

# Departmental leadership for quality teaching - an international comparative study of effective practice

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## Conceptual background

### Leadership characteristics, leadership activity, and effectiveness

Much of the literature on leadership in general and of leadership of academic departments in particular, focuses on the leaders themselves and their characteristics. Lists of these characteristics are long and intimidating. A recent review of these studies came to the “inescapable conclusion that department leaders need to be good at pretty much everything”<sup>1</sup>. This is unhelpful partly because there is little distinction between the relative importance of these many characteristics and partly because they may be difficult to emulate or develop. If you are not already ‘charismatic’, for example, there is probably little you can do about it. In addition, academics do not share leaders’ perceptions of what makes for good leaders<sup>2</sup>. For example one study found that ‘charisma’ was rated very highly by department heads but viewed comparatively negatively by those being led<sup>3</sup>. The focus in this study is therefore not on what leaders are like, but on what they do. It will provide accounts of leadership activity that it may be possible for other heads to emulate.

The link between these lists of leadership characteristics and departmental effectiveness is rarely established<sup>4</sup>. Most studies of leadership start by identifying those considered effective leaders rather than by identifying successful departments<sup>5,6</sup>. In the present study departments have been identified that have distinctively excellent teaching and then studied to explore what role, if any, leadership played in creating this excellence. The focus is on the role of leadership in the creation of excellence in teaching, not on the characteristics of leaders.

### Leadership of research, leadership of curriculum change and leadership of teaching

It is likely for leaders of research-intensive departments to be outstanding researchers and to know how to develop and support research. Little of the literature on departmental leadership concerns the fostering of excellence in teaching but there are indications that leadership associated with high research productivity is different from that associated with high teaching quality. For example while it has been found that more effective approaches to teaching are found where teachers are involved in decision-making about teaching<sup>7</sup>, being in a department in which ones views are taken seriously is associated with low research productivity<sup>8</sup>. Good leadership may be viewed as whatever secures the resources necessary

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<sup>1</sup> Bryman (2006) *Effective Leadership in Higher Education*. Leadership Foundation p8.

<sup>2</sup> Moses, I. and Roe, E. (1990) *Heads and Chairs: Managing Academic Departments*. St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press.

<sup>3</sup> McGrath, J. (2005) Leading in a management paradigm: a survey of perceptions within a faculty of education. *Management in Education* 18: 17-22.

<sup>4</sup> Bryman *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell, M.B. (1987) The process of department leadership. *The Review of Higher Education* 11, pp161-176.

<sup>6</sup> Creswell, J. and Brown, M.L. (1992) How chairpersons enhance faculty research: A grounded theory study. *The Review of Higher Education* 16, pp41-62.

<sup>7</sup> Prosser, K. & Trigwell (1997) Relations between perceptions of the teaching environment and approaches to teaching *Br.J.Educ.Psychol.* 67, 1, pp 25-35

<sup>8</sup> Bland, C.J., Center, B., A., Finstad, K.R.R. and Staples, J.G. 2005. A theoretical, practical, predictive model of faculty and departmental research productivity. *Academic Medicine*, e 80, pp225-237.

to protect time for research<sup>9</sup> rather than being viewed as paying attention to teaching. What studies there are about leadership of teaching are usually about curriculum renewal or radical curriculum change<sup>10,11,12</sup> rather than about improvements in teaching. In the present study where there had been fairly radical changes in curricula and pedagogy this appeared to have been brought about by quite different forms of leadership than where teaching excellence had been achieved without such radical change.

### **Leadership, management and conservatism**

We had initially followed the distinction made by Kotter<sup>13</sup> between management and leadership. We saw leadership as concerned with change and management as concerned with efficient operation of existing systems and the creation of order. In practice this distinction was difficult to make. Efficient management often underpins effective leadership, especially where resources, and especially academic time, need to be obtained, mobilised and allocated. The leadership we encountered in this study did not often involve the dramatic change often associated with transformational leadership but did often involve the creation of new 'activity systems'<sup>14</sup> that employ academic resources differently in the development and organisation of teaching and learning.

There are departments in research-intensive universities, and especially those with long pedagogic traditions, where the dominant approach to educational quality is to defend existing ways of organising and conducting teaching against the ravages of reduced resources and interference by government agendas. The main aim of the chair or head of department that takes this approach is to protect academics from the influence of the external world and from policies and initiatives that are not perceived as congruent with traditional academic values. The chair acts as a kind of 'gatekeeper' keeping out unwanted influences. Given what is known about the impact of increased class sizes on teaching and student performance<sup>15</sup> it is easy to see the attraction of attempting to hang on to traditional methods in the pursuit of quality. We suspected that while it may be possible to maintain reasonably good teaching in this conservative way, it is not very likely that outstanding teaching could be fostered in this way. In practice none of the departments we studied, selected because they were identified to have outstanding teaching, exhibited this conservative approach to leadership. Indeed in several cases the leader exploited external pressures to bring about worthwhile improvements. While academics may welcome such conservative leadership as a way of protecting their research time we found no evidence of it improving teaching.

### **Departmental leadership and organisational culture**

The organisational culture within which departmental leadership of teaching could be exercised is important to this project given the kinds of universities involved. We have

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<sup>9</sup> Lindholm, J.A. (2003). Perceived organizational fit: Nurturing the minds, hearts, and personal ambitions of university faculty. *The Review of Higher Education* 27: 125-149.

<sup>10</sup> Quinn, R.E. 1988. *Beyond Rational Management: Mastering the Paradoxes and Competing Demands of High Performance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>11</sup> Stark, J.S., Lowther, M.A., Sharp, S. and Arnold, G.L. (1997) Program-level curriculum planning: an exploration of faculty perspectives on two different campuses'. *Research in Higher Education* 38, pp99-130.

<sup>12</sup> Stark, J.S. (2002) Testing a model of program curriculum leadership. *Research in Higher Education* 43, pp59-82.

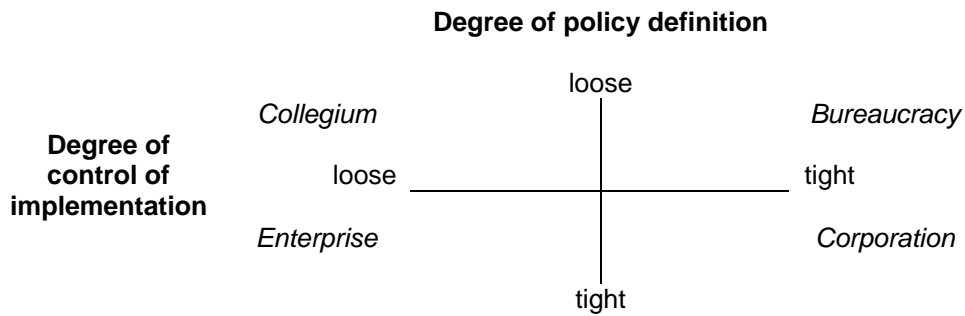
<sup>13</sup> Kotter, J.P. (1990) *A force for change. How leadership differs from management*. p139. New York: Free press.

<sup>14</sup> Engeström, Y. (1987) *Learning by expanding: an activity theoretical approach to developmental research*. Helsinki: Orienta-Konsultit Oy.

<sup>15</sup> Gibbs, G, & Lucas, L. (1997) Coursework assessment, class size and student performance: 1984-94 *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 21, 2. p183

adopted the conceptual framework of McNay<sup>16</sup> who distinguishes four organisational types that vary on two dimensions: the degree of definition of policy and the degree of control of implementation. These dimensions are crucial to understanding the extent of development and implementation of learning and teaching strategies in universities. Traditional collegial organisational structures and cultures that are common in long-established, and sometimes medieval, research-intensive universities exhibit loose definition of policy and loose control over implementation, while enterprise cultures exhibit tight definition of policy and loose definition of implementation (see Figure 1). Much implementation of learning and teaching strategies has involved tight control of implementation with or without tight definition of policy.

**Figure 1. McNay's<sup>8</sup> four university models**



The following summaries of the four models are based on Ramsden's account of McNay<sup>9</sup>:

Collegial cultures are characterised by:

*freedom to pursue university and personal goals unaffected by external control. Standards are set by the international disciplinary scholarly community and evaluation is by peer review. Decision-making is consensual, management style permissive. Students are seen as apprentice academics.*

Bureaucratic cultures are characterised by:

*regulation, rules, and consistency with standards related to regulatory bodies and external references (such as institutional quality assurance procedures). Evaluation is based on the audit of procedures. Decision making is rule-based. Students are seen as statistics.*

Corporate cultures are characterised by:

*an emphasis on loyalty to the department and its management. Management style is commanding and charismatic. There is a crisis-driven, competitive ethos. Decision-making is political and tactical. Evaluation is based on performance indicators and benchmarking. Student are seen as units of resource.*

Entrepreneurial cultures are characterised by:

*a focus on competence and an orientation to the outside world, involving continuous learning in a turbulent context. The management style involves devolved and dispersed leadership. Decision-making is flexible and emphasises accountable professional expertise. Its standards are related to market strength. Evaluation is based on achievement. Students are seen as partners.*

Studies of perceptions of the shift over time from one organisational culture to another, within universities<sup>10, 17</sup> have identified the same sequence: from collegial to bureaucratic to corporate and finally to enterprise, involving first a tightening up on implementation, then a tightening up on goals and policy definition and finally a loosening up on control of

<sup>16</sup> McNay, I. (1995) From the collegial academy to the corporate enterprise: the changing culture of universities. In T. Schuller Ed.) *The changing University?* Buckingham: SRHE & Open University Press

<sup>17</sup> Ramsden, P. (1998) *Learning to lead in higher education* p31-34. London: Routledge.

implementation while retaining clear goals. This picture almost certainly oversimplifies the multifaceted nature of organisational cultures at any one time, the different perceptions of these cultures by different individuals within them, and the ability of individuals to hold multiple and conflicting perceptions of the organisational culture at same time<sup>18</sup>. It has even been argued that academics do not experience 'organisational culture' at all<sup>19</sup>.

There is no evidence that moving through this sequence improves teaching. Indeed the loss of collegiality has been blamed for creating an inhospitable environment for teaching<sup>20</sup> characterised by less socialising, less time spent in the department and hence less opportunity to discuss teaching practice. However it can be difficult to disentangle those features associated with a more intensive work environment and extreme research and administrative demands, from those of organisational culture. And teachers can also experience the freedom of collegiality as isolating and unsupportive, as studies of English, Canadian and Australian University academics have reported<sup>21,22</sup>. While collegiality is looked back on fondly, it has also been severely criticised, in the forms it often currently takes, in terms of its ability to foster either quality or effectiveness<sup>23</sup>.

We assume that the forms of leadership that department heads and chairs might exert will be framed by the dominant university organisational culture, that departmental organisational cultures also exhibit this kind of variation in culture, and that this departmental culture might also change over time as a consequence of the exercise of leadership, and in the same sequence described above. The organisational context is therefore one of the foci of attention in our case studies of departmental leadership, with a particular focus on whether leadership involved a change in the organisational culture in order to develop teaching.

### **Departmental leadership and disciplinary culture**

Much of the research literature on leadership in higher education is either discipline-blind because it focuses on senior and central management and not on departments<sup>24</sup> or treats disciplines as background while leadership styles or conceptions are in the foreground<sup>25</sup>. However studies of disciplinary differences<sup>26</sup> do not simply describe cultural differences, they describe differences in activity systems and the way work is organised that have profound implications for the way leadership does, or even could, operate. For example humanities subject characteristically involve solitary research based in libraries and an infinite variety of views about what the curriculum should consist of or how it should be structured or sequenced. Teaching is characteristically private and idiosyncratic. In contrast science subjects characteristically involve collaborative research carried out in shared laboratories and often also have shared social spaces. The more hierarchically structured knowledge allows the possibility of agreement about the content and sequencing of curricula and the social organisation of activity systems makes reaching consensus more possible. Teaching is often undertaken in teams and can be public with several teachers present at the same time (for example in laboratories). There is common agreement to use the same 'problem sheets' for all parallel problem classes while in the humanities such standardisation between

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<sup>18</sup> Becher, T. & Trowler, P. (2003) *Academic tribes and territories: intellectual inquiry and the cultures of disciplines*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education/Open University Press.

<sup>19</sup> Silver, A. (2003) Does a university have a culture? *Studies in Higher Education*, 28, 2, pp157-169.

<sup>20</sup> Knight, P.T. & Trowler, P.R. (2000) Department-level cultures and the improvement of learning and teaching. *Studies in Higher Education*, 25,1, pp 69-83.

<sup>21</sup> Knight and Trowler, *ibid* p73-74

<sup>22</sup> Ramsden, *ibid* p101.

<sup>23</sup> Massy, W.F., Wilger, A.K. & Colbeck, C. (1994) Overcoming 'hollowed' collegiality. *Change*, 26, pp10-20.

<sup>24</sup> Middlehurst, R. (1993) *Leading academics*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education/Open University Press.

<sup>25</sup> Ramsden, P. (1998) *Learning to lead in higher education*. London: Routledge.

<sup>26</sup> Becher, T. & Trowler, P. (2003) *Academic tribes and territories: intellectual inquiry and the cultures of disciplines*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education/Open University Press.

teachers is often unthinkable. It would be surprising if such profound disciplinary differences were not related not just to leadership styles but to what kinds of leadership it was practicable to attempt and what kind of change or development in teaching were possible. Large scale curriculum and pedagogic innovations, such as shifts to problem-based learning across all courses, almost always take place in professional and applied subjects rather than in the humanities. This is partly because it would be so much more difficult to agree upon any such global change in the humanities where you are much more likely to find that teaching quality is associated with a supportive teaching environment rather than with across-the-board innovation. Disciplines are stronger, more well defined and more central to academic endeavours, in research-intensive universities. The disciplinary environment will form an important component of our case studies.

### Departmental leadership and teaching quality

The vast majority of the literature on departmental leadership contains no evidence that the methods or principles they espouse have any consequences for the quality of teaching let alone for the quality of student learning, and so we will not list these sources here. The most convincing evidence we have found of a link between leadership of teaching and both teaching and learning derives from empirical studies involving a phenomenographic approach<sup>27,28</sup>. To understand the significance of these studies it is necessary to step back and examine what we know about how students approach learning, how teachers approach teaching and how heads of department create 'teaching environments' within which it is likely that teaching and learning take place in an effective way. The following sequence of relationships from, at one end, student learning outcomes, and at the other, leadership of teaching, has involved a long series of studies going back to the 1970's<sup>29</sup>. These relationships have been demonstrated in a substantial number of empirical studies and the results are consistent across different countries, institutional contexts, disciplines and even methodologies.

- One of the most important aspects of how students study is their approach to learning. Students who take what is termed a 'surface approach' intend to reproduce material while those who take a 'deep approach' intend to understand material. This difference can also be understood in terms of a focus of students' attention on the sign itself, or what is signified. A comparative study in the UK found that a 'surface approach' was more likely to be found amongst students in research-focussed higher education institutions than in teaching-focussed higher education institutions<sup>30</sup>.
- Such approaches to learning are not a characteristic of the student. Most students, and especially most of the very able students in research-intensive universities, are perfectly capable of taking a deep approach and take a surface or a deep approach in response to perceived assessment demands and in response to perceived features of their learning environment.
- The approach students take has a close relationship with what they learn and how long they retain what they learn. Students who take a surface approach are likely to be able to recall facts but not to be able to understand or explain what they have memorised. They produce essays that are list-like in nature and they remember the details of case studies instead of the principles the case studies exemplify. Students who take a deep approach are more likely to have made sense of material and to

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<sup>27</sup> Prosser, K. & Trigwell (1997) Relations between perceptions of the teaching environment and approaches to teaching Br.J.Educ.Psychol. 67, 1, pp 25-35

<sup>28</sup> Martin, E., Trigwell, K., Prosser, M. & Ramsden, P. (2003) Variation in the experience of leadership of teaching in higher education. *Studies in higher Education*, 28,3. pp 247-259

<sup>29</sup> For a fuller account see Prosser, M. & Trigwell, K. (1999) *Understanding learning and teaching: the experience in higher education*. Buckingham: SRHE & Open University Press.

<sup>30</sup> Ramsden, P. (1979) Institutional variations in British students' approaches to learning and experiences of teaching. *Higher Education*, 12, 6, pp 691-705.

have integrated materials from different sources. Their essays have a structure that relates ideas together and they 'go beyond the information given'. While students who take a surface approach outperform those who took a deep approach on immediate tests of factual recall, they will forget quickly and those who have taken a deep approach will overtake them, even in terms of how much they can remember, within a few weeks, although they did not initially intend to memorise information. In most studies, including at the University of Oxford<sup>31</sup>, those students who take a deep approach gain higher grades and obtain better degree classifications, though if the assessment system rewards memorisation this will disrupt such a relationship.

- Teachers can be characterised as having a 'teacher-focussed' approach or a 'student-focussed' approach to their teaching. A teacher-focussed approach involves a focus of attention on transmission. What is transmitted might be facts, concepts or even methods but the intention is still that students acquire these in the form the teacher imparts them. A 'student-focussed' approach involves a focus on students developing their own understanding of concepts. While a student focussed approach may be more likely to involve the teacher using active learning strategies it is not student activity that distinguishes a student focussed approach but teachers' intentions. This distinction parallels the 'paradigm shift' from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning described by Barr and Tagg<sup>32</sup> in the USA and relates closely to other distinctions made in the literature about teachers' intentions<sup>33</sup>.
- Students of teachers who take a teacher-focussed approach are much more likely to take a surface approach to their learning, and to understand less and remember less in the long term, as a consequence. A student-focussed approach to teaching has been found to be associated with a range of indicators of high educational quality as experienced by students (such as good teaching, appropriate assessment, appropriate workload and independence), as well as being associated with students taking a deep approach to learning<sup>34</sup>.
- A teacher-focussed approach to teaching has been found to be about twice as common as a student-focussed approach, in a wide variety of higher education contexts, and indicators of a low quality learning environment (associated with students taking a surface approach) have been found to be about twice as common as indicators of a high quality environment. No relationship has been found between how research-intensive a university is and the frequency of occurrence of either teacher-focussed teachers or low quality learning environments, and so we assume these negative indicators are also likely to be present in the universities studied here, though not in the excellent teaching departments that are described in the present case studies.
- Just as students vary in their perceptions of their learning environment, and respond in terms of their approach to learning, so teachers also vary in their perceptions of the 'teaching environment'. Teachers have been found to be much more likely to adopt a student focussed approach to teaching when they experience:

*Transformational leadership*, where teachers experience leadership driven by values, and engagement through collaboration, inspiration and spontaneity, trust and

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<sup>31</sup> Trigwell, K. and Ashwin, P. (2004) *Undergraduate students' experience at the University of Oxford*. Oxford: Institute for the Advancement of University Learning.

<http://www.learning.ox.ac.uk/iaul/pdf/OLCPFfinal.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> Barr, R.B. & Tagg, J. (1995) From teaching to learning: a new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change*, Nov-Dec, pp12-25.

<sup>33</sup> Kember, D. (1997) A reconceptualisation of the research into university academics' conceptions of teaching. *Learning and Instruction*, 7, pp255-275.

<sup>34</sup> Kember, D. & Gow, L. (1994) Orientations to teaching and their effect on the quality of student learning. *Journal of Higher Education*, 65, pp58-74.

exemplary practice. The leader helps teachers to think about teaching problems in new ways.

*Clear goals and contingent rewards*, where teachers experience expectations as clear. What is considered good teaching is explicit, effort to teach well is acknowledged and excellent teaching is recognised and rewarded.

*Teacher involvement*, where teachers have scope to make their own decisions about their own teaching practice and also contribute to departmental decisions about the curriculum and about how teaching is undertaken

*Collaborative management* where leadership is characterised by openness and empowerment of teachers to make their own decisions. Responsibilities of various kinds may be delegated, and this delegation is managed fairly.

The concept of *transformational leadership* is prominent in general literature on leadership and is contrasted with *transactional leadership*<sup>35</sup> which embodies characteristics of what is termed above as 'collaborative management'. Teachers are found to be more likely to display a student-focused approach to teaching when they experience both these forms of leadership. This echoes findings based on the Ohio school of leadership that nearly all effective leaders exhibit both 'consideration' (involving trust and mutual respect between leader and followers) and 'initiating structure' (emphasising goal-oriented behaviour)<sup>36</sup>

### **Department heads' conceptions of leadership of teaching**

While much literature on leadership focuses on leaders' behavioural characteristics, phenomenographic studies of leadership in higher education focus on how department heads conceive of leadership – on what underlying conceptions drive their behaviour. Martin et al<sup>37</sup> report a study that involved interviews with heads of department about their conceptions of leadership of teaching, and interviews with teachers in the same departments about their perceptions of leadership. The heads were characterised as having one of six categories of conception of leadership:

- A A focus on the bureaucratic structure and organisation of the department, imposed by the head
- B A focus on the role, responsibility and practice of the head, who imposes a model of good practice in teaching upon the teachers in the department
- C A focus of the nature and content of subjects and disciplines, which is discussed with the teachers in the department
- D A focus on the roles, responsibilities and practices of the teachers in the department, which are discussed and/or negotiated with the teachers
- E A focus on teaching that emphasises students' experience of studying, which is discussed and/or negotiated with teachers
- F A focus on teaching emphasising the students' experience of studying in a continually changing and developing curriculum. How to change and improve is the subject of systematic discussion and consultation and the head systematically establishes means to enable teachers to develop

For example a head categorised as having conception A said:

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<sup>35</sup> Bass, B.M. (1990) From transactional to transformational leadership: learning to share the vision. *Organisational Dynamics*.

<sup>36</sup> Knight, W.H. and Holen, M.C. (1985) Leadership and the perceived effectiveness of department chairpersons. *Journal of Higher Education*, 56, pp 677-690.

<sup>37</sup> Martin, E., Trigwell, K., Prosser, M. & Ramsden (2003) Variation in the experience of leadership of teaching in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 28,3. pp247-259

*“I’ve restructured the department. I’ve glued in place a new administrative structure, and defined better the roles and responsibilities of administrative staff and teaching staff... My role is to monitor and act. I intercede between staff and staff and staff and students, and ensure that what ought to be acted upon is acted upon.”*

In contrast a head with conception F said:

*“In an academic institution you gather together people of very considerable and unusual ability and the real task is to give them the opportunity to realise their capacity and that’s true in teaching and that’s true in research, its true in all the areas of involvement of academic staff and students. So I really see the main task of leadership or management in this area as being to make constructive, collaborative decisions which allow people to get on and do great works ... I’m involved in the creating of the right climate...”*

There is little evidence that this is a developmental sequence that all leaders go through, or even that leaders hold only one of these conceptions at any one time. There are two main dimensions that vary in these conceptions. First, leadership is exercised by imposition, discussion, negotiation or enabling. Second, leadership focuses on structure, roles and responsibilities of the head or of teachers, on teaching, or on teaching with an emphasis on student experience. This distinction between the form of exercise of leadership and the focus of leadership emerges in our case study interviews.

In the Martin et al study, teachers perceptions of leadership of teaching were categorised as varying from no experience of leadership, because no change was seen as required, through experience of imposition, to negotiation with the leader, negotiation between teachers, and individual autonomy within a previously agreed collaborative framework. Teachers’ approaches to teaching were also categorised as ‘teacher focused’ or ‘student-focussed’. There was found to be a large positive relationship between teachers’ perceptions of leadership of teaching and their approach to teaching. No teacher who perceived the leadership as transformational adopted a teacher-focussed approach to teaching. This relationship is not causal and the evidence does not mean that transformational leadership eliminated teacher-focussed approaches to teaching. It is possible that if a departmental chair finds that most or all teachers already have a student-focussed approach to teaching then this enables them to take a transformational approach to leadership, or conversely if almost all teachers already have a teacher-focussed approach to teaching this may make transformational leadership extremely difficult to implement.

This finding of a relationship between perceptions of leadership and approaches to teaching mirrors research undertaken in school settings where there are many accounts of associations between perceptions of a supportive style of leadership and higher commitment to good teaching. Effective heads, in schools, encourage discussion of teaching, observation of teaching and exploration of teaching ideas. They emphasise decision making by groups rather than by themselves and develop and communicate a shared vision and help teachers to work collaboratively towards this vision and their own educational goals<sup>38 39 40 41</sup>. Teachers in more effective schools (defined largely in terms of student performance) describe a teaching environment where teachers are encouraged to discuss teaching issues and where management is open and collaborative<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Beare, H., Caldwell, B.J. & Millikan, R.H. (1989) *Creating an excellent school*. London: Routledge.

<sup>39</sup> Donaldson, G.A. (1991) *Learning to lead: the dynamics of the High School Principalship*. New York: Greenwood Press.

<sup>40</sup> Harris, A., Jamieson, I. & Russ, J. (1996) *School effectiveness and school improvement: a practical guide*. London: Pitman.

<sup>41</sup> Leithwood, K.A. (1992) The move towards transformational leadership. *Educational Leadership*, 49, pp8-12..

<sup>42</sup> Ramsden, P., Martin, E. & Bowden, J.A. (1989) School environment and sixth form pupils’ approaches to learning. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 51, pp 368-383.

The relationship between teachers' approaches to teaching and their perceptions of the 'teaching environment' have also been studied using questionnaires: the Approaches to Teaching Inventory (ATI)<sup>43</sup> and the Perceptions of the Teaching Environment questionnaire (PET)<sup>44</sup>. Teachers are more likely to take a student-focussed approach when they perceive that they have some control over what is being taught, when their department shows support for teaching, when they have an appropriate academic workload and when their class size is not too large. Research on departmental characteristics associated with high quality student learning highlight the same variables<sup>45</sup> and in this sense effective leadership could be seen as whatever helps to create these departmental characteristics.

In summary, there is empirical evidence that if department leaders behave in particular ways such that teachers experience a good teaching environment (as characterised above) then these teachers are more likely to take an appropriate approach to teaching, their students are more likely to take an appropriate approach to learning, and learning outcomes will be measurably enhanced. What is missing from the literature is accounts of what heads can do to create such teaching environments in research-intensive departments. There has also been scepticism about the practicability of Ramsden's suggestions about what an effective leader of teaching should do, given the context of the often unsupportive local cultures and values that may be experienced in research-intensive departments<sup>46</sup>.

### Leaders and distributed leadership

Much leadership is shared, and effective leaders devolve leadership tasks, disperse leadership roles, develop the capacity for leadership in their followers and create a climate in which individuals feel confident to assume leadership over some aspects of departmental work, whether or not it is formally allocated. The importance of 'distributed leadership' has long been recognised in studies of leadership of effective schools and six distinct forms of distributed leadership have been identified that may be experienced in a developmental sequence:<sup>47</sup>

- Formal distribution via hierarchical structures – devolving responsibilities to staff to specific roles, identifiable in an organisational diagram;
- Pragmatic distribution – via ad hoc devolution of tasks to meet demands as they emerge;
- Strategic distribution – via planned appointment of individuals to contribute to specific initiatives
- Incremental distribution – involving giving progressively more responsibility to identified individuals as they demonstrate their growing competence;
- Opportunistic distribution – where individuals willingly take the initiative to extend their roles;
- Cultural distribution – where leadership is assumed rather than given and shared in a flexible way enabled by the local culture.

The highly devolved organisations studied here might be expected to be characterised by forms of collegiality involving 'cultural distribution' but where the leader takes little active part in making this distribution happen. In the case studies examples will be identified where different forms of dispersed leadership are described by those in the department. How

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<sup>43</sup> Trigwell, K. & Prosser, M. (1996)

<sup>44</sup> Prosser, M. & Trigwell, K. (1997) Perceptions of the teaching environment and its relationship to approaches to teaching. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 67, pp 25-35.

<sup>45</sup> Ramsden, P., & Entwistle, N.J. (1981) Effects of academic departments on students' approaches to studying. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 51, pp363-383.

<sup>46</sup> Knight, P.T. & Trowler, P.R. (2000) Department-level cultures and the improvement of learning and teaching. *Studies in Higher Education*, 25,1, pp 69-83

<sup>47</sup> McBeath, J., Oduro, G.K.T. & Waterhouse, J. (2004) *Distributed leadership in action: a study of current practice in schools*. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.

capability for dispersed leadership is developed is a focus for a parallel Leadership Foundation research project<sup>48</sup>.

### **Definitions of quality teaching: excellence, innovation and timescales**

This study focuses on two rather different kinds of quality in teaching: first, quality as progressive improvement largely within the framework provided by the existing pattern of teaching, learning and assessment, and second, quality as successful innovation, often involving radical change in curricula, teaching, learning and assessment. Studies of successful innovation in higher education highlight the role played by infrastructure blocks in preventing change (such as the lack of recognition for teaching achievements), and also the role of leadership in removing or overcoming these blocks to innovation<sup>49</sup>.

The first two case studies undertaken illustrated the difference between these two forms of excellence well. The first involved progressive improvements introduced by individuals within individual courses with the support of leadership without any agreed overall change in either the curriculum or the pedagogy. There was no coherent direction to these changes. High quality was achieved by progressive tuning of whatever teachers were already doing, with much personal support. In the second case a radically new pedagogic approach was introduced, adopted by all teachers for all courses within the department, in one carefully planned large scale change project. High quality was achieved by innovation. It has been a prerequisite for a department to be included in this study for there to be convincing performance indicators of teaching quality, whether the case involved progressive tuning or innovation. Innovation without such evidence was not considered an indication of quality. There are examples in the literature of leadership of innovation in teaching leading to worse student learning<sup>50</sup>.

Schools effectiveness literature highlights that improvements in educational quality or performance are not common: most schools are 'stuck' and stay stuck despite efforts to improve them. Furthermore, those that improve seldom improve consistently over an extended period<sup>51</sup>. Many of the departments selected in this study had records that demonstrated excellence in teaching (at least in comparison with other departments in the same university) over an extended period, sometimes decades, with either teaching improvement processes maintained over the periods of office of successive department chairs or successful innovations that lasted and evolved.

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<sup>48</sup> Bolden, Richard., Gosling, J. & Petrov, G. (2005) Developing Collective Leadership in Higher Education: processes, practices and performance. Leadership Foundation [insert web address]

<sup>49</sup> Hannan, A. & Silver, H. (2000) *Innovating in Higher Education: teaching, learning and institutional cultures*. Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education/Open University Press.

<sup>50</sup> Jones, C. & Hassall, T. (1996) The approaches to learning of first year Accounting students: some empirical evidence. In Rust, C. & Gibbs, G. (Eds.) *Improving student learning through course design*. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.

<sup>51</sup> Knight, P.T. (2002) Learning from schools. *Higher Education*, 44, 2, pp 283-298.