

“What I wish I’d known” - Academic Leadership in the UK, Lessons for the Next Generation

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ABSTRACT

In a project funded by the UK’s Leadership Foundation for Higher Education’s Efficiency Exchange programme, 18 academics in leadership positions in 5 UK universities were interviewed about their leadership experiences and what they wished they had known before taking up their leadership posts. This paper shares the research results grouped around the three emergent themes of:

- aspects for career development;
- aspects that were found to be challenging;
- and the “serendipity principle”.

The results from this study are aimed at better preparing and informing the next generation of academic leaders of the challenges that may lie ahead.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents results from a research project funded by the UK’s Leadership Foundation for Higher Education’s (LFHE) Innovation and Transformation Fund in 2015. 18 academics in leadership positions were interviewed about their leadership experiences and what they wished they had known before taking up their leadership posts. The interviews were analysed and 8 key themes and information about the context within which they lead were identified. The project and the themes are presented here along with a discussion of how this contributes to our understanding of the development of those who aspire to leadership positions in higher education. Recent literature has focused on the importance of prestige for promotion which can leave academic leaders unprepared for the other challenges of their role (e.g. Blackmore 2015, Kandiko-Howson and Coate 2015). This paper identifies some of those challenges and themes which can be used to prepare the next generation of academic leaders more effectively.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Although much exists in the education literature and wider management and leadership literature about the qualities of “good” or “effective” leaders (Steffens et al 2014) there is little that considers the experience of leaders in the academic field (Peters and Ryan 2015). Those in academic leadership positions are interesting to study in particular because they have usually reached their leadership position as a result of being highly successful in their discipline area – particularly with regards to research – but not necessarily because they exhibit the characteristics or skills necessary for their leadership role. Research into the role that prestige plays in academic progression (Blackmore 2015, Kandiko-Howson and Coate 2015 for example) indicates clearly that this is important for progression to a leadership position. The leadership role itself, however, is then likely to require the individual to prioritise other aspects besides those which traditionally contribute to prestige (obtaining grants, writing papers etc) which can cause identity conflict and dissatisfaction.

The Leadership Foundation’s Higher Education Leadership and Management Survey (HELM) conducted in 2014 found that the majority of respondents felt that the leadership skills and abilities required in UK higher education differed from those required for leadership and management in other sectors (Peters and Ryan 2015). In other words, that the context has a significant impact on the ability of the leader to be effective.

Given this, it would be reasonable to assume that the process of identifying, selecting and training successors would have a more prominent role in the literature and UK HEIs but this is not the case. A number of UK universities are developing variations of leadership training for those already in key positions (such as Head of Department). These are positive interventions to support and develop those already appointed to leadership positions, but they don’t help early career researchers (ECRs) and academics in identifying what they need to do in order to progress (besides developing the prestige markers). Nor do they, more importantly, help those in early career stages to be better prepared in advance for the challenges of an academic

leadership role and the impact that these challenges have on being able to continue with the prestige activities.

Our research identified 8 key themes and additional information about the context within which the interviewees are leading. These themes have been developed into training materials which are freely available across the UK HEI sector. The research provides an evidence-base for focusing training and developing the next generation for the challenges of leadership ahead of them actually attaining a leadership position, and takes the literature beyond prestige factors to encompass the other aspects that aspiring leaders need to consider in their career planning.

METHODS

In January 2015 a bid was submitted to the UK LFHE's fund for Innovation and Transformation for funding to carry out qualitative interviews and to develop training materials for the development of the next generation of academic and research leaders. Following the success of the bid, we had 8 months to conduct the research and write the materials. The materials are freely available under a Creative Commons Licence and can be found here:

<https://www.vitae.ac.uk/vitae-publications/guides-briefings-and-information/developing-the-next-generation>

5 UK Universities took part in this research – 3 were from the elite, large research intensive “Russell Group”; one was a “post-1992” new university, smaller and more teaching focused and the fourth was founded in the mid-1960s, smaller and research-intensive. In addition, the research group included a prominent national and international organisation, Vitae, which supports the development of ECRs and took the role of project management for the research.

We identified and approached 18 academics in various leadership positions across the 5 universities who all agreed to be interviewed. There were no refusals and considerable interest in the project was shown. Ethics approval for the project was obtained at the lead partner

institution and then at the other universities. We guaranteed our interviewees complete anonymity and all identifying comments have been redacted from the analysis of the interview transcripts. All documents are held securely in line with the lead institution’s data management code.

We were keen that our 18 academic leaders were reflective of the spread of leadership roles, disciplines, ages and genders across the Universities and Table 1.1 shows these details.

TABLE 1
INTERVIEWEE DATA

Title / Position / Role	Number
Dean or Head of School	2
Dean or Director of Research	3
Vice, Deputy or Associate Dean	5
Senior Lecturer or Reader	2
Vice Principal, Pro Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor	4
Head of Department or Department Lead	2
Gender	Number
Male	10
Female	8
Discipline	Number
Arts and Humanities	5
Social Sciences	4
Engineering and Physical Sciences	4
Biological and Biomedical Sciences	5

Prior to the interviews, we agreed an initial set of questions (see Table 1.2) and that further probing would be allowed. The lead researcher at each institution conducted their university’s

interviews. All interviews lasted approximately one hour in duration and were audio-recorded and were then transcribed and uploaded to NVivo for analysis.

Interviewers were encouraged to probe further as they considered appropriate. We acknowledge that bias is a potential issue here but we needed to take a pragmatic approach in order to develop relationships quickly as we felt that the rapport between interviewer and interviewee was crucial in this study to facilitate a safe environment quickly where the interviewee felt comfortable in sharing some difficult experiences and often highly confidential information. All interviewees were known well to the interviewers prior to interview and this formed part of the selection process. We used a 'peer scrutiny and triangulation' (Shenton 2004) process in the data analysis, including refining the themes at a workshop at the Vitae international researcher development conference, in order to ensure validity and to counteract bias.

It is worth noting here that the object of the research was not to identify "good" or "excellent" leaders. The definition of what constitutes good or excellent leadership is problematic because it depends on the perspective of the person being asked and varies according to time of asking. The aim of the research was to explore the experiences of academic leaders with a view to providing an evidence-base for the enhancement of support and development for early career researchers and academics.

TABLE 2

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Please give a brief description of your backgrounds and how you came to be at this current point in your career?
- What do you consider to be the key decision-points in your career journey? What factors at the time prompted you to make the decisions that you did?
- What lessons have you learned in your position(s) of leadership?

- What do you wish you had known before you moved into a position of leadership?
What would have helped you in your journey?
- What 3 pieces of advice would you give to an early career researcher (post-doc / PhD student) who wants to develop their career in academia and become a research leader?
- What do you do to enhance the performance of your researchers?
- If you designed leadership training for academics / ECRs, what would be the top 5 topics that you would include and prioritise?

The questions were key issues that we wanted to know about – in particular around lessons that our leaders had learned along the way and what they wished they had known before they took on their leadership role. This provided us with insights on topics that could be focused on when developing the next generation of academic leaders.

The questions therefore gave us *a priori* codes which we used when analysing the transcripts and we also coded anything additional that we thought was insightful or potentially useful. The coding was done by 1 researcher initially and then reviewed by 2 others. Following refinement after presentation at the researcher development conference, these were developed into 8 core themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The 8 themes that emerged can be further aggregated into 3 groups as follows:

Aspects that help career progression

Aspects of leadership that were found to be challenging

The “serendipity principle”.

Aspects that Help Career Progression

Career Advancement and Planning

Developing and planning a career were highlighted as important aspects of becoming a research leader. All 18 people interviewed took very different routes to their research leadership positions and we identified what they found useful as they progressed their career, what they think would have been useful either at the beginning or along the way, and how they support the career progression of the people they lead.

In particular, interviewees highlighted the following advice as good practice:

Firstly, learn about the roles you are interested in and know the criteria for progression: the interviews emphasised the importance of understanding what an academic role is and how this can differ between institutions. The balance between teaching and research emerged as something that differs from university to university and also between disciplines. In addition, interviewees emphasised the importance of identifying what being in a position of leadership would actually mean:

“The honest reflection is that at some point I should have really looked a little bit more closely at what leadership at my University means...if anything I think I would have preferred to have stayed and carried on leading research within a defined group, not at an institute level.”

Secondly, take the time to plan ahead and use appraisals to discuss and plan career development. Many of the leaders we interviewed did not have linear career paths. Some, for example, had spent time in other sectors and interviewees advised that it is useful to spend time developing career plans whilst still recognising that it is important to be open to unexpected opportunities. They also advised not focusing solely on staying in academia or in one discipline area but being open to moving around where the opportunities arise.

The interviewees placed value on having a space to review and reflect on career plans through appraisal mechanisms in their institutions. One interviewee commented that they do reviews regularly as soon as someone new in their team starts:

“I would say to people, ‘You need to think a bit about your career as you go along’.”

Thirdly, factor your personal values into your career planning. The leaders talked about having a sense of a good fit between themselves and the institutions they chose in their careers, leading to the conclusion that the “best” institution might not always be best for them. The values that they talked about covered the personal and professional “worth” that they could bring as added value to an institution or group, the opportunities for further career progression, goals, motivations and support of others around them and the balancing of home and other commitments in the career decision-making process.

“I’m not defined by my institution, I’m defined by my work. And I think a lot of people cling onto their institutional status in way that actually prevent them from fulfilling what they really could do if they were a little bit more free to do that.”

“Once you have your career and two children, you’re kind of driving an oil tanker and there’s quite a big turning circle.”

The interviewees also talked about practicing and honing skills needed for leadership positions prior to securing the job. They talked about helping the next generation by ensuring that they were involved in activities such as grant writing, teaching, supervision and reviewing other people’s work in order to develop experiences that would stand them in good stead for obtaining leadership posts.

In addition our interviewees recognised that a critical skill for leadership is the ability to learn from failures and to be resilient:

“I wish I’d known that you will fail at some things and I think that would have been useful for me to have known that beforehand, that everybody fails and things can go wrong and that’s not a bad thing necessarily.”

Failure is not something commonly admitted to in the perfectionist-driven culture of academia so this recognises a critical failing in the current preparation of the next generation for academic leadership positions.

Mentoring and Role Models

The interviewees mentioned the importance of mentoring and role models from two perspectives: firstly the pivotal roles that effective mentors and role models had played in helping them to develop; and secondly, the role for them, as leaders, to provide support and mentoring and to act as role models for the people that they lead. They also mentioned the role that informal mentoring can play and that mentors can be identified in a range of different settings – not just through formal mentoring schemes. In particular, interviewees commented on how they had used informal mentoring relationships to gain wider views on issues, to ask advice and learn from other people.

Mentoring in the UK, does not mean a sponsorship-type relationship as it often does in the US. It is more of an advisory and role-model type of relationship and for early career academics, it was emphasised by our interviewees that this can often get confused with the supervisory relationship. Our interviewees encouraged early career academics to think about getting mentoring outside of their area of expertise – to lend a wider perspective – particularly in terms of exploring career options outside of academia. They also felt that mentoring is something that adds value throughout a person’s career and not just in the early stages:

“I think recognising [that] mentorship is something which takes place through the whole trajectory of somebody’s career, not something which stops.”

Building Networks

Our interviews revealed the importance of building and maintaining networks as a means of career progression. Our interviewees also commented on the importance of supporting networking activities for their own ECRs and suggested ways in which this might be incorporated into training and development – for example through identifying networking opportunities and supporting attendance at conferences. They also acknowledged that social media is increasingly important for the new generation of researchers - although they didn't always feel that they were the best equipped to advise on how to use it!

“Engage with the academic community, engage with the practitioners as well, go to conferences.”

“Presenting at conferences and networking is probably more important than...writing journal articles and [getting] really top drawer publications.”

Interviewees were also clear that these opportunities should not be left until late in the postdoctoral or PhD process and that the earlier a researcher or academic engaged with networking, the better it would be likely to be for their career progression.

Building a Research Profile

Our leaders came from a variety of academic backgrounds and had different emphases in their current roles on teaching and research. One thing that came across clearly from all of them, however, was the importance of doing the “business” of research in order to progress with their career as research and academic leaders.

There was no getting away from this core message from our interviewees – publishing papers was key to progressing in their academic careers and, if anything, they felt that the pressure to publish is more intense now than when they started out.

This relates directly back to the literature which identifies that the prestige factors - the importance of doing the “business” of research – are critical in order to gain progression as an academic leader. As such, the interviews revealed not only the importance of publishing for career progression, but our research leaders also told us that they thought that this was a key aspect that their ECRs needed support and development for.

“You have to get the grants. If you don’t get the grants you can’t do the research. And then you need to get the research completed in order to get papers.”

“I was talking this week to one of our top life science researchers, just got elected to the Academy of Medical Sciences...and he told me it was ten years work to produce those papers and they cost two million pounds of cumulative grants. So that’s a real example of how forward looking you have to be to get to that point.”

Aspects of Leadership Found to be Challenging

Balancing Work and Life

Many of the leaders interviewed for this study commented on how important it was to put appropriate boundaries in place in their lives to stop work from consuming everything. Our interviewees reflected on the steep learning curve that they encountered when they stepped into a leadership position and found that the workload increased exponentially. In particular, most of them made reference to the fact that you can’t do everything and that prioritizing and not saying “yes” to everything were important skills to learn.

“I thought I had to read every document...It never occurred to me to ask the people who had done the job in the previous year, or to ask someone else to edit it for me.”

“You need to be writing grants...reviewing papers, sitting on grant panels...Sitting on college committees, administrative work, supervising and mentoring people, so these are all demands

whether you are a leader of a lab or a small research team or in my position and these are so many demands and it is very difficult to manage them all. So your own time management is really, really important and prioritising the different demands and learning to...juggle because most of them, no researcher is prepared for."

Our leaders also recognised the importance of taking time out of work to prevent burn out – although it was clear that work overload was the norm and pressures on a daily basis made this hard to do. They also mentioned the importance of communicating positive messages to other people about taking time out in order to support their staff and set a good example.

"take time out...that's my other real lesson, because otherwise you burn out from it and it just becomes too much..making sure you take a lunch break and that is really, really important, make sure you do some exercise every day, you know, even if it's just making sure you walk; leave this office...I think that's really important to make sure other people are doing that as well, and that's a really, really important lesson to say, 'Right, I'm switching off now.'"

"in this role you have to let stuff go I think. And I think there's power in letting stuff go."

"there's so much pressure on us to do things and to not speak up about it. I was on a Research Council panel meeting last week and I didn't mind the fact that I had very long days associated with it, but when they were sending me the paperwork at midnight the night before the meeting I took the view that I wasn't going to read it. And I went to the meeting and said, 'I haven't read this therefore I can't comment on it' and I was the person actually leading that section. And my advice was that they would have to defer it until the next meeting. Because there's a lot of pressure on people to do things and I just said 'Sorry that's not reasonable. You're asking me to do a job with integrity.'"

Impact of Culture and Environment

During our interviews, it was clear that academia has undergone considerable cultural and business change in recent decades and that this has consequences in terms of work-life balance, management, leadership and the balance of teaching and research. Our interviewees suggested that the most significant shift has been towards a performance-management style in combination with an increased emphasis on the importance of research and grant income.

“I think what’s certainly changed in higher education in the last 30 years is the nature of leadership which is now much more like line management and much more top down than it was when I started. And I think whether you’re a leader or whether you’re somebody who’s being led...you just have to get used to that change.”

“...the only thing perhaps is not understanding... I don’t know what the right word is but understanding the full map of the sector, of the structure, you know, with competing and often sometimes conflicting priorities, you know, and how to really approach this and manage this. Because coming in as a researcher. I’m talking now in my role as...research, all guns blazing, REF was round the corner, a new school was being formed out of four previous schools, there was a lot of pressure to ensure that research was successful enough to go into the REF, so my approach was research, “Everything’s got to stop, it’s got to be research,” without really understanding that there’s some other bread and butter stuff that needs to be done and engaging the conversation and having the skills sets to be able to navigate through that maze and get people to buy into my urgent agenda without putting them off and alienating them.”

Working with Others

Without exception, all 18 senior manager interviewed for this study referred to the importance of working with other people to being able to achieve goals and lead well in an academic environment. There were a variety of contexts for this – networking, management, dealing with difficult people, meetings, giving feedback and the development of additional skills such as listening. What was clear in all of this is that academia is not a career option for people who

want to work by themselves - contact with other people and the ability to interact with them in a way that achieves things positively – is a key aspect of working in UK academia.

“...In being a research leader you have a responsibility...not just in leading a particular research area but actually leading a group of people. If you can’t lead the group of people effectively then you’re not going to achieve what you want to achieve.”

“As happy as I am with them, I don’t make it all sweetness and light...I’ll say very positive constructive things but I’ll always say, ‘okay what can we actually work on in order to make you stronger as an academic?’”

“These are difficult conversations to have but if I left it later and we were off track the last thing I’d want...is you to say to me, ‘Well why didn’t you say something a year ago?’”

“If you’re going to be an effective leader you’ve really got to understand the barter economy, which is that people will do you something as a favour but they wouldn’t dream of doing it just because it says in their job description that they have to.”

Challenges of Management and Leadership

It was clear from the interviews that being a leader in a UK university is likely to involve an element of management, Our interviewees were responsible for line managing people, managing finances, leading and developing strategy and policies and of course leading and managing their own research and teaching. Common themes in the interviews included the challenges of managing and leading within a modern higher education environment, the complexity of meeting organisational goals, working with staff with differing contributions and motivations, and balancing administrative and mechanistic processes with the need to be innovative and creative in research. Based on our interviews, we have chosen here to differentiate between *leadership* and *management*. We found that our interviewees referring

to exhibiting leadership characteristics as being different from learning how to manage things and people. In many cases, it seemed that the management was more problematic.

“So leadership in one sense is about it suggests follow ship. And I’ve always thought that leadership is about having something to lead on. So you’ve got to have a clarity around why would anybody want to follow you? If you believe in that kind of leader follower thing...why would anybody want to follow you? You’ve got to have something compelling and whether that’s about who you are as a person or what you believe in or how you set out a vision of where we’re all going, you’ve got to have something.”

“In terms of leading research at a school level there’s a lot more strategic thinking behind it and a lot more getting people to buy into that thinking and strategy, and I guess if there was anything I needed for the role that I’ve had to learn quickly [it was that].”

“It’s about recognising it can be lonely, and trying to find those areas where you can seek comfort, advice, support, or just say it as it is.”

CONCLUSIONS

“I think I ended up getting where I am through a lot of just hoping I’m doing it right.”

Through asking our interviewees what they wished they had known before they started in a position of academic leadership our research has found a high level of uncertainty and a lack of knowledge about how to do key aspects of the leadership role. The common thread throughout the interviews was the concept that the leaders were relying on luck, trial and error or “serendipity” to get things right. The role of serendipity is important to understand as it identifies key gaps in training and preparation for succession planning and it raises the question of how much of leadership is due to good instincts and whether it can indeed be taught – akin to the trait theory of leadership (e.g. Mann 1959 and Stogdill 1948) which suggests that

organisations should make more effort in identifying people with the “right” traits for leadership roles.

This raises a number of questions for further research including whether serendipity is another term for good leadership instinct. Clearly the “learning through getting wrong” was not so bad that it could not be unpicked, or warranted the withdrawal of the leadership role, so this also raises the question of whether UK universities see “a baptism of fire” as part of the learning process for leadership. It is, however, suggested that this is far from ideal for both the person in the role and the institution itself and perhaps the current higher education efficiency agenda would be better served if universities put more of a focus in training and preparing the next generation for leadership, in addition to continuing to support those in existing leadership roles.

In addition, this area of work would benefit from research into how certain characteristics affect the way in which people are selected for, and experience, leadership roles. The intersectionality of developing as a leader in academia and gender, disability and race are all key aspects which would benefit from further exploration with a view to helping higher education reach the goals of diversity and inclusivity that it sets itself.

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