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Exploring the role of Associate Dean in UK Universities

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Research Domain: Management, leadership, governance and quality

Introduction

Changes occurring within the Higher Education sector in the UK and elsewhere have been well documented over the past decade (see, for example, [Bolden et al., 2012](#); [Deem, Hillyard, & Reed, 2007](#)) with the focus being on what Pollitt ([1995, p. 134](#)) originally called 'new public management' (NPM). NPM focuses upon cost cutting, transparency in resource allocation and increased performance management of both staff and resources. In several UK universities, this approach has resulted in a fundamental review of organisational infrastructure and the systems of administration and management. Consequently, middle leadership roles such as the Associate Dean (AD) have gained in complexity and importance (reference removed for blind review; [Bryman, 2009](#); [Winter, 2009](#)).

Below the level of Dean, but above the level of department head, ADs are involved in largely strategic as opposed to operational duties. In supporting the Dean, they can have a critical effect on success and provide a link between the academic voice and the ever-changing demands being placed upon University faculties. However, it is a role that is not well understood with previous research tending to look at more clearly defined positions such as the department head (reference removed for blind review), the Dean ([Harvey, Shaw, McPhail, & Erickson, 2013](#)) or the Vice Chancellor ([Bosetti & Walker, 2010](#)). An exploratory study into the role undertaken by one of the authors of this paper (reference removed for blind review) suggests that very few academics view moving into the role as permanent; rather, they see it as a temporary diversion from their real career. Yet, they seemed motivated by the desire to contribute to the strategic and operational successes of their departments by providing an academic perspective on the changes that they could see taking place and the demands placed on themselves and their colleagues.

The purpose of this paper is to build on these findings by reporting on data from a Leadership Foundation funded project investigating the role of Associate Dean in UK universities. The study's research questions were as follows:

- RQ1. How is the role of AD defined and positioned in relation to University leadership structures?
- RQ2. What are the professional and personal circumstances that lead to academics becoming ADs?
- RQ3. How do academics describe and understand their experiences of being an AD?
- RQ4. How do academics see their position as AD influencing their career in the short and longer term?

In evaluating this crucial but under-researched role, it is hoped that a more thorough understanding of the role of ADs will emerge which is important for policy-makers, managers and researchers. Such research, for example, could help in the selection processes of new ADs, could allow for more informed career advice for ADs (potential and in post), and could help tailor specific training, development and support for academics who aspire to, or who are in, AD roles.

Theoretical framework

Theoretically, we use a framework based on the interplay between the three related concepts of socialisation, identity and career trajectory, which in turn are underpinned by the notions of

structuration ([Giddens, 1984](#)); academic identity formation, maintenance and change ([Henkel, 2005](#); [Nixon, 1996](#); [Winter, 2009](#)); and internal and external academic career capital (reference removed for blind review). It is hoped that by applying this framework it will give rise to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by policy makers and VCs in moving academics into key middle manager positions, and that we may be able to better understand the role of Associate Dean and how it impacts on these three important inter-related concepts in the life of an academic.

Methods

We undertook a two staged, mixed methods approach utilising an embedded mixed methods design ([Cresswell, 2014](#)), where the whole study was framed within a social constructivist framework ([Flick, 2006](#)). 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.

First, we conducted interviews with 15 ADs from 5 different institutions. These institutions included 2 post and 3 pre 1992 Universities. The sample included a range of age, gender and experience. Following ethical approval, participants were identified and invited to take part via email. Each participant was interviewed for approx 1 hour and interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interview data were analysed using Nvivo and thematic analysis techniques outlined by Charmaz ([2006](#)) and Lichtman ([2006](#)). Then, we surveyed ADs across the UK (n=172) using an online questionnaire (Survey Monkey) which was based on themes and issues emanating from the first stage of the project. The results of the survey were analysed and cross tabulated to compare and contrast data from those who were ADs in pre 1992 Universities with those from post 1992 Universities. It is this data that forms the focus of this paper.

Key Findings

- ◆ Key reasons for taking on the role include:
 - Wanting a new challenge
 - Wanting to make a wider impact at the Institution
 - Being asked to take it on by a senior member of staff
- ◆ Contracts and remuneration:
 - 84% of pre 1992 ADs are on a set time contract (3 years on average)
 - 73% of post 1992 ADs on a permanent contract
 - 88% of ADs in post 1992 Universities are on a promoted senior leadership contract versus 23% of ADs in pre 1992 Universities
 - 19 ADs (11%) do not receive any remuneration for their role (all in pre 1992 Universities)
- ◆ Key purposes of the role:
 - Strategic development across the faculty
 - Strategic development across the University
 - Management of resources

- Management of staff (only 42% of those surveyed manage academic staff)
- ◆ 63% are budget holders with 60% of these managing a budget of £50k or over
- ◆ 61% had received little or no training for their role
 - 51% of ADs identified the need for strategic leadership training for their role
 - 25% highlighted a need for budgetary training
- ◆ Biggest challenges:
 - Keeping research going (71%)
 - Leading and managing people (51%)

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