GatenbySanderson
Becoming Academic Manager

Defining behavioural excellence

The role of Head of Academic Department/School is one of the most important senior leadership roles in any university with responsibility for managing education and student experience and research and enterprise activities. Academic leaders at this level play a pivotal role in disciplinary leadership, strategy development, business planning and in leading change. The role is a mission critical link between the academics and senior management involving the navigation of a complex set of institutional dynamics, significant resource constraints, competing priorities and perspectives.

In this second of GatenbySanderson's Becoming … series we have been speaking with recently appointed Heads of Departments/Schools to explore their experiences of becoming academic managers. We are incredibly grateful to everyone we spoke to for their honesty and insights.

Context

In 2004, Professor Martin Parker, then at the University of Leicester, published an article called Becoming Manager or The Werewolf Looks Anxiously in the Mirror, Checking for Unusual Facial Hair.[1] In this autobiographical article, Martin reflected on his experience of becoming the Head of the Management Department at Keele University three years earlier. He talked about how becoming manager 'puzzled and challenged' him in equal measure. As a Professor of Management, he had assumed that '… management was something – an attitude, a set of skills, a form of character, a kind of language; something that can be learned by managers …' He reflected on 'the fragmented character of managerial work, the changing relations between self and colleagues, and the seductions of power, centrality and speed.' He also set out his reflections 'on the relationship between a critical management, academic identity and managerial practice.'

Since Martin first became Head, the role has become even more critical to institutional success. Heads are at the forefront of executing significant change and transformation that involves incredibly challenging, and often longstanding, people and culture issues to address. They are charged with driving up academic productivity to meet sets of sometimes conflicting strategic KPIs. Their exposure to governing bodies is unrecognisable from what it once was and, depending on how their institution structures its professional services, they may have little or, in some cases no, on the ground support.

Against the backdrop of huge financial, cultural, mental health and regulatory challenges facing the HE sector, and given the importance of this role to organisational success, we ask a simple question: Do higher education institutions have the right infrastructure in place to recruit, prepare and support their Heads of Departments/Schools to be the indispensable leaders they are?

[1] Professor Martin Parker, Becoming Manager or The Werewolf Looks Anxiously in the Morro, Checking for Unusual Facial Hair. Management Learning, Sage Publications 2004

GatenbySanderson

Our interviews

Tessa Harrison (HE Partner) and Hilda Gjika (Associate Consultant) at the executive search firm, GatenbySanderson have undertaken a series of interviews with Heads of academic Departments and Schools appointed into their role since 2020 to examine the route to becoming academic manager. We found a high degree of commonality in our conversations.

Semi-structured interviews were held with 10 individuals, some of whom had been recently successful first-time headship candidates of GatenbySanderson; others were more experienced in their roles. Interviews were also held with current researchers with an interest in academic management and leadership careers more broadly to address the following areas:

- the decision making process to become academic manager

- leadership development and skills

- the recruitment process

- the role of executive search

The decision making process to become academic manager

Our conversations revealed that happenstance plays a significant part in individuals' decision to become an academic manager. For most, there had been no recognisable career planning beyond their focus on doing everything required to be an outstanding researcher. The initial impetus to apply for a role often came from the traditional tap on the shoulder/it's your turn approach. Those willing to 'give it a go' found themselves becoming increasingly curious and ambitious about leadership while also acknowledging that the success of this approach depends very much on the motivation of the tapper and the tapped. For some, the prompt to move into academic management resulted from an approach by a head-hunter. For many, the pandemic played a significant part in rethinking careers, especially when they found themselves enjoying new opportunities to influence, create change and innovate as a result of taking on unplanned leadership responsibilities.

The point of transition into becoming Head usually involves consideration of the key question of professional identity; whether becoming Head will take individuals away from their identity as academics, and especially as researchers. Their thoughts about manager identify are more often informed by individuals' experience of working with other Heads throughout their careers. In their current research on Hybrid Managers in Higher Education,[2] Budjanovcanin and Denney discuss the role of Heads of Departments as hybrid managers, '… professionals that manage in professional contexts, overseeing the work of other professionals ,,, the link between professionals and senior managers … responsible for helping deliver organisational strategy.' The study examines the role of hybrid managers in academia, focusing on the motivations of university Heads of Departments, challenges that affect the successful enactment of their role, their relationship with power dynamics and their development needs for undertaking leadership as a hybrid manager. Their interviews with 20 professors in their respective institutions identified five Head of Department types: aspirational heads who emphasise their managerial identity; loyal heads who emphasise their professional identity with a focus on their department; visionary heads who emphasise their professional identity with a focus on their discipline; monocular heads who equally emphasise their professional and managerial identities and the isolated head whose motivation is to gain power for self preservation.

From our conversations with institutions recruiting new academic managers, the Monocular Head defined by Budjanovcanin and Denney as an individual able to equally emphasise their academic and leadership identities, is clearly the ideal personification of what many are looking for. But the skills needed to lead an academic department don't necessarily come naturally. Academics' ability to place their daily administrative work in the broader context of HE to develop the insights and resources required to understand and develop their own capacity for strategic leadership don't necessarily form part of academic career planning.

[2] Dr Ali Budjanovcanin (King's Business School, King's College London)
and Professor Fiona Denney (Brunel Business School) Hybrid Managers in Higher Education

Leadership development and skills

We invited interviewees to reflect on their leadership development and the skills needed to be an effective academic manager. We were interested to answer the question: what really lies behind the need for academic credibility when the danger can be that a department can 'lose a great academic but gain a lousy head of department?' The key themes arising from the interviews were:

The assumption. Interviewees spoke about the lack of formal leadership development throughout their careers which they saw as stemming from a persistent assumption about the innate ability of academics to be effective academic managers and that they will work it out for themselves.

In a follow up discussion with senior HE leaders, there was a resounding 'no' to the question, are the right career progression conversations happening in performance reviews?' The value of academic leadership is widely felt to be under valued and the differences between academic leadership and more general forms of leadership are not understood.

Skills. Of most concern to new managers was nervousness about the people management element of the role, the sense of responsibility and lack of training especially at a time of heightened employee relations in HE and learning how to navigate the challenges associated with acute student mental health challenges and protecting academic freedom within the culture wars context. Financial management was highlighted as a gap; running a research grant is not necessarily the best preparation for running a departmental budget or for understanding how a university's money works and flows around the system. Similarly, understanding institutional metrics; how these are set and what data sits underneath them to understand the context behind the numbers and the impact metrics are having. But perhaps the most often mentioned gap was in better time management, both their own and that of others. While the first two, people and financial management, can to a large extent be taught and learned; the last, time management, is defined by an individual's management style but new managers need time to develop their authentic leadership approach which fits with the context they operate in so management style might not be 'taught' but it can be developed.

Institutional leadership programmes were seen as being too generic with not enough attention paid to how to lead inclusively and manage with emotional intelligence; how to nurture self-awareness; how to think and operate strategically and work effectively with others including professional services to drive up performance and achieve results. Particularly, how to deal with the often longstanding cultural and behavioural challenges that have been known about but left unchallenged. How are institutions supporting, onboarding and developing academic leaders in areas like team management, particularly giving them the tools to navigate difficult conversations, influencing, managing a highly skilled team, Inclusive leadership, building belonging and psychological safety and operationalising strategy?

The recruitment process

Much has been written on the positives and negatives of the rotational approach to academic leadership roles but the sector has been changing for a while now. In recent years there has been a shift towards external appointments as fewer and fewer career academics have been willing to take on the role even for a fixed term period. Executive search firms are increasingly used to recruit academic managers especially in hard to fill roles where there is no obvious internal candidate. Some of this is to do with a negative perception about the impact on individual careers of taking a couple of years away from research; some of it is concerned with the sense that the role of Head has become an impossible, un-strategic and thankless job.

Those who make the case for the rotational model say it enables equity, collegiality and career development and also supports a positive view of Heads coming up through the ranks from the inside who know how things work and are trusted by their colleagues. Those who make the case against talk about the potential dangers of rotational Heads taking a short term view and being resistant to tackle longstanding culture challenges or taking unpopular decisions when the individuals know they will to face their colleagues when they return to their substantive academic role.

From our discussions, the overwhelming sense was that the majority of academics see the Head role as an impediment to their academic promotion and advancement rather than a positive and integral part of their academic career progression. For some, the reward of a sabbatical 'to get back on track' once their tenure is over can be a huge motivation. Does the rotational model underpins a view that academic management is a duty rather than a vocation? What are the implications for institutional academic workforce planning strategies at a time when the need for strategic and inclusive change leadership has never been greater?

We heard that institutions search for people with vision so that individuals arrive with an idea of what they 'want' to manage rather than what they 'have to' manage when they start in role. Interviewees argued strongly that recruitment should start from where the department/school actually is. They wanted to see improved scoping of the academic manager role specification to make it absolutely clear what the real job to be done is and therefore what skills, experiences and qualities are going to be needed at a particular point in time. This scene setting is rushed if it is done at all. Cutting and pasting role specifications is the norm and only occasionally is the wider community involved in stepping back to take a considered and fresh look at what sort of Head is required.

We know from our own experience the power of facilitating discussions with a department's staff that start from talking about the future of the discipline before moving onto considerations of departmental identity, leadership and change within the context of delivering institutional strategy. Without this explicit understanding between the department, the institution and executive search, institutions seeking to make the role of Head of Department/School attractive can inadvertently create a gap between the promise and the realities facing the new incumbent. In one case we heard that despite thorough probing throughout the recruitment process about the issues facing the School, the reality of the situation facing the incoming Head was such that the consequences for a less experienced new academic manager and the School could have been potentially catastrophic.

The role of executive search

Reflecting on our role as enabling partners in the recruitment and development of academic managers, the main themes arising from our discussions were:

Institutional context shapes the leadership requirements for any role. Being absolutely honest and clear about the actual job to be done and what the priorities, opportunities, challenges and measures of success will look like for the individual and the institution is paramount to assessing what needs assessing to select the right candidate.

Academic leadership succession planning remains a challenge. We heard that HE continues to be poor at academic management succession planning. Running a department/school is entirely different from running a research group or programme team and yet the assumption persists that because someone has done one they can make the transition to the other. Similarly, showcasing to early career academics those examples where academic managers are demonstrating it is possible to combine a successful academic career with an academic management role is critically important to securing the pipeline of leadership talent.

The role of executive search is not well understood. Many academics, and especially women and academics from ethnic minority backgrounds tell us they don't know what the executive search process is or how to engage with it. The 40+ page academic CV and speculative application is the least effective way of ensuring applications for leadership roles are given due consideration at the earliest stage of the search and selection process. Academic managers identify and sponsor talent all the time; they are personally accountable for equality, diversion and inclusion in their areas of responsibility simply by virtue of the fact that they are close to the institution's staff and students. Executive search firms are used by institutions because we are generally seen as being able to access untapped talent both inside and outside institutions. Our role as executive search consultants is to build relationships and network from which to identify individuals and encourage them to apply for roles they might not previously have considered. How and when are academics informed about the fundamental role headhunters are increasingly playing?

Understanding the team dynamics into which a new Head is landing is critical to success. One interviewee suggested all recruitment should start with a full team analysis before scoping a role rather than wait until the new lead academic manager is appointed. Stakeholder engagement before embarking on a recruitment campaign is vital to helping identify where there is commonality and dissonance within the wider community about what is required to shape the person specification, search strategy and selection methods.

Supporting transitions is vital. As part of being clear about the context for the role, supporting the transition into a new lead academic manager is vital. Psychometric assessments during the recruitment process can provide an opportunity to identify the right skills and attributes for an academic manager which can then be rolled forward into the setting of developmental objectives for the appointed. There is a widespread belief that much more support needs to be put in place at institutional level to recognise the importance of the Head role, to reward it properly and put the right support structures, particularly leadership training, in place. Equally important is the need to support the transition of the outgoing lead either back into their academic community, especially in the rotational head model, or into their next leadership role. 1:1 coaching was widely agreed to be a powerful source of support for new academic managers in what can be a lonely role and one with a complex set of challenges to navigate.

The candidate market is changing. It is not entirely clear that institutions have caught up with the need to attract candidates to them. The candidates we speak to are very clear about what their work/life balance requirements need to be and expect more from institutions in terms of the salary and wider remuneration package.

Advice to aspiring academic managers

We found a high degree of commonality in the advice given across the series of interviews:

- learn to live with uncertainty as no two days will ever be the same
- be firm where you need to be firm around diary management and manage your time effectively
- don't take work home and create space to think
- approach the role as a sociological experiment – there is nothing more fascinating to see how people and organisations work/don't work
- work out how to operate upwards, downwards and across – be visible and accessible
- pick your battles carefully and work out how to decide where your red lines are
- be OK with the fact that the role can be lonely
- don't feel pressurised in your decision making; be comfortable about sometimes not taking a decision
- communicate honestly and often and then communicate again
- establish external networks to see how other institutions are dealing with challenges and share experiences
- if you are ambitious about applying for an academic manager role don't just submit a speculative application forward; engage proactively with the executive search firm when they are involved.
- be available, approachable, visible
- be resilient
- take the role seriously, but don't take yourself too seriously

For one of our interviewees this was all summed up in the advice to 'think like a cat – you will land on your feet and have more than one life – this is not a popularity contest.'

Conclusions

Being an academic manager is an incredibly important and privileged position; an opportunity to make a real difference for students and staff. For Budjanovcanin and Denney the Head role is "the lynch pin that enables the delivery of policy 'from above' and the implementation of it 'by the below ... critical in the contribution they make to knowledge brokering, strategy formation and implementation and facilitation of change.'[3] The academic manager sits at the centre of the institutional and local issues and decision. Individual academics have the freedom to be critical, but the challenge and opportunity for the academic manager is to take the critique to the next level within the context of institutional strategy and collective priorities. In this sense, the academic manager is the go-between, the upwards and downwards translator and provider of context.

How does the sector and its partners dispel the myth that the Head of role is not 'the kiss of death' to an academic career? The views given voice by Baker and Goodall in their article, What makes a good head of department[4] that being a lead academic manager is career limiting rather than career enhancing needs to change. We heard that the sector needs to embrace, respect and inculcate the academic leadership profession and roles from PGR. In the words of one Deputy Vice Chancellor we spoke to, "researcher driven people tend to supervise disproportionate numbers of PGR students compared to more 'balanced' people. Good they should, it's part of their contribution. But at the same time is it any wonder that newbies see the world in research terms and perpetuate unhelpful dichotomies? Particularly given the 'mini me' cultivating inclinations of many rock star researchers. Not everyone who enters academe will want to be a leader ... and many will excel in ways we absolutely need them to. But just as leaders need to appreciate the contribution to their organisation made by those not in leadership roles (which is why we think we need them to have that expertise and standing in those activities) so all, whatever the contribution of excellence being made, should have an understanding of the challenges and contribution of those that have taken on leadership on their behalf, and on behalf of the organisation. We'll find that pipeline easier to establish and it will be less leaky once established."

[3] Ibid.
[4] Agnes Baker and Amanda Goodall – What makes a good head of department

GatenbySanderson

GatenbySanderson brings deep expertise in identifying, securing and developing HE leaders. We design and deliver leadership programmes bespoke to your needs, combining our unique insight of 'what works' for HE leadership with our knowledge from across the public sector and not for profit. Whether it's supporting your academic leaders to navigate difficult conversations, lead change and build inclusive research cultures, to implement strategic goals or develop their personal impact, we provide effective leadership development solutions bespoke to your needs. Get in touch to find out more by emailing **education@gatenbysanderson.com**

Tessa Harrison
Partner, Education
tessa.harrison@gatenbysanderson.com

Hilda Gjika
Associate Consultant, Education
hilda.gjika@gatenbysanderson.com

GatenbySanderson