Leading from the Middle

A report on support and training for middle managers in the sector

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Executive Summary

Greater attention should be paid to the support and development needs of Higher Education staff taking their first steps into leadership roles. The challenges and emotional stress felt by these colleagues in the sector have been underestimated and insufficient attention has been paid to their importance and value in enabling the success of their organisations.

Who are the Emerging Leaders in Higher Education?

An Emerging Leader in Higher Education (HE) is someone who leads from the middle of the organisation, specifically a middle manager who has some responsibility for leading a group of colleagues who deliver aspects of their institution’s mission and activities. The ‘middle’ in Higher Education is broad and diverse, covering any role from a programme or course leader, to a head of a particular part of student services, a research director or the dean of a faculty. In other words, ‘the middle’ in HE includes everyone who is not a senior leader, lecturer, or the sole deliverer of a service. Therefore, these leaders are the largest staff grouping in any Higher Education institution, and they are often left behind regarding support and development needs.

This report grew out of research conducted examining the support needs of emerging leaders by interviewing sector leaders and emerging leaders themselves, as well as surveying Human Resource Directors/People Transformation Leaders. A literature review and the training and course provision available for emerging leaders in the UK was also examined.

Our research found that more attention, in either provision or support, is paid to the most senior leaders in Higher Education and that there is little support, research, or training for the emerging leaders who lead from the middle of the organisation. There is little understanding of the importance of this group of colleagues in Higher Education and how they contribute to an organisation’s success.
Leading from the Middle | The Importance of Emerging Leaders in Higher Education

Why are Emerging Leaders important in Higher Education?

Those leading from the middle in Higher Education are essential to the success of an organisation. They are the key interpreters and implementors of strategy, representing senior leaders’ plans in the context of their team’s specific work activities and provide a detailed and knowledgeable understanding for senior leaders of what staff in the organisation are thinking and feeling. These insights can support and enable successful development and change in the organisation. Research suggests that effective middle managers can create an improvement of up to 25% in an organisation. Without support from this group, senior leaders will struggle to succeed. Ensuring that they are adept at their roles, can work effectively with their teams, and enable the delivery of institutional priorities is vital to the overall health of their institutions. The importance and significance of emerging leaders in enabling successful institutions is not fully recognised by the sector.

Emerging leaders are usually motivated and enthusiastic and, in this research, many of the interviewees were passionate about making a positive difference in their new roles, wanting to support their colleagues and do ‘a good job’. Most of our interviewees indicated that at the time, they had not understood the changes they would face when taking on a leadership role. They felt that they were often left to ‘sink or swim’.

Leadership Roles in Higher Education

There is a lack of appreciation of the specific nature of leadership and management in Higher Education itself. Leadership in Higher Education is, by its very nature, dispersed across the whole of the organisation with the leadership responsibilities shared from the early career staff through to senior leaders. Higher Education leadership is best understood and taught as a complex system with different elements and players across the organisation.

HE institutions engage in a wide variety of activities that require a variety of knowledge, capabilities, and attributes and are often more complex than other sorts of businesses or organisations which are less diverse. This complexity requires a broader understanding of the wider context and the variety of competing interests and demands to which emerging leaders are seldom exposed when they take on their leadership roles.

As an emerging leader moves into their first management or leadership role in Higher Education, they may well be moving from a specific disciplinary or professional background where they will have received training as part of their degree to a role managing and leading where they may oversee colleagues from different professional or disciplinary backgrounds. Individuals making this transition can experience uncertainty in their new role and feel ambiguous about taking on the leadership of others in an environment where the attitudes towards management and leadership are, at the very least, contested and sometimes even hostile.

In universities, the oversight of their colleagues’ work is always ambiguous and at times amorphous, as individuals working with knowledge creation and dissemination must have some degree of independence in their activities. This means that leading in these circumstances requires specific training and ongoing support to help emerging leaders succeed.
The interviewees in this research all pointed out that as they moved into a leadership role, they sought support from others who could help them. Some of these experiences were positive and helpful and some were negative and undermined their abilities in their new role. Many felt that they were expected to know what to do and ‘get on with it’.

Reflecting on their experiences, many suggested that they learned from both the positive and negative experiences and at times drew on their own disciplinary or professional background to seek solutions to the problems they encountered. Many suggested that they never had the time to reflect on this process. They found that the interviews conducted were a helpful reminder of their journey. The interviewees argued that the process of reflection and support for ‘on-the-job’ activities would benefit emerging leaders.

Emerging Leaders Seeking to Find Their Way in Their New Roles

The interviewees pointed out that these roles can sometimes be lonely and some commented that they had found the extent of loneliness surprising as they moved from having colleagues as friends to leading friendly colleagues. Ensuring that emerging leaders can develop support networks with their new peers who come from across the organisation (and beyond) is vital. In other words, this research has identified that taking on a leadership role can affect and change an individual’s work identity and the established support frameworks they have in the work environment. If these changes are not understood and recognised, they can lead to emerging leaders feeling alone and out of their depth.
Training and Support Available

This research identified several in-house and university-provided courses for middle managers. However, there were few appropriately tailored external programmes for those in middle management positions in Higher Education in the UK. Many senior and emerging leaders do not believe that the available provision addresses the complexity and experience of staff in these positions.

In-house programmes are valuable and support an understanding of the institution’s current needs, as well as providing internal networks for emerging leaders in the institution. External programmes provide a wider view of the HE sector and offer a safe space for participants to explore issues and challenges with their colleagues from different institutions who can provide alternative perspectives to compare institutional practice and learn different approaches. In other words, both in-house and external courses are valuable for different reasons.

This research notes that the single most challenging issue when enabling emerging leaders to access training was the cost of the programmes. In the current environment, value for money was seen as vital to justify the limited funding available to spend on emerging leaders.

Beyond a course, a few of the interviewees indicated that new emerging leaders were offered mentoring support or some coaching but that this was by no means common. In other words, this research indicates that while there is a recognition that emerging leaders do need help, especially when they are starting in their role, there still seems to be limited support of any kind.

What Training and Support Would be Valuable?

All interviewees felt that paying attention to the basic practical skills of leadership and management was important as many who enter these roles have not had experiences of financial or risk management or analysing the necessary data. Ensuring that emerging leaders have a good start in these areas provides them with the context and confidence to lead their colleagues in challenging times. Developing a sense of compromise and pragmatism was also essential to develop strong teams around them.

This research has highlighted the importance of emerging leaders developing knowledge of their approach and style of leadership based on a deep self-awareness to help them develop resilience. Supporting emerging leaders to reflect on their leadership and the big picture, important issues beyond the everyday, is extremely important and relates to their success in the role. Mentoring was highlighted as a crucial part of any support package for emerging leaders, as was the ability to influence and affect changes in practice within their teams.

Increasingly, there is a need to understand the HE policy environment in which emerging leaders and their teams work. The interviewees in this study felt that understanding how to access information about HE policy to build an awareness of the environment in which universities and HE colleges operate was considered important.

Developing strong external networks beyond their immediate team and university provides early-career leaders with a support group that will benefit their work and careers for years to come.

This research suggests that more attention should be paid to emerging leaders in the sector rather than just focusing on senior leaders and that senior leaders themselves need further training on how to work with their middle managers to affect successful change.

This report focuses on how middle managers have developed, what their needs are, and why they matter. It argues that supporting leaders early in their careers creates better leadership overall. We believe that recognising all aspects of HE leadership not just more senior leadership roles will ensure a more mature appreciation of the responsibilities and value of leadership across all levels in a higher education environment.
Leading from the Middle | The Importance of Emerging Leaders in Higher Education

Full Report

Who is an ‘Emerging Leader’ in Higher Education?

“There’s an overall leadership vacuum”
[in Higher Education]

This quotation from a senior leader in Higher Education establishes the challenge faced by the HE sector going into the second quarter of the 21st century. In a difficult competitive environment, good leadership is vital. Unlike much of the literature on leadership, this report focuses on those who sit at the heart of universities, the emergent leaders, who lead from the middle. Most of the literature on university leadership does not focus on these leaders but rather concentrates on senior leaders, ignoring middle managers. While good leadership from the top of an organisation is important, we argue that there is a need to focus more on the middle tier of leadership. In this report, middle managers are referred to as emerging leaders as we believe that their role is crucial to the success of institutions and that while they do manage, they have a larger and more significant role in the leadership of the organisation, which is often ignored. Mauritz (2021) identified, following his global study of middle managers in different sectors, that ‘good’ middle managers could make as much as a 22% difference in the profits of an organisation. Below, it is argued that leadership in Higher Education is dispersed and requires colleagues at all levels to play their part to create a successful institution, while it is those who sit at the heart of the organisation, the emerging middle leaders who play a very significant role.

Leadership in Higher Education is complex and is seldom just “top down”. It is usually a dialogue between different elements and members of the university community, as well as the wider social, policy, and financial environments. The dialogue must take account of the culture, ambitions, and values embodied in the organisation and crucially, the staff and student aspirations. While senior leaders must take account of all these factors to create a credible vision and strategy, those who lead from the middle dominate the dialogue between senior leaders and their colleagues and students. In other words, leading from the middle requires a subtle interpretation of the senior leaders’ strategies to make them relevant to all members of the wider HE community.

Leadership is a dialogue between different elements and members of the university community, as well as the wider social, policy, and financial environments.
Emergent leaders are responsible for the execution of the organisation’s vision and mission and contribute towards its goals. They keep the show on the road, as it were. They operate as the force between senior leaders and their colleagues in schools and departments who implement strategy and policy and do the day-to-day work of a university, as well as teaching and research, and provide the services needed for the activities in the organisation to run smoothly.

Emerging or early career leaders oversee everyday activities based on organisational change, processes, and procedures, and realise the university’s and their department/school or service objectives. Leading from the middle in Higher Education is therefore crucial to the success of the institution.

The so-called ‘middle’ in Higher Education makes up a significant proportion of all staff in an organisation. It includes Deans, Heads of Departments, Subject Leads and Principal Lecturers/Programme Leaders, and Heads of Service and/or Departments. These colleagues inhabit a central position in the organisational hierarchies, interpreting and executing senior management plans by supporting and encouraging their colleagues to fulfil their roles. However, this large, important, and diverse group of people seem to receive little support or training to be successful. As one person interviewed put it, “You just have to sink or swim.”

This report sets out the findings from the research conducted with a sample of emerging leaders, senior managers, and HR and People Transformation leaders. Most of the interviewees felt that they had not been given the knowledge they thought was necessary about their new roles and were expected to just ‘get on with it’. One interviewee summarised what many stated. They:

• Received no proper induction and had no perception of the department and the team/university.
• Did not receive an introduction to the senior team.
• No one explained what was expected of them in their role.
• There was no contextualisation of what and why something was important (for example, in terms of budget or student recruitment) or why any of it mattered.
• When they took on the role of leading the department, they had a completely different perception of the university, having only seen it before through the lens of their discipline or profession.
Higher Education in the UK has been going through a considerable change over the last ten years or so. Each nation in the UK has oversight of its own HE policy and funding which has led to a tearing apart of a unified HE policy and funding environment in the UK. Over time, this policy oversight has changed in different nations, placing additional burdens on institutions. Changing policies on funding in the sector, student fees, immigration, free speech, and the perception of the value of Higher Education have all played their part in making leading in the sector more volatile, uncertain, and at times, depressing.

While senior leaders have needed to navigate these major changes to ensure that they protect the reputation and financial health of the organisation, it is increasingly those leading from the middle who are responsible for ensuring the welfare and support of students including, most recently, through the pandemic and the growing crisis of poor mental wellbeing across society, in an increasingly regulated environment while also dealing with often swiftly changing financial pressures as student numbers shift year on year or cuts are announced at times with little notice.

Given the fractious relationships that have developed in HEIs over the last ten years, evaluating how staff in the sector are supported and worked with is surely an important focus for all institutions at this time. Early career leaders are directly responsible for the welfare and activities of their teams. Across Higher Education, there have been changing working conditions, such as a significant increase in fixed-term contracts with more precarious career structures. These changes, coupled with the cost-of-living crisis and changes in life choices and lifestyle following the pandemic, make for challenging relations between the staff in professional departments and academic schools. Institutions need to recognise that it is the middle managers who must deal with these challenges on a day-to-day basis and that how these leaders deal with these challenges can affect the overall sense of community within a HE institution.

Why does it matter to HE now?

Starting as a new emerging leader means a transition, a move from one position and one identity to another. As Harrison and Gjilda (2023) pointed out many middle managers, had not even planned to be managers but their careers developed in a happenstance way. Making such significant changes to everyday life is challenging, but doing so without support is particularly difficult. As these colleagues become emerging leaders and middle managers, they find themselves moving from a specialism (either academic or professional) to taking on wider responsibilities, in particular, the oversight of colleagues, the planning of activities and overall objectives and strategy, and the management of budgets. While this amount of change in work activity is challenging in itself and needs support, it is important to recognise that changing from their first work passion, their discipline or profession, to a new one, that of a leader, is also a significant personal identity change.

The literature on leadership deals a lot with the importance of authenticity in leadership (Gardner et al., 2011) but seldom deals with the ambivalence that many new emerging leaders, particularly in Higher Education, may feel as they shift from one sense of who they are to another (Parker, 2004). In this report, it is argued that it is vital to shine a light on this group of leaders and to ensure they have the right support, knowledge, and skills to be effective, not just for the organisation but also to support their sense of self. In other words, to be successful HEIs, it is essential to pay particular attention to those who lead from the middle.

Equally, many senior leaders need to refocus their organisations under new conditions. The role that emerging leaders play in the translation and implementation of strategy is often underestimated but it is these colleagues who oversee these changes and make them achievable. Emerging leaders are crucial to the success of the organisation.
In this research, the interviewees all agreed that four areas had changed the role of those leading from the middle substantially over the last few years. These were increasing complexity and uncertainty, regulation, changing student expectations, and societal change.

I probably spend a disproportionate amount of time compared to our predecessors in terms of dealing with, you know, regulatory stuff and trying to make sure we are compliant. You spend a lot of time trying to second guess what is going to happen in all the areas that we oversee.

I think student expectations have changed hugely. The growth in international students and the fees being introduced for students has created a sort of transactional relationship more than was the case, which means there is an element of running a kind of customer-based business.

There is a sort of positive societal change. The good thing is we are a much more inclusive society and a much more inclusive institution than we once were. But we need to keep working at this and ensure everyone is on board with the changes so that changes the role as well. For example, If, you’re a mature student, your expectation is different. It’s like, you know, with customer service, and if you’re not getting the service at 40, and you’re done 20 years of work, you’re going to speak about it and I could give so many more examples of changing norms and attitudes which have to make us pause and re-think.

We are trying to create spaces for those difficult conversations that universities need to have, but it is tricky, we also must take account of the changing norms and values of students. It is not a simple matter.

The need to develop and support good leaders in the current Higher Education environment could hardly be more pressing. However, the support and development of middle managers is not a topic that is engaged in by sector bodies and is seldom highlighted as a risk by senior leaders, councils, or governors in the sector. While we identified some management courses dealing with some of the elements of leadership that could be useful to HE leaders, the specifics of leading from the middle in organisations where line management is a complex and less secure process is seldom taken into account. As one of the interviewees put it:

[In Higher Education you are given] … an oppositional training and I don’t mean oppositional in terms of everything, but the way in some disciplines [that] you distinguish yourself is by saying…. by questioning authority, the authority of the candidate or the authority or whatever it might be. - I think …that translates into an interesting management challenge [which is quite specific to our leadership environment in HE].

Those interviewed highlighted that increasing complexity and uncertainty, regulation, changing student expectations, and societal change had made the role of a middle manager more challenging in recent years.
Recognising that universities are communities of colleagues who are expected to understand why decisions are taken and to contribute, through structures such as departmental meetings, senate or academic board and their committees, to decision-making, makes for greater complexity than in most organisations. However, this is the ‘stuff’ of Higher Education and cannot be ignored by using models used for management from other sectors that cannot adapt to this kind of dialogue between members of the community.

The literature on emerging leaders or middle managers in Higher Education highlights the complexity and growing accountability of those leading from the middle, including questions on budgets and resource allocation, which are measured against centrally set performance indicators (Deem et al., 2007; Bolden et al., 2012). Widely spread amongst the middle managers in HE is the feeling of being ‘stuck in the middle’ between the organisational goals and expectations and those of the staff they lead (Bryman, 2009), rather than leading from the middle. Some writers question whether the sector cares about the middle managers’ needs at all (Floyd, 2016). Taking about the position between senior managers and their team, one interviewee put it this way:

There is sometimes a lack of understanding of what it’s actually like either from senior managers about the experience on the ground or from the team who do not understand the pressures on senior managers. I see my role more as a mediator and a translator, which works out as being someone who’s confronted from below or above with a lack of understanding of the other’s role and tries to mediate and translate.

The literature highlights that these colleagues play an influential role in the implementation of change and shaping strategies (Carvalho & Santiago, 2010), crafting a vision for their teams, encouraging teamwork, mentoring staff members, managing change, resolving disputes, and responding to student concerns, all of which are critical responsibilities of academic deans and other emerging leaders in Higher Education. Middle managers depend on maintaining a good working relationship with executive leaders while balancing the immense expectations of their teams. The tasks of middle managers include representing the needs of their group, as well as the interests, and desires of others whose work that affects their team; managing conflicts among team members while sustaining a positive working climate; ensuring effective communication across various parts of the organisation; and developing beneficial relationships with external stakeholders.

Middle managers experience multiple stress factors, including feeling overwhelmed by their responsibilities, feeling isolated in the position, struggling to handle multiple priorities, addressing fiscal difficulties, and balancing the numerous demands of stakeholders (Wild et al., 2003). Working with colleagues in this way can be highly pressurising for those leading from the middle who need to take care of themselves as well:

I have a very noisy school who want to raise issues, and I’m literally the person there to moan at because I’m everyone’s line manager so after two or three days (on campus), I’m literally like, I need to go home, I need to decompress. I’ll walk my dog, I need to see my hills.

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What Support is Available?

Managing academic knowledge work is unique to HE and generic programmes will not allow for the particular challenges experienced in the HE sector (Harrison & Gjika, 2023). It is also clear that most support and programmes do not focus on the emergent leader but rather on senior leaders. One of the interviewees put it this way: “I think unless we can sort out the problem at the entry-level if you like, we will continue to end up with mixed-ability leaders as we have now and I think that’s the real problem.”

Cost (72% of survey respondents) and the relevance of programmes not being tailored to the needs of Higher Education (58%) were confirmed as an issue in the survey of HR and People Transformation. Colleagues in the HE sector identified these as the biggest barriers to training. As one interviewee pointed out:

The problem is we don’t teach leadership for universities; we teach it generically.

On most leadership courses when it is about having a difficult conversation, [for example] it’s all right, it’s the right stuff you need to cover. But it’s from a different ambient context. That means those things are abstract, they’re not linked to HE. It is more as if someone would learn to manage Tescos. You go from line managing two or three to 10... and at each stage, you’re scaling up the same broadly, the same skills and adding the strategic incrementally, whereas a lot of people go into management in universities from a standing start and might suddenly be like managing 100 people having previously only line managed research students if that.

Seldom do generic courses take account of the particular nature of line management in the HE environment where leading amongst equals and colleagues is more common than not. Understanding how to approach this environment can prove complex, especially when dealing with challenging situations. The support needed to deal with this sort of leadership style is important, especially when the emerging leader had previously been a member of the team before they were promoted to lead the team. Another concern raised by the interviewees was that generic leadership courses focus too much on particular models of leadership rather than helping the participants learn to adapt and respond to events as they unfold. One interviewee argued that the courses were:

…very formulaic and too generic, selling one leadership model or framework as the one solution, and as soon as something does not happen as planned, people struggle and do not know what to do. This underestimates the danger of a fixed framework to work within for emerging leaders because when the formula does not work, people are all over the place and do not really know how to grapple with or handle a situation. Formulaic leadership frameworks hinder people’s creativity, their creative thoughts, and their ability to go back to first principles, work things through and come up with their own solutions. We need provision that works with that intelligence and creativity, so our new leaders feel empowered to handle different situations.

As the interviewees highlighted, universities have very specific needs. For example, they educate students and while the sector has had, for some time, good programmes to help lecturers teach, there is little help with the management of wider and often more personal student issues. Emerging leaders can be thrown into dealing with student matters as one interviewee stated:
...you get pulled into all kinds of complex student issues and different faculties. You’re pulled into other faculties, and then getting your head around their programmes and how they work. Again, it’s that requirement of being really flexible and adaptable and willing to jump in and sort of give you tried to turn your hand to anything that kind of comes up but there is little training about the broader principles to work from.

There is also little provision that offers participants a good grasp of HE policy which creates the overarching framework in which HE institutions operate. When emerging leaders take on their leadership role, they find themselves dealing with all sorts of issues that have sprung from the policy decisions at a national level. However, they are not often trained in the impact of policy on university work. Some institutions have developed their in-house provision for emerging leaders. This is to be welcomed as it does provide a basic understanding of the organisation and its workings, and is an important foundation for the leadership among their colleagues:

Our university provides a programme for people who are thinking of taking on leadership roles. It is useful and I was glad I did it but it was pretty basic and I have found it more difficult since I joined than I expected. I am very glad I have had other training since then.

It is also the case that it is harder for smaller and less well-resourced institutions to provide this level of support, requiring them to rely on external provision, if at all.

Overall, professional leadership development in the UK in Higher Education is still a relatively small niche. Many emerging leaders are forced to look elsewhere for the support needed to acquire the necessary skills, knowledge, and mindsets needed to operate effectively in their roles and shape their leadership style. Some institutions have understood this issue and provided their own leadership development provision. This is a welcome and proactive approach that provides a vital part of the picture, offering bespoke and tailored support to suit the needs of a particular institutional environment. What these courses and support opportunities lack, however, is the ability to meet with wider networks and compare different institutions and approaches that a cross-institutional course can provide. Considering that leadership roles can be lonely, the current lack of support for people in those positions makes it even worse for them or forces them to find ways to work around these issues. This is exactly what the interviewees stated when asked about their experiences.
Emerging leaders are usually motivated and enthusiastic. In this research, many of the interviewees were passionate about making a positive difference in their new roles, wanting to support their colleagues and to do ‘a good job’ but many also said that they found the reality of the role challenging:

Many said that becoming ‘leaders’ did not enter their minds until they suddenly found themselves in the role. “I mean I kind of tumbling into leadership. I probably didn’t think about leadership in any major way until [then].” Most identified that they had not received any formal training. “There was no training. You just got to get on with it. You just had to know to do it.”

With little support available, emerging leaders try to learn and acquire knowledge and essential skills for their roles by working with senior professors and developing a robust hands-on approach. This approach worked very well for some colleagues but less so for others.

Learning by doing is extremely effective if there is space for reflection and where individuals have already been able to develop their self-awareness in other environments. The interviewees highlighted three ways that they sought to develop themselves: learning from their disciplinary background, seeking mentorship from senior colleagues, and being curious and engaged with the wider university activities available.

How Have Leaders Developed Themselves?

While applying for a role, people apply based on a job description, and you develop a broad understanding of the role, but usually, the day-to-day experience in the job differs a lot from that.

Learning from their Discipline

Certain disciplinary backgrounds lend themselves to self-reflection and provide theories and skills that support the inclusive leadership culture necessary in Higher Education. In particular, the social sciences offer different frameworks that could benefit leaders when undertaking their new roles. A few of the interviewees came from social science disciplines and referred to that training as invaluable:

I drew on my experience of my disciplinary background. It helps that I was a social scientist, so I had some frameworks to draw on.

One of the things that I’ve learned from teaching, and I’m doing my role as a teacher in education, to the way that I work. So, I think I’m quite educative in my approach as a leader. So, one of the things I try and do [as] if I would teach a group of students, and let’s say they fail on a piece of work, as a teacher, I’d go back through it with them or try and work out where they went wrong. And I would help them to put it right, and then I’d give them the chance to do that. Why would I do that to my colleagues? Why

would I do that to my staff? ...the same...we’ve got to have a relationship that’s trusting enough that you can put your hand up and say, I don’t get it. I don’t understand. Help me. And it’s okay. It’s like, okay, let’s try again, let’s do it a different way.

And I’m actually helping you from the past, personally, slightly different because my first degree was Economics. And I come from a bit and I teach business and economics. So I’ve got a business economics kind of background anyway, so in terms of being able to, you know, so when I look at the data, I’m I work with data, or when I’m looking at things like, you know, trends, and you know, that kind of stuff, is what I did anyway, but if you happen to have been, you know, somebody in some soft sciences, or in the sciences or whatever, you’d have a different way of working and reporting.

As an Engineer I am quite pragmatic and am always learning to fix things so I draw on this in how I approach problems in leadership. Being flexible and adaptable is vital.

These interviewees were resourceful and reflective about their prior learning and the skills that they could adapt to take on their new roles. Working with their prior experience helped them deal with new situations and enabled them to feel the ongoing strength of their disciplinary identity. However, many felt that the most successful strategy was working with more senior colleagues who supported their development through the early stages of their new role.
The importance of having a more senior colleague who would listen and offer advice was consistently highlighted throughout this research. Mentoring is a vital part of support in the Higher Education environment but it is not a taken-for-granted as having been part of everyone’s experience. Many interviewees said that they had to seek support themselves by reaching out to others rather than it being offered when they took on the role:

There was no training for that I just sort of made it up. I went along and worked with several kind of well-established professors there who were on the kind of steering team. That was when I actually started to understand the processes of working there. I just had to do something like that.

I reached out to quite a bit and actually my previous boss, he was brilliant, dropped everything just to talk me through something. So I needed that an awful lot at the beginning. I think those first sorts of six months, I was forever reaching out to people and so just can you just talk me through ideas about how I should address this issue.

I have also been lucky enough to have two great mentors from outside of the University but in the sector who I can share things with and who will tell me like it is.

However, not everyone found they had colleagues or senior leaders they could turn to and would have welcomed the support of mentors or others who had been through similar experiences. “I would have welcomed more support particularly at first. I really did not know who to turn to. Leadership is lonely.”

Most of the participants said that they do still experience a certain kind of loneliness that comes with being a leader, a sort of feeling of solitude that they saw as part of their role, but that it was in the early stages of their leadership career where support was vital as there was a shock as their work identity altered:

For the people who genuinely are taking on their team, they probably have not signed up for the pain that they’re going to encounter. As soon as people learn to manage a group of more than twenty, somebody is going to be, at the very least struggling probably with capability, possibly needing to be moved on. At that point, people …feel terrible. That is where the loneliness comes. That’s how the isolation manifests itself when you stop when things happen that you can’t talk about in the tearoom anymore. You have changed and you had to change.

The interviewees felt that if only at this point they could have had someone or something that helped them understand how to move on from this, it would have made a significant difference:

What would have been good would just be some of the people who were my managers, either formal or informal to just to me sit down and say, you know, this is the way it works. And while some of it can be alienating don’t worry about it you can find your way through and keep your values. I had no advice from people who I really still admire actually but they should have known better. They could have pointed me to other forms of support or something.

This research suggests that HE institutions do not seem to appreciate the level of personal impact that taking on a leadership role in a university has on individuals. The interviewees talked of deep emotional issues such as losing friends and feeling alone. It seems that moving into a leadership role is not only a career advancement but that it also has a fundamental effect on one’s work identity. Creating spaces where it is acceptable to find the space to discuss and learn one’s way into the new role should be a natural part of the process of recruiting and appointing an emerging leader.
Learning about the University

Moving from being in a school or department to leading a team requires a greater sense of the whole of the organisation and how it works. All interviewees spoke about having to learn how things worked in the organisation for themselves.

You sort of are expected to know. You have after all been a lecturer for some time. Although I had been at ... university for some time I actually didn’t really know anyone more senior in the other services so had to start working on getting to know people all over again.

Some of the interviewees were particularly proactive and curious which helped them develop their understanding of themselves:

I also got elected Senate in my first or second year. I saw that you could get elected, so I put myself forward, and that is a kind of training in how a University Senate operates (…) it was actually kind of really good space. So, I was doing a whole raft of different things that added up to the pieces in the jigsaw puzzle, kind of learning about how universities work. If you are reflective you sort of learn it is a people business. Universities are a people business with students, staff, and external people. You have to get on with people to make things happen.

Leaving it up to individuals once they are promoted does not seem the best way forward to create successful emerging leaders. It is not only painful for the individual leaders but also for their teams and costly, both emotionally and financially, for the institution. This research has found that a more successful approach was providing clear support as individuals took on a middle manager role.
Towards a New Vision for Those Leading from the Middle - Support and Development from the Start

I don’t think people in worlds below the top team necessarily see themselves as leaders... the organization [needs] to say that you are actually a leader, you are a leader of your area, you’re a leader of your function, and you need to identify appropriate opportunities to develop into the role from the start.

Higher Education in the UK is now part of many people’s lives, with many either having been or currently are a student, a parent or family member of a student, or as a partner who works with one or more of the universities, HE colleges or institutes to innovate or train their workforce. HEIs have grown and changed the way they engage with wider society. Equally, post-pandemic, taking care of the university community has become even more important. While reflecting on their experience in Higher Education, the interviewees argued that there is a need to look again at how leadership is defined in the sector. The necessary culture of any HE institution requires a dispersed leadership environment where people at all levels take on different responsibilities and roles. While this is obvious, it is not often discussed in this way. Much of the focus has been on senior leaders, but many of the interviewees felt that while it is crucial to ensure there are good leaders at the top of organisations who have vision and can build a successful senior team, having good middle managers who not only allocate tasks and ensure objectives are fulfilled but who can also develop teams equally important. This was highlighted by a comment from one of the interviewees when discussing the extent of top-down approaches in leadership in Higher Education:

I think there’s quite a lot of top-down decision making, and generally, people want to do things, and if they question it, then it’s kind of, you know, ‘I don’t know’ they shrug their shoulders... the difficulty is, people just sort of end up saying, ‘we’ll do it’ because you said it because we were told you need to do it.

This approach stifles any creativity and deadens any innovative spirit, which is exactly the opposite of what is needed in a HE environment. Far better to foster mutual responsibility, a mutual understanding of what is needed, and to value responsible leadership at all levels of the organisation. The proposal in this report is that there is a need to think about HE as a whole system of leadership and as an approach and a practice for all members of the HE community, including students, early career staff, senior leaders, and emerging leaders. What this requires is a different approach to training, specifically training that will provide an understanding of the complex system of the organisation, creating clarity on the roles and responsibilities, and confidence in and knowledge of culture and practices, including approaches to finances and information, a focus on shared understanding and values, and the highlighting of networks and people skills.

Evaluating the HE environment as a complex system of leadership in this way places a sharp focus on developing appropriate support and training for leaders at all levels of the organisation, especially those who lead from the middle as their pivotal role affects all parts of the organisation.

In our survey, the human resource directors recognised that emerging leaders would benefit from a range of training and support. They particularly focused on core people skills, first, on the individual leader, such as examining their leadership style, with self-reflection and awareness skills (90% of respondents). Other people skills included working with a team (77% of respondents) and network and support mechanisms (77% of respondents). Also in their top list of training needs were strategies for dealing with challenging people situations (66%), ‘the basics’ (finances, risk, and data analysis, 61%), understanding what is expected of middle managers, (55%), and HE policy (50% of respondents). They all felt these elements to be essential for successful leaders. However, they also acknowledged that the cost and availability of suitable programmes prohibited their emerging leaders from getting the support they needed. They pointed out that this led to HR departments having to provide extensive one-to-one support as issues arose rather than being able to work with leaders who had developed confidence in their roles already. Both senior leaders and HRDs stated that their emerging leaders were surprised by the amount of time and energy required by their roles related to people. They pointed out that emerging leaders should spend “about 70% of [their] time... taken up by people. And that always comes as a shock.” This is reflected in the areas they most highlighted as key training needs. Making clear what the role of a leader is in these circumstances is surely preferable to having to pick up the pieces as their colleagues struggle through their first year or so of overseeing their teams.

About 70% of a middle manager’s time is... taken up by people. And that always comes as a shock.
Developing Teams

The interviewees were clear that building and working closely with a good team was very important to the success of any emerging leader. They argued that early-stage leaders needed to ensure that their team developed a sense of shared values, where they “cultivate[d] a generous spirit so that people feel appreciated and feel that they have the leader’s trust and confidence.”

In an HE environment where questioning and understanding are central to the mission of the organisation, all teams need to feel they can grapple with complex issues and trust the decisions that their team leaders make:

I really like the fact that leaders require followers and to get followers you need, people need to believe not in everything you do, and they need to believe in the integrity of the decision-making process. And it’s ultimately aimed to make the institution or the sector or whatever it might be, as strong as it can be. And that does require you to be able to communicate with... the people who work for and study with you. You’re managing through a relationship, you’re managing through influence, you’re managing through the fact that you’ve... that you can nudge people, and that you’re having to be leaning on your characteristics and traits. ...I spent a lot of time kind of nurturing relationships to make sure that people felt listened to and cared for.

As a result, the senior leaders felt it was important to ensure that the emerging leaders were given tips and strategies related to learning several skills including building a strong team, involving their teams in decision-making, and learning to delegate as well as developing good communication skills and listening to different perspectives, as one interviewee put it:

Communication really is about hearing as well as speaking. The key bit is that whether you’re a Vice Chancellor or whether you’re a head of school, finding ways to hear as well as transmit, is absolutely central.

The maturity to focus on serving their teams and their organisations in a professional capacity, rather than just focusing on their own needs. Providing an environment where their team members’ tasks and responsibilities are clear and where they have the confidence to delegate and trust their teams comes from developing good communication skills and a high degree of self and social awareness.

Learning to reflect and develop self-honesty was seen as central to the ‘work’ of leadership in Higher Education.

Emerging leaders need to create an environment where decisions are properly explained. It must be a culture where team members can ask questions and feel safe exploring decisions:

I really like the fact that leaders require followers and to get followers you need, people need to believe not in everything you do, and they... need to believe in the integrity of the decision-making process.... And it’s ultimately aimed to make the institution or the sector or whatever it might be, as strong as it can be. And that does require you to be able to communicate with... the people who work for and study with you. You’re managing through a relationship, you’re managing through influence, you’re managing through the fact that you’ve... that you can nudge people, and that you’re having to be leaning on your characteristics and traits. ...I spent a lot of time kind of nurturing relationships to make sure that people felt listened to and cared for.

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To operate at this level, it was felt that emerging leaders also need to understand themselves and their triggers in certain circumstances and have...
Many of the interviewees also pointed to the need to develop an understanding of the day-to-day management tools needed to operate as a leader in the middle of an organisation. Seldom are the tools and practical arrangements set out that middle managers need to be able to use. Organisations provide an induction for new starters as part of their HE institution but they do not have planned induction programmes for new middle managers or emerging leaders. There was also a view that many middle managers were not financially literate, and this is a skill that they needed to learn:

One of the things that were an initial challenge for me was trying to get my head around how the budgets worked, and how money flows from one place to another, that was really, really difficult to understand, and I had to kind of seek out that sort of training for myself and speak to the relevant finance people to get them to talk me through how things were done. We didn’t have a dedicated ‘how-to’-school training programme as such, as I say, you just kind of assumed that you will...find people and get on with that sort of thing yourself.

Another area that the interviewees felt was lacking was a grasp of how emerging leaders manage their time due to the overwhelming level of competing demands that people in those roles face.

Using your time effectively can be taught, and yet so many people just drown because they cannot manage their inbox or deal with requests from competing groups in the organisation. This is a tragedy and so unnecessary.

Time management is usually about learning to prioritise tasks and activities. Teaching this process entails a focus on the needs of the area in the context of the organisational needs, helping early-career leaders develop a sense of the priorities that need urgent attention while also creating space for important but often longer-term issues. This skill also helps new leaders learn to live with the role they have, which is a vital part of becoming successful as a leader:

I realised I’ve never been able to finish the work I’ve got in a day and therefore, you just have to go home feeling easy. That you’ve done what was needed for the day. And it is also about that self-care and self-management about how do I prioritise, how do I switch from one thing to another without thinking and at the end of the day, without holding that stuff.

I would never go into a session, or anything without a bit of preparation. I always prepped ready for Monday, you know, that kind of stuff. I am not somebody that gets particularly stressed about things. Because I think I do the preparation and kind of break it down and that’s all I can do...
The Power of Networking: Gaining Knowledge and Support

During the course of this research, it became clear that leadership success was ‘all about the people’. People not only in an individual’s team or in the organisation but also across the sector of higher education. Developing networking skills was seen as a vital skill for emerging leaders to learn as it helped them learn about policy and new ways of doing things, opening their eyes to different approaches and perspectives. However, many of the interviewees felt that the value of networking was seldom recognised despite being a central part of the research ethics involved in HE:

The other thing that I think is really key is looking outwards as well as inwards. And again, I’d say where I see quite a lot of limitations and sort of heads of schools that they spend a lot of time managing, you know, the things that are within their system, but much less time looking out and learning about the sector and why it is the way it is.

Make links with others outside of your organization, become part of networks. It will make you better at your job. And it will make the organisation better.

But actually, also do it because it makes you better. You gain a better understanding of why things are the way they are.

Learning how to build networks, value them and carry them throughout a career was highly valued by everyone spoken to. Cross-sectoral courses and events provide opportunities to network but it was also considered important to set out the basics of networking and maintaining networks as well:

What helped me in this role was us four deputy principals... formed a group. And to be honest, I can't believe how important and powerful that group became. Because what we did was ...say, for example, if there was an issue around personal finance, we would invite the finance team to a meeting with us. And we would talk about what it meant for our students, and how we could work with them. And then we would call the international team in, and so on. In the end, everybody kind of wanted to come to our parties!... Mind you we had to learn that you needed to keep this up and keep building to keep your relevance. I wish someone had taught me that in the first place.

Make links with others outside of your organization, become part of networks. It will make you better at your job. And it will make the organisation better.

It is really key to look outwards as well as inwards beyond your team, beyond your university.

The Complex Web of HE Leadership: Learning Leadership Throughout Your Career

While training in leadership in Higher Education requires specific skills and attributes, it would particularly help those participating in the training reflect on how leadership works in the sector.

In a dispersed and discursive environment like a Higher Education institution, it requires a recognition of different types of leadership at all levels of the organisation from the self-leadership of early-stage academics or professionals who are responsible for the tasks and activities to team leaders who take on roles to support and build their colleagues’ abilities, creating a high-quality team, to more senior leaders who set out the direction and vision for the whole organisation.

Each part of the leadership web needs to value each other’s contributions, interacting and communicating to create successful organisations. Perhaps the greatest lesson learned through this research was that training for leadership in Higher Education needs to start with an underpinning of the complex web of leadership systems in HE.

It needs to ensure that all staff in a HE institution, at whatever level, receive training and support related to their leadership responsibilities at this stage of their career. This training must crucially also focus on an understanding of how their roles relate to and support others’ roles. Importantly, it was found that to ensure that an organisation can benefit from the wealth of knowledge and creativity held within the HE staff, senior leaders need to learn to appreciate the value of the different leadership levels within the organisation.

There is a need to be more explicit in all aspects of HE leadership about the complex and dispersed nature of leadership in the sector, ensuring that all colleagues are educated on their leadership responsibilities. It is the conclusion of this study that only in this way can a dynamic and innovative HE sector be supported in the future.
If a culture of self, team, and strategic leadership is nurtured in an organisation, it will benefit the whole community and create a highly effective and strong institution.

If a culture of self, team, and strategic leadership is nurtured in an organisation, it will benefit the whole community and create a highly effective and strong institution. This research argues that in a dispersed leadership environment, supporting those who lead from the middle is even more important for the very reason that it is these colleagues who sit at the heart of the institution. It is these colleagues who, with support, ensure the successful implementation of strategy or change. Across the sector, those who lead from the middle are enthusiastic and committed people who can make a significant difference in an organisation’s ability to thrive in the challenging times in HE. Over the course of the research, it was determined to be important to find appropriate ways to support this group of people and enhance their status. When early career leaders are supported and recognised, they give more to their organisation as one of the emerging leaders indicated:

And I think that’s the first time I really realised how important... or that I was actually a leader in this organisation. I was making a difference and helping in a kind of underpinning way, ...we’ve got an ethos of value in students and partnerships, of belonging and all of those things. And I could help to make that into concrete experiences and overcome the fear and the loneliness of a leadership role. But working across the organisation, with others, you thought that, actually, the power of us together made us more powerful as leaders and meant we were having a truly positive effect. That was just great.
Some Comments on the Methodology

Our research was based on a set of questions about the support provided to early career leaders in higher education. We wanted to understand how the sector has understood these roles in order to understand the career histories and support provided for their colleagues throughout their careers, and to understand the practice in training and support in the sector at present. We used a range of methods to develop this understanding.

As well as conducting a literature review of the material on middle managers and their support, we reviewed the current training provision by examining websites and publicity materials. We also conducted an anonymised survey of Human Resource Directors at British universities.

Following the collection of the background data, we then conducted twelve semi-structured interviews based on open-ended questions with vice-chancellors and middle managers from across the sector. Interviewees were approached and kindly agreed to participate in our research. We recorded the interviews and transcribed them.

We hope the insights recorded here will help to improve the development of academic middle managers and emerging leaders across the sector. Moreover, we hope the implications of this report will open a dialogue and debate within the sector about how to support good leadership in the sector throughout the twenty-first century. This report has already informed the Emerging Leaders course developed by Minerva.

We would particularly like to thank our interviewees who shared their perspectives and experiences with us. The interviews were rich and insightful, as well as extremely helpful in developing our ideas and recommendations.

References


Gardner, W., Cogliser, C., Davis, K., and Dickens M., (2011) Authentic Leadership A Review of the Literature The Leadership Quarterly (22) (pp 1120-1145)


List of Interviewees

Abigail Locke, Keele University
Adam Tickell, University of Birmingham
Jordan Kenny, University of Roehampton
Katie Normington, De Montfort University
Marilyn Holness, University of Roehampton
Rama Thirunamachandran, Canterbury Christ Church University
Sasha Roseneil, University of Sussex
Susan Rigby, Bath Spa University
Steven Lyttle, De Montfort University
Thomas Jansen, Aberystwyth University
William Purkis, University of Birmingham

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