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Experiences of Academics who become HoDs in a UK University: Socialisation, Identity and Career Trajectory

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Experiences of Academics who become HoDs in a UK University: Socialisation, Identity and Career Trajectory (0266)

This paper aims to describe and interpret experiences of being a head of department (HoD) in a post-1992 university in the current higher education (HE) climate. Although the role of the academic head of department (HoD) has always been important to university management and performance, recent policy and culture shifts have greatly elevated the importance of this position. Previous research suggests that as academics move into HoD roles they require different sets of skills, values and knowledge (Bolton, 2000; Knight and Trowler, 2001), and that HoDs now find themselves performing increasingly complex management and leadership roles with little or no training (Deem, 2004). There appears to be very little current HE research investigating the HoD using appropriate methodology that recognises that a person's career does not exist in isolation at any one point in time but is part of a complex social interaction influenced by past and current events. This paper draws on life history interviews with 17 male and female HoDs, from a range of disciplines, in a post-1992 UK University. By using a life history approach, it is hoped that individuals' social constructions of their own experiences can be interpreted and understood in relation to national, social and political contexts; that localised narratives of HoDs within one university can be connected to the grand narratives of educational and social change in the UK. These life history data have been analysed using a framework based on the interrelationships between the concepts of socialisation, identity and career trajectory. Findings suggest that the majority of respondents perceive themselves to be academic role models but the complexities of the job do not allow them to focus adequately on aspects of academic life valued as important for career progression, namely research activity.