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Institute of Education 

Supporting middle leaders in higher education: Do we care?


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Context

- Changes in University management culture
- Changes in academic career (and careers in general)
- HoD position has increased in complexity and importance




Key Changes

- A large increase in student numbers
- A more academically diverse student body
- An increase in bureaucracy
- An increase in both market and government accountability
- (Collinson, 2004; Henkel, 2002; Knight and Trowler, 2000; Nixon, 1996)



Key Changes to Academic Careers

- Academic careers are no longer seen as linear (Poole and Bornholt, 1998)
- More academics choose to, or have to, change research fields mid-career to keep up with rapidly changing research horizons (Gordon, 2005)
- A large number of academic staff are now employed on fixed term contracts (Collinson, 2004)
- Academic staff are developing more individually-focused career paths based on ideas of portfolio work and Arthur and Rousseau's notion of the "boundaryless" career (Floyd, 2012)



Role of the Department Head

- Playing an increasingly important role in the leadership and management of our universities (Bolton, 2000; Bryman, 2007; Floyd and Dimmock, 2011)
- Role is becoming increasingly difficult (Deem, 2000; Smith, 2002, 2005)



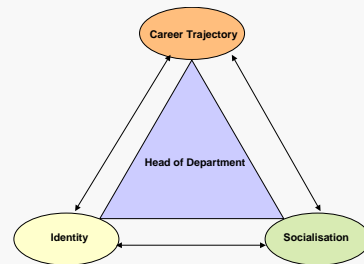
Other Influences

- Gender
- Age
- Organisational culture
- Academic discipline
- Size of department
- (Deem, 2003a; Deem, 2003b; Karp, 1985; Smith, 2005; Twombly, 1998; Ward, 2001)

Perceived Problems

- Who wants to be a HoD?
- Motivation to be a HoD?
- Experiences of being a HoD?
 - Support whilst in role?
- Career expectations of HoDs?

Conceptual Framework



Methodology

- The UK context
- Two studies – one post 1992 (17) New U, one pre 1992 (11) Old U
- Life histories

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Case Study Institutions

- Old U – Research led; HoD role rotated
- New U – Teaching focused but research becoming increasingly important; typically HoD role permanent and remunerated

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Defining the Role of the HoD

- Key definitions included: role model, academic leader, and representative academic
- There were differing experiences of what a HoD does, more so in New U.
 - This appeared to be very dependent on the culture of the school, which, in turn, appeared to differ considerably across the University

Reasons for Becoming a HoD?

- Empowerment of individual
- Empowerment of department
- Confirmation of individual's abilities by being asked to take on the role ("vote of confidence")
- My turn (Old U)
 - Who else?
- Career development (New U)
- To stop someone else!

Becoming a HoD

- Majority had received no formal training
- Peer consultation and training had happened informally. This was seen as very useful and extremely important
- Learning through the job/experience was seen as very important to learn the skills necessary for the job role

Becoming a HoD

- Cross university fertilisation and sharing of experiences at HoD level seen as important and necessary for improved practice and whole university growth
- Individualised training programmes seen as more useful, rather than generic “all must attend” courses

Difficulties

- People management
- Conflict resolution
- Lack of time/too much workload



Difficulties cont/d

- Workload planning procedures and related bureaucracy
- Financial procedures

Difficulties (New U)

- Majority of interviewees suggested that their research had suffered and, paradoxically, as a consequence of becoming a HoD, so had their career
- In relation to academic careers, the majority of participants perceived that research is seen as important, not academic leadership

Voices....

- In a way I followed one particular career path, which has been fairly prominent within the institution and not so prominent outside the institution. I've not been doing the networking and the conferences and the sort of research profile stuff that I probably should have been doing...

Voices....

- ...One thing that concerns me is the perception of me as a researcher and I think that, given that we are in a university that is meant to be research driven now, I am worried about my future because of where I am in terms of research. (Michael, 45, Arts and Humanities)

Voices....

- There's quite a tension about whether I should carry on doing research. There is no doubt that I've ruined what could have been an extremely good research career by doing these other things. (Michelle, 49, Natural Sciences)

Voices....

- So I got the job, and things have gone downhill ever since in terms of my research. ..but actually it's not fair when you look at the load that some people have been carrying to allow other people to continue their research careers. I find it difficult to be selfish and say I'm not going to do x y and z, I'm going to spend three weeks doing my research. But I'm getting to the point now where I'm going to have to do that. I'm going to have to do that if I'm going to survive in this place...

Voices....

- ...And I really resent what the institution has done in that sense. I feel there is a real lack of value...in people who've actually kept the audits going, the quality, all of that kind of basic, boring stuff that keeps the place going, that keeps students happy...all the detail...(Hannah, 41, Arts and Humanities)

Academic Career Capital

- Internal
 - job role/title
 - Internal networks
 - Perceived institutional standing
- External
 - Research outputs
 - External networks

Academic Career Capital

- External perceived as more important
- Becoming an HoD stultifies development of external academic career capital

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Old U - three narratives...

- Becoming a HoD
- Being a HoD
- Looking to the future

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Key questions

- How do we best prepare academics for the role of head of department and further leadership roles?
- How can we ensure that taking on the role is not perceived as detrimental to an academic's future career?

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