching’ for her.

As a research-active academic, Sylvia particularly values leadership support in relation to attracting research funding:

‘Funding is like a huge thing … but now [leaders in my department] have a strategy where they all bid for this funding, but they always involve the junior member so that everyone can say they’ve got funding. We work as a team rather than individuals.’

She represents the academic leads in her department as forming a group which works with others in leadership roles, and fosters an inclusive group ethos.

James also feels that his relationship with his AL, particularly through the annual Performance and Development Review (PDR), has had a significantly positive effect on his work. He describes how his Academic Lead:

‘explained to me that I should concentrate on maybe fewer publications but with higher visibility or with more high profile publications. … That made me think of how to organize my research.’

Tobias, too, feels that his approach to research has benefited from the mentorship provided by his Academic Lead, who was:

‘very, very helpful in terms of suggesting publishers for a book that I was working on and very interested and invested in the [research] project I was looking at.’

John talks about how his AL has been helping him ‘get to grips with the system’ of the institution; the AL has been particularly helpful in welcoming him to Sunnyside with ‘coffee and an informal chat’ as part of his induction. Jane finds that working with her AL has been ‘a very, very rewarding type of exchange’, which has helped her to focus on goals by discussing future directions through dialogue:
‘Ok, so where are you going next? And what are you going to do? You have all these strands of research, which one is it going to be?’

Katherine, too, speaks of how working with her AL has helped her to identify her own personal strengths and weaknesses and move forward:

‘I’m much clearer what my goals are for the rest of the academic year and the next two years. I’m also much clearer on the perceptions of my strengths and weaknesses, in terms of how his perceptions compare with mine; they might not be the same, but that’s absolutely fine. I’m also encouraged for the first time in probably quite a long time.’

James is happy with his Academic Lead and in particular with the mentoring aspect of the relationship:

‘I consider him as a mentor – and I don’t want to think of him as, as part of the management. I would like to consider him more as somebody I can rely on, instead of somebody who was here to control what I’m doing, which would be the case in a company, for example.’

Overall, the individual relationships between Academic Leads and the academics assigned to them seem to be generally successful, and sometimes extremely successful, particularly where some kind of accommodation has been made between the mentoring aspect of the role and any more directive managerial requirements. The creation of spaces for a listening ear, practical advice and encouragement has proved especially beneficial.

These findings were also reflected in the survey data in the main, although responses differed somewhat depending on how effective Assigned Academics felt their Academic Leads were. Figure 8 shows that although the majority of AAs (72; 53%) agreed that their AL was effective at providing guidance and support, 32 (24%) did not.

However, when asked about their relationship with their Academic Lead (shown in figure 9) the majority of Assigned Academics felt that they had a positive relationship. Indeed, 90 AAs (66%) agreed that this was the case and only 15 (11%) disagreed.
Assigned academics’ negative experiences of working with an Academic Lead: problems and limitations

Only one of the academics interviewed gave an unremittingly negative picture of working with their academic lead; some others offered a degree of criticism, and a small number were able to talk of having had two different academic leads, where one has been considerably more helpful than the other. As indicated above, most of the interviewees appreciate the support, input and accessibility of their AL, and the following analysis of difficulties must be seen within that context.

For a small minority of the participants, the experience of working with their academic leads had been very difficult, and even distressing. Clare, a mature ‘early career’ academic, talks of how she ‘had absolutely no confidence in that person whatsoever, right from the outset’. She explains further:

‘I knew myself to be more experienced and better qualified than the person who just by circumstance ended up as my Academic Lead. Therefore I didn’t have any confidence that that person would be able to lead me anywhere or even be academic either. … I was very disappointed. … The person concerned wasn’t really able to give me any guidance … Couldn’t really give me any aims or discuss anything on that kind of level at all.’

For Clare, the problem is that she doesn’t have the ‘right’ Academic Lead. She wants to work with someone who has ‘travelled the same route’ so that genuine understanding could develop in the relationship:

‘If the other person hasn’t then they can’t really share your concerns and anxieties or expectations, and it’s very difficult to be on the same wavelength.’

Tobias tells a similar tale in relation to one of his ALs, expressing frustration that he or she was unable to give him the necessary guidance:

‘I think that if someone’s actually going to be helpful in that role, they have to know your work, and what you’re working on, to be able to offer advice.’

Nick has fundamental concerns about leadership in his department more widely, which affect his view of the Academic Lead role:

‘There is little space for constructive comments and for creativity from below, from staff. It’s really a lot about guidance, guidelines coming from above… There is not much space for the personal, for original thinking or freedom.’

He also argues for the needs for a focus on the assigned academic’s own personal development, rather than ‘what you should do for the university’. On the probation programme and needing to meet certain targets to complete that successfully, Nick had wanted more personal support:

‘I thought it should have been a kind of exchange of ideas, constructing exchanges. It turned out to be, in my experience, a very strong, pushy way to implement the policy from above.’

In general, negative experiences for the early career academics of working with an AL stem from the Academic Lead’s not being willing or able to make time for the individual and/or to advise appropriately on issues important to the academic, whether those are in relation to teaching, research or just getting familiar with the institution as an organization. The most negative experiences are characterized by a perceived lack of respect by the AL for the assigned academic (and vice versa) and an overly directive style, but in general assigned academics felt that ALs were in practice emphasizing the mentoring aspect of the role, which works well, notwithstanding the perception expressed by most participants that there is an inherent tension between ‘mentoring’ and ‘managing’: that tension is explored further here from the perspective of the early career academics interviewed.

Conflicts or tensions, as perceived by assigned academics, between the Academic Lead as mentor and the Academic Lead as line manager

All of the interviewees refer at some point to their awareness of the pressures upon a modern university to perform well as a business, recognizing the well documented tension between the value framework of a traditional university and that of a 21st century institution needing to operate in a highly complex and competitive business context; Terry refers to this succinctly as the ‘messy institutional environment’ of higher education.
Nick sums up a common perspective when he expresses the view that:

‘It’s really difficult to manage a University like this … The University is not private, it’s public, but it runs like a private company. … A culture of research, of academia, should be developed more, but people are so overwhelmed.’

A number of participants, including Nick, perceive that senior university leaders themselves are ‘overwhelmed by the normal business of the university’, citing the stresses of having to meet very demanding business targets. Clare notes that:

‘There’s perhaps in higher education, in certain areas, a rather over competitive, overheated kind of atmosphere where everybody’s scrabbling to carve out a role for themselves, to distinguish themselves from other colleagues.’

However, this sense of being in a heated business cauldron is not universally experienced in relation to perceptions of Sunnyside’s leadership styles. Sylvia, whose previous working experience has been in China, contrasts the organizational expectations there with those at Sunnyside:

‘In the Chinese system, the leader is the leader, so you are basically told what you should do and what you should not. … The leader really is like a head of state, they decide what the business should be like. … I think here [in the UK] it is more open and straightforward … because you’re being evaluated by your performance and your personal values rather than something else. … Here you can have your own aims and targets and goals and there is always a way you can achieve that.’

Terry notes that ‘here in academia there’s a lot more autonomy’ than in the business sector. Amy, having also worked outside academia, notes – in contrast to the typical working experience among the interviewees – how ‘relaxed’ the university is, at least by comparison with her former place of employment:

‘I was surprised when I first started that academia is so completely different from the world outside. It’s completely different from any business I’ve worked in. It’s very relaxed, which is a good thing, but … it’s almost like being self-employed but being employed, because everyone tends to work their own hours and to work where and when they’re needed. … It’s a funny environment … it probably could be quite a lonely job.’

Amy feels that given the potential isolation of individuals within academia, it is ‘even more important to have a strong academic lead and somebody that’s almost going to look out for you’. Jane, again atypically, is somewhat scathing about academic colleagues who complain about the growing burden of administration in academia:

‘Yes, it’s increasingly demanding, but it’s not nuclear physics. It just takes good organizational skills and that’s something one learns in the process of becoming an academic. I think it’s just new – you know, coming from a very sheltered academic culture where the academic was in his or her ivory tower and would impart knowledge to the hoi polloi … It’s just different now, times are changing.’

Despite the notable exceptions above, the most frequent perspective among the assigned academics is that there is a great deal of pressure to meet the competing demands of research, teaching and administration, all of which are seen competitively in terms of targets. This can lead to a strongly competitive culture in some subject disciplines. As James puts it:

‘Many people are trying to make their own career or their own success without taking into account what are the others’ goals.’

Sophie, a Director of Education as well as an Academic Lead, describes experiencing significant stress as a result of demanding targets for generating research income, referring to one colleague who ‘failed to meet her targets and has subsequently left’. Sophie argues strongly that these targets were not realistic, and that what she describes as a ‘blanket target’ for her to apply for more than £500,000 pounds worth of funding when she is also fulfilling a Director of Education role is unrealistic. She comments:

‘To give you an idea of the benchmark in my profession, one of the top professors in my field [has] to apply for [only] £150,000 in research income.’

In Sophie’s experience, she and her immediate colleagues, with whom she gets on very well, feel that the targets are ‘pushing people so hard that it’s very difficult to have a life as well as working here’. She cites lack of support, and notes that the environment is particularly hard for women academics who work part time, are returning from family-related career breaks and/or are taking on pastoral or education-related responsibilities. She observes, she feels, a ‘glass ceiling’ at Sunnyside, and wants to see a culture where there is ‘more praise’ for what is achieved.
So there is considerable variation across the interviews as a whole, exemplified in the contrast between Amy’s experiences with those of Sophie, in the extent to which Academic Leads are taking a target-driven managerial approach or a more person-centred mentoring approach to the relationship between Academic Leads and the academics assigned to them. The perceived differences here, and in the degree of personal autonomy afforded to early career academics at Sunnyside, appear to depend in part on what comparisons are made to evaluate Sunnyside’s current institutional culture. They also appear to be influenced by which subject discipline the participant is from and also by the personality and approach of the individual Academic Lead. This variation seems to come down to a significant extent to the culture of the particular department, as Clare recognizes: ‘I’ve worked in more than one department and they’re very, very different.’

It is within this mixed context that Tobias explains that he prefers the term ‘academic lead’ to that of manager, as the latter ‘doesn’t really signify that kind of personal interest’. By contrast, Matthew, speaking about the new AL role, says:

‘A term I’ve heard used as a synonym, and it means something quite different, is ‘line manager’, and to me that makes more sense.’

James, like many participants in the study, notes the inherent tension in a role which tries to combine that of mentor and line manager, if indeed that combination of roles is implied by this new ‘Academic Lead’ designation:

‘I think the Academic Lead, as a mentor, is somebody who is very, very useful, I think. But when we consider the academic lead as part of the chain of leadership, it’s much more problematic, I think.’

Bert similarly notes this, and argues that the current role, which he identifies as indeed having that dual purpose, inhibits open communication:

‘So you would be asked if you are getting into difficulties or things like that, but [the AL] is also there to evaluate you as well … you certainly can’t unburden yourself to an Academic Lead.’

Matthew notes that there is:

‘tension between the management side, the administrative target and the pressure on budgets that we’re well aware of, and the academic side.’

He sees the solution as creating an environment where ‘people are pulling in the right direction’, referring to the need for leaders to be able to ‘get rid of people’ who ‘aren’t pulling their weight’.

A number of participants note what they consider to be the powerlessness of or constraints upon colleagues who take on the Academic Lead role. For Nick, the ALs ‘have to implement what they are told’. He argues that ‘there is not much space for personal, original thinking or freedom’. Bert perceives that in his discipline the AL, like the Head of Discipline, has ‘an utterly powerless role’ because of the difficult relationship between the college and the subject department. He sees both the HoD and the AL as being just conduits for information, when they have it, but with no power. Difficult institutional decisions, Bert feels, are being made with no consultation:

‘I understand it’s a tough economic situation and cuts have to be made, but if these people have more autonomy or there is more communication there then people could prepare for this or they would know what’s going on. It struck me that the academic leads are just communicating this information, rather than having the power to share things.’

James notes the difficulty of being an AL when you have to ‘balance the necessity of listening to people’ with being ‘part of the management’, where you have also to press people and to push them to do more in this direction or in that direction.

Harold sees the issue compounded by the fact than academics tend to be reluctant managers:

‘The point about academia in contrast to many other jobs is that nobody who’s an academic really wants to be doing anything managerial. They want to be academics.’

Katherine asks rhetorically whether an AL really is a mentor – for example, when she needs to talk with someone about very difficult and personally upsetting student issues in relation to the personal tutoring of students who may have mental health issues. Is it the AL’s role to mentor her through that? Her narrative suggests that she suspects not, but also that she feels the lack of a personal mentor who can provide that kind of support.

Overall, there is a consistent sense of appreciating the need for an Academic Lead as a mentor. However, the picture is more mixed in relation to whether the tension between taking a mentoring role and a line management role is workable, and this complication is compounded by
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a considerable variation in the extent to which ALs appear to be (being required to) apply pressure on their assigned academics to meet demanding targets in relation to research income.

These findings are also reflected in the survey data, as shown in figure 10, with the majority of Assigned Academics (70; 52%) happy about the mentoring aspect of the role compared with 37 (27%) not agreeing with the statement.

While there are a number of staff who are not happy with the mentoring aspect of the role, perhaps due to negative experiences detailed above through the interview data analysis, it is abundantly clear that the vast majority of Assigned Academics believe that this should be a very important focus of the position. This is illustrated in figure 11 where 82 AAs (61%) believe that the role should be mainly about mentoring staff while only 21 AAs (16%) disagree with this statement.

RQ2: How do Academic Leads describe and understand their experiences of being ALs?

Academic Leads’ perceptions of Sunnyside’s new Academic Lead role and its purpose

‘The training early on gave the impression that this is a bit of a buddy process. It isn’t really. It’s a more serious game than that.’ (Brandon)

Before looking at how the Academic Leads have experienced the role in practice, we consider here the ways in which the ALs who participated in the study construct their understanding of the original purpose of the new role. There is some variation in these constructions, in particular with respect to the degree of line management responsibility allocated in principle to the Academic Lead and also in terms of how the AL role relates to the other key leadership roles of Director of Research, Director of Education and Head of Discipline.

For Brandon, the purpose of the AL role is clear. It relates to the need for a leader to take a holistic interest in the work and progress of the individual academics assigned to them:
'The theory, I think, is perfectly sensible... Who looks after a member of academic staff, whether they are teaching only or teaching and research, in the round? Who actually cares about the overall career development and performance of this individual in the round?'

Brandon perceives the coaching dimension of the role as very important and sees the function of the new ALs as 'joining up' the messages from the other leaders with their diverse research and education portfolios:

'I do think that instead of staff getting mixed messages about 'research is the most important thing in your life, forget everything else', or 'yes, go and develop that new degree programme and spend two years doing it', they're actually getting a single message. Because those Academic Leads are part of the college management group and so the Executive Group is talking directly to the Academic Leads, and they ought to have the bigger picture.'

Arthur, too, sees this connectedness as making sense in the original purpose of the role. He sits on a management group at college level, which he sees as a formal structure in which, in theory, the college 'both disseminates important information to its staff through the academic leads and also things are filtered back and taken to the senior management within the college'.

Lisa sees the AL role as being 'very closely tied to mentoring, but with a career focus'. But Diane sees it as being 'a mentor, but also somebody who disciplines staff', noting however that 'it's a bit ambiguous as to whether the academic lead is somebody who disciplines somebody or whether that's the Head of Department, or me as Director of Education'. Howard, who is a Director of Research as well as an Academic Lead, sees the AL role as:

'part mentoring... partly just being supportive, yet chivvying: 'Oh, you said six months ago you will work on this grant application, how's it going?’.… Obviously another part of the Academic Lead's role is where there are management issues… Academic Leads are the ones that are often asked to have a word with that member of staff. So I guess it's part nice guy… but also partly line management, for example dealing with people getting poor [module evaluation] scores.'

For Kendra, the purpose of the Academic Lead role is 'a slightly off mix of two things. The supportive, mentoring, coaching role, which is great - I understand that thoroughly – [but also] a more coercive management role'. The required balance between the two, she says, is unclear:

'The mood music is all about mentoring, but there's also a very hard-nosed expectation.'

Kendra feels, however, that in practice individuals have 'room to play it in the most productive way'.

As Chris sees it, the original purpose of the new AL role was to 'spread the power a bit'; and for Martin it was about 'reducing the burden on Heads of Department'. Jack notes similarly that ALs were introduced so that they would 'have under their umbrella a sensible number of staff that they could deal with. And there would be a director of research and a director of education who would deal with discipline-level issues.' But for Chris the function of the AL was always unclear in relation the other leadership roles:

'I think this is an attempt at some kind of matrix management, but you can't look at the AL role outside the other new structures, where you have an Associate Dean for Education, who although he or she does answer to the Dean of the College, also answers to the Dean of Education and answers to the DVC Education. So that's not a clear line direction (for the ALs), and it causes confusion. … In any organization where you don't have that clarity you have communication problems. And it can damage morale, so I think we need to address that.'

Ian takes a particularly critical view, referring to a lack of institutional clarity with respect to the Academic Lead from its inception:

'When they introduced [the role], they weren't really clear. There was no documentation about what an Academic Lead should do – and I still don't know... They talked about this notion of mentoring but they had no sense of what that was, what it required, what the skill set should be [and] from one year to the next they don't know where the paperwork is. There's nothing iterative about the process. They just want the paperwork to come out once a year, look at it, put it in a box … I still don't know what it's for and they can't decide whether they want to manage people who are not progressing or whether they want to mentor them. They're not the same thing, as far as I'm concerned.'

Arthur perceives that there are different conceptions of the AL role operating at different levels of the organization:

'We're told two very different things (about the AL role), depending on whether you ask the college or you ask the university. The university in all its communications and its training emphasized that this was a mentoring role purely.
It’s about trying to get the best out of your staff, and trying to help them fulfil their career goals and all that sort of stuff. The college sees it very differently, I think; the college sees it very much as a line management role… We are responsible for the performance of our team and for reporting on both the positives and negatives in order that action can be taken.’

Arthur notes, however, that his role as AL is influential in relation to the college’s management because he ‘feeds into recognition and reward processes.’ For George, the AL role is something which metamorphosed from a previous research mentoring role, noting, as do other interviewees, that there is a potential difficulty in expecting successful research-focused academics to lead colleagues who may be on teaching-focused contracts:

‘This whole notion of line management was thrown in, rather than being a mentoring/coaching role. The academic leads, strangely enough, continued to be your professorial staff, your leading researchers, even though they are not necessarily the best placed to do the appraisal of the teaching and administrative side.’

Brandon similarly notes a potential problem ‘in that most ALs are research professors and therefore can’t lead an academic ‘in the round’.’ He states,

‘They’ll pay lip service to a certain extent but [will focus almost entirely on] research grants, income targets… It will be driven that way and then there will be some lip service paid to teaching performance.’

Few Academic Leads are able to articulate a sense of knowing to whom the ALs are designed to be accountable in that role, and what that might mean. Those who can are in one of the most senior roles, responsible for academic leads who were themselves responsible for a number of academics. Some ALs are adamant that there is no line of accountability; George sums up the perspectives of a number of colleagues when he says:

‘I’m not really aware of there being any accountability for the role… I don’t know of a method by which the academic leads are accountable.’

Once again, there is some variability in understandings of the original purpose of the AL role; for some, the role was always either unclear or the embodiment of contradictory expectations, whereas for others the role is clear and logical in its function of joining up different dimensions of academic practice in the leaders’ holistic involvement with the career and progress of their assigned academics.

This variability was also found in the survey data, as shown in figure 12 below. Figure 12 indicates that although 29 ALs (45%) agreed that they were clear about the purpose of the role, 9 (21%) did not.

The variability in understanding of the original purpose of the role can also be seen when looking at the survey results in response to the statement The role boundaries are clearly defined as set out in figure 13. Here, 13 ALs (31%) agreed with the statement while 18 ALs (43%) disagreed.
One of the reasons that this variability exists could be down to the perceived communication issues felt by large numbers of ALs when asked whether they felt that information about the role had been communicated clearly to staff. 19 (45%) disagreed with the statement, as opposed to 11 (26%) who agreed with it. These responses can be seen in figure 14. It would seem that Sunnyside needs to communicate information about the role more clearly to staff in the future, especially to those who are actually taking on the AL roles.

Academic Leads’ positive experiences of the Academic Lead role

Reflecting on the ways in which they have made the role work in practice, the Academic Leads interviewed were able, like the assigned academics, to give many examples of ways in which the role has had a positive impact. These positive dimensions range beyond the one-to-one AL/AA relationship to ways in which the ALs as a group work are able under certain circumstances to work constructively together.

The AL role appears to work particularly well when there is opportunity for ALs to get together as a group and also to discuss issues arising with other key leaders. Diane, for example, describes purposeful meetings:

‘We have unit coordination group meetings, where the Director of Research, the Heads of Department and Director of Education meet with the academic leads and discuss issues that have come up (and) what the priorities are. And we talk about particular staff needs and interests, and I try and shape the division of teaching around what the staff needs and interests are. … I would present [the plan for teaching] to the academic leads … and we would have a discussion about balancing certain people, who we should be suggesting study leave for, who maybe needs protecting a bit. [We] really respect people’s research needs as much as possible by having a dialogue [to discuss] what they really want to teach and what is best for their careers. And we try to engage them all the way along the line with, well, we can’t actually do that for you this year, but if you do this then maybe we will do a bit of that next year and balance things out a bit.’

Arthur, too, refers to the opportunities he has had through his AL role to bring issues raised to the college management group and College Dean. Oliver finds this dimension of the role particularly productive, talking of how it is good to have regular unit meetings to share issues openly:

‘It’s a very informal meeting, so it’s for all the academic leads and the heads of research to come together to discuss the way things are going. … Here all the people can sort of meet informally… Those are unscheduled meetings but really critical for people to keep in touch and sort of develop a policy as to what they’re going to do and the, of course, there are staff meetings where people are briefed about what’s going on.’

Academic Leads

Figure 13: The role boundaries are clearly defined

Figure 14: Information about the role of Academic Lead has been communicated clearly to staff
In addition, many ALs refer to the benefits of the mentoring side of the role. For Evelyn, mentoring is ‘the rewarding part of the job, because people appreciate it’. Similarly for Chris, ‘The positive aspect is the mentoring role… That’s very valuable, I think; that could be developed.’ Diane recalls how ‘we sat down together and tried to resolve things… That was successful’. For Arthur, ‘It’s all about the relationships you build up’; he enjoys ‘seeing people … blossom, really develop’. And for Arthur, the mentoring is not a one way relationship. He notes that ‘In helping others to grow, I’m learning’. In a similar vein, George notes the benefits of ‘Opening up doors to people who thought they were closed, really – that’s been very positive. It also makes me feel good about myself [Laughter]’. For Lisa, ‘It’s nice to feel that it is possible to help people develop their careers and grow as an academic, and share my experience.’

The survey data also reflected the fact that the majority of staff were pleased with the mentoring aspect of the role. As can be seen in figure 15, 30 ALs (71%) agreed with the statement *I am happy with the mentoring aspect of the role* and only 7 (16%) disagreed.

In practice, the mentoring is characterized in terms of enabling assigned academics to progress in some substantive way. For example, Evelyn has worked with one academic assigned to her in order to help her to progress her career, which was struggling, by co-authoring a paper with her, to ‘show her the ropes’. ‘And I’m making a real difference to her, I know I am,’ she says. Brandon talks of how ‘It’s really great … to be able to promote people’s careers’. He, as a teaching-focused academic, particular appreciates being empowered to encourage other teaching-focused staff to apply successfully for grants relating to the scholarship of teaching and learning, and to free them up to take on some leadership themselves in relation to curriculum or working with students so that they become agents of change for the institution. Arthur refers to his sense of satisfaction when some of his assigned academics were awarded Fellowships or Senior Fellowships of the Higher Education through an accredited, institutional Continuing Professional Development scheme: ‘I find that really exciting.’ George feels that it has been enjoyable trying to motivate staff and ‘to see their educational endeavours, and the scholarship they do that might not necessarily be appropriate for the REF [Research Excellence Framework] but is still making a major contribution, often within their professional networks. I have really enjoyed that.’

Other benefits for the Academic Leads themselves are alluded to in the interviews. Jack, in seeing those he leads ‘do very, very exciting things’, feels ‘more connected’ to the academic community: the ‘connection’ motif is repeated.
several times. He also feels that ‘you’re learning yourself’ through the role, and ‘you get to see how the university works’ and ‘see things on quite a few different sides’. Evelyn talks of how even the administrative side of the AL role has ‘legitimacy’ in an academic setting: through the administration, she says, ‘you’re actually contributing something to the university’.

For the Academic Leads as for the assigned academics, there appear to have been many examples of successful activity stimulated by that relationship. This applies both to research-focused and to teaching-focused academics, and the interviews overall paint a picture of a range of very productive and meaningful activity arising from the relationships between Academic Leads and their assigned academics.

Academic Leads’ negative experiences of the Academic Lead role: problems and limitations

Most of the difficulties associated with the AL role come from a perceived tension between the combination of mentoring and line management functions, and these will be analysed in detail in the next section of this report. Here, we consider a number of difficulties and challenges which were conveyed by participants which are not directly related to that tension.

For some ALs, the difficulties stem from what are perceived as crossed lines of responsibility between the Academic Leads role and that of other leaders: the Directors of Education, Directors of Research and (less commonly) Heads of Discipline (HoDs), who are sometimes referred to as Head of Department by the participants. Howard, for example, feels that the AL role ‘has interfered with [his] role as Director of Research’, in that ‘some of the discussions I used to have are now being done by somebody else’. He continues:

‘You either don’t have certain discussions or you duplicate discussions with the Academic Leads, and then you run the risk of different messaging.’

Lisa, as Head of Discipline, feels that the HoDs themselves ‘aren’t actually recognized; they’re just the person who actually does all the teaching allocations and so on’. And she observes that ‘the relationship between Head of Department and Academic Leads is not at all clear, either’. Oliver also perceives that there are ‘unclear lines of responsibility, for example with respect to workload allocation’. He comments:

‘I know they justify the Academic Lead as distributed leadership, but I think distributed leadership is one thing but distributed management is another. In the end … you do need some management and boundaries, and by and large that tends to be done by someone who’s head of the unit [HoD].’

Nel also speaks of the challenge of being a Director of Education and an Academic Lead at the same time, arguing that this reinforces a ‘hierarchical structure’ and a ‘double layer’ of management, which is there for some academics and not for others. Arthur notes that ‘the lines of management are very complicated; they come from the research direction, the education direction and then through the formal management structure’. He explains that in his AL role, ‘while it should be me balancing up all those things and having direct contact with the people I lead; actually, in reality that’s not how it works’. Diane speaks of a tension caused by lack of clarity about the ways in which those in Academic Lead roles should interact with other leadership roles:

‘(There are) not good communications within the university system about how Academic Leads work, how Directors of Education work, how Directors of Research work, and what is the role of the Heads of Department. I don’t think anyone knows… Heads of Department are not budget holders anymore, so what is their role? Are they just a super Academic Lead, or are they a super Director of Education, or are they completely removed from that?’

These frustrations were also clearly evident from the survey data, although they do not reflect the majority view. Figure 17 shows the responses to the statement I understand how the role fits into the management structure of the college. As can be seen, 24 ALs (57%) agreed that they did understand how the role fitted into the management structure of their college, but 13 ALs (31%) did not. Although a minority of the group as a whole, it is still worrying that a substantial number of people in Academic Lead positions did not seem to know how their role related to college management structures.
Focusing the kaleidoscope: Investigating the newly formed role of ‘Academic Lead’ at a research-led University

How many academics do you line manage?
- 20
- 18
- 16
- 14
- 12
- 10
- 8
- 6
- 4
- 2
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**Figure 17: I understand how the role fits into the management structure of my College**

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‘You don’t, as an AL, have that kind of power; you don’t have those decisions in your gift.’

Chris illustrates this with a military analogy:

‘You’re expected to be responsible and accountable, but you don’t actually have the power to do anything. It’s a bit like being a Lance Corporal, you’ve got the stripe and if anything goes wrong you get the blame, but actually everybody knows you’re just a Lance Corporal so they’re not really going to do very much of what you say, you have to go to the Sergeant Major to get any real bite.’

The ALs appear to be negotiating within their own thoughts between wanting to help, support and advise their assigned academics and yet feeling that their authority to act, to effect change, is very limited.

**Leading in a target-driven and male dominated culture** is also difficult for a number of ALs, for a variety of reasons. Arthur sees some difficulties as stemming from a clash of perspectives on the direction of travel:

‘The frustrating part of the job is trying to lead a group of academics who don’t want to go in the same direction and sometimes feel that they’re at the university by their own grace, and that’s hard.’

For Evelyn, it is hard to ‘tell people the harsh realities’. For her, too, there are ‘expectations of achievement’ which are ‘not realistic for people in certain situations, for example women who have been away to give birth’. She continues, ‘there are far fewer women entered into the REF than men anyway’, alluding to issues relating to the well documented unequal representation of women in senior roles in academia; here she echoes comments made by assigned academic Sophie.

Administration and administrative support are also challenging for some. Although generally ALs have few complaints about this dimension in their role, for some the administrative dimensions of the role can be problematic. Arthur cites ‘lack of administrative support’; and for George, too, there is a problem with administration in support of all leadership roles whereby in the larger college structures ‘Professional services staff are now aligned to a college and not to the [subject discipline]’. ‘It’s a mess,’ he says, because the administrative staff members ‘have difficulty meeting the needs of individual specialist subject groups, especially those with peculiar external professional body requirements.’

It would appear that any understanding and analysis of the effectiveness or otherwise of the Academic Lead model of leadership at Sunnyside needs to be considered within this wider context of the perceived lack of clarity with regard to the responsibility boundaries of its other leadership and management roles.

**Feeling powerless to change things** which may need to be changed in order better to support their assigned academics is, for a number of ALs, problematic. For Kendra, the difficult parts of the role are ‘Helping colleagues who are particularly frustrated with aspects of their role, and dealing with things that ultimately we can’t do anything about’. Arthur finds it hard to advise his staff on career progression:

‘The responsibility of making sure that someone is feeling fulfilled or helping them to see where they can fit in strategically within the organization, I think that’s hard, because I’ve no power to award this position or that responsibility to so and so. I do go and represent them to senior management and to people who do have the power but, yes, you understand you’re a middle man there.’

For Martin, the problem with AL role is that it is not possible, for example, to adjust the workload or the balance of responsibility between research and teaching in order to support your assigned academics or help them progress their careers:
For Brandon, the specific administrative difficulty relating to the AL role is that of a shortage of timely data about the relative performances of his assigned academics, which he wants to draw on in discussions. He wants, through this, to be able to ‘consider the whole [group of staff] as well as the individual’. Howard’s comments succinctly describe a view to which a number of other ALs allude:

‘Professional services staff need to have a more supportive culture and realization of how busy academics are. … I would like to be in the position when I do the PDR [Performance and Development Review] to be provided with a set of data about that person, such as their [module evaluation] scores, measures of research performance, and so on. But certainly through my college we’ve got absolutely nothing… I expect the university centrally to provide me with the data that I am supposed to discuss with the member of staff.’

Jack conveys a more mixed picture with regard to admin support, explaining that in his experience some of it is excellent, with individual administrators working very hard and experiencing ‘the same frustrations’ as the academics. However, not having relevant information needed to discuss progress with assigned academics is clearly perceived to be a limiting factor for some who are undertaking the AL role.

Several Academic Leads refer to training and development as an area which needs more focus. Although a few criticize aspects of the initial training provided, which focused on the coaching role of the AL, a number were very appreciative of it. Some participants note, however, that the developmental sessions did not fully address what Evelyn refers to as ‘the other stuff’: that is, how to approach the difficult, more managerial conversations needed when performance issues need to be addressed. For George, there needs specifically to be more clarity about what colleagues need to do to ‘gain promotion, or prove to us they need more permanency to their contract’. Several participants, including George, suggest more use of ‘case study’ approaches to developmental sessions, whereby academics can talk openly with each other about possible challenges and solutions.

The survey data was mixed on this point, as shown in figure 18, with the majority of ALs (17; 40%) feeling that they do not need more training for the role against 11 (26%) who felt that they did. These data suggest that individual training plans may be more useful for ALs, tailored to each person’s experiences and training needs, rather than blanket “all must attend” courses for all of those taking on the AL role.

Communication is one of the most frequently evoked themes. For those who have been moved from a smaller to a larger department, there has been a change in the culture of communication which has led to some discomfort. Martin has found it ‘difficult to adjust’ to a ‘larger scale department … where everyone has to be more routinized and so on’. He finds the lack of opportunities for interpersonal, ‘face to face’ communication problematic. But for Diane, the issues are more systemic. Difficulties for Academic Leads arise, she says, from ‘a big lack of communication, a massive lack between the university, the college, and us on the ground’. She calls for better structures to be put in place to ‘secure those layers of communication’ which are not just ‘operational’ but which will provide opportunities for open conversations which ‘really deal with things, with the issues or staff we are all really worrying about’. Arthur, echoing the observations of a number of assigned academics, cites problems with the physical environment in terms of finding meeting places, and Chris feels that there is a ‘lack of consultation’ with ALs, particularly in a time when the focus of the role is necessarily affected by pressured demands of the Research Excellence Framework.

Oliver describes a lack of honest communication in relation to the possible tensions between the values and expectations of the university and those of the individual academic leader:
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‘My attitude to authority, organizational authority, is to distance myself from the role I’m thrust into, because I think that’s the way to get on with people better.’

Referring to a time when a senior manager previously announced cuts, which resulted in some ill feeling, Oliver continues:

‘If only he’d said, “Look, I have to do this, I completely disagree with it, but what can I do?” That is the case in the more market type of environment in the universities; you have to do things, even though you might not like them. But somehow people don’t communicate that they identify with this [complexity]. I think it can be a source of tension, unnecessary tension actually.’

There is a range of challenges, then, perceived by those undertaking the Academic Lead role, some operational, such as administrative support, and some more philosophical, where the identity of the individual AL is potentially challenged by the possible conflicts between the values and expectations of the institution with those of members of staff.

A number of the above difficulties have some relationship with the most commonly expressed critique of the Academic Lead role, that of the potentially problematic co-existence, in the one leadership role, of a supportive mentoring or coaching responsibility with a line management function, and we consider that issue in more detail in the following section.

Conflicts or tensions, as perceived by the Academic Leads themselves, between the Academic Lead as mentor and the Academic Lead as line manager

‘They want us to be poacher and gamekeeper at the same time.’ (Evelyn)

Clearly identifiable in almost all of the interviews, as well as in many of the comments made in response to the online survey, is a perceived conflict between the mentoring side of the new Academic Lead role and the line management function which appears to sit alongside it. Francis sums this up neatly:

‘There are two quite different ideas. The official story … is that there’s a managerial role in coordinating the goals of the academic with the goals of the institution, the goals of the college, or all the way up. There is also a mentoring role [and] a lot of Academic Leads tend to emphasise the mentoring role, rather than the managerial role. … Many people will have perceived the incoherence of this.’

Kendra also talks about lack of clarity for AL role:

‘I was quite disturbed to find out about six months ago that formally we’re designated as line managers, and yet it was never portrayed that way initially. It was described more as a mentoring role with an annual reporting process: developmental.’

She also notes in relation to this that the relationship between Academic Lead and Head of Discipline roles therefore seems ‘very unclear’.

Arthur recalls that this tension was apparent from the time when the new role was introduced. He recalls early developmental events focusing on the role in which questions were asked about how mentoring could sit alongside line management responsibility:

‘I was trying to clarify just what the role meant and what the responsibilities were, and I think there was a great deal of nervousness amongst ALs that we could be made responsible for the people over whom we wielded no power. And I don’t mean that in a sense of wanting to have that, but a worry that we’re being put in an impossible position: we couldn’t, other than through the good will of people we’re leading, effect any change whatsoever and yet we might be responsible for their performance. … And there’s no budgetary control at all!’

Jack also recalls the early developmental session which focused on coaching and which was all related to ‘how you have a nurturing role and act as a sort of confidante’. That, he says, was one of the problems:

‘There’s this idea that everything that happens within that role is sort of almost like you’re a priest or a doctor. You should be supportive and it shouldn’t go any further. But that’s actually problematic because you’re actually the line manager… How can you be a neutral mentor?’

Brandon links this tension with being asked by other leaders for his comments in relation to the performance of his assigned academics:
'Some of the Academic Leads were saying, no, I don’t want anything to do with recommending things around promotion. I’m supposed to be supportive, coaching, and I shouldn’t be the person who decides to support a recommendation that this person’s application for an Associate Professorship. ‘

For Brandon himself, the AL should be involved in such recommendations, but he feels that the official university position on this is unclear.

Howard notes that an Academic Lead ‘can’t fire somebody. You don’t have any line management authority, and that’s what I find slightly difficult’. Howard speaks of how the institution appears to be

‘rolling together the mentoring, which is where you’re supposed to be a supportive friend, a coach to somebody, with the college’s first point of contact if anything goes wrong. Then you’re often left to try and deal with issues, but you don’t have any stick, you can’t do anything.’

Chris does not feel that the AL role has been able successfully to combine line management with mentoring:

‘What you’ve got is that the Academic Leads have become champions for the sub-disciplines in some case; in other cases, they try to be line managers and that’s been pretty severely resisted by the people they’re supposed to be line managing. It’s not worked while they tried to do that.’

In addition, Chris sees this as causing problems for those in other leadership roles:

‘I think that where you’ve taken the line management role away from Heads of Department, it hasn’t gone to Academic Leads because there’s too many of them and they can’t coordinate… So it inevitably ends up going through the Dean.’

George agrees that the dual Academic Lead function causes problems elsewhere:

‘In almost every situation, the individual would be referred to the Head of School, Director of Research or Director of Education. They really fulfil the line management functions within the units, as far as I can tell. Having the academic leads trying to fulfil any of those functions clouds the issue, muddles it, causes problems.’

These views are supported by the survey data shown in figure 19 which shows that the majority of ALs (26; 62%) do not think that the role should focus on management functions.

As discussed earlier, there is a general agreement among the Academic Leads interviewed that the successful dimension of the AL role is characterized by mentoring rather than line management and this is confirmed through the survey data.

Jack talks positively of how the AL should be there as an ‘adviser’, to ‘help and encourage’, and Martin appears to speak for many ALs when he argues that:

‘You can’t expect people to be completely candid about the mentoring side of stuff, if they know that this is being fed up to senior management in an environment that is at least perceived to be becoming increasingly top down. But … I am very happy with the mentoring and supporting role.’

Chris is one of a number who is happy with the AL label, but wants to change it to a role which is wholly focused on supportive mentoring:

‘I might keep the name ‘Academic Lead’, but I’d revert it to a mentoring role.’
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George sees it as a role which should be characterized by mediation:

‘Evidently it is better to be ... mediating and liaising and trying to articulate to the member of staff the management and also trying to make the management understand the particular circumstances of that member of staff. I think that’s a valuable function.’

There are some clear messages here, in relation to the nature of the AL role: mixing mentoring and line management is highly problematic. However, there are wider challenges emerging from this case study in relation to the ways in which line management structures and lines of accountability should operate in a complex structure which is focused through one track on research and another on education. There are challenges, too, and opportunities, relating to systemic communication issues and the development of leadership skills and approaches.

**RQ3: How do Assigned Academics perceive and experience the new PDR process?**

When discussing the purpose of the PDR process, the interview data suggests that some assigned academics have a sense that the real purpose of the PDR is unclear, even among the Academic Leads. The uncertainty over the purpose of the PDR is summed up neatly by Nick:

‘I would like to know how [the PDR] was conceived; whether it was conceived for the sake of the individual development as is said, or was just conceived and created to try and get the most out of the individual staff for the bigger aim of the University?’

In relation to this point, Terry speaks about it at some length, arguing that there should be some kind of research into the PDR process to examine different understandings of the nature of the process and to establish whether the PDR is focused on ‘appraisal, compliance, control, improvement’, or whether the process is ‘just to alleviate people’s stress’. He continues:

‘Is it a developmental review; is it a critical review? … [We need] a better understanding of that, and … a glossary of the vocabulary around it, so that we all understand what we mean when we say PDR, because I don’t think people understand, you know?’

Terry, amongst other, recommends more training for the ALs and also for the assigned academics in relation to the PDR in this respect, but Tobias sees the perceived institutional lack of clarity as deliberate, so that university leaders can move the goalposts of success when necessary:

‘What the PDP values is … very unclear, and I feel like it … is purposefully unclear. It comes back to this feeling like we feel you’ve published the right amount, we feel this is enough to move into senior lectureship.’

These uncertainties were also evident in the survey data. Although the majority of AAs (66%) were clear about the purpose of the PDR process, there were 26 AAs (19%) who were not, as can be seen in figure 20.
The interview data suggests that, for some, albeit a small minority, the annual meeting where progress is discussed and goals set for the following year is taken as something of a paper exercise; for others it is a fairly useful regular opportunity to take stock. For some, it is of vital importance, and there is a strong wish by some to see the AL treating the PDR meeting even more seriously and using it as a genuine opportunity for open and frank discussion about the nature of the individual’s contribution to Sunnyside, about the individual’s career goals and even for creative thinking in relation approaches to research and/or teaching.

These mixed experiences were also evident from the survey data as shown in figure 21, where there were a range of responses to the statement the PDR system is effective on helping me plan, agree action and get support related to my work. However, it can be seen from the chart that negative experiences were not a minority view with only 44 AAs (33%) agreeing with this statement, while 54 (40%) did not. These findings suggest that Sunnyside may need to revisit the PDR process, to ensure that a much larger percentage of staff perceive and experience it more positively in the future.

From the interviews, positive experiences are related to a sense of purpose in the dialogue afforded by the PDR meetings. Tobias notes that his first PDR conversation ‘influenced [his work] quite a bit’, in that the AL advised specifically on ‘admin duties’ and ‘realistic timelines for publishing’. For Nick, it’s a ‘useful tool’:

‘I like the idea of the PDR; I like it. It’s really true. … When you look at your CV, it helps to emphasise what you’ve been doing and also to reflect on what you should do.’

Although the data shown in figure 21 suggests that a large number of staff do not feel that the PDR process is effective in helping them get support about their work, it appears that the majority of staff surveyed felt they were able to have an open and honest discussion about their needs during their PDR meetings. Figure 22 shows the responses to this statement with 85 AAs (63%) agreeing.

However, similarly when compared to the interview data, it is a mixed experience with 34 AAs (25%) disagreeing with the statement. These findings highlight once more that Sunnyside may need to revisit the PDR process to ensure it is perceived more favourably by a larger number of Assigned Academics.

A number of interview participants note the change in the format of the paperwork for record keeping under the new AL system, and they are mostly in favour of the revised ‘folder’, although the picture here is also somewhat mixed. For Jane,

‘The PDR form has changed and become more precise. Yes, there are advantages and disadvantages to that, but from my point of view this itemisation of various areas to be targeted is quite good because it focuses my mind on … what is required … and what I need to do.’
Tobias's experience is similar:

‘The [PDR form] was very useful for me to sit down and look at the issues… it draws attention to the fact that there are areas I need to work on. But it also draws attention to areas where I feel I have achieved something as well, and I think you need a pat on the back sometimes. You need to feel valued, and that doesn’t come through the PDR form, that comes through the conversation with the Lead.’

Harold, too, notes the role of the PDR in making academics feel valued:

‘It’s quite nice when somebody recognizes what you’ve done, because otherwise in academia that never happens.’

Ruth describes the PDR process as ‘good’, appreciating the opportunity for discussion

‘We fill out [the forms] and it makes you think about where you are in your career. I am quite competitive and I do want to progress, so I think it’s a good thing for me, because I can have a checklist of things I want to do.’

Katherine has had two Academic Leads because of a change in personnel. One, she feels, managed the PDR poorly because he concentrated on spreadsheets and workload, but her second AL ‘has a quiet, calm leadership style’ which she appreciates. She is clear that the PDR meeting ‘is not something being done to you, it’s your opportunity to take things forward’. She continues:

‘That gives me ownership. Not ‘You will do this, you are in a box, you will perform the following matters; when you’ve laid your golden egg come and tell me.’ It wasn’t like that. It was a matter of, ‘Here’s a way forward, do you want it? Do you not want it? How can I help you? Off you go and let me know how it’s going. Great! Independence and ownership.’

Bert’s experience of the PDR is also more mixed:

‘I think it’s a really valuable process in that everyone has to be judged on what they’re doing … but in terms of actual career building I don’t necessarily find it that productive. I mean, we can’t afford what we need to do anyway to publish papers, bring in money and stuff like that. And I don’t need that [PDR] meeting to tell us that. But yeah, I think it does have a function in terms of making sure everyone is doing the work.’

Overall, however, the interviews suggest that the PDR process is seen to have improved in worth by most assigned academics since the change to the new AL system.

The format of the PDR is challenged by a number of assigned academics. For a minority, such as Katherine, the hard copy folder provided for the purpose is useful as a collection point for useful ‘evidence’ of achievement during the year or as a colourful, physical reminder of the activity. Sylvia finds the new, more itemized ‘folder’ more helpful in terms of ‘mapping of different areas of [her] daily job’, which is ‘helpful when you need to think seriously about the future’.

However, for most there is a strong sense that everything should be digital and more flexibly conceived. Terry wants an online system, which is ‘live’ and genuinely developmental, ‘almost like a diary’, in which evidence through the year can be both collected and reflected upon:

‘So then when you start the PDR, you’ve done the analysis first. … That would get really deep.’

Others recommend changes to the format of the paperwork to make it more adaptable to different academic ‘tracks’ – for example, whether the academic is predominantly research-focused or teaching-focused – and others feel it needs to be simpler. For Ruth, for example, the format ‘needs to be refined. There’s too much repetition in the process’. James makes a very similar comment with respect to ‘overlap’.

These tensions were also evident from the survey data with only 59 AAs (44%) agreeing with the statement, *I am happy with the paperwork process* associated with the PDR process against 76 (56%) who disagree.

**Figure 23: I am happy with the paperwork associated with the PDR process.**
The reasons given for being unhappy with the paperwork are shown in figure 31 and include 27 AAs who think that the forms are not helpful, 30 who think that they need to be simplified, 41 who think that some of the sections are irrelevant and 30 who think that some of the sections overlap.

As can be seen from figure 25, these frustrations were also reflected in the survey data with 79 AAs (59%) disagreeing with the statement *I am clear about what happens to the PDR paperwork* compared with only 36 AAs (27%) who agreed with the statement.

From the interview data, there is a consistent request that this process be made more explicit, and that the PDR system be used as a means of highlight good practice and managing a complex institution by recognizing more effectively the potential contributions of individual academics to the organization as a whole. It would appear that these messages are confirmed through the survey data.

The success of the Professional Development Review process overall appears to be contingent upon the extent to which the principles of ‘good’ leadership are operating, rather than on specific configurations of paperwork or timings of reviews. Indeed, only 21 out of 135 Assigned Academics (16%) disagreed with the statement *I think the timing of the PDR meetings is about right* (as can be seen in figure 26 below). Consistently, however, through both the interview and survey data, there is a perceived lack of clarity in relation to what happens to the PDR paperwork once it has been completed, and its role in furthering the needs of either the institution or the individual. This appears to be a key issue that Sunnyside needs to address.

A specific issue arises for some interviewees in relation to those on temporary contracts – should the format be different in that case? One participant, Matthew, himself on a temporary contract, had not has a PDR meeting in his year at Sunnyside. He had found other kinds of support in the form of ‘junior colleagues just a couple of years ahead’ who were ‘most helpful in providing advice and guidance about research and teaching’ and through the Postgraduate Certificate programme for new staff.

With very few exceptions, the assigned academics do not know what happens to the PDR form once it has been completed. Some hazard a guess, but most feel that they probably get simply filed away and no one looks at them other than the AA and AL. Amy’s comment is typical:

‘I don’t even know if [the PDR records] ever get looked at. … I know my AL signs them, and then I send them off to – I can’t even remember who it is, and I don’t know where they go. I don’t know if anything comes from it. If there’s no buy in from the people above it does seem a bit pointless that these forms are just getting lost in the ether.’
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RQ4: How do Academic Leads perceive and experience the new PDR process?

Our findings suggest that there is a general understanding among the Academic Leads interviewed of the purpose of the review process and the values which underpin it. These results are also reflected in the survey data with 30 ALs (71%) agreeing that they are clear about the purpose of the PDR (as shown in figure 27 below). However, with 10 ALs (24%) disagreeing with the statement, there is evidently some work to be done by Sunnyside in ensuring that all ALs are clear on the purpose and role of the PDR, especially as they will be the ones leading the process within their Colleges.

One way of ensuring the aims of the PDR are clear for ALs may be to look at the training and support activities which are in place linked to the process. Figure 28 shows that when Academic Leads were asked whether they had had sufficient training about the process, 21 ALs (50%) disagreed. The discrepancy in these results, between ALs who feel that they need more training and those that don’t, suggest that any training linked to the PDR process should be individually tailored to ensure that ALs who feel they need it can take it up, without assuming that all staff in the role of AL need the same levels of training and support.
As with the assigned academics participating in the study, from the interviews the principle of a regular review is very broadly supported. As an example, Arthur describes the PDR meeting as an opportunity for ‘being reflective with one’s own practice and making professional judgments, and that’s what I try to encourage the people I lead to do’. For him, the details of the assigned academic’s performance, for example in student evaluations, is not as important as the opportunity to have ‘an open discussion about how to improve’, and ‘trying to understand how to do that in the future better, rather than hammering someone for not performing according to some metric’. In practice, he says, he talks with each assigned academic to review the year, set goals under various headings, sign it off and make sure it goes to the senior management team. ‘I doubt anyone reads that’, he says, ‘but that’s one of my formal responsibilities’. Francis, too, sees the value in the PDR process:

‘I think what happens [for the PDR] is probably ample. There are two things that are valuable: one is that particularly junior people at least have the name of somebody that they know that would in theory be an appropriate person [to approach] should they have some kind of real professional concern… And the second is that there is at least an annual meeting to review progress, look at what they’ve been trying to achieve and how that might have changes, and so on… It probably works fine.’

A number of ALs interviewed, as we have seen, raise the issue of a potential gap between the intentions, interests and values of the academic reviewed and the expectations or requirements of the university. Francis perceives, however, that the PDR is an opportunity for interests to coincide:

‘There’s no reason, certainly in the modern age, why the goals of the individual academic align with the goals of the institution, and the institution isn’t run on a philosophy that would guarantee that [Laughter]… But talking to somebody about their personal career goals will include things like not being fired by the university, being promoted – so obviously they do come together in a certain way and the structure of the [PDR] form we work through makes sure that happens.’

There is a mixed response to Sunnyside’s new PDR folders, which are more detailed than the previous PDR forms, showing a range of topics to be discussed at the Review. Arthur sees them as useful as a ‘scrapbook to record the various things they are doing’, but for George, the PDR forms need to be in digital form, so that reviewees can let them grow and change, rather than in hard copy form. But the format is fine, he feels. For Chris, the new PDR process ‘is an improvement on what it was before’. He continues:

‘Obviously we have a set of goals implied here, but it’s very disparate as it is in all academia, so you can’t have it [as a tick box exercise], but we have moved slightly towards that [with the new paperwork]. So I think that’s an improvement, but we need I think to build onto it [with] other criteria… We need to look at ways of linking the PDR annually with performance for career building… and need to make it clear as well where it can aid promotion and act as a guide.’

Howard is pleased that the new PDR meeting requirement is ‘more rigorous than it used to be’. He continues:

‘It used to be just a one off event, once a year. Now we have several meetings in the course of the year, only one of which has a written record. I think that’s quite helpful; it just helps build more of a relationship if you’re meeting with these people more often. So I think that’s positive.’

However, he is unhappy with the design of the PDR form, feeling that it ‘needs to be much more concise and focused on key data’.

Along with a number of other interviewees, Chris also wants more clarity about the criteria ‘against which they’re measuring themselves, so that they can advance’, and wants to have relevant performance data available, such as student evaluations. However, there remains concern for a number of academics about whether some of the criteria and targets are applied too zealously to diverse individuals in a way which is insufficiently nuanced. Some, like Evelyn, comment particularly upon the demanding targets for achievement expected by early career academics still on probation and want these reviewed in order to feel confident in approaching the Review discussion.

For Lisa, the PDR is a good idea in that a formalized review process is needed, but the current PDR forms are not particularly helpful for academic staff who are on teaching-focused contracts; it is ‘too rigid’; as some of the elements are not applicable. George, in a similar vein, feels that the forms don’t quite work for academics on the education and scholarship track: ‘A little more thought could have then gone into what it means to be an academic lead of education and scholarship staff: Others express a desire for differentiated forms to suit staff on different types of academic contract, or at different stages in their career. For example, Ian finds it inappropriate to be asking brand new staff about their contribution to ‘internationalization’, which is one of the PDR themes. Nel also notes the difficulty of working through a personal development plan for staff on very fractional contracts.
These issues with the paperwork were reflected strongly in the survey data, as shown in figure 29. Here it can be seen that 29 ALs (69%) disagreed with the statement *I am happy with the paperwork associated with the PDR process* against only 13 ALs (31%) who agreed.

For some of those interviewed, the timing of the main annual review meeting needs itself to be reviewed. For Diane, as a Director of Education responsible for delivering academic programmes of study, it ‘needs to be at a better time in the year, so that it’s possible to feed into planning more effectively’ and ‘give us a chance to really value people’. Evelyn feels that the main review could be biannual rather than yearly, and that whatever the agreed timetable there could be more information in advance about ‘expected timings’; the majority of participants indicate that the annual review feels appropriate, however.

These findings are similar when looking at the survey data, as shown in figure 31, with 24 ALs (57%) agreeing with the statement *I think the timing of the PDR meetings is about right* versus only 7 ALs (17%) who disagree.

The reasons given for why they were unhappy with the paperwork are shown in figure 30 and include 15 ALs who felt that the forms were not helpful, 12 who thought the forms needed to be simplified, 13 who thought that some sections of the form were not relevant and 11 who felt that there were overlaps in the sections of the forms. These findings, combined with similar data from the AAs presented in the previous section, point to the fact that Sunnyside may need to review the forms it uses for the purpose of PDR.

Some Academic Leads who were interviewed see a wasted opportunity in not *making more of the outcomes of the PDR meetings* and records, by using them more systematically to inform activities. Nel feels that the PDR paperwork ‘seems to disappear into a kind of black hole… It seems that the process ends with me’. Brandon refers to the challenge of getting relevant information from the PDRs back into college-level decision making; there needs to be a ‘summary of issues … that need to be highlighted to the college … so that we as a college can understand where problems are arising’. There is no university guidance about this, he feels, but it would be useful. Martin comments, ‘It’s not clear to me that the often very important and significant problems that people experience, which are not so much personal as systemic, get collated and fed back and dealt with.’
He explains at some length his views on what could be done more effectively:

'It’s part of a good conversation, actually. It gives [colleagues] chance to blow off steam [although] it’s not always stuff I can do anything about. It would be helpful if there was some onward person or centralized depot where generic complaints could go, because I mean apart from letting off steam it is not clear to me where this stuff is collected, where it goes and feeds into … policy making or into administrative routines. It’s asymmetrical … in the sense that it’s focused much more on what the person is doing rather than reflecting the experience of personnel to an administrative apparatus which often fails to deliver… It is not clear that the problems or difficulties that the personnel are experiencing get focused to a place where something might be [dealt with] systematically… And it’s not clear that I have any power to respond, you know, or change the environment of the person for whom I am the Academic Lead.’

These experiences were also reflected as the majority view from the survey data, with 21 ALs (50%) disagreeing with the statement I am clear what happens with the PDR paperwork compared to 16 (38%) who agreed. This number seems especially high when we consider that the ALs are the people who are meant to be leading the PDR process within Sunnyside’s College structure.

In summary, the perspectives of the Academic Leads on the PDR process are congruent with those of the assigned academics. The conversation is important and can offer significant levels of guidance and support. However the Academic Leads stress the importance of a review structure which is adaptable, but with clearer guidance on how to make sense relevant data (such as research income gained and student evaluation scores). They also emphasize a need to make more of the outcomes of the PDRs in terms of feeding into wider decision-making processes.
Recommendations and conclusions

What can be learned from the study reported here? Based on our key findings in relation to the lived experiences and perspectives of those who lead and those who are being led within Sunnyside’s new leadership structures, we recommend that universities consider the following questions when reviewing their leadership models and Professional and Development Review (PDR) processes. We also highlight specific questions for Sunnyside to consider when reflecting on the role of Academic Lead within the institution.

Questions for universities in relation to distributed leadership

- Taking into account the complexity of the institution’s mission (e.g. in relation to research and teaching), do the different leadership roles across the institution interweave to create a logical and effective leadership structure? In particular, how does this point relate to any diversity of academic ‘job families’ (at Sunnyside, those demarked as ‘Education and Scholarship’ and ‘Education and Research’)?
- In a distributed leadership model, how exactly are the mentor/line management role(s) characterized, and what is the relationship between these roles and/or functions?
- How is information about distributed leadership models communicated with staff?
- How does the institution engage in dialogue with staff at all levels to ensure that these roles and structures are fit for purpose in their design?
- Are academic staff members at all levels actively enabled to participate in dialogue focused on meeting the institution’s complex challenges?
- Is the institution providing sufficient spaces, both temporal and physical, in which academics can meet, share, collaborate and create?
- Are the policies on distributed leadership clear, public and consistently applied across the institution?
- Do the policies on distributed leadership and their implementation provide equality of opportunity and foster a culture of dialogue, inclusion and recognition?
- How are leaders developed (for example, through structured opportunities to share ideas, challenges and approaches with one another) and supported (for example, by regular multi-way communications involving senior management, human resources, staff development and other relevant stakeholders)?
- What individually tailored leadership development opportunities are available to leaders?
- Are there sufficient opportunities for leaders to develop themselves through networking with one another (for example, at Sunnyside, in intra-College and/or inter-College forum meetings), in which good practice can be shared?

Questions related specifically to the role of Academic Lead at Sunnyside

- What are the aims and purpose of the role of Academic Lead?
- How does the role fit into the management structure of the Colleges?
- What are the criteria whereby leaders are selected, and are these appropriate, transparent, congruent with the principles of equality of opportunity, and consistently applied?
Questions related to Performance and Development Review purposes and processes

- Are the best people in these roles and are they supported enough to undertake the role successfully?
- What about succession planning for the role of Academic Lead?
- Who will take on these roles in the future?
- How will this work in practice? (For example, how will potential ALs learn how to undertake these roles?)

To conclude, this case study of a new leadership model in one research-led, UK university suggests benefits for institutions in adopting a more distributed leadership model, but also raises many questions for university communities and their leaders. Our 'top line' findings relate to the appreciation by academics of the value of distributed leadership, but they also point to the importance of an institution's defining and communicating expectations and lines of accountability very clearly through dialogue with its staff. More specifically, findings clearly indicate a perceived need to address the difficulties inherent in the conflation of mentoring with line management functions within one role and to clarify the purposes and processes of the Performance and Development Review. Also clearly evident in the data are the perceived benefits of creating times and spaces in which academics can build positive institutional and departmental cultures and shared identities, and the related need to ensure that leadership-related practices are inclusive, afford equality of opportunity and enable all academics to contribute fully to the success of the institution.

Our data on academics' diverse perspectives on leadership within higher education evoke, in addition, many nuanced normative themes, including the complex issue of the relationship between the values, identities and goals of individual academic staff and those of the institution itself. The data suggest that conceptions, models and everyday practices of leadership are affected by this relationship, and that any 'effective' leadership model needs to take account of its inherent tensions. An overarching finding is that academics would welcome more dialogue and openness with respect to such tensions; recognising the challenges faced by institutions in kaleidoscopically turbulent times, many academics are seeking more explicit and authentic opportunities to have a voice and to co-create solutions to the challenges facing universities today.
References


Notes