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Understanding the professional identities of PVCs education from academic development backgrounds

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two years, four research-intensive universities in the UK have appointed senior academic leaders from academic development backgrounds, a new phenomenon in this sector of UK higher education that may suggest a changing pattern. This study interviewed these four leaders to explore what the appointment means for their academic identity. The interviewees identified internal and external drivers for change and noted their backgrounds as academic developers made their routes into these senior roles different from their peers. For this reason, their 'academic credibility' was critical in order to implement culture change effectively.

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Introduction

Since 2018, four research-intensive UK universities have appointed new Pro Vice Chancellors (PVC) Education (or equivalent) and Deputy Pro Vice Chancellors who come from academic development backgrounds, rather than the traditional research route that has historically tended to be favoured in pre-1992 universities. The growth of a second-tier management layer in pre-1992 institutions and expansion of associated responsibilities has been well documented, and Smith and Adams (2008) point out that the majority of the postholders are from science backgrounds, are professors, and have an academic background from Cambridge, Oxford, London or large civic universities.

The appointment of four such senior academic leaders from academic development backgrounds within such a short timeframe signifies a potentially important shift in research-intensive universities. The implication may be that there is an attempt at significant culture change in pre-1992 institutions focused on the enhancement of teaching, and that these posts are used not only to drive change at a senior and strategic level but also to signal it clearly throughout the individual institution. This study examined the experiences of the people in these roles, their routes to academic leadership, their interpretation of the drivers for change, and also their perceptions of their own professional identities and how they constitute a 'uniquely different' leadership in the education space in pre-1992 universities. The paper focuses on one aspect of the study, namely their academic identity. The limited existing literature on senior academic leaders, usually referred to as PVCs, is reviewed before considering the factors constituting academic identity. The methods of this qualitative study are then reported, which

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leads into a discussion of the findings and links back to existing literature. Finally, recommendations for further research are considered.

Academic development

The terms ‘academic development’ and ‘educational development’ are today used widely and interchangeably in universities globally (Mårtensson, 2014). Academic developers (as they are referred to here) are usually those members of staff who work across their institution to support systems, processes, and individuals in order to enhance the educational experience of students – with a particular focus on developing academics in the teaching aspect of their role (Leibowitz, 2014). In the UK context, they often work in centrally located departments and may differ from international counterparts in that they can cover a variety of roles, including student academic support and enhancing academic practice, amongst others. The common focus is on enhancing teaching and learning, with these roles being critical for universities as they feed into the key performance indicators and other data that universities collect (Davis et al., 2020). Academic developers in the UK usually fall into the third space professional category of staff identified by Celia Whitchurch (2006); different universities treat these staff in varying ways, with the type of contract being the most obvious. The participants in this study switched back and forth between academic and professional services contracts at various points in their career trajectories and there is a general sense in the UK academic development community of not really knowing in which ‘camp’ they belong. This is, however, not necessarily the case in other countries, where academic developers in research-intensive universities may have full academic status. The situation in the UK for academic developers can be further complicated by a ‘blurred’ situation, given that they have professional services contracts themselves yet report directly to the second-tier academic leader responsible for education – the PVC Education, the role of whom is of interest in this study. Furthermore, the opportunities to engage in doing research themselves are often practically limited, in spite of research into academic development being a key part of the learning that contributes to the enhancement of teaching (Leibowitz, 2014). Overall, there is something of a sense in the UK academic development community of being ‘neither fish nor fowl’. Consequently, the professional identities of the participants included in this study are of considerable interest. Research-intensive universities tend to be rooted in a traditional sense of academic identity and, as the next section considers, have historically selected senior academic leaders based on their research prestige.

The development of the role of PVCs and second-tier leaders

UK universities have changed significantly since the Dearing report in 1997 first encouraged a market approach and opened the door to significant growth (Dearing, 1997). Over the past twenty years, not only has marketisation played a role in changing the culture but UK universities have become increasingly subject to government scrutiny and need to demonstrate ‘value for money’ in their use of public funds (Deem, 1998). The effect within universities has been a shift away from a traditional culture of collegiate communities of scholars working with academic leaders, who took turns to step into the main

leadership roles of the institutions (Shepherd, 2015). Instead the leadership ‘team’ is now much more likely to comprise both academics and professional staff, although the roles of Vice Chancellor and second-tier positions with responsibilities for research and teaching are still (currently) practically constrained to those with academic backgrounds (Akerman & Standen, 2020), and the team’s primary responsibilities encompass management of budgets, staffing, estates, teaching and research, marketing, student recruitment, and public perception – often through league tables and sector-wide competition. Deem and Brehony (2005) pointed out that in spite of the rise in the number of academics in management roles, only one-third of the manager-academics included in their ESRC-funded study had been adequately prepared for the role through formal management training. ‘Thus, their legitimation is often based as much on their academic status and occupational position as on mastery of the theory of management’ (Deem & Brehony, 2005, p. 227), reinforcing the traditional academic-prestige route into these positions.

In terms of management approaches, within the UK higher education sector there is still a distinction to be made between pre-and post-1992 institutions; 1992 was a watershed moment in the development of the UK higher education sector, as this was when polytechnics (institutions that focused more on work and technical skills) were allowed to become universities. The pre-1992 institutions, which have traditionally been more research-focused than the former polytechnics, appear to have maintained more collegiality and less explicit management practices for a longer period of time (Deem 1998). In particular, it has taken some time for the pre-1992 institutions to adapt to having second-tier academic leaders with specific areas of responsibility, given a long tradition of making appointments to these positions from within the ranks of the university’s own academics, based on a track record of stellar research publications and grant income (Shepherd, 2015; Smith & Adams, 2008). Between 2005 and 2014 there was, along with a raft of other senior administrative posts, an increase of, on average, more than one post per university in the number of second-tier managers in pre-1992 institutions, indicating a steady but inexorable path towards a larger senior management team (Shepherd, 2015). Furthermore, there has been a gradual shift away from the aforementioned pattern of recruiting internally, though it is still the norm to have been an academic in order to be considered for the post of PVC (Shepherd, 2015). Nevertheless, it is here that the most interesting shifts are taking place, thus prompting this study.

Other changes in the UK higher education sector since Dearing in 1997 have been substantial, including significant growth in student numbers, changes in funding mechanisms with the creation of a quasi-market due to students paying fees, and the proliferation of publicly available information such as league tables about seemingly every aspect of university life. The impact of these changes has been to enforce a form of modernisation of higher education institutions intended to make them more responsive to ‘consumers’ (students) and funders. In particular, the combination of student fee income (creating ‘consumers’) and the growth of student numbers, has resulted in a focus on student satisfaction for all institutions, including the pre-1992 universities: a situation that even the most elite universities are now unable to avoid.

The pre-1992 research intensive institutions that recruited the PVCs included in this study were responding to a tipping point, with these external factors juxtaposed against a traditionally research-focused internal culture. At the same time, new Vice Chancellors

were appointed with a mandate to change the culture and become more oriented towards teaching and learning. It was in the context of this environment that the study participants from academic development backgrounds were appointed to senior management positions.

Academic identity

The concept of identity

Social constructivist approaches to the concept of identity state that it is ‘constructed within the context of social institutions and relationships’ (Henkel, 2005, p. 156), and that it continues to be constructed over time in relation to people and institutions relevant to the individual. Identity is considered to be more fluid if role boundaries are not clear, which seems particularly pertinent for the roles quasi-academics in the third space occupy. Boundaries are probably stronger in the pre-1992 universities because these universities have been protected, to a degree and for some time, from the changes affecting the rest of the sector, in particular putting education on a stronger footing.

Developing *as an academic* – in the aspects of the role that are deemed to be ‘core’ or traditional, namely research, teaching and administration – is crucial for developing *an identity as an academic* (Lee & Boud, 2003). Developing an identity as an academic therefore means having access to each of these aspects of being an academic, whereas the current trend towards ‘para-academic’ jobs, understood as involving the unbundling and deskilling of traditional academic roles, would restrict such access (Macfarlane, 2011b). Macfarlane specifically mentions the examples of ‘deskilling’ of academics into academic developers, along with student support roles such as academic skills guidance. Specialisation into these roles means, for Macfarlane, that a limited set of skills are necessary, although it is not clear why specialisation *per se* should involve a more ‘limited’ number of skills rather than a tailoring of skills from a broad base to a more specific role. Furthermore, Macfarlane does not take into account the role that personal agency may play in individuals determining their own career paths, since he views all of these roles as reducing the skills of academics. However, becoming an academic developer could simply be understood as presenting an alternative career path within higher education as a result of the increasing complexity and scale of the 21st century university landscape.

Whatever the reasons for pursuing this career path, however, it can be argued that being a para-academic reduces access to a number of those activities that would affect the definition of who identifies as an academic, as ‘academic identity and status are closely linked to research and scholarly activities’ (Macfarlane 2011b, p. 64). Academic identity depends on research and scholarly activity and whether someone is distinguished in their field (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011; Coate & Howson, 2016; Macfarlane, 2011b). The question here is the degree to which an alternative third space career path might hinder progression into academic leadership as a result of constraining academic identity.

Macfarlane (2011b) does note the particular instance of academic developers is interesting as people in these roles have often moved from academic contracts to ‘academic related’ ones, particularly in the post-1992 sector. Academic-related contracts (common in the UK before a single pay spine was introduced in 2007) were replaced by

a structural binary divide between academic and professional services, which actually in reality works well only for relatively few people (Macfarlane, 2011b; Whitchurch, 2008).

But how does this impact on senior management? The traditional route to the top in pre-1992 universities is via the academic identity of research and scholarly activity. The defining characteristic appears to be whether candidates have done work that has made them a 'distinguished authority in their field' (Macfarlane 2011a, p. 129). For academic developers, therefore, the key is how to get access to doing this kind of work. This study therefore examined the professional identities that the participants themselves reported as having, given their progression from this para-academic background.

Methods

Sample

The sample consisted of second-tier academic leaders and members of senior management teams of research-intensive universities in the UK, who had an education portfolio and came from an academic development background rather than via the traditional route. Research-intensive universities were defined as the 24 current members of the Russell Group as well as former members of the 1994-Group of smaller research-intensive universities. The publicly available information of each of the second-tier senior managers was examined to identify those from academic development backgrounds ($n = three$). Academic development backgrounds were defined as having been a member of staff of an academic development unit. All four participants in the study had headed such units either in their previous role prior to their progression to their current senior post, or just before that.

At this point in the study a further, third tier, Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor Student Learning Experience, at a Russell Group university was flagged as having an academic development background. As she is also a member of the university's senior management team, she was included in the sample ($n = four$).

Given the very small size of the sample and the prominence of the people in these positions, it was acknowledged by both researcher and participants that they would be easily identifiable. This was a significant factor in the decision not to conduct full case studies as it would be impossible to exclude details from the data analysis and reporting that would have identified the participants. The researcher discussed the possibility of identification with the participants and it was agreed that whilst the usual processes to anonymise data and ensure confidentiality would be followed, an additional step would be included to allow all participants to view presentations, conference papers, journal articles and other publications before submission to ensure that they were comfortable with the level of anonymity. This was also included in the research ethics application for the study.

Data analysis

In order to understand the experiences, identities and drivers for change from the perspectives of the participants themselves – the 'lived experiences' of the participants (Miles et al., 2020, p. 7) – a qualitative approach based on grounded theory was taken

(Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour in length were conducted with all four participants and all interviewees were asked the same core set of questions. They were encouraged to talk about the broad topics (open questions were used to facilitate wider discussion), while aspects that the researcher thought were interesting were incorporated into later interviews. All interviewees were also asked for additional written data such as job descriptions and relevant strategy documents. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed along with the additional documents.

The coding framework used a standard qualitative analysis process involving descriptive terms, with subsequently interpretative codes and, finally, pattern codes (Miles et al., 2020). In reality the process was iterative. The researcher also engaged with existing relevant literature and identified links between the pattern codes and theory, which resulted in returning to the original transcripts and audio files a number of times to ensure that all nuances and meanings were captured accurately. Finally, the initial descriptive and interpretative coding was shared with members of the Heads of Educational Development Group (HEDG) – a UK-wide, non-profit association founded in 1994, which provides a network for the communication of ideas and sharing of good practice relating to the institutional role of heads of academic development and engages in national debates with regard to issues concerning the enhancement of teaching and learning in UK higher education – at their spring 2020 meeting as an additional ‘sense check’, and also with the research participants themselves as a form of data analysis triangulation.

Limitations of this study

The main limitation of this study is the size of the sample and therefore the lack of generalisability of the findings. The purpose of the study, however, was to understand the identities and experiences of participants who had very specific characteristics and were therefore purposely selected for the study. It is acknowledged that this means the results are not necessarily generalisable across the sector, but the progression of those from academic development backgrounds into second-tier academic leadership positions in research-intensive universities is worthy of study in its own right. In addition, there are very specific internal and external drivers that have driven these universities to change their traditional recruitment practices, which may herald a new trend for this part of the UK university sector.

Academic credibility

The existing literature clearly shows that academic credibility and progression to senior academic leadership positions are based on prestige factors (Blackmore, 2007; Blackmore & Blackwell, 2006; Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011; Coate & Howson, 2016). Prestige factors are defined as those that carry ‘honour, respect and standing’ (Coate & Howson, 2016, p. 573) and a key aspect of this is how prestige is conveyed through ‘indicators of esteem’ (Coate & Howson, 2016, p. 573) such as job title, position in the academic hierarchy, salary, and additional work tasks such as chairing committees. Indicators of esteem are particularly important when hiring and recruitment decisions

are made, with high-status publications and research grant funding as two key aspects (Morley, 2014).

If academic identity is derived from the activities that are undertaken and the perceptions of other people with regards to these activities, it is important to understand what the interviewees' own perceptions of their own academic identity was and how they thought they were perceived by others. This gave rise to responses which fall into three broad categories: firstly, academic credibility that was required to obtain the job; secondly, the credibility with which they are regarded by others when in the job, which may also have played a role in the first category; and thirdly, how they view their own academic credibility. These are each discussed in turn below.

Academic credibility to obtain a PVC position

When asked about the recruitment processes for the position that they obtained, the interviewees responded with details about how they had come to be selected, which gave rise to the theme of academic credibility necessary to obtain the position:

I think what's helped enormously is the fact that I have published. I think the fact that I ... publish and have research credibility in the field albeit a field that's not that respected gives me some clout ... and I think my credibility comes from working across the sector and then the work I've done at XXX [former institution] ... [I3]

I developed a lot of things there ... and also developed quite a national profile, particularly around the developments of what then became the Higher Education Academy and Accredited Programmes ... and because of that, I got a bit of a national reputation ... Because I was interested and I got opportunities, I did various research projects including some externally funded research projects, relatively small funding, but useful ... So then I started getting things published and obviously again it makes your profile reasonably well noticed [I2]

So those kind of major achievements and clear policy level visibility on some of the work I did round student engagement and whatever, that gave me the credentials for XXX University [I4]

we put in a [prestigious national] bid around student engagement and the projects really so informed our work in academic development and made us quite external facing and that's what really helped me. [I3]

Academic credibility in terms of prestige factors – publishing, getting grants, externally recognised and valued work – is seen by the interviewees as being hugely important in terms of actually getting the job, in spite of the fact that they came from academic development backgrounds. All three participants who were external appointees were recruited via headhunters and prestige factors were important in getting on their radar and making the first cut. In this sense, the appointment process was not dissimilar to that of people from traditional routes. Whilst these were identified as important factors in getting appointed, the same factors were also discussed as relevant for conveying academic credibility in doing the job of PVC Education in a pre-1992 institution.

Academic credibility in the role

The participants described a split picture when discussing academic credibility in the role and, in particular, how they thought they were perceived by colleagues:

... you just get impressions and I think in a way they're just like well you're a new PVC ... and people don't necessarily know what my research background and ... to them, I'm just [senior team office location], I'm the PVC and I think there's an interest in like what's XXX going to be like, but they don't think that necessarily always translates into and what has she done ... they're not like oh, we now have XXX who, you know, has a huge amount of credibility in the space of, you know, the literature, and scholarship ... they probably maybe just think, yes, she had an education background and that makes sense. And that fits with the PVC Education but I just don't really think it goes much further than that. [I1]

... until recently I was hugely worried about it, thinking at some point somebody's going to point out that my research track record is, I mean I've only got a handful of publications, yes, I did my PhD but I did my PhD [much later in my career]. It's not, you know, that's not where I come from. Nobody's questioned it. It's not been an issue. [I4]

... one of the PVCs said to me, two of them, when I went to this PVC network, he said, "I just want to say to you, this network was absolutely delighted when you were appointed. They saw this as a signal that having people who know about education in the role is a wonderful thing." So I thought that was quite a validation - the sense that actually there is a move more and more to think about having people in these roles who actually have got a deep and rich understanding of teaching and learning. [I3]

There are two factors that emerge from this. Firstly, when someone is appointed to a second-tier academic leadership role there appears to be broad acceptance on the part of the academic community that the person appointed must be suitable, and therefore neither their background nor their research expertise is questioned. On the face of it, this is a very pragmatic challenge to the continuing persistence of appointing senior academic leaders based on their research prestige: if it actually does not matter greatly to the academic community, then why should research prestige be the most important factor in progression? Instead, the assumption internally seems to be that the person appointed is the best person for the job, which theoretically should then open up further pathways to these posts to staff from a variety of other backgrounds. This is important as regards the accessibility to third space professionals of the opportunities that give rise to prestige factors. The 'unbundling' of academic roles is likely to give limited access to some of the opportunities that are important for progression, namely research outputs and grants. Part of the problem, it would seem, is that higher education as a research field is not highly regarded across the sector. This in turn leads to a tendency, particularly in research-intensive universities, to put academic developers on professional services contracts and thus limit their ability to progress. The participants in this study have broken that mould, but the question is what benefit this might bring to the remainder of the academic development community.

Finally, the interesting observations of colleagues from outside of the individual's own institution, in this case the relevant PVC network, indicate that second-tier leaders in other universities are very much aware of the credibility of their peers and value the expertise that those from educational development backgrounds have brought to the pre-1992 part of the sector more broadly, suggesting a move towards a more evidence-based and research-credible approach for teaching and learning decisions in higher education.

How the participants regard themselves

Identity is seen as constantly evolving throughout our lifetimes, formed from the views of others but also the perceptions that we have of ourselves, which are contingent on the circumstances in which we find ourselves. The move to a new job therefore involves an inherent re-evaluation of identity. Academic credibility forms a key part of identity, and self-perception of academic credibility, albeit based at least partly on the reactions of, and interactions with, other people, can be influential in this.

So it was quite a big step for them, actually, to make that move and I think there was obviously some discussion about whether that was going to go down well, to have an outsider, if you like, in that role ...I had quite a few warnings, even before I had the interview and then between being offered the post and arriving, friendly warnings, from people here and even associated with this institution who are not necessarily here now, saying, "Oh, you're going to have to be really careful and people are going to be very suspicious of you" ... I've really not felt it at all. [12]

This interviewee refers here to a concern about being seen as an 'outsider' to this particular prestigious institution, even though she came into the role from a similarly prestigious university. I1 also referred to the importance of understanding the context of the university, with the implication here being that new appointments, if they are from outside of the university, must be able to demonstrate that they understand and can engage with the specific contexts they find themselves in.

I3 referred to working with academic staff and how she was perceived by them:

And I think having expertise and reputation in education is really, really valuable and hugely valued by academic staff. One of the things that I've noticed coming into this role as a PVC education. Academic staff say, "We are just thrilled we've got someone who understands our business." ... academic staff ... in this institution have been hungry for the kind of conversations we are now able to have round the institution around education. [13]

The is also reflected in the interview with I2:

I'm still actually drawing on research I have done to do things in this job and very directly I'll give you an example. So just last week with another colleague here, who's also involved in a research study with me, before I came here, we spent a morning with new Heads of Department ... as part of their leadership development experience and we used our research and some research I've done with another colleague, and other research, as a way of framing a more developmental morning and really getting to know the Heads of Department. It was immensely useful and to frame that conversation with those HODs ... to frame the research in that way so that they understood a kind of theoretical framing and they understood that there was an academic substance to the thinking behind what's going on here and the plans for the institution and the plans for education in particular. It was immensely useful, so that hybrid opportunity to bring those things together into one space is enormously powerful when you can do it. [12]

The interviewees here refer to themselves both as being 'outsiders' or 'the other' in that their research is not in a highly respected field, and also as being 'within' and 'of' their institution's academic community. In this regard, they thoroughly understand the academic community they are working with and are able to demonstrate this understanding by utilising the high-profile research projects in which they have been involved

previously. Their academic work can perhaps be comparable to that of a professional practice discipline, for example, physiotherapy, rather than something more abstract.

Academic credibility and identity

The sources of academic credibility and identity according to the literature are primarily the markers of esteem and prestige factors identified by Blackmore, Kandiko Howson, and Coate, and the ways in which the individual is regarded by others, in particular the academic community within which they are engaging. In the case of these four PVCs, their identities as expressed in the interviews are very clearly academic. The markers of esteem are research, publications, grants, and high profile national/cross-sector projects. They are regarded by their peers in other universities as experts and are fully accepted by their colleagues in their new institutions. From this point of view, it would be difficult to distinguish them from any other senior academic leader. The interviewees were also, however, quite unequivocal in the message that coming from an academic development background makes them unique in very positive ways.

Conclusions and further research

The study reported in this paper identified a new phenomenon emerging in research-intensive universities – the appointment of four PVCs Education from academic development backgrounds, as opposed to a traditional progression from a background embedded in a particular discipline. The study identified a ‘perfect storm’ of factors that brought this about, in particular the appointment of a new Vice Chancellor focused on improving the educational performance of the institution combined with under-performance in this area at a time when there is an increasingly public focus on student experience. The academic development backgrounds of the interviewees make them an interesting sample to study, and their perception of their own identities as academics adds to knowledge of how academic developers develop themselves. Third space professionals do not necessarily have the same access to opportunities that culminate in prestige factors as those in academic positions. The interviewees also identified themselves as being ‘uniquely different’ and well-positioned to take advantage of a career opportunity. They specified skills and experiences such as implementing change, an extensive pedagogical knowledge, and the ability to work with, and talk the language of, different disciplines as enabling them to be especially effective in these roles.

The career histories of the participants indicate an ambivalence in the pre-1992 sector about the role that academic developers play and the kinds of work that they do. All of the participants needed to be able to demonstrate a credibility based on the esteem factors of research, publications, grants, and national and international policy work in order to progress to the senior leadership positions that they now occupy. Most of the interviewees displayed a high degree of agency in moving roles and institutions, and in negotiating academic contracts in order to be able to carry out this kind of work and progress to a higher level, but it was clear that access to these opportunities was far from easy.

This study looks at a very small sample of people in only four institutions and at a very early stage of their progression into senior leadership roles. It is therefore limited in its generalisability, though the purpose of the study was only to identify and investigate the

emergence of a new trend in this part of the UK higher education sector. Further research would benefit from comparing the UK situation with international counterparts, particularly considering the progression of academic developers with full academic status in research-intensive universities.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

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