

TENSIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP: TOWARDS A MULTI-LEVEL MODEL OF LEADERSHIP PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we will present findings from a recent LFHE-funded study comprising interviews with 152 university leaders at various levels in 12 UK universities to explore competing perceptions, experiences and approaches to leadership within HE. In particular, we explore the concept of 'distributed leadership' and its potential as a descriptive and analytic framework. Analysis of transcripts reveals two principal perspectives on the distribution of leadership in HE – the first as devolved authority (associated with top-down, formal accountability) and the second as emergent influence (associated with bottom-up, horizontal and informal influence). Our conclusion is that effective HE leadership requires both individual hierarchical leadership and shared bottom up leadership at all levels.

In addition to the tension between individual and collective leadership our research also reveals numerous other tensions, each of which can give rise to multiple and conflicting identities (personal, professional and social) that can discourage academics from actively seeking and embracing formal leadership roles. Using distributed leadership as analytic framework that draws attention to the broader contextual, temporal and social dimensions of leadership we present a model of leadership practice that incorporates the individual, social, structural/organisational, contextual and developmental aspects of leadership identified in our own study that endeavours to give a more comprehensive representation of leadership in HE.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership has been a topic of investigation for millennia yet remains an “essentially contested concept” (Grint, 2005: 17). An inability to clearly define and isolate the essential attributes of leadership, however, has not diminished calls for better and more effective leadership – on the contrary, it seems that leadership has become the panacea of modern times. Leadership is now regarded as fundamental driver of competitiveness in all parts of the economy and within the UK is being particularly strongly pursued by the public sector. It is a central strand of the UK Labour governments' agenda for the modernization of public services and even Higher Education (HE), a sector typically resistant to government intervention, has not been immune to these trends. The White Paper on *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003: 76) cites the necessity for “strong leadership and management” as an essential driver for change in the sector and HEFCE (2004: 34) identify “developing leadership, management and governance” as one of their eight strategic aims.

The notion of 'effective' and 'strong' leadership has thus become a powerful call to action, offering the promise of a better future and more equitable and inclusive work practices. Despite this, however, the political discourse from which much of it is informed remains firmly rooted in individualised and managerialist concepts and practices. In HE, as well as other parts of the public sector, there appears to be a mismatch between the rhetoric of leadership and the lived experience of people in organisations: a tension derived, in no small part, from the competing narratives of 'leadership', 'community', 'democracy' and 'regulation' pursued in recent UK government policy (Brooks, 2000). In order to reconcile these differences it may be necessary to embrace an alternative, more relational, understanding of leadership.

From an individual to a relational understanding of leadership

As a field of academic study, research and investment on leadership has grown almost exponentially over the past 30-40 years. During this period there have been substantial developments in leadership theory, however, most models have remained firmly focussed on the individual 'leader', presenting followers as some what passive in the process. Increasingly, however, there are calls for a more 'relational' perspective on leadership whereby it is reconceptualised as “a social influence process through which emergent coordination (i.e. evolving social order) and change (i.e. new values, attitudes, approaches, behaviours, ideologies, etc.) are constructed and produced” (Uhl-Bien, 2006: 668).

One of the most influential of such models to be embraced within the UK public sector is 'distributed leadership', which presents an image of leadership as widely dispersed across organisations. In a review of the literature Bennet et al. (2003) suggest that the concept is based on three main premises: (1) that leadership is an *emergent property* of a group or network of interacting individuals; (2) that there is an *openness to the boundaries* of leadership; and (3) that varieties of expertise are *distributed across the many*, not the few.

The distributed perspective draws attention to some very different aspects of leadership than do traditional leader-centric perspectives – it “puts leadership practice centre stage rather than the chief executive or principal” (Spillane, 2006: 25) and recognises the situated nature of the process. Leadership acts need to be understood within the broader context in which they occur and recognised as the cumulative effect of a diverse range of factors.

Theorising distributed leadership

Of the authors who have attempted to develop a conceptual model of distributed leadership Gronn (2000, 2002) and Spillane et al. (2004) are perhaps the most comprehensive. In each case, they have used *activity theory* (Engestrom, 1999) as a theoretical tool to frame the idea of distributed leadership practice, using it as a bridge between agency and structure (in Gronn's case) and distributed cognition and action (in Spillane et al's case). For Gronn, distributed leadership is the result of “three forms of concertively patterned and reproduced activity-based conduct, each representing varying degrees of structural solidity: *spontaneous collaboration*, *intuitive working relations*, and *institutionalised practices*” (Gronn, 2002: 446-447). Spillane et al. (2004) similarly distinguish between *collaborated distribution*, *collective distribution* and *coordinated distribution*. From this perspective leadership is a shared and emergent process, dynamically constructed and shaped over time through the interaction of leaders, followers and the situation (Spillane, 2006: 3).

Whilst these representations are useful for extending our focus beyond the individual personages of leadership, however, they remain somewhat unclear about how, when and why particular individuals (or groups) might be motivated and enabled to contribute towards 'leadership' and retain the somewhat problematic 'leader/follower' dualism. In order to address these issues we, the authors, believe that it is necessary to give consideration to two further factors: (1) the identity processes (both individual and social) that shape our sense of belonging and purpose, and (2) the more enduring structural aspects of the environment (including organisational systems, processes and physical layout). In effect, we seek to bring issues of agency and structure more overtly into the model – to hold them in interdependent tension, largely using the concept of 'social identity' (Haslam, 2004) as a bridge between the two.

In the remainder of this paper we will use findings from a major research project in HE to extend Spillane's (2006) model of distributed leadership to represent it as a dynamic outcome of five inter-related factors (see Figure 1).

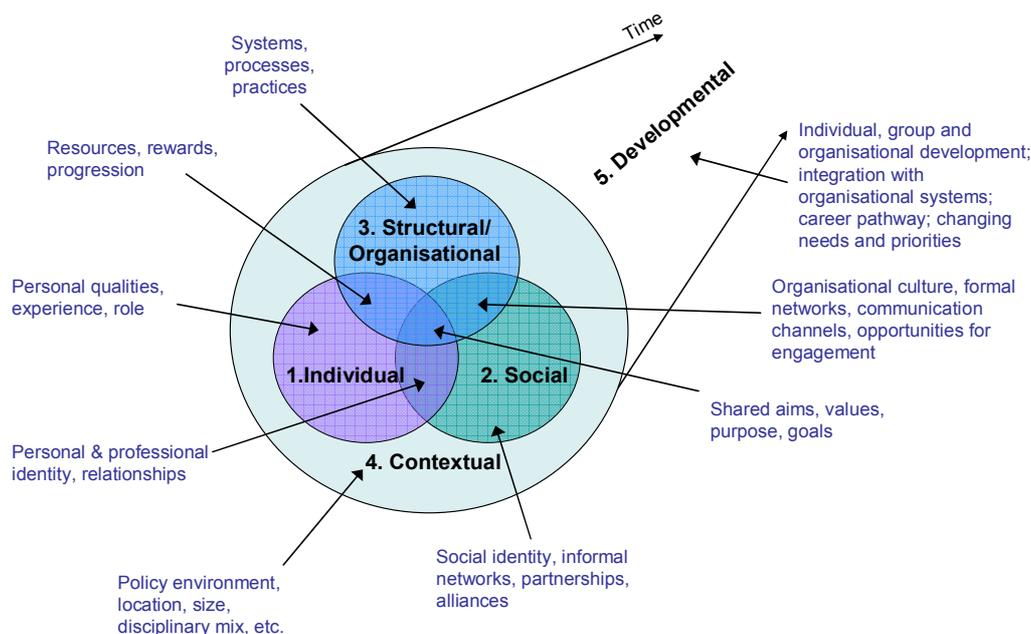


Figure 1 – Dimensions of leadership in HE

METHOD

The findings presented throughout this paper are drawn from an LFHE-funded investigation of leadership and leadership development in HE (Bolden et al., 2007). The aim of this study was to identify common and competing experiences and perceptions of leadership at different levels within HEIs in an attempt to identify the 'collective' nature of HE leadership and implications for leadership development. Our research used an in-depth qualitative interview approach, gathering data from a total of 152 university leaders in 12 UK universities. Institutions were selected to give a broad cross-section of locations, types, sizes and disciplines and interviewees selected from both academic and professional service roles at the senior executive/central university level, faculty (or large school) and school/department.

The main focus of this research was on the leadership of the academic work of the university. Within this, we were particularly interested in leadership at the school/department level as this is the main operational unit of universities, the primary source of future senior academic leaders, and the main point of interface between leadership of the institution and leadership of the academic discipline. We were interested both in how leadership is experienced at this level and how it interacts with other parts of the organisation. Notably we were looking to explore how strategic direction emerges and is negotiated between the varying actors and how this is influenced by ones' sense of personal, professional and social identity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overall, our findings indicated a tendency to distribute leadership widely within UK universities. Despite this, however, all institutions in our sample reported difficulties in achieving a balance between top-down, bottom-up and lateral processes of communication and influence. In all cases a dynamic tension was experienced between the need for collegiality and managerialism, individual autonomy and collective engagement, leadership of the discipline and the institution, academic versus administrative authority, informality and formality, inclusivity and professionalisation, and stability and change. Furthermore, we noted that despite a reported desire for participative leadership the true locus of power and authority invariably lies with budget holders and where they are situated within the organisation. Overall our findings support those of Collinson and Collinson (2006) in the Further Education sector that recognise the need for 'blended leadership' comprising elements of both 'vertical' and 'shared' leadership (Pearce, 2004).

Key dimensions of leadership in HE

In the following section we use our findings to elaborate on the model presented in Figure 1.

(1) Individual

This dimension refers to individual leaders – their personal qualities, experience and preferences. Our research revealed a wide variation in styles, motivations and approaches within and between universities, ranging from highly individualistic through team and collective approaches. There was general consensus on the need for academic and professional credibility, consultation and openness, although the manner in which these translated into leadership behaviour varied considerably.

Despite overwhelming support for a collective/participative approach to leadership, our research also clearly demonstrated a desire for inspirational or visionary leaders in times of change. The VC/Principal, in particular, was looked to as setting the overall direction for the organisation (in consultation with others), with a similar perspective often being afforded to Deans and Heads. To this extent it could be argued that the designated leader needs to be given the authority to act on behalf of the group, in effect to be seen to be 'doing it for us' (Haslam et al., 2001).

Another important aspect relating to personal style regards the use of informal channels of communication and influence. Despite the complex organisational structures present within universities, many leaders appear to rely heavily on informal networks, sometimes totally bypassing and undermining the formal structures. An example of this would be where discussions are held informally prior to committee meetings where a decision is effectively reached prior to the formal discussion.

(2) Social

This dimension concerns the social and relational aspects of organisational life, incorporating the informal networks, partnerships and alliances; culture or 'feel' of the place; and any shared sense of purpose and identity. Within our own study, the concept of identity seemed integrally linked to motivations and experiences of leadership that are not well captured in behavioural or procedural accounts. Identity refers to the multiple, shifting and sometimes conflicting senses of self experienced by university managers/leaders. Thus, for example, academic leaders (even up to the most senior level) retain the identity of 'academic' alongside their managerial role – a dual role that has the potential to generate difficult tensions such as conflicting allegiances between the institution, the discipline and even the research group.

A related tension involves what counts as 'research' activity. We noted a biographical element to the findings whereby, over the period of ones' career the research contribution transforms from active production to facilitation and support. This dimension of research contribution would seem to be a fundamental part of the transition from 'academic' to 'leader' yet continues to receive little recognition or reward within the current performance output climate in UK HE.

Within our study there were also considerable variations in the extent to which academic leaders shared a sense of common 'social identity' with other managers (both academic and administrative) within and beyond the institution. In a number of cases informal networking opportunities had arisen for people in similar or connected roles to share experiences and ideas and these seemed to be important in the construction of a sense of belonging to the management cadre. The social identity approach argues that a shared sense of identity is essential for leadership to occur, in which case if a HOS/HOD is aligned with the discipline rather than the institution it is unlikely that s/he will either want to or be able to rally support in pursuit of broader organisational objectives.

(3) Structural

The third dimension refers to the organisational environment in which leadership occurs. In particular our research demonstrated how devolution of budgetary control, along with transparency in the allocation of finances, is fundamental in shaping leadership at the school/departmental level. The consequences of devolution are likely to be both beneficial and problematic for the institution as a whole. Thus, whilst it may encourage schools and departments to become more commercially orientated, it may also lead to fragmentation of the organisation and the development of 'silos' that render cross-organisational initiatives particularly challenging. Furthermore, devolving formal power to leaders at lower levels may well disempower those at more senior levels – leaving them to rely on inter-personal influence alone.

It thus becomes possible to distinguish at least two types of leader within universities – those with formal hierarchical power (top-down influence) and those relying predominantly on inter-personal influence (horizontal influence). A third type may well be those with less formalised

roles within the university hierarchy but who, nevertheless, exert a great deal of influence by virtue of their access to sought after resources such as research funding, academic reputation, political/social influence beyond the organisation, and/or a charismatic presence (bottom-up influence). As people progress through an academic management pathway, they may well be required to alternate between different types of role and forms of influence - a transition that may pose major developmental challenges.

(4) Contextual

The fourth dimension captured within our model is 'contextual', reflecting the way in which HE leadership is becoming increasingly politicised and subject to external pressures. Such trends, noted in the introduction, are driving towards greater commercial and market focus that puts pressure on traditional bureaucratic and/or collegial forms of organisation. Within this context there is a danger that economic performance becomes the overriding priority at the expense of the wider social contribution of HE and may alienate staff who regard whose primary motivations for working within the sector are more closely aligned with social and public value rather than economic goals.

(5) Developmental

The final dimension in our model refers to the ongoing and changing developmental needs of individuals, groups and organisations. Specifically within this field there is an overlap between individual, team and organisational development whereby, in order to be effective, interventions must endeavour to avoid returning changed individuals to an unchanged system or vice-versa. Thus 'leadership development' is necessarily broader than the development of people in leadership positions and organisational development addresses the human as well as non-human aspects of the system.

This dimension also draws attention to the temporal aspects of leadership in organisations – acknowledging that there is a time and a place for particular approaches and that personal engagement with leadership should be regarded within the wider biographic narrative of the individual both within and outside of work. Leadership is not a destination for individuals and organisations - it is an ongoing journey that requires adaptation, transformation and change.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have extended theorising on the nature of leadership practice in HE through the presentation of a model derived both from empirical research and theoretical reflection. In doing so, we have demonstrated the multi-layered and multi-faceted nature of leadership in HE and the manner in which individual agency and organisational structure interface at the group level through social capital and social identity.

In presenting this model we hope to bring into focus some aspects of HE leadership that typically remain obscured, particularly the multiple and competing nature of personal, professional, social and organizational identities; the varying forms of influence available to leaders throughout the organization; and the informal, emergent and shifting processes of social influence within large, complex organizations such as universities. To this extent, leadership practice can be considered as the process of working through a series of dialectical relationships arising from the juxtaposition of conflicting ideas, forces and differentials of power and resources (Collinson, 2005).

The implications of these findings for leadership development are to extend it beyond formal leaders, to incorporate the development of social capital and social identity as well as organisational structures and systems. At a research level, this paper seeks to encourage researchers to experiment with alternative theories and methodologies that open possibilities for a more processual understanding of leadership and to tease apart the varying units of analysis. And at a policy level, this paper argues for a move from individualistic and managerialist conceptions of leadership to a more relational understanding that recognises the multitude of forms in which leadership occurs, the diverse array of factors that influence it, and the competing priorities and objectives that universities are faced with.

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