

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

Graham Gibbs, Chris Knapper and Sergio Picinnin
University of Oxford

Key findings

Outstandingly good teaching across a whole department was found to be a somewhat elusive phenomenon and was clearly not the norm even in the participating world class universities. Two universities withdrew, one identified only one department and two universities nominated departments that were later rejected on the grounds that the teaching was found not to be excellent. The departments and the leaders studied here are therefore unusual and the form leadership of teaching took in these departments might therefore be different in important respects from that observed in studies of departmental leadership that have not first identified excellent teaching departments.

In two cases there was little evidence of leadership playing a major role in creating teaching excellence, but in all other cases leadership appeared important and in many it was pivotal.

Leadership associated with excellent teaching was found to be multi-faceted. Several cases displayed almost every sub-category of leadership activity. These cases tended to involve a comprehensive planned innovation to address an identified problem. A few cases displayed a form of 'non-leadership' involving maintenance of a culture that valued teaching and students but almost no overt leadership efforts to develop teaching. Few or perhaps none of these leadership of teaching activities can therefore be considered essential for excellent teaching. Rather effective leadership of teaching involves different combinations of these characteristics in different contexts.

Excellence in teaching took many different forms, and in particular there were marked differences between departments that emphasised fine tuning of largely traditional methods under the autonomous control of individual academics and departments where a radical innovation had been planned and implemented as a collaborative venture. Effective leadership of teaching was found to take markedly different forms in such different contexts.

The heads in these departments were unusually likely to have been respected for their outstanding teaching or to be teaching award winners at institutional or even national level. This must be an unusual phenomenon in research-intensive departments but it may be important for the development of teaching in such contexts.

Some of the leaders of teaching in the case studies were not Deans or Heads of Department themselves, but they did have responsibility for the development of teaching. On occasion the head, when contacted, would say "That is nothing to do with me, you will have to talk to Professor X". And not all the leaders of teaching we interviewed did all the leadership themselves. Indeed some form of dispersed leadership was visible in every department. One head said that while he took responsibility for leadership of teaching he was not an excellent or expert teacher himself and so he had co-opted others who were and had set up and supported a group to lead change in teaching. Despite the common collegial culture, 'cultural' dispersal of leadership was rare while formal allocation of teaching development roles or duties to individuals was very common.

Heads of department in research-intensive universities are usually appointed or elected for a single term of office lasting three to five years. In quite a few of the cases excellence in teaching had been developed progressively over an extended period of time. The examples involving radical innovation had sometimes taken the equivalent of two or three terms of

office of a departmental chair. In examples involving emergent change the pattern of leadership of teaching had sometimes been established decades before and the current head had been selected so as to maintain that pattern. There were no examples of a head being responsible for bringing about excellence in teaching within a single term of office. This is an important finding that has implications for the way departmental heads are appointed and their terms of office determined, and also for the timescales of institutional teaching development initiatives that heads are sometimes expected to respond to.

Patterns were evident in the relationship between context and leadership. We assumed that large departments would tend to adopt more strategic and managerial approaches to achieving excellence but this was not found to be the case. Emergent change and planned change was just as common in small, medium and large departments. There were also no systematic differences found between departments in universities in the UK and Australia, Europe and North America. Their research-intensiveness was their dominant characteristic, not their national context, although national contexts generated different kinds of educational problems that leadership sought to tackle.

In contrast, the academic discipline was found to have a profound affect on the form of leadership of teaching and the form of educational change associated with excellence in teaching. Change was much more likely to be emergent than planned in Humanities and Social Science. No examples of emergent change were found in Science. An entrepreneurial organisational culture and approach to change was much more common in Professional subjects. Any advice about leadership of teaching should take into account these disciplinary characteristics and cultures or it is likely to risk being not just irrelevant but inappropriate.

Experiencing a significant problem or challenge (such as a negative external review of even the threat of removal of professional accreditation) was found to be virtually essential if a process of planned change was to be adopted. Conversely every example of emergent change was associated with no experience of a problem. An entrepreneurial culture was common where there had been a problem and a collegial culture where there had been no problem. In at least two of the universities the 'problem' was university-wide rather than restricted to the department concerned. McNay's characterisation of academic organisational cultures was very helpful in understanding what form of leadership and change was taking place, and the motor that drove cultures and leadership to change in style was the existence of a problem. The role of the leader appeared to be to 'name' the problem, face up to it, and to mobilise colleagues to see addressing the problem as an opportunity. Sometimes the problem had sat unattended to by previous heads for some years. The relatively well resourced university contexts, research standing and high quality of students in these departments meant that severe problems were less prominent in many cases compared with departments in other kinds of universities. In such contexts the development of teaching could be seen to be value-driven rather than problem-driven.

Most departments were identified as having a predominantly collegial culture and this provided a context for the form leadership of teaching took. However a third of these departments also exhibited features of an entrepreneurial culture at the same time. Bureaucratic and corporate cultures were rare.

Conceptions of leadership of teaching found in the departments studied here were much more sophisticated than reported by Ramsden¹ with about 85% of the leaders studied expressing a "focus on teaching emphasising the students' experience of studying in a continually changing and developing curriculum" compared with less than 10% of leaders in previous studies that have sampled departments of varying degrees of teaching excellence. This finding provides strong support for the notion that such a conception of leadership is associated with teaching excellence.

¹ Ramsden, P. (1998) *Learning to lead in higher education*. London: Routledge
Graham Gibbs, Chris Knapper and Sergio Picinnin, University of Oxford
Leadership Foundation Project
page 2 of 3

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

A number of heads had hired pedagogic experts, for example in curricula planning, assessment and evaluation, sometimes on an extensive scale over a long time period, to help plan and implement changes to curricula and to teaching. Heads also read books, not just about teaching but about leadership and organisational change, and took themselves off to seminars and programmes to become more expert in the things they felt they needed to be able to do. Several had developed sufficient expertise in leadership of teaching that they were much in demand to give lectures and run seminars for other heads of department, sometimes on a national or international scale. They could reflect on what they had done and why and had sophisticated and convincing rationales for their approach. This awareness of the importance of expertise that they did not initially possess marks these heads out as quite distinctive in their approach to leadership.