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Sustaining Academic Leadership in Higher Education

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Introduction

Leadership is not defined by the exercise of power but by the capacity to increase the sense of power among those led. The most essential work of the leader is to create more leaders.

(Follett, 1942:3)

Both the higher education sector and the healthcare sector require people who do not identify with a formal role of leader to engage in leadership. In both sectors, leadership must be exercised on a continuous basis. Leadership development in higher education is influenced by an increase in managerial control, market competition, organisational restructuring and government scrutiny. Tensions between the need to meet requirements of industry versus academic requirements will continue as long as universities face these dual challenges in a competitive global economy. Universities are expected to be efficient and cost effective, flexible in their offerings, while being increasingly responsive to student expectations and needs. These tensions have resulted in some resentment from academic staff who perceive that their autonomy is being reduced. This chapter presents current debates about leadership with a particular focus on higher education and leadership development of academic staff. Academic leadership is understood to incorporate the core academic functions of teaching/learning, and research and scholarship together with a broader focus on academic values and identity. The changing nature of this sector provides a background for current thinking about academic leadership.

This chapter will draw on a recent case study from the healthcare sector which we argue contributes to the thinking on leadership not only in the healthcare sector, but also in the context of higher education. The chapter concludes with key messages for academic staff making a case for building capacity of leaders in education at all levels.

The changing nature of higher education

Higher education continues to undergo significant change in response to such factors as government policy, continuing growth in demand for ever higher levels of educational attainment and credentials, rapid economic development, pervasiveness and society-wide impact of communication and information technologies, demands for increased access, internationalisation and globalisation (Bolden et al., 2012, Jones et al, 2012; Skilbeck 2001). The emergence of the concept of the knowledge economy and its importance as a driver of economic growth has increasingly challenged the higher education sector to provide a skilled workforce that can service such developments (Bolden et al., 2012; Thorp and Goldstein, 2010; Universities Alliance, 2010).

We believe that the Irish higher education is not immune to these changes and the Irish higher education sector is likely to become increasingly important in the context of the economic challenges currently facing the country. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Hunt, 2011) identified the specific challenges for the Irish higher education sector as: the increasing number of people entering the system, the changing profile of students, unemployment and changing patterns of work bringing new urgency and an emphasis on life-long learning and upskilling, the need for high-order knowledge-based skills, many of which can be acquired only in higher education institutions, and the importance of high-quality research to the teaching mission and to underpinning socio-economic development (Hunt 2011). This strategy suggests that in Ireland, there is an opportunity not only to transform the higher education landscape, but to leverage the leadership skills of our current academic staff and to foster the leadership skills of our next generation of educators. Garvin (2012) supports this viewpoint calling for the management of universities to be put back into the hands of academics. Our experience with healthcare concurs with this

perspective that sustaining academic leadership in higher education needs positive buy-in and engagement of staff and students to ensure leadership at all levels.

The changing demands on higher education are challenging traditional assumptions not only about the nature and purpose of higher education and its place in society, but also about the most appropriate systems of management and leadership that should operate within educational institutions. Cowan and Heywood's (2001) research findings, and more recently Jones et al.'s (2012), support Ramsden's (1998:4) old argument that leadership should be distributed, rather than being based on a hierarchy, viewing leadership as 'how people relate to each other'. Bolden et al. (2012) contrast the traditional model of the University as a community of scholars with a highly democratic and decentralised process of decision-making, representing leadership as a shared responsibility, to the increasingly common corporate or entrepreneurial approaches to leadership and management in universities. However, modern thinking about leadership highlights new approaches, which might be considered for sustaining leadership in higher education.

Current thinking about leadership

Current thinking about leadership moves from leadership being innate, to it being transactional, transformational, nearby and distant. In the context of a changing environment the ability to respond productively to the myriad of demands facing academics requires a re-examination of leadership thinking.

The research literature on leadership is vast, is of mixed quality and continues to accumulate at an extraordinary pace (Gill, 2011, Avolio 2009, Yammarino et al 2005). One of the most important debates in the present context relates to the question of whether leadership is innate: are leaders born or made? There is a broad spectrum of views on this, as one might expect, but the implications of one's position on this question are important. If leaders are born, then organisations need excellent selection systems and the potential for developing leaders is limited. However, if leaders can be developed, then attention must be paid to creating the conditions in which leadership can flourish. Using preliminary evidence from their behavioral genetics approach study, Arvey et al. (2007) claim that approximately 30% of the

variation in leadership style and emergence was accounted for by heritability. Their findings also claim that the remaining variation was attributed to differences in environmental factors such as individuals having different role models and early opportunities for leadership development. The authors suggest that predicting leadership emergence across one's career is much more influenced by the life context one grows up in and later works in, than heritability.

While no consensus exists, a reasonable position based on the research literature is that, even accepting that there are genetic influences on leadership, there is still significant scope for changing leadership behaviour. Leadership can be learned by application, practice and feedback (Gill, 2011). As Macaveli says in *Twelfth Night*: 'Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them'. The emerging consensus seems to be that leadership, as such, cannot be taught as a set of skills but it can develop. All of us have some degree of leadership potential which can flourish through recognition, development, growth and practice. From our experience with healthcare professionals we believe this to be true.

Generally transactional leadership is portrayed as managerial leadership, which is strongly directive, motivating people with rewards in exchange for performance which meets expectations. Avolio (2012) suggests that transactional leadership can form the basis for transformational leadership, despite the differences in their orientations; once you honour your dealings or transactions with your followers, they will, over time trust you. He believes it is the higher levels of trust, rather than compliance, that transformational leadership uses as its base for achieving excellent performance. Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe (2006) stress the importance of distinguishing between 'distant' leadership and 'close' or 'nearby' leadership. They view distant leaders as those at senior and top levels in the organisations, whereby those leaders who were closer by social distance were categorised as nearby or day-to-day leaders. Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe (2006: 311) suggest that their model of leadership is very different from the 'heroic' models, which dominated previous decades; rather they emphasise that leadership is a collective engagement of individuals working at all levels in the organisation, and not the sole responsibility

of one person. More recently, reports on leadership in the NHS reiterate that the model of the romantic superhero leader is not suited to current demands. The authors concur with this perspective that the ability to work across boundaries and persuading others (followers) over the right course of action is more important than gaining reputation for any one organisation (Grint & Holt, 2011; The King's Fund, 2011). In other words, there is a need for multiple individuals to share leadership by working collaboratively with a focus on organisation relations and connectedness.

Leadership in Higher Education

Similar to the research by the King's Fund for the NHS, the Leadership Foundation in the UK invested in a number of studies focusing on leadership development in higher education from 2007 onwards. These studies took place during a significant period of change including restructuring of university boards and councils, which challenged academic leadership. Focusing on leader behaviour and effectiveness in higher education, Bryman (2007) conducted a qualitative study with 24 leadership researchers about their experiences. Fostering a climate which balances support with maintenance of autonomy seems to have a particular importance for academics. Although there were no conclusive distinctive features of leadership effectiveness in higher education, the expectations of academic staff included their need for consultation over important decisions and mutual cooperativeness. However, their findings suggest that there is an increasing tendency towards academic leadership as a career path. They suggest a number of important facets of leadership based on their literature review and study (See Table 1 for key characteristics of successful leadership in higher education, based on a sample of studies reviewed).

Key findings from Burgoyne et al.'s (2009) research of UK higher education institutions suggest that while 78% believe their investment in leadership development gives value for money, many are uncertain if this investment has had an impact. In fact, Fielden (2009) suggests that the need for personal development is not always recognised and that senior university managers either find it hard to clear

their diaries or that they believe they can cope without help. Exploring departmental leadership of teaching in research-intensive environments, via case studies, Gibbs et al (2009) found that, while dispersed leadership was evident in every department, effective leadership of teaching was seen to involve different combinations of leadership activities. Studies by Bolden et al. (2008; 2012) suggest that individual motivations can change over time and often have to operate in tension with one another e.g. motivated by career or management. They make a clear distinction between academic management and academic leadership, the focus being institutional for the former and personal for the latter (Bolden et al. 2012). In their model of academic leadership Bolden et al. (2012) draw attention to the fact that academic leadership is only likely to be seen as important by academics to the extent to which it facilitates their ability to work autonomously. However, the challenge of this finding is a potential lack of teamwork and distributed leadership.

We believe that at the heart of academic leadership are academic values and identities, and the carving out and pursuing a particular line of scholarship rather than direction and control of academic work. This type of leadership could be collegial, with mutual support from staff, consensus decision-making, and debate and discussions with peers, as opposed to a bureaucratic controlling environment or managerialism. Clegg & McAuley (2005) suggest that more discussion is needed on middle managers' roles in higher education so that more productive relationships can be imagined and that universities become more humane places in which to practice. Others (Hyde et al., 2013; O'Connor & White, 2011; Whitechurch & Gordon, 2010; Kolsaker, 2008) concur that juxtaposing collegiality and managerialism is too simplistic and unhelpful and that the collegialite/managerialism debate underplays the inherent complexity of power relations in universities.

Rather than viewing leadership as a gift for one individual, Lumby (2003) advocates that it be created by a group, offering the opportunity for many to contribute. Gosling et al. (2009) suggest that this distributed leadership approach embraces this notion of collegiality and autonomy while also acknowledging the need for management. It also draws attention to the number of people involved in leadership and the importance of organisational processes in shaping their engagements. The idea of academic leaders being open and accessible to others, showing care, empathy and compassion means that the leaders themselves, at all levels, need adequate

support. These values can breed an atmosphere of trust and consistency, ultimately having a reassuring effect on staff (Jones, 2011). However, the leadership literature, for the most part, emphasises the development of the individual leader, focusing on skills and early life experiences, suggesting that leaders are isolated from others in the organisation.

Developing Academic Leadership

The arguments presented, and endorsed by the authors, suggest that leadership can be developed and that this development needs to be deeply embedded and driven out of the context and challenges faced collectively by leaders in the organisation (Turnbull James, 2011). Assumptions about leadership and leaders can shape the way that staff perceive and evaluate leadership. A shift to a distributed leadership will require a mindset change in the concept, an understanding of the leaders' tasks at various levels and an understanding of the emotional challenges facing leaders in these settings (Huffington et al. 2004).

Generally, the focus of leadership development starts with the individual and then moves to the organisational context. People will engage enthusiastically at different points in this journey depending on their work situation. For teachers in higher education, this progression can involve leadership of schools or faculties, moving to senior management positions. In this scenario, there can be tensions between leaders as teachers, or, teachers as leaders. Here, the culture of the organisation is paramount in supporting any learning back to practice with the ideal situation being one where activity is underpinned with a learning organisation philosophy. This integration of leadership development with career progression and organisational performance is not an automatic follow through. Kandiko and Blackmore (2010) recommend a review of recognition and rewards, including promotion, to ensure that excellence in teaching and its leadership are recognised appropriately, alongside other aspects of excellence.

Table 1: Key characteristics of successful leadership in higher education.

Authors	Successful Leadership	Sample
Bolden et al (2012)	Energising Competent Warm Ethical Promoting the group Scholarship	Informal academic leaders
Jones et al (2012)	Trust Respect Recognition Collaboration Commitment to reflective practice	Academic, professional & executive staff
McFarlane (2011)	Role model Mentor Advocate Guardian Acquisitor Ambassador	University Professors
Ngui et al (2010)	Relating to people Leading change Managing process Producing results	Academic staff (all levels) from 20 Malaysian public universities
Gibbs et al (2009)	Establishing personal credibility & trust Identifying problems, turning them into opportunities Articulating a rationale for change Devolving leadership Building a community of practice Rewarding & recognising teaching Setting teaching expectations Marketing the department as a success Supporting change & innovation Involving	Departmental leadership of teaching in Research-intensive environments/
Goodall (2009)	Credibility Expert knowledge Standard bearer (arbiter of quality) Signalling commitment to research excellence on behalf of the institution	Vice Chancellors (research profiles)
Breakwell and Tyherleigh (2008)	Academic credibility Financial awareness Adaptability Confidence Strong persona Sense of mission, strategy and/or vision	Vice Chancellors in UK Universities
Bryman (2007)	Providing direction Creating a structure to support the direction Fostering a supportive and collaborative environment Establishing trustworthiness as a leader Having personal integrity Having credibility to act as a role model Facilitating participation in decision-making; consultation Providing communication about developments Representing the department/institution to advance its cause(s) and networking on its behalf Respecting existing culture while seeking to instill values through a vision for the department/institution Protecting staff autonomy	Literature review and interviews with 14 leadership researchers about effective academic leadership and departmental level
Bryman (2007)	A proactive approach to pursuing the university's mission An emphasis on a visionary approach that guides and provides	Literature review in relation to

	focus for what the leader seeks to achieve for the institution Being internally focused, i.e. in being well connected in the institution, being seen and drawing inspiration from its participants Being externally focused, i.e. networking with a variety of constituencies and reinforcing within those constituencies the direction the university is taking - good understanding of higher education Having personal integrity Introducing changes in a way that entails consultation with others Importance of not sealing leaders off from the university at large Importance of not undermining pre-existing organisational culture Being flexible in approach to leadership Entrepreneurial/risk-taking Influencing the organisational culture and values to support change Designing structures to support change	effective leadership at an Institutional level.
Spendlove (2007)	Academic credibility Openness Honesty Willingness to consult others Ability to think broadly and strategically Ability to engage with others	Pro-Vice Chancellors in 10 UK Institutions

The Leadership Foundation UK research generally argues for an integration of leadership development at all levels in the organisation with an evaluation of leadership initiatives and assisting the sharing of learning across the sector. The scale of integration can correlate with organisational performance, according to Burgoyne's ladder (Burgoyne, 1988) through six stages where Stage 1 has no systematic management to Stage 6 where there is strategic management. However, leadership development in UK Higher Education Institutions is interpreted as largely piecemeal, focusing on a small number of individual staff rather than being a systematic approach (Burgoyne et al., 2009). The expectation is that this will change over the next few years. Our argument, in this regard, is that leaders in formal roles set the tone for providing opportunities for staff to develop and exert their leadership among colleagues, students and collaborators.

Other countries have established units similar to the Leadership Foundation in the UK. In 2008 new agencies emerged in Malaysia (AKEPT) and Australia (LH Martin Institute) with governments here explicitly acknowledge the importance of management development for university leaders. In Pakistan the reform activities of the Higher Education Commission include the enhancement of management skills of Vice-chancellors, through a series of international programmes for this cohort. Research funds are being protected by agencies such as the American Council on

Education, the Leadership Foundation and AKEPT to investigate the competencies and skills required of institutional leaders. A study by Ngui et al. (2010) emerged from AKEPT and highlights leadership behavior underpinning effective leadership in the context of Malaysian public universities (Table 1). The Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) was established in 2005 with a remit to find projects that could provide research evidence of effective leadership in higher education, classifying projects into institutional and disciplinary leadership (ALTC, 2011). The challenges facing Australian universities, according to Coates et al (2010), are complex necessitating an increased need to create a stimulating and challenging environment in which academics can continue to thrive in order to contribute to Australian society and internationally to the academic community.

Leadership Development in Practice

In their vision for the higher education system in Ireland, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) (Higher Education Authority, 2012) advocate a core of well qualified and motivated staff who are capable of teaching to the highest standard while pursuing opportunities for scholarship and conducting research. In achieving this vision, there is a need for a system-level approach where each institution must play to its strengths in order to make the biggest impact and benefit for itself and Irish society in general. In the HEA strategic plan 2012-2016 (Higher Education Authority, 2012) objective 5, the top three priorities are to:

- achieve excellence in higher education,
- the management of teaching and learning,
- research, innovation and engagement with community and enterprise.

In order to achieve this objective a system-wide approach to good practice in teaching is a key action. In tandem with this approach the Higher Education Authority (2012) has recently announced the establishment of a national forum for the enhancement of teaching and learning. The National Forum proposes to build on the strengths and experiences of innovations in teaching and learning which have already been established. Investment in higher education has been made over the past twelve years in particular on resourcing of pedagogies for enhanced student

engagement, including technologies and on supplying professional development of staff. Such investment suggests a support for innovations in higher education and one could argue that implicit in this support is an encouragement to staff to lead out on new initiatives. One way of keeping leadership at the centre of higher education is to develop academic staff with leadership skills, which allows them to be both innovative and creative in the programmes they design and deliver. If leadership is interweaved across these programmes, graduates not only complete their programme with specific knowledge and skills but with leadership attributes for lifelong learning, thus leaving them well positioned to deal with the fast pace of change in the 21st century. The following section draws on a case study where academic staff, from one institution, were offered the opportunity to work collaboratively with another academic institution to develop a bespoke programme for a healthcare organisation. Their remit was to design, develop and deliver a programme in organisational change and leadership development that would address current and future needs of the healthcare organisation. To this end academics had the opportunity to work across boundaries, taking a system-level approach where each played to their strengths in order to make the biggest impact and benefit.

Case Study

Senior management staff in the organisation signalled their intent to implement changes to position the hospital at the leading edge of medical treatment and care. They were endeavouring to create a culture that embraces change, learning and development. The aspiration for this programme was that it would be at the cutting edge of learning and development and would incorporate innovative and creative practices and methodologies. Senior management's willingness to fund the programme was indicative of the growing importance of change management and leadership development in the healthcare sector. Nineteen senior staff, from different healthcare professions and disciplines, were funded to undertake the programme. Such a decision, in itself, was visionary, as these staff set off on a journey of leadership development, which was situated within the context of the organisation in which they worked. Not only were the individuals gaining at a personal level but they were also matching their development with the values and identity of their organisation. The end result was the bringing together of senior staff to develop how

each of them can operate better in the organisational context in which they are exercising leadership. They were doing this with academic leaders who were championing the programme's aims and outcomes. Thus, while individuals on the programme might have regarded this opportunity as personal development, they were in close proximity to senior leaders, in their own organisation, with whom they were about to make significant impact and change on their return to practice during and on completion of the programme. This is exactly what happened.

During the programme participants were required to agree their projects with senior management staff. This was an opportunity for the organisation to plan and implement initiatives which were much needed, and which could be carried out under the guidance of academic facilitators who valued change themselves. During the early part of the programme participants worked on small initiatives which engaged staff within their own departments and the bigger organisation. For their final projects participants were required to engage in an organisational development project which linked in with the organisation's strategy and necessitated them networking within and outside of the organisation. Small groups worked on projects and were guided by an action learning facilitator. In these groups they were able to address personal challenges so that they could work on how their experiences might impact their leadership skills and how they could deal with any barriers.

The CEO of the organisation captures the success of the programme to date:

The change in our staff who are taking this programme is extraordinary. Individuals, who would never have previously stepped up to take the lead in solving problems, are now looking for opportunities to do so. The impact of having a critical mass of mid-line personnel who are undertaking this education, on the organisational development of the hospital cannot be overstated.

In developing a leadership programme such as this one there are opportunities for the organisation to subscribe to distributed leadership. Gaining nineteen leaders back into the organisation must be valued if they are to be supported to take on the authority to lead organisational change. Allowing groups of people in the organisation to come together and create their own perspective on what it is to be a

leader is a huge step towards leadership sustainability. For the academics, closely involved with the programme, their autonomy and management skills were challenged. At each decision-making step, both academic institutions were consulted. This, in itself, fostered a distributed leadership ethos and was mainly down to academic and healthcare staff recognising values and identities of all concerned.

Conclusions

In the same way as healthcare organisations are influenced by staff returning to practice after a leadership development programme, academics in higher education have the potential to give support and leadership to colleagues by taking opportunities to be innovative in developing programmes. Attending to context first will support opportunities to change individuals who operate within such contexts. Transformational leaders do not accept the context as given, but see elements of the future in the current context and get ahead of the competition by moving to capitalise on what they see before others do. Higher education is changing rapidly placing increasing demands on academic staff. The time is ripe for a distributed academic leadership. Research evidence indicates that leadership can be developed to some degree. New models of leadership seem particularly relevant for higher education where leadership development is integrated in an organisational context.

Higher education staff need to view themselves as leaders not because they are exceptional or senior but because they recognise what needs to be done and can work collaboratively with others to do it. Depending on a small number of people in higher level institutions to carry the leadership flag is no longer an option. Now is the time to encourage staff at all levels to come together to work on real challenges and opportunities. Identifying individuals with leadership potential and supporting their leadership development is a positive solution but it is not the only one and will not sustain leadership in higher education. The future involves working across boundaries with multiple stakeholders dealing with complex bureaucracies and politics. Higher education needs individuals who do not currently identify with being a

leader to engage in leadership. It is time to start concentrating on individual's effectiveness as a leader. Only then will we be able to tackle sustainability of academic leadership for the higher education sector.

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