Academia too reliant on ‘accidental leadership development’

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Few academic department heads receive any formal leadership training when they step up into middle management, a study says

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- By Jack Grove

Source: Alamy

Improvise: one department head confessed that ‘no training was offered at all’

Universities are relying too much on “accidental" leadership training for those about to take over academic departments, a study claims.

Identifying a culture of “institutional neglect” of potential future academic middle managers, the report published in the journal *Higher Education Policy* found that many departments are led by those with no formal training who had been asked to pick up complex and diverse managerial duties with very little support.

Some newly appointed managers had not met their predecessors or even received a handover file, according to the paper by Alan Floyd, senior lecturer in leadership and management at the Open University, entitled "Supporting academic middle managers in higher education: do we care?"

“Universities appear to be giving increasing consideration to caring for their student body, especially in the context of rapidly rising student fees [but] this is far from the case for academics who are asked to take on middle management roles,” writes Dr Floyd, who conducted interviews with 28 middle managers at two medium-sized universities in the South of England.

Just three of the 17 interviewees at one unnamed teaching-led institution had received any formal leadership training or preparation for their role, Dr Floyd reports.

“You’re just kind of dropped into it as it were – no training was offered at all,” one social sciences department head explained.

Another head of department said that his lack of induction had “hampered him quite severely in his first few weeks and months”.

“There was no indication of what needed to be done – it was, 'Here you are. Get on with it!',” he said.

At a research-led university, eight out of 11 interviewees said that they received no specific training for their management role.

“There was no training at all – I discovered everything [myself],” said one head of an arts and humanities department.

In one case, a department head found that “people in his department were deliberately keeping information from him, so that he could not perform his role and implement the changes that they were against”, the report says.

Of those who had some kind of training, shadowing an outgoing leader or speaking to those in similar roles was seen as particularly useful.

“There’s nothing more valid than institutional knowledge and people who have gone through a similar situation before,” said one departmental leader.

Others spoke highly of “accidental leadership development practices”, such as running a department for a more senior colleague, despite these “apprenticeships” being unpaid and largely informal arrangements, the report says.

Given that the sector accepted that “good leaders are essential for the future success" of our universities, institutions need to “provide more time, support and training for today’s academic middle managers to allow them to fulfil their duties successfully”, the paper concludes.

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