

Chapter 2

Departmental Leadership in a Post–Pandemic World: Taking Collective Responsibility for Our Future Success

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores some of the specific departmental leadership issues that have emerged as universities around the world have struggled to adapt to restrictions imposed by governments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter argues that for academic departments to succeed and flourish in a post-pandemic world, there needs to be a major reconceptualization of what we mean by academic leadership at the department level. Consequently, a new model of academic leadership is proposed, one which is based on social and relational models of leadership practice, focused on a more individualized approach to leadership development than is currently the case, and which recognizes the crucial role that all academics must play in ensuring the future success of their departments.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to explore some of the specific departmental leadership issues that have emerged as universities have struggled to adapt to restrictions imposed by governments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter argues that in order for academic departments to succeed and flourish in a post-pandemic world, there needs to be a major reconceptualization of what we mean by academic leadership at the department level and that all members of the academic community need to accept that they have a collective responsibility to ensure the future success of their subject areas. This reconceptualization will inevitably require a more nuanced approach to leadership development for departmental leaders than is currently the case, in line with more social and relational models of leadership

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practice, while at the same time recognizing the crucial role that academics not in leadership roles have in the departmental leadership process.

The chapter begins by contextualizing some of the key issues that have emerged during the pandemic arguing that although senior leaders have had to make the majority of strategic institutional wide policy decisions, as ever it has been department leaders who have been on the front line facing the crucial day-to-day leadership and management issues affecting our universities since the start of the crisis. This will be followed by an exploration of the specific challenges and opportunities that have been experienced by middle leaders during the crisis. Next, drawing on published research undertaken by the author and others, there will be a discussion and critique of the traditional models and experiences of middle leaders in relation to successful departmental leadership and leadership development prior to COVID-19. Finally, a new model of departmental leadership and support will be proposed for departmental leaders, recognizing the critical role that all academics must play in ensuring the future success of their departments in a post pandemic world.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR MIDDLE LEADERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

There is no doubt that senior university leaders have had to make the majority of key strategic institutional-wide policy decisions during the pandemic, such as closing campuses while ensuring support for students who could not return home, moving all teaching on-line, and managing and supporting thousands of students and staff who are all working from home. This has been no small task, and Senior Management Teams across the sector should be praised for working tirelessly and under great stress to rapidly respond to the various governmental restrictions initiated in an attempt to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. In the author's own institution, in a move which has no doubt been mirrored around the Globe, a Major Response Team was formed (now called Major Recovery Team) to co-ordinate the response to the pandemic. This team includes Pro Vice Chancellors and colleagues from across the University, including representatives from the student union. A Major Incident Team was also formed to specifically co-ordinate the University's response to polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and lateral flow positive cases. These two teams have instigated a range of measures designed to urgently address the most pressing issues brought on by the pandemic including financial stability, optimization of services and operations, and future sustainability of the institution.

However, in this chapter it is argued that it has been middle leaders who have borne the brunt of the day-to-day challenges that academics and students have experienced in relation to teaching, research and administration during the pandemic. This is due to the fact that it is within departments where the majority of day to day decision making takes place, with the head of department being highlighted as the most critical role in the university, and the most unique management position in the academy (Gmelch, 2019). Moreover, recent fundamental changes in the sector that occurred before COVID-19 have greatly elevated the importance of this position. For example, changes in funding provision, the increased marketization of higher education, and the effects of globalization on staff and student recruitment and retention have resulted in the department head being placed firmly at the centre of university leadership structures and decision-making processes; and increasing significance given to bureaucracy, productivity, and accountability has meant that department heads now take on far more strategic roles within their universities than they did previously (Billot & Codling, 2013; Floyd, 2016).

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