

Knowledge Exchange Programme

Redefining Academic Leadership

3 October 2023

Introduction

On 3 October 2023, higher education professionals involved in implementing Recognition and Rewards convened in the Residence of the British Ambassador in The Hague for a meeting about redefining academic leadership. The meeting kicked off with an informal networking lunch for the participants to get to know each other before starting the session. The participants were academics and faculty at institutes across the Netherlands and the UK. The British Council and the British Embassy organised this meeting to enable knowledge transfer between practitioners in both countries. This report is a summary of the discussion between the participants, highlights common challenges in the field and touches on some possible solutions.

Keynote speakers

Dr Annette Bramley, Director N8 Research Partnership

Dr Maaïke Verbree, Head of Academic Affairs, Science Faculty - VU Amsterdam

Moderator

Struan Campbell, Head of Education, British Council in the Netherlands

Report writer

Ishar Mayor, Student, Utrecht University

Keynote Speeches

The participants were welcomed into the Residence with a short address by the Deputy Head of Mission Keith Allan. Struan Campbell then introduced the two speakers and held a short exercise to help the participants understand the interconnected nature of systems we work within. The speakers are practitioners with experience in redefining academic leadership, and the challenges of change in the system. Their speeches expressed examples of actions taken to address these challenges in the UK and Dutch contexts.

Dr Annette Bramley, Director, N8 Research Partnership

The first speaker was Dr Annette Bramley, Director of the N8 Research Partnership in the UK. The N8 is a strategic partnership of the eight most research-intensive universities in the North of England. It provides its members with a platform to work together to tackle shared challenges such as improving the research environment to make it more inclusive, supportive and psychologically safe. She began her presentation by expressing what good academic leadership looks like since. In general, people need both support and challenge to perform to the best of their ability. Dr Bramley stated that a diverse, psychologically safe yet accountable environment is one where people are able to shine brightest. Dr Bramley then went on to explain the number of roles an academic leader has, and how important each of these roles are to their position, and why it is important that there is more than one career path to become an academic leader.

An academic can have many roles ranging from research to management. Therefore, Dr Bramley explained that it is important to have a way to be able to articulate and capture different forms of leadership. She gave an example of how universities can shift their focus to recognise both quantitative and qualitative aspects of someone's career, using the case study of the UKRI Resume for Research Innovation. She suggested that the criteria for a Narrative CV might be a starting point to define what good academic leadership looks like. She described how academic leadership changes through a career, referring to the University of Edinburgh taxonomy which sets out some of the academic leadership skills which a researcher might be taking on as they move through their career, gaining experience as they go.

Furthermore, Dr Bramley posed the question, "how might we diversify academic leadership?", whether that is in gender, race, class or beyond. She explained that when people from similar backgrounds are placed into decision making groups they can become collectively blind. She noted that learning from a project at the University of Leeds had found that that even modest amounts of funding supporting the leadership and development skills of underrepresented groups can help override bias in the funding system and better empower them to progress.

Dr Bramley outlined various methods universities in the UK are taking to tackle these challenges. She believes it is important to have collective discussions across borders and disciplines to focus on the right behaviours and systems rather than the right individuals. To support this, they have established the N8-European Research Culture Observatory, aimed at providing a forum and repository for sharing learning about organisational change for healthier research cultures.

Dr Maaïke Verbree, Head of Academic Affairs, Science Faculty - VU Amsterdam

The second speaker, Dr Maaïke Verbree, the Head of Academic Affairs at the Science Faculty of Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam, spoke about redefining academic leadership in the Dutch context, and specifically at VU. To begin her keynote speech, Dr Verbree made a distinction between leadership and management. Where she defines leadership as an attitude, trait or responsibility whereas management is a functional role within an organisation. The expectations of leadership within VU are defined by four principles described in the Art of Engagement: 1) contribute to the bigger picture, 2) listen and encourage growth, 3) be transparent, and 4) be decisive. Dr Verbree consistently expressed the importance to develop self-knowledge and reflective capacity as an employee, and as a leader in particular. Furthermore, teamwork is increasingly part of the academic setting and everyone in the organisation is expected to contribute to an open, safe and inclusive working and learning environment. Finally, academic leadership is demonstrated by a vision on your discipline and inspire researchers, teachers and students with it. Dr Verbree expressed why management is important as it furthers organisational goals through planning and structuring of resources through formal power, it takes vision to implementation. She then helped the audience understand the structure of management and governance of the university through the various roles present, along with their tasks. Each of these management positions require leadership skills.

Dr Verbree outlined the organisational structure and method behind VU's approach to leadership and management. She expressed that VU is promoting the diversification and flexibility of career paths through career guidance for both horizontal and vertical development. In addition VU expects training, development of leadership and management skills for promotion.

Discussion

The plenary group was divided into 3 subgroups after the keynote for the discussion, where they were asked to discuss different topics to rethink academic leadership. Each topic contributed to different aspects of this process, and the participants could share their own experience with it, allowing for knowledge transfer between stakeholders. Some of the groups were mixed with those who work within the field in the Netherlands and those who work in the UK. This allowed for an exchange of practical experience, and helped to set up a platform to learn from each other, while still discussing their shared or specific challenges. Once these discussions took place, each group shared what they talked about in the plenary session. Before beginning the discussion, each member was asked what their name and organisation was and what they expected to get out of the discussion. Most of the participants wanted to learn what other practitioners in the field were doing, and perhaps identify similar challenges that they could share ideas about or tackle together. They agreed that this session was set up to build connections and form a network where these issues can be addressed together.

As most of the participants of the panel agreed that academic leadership requires redefining, the moderator, Struan Campbell, posed questions about implementation and ways forward. The three groups were posed 3 questions, and they could choose to discuss any or all of them. An allocation was made to make sure all questions were covered. The questions were:

1) How to implement changes to academic leadership and what might the challenges be?

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- 2) How do we influence people to adapt to these changes, and what challenges would we face?
 - 3) How can practitioners from the UK and the Netherlands work together moving forward?

The discussion of this report is split into subsections of the themes from the questions, and responses from each theme will be summarised, regardless of which group these ideas originated in.

Redefining Academic Leadership: Implementation and Challenges

To begin the conversation of implementing changes in academic leadership, the participants first agreed that changes are required. They believe that universities must be environments that value skills, talent, merit and diversity. The speakers explained that there is research that shows that a more diverse, safe and welcoming environment stimulates better results. Universities need to create an environment that is transparent, values talent and brings colleagues with diverse backgrounds into the discussion.

A major aspect of the implementation of recognition and rewards programs, or as they call it in the UK- research culture programs, is time. Many of the practitioners at the meeting asserted that there have been efforts to redefine academic leadership for the last 10 years. Yet, although there is more awareness of the necessity for change, there hasn't been many tangible changes. As many people do not know what works for certain in the implementation phase, there is a lot of scope for experimentation in methods and policies. However, the participants discussed that there are three tiers through which these changes can be implemented; through policy at the university level and through people on the ground. However, all three of these tiers must work together to be able to achieve tangible results. The participants all agreed that there needs significant growth in structures and mindsets to catalyse this change. However, the most challenging aspect is that any of these changes require time and concerted effort, and many of these changes are incremental and gradual.

Redefining Academic Leadership: Influencing People to Adapt and its Challenges

To begin with, the question of who must be influencing and who must influence arose. This led to discussions about whether HR departments or academics must be the one to initiate these changes. A major challenge that many of the participants could agree upon was that academic staff and HR departments have very limited time and capacity to be influenced to implement these changes. Hence in order to influence academic leaders and other academics within departments, it is vital to promote this structurally, allowing time to be allocated to adopt changes. Additionally, it is important to integrate these changes into contracts and be compensated for these efforts to change or to be trained.

Furthermore, it is important to leave time for self-reflection, to realise that there are alternatives to linear career paths. And if academics can understand that they do not need to take on managerial positions to further their career if those positions aren't the right fit for them. The participants explained that this can only be truly fulfilled if there is compensation to support these claims. Hence, having various career paths for academics or non-academics, such as those with managerial experience, can be a way forward. However, a major challenge is that mindsets must change, and this should begin from the beginning of someone's career. The participants discussed that a large reason it is hard to influence people to adopt these changes is due to an established mindset and method that is hard to change. Many believed that these

changes must occur through leaders leading by example. This could work if there are practitioners from outside the team that are able to hold training sessions, where academic leaders are able to learn from experienced professionals.

Next Steps: UK and the Netherlands collaboration

A major theme throughout the entire meeting was that of collaboration between the Netherlands and the UK, and hence the practitioners from each country. The participants believed that is vital and necessary to facilitate exchange of ideas, experience and knowledge. Hence, each of the groups came up with innovative ideas about how to facilitate this within an academic context. Learning from each other about how to redefine academic leadership requires time and energy spent in each country. They came up with ideas such as creating exchange programs between UK universities and Dutch ones for faculty and staff. Although this comes with a host of practical and institutional challenges, it is an idea they sought to build upon. However, a more applicable idea was to create delegations from universities in each country to visit the other and spend a considerable amount of time, both assisting with existing challenges and learning to apply the solutions at home.

Another idea was about stimulating funding organisations to promote North Sea neighbour collaborative grants, to stimulate research and further knowledge exchange between universities from both countries. If there are grants available for collaborative research that would influence academics to work together and hence stimulate mutual learning. An interesting point brought up was about the similarities or differences between evaluation protocols in each country and how evaluating bodies, whether that be employers or funders, determine standards for academic leadership. The participants expressed that these are important aspects of the process that can be learned and shared between academics from both countries. Additionally, the participants agreed that starting initiatives with an entrepreneurial spirit is very important. The participants expressed that talking about making these changes can only lead to so much, if no follow up no action is taken. Furthermore, as there are existing networks that connect academics from the UK and the Netherlands already, it is also important to build on existing networks as opposed to trying to reinvent the wheel and doing double work.

However, an important consideration is that each local context can be very different and hence must be engaged differently. Each country, each organisation must have a tailored approach, however it is vital to learn from successes and failures of other organisations between the two countries. Many of the participants asserted how positive and inspiring having these conversations can be.