

Does discipline matter? Issues in the design and implementation of management development programmes for heads of academic departments

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Abstract: *Government enquiries, universities and academic developers have all pointed to the need for systematic management development programmes for heads of academic departments. After noting that there were few examples of successful programmes in the literature and having met with limited success with one of their own, the authors conducted a needs analysis which included a survey of heads and other stakeholders. Analysis of the survey results indicates the existence of perceptual differences between academics from differing discipline cultures as to the importance of a range of possible heads' roles and of the need for professional development in them. This finding suggests that management development programmes should take more account of such cultures than appears to have been the case to date. Reasons for the differences should be the subject of further research.*

Keywords: *heads; management; development*

Introduction

In recent years there have been increasing calls from governments, academic institutions and from academics themselves for systematic management development for heads of academic departments. There are however few examples of successful programmes in the literature and we have so far been unable to conduct one at our university. This paper explores some possible reasons why such programmes appear difficult to implement and suggests one way forward.

Background

Commissioned reports which focus on national systems of university education such as the Jarratt (1985) and Dearing (1997) Reports in the UK and Hoare (1996) and West (1998) in Australia acknowledge academic departments as key units in the process of efficient management and

make proposals for improving their effectiveness. In 1994, a working party at our own university noted that heads of departments received no training or specific support and had no agreed framework within which to manage staff development and appraisal and recommended that they be provided with appropriate training programmes (initial and in-service).

A survey conducted in 1996 by Ramsden (1998) of heads of academic departments in Singapore, Hong Kong, UK, New Zealand and Australia identified four key challenges facing academic leaders in the years 1997 – 2005:

1. Maintaining quality with fewer resources, doing more with less; stretching and managing budgets
2. Managing and leading academic staff during a time of rapid change
3. Turbulence and change in the higher education environment
4. Increasing student numbers and responding to new types of students

For Ramsden these changes necessitate a re-conceptualisation of the traditional university leadership and management roles. For heads of department this means a shift from “amateur administrator” to “trained professional leader” (Ramsden, 1998, p.34).

A similar study by Marshall, Adams, Cameron and Sullivan (2000), pointed to the need for university staff development units “to design, develop, and implement professional development strategies that support all academic staff in acquiring knowledge and skills in each of the seven key dimensions (professional identity, academic leadership and management, strategic leadership and management, operational leadership and management, information management, financial and physical resources management, human resources management)” (pp. 44-45).

Yet the literature on higher education contains few examples of successful management development programmes for heads. One recent exception is the programme reported by Clifford (2001). We maintain however that the very specific circumstances under which this programme succeeded were very different from those facing us and therefore we cannot simply transfer this model.

While research into the roles and responsibilities of heads of academic departments identifies the need for management development, it provides little guidance as to the form this development should take and how it should be implemented. (Greene, Loughridge & Wilson, 1996; Moses and Roe, 1990; Sarros, Gmelch & Tanewski, 1997a; Sarros, Gmelch & Tanewski, 1997b) Even commissioned reports that draw attention to the need are silent on design and implementation. See (Dearing, 1997; Hoare, 1995; Skilbeck, 2001; UCoSDA, 1994).

Evidence of implementation is limited and tends to report work in progress, difficulties encountered and further issues to be resolved (UCoSDA, 1999). Taylor (1998), reporting on a survey of the training needs of heads of department in a British university notes the heads’ resistance to training in other than “technical subjects such as finance and personnel procedures” (p. 4), and cites as explanation, Middlehurst’s list of the ‘seven cults’ which impede development:

- The gifted amateur;
- Heredity (those with natural talent will emerge);

- Deficiency (training is remedial – ‘for the second eleven’)
- Inadequacy (once qualified, loss of face is involved in admitting gaps in one’s knowledge or competence);
- Implicit (learning by osmosis)
- Selection – (the selection of good staff will ensure good performance and obviate the need for training);
- Intellectual (there is no scientific basis to management and therefore it does not need to be taken seriously). (Middlehurst, 1993)

Davies (1995), commenting on the difficulties of initiating development programmes for heads, adds the following three points to Taylor’s list: the widely held view that the basis of good headship is expertise in research as demonstrated through publication record; “suspicion of creeping managerialism”; and the lack of available time for attendance at courses and workshops (Brew, 1995, p. 128).

Both Taylor and Davies conclude with sets of recommendations for best practice which are essentially aspirational. (Brew, 1995; Taylor, 1998). Taylor provides no empirical evidence from the university sector to support her “principles of best practice” while Davies offers “some tentative conclusions” based on the “varied” experiences of only three internal programmes (Brew, 1995).

Marshall et al. postulate two essential preconditions for the introduction of professional and leadership development; “Pressure from and involvement of the university’s executive leadership team” and “Support from Staff Developers” (Marshall et al., 2000, pp. 50-51). Such support may take the form of encouraging action-research projects, workshops, seminars and organisational development activities. No advice is given to staff developers in institutions where the ‘executive leadership team’ is unwilling or unable to apply pressure and become involved or for those whose status precludes them from a significant organisational development role.

Where there is evidence of successful implementation, it appears to be at the national or regional levels as in Sweden, where the Government wished to promote strategic planning and therefore provided strong sponsorship. Even though this programme is deemed to have been successful, the author notes, “Such programmes tend to be stronger on information giving than on attitude change or skill development.... Thus as a whole, they would be relatively weak on transfer of learning back to the job or on changes in individual behaviour and practice” (Brew, 1995, p. 124).

Notwithstanding the difficulties described above, there exists a sub-genre of university management texts whose intended readership explicitly includes departmental heads. On the negative side such works situate their advice within specific national systems and cultures of higher education. Lucas (1994), Hecht et al. (1999), Gmelch and Miskin (1995) and Tucker (1992) for example write from perspectives within the American higher education system while Ramsden (1998) writes with the specific purpose of preparing Australia’s heads of academic departments.

In spite of this reservation, there are clear parallels, particularly at the micro-level, between the responsibilities of heads (regardless of national context). Lucas, for example, discusses personnel matters such as dealing with difficult colleagues (Lucas, 1994).

Taking into account these reservations, heads could be provided with a substantial and useful bibliography on university management, the contents of which, if studied carefully, would assist them to perform their duties both efficiently and effectively. Our own experience however, suggests that few heads avail themselves of such opportunities. Hence the problem of systematic management development remains.

In 1996, one of the authors sought feedback from heads of department in her own university on their management development needs. Most respondents indicated a preference for development consisting of inputs from experts over self-learning packages, external management development programmes or workshops led by peers. There was moderate interest in the idea of a Heads Forum for ongoing discussion and exchange of ideas. Finally, there was significant interest in the development of influencing and negotiating skills, time management and performance appraisal.

On the basis of this information, in 1997, we produced *Leading An Academic Department*, a development programme for heads consisting of three skills development seminars led by external expert management consultants and concluding with a Forum where heads shared issues of common concern.

Between 16 and 20 heads participated in the skills development seminars with approximately 40 attending the network meeting. Feedback from the seminars indicated that in spite of their stated preference for expert input, heads found it difficult to relate to the management jargon employed and were highly sceptical of the transferability of models drawn from the world of business. The Forum on the other hand was much more successful and subsequent meetings continue to attract good attendance and positive feedback.

1998 to 2000 saw the continuation of one-off skills seminars together with briefing sessions on legislation. Only very small numbers of heads were attracted to these activities and they certainly did not constitute a systematic programme of management development nor did they meet guidelines for best practice as described in the literature.

We decided, therefore, to conduct a more comprehensive needs analysis involving an examination of the institutional culture, policies and structures, a review of the literature relating to the roles of academic heads of department and their developmental needs and an institutional survey of the heads themselves and other key stakeholders.

This paper focuses primarily on one aspect of the analysis, namely the impact of discipline cultures on the heads' perceptions of their management roles and associated development needs.

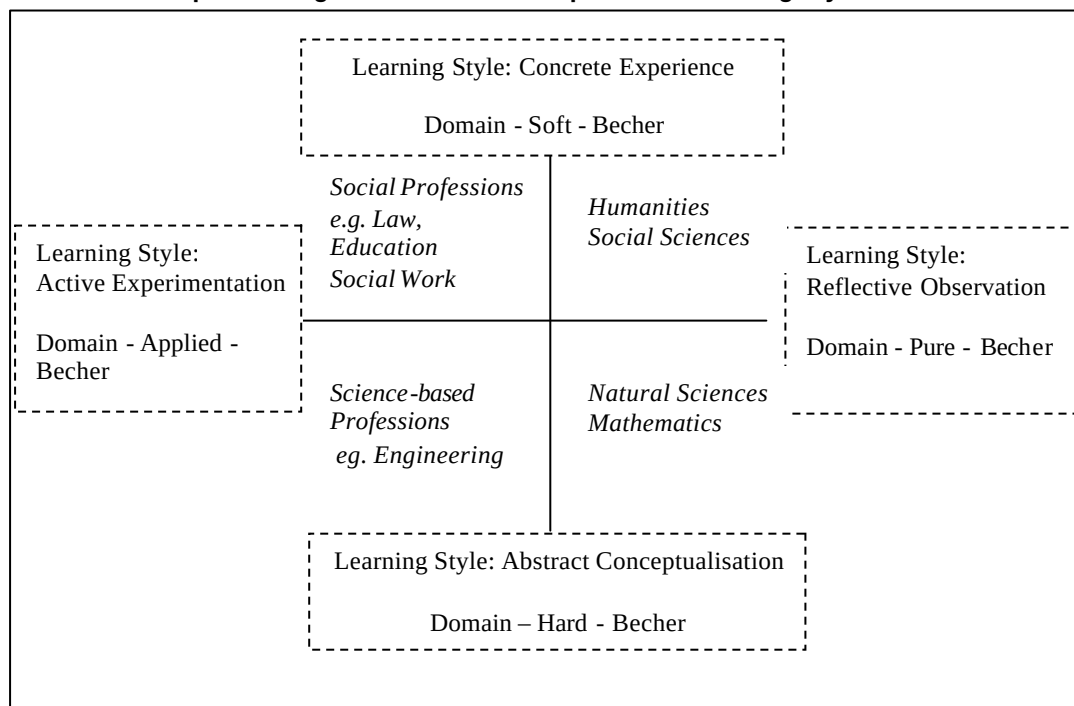
Discipline cultures

Kolb's (1984) research on learning styles and Becher's (1989) on discipline specific cultures in academia draw distinctions between disciplines on the basis of their systems for creating and interpreting knowledge. They assert that variations in modes of enquiry between academic disciplines can be described by a two dimensional model, as depicted below, where one axis is

concrete/abstract (Kolb) or soft/hard (Becher) and the other active/reflective (Kolb) or applied/pure (Becher). They use this model to demonstrate that with some exceptions the academic disciplines fall into one of four cognitive domains. In the interests of simplicity we decided to employ Becher's nomenclature.

Thus 'hard' disciplines are essentially quantitative and 'soft' disciplines qualitative. 'Applied' disciplines are those which produce graduates in the recognised professions, the remaining being 'pure'.

Academic disciplines: cognitive domains and preferred learning styles



Sources: (Kolb, 1984) (Becher, 1989)

This model suggests that there “are relationships among the structure of learning, the structure of social knowledge, and living systems of inquiry (academic fields) and endeavour (careers).” (Kolb, 1984) Thus, for example, the preferred learning style of a head of department from the Humanities is likely to be significantly different from that of a head in Engineering. Management development programmes for heads of department should, therefore take such differences into account in both design and implementation.

Becher's research differs from Kolb's in several ways. Firstly, his subject is academics rather than students and practitioners. His purpose is to “begin to identify the nature of the connections between fields of study and those who work in them...and in particular the examination of both the cognitive and social aspects of intellectual enquiry...” rather than restricting himself chiefly to learning styles (Becher, 1989, p. 162). Second, Becher uses the semi-structured interview as

his preferred method of data collection (Becher, 1989) while Kolb employs a psychometric test – the Learning Style Inventory (Kolb, 1984).

The potential implications of the work of Kolb and Becher are important for two reasons. Firstly, academic heads from the four cognitive domains may view their roles and their development needs differently and second their different learning styles may need to be taken into account in the design and implementation of management development programmes.

Research questions and methods

Our research questions were, therefore:

1. What perceptions have heads of academic departments, non-academic managers, senior academic managers and academic staff of the heads' roles, responsibilities and management development needs?
2. What might be the effect of the various discipline cultures on the design and implementation of a management development programme for heads of academic departments?

Given these research questions, we decided to use a survey strategy and searched the literature for guidance in the design of appropriate questions. In the event we drew heavily on the work of Moses and Roe (1990), Middlehurst (1993) and Marshall (1997). From these sources we constructed a 53-item questionnaire including space for respondents to add their own items and comments if they wished. The questionnaire was in two parts, the first part used a three-point rating scale - from Unimportant to Very Important - to seek information about the importance or otherwise of possible headship roles and responsibilities. The second part utilized a Yes/No categorical scale to elicit views on the desirability of management development in those roles.

Ten draft copies of the questionnaire were sent for evaluation to former heads of department, current senior administrators and experienced academics. Their responses indicated that the questionnaire provided comprehensive coverage of the topic and that the questions were unambiguous and sought information which the target groups could reasonably be expected to provide. Their only negative comment was that, as the questionnaire was rather long, the items should be grouped under broad categories. This was done and the categories were; administration, staff relations, personal skills, teaching and research.

Findings

Following Moses and Roe (1990) and Gmelch and Miskin (1995), we decided to concentrate our analysis on those items where more than 70% of respondents in any given group were in agreement. In the interests of brevity we shall use the 'shorthand' expressions 'most respondents' and 'consensus' in place of 'more than 70% of respondents'. It should be noted that in some cases the number of respondents in any one group was small, for example, in the soft/applied category only two heads out of a possible three responded and therefore the data must be treated with some caution. Given that the primary purpose of this study was to reveal opinions, perceptions and recommendations of key groups of staff in one institution, rather than to confirm hypotheses or to generate theory, we do not see this limitation as a serious handicap.

Roles of heads

There was little consensus amongst all the heads (n =28) surveyed about which of their roles were “very important” in comparison with the responses of the senior academic managers (n=5). Heads appeared little concerned about staff relations but much concerned about their own time and stress management. Research leadership was seen as “very important” by academic managers and but not by heads or non-academic managers (n=5).

Marshall, Adams and Cameron (2000) note that departmental heads have tended to regard their teaching and research leadership roles as highly important. It is interesting that this group of heads apparently did not. One possible explanation is that teaching and research still remain very private matters for many academics and departments at this research-led university and hence heads in general do not expect to play leadership or management roles in these areas except in the most general sense of “promoting excellence”. Senior academic managers, on the other hand, took a wider view, which may have been brought about by closer acquaintance with pressures from the external environment.

Analysing the survey data according to gender revealed a very high degree of consensus amongst the female heads and very little amongst the males. With the exception of items related to research, the female heads identified “very important” roles across all categories and they were also more concerned with staff relations and teaching than were their male counterparts.

When the data was examined in relation to Becher’s discipline categories, heads in Hard/Applied disciplines (n=12) identified roles as “very important” in all categories. They were unique in placing strong and equal importance on both teaching and research roles. There was a low level of consensus amongst heads from Soft/Pure disciplines (n=7) as to which roles were “very important”. Alone of all sub-groups, heads from these disciplines did not rate **any** administrative roles as ‘very important’ although they were more concerned with teaching than most of their colleagues.

The two heads in the Soft/Applied disciplines had a high level of consensus but did not include any staff relations items as “very important”. In contrast, heads from the Hard/Pure (n=7) area identified staff relations, administration and personal skills as “very important”, but teaching and research leadership and management appeared to be of little common interest.

The differences in responses from the different discipline areas are quite striking but it would take considerably more research to uncover detailed causes. It is puzzling, for instance, why the heads from the Hard/Applied disciplines rated a number of teaching and research roles as “very important”, whereas their colleagues from the Hard/Pure disciplines did not. One possible explanation is that funding for research in Engineering, Medicine and the Sciences is at a high level and there is strong competition for such funding which would suggest that heads from these disciplines would be more likely to take a close interest in research planning. Again, team research is common to all these disciplines.

Notoriously, heads from Soft/Pure disciplines are not particularly interested in what they regard as “administrivia”. But why were heads from the Hard/Pure disciplines the sub-group with the most interest in staff relations?

Responses from the academic group (n=23) broadly mirrored those of their heads with some exceptions. For example, staff in the soft/pure disciplines (n=6) rated some staff development

roles as very important, whereas those respondents from soft/applied disciplines (n=6) rated only one administrative role as very important there being no consensus in any of the other categories. Finally academics from the hard/pure disciplines (n=5), unlike their heads, rated some teaching and research management roles as very important.

Professional development needs of heads

Again there was very little consensus amongst the heads, as a group, in relation to their professional development needs. They recommended only three items for development, all from the administrative category, with two of them linked to departmental reviews that were being introduced systematically at the time of the survey.

The academic staff and the non-academic managers, the groups who have most regular contact with heads, thought very differently. They identified items across the whole range of categories with particular emphasis on staff relations. The academic managers agreed with their non-academic colleagues but with less emphasis on the staff relations. Surprisingly, they did not identify research leadership as a development priority despite regarding some items in this category as being “very important” roles.

Comparison of responses of male and female heads revealed that the females, unlike their male counterparts, identified discipline and grievance procedures as matters for professional development. They also recommended two items related to research.

Heads from the Applied Disciplines – Soft and Hard – provided the most comprehensive list of development needs (but note: n =2 for the Soft/Applied group). Against the trend, heads from Hard/Pure disciplines did not list preparing for departmental review.

Although heads from Soft/Pure disciplines did not rate any administrative items as “very important”, they listed four of those items as requiring professional development.

Apart from the two heads from Soft/Applied disciplines, no other groups recommended development in teaching leadership or personal skills.

Only heads from the Hard/Applied disciplines recommended professional development in industrial relations issues.

Heads from the Pure-discipline areas – both Soft and Hard – did not list any research items as “very important” nor did they recommend development in this category. Conversely, heads from the Pure-discipline areas – both Soft and Hard – exhibited a high level of consensus about items which should **not** be included in the development programme.

Again, much further research would be needed to uncover the reasons for the perceptual differences between the discipline areas. The findings do suggest, however, that a key issue for the proposed management development programme will be meeting the needs of diverse groups of heads.

Discussion

Our findings pose three dilemmas. The first is that while heads, *considered as a homogenous group*, did not see the need for much management development, those who work with them most certainly did. Marshall et al. (2000), discussing an analogous situation relating to academic leadership suggests the inclusion of all stakeholders in their proposed development programme thereby enriching "...both leaders and followers, by exposure to the views and perspectives of the other".

The inclusion of such "multiple perspectives" in the programme is very attractive but the difficulty still remains of how to motivate heads to engage with such a comprehensive programme in the first instance when they do not perceive the need for it. This perception may be based on the view that they are already proficient in those roles that they viewed to be very important.

The second dilemma is that while bringing together heads from all disciplines provides cross fertilisation of ideas (as we found with the Heads' Forums), a more systematic management development programme would run foul of the significant differences between the discipline cultures. Thus for example, heads who do not see that staff relations are very important or that they could benefit from development in this area will simply not take part in that aspect of the programme.

A possible solution may be to continue with the Heads' Forums as a vehicle for discussion and networking while devising separate management skills programmes for heads in the four discipline cultures. Such programmes would have different priorities in terms of content and may need to employ different delivery methods.

Finally, while our research does not indicate a need for a separate management development programme for women heads. The very small number of women in our own institution seeking headship suggests the need for some type of pre-headship programme to encourage more women to consider this career option.

The literature indicates factors, such as support from senior management, which may impact on the success or otherwise of management development programmes for departmental heads. We believe that we have identified one factor, which if neglected, will almost inevitably lead to poor uptake of such programmes, namely differences in perception of heads' roles and associated development needs between academics from the four discipline cultures. It may be worthwhile to test this conclusion in other institutions and to seek explanations for it. In particular, it would appear that it maybe useful to extend the arguments of Becher and Kolb to the whole area of academic management.

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