

A REGISTRAR'S PERSPECTIVE ON SENIOR MANAGEMENT ROLES IN HE

Interview by Dr Lesly Huxley with John Hogan, Registrar, University of Newcastle upon Tyne and Treasurer, Association of University Administrators (AUA)



WHAT IS THE AUA?

The Association of University Administrators is a member-led organisation (membership currently stands at around 4,000) with an inclusive and broad-based approach, and income overwhelmingly from subscriptions and event fees. The annual conference migrates around the country (this year it was in Belfast in April) attracting around 1,000 delegates over three days. The AUA also offers a Postgraduate Certificate programme, the professional journal *Perspectives*, regular newlinks and a news digest. Membership is on an individual basis both at home and abroad. With globalisation, international exchanges and study trips are increasingly important. All HEIs are taking their own staff development more seriously and the AUA brings a cross-university dialogue that supports that.

We have a broad membership; the administrator-manager debate is almost completely settled in institutions in favour of the term 'manager', although the latter has suggestions of 'telling', echoes of the new managerialism which grate, particularly with academics. Administration is an important part of university life. The label is a potential barrier, but there are just as many problems with changing it. We don't want to define ourselves too narrowly. We are developing partnerships with other organisations such as the Association of University Directors of Estates (AUDE) and we would welcome more senior academics as members. PVCs are increasingly taking on management responsibilities and could benefit from the broader understanding of HE that AUA can offer

Q: What does a registrar actually do?

The title 'registrar' is one that still confuses people, particularly outside universities. There are different models across the sector, which adds to the confusion. In the pre-92 sector the registrar usually has a large portfolio of support services and is a member of the senior team, often on a formal basis, not just in attendance as may have been the case in the past. The title 'academic registrar' is typically associated with activities around curriculum development, student services and so on, particularly in post-92 institutions. In some universities the title 'registrar and secretary' may be used, a combination that emphasises the governance element of the role.

I have three roles as registrar at Newcastle. First and by far the most significant in terms of time and probably in terms of responsibility is as head of all support services – library, estates, finance, IT and so on. Elsewhere the role is sometimes slightly narrower, typically with the directors of finance, estates and development all reporting separately to the VC. I'm a member of the senior team and I act as clerk to the governing body with the formal role as defined in the Committee of University Chairmen's (CUC) code of practice. It's a sensible model, albeit occasionally with some potential for internal conflicts of interest; the registrar is someone who has very detailed knowledge of how the institution works, has sufficient authority and can keep the chair informed.

Essentially the registrar's role combines head of support services, membership of the senior team and governance.

Q: Is the shape of HE senior management changing?

There is a greater acceptance across the sector of the need for a senior management team; the phrase is now almost in universal use, with a clearer understanding of the membership including pro- and/or deputy-vice-chancellors. The fact that the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education was set up is partly a reflection of a greater need to prepare people for these senior management roles. In the past, the VC was the focus of attention, but now there is a greater recognition of collective responsibility.

One of the things that a registrar can do is provide an overview and balanced approach that allows prioritisation of resources between functional areas if needed.

Q: So, as a registrar with a broad portfolio, what are your current challenges?

Managing the big changes in the sector: the nature of our relationships and communication with staff, with students and, certainly here at Newcastle, with the region.

Adoption of the single spine is an interesting process. The AUT has accepted proposals for their staff at Newcastle, two other unions are taking longer than hoped to agree, but I believe we can reach a solution. Negotiation with the trade unions has presented some interesting communications issues as they have far less than 100% membership so we've sent individual letters to staff

and made extensive use of our website, emails, and so on to ensure everyone's informed.

Clearly the fee position is one of the big issues. Our applications through UCAS this year are about 4% down and I'm not surprised. The potential benefit has been partially lost already because of the complexity of bursary arrangements. Students may just find it all too complicated. There is now pressure from the student body on achieving value for the monetary contribution they are making to HE. The money is of course extremely welcome, but the danger is that it further changes the relationship between the student and the institution, particularly as we haven't solved the degree class system.

'If you're looking for an easy management role, look elsewhere!'

For example, we'll have very well qualified students with good school-leaving grades entering HE. Assuming they're diligent and complete their programme on time and have paid their fees, they're likely to think that the institution is to blame if they don't get a 2(i). The difficulty is that HE isn't a passive process. Contact hours are important, but there's a correlation between what you get out and what you put in – students have got to take opportunities actively.

Of particular interest to us here at Newcastle is what HE does directly for the economy. We've made a commitment to the Science City strategy which involves a £600m development programme over five years in partnership with the City Council and other local organisations. It could transform our ability to work with business and individuals to revitalise the north-east. It's a wonderful region, it's never been better with some excellent regeneration programmes and universities in the north-east have been really successful at providing HE to a wider range of students than before.

Science City supports our enterprise agenda with opportunities for students to develop enterprise skills and incubator space for student start-ups. It's also facilitated third-strand activity for staff although there are tensions, of course, between a primary aim of disseminating knowledge and protecting it for commercial purposes. One of our PVCs said that, fundamentally, universities only really do two things: we find out and tell people. It's just that if you commercialise, you might not do the telling until later. That area of communication, of knowledge transfer, is tricky though as we're so steeped in HE jargon and acronyms; it's becoming an art.

As far as personal challenges go, I do find the pace of work extremely challenging. What we've got is a whole basket of activity with a huge range of complexity built in. I know a little about a lot, but don't know a lot about anything. I find managers quite often confuse the intention to do something with it being done. Just because you've said something doesn't make it so – it's a common problem, and back to communication.

And email drives me insane the moment I turn it on! You can't even claim you're better informed because of the noise of it all! All the signs are that it'll get worse. It may be as we adapt, new conventions will arise, but it's an area where there probably need to be changes in behaviour. I do find communication of all sorts very difficult in universities. Arguably, HEIs are highly devolved, highly complicated, with a good sense of loyalty. But one of the things I find quite extraordinary about HE is staff's ability to have a go at each other in the name of academic debate.

If you're looking for an easy management role, look elsewhere!

LEARNING FROM AMERICA



Northwest Missouri State University was founded in this building in 1905

Demand for the LFHE/HEFCE February to May 2006 one-day presentations, Learning from America, has been high. The presentations, supported by HEFCE's Leadership, Governance and Management Fund, featured the methods of leading and managing an institution developed by Northwest Missouri State University over two decades. The university is recognised by the American government for its performance excellence in education, and in particular for the cumulative effect of its many areas of good practice.

"Three main points," says the Leadership Foundation's Professor Bob Thackwray, (see ENGAGE issue three, 'Missouri welcomes Bob') "are that Northwest does simple things well. Its values are seen to work in practice, and it looks after its people." Hardly surprising, "that one day the staff got together and planted lots of flower bulbs - because they wanted to."

There is already a waiting list for the next series of presentations. If readers wish to add their name please contact Wendy Mason, Programme Administrator at The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, Kingfisher House, T 0114 270 0188, E wendy.mason@lfhe.ac.uk

SUCCESSION UPDATE

In the last issue of Engage we reported on the work of the Succession Management Group. The list of members should have included Lynne Howlett, Leadership and Management Development Advisor, University of Newcastle upon Tyne - our apologies for the omission. Julie Mansfield, Management Development Manager at the University of Bristol, has joined the group to replace John Limbert, who recently left Bristol. The group's ideas about and research into succession management are currently being developed on the Leadership Foundation website, providing a resource for all institutions to draw upon. To view the succession management section of the website visit www.lfhe.ac.uk/supportteam/sm/