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Academic Leadership in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: A Personal Reflection on one Programme Director's Professional Development

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Abstract

This article provides a critical commentary on my development in academic leadership in a number of learning and teaching roles in Higher Education, principally that of Programme Director of the BMus programme at City University London (2009–13). It proceeds by interweaving discussion of aspects of the scholarly literature that has influenced my academic leadership over the years with personal reflection on the application of these theories to activities associated with my roles. Ground covered in the course of the article includes the ways in which academic leadership is distinct from other forms of leadership; the collaborative nature of academic leadership; the implications to leadership of the substantial changes witnessed in UK Higher Education in recent years; approaches to change management in relation to academic leadership; the current emphasis given nationally to metric-based performance measures, and the dangers posed by unrealistic goal-setting; the different qualities that may be embodied by an academic leader; and the transferral of leadership experience to different roles and institutional contexts.

Keywords: academic leadership; learning and teaching; higher education; programme director; change management

Introduction: be(com)ing an academic leader

From heading up a subject area, to overseeing a research project, to directing a degree programme, to mentoring junior colleagues, to simply taking charge of a class of students, the undertaking of leadership roles is an inevitable part of a career in academia. Detailed consideration of the principles underpinning leadership in Higher Education, and of the application of suitable approaches to leadership and change management in one's day-to-day practice, may therefore form a significant part of continuing professional development for academic staff, particularly those who currently undertake, or actively aspire to, positions of increased leadership.

This article, originally written for the 'Academic Leadership' module of the MA in Academic Practice programme, integrates the exploration of theories drawn from the literature that has guided my thinking on academic leadership with personal reflection on their practical application to a range of activities. It therefore takes the form of a personal commentary with a scholarly dimension, rather than a conventional research paper, following a multi-section structure in which different facets of academic leadership are considered in turn. In this context, 'academic leadership' refers not just to the overall leader of a given institution (a university's Vice-Chancellor or equivalent) but also to the intermediary leadership positions located throughout the organisation's hierarchy down to the local level of individual departments and programmes. The latter have characterised my eight-year tenure in the Department of Music at City University London, in that I was made a Programme Director at the outset of my career, initially for the MA Music degrees (2005–09) and subsequently for the larger BMus programme (2009–13). While the below discussion focuses on aspects of

leadership associated with work undertaken while at City, largely from the perspective of the Programme Director's role (and focussing on academic activities in relation to learning and teaching rather than to the pursuit of original scholarship), many of the themes it encompasses are consonant with my current position as Director of Learning and Teaching for the School of Arts at the University of Surrey (2013–), which is further outlined in the concluding section.

In presenting elements of my own story, I am by no means seeking to make any claims that it is exceptional or even exemplary, merely that it offers a narrative of adopting positions of academic leadership in Higher Education that have been informed by critical consideration of scholarly studies and the application of approaches they set forth. This article has also benefitted from an unusually long gestation period spanning the five years between 2009 and 2014, and in this respect, it represents the end product of an evolving record of my growth as a leader during this timeframe, one that has enabled much valuable reflection on my own professional development as well as on personal strengths and weaknesses. The intention is that the discussion that follows may be of interest to others entering academic leadership roles, whether at City University London or, indeed, elsewhere in the national sector.

Literature on (academic) leadership
The bibliography on leadership is, understandably, substantial. In addition to general studies in dedicated journals including *Harvard Business Review* and *Leader to Leader*, there exists a vast array of multimedia resources featuring material such as interviews with influential business leaders, one enlightening example of which is the Deloitte Leadership Academy (DLA). Much has also been written in recent years addressing the specific issue of leadership in Higher Education, which is emblematic both of the increasing importance of effective leadership within this context, and of the value of applying leadership theories to facilitate success. Key texts include Knight & Trowler (2001), Anderson & Bennett (2003), Kumar (2007), Marshall (2007), Bush (2008, 2011), Wiseman (2009), Garrett & Davies (2010), McCaffrey (2010), Bryman *et al.* (2011), English (2011), Bolden *et al.* (2012) and Grogan (2013), although the scope of this article precludes even a cursory summary of their views and theories. Among the notable publishers in the field are Jossey-Bass, Sage, Routledge and Harvard Business School, and major contributors to scholarship include Tony Bush, Paul Trowler and Alan Bryman. Leadership studies have also been undertaken by organisations such as the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the European University Association (EUA), the latter having published a comprehensive document bringing together a wide range of case studies from across the continent (Conraths & Trusso, 2007). One leading writer on change management in education is Michael Fullan, who has several books to his name as well as a website (michaelfullan.ca) on which his articles may be freely viewed. After some years of inactivity, the *Academic Leadership Journal* (academicleadership.org) launched in 2013.

Inevitably some approaches are better suited than others for a particular leader or leadership setting. In consequence, it has continually proven necessary for me (and, no doubt, anybody who aspires to a leadership role) to evaluate specific theories critically in order to determine whether, and how, their application to a given context is appropriate. For instance, Jensen and Klein's *Hacking Work* (2010) yields a fascinating central tenet suggesting that if an organisation's rules obstruct progress and success, then it may be prudent to find ways to circumnavigate them. However, this might not always be an appropriate way of dealing with restrictive or bureaucratic policies, and there may be more suitable alternative courses of action, such as escalating the matter up the managerial chain with a view to effecting change through conventional mechanisms.

Leadership, academic leadership and collaborative leadership
In light of the above, one of the questions with which I have been grappling throughout my time in Higher Education concerns the difference between leadership (in general) and academic leadership, and what behaviours might therefore be more specific to the university context. Bryman (2007:707) has provided some insights into this issue, suggesting that traditional leadership may often prove less necessary within Higher Education owing to individuals' relative autonomy and 'internal motivation', and that in academic leadership, the avoidance of damaging practices may actually be more important than cultivating positive benefits. Bain (2004) sheds some helpful light on the related issue of the difference between leadership and management in Higher Education, indicating that the former deals with direction and change, whereas the latter (although there is some overlap) is more concerned with maintaining structures and organisation.

One matter of particular relevance to leadership is that academia can become quite tribal, as Becher & Trowler's (2001) landmark study has explored. Given the striking differences between self-contained disciplinary areas and the consequently distinct ways in which processes may be implemented from one subject area to another, mixed messages may be received from different avenues where conflicting practices are concurrently in operation within different parts of the institution. In such eventualities, which are inevitable given the large-scale nature of such an organisation, localised leadership (at programme or departmental level) becomes especially important in order to mediate between contradictory positions.

Another area in which Higher Education is distinctive, and which relates to Bryman's observation about the relative autonomy of its staff, is that the operational environment can involve a managerial hierarchy akin to collaborative or shared leadership. The structure of which I was a part while at City University, in which the Head of Department (with overall responsibility for the subject unit) is not the same person as the Programme Director (who takes the lead in, and is responsible for, matters pertaining to the programme in question), is by no means atypical of the UK sector. The Department of Music, also in keeping with common practice, supplements these roles with separate Heads responsible for specific disciplinary areas such as Performance or Composition; while other members of staff, not in leadership roles, nevertheless have insightful contributions to make to key discussions such as the Department's strategic direction. A Programme Director also will routinely find

themselves collaborating with many other stakeholders beyond the immediate departmental Programme Team. At City University, these may include the School's professional services team, notably the Registrar and other Programme Administrators; the Associate Dean (Education) and members of associated School committees; Academic Services, both centrally and School-based; the Library and Careers Services; Learning Enhancement and Development (LEaD), from the perspective of the continuing enrichment of learning and teaching; and, of course, the students, including Programme Representatives and Students' Union Sabbatical Officers. Many of these individuals themselves hold positions of leadership in relation to their own areas of activity within the University.

The value of collaborative leadership, and the benefits of utilising innovative models to draw on shared knowledge and experiences rather than uniting behind a solitary leader, has been recognised for some years in business, society and academia (see, for example, Kanter, 1997 and Chrislip & Larson, 1994). The success of an overlapping managerial structure such as that outlined above hinges on colleagues' commitment to working closely with one another to gain a mutual understanding as to where one role ends and the next begins. Continual collaboration of this nature is necessary in order to avoid duplication of workload and its associated inefficiencies, and, conversely, to ensure that all areas of activity are covered by one role or another, such that nothing is able to slip through the proverbial net. At the same time, when faced with a group of authoritative staff each with their own remits, and with potentially as many different views as people to express them, it is equally important for one leader to be identified with whom the decision-making power ultimately rests in the event of a conflict of opinion.

Leadership and the changing context for Higher Education
It would be a truism to observe that UK Higher Education has borne witness to some dramatic changes in recent years. The substantial rise in tuition fees for home students to £9,000 per annum for undergraduate entry from 2012, coupled to the removal of the cap on student recruitment above certain A-level grades (set initially at AAB, subsequently lowered to ABB), emerged in the wake of the 2011 governmental White Paper. The more fiercely market-oriented climate brought about by these changes has been compounded by an unprecedented emphasis on major league tables such as those that appear within *The Times Good University Guide*, *The Complete University Guide* and the Unistats website (unistats.direct.gov.uk), as well as on student satisfaction as measured by nationwide surveys including the influential National Student Survey (NSS) for final-year undergraduate students. The 2013–14 academic year saw the introduction of Key Information Sets (KIS) for undergraduate degree programmes, requiring institutions to publish headline data as part of their marketing materials.

This changing environment has major consequences for academic leadership in Higher Education at all levels. Across the UK, universities' senior management have responded through such strategies as asserting their position within the more competitive market economy, aspiring to consolidate and improve upon their standing in the national league tables, developing institution-wide policies that place greater emphasis on teaching quality and student satisfaction, and reformulating their recruitment strategy to attract high-achieving students and raise entry requirements, as well as engaging in longer-term

planning to increase the profile of all areas of their research activity. In addition to implementing new institutional policies at more localised levels, academic leaders associated with individual subjects and programmes have themselves needed to react to the changed national context in respect of those implications that may be more specific to a given disciplinary area. For instance, in my former role as Undergraduate Programme Director for Music, it became necessary to devise strategies by which to manage the renewed currency of A-levels heralded by the national policy change, given that a significant proportion of applicants to undergraduate Music degrees (in general) will have pursued alternative qualifications, such as BTECs, instead. Moreover, many will hold music performance examination qualifications, which may, indeed, be more relevant to their university education than A-levels in non-musical subjects. However, and even though such qualifications have an identified UCAS points tariff, they will be infelicitously overlooked when consideration is made of A-level entry grades exclusively, as will inevitably be the case in light of the removal of the cap on recruitment of students attaining the threshold grades.

Academic leadership and change management
The Higher Education sector is seemingly in a constant state of flux, and in this respect the traditional binary model of 'transitional' leadership versus 'transactional' leadership would appear to be an unconvincing, if not altogether unhelpful one. Rather, it is merely the size of the transition that differentiates one leadership context from another; and in any case, successful leaders should strive continually to enhance the areas for which they are responsible, rather than allowing them to stagnate through inaction. Bain (2004: 2) has even gone so far as to suggest that leadership without change is 'a contradiction in terms', highlighting the inextricable link between the two.

My approach to change management is informed by the need to bear in mind the purpose for the change and the objectives to be reached. As Siegal & Stearn (2010) have explored, it is fruitful to work backwards from the target position by way of mapping out how to get there from the given starting-point, rather than focussing on the interim steps (or on preparing for the change) at the expense of considering the wider picture of the complete process. My practice has therefore often been to set the goal first, and then to consider what actions are needed in order to attain it. One suitably illustrative example is my implementation of a new means of integrating Personal Development Planning (PDP) within the undergraduate Music programme, which aspired ultimately to electronic delivery in the form of a bespoke blog. Having identified the desired outcome, a plan was devised by which it would be reached progressively across a three-year timeframe, starting out with a simple paper-based form to introduce the process to the students and to embed it more firmly within their learning culture, before moving incrementally to more sophisticated electronic methods.

Scott (2003) has discussed how change is not an automatic, linear process but a continuous one that needs to be actively led for it to take place successfully. In leading the ongoing development of the BMus degree during my tenure as Programme Director, it became increasingly apparent that change management activities involve cycles of detailed communication with stakeholders at every step of the way, consultation to monitor the effectiveness of changes made (in this instance, through focus groups with nominated student representatives), and their subsequent modification in response to feedback. It can

be particularly beneficial to ensure that colleagues are fully apprised, and persuaded, of the rationale behind change by the point of implementation, partly because, as Ong (2012) has discussed, it is necessary to embrace staff in change rather than merely paying attention to the structural process itself.

In initiating change in my leadership roles, I have been mindful that the core professional identity of academic staff is that of teacher-researcher rather than manager, and that associated change management activities should therefore be focussed on informing and enhancing the quality of education and research as their primary objective. I am especially wary of Fullan's (2006:5–6) warning that concentrating change on matters such as academic standards, assessment and curriculum development alone results in 'seriously incomplete theories of action because they do not get close to what happens in classrooms and school cultures'. Instead, such exercises may be embraced as opportunities to re-evaluate the strategic thinking within a given subject area periodically, and to implement changes that are desirable for pedagogical reasons rather than merely to accord with secondary agendas such as endeavouring to meet metric-based targets.

Metrics and the perils of goal-setting
The emphasis currently given to league tables and their associated metrics in UK Higher Education has led to a significant focus being placed by institutions on quantitative measures of performance garnered from such sources as national surveys and internal end-of-module evaluations. In turn, these practices have given rise to the present predilection for target-setting, whereby individuals are tasked with improving upon last year's scores by a specified margin; this warrants further exploration for the potential problems it may create. Ordóñez *et al.* (2009) have warned, albeit in a different context, that slavish adherence to unrealistic goals can become harmful, encouraging behaviours such as risk-taking, demotivation or dissatisfaction if the targets are unrealistic within the timeframe, too narrow or precise, not administered carefully or their progress is not effectively monitored. Although not discussed by Ordóñez *et al.*, one common principle intended to avoid such scenarios is to apply the SMART criteria that is, ensuring that each goal is Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound. Targets set in respect of such indicators as scores received in satisfaction surveys do not meet these criteria: staff are not in a position to achieve them as they have no control over the students' responses.

As an Undergraduate Programme Director, I was responsible for proposing target scores in relation to possibly the single most significant measure of performance in the UK sector today, the National Student Survey, as well as developing action planning by which the Programme Team would strive to achieve them. Mindful of the above, I resisted setting unrealistic targets, arguing that projected leaps of 20% or more for a given score should be revised downwards as staff will be much more readily motivated towards reaching goals that do not feel to be asking the impossible. Through determining a more attainable series of targets progressively rising across several years, coupled to implementing a variety of enhancement activities aimed at interrogating past results and improving student satisfaction going forward, the programme's NSS scores increased in subsequent iterations of the survey until, in 2013, it achieved the highest overall satisfaction score in the country for

Music. This result would not have been realised without significant effort and effective leadership on the part of several different colleagues.

The multi-faceted qualities of the academic leader

Collaborative endeavours such as that described above raise questions about whether a single person can realistically be expected to exemplify all of the characteristics of a rounded academic leader, and about strategies by which to supplement any shortcomings. As somebody who took up leadership roles within Higher Education at what many would regard as a relatively young age (I was 30 when I was asked to become BMus Programme Director, having previously been MA Programme Director), it was important for me to recognise that more senior colleagues will, by virtue of their breadth of experience and professional development, often be in a position to contribute valuable input on a given issue. That said, the converse can also be the case: sometimes I might be able to offer a fresh perspective that may be useful in calling into question unchallenged assumptions that longer-standing staff may take for granted. This is an issue particularly associated with junior managerial positions in which leaders find themselves assuming responsibility for the first time for tasks involving others, but it is certainly not (and should not be) exclusive to such situations. Ancona *et al.* (2007) have identified how different leaders possess different qualities and how the more successful ones recognise that they do not have to stand out in all areas, but instead seek the support of others to complement their own personal strengths. It is in such instances that the wealth of shared experience that arises from collaborative approaches to leadership in the departmental context can prove to be extremely fruitful: as in the familiar Aristotelian axiom, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

In Higher Education, as elsewhere, it seems unlikely that many people will naturally excel in every aspect of leadership, not least because the path to the profession for most academic staff involves the demonstration of excellence in research and/or practice within their specialist discipline, rather than a proven track record of management necessarily. It is therefore difficult to envisage that a single individual will perfectly encapsulate every one of, for example, the 13 distinct forms of effective leadership behaviour determined by Bryman (2007) following a rigorous literature review of UK, US and Australian studies. Some of Bryman's categories may fairly be critiqued in light of more recent developments in Higher Education; one, for instance, is 'Acting as a role model', and, while it is crucial for leaders to retain credibility in terms of proficiency in performing the roles associated with their position (teaching, administration and/or research), merely leading by example would seem to be insufficiently proactive in the current UK academic climate to yield effective leadership in itself. This caveat notwithstanding, as an academic leader I identify with several of Bryman's themes, including acting considerately and with integrity, communicating effectively, promoting a collegial environment and encouraging open discussion to inform decision-making. Others, such as managing academic workloads and appointing new staff, fall largely outside my remit although they are key to different leadership roles such as Head of Department, as, for that matter, are more research-oriented behaviours such as maintaining a work environment conducive to high-quality scholarship or activating directions in relation to departmental research strengths (to which I might add mention of steering staff through various research exercises). The behaviour that I perhaps accorded with the least during my tenure at City University is Bryman's opening theme, 'Clear sense of direction/strategic

management', in that the limited position of Programme Director largely precludes broad-scoped visionary thinking and planning beyond the confines of a single degree. For this reason, as I shall explore momentarily, I have adopted various strategies in respect of my recent move into a wider role that includes a more developmental dimension.

Conclusion: transferring leadership experience to a new institutional context

This narrative has focussed on activities undertaken at City University London in the four years of my role as Undergraduate Programme Director (2009–13). There are, of course, many other examples of leadership roles that academic staff may assume beyond the confines of a single institution. My work during this timeframe has also included tenures as external examiner for two other UK universities, and as external representative on validation panels and course boards for four further institutions. These positions necessitate leadership both as a Higher Education subject specialist and, more importantly, as arbiter in matters of academic standards and quality assurance. Recently I have also been fortunate to receive national and international recognition as an educational leader, notably, being appointed to Turning Technologies' global Distinguished Educator programme in 2012, and being awarded an HEA National Teaching Fellowship the following year. As an indication of the reach of my activity in the former role, I have given talks to academic staff at universities across the UK and Europe on the pedagogy and educational applications of electronic voting systems, sometimes individually and sometimes co-presenting alongside a representative from the company.

My career took a new direction in September 2013, as noted, when I moved to the University of Surrey to take up the position of Director of Learning and Teaching for the School of Arts. The remit of this role is much broader than those I undertook at City, straddling the subject areas of Music and Sound Recording, Dance, Theatre, Film and Digital Media Arts, as well as the Guildford School of Acting. This move thereby represented a significant advancement in terms of my managerial seniority, placing me in a position to influence policy and practice across a School comprising some 700 students and over 200 staff in a range of different disciplinary areas. Highlights of the first year of my new post have included organising and leading a School-wide one-day symposium on assessment and feedback (for which I insisted that staff in different subject areas worked alongside one another to avoid any sense of perpetuating academic tribes) as well as a more recent follow-up event on inspirational teaching; chairing, and standardising process across, six different Boards of Studies overseeing a total of ten programmes; co-ordinating across five different subject areas to establish a unified Board of Examiners, also under my chairmanship; leading the School's learning and teaching strategy, and its implementation of institutional policy; supporting five separate re/validation projects; establishing and maintaining a staff-specific resource within the institutional VLE (including information such as timetables, blank electronic forms, minutes of Board meetings, links to University regulations and guidance documentation, etc.); analysing the end-of-module survey results across the School, exploring the reasons for any low-scoring modules and identifying programmes of action where needed; and introducing a School student-led teaching award scheme.

In undertaking the more developmental aspects of my role, it has been immensely helpful to reflect upon my experience of processes at City University, as well as drawing on my knowledge of the national sector acquired through involvement with organisations such as the ANTF (Association of National Teaching Fellows) and SEDA (Staff and Educational Development Association), to determine enhancements that it may be fruitful to implement at the University of Surrey. My introduction within the School of Arts of a student-led award for the recognition of teaching excellence is an instructive example, having been directly motivated by the success of City's institution-wide Student Voice Award. In its inaugural year, the School of Arts teaching award has generated over 100 nominations from students, yielding much valuable insight into student perspectives on teaching excellence as well as increasing staff satisfaction by providing a mechanism by which students may anonymously convey their gratitude to lecturers, associate staff and administrators alike. This award scheme is possibly the single most consequential initiative I have implemented in the last year.

The above discussion has indicated that the present time is one of significant change for learning and teaching in UK Higher Education, and that judicious approaches to leadership and change management are needed at all levels to navigate the resulting terrain, responding to the changing context while taking care not to set unrealistic or unattainable goals. In providing a narrative of my development in academic leadership enriched by the scholarly literature, the point that has arisen most frequently concerns the value of the collaborative nature of academic leadership (coupled to the implications of the improbability of any one person exemplifying all of the characteristics of an academic leader), thereby endorsing the merits of the team over and above that of the individual. Having moved institution and taken on a new leadership role across the past year, the significance of academic staff pooling their experience in order to advance leadership collaboratively has become important to me afresh; I have not infrequently found myself being required to lead meetings whose membership has comprised colleagues of much longer standing, and who were therefore better acquainted with the institutional context and processes. Conversely, I brought to such meetings a different critical perspective essentially akin to that of an external reviewer, informed by my wider knowledge of pedagogical scholarship and of trends in learning and teaching that complemented current practices within the institution itself. Thus I remain indebted to the experience acquired during my tenure at City University as I continue to develop my academic leadership, in embracing the many exciting challenges of a new role of increased responsibility and scope.

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