Developing Research Cultures and Researchers in HE: the Role of Leadership
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INTRODUCTION
With so many layers of research leadership in most British higher education institutions (HEIs) why isn’t every university bulging at the seams with internationally-recognised, prolific, grant-winning researchers producing top class, leading edge work? In my own university designated research leadership roles occur at institutional (pro-vice chancellor), faculty (pro-dean), departmental (director of research) and research group (group co-ordinator and deputy co-ordinator) level. I would be surprised if this commitment to drive up research quality, manifested by multi-level dedicated leadership, were not mirrored in all ‘old’ universities, as well as in many, if not most, ‘new’ (post-1992) ones. Yet the disparity found in research activity and output – both in terms of quantity and quality – suggests that much research leadership is failing to achieve its purpose. Precisely what this purpose is, of course, and the nature of the specific roles and responsibilities that are determined by that purpose, are identified by each university. For the sake of discussion in this necessarily brief paper I shall assume a general purpose of institutional research leadership as the development of the institution’s research capacity, adopting McIntyre and McIntyre’s (1999, para. 1.4) definition: ‘Research capacity is conceived as the most and best research which could be done now if there were the political will and the necessary resources for it to be done’.

The paper addresses the key theme of individuals’ work-related attitudes and the impact of leadership upon these. Outlining suggestions for how research leadership may better achieve its purpose, I briefly focus on two inter-related components of developing institutional research capacity: developing a research culture, and developing researchers.

DEVELOPING A RESEARCH CULTURE
What, precisely, is meant by a ‘research culture’ is not easy to convey. Judging from the paucity of available literature, research cultures in HE appear to be an under-examined topic, and within the literature that does allude to them they are seldom stipulatively defined. Silver (2003), who disputes the notion that a university has a single culture, nevertheless reports:

Interviewees were able, in the appropriate institutions, to interpret their institutional culture as a “culture of research”, with all the implications this had for the role of the subject and the department, the relationship between research and the demands of teaching and administration, and the personal positions of individuals. In universities where research was less prominent in the institutional profile, those interviewed nevertheless still felt able to consider the culture as mainly defined by the prestige and development of research (p. 161).

Deem and Brehony (2000), who also reject the notion of a single institutional university culture, ask (p. 158): ‘What does it mean to speak of academic research cultures?’ Their suggestion is that ‘academic research cultures include disciplinary or interdisciplinary ideas and values, particular kinds of expert knowledge and knowledge production, cultural practices and narratives (for instance how research is done, and how peer review is exercised), departmental sociability, other internal and external intellectual networks and learned societies.’

1 I use the term ‘researcher’ in the context of this paper to refer both to academics for whom research is, or is intended to be, a component of their work and of their contractual responsibilities, and to those employed in research only roles.
My on-going review of a broad range of social studies literature in preparation for my research into HE research cultures has revealed a plethora of definitions of culture - leaving aside the ‘research’ qualification. Nevertheless, as Archer (1988, p. 1) points out:

At the descriptive level, the notion of ‘culture’ remains inordinately vague despite little dispute that it is indeed a core concept. In every way, ‘culture’ is the poor relation of ‘structure’. Definition of the former has not undergone an elaboration equivalent to that of the latter. … Methodologically, such is the poverty of conceptualization that there are as yet no ‘units’ for describing culture; essentially cultures are still ‘grasped’ in contrast to structures which are now ‘analysed’.

Since a short section of a paper that must not exceed three thousand words is grossly inadequate even to begin to do justice to the rich and varied collection of discursive argument incorporated into social studies literature I shall not attempt to do so; that must be the subject of a later paper. Here, I simply present a working explanation of an institutional research culture as: shared values, assumptions, beliefs, rituals and other forms of behaviour whose central focus is the acceptance and recognition of research practice and output as valued, worthwhile and pre-eminent activity.

Developing such a culture is not simple, straightforward or formulaic. If it were, every university in the country would be applying the winning formula. Indeed, Hazelcorn (2005, p. 65) reminds us that building a research culture ‘is not without its challenges, especially in those institutions where research is relatively new or fragile.’ She points out that it is ‘not a one-off project but rather the result of an on-going series of strategic policies and actions’. Dyson and Deforges (2002) identify several such strategies which, although being focused towards a national, systemic research culture, may be adapted for application to institutional research culture development (e.g. ‘public pronouncements from opinion-formers as to the value of research, university promotions criteria which focus on research excellence’ (p. 12)).

My proposal is for the development of a specific design of research culture: a culture of ‘extended’ researcher professionality. Elsewhere I present both the rationale for, and a description of, such a culture (Evans, 2002a; 2007), which, essentially, is a culture of developmentalism, manifested by commitment to individuals’ career-long professional development as researchers. Based upon a developmental framework that involves progression from ‘restricted’ to ‘extended’ researcher professionality 2 (each of which is represented by indicative characteristics, presented in figure 1, below) this is what I refer to as a culture of ‘extended’ professionality. The ‘extended’ professional may be thought of as an ‘analytical’ researcher: one who is reflective and analytical, not just about the topic of her/his research, but about the research itself. S/he adopts a developmental approach to research, seeing her/himself as a professional who is constantly striving to improve her/his practice and who therefore is continually scrutinising it for inadequacies and weaknesses which may be reduced or removed. It is the examining of processes and questioning of the bases of established practice that characterises the ‘extended’ professional educational researcher.

Developing a culture of ‘extended’ professionality, however, involves fostering a commitment to progression along a development continuum such as that implied by the models of ‘extended’ and ‘restricted’ professionality presented in figure 1. Here the focus shifts from the plurality of a culture to the singularity of the professional development of individuals.

DEVELOPING RESEARCHERS

Do individuals form and shape cultures or do cultures shape individuals? This is, of course, an issue that is much debated, and that remains unresolved, in the context of sociological theory: the issue of structure and agency (e.g. Archer, 1988; Parsons, 1951). Notwithstanding this issue, my conception of a culture of ‘extended’ professionality is underpinned by the notion of its being an amalgam of individuals’ professionalities. Applying the brevity of explanation required by the constraints of this paper, I suggest that professional culture may be interpreted as the collective,

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2 After Hoyle’s (1975) heuristic models of ‘restricted’ and ‘extended’ teacher professionality.
Figure 1: Characteristics illustrating the extremes of the ‘restricted’–‘extended’ professionality continuum in relation to social science research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The researcher located at the ‘restricted’ extreme of the professionality continuum typically:</th>
<th>The researcher located at the ‘extended’ extreme of the professionality continuum typically:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>conducts research that lacks rigour;</td>
<td>conducts highly rigorous research;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>draws upon basic research skills;</td>
<td>draws upon basic and advanced research skills;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fails to develop or extend her/his methodological competence;</td>
<td>strives constantly to develop and extend her/his methodological competence;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>utilises only established research methods;</td>
<td>adapts established research methods and develops methodology;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fails to develop basic research findings;</td>
<td>generates and develops theory from research findings;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perceives research methods as tools and methodology as a task-directed, utilitarian process;</td>
<td>perceives research methodology as a field of study in itself;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>applies low level analysis to research data;</td>
<td>strives constantly to apply deep levels of analysis to research data;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perceives individual research studies as independent and free-standing;</td>
<td>recognises the value of, and utilises, comparative analysis, meta-analysis, synthesis, replication, etc.;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perceives individual research studies as finite and complete;</td>
<td>constantly reflects upon, and frequently revisits and refines, his/her own studies;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>struggles to criticise literature and others’ research effectively;</td>
<td>has developed the skill of effective criticism and applies this to the formulation of his/her own arguments;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>publishes mainly in ‘lower grade’ academic journals and in professional journals/magazines;</td>
<td>publishes frequently in ‘high ranking’ academic journals;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is associated mainly with research findings that fall into the ‘tips for practitioners’ category of output.</td>
<td>disseminates ground-breaking theoretical issues and contributes to, and takes a lead in developing, discourse on theory.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

predominantly attitudinal, response of people towards the professionalism that predominantly defines how they function. How they function reflects their individual professionality’ orientation since the ‘singular’ unit of professionalism – and one of its key constituent elements – is, professionalism, as I interpret the term. The implications of this reasoning are that potentially the most effective mechanism for achieving a culture of ‘extended’ professionality is the shifting of individuals from their current location on the professionality continuum towards the ‘extended’ end. This is likely to be most successful if it is underpinned by an understanding of work-related attitudes and professional development.

Professional development: the concept and the process
My own interpretation of professional development is wide. It reflects my view that professional development may be conceived of as an enhancement to the status of the profession as a whole, and it may also be conceived of as an improvement to individuals' knowledge, skills, and practice. I currently define it simply as: the process whereby people’s professionality and/or professionalism may be considered to be enhanced. This interpretation incorporates consideration of professional development’s having a range of applicability that extends from an individual- to a profession-wide level. It may be applied to variously formed professional groups or units: individual professionals; the staff of an institution, or a department in an institution; staff who hold a common role; and a profession as a whole. My inclusion within my definition of the words ‘may be considered to be’ is deliberate, to incorporate consideration of subjectivity in relation to views about what actually constitutes development.

I define professionality as an ideologically-, attitudinally-, intellectually-, and epistemologically-based stance on the part of an individual, in relation to the practice of the profession to which s/he belongs, and which influences her/his professional practice. (See Evans, 2002a; 2008, for a full explanation of the relationship between professionalism and professionality).
Elsewhere (Evans, 2008) I have identified two constituent elements of professional development: functional development and attitudinal development. I define attitudinal development as the process whereby people’s attitudes to their work are modified, and functional development as the process whereby people’s performance is considered to be improved. I currently perceive attitudinal development as incorporating two constituent change features, or foci of change: intellectual and motivational (referring respectively to individuals’ development in relation to their thinking, thought processes and ideas, and their motivation) and I currently perceive functional development as incorporating two constituent change features, or foci of change: procedural and productive (referring respectively to development in relation to procedures utilised, and what and/or how much people ‘produce’ or ‘do’, at work). The key point is that the development of a culture of ‘extended’ researcher professionality involves the fostering of changed attitudes. It is therefore dependent upon attitudinal development, with its two key change foci of intellectual and motivational change.

In the course of my on-going work in this area I have found the process of professional development very difficult to represent as a theoretical model. My early attempts identify a process of at least six stages that includes the individual’s: recognition of perceived imperfections or deficiencies; recognition of a perceived alternative constituting improvement: a ‘better way’; the motivation to adopt the perceived ‘better way’; the adoption of the perceived ‘better way’; and the recognition of the new practice as an improvement. There is a case for including at least one more stage that involves evaluation of the perceived ‘better way’ and perhaps also one that involves refinement to the perceived ‘better way’. My work on this is on-going and constantly being refined, yet already I perceive difficulties in the ordering of the stages – assuming that they are to be retained within the model. Placing ‘recognition of perceived imperfections or deficiencies’ as the first stage precludes the retrospective recognition of perceived imperfections or deficiencies that is so often a feature of development: often, for example, it is not until we inadvertently stumble across a ‘better way’ that we then, in retrospect, recognise inadequacies within the practice that it replaces.

Nevertheless, even a rudimentary, imperfect model of the process has much to contribute to informing the practice of developing people professionally – in this case, researchers.

*Developing researchers into ‘extended’ professionals: the role of leadership*

No matter where, precisely, it occurs in the process, recognition of what are perceived as inadequacies or imperfections – no matter how slight - in one’s current work situation or practice is essential to professional development. Dissatisfaction prompts the quest for improvement (retrospectively recognised dissatisfaction reinforces the perception of improvement); satisfaction, on the other hand, fosters complacency. Only by recognising the inadequacies in their current practice will researchers appreciate the need to improve; that is, to progress along the ‘restricted’-‘extended’ professionality continuum. Herein lies a distinct role for research leaders.

There is much agreement that the most successful form of researcher professional development is one that is situated: learning that takes place in context (Pollard, 2007; Raddon, 2006; Rees et al., 2007), through communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), rather than through a ‘technical model’ that is focused on skills and competences, delivered through formal provision such as courses and workshops. Certainly such a situated learning approach is compatible with the development of a culture of ‘extended’ professionality. More specifically, individuals’ recognition of their own location or position on the ‘restricted’-‘extended’ professionality continuum – and of the direction they need to take in order to progress - is likely to be made much easier within a context where comparisons may be made with others, particularly others who have manifestly progressed further along the continuum. If designated researcher leaders do not, themselves, represent such yardsticks against which to measure good practice because they do not form part of the close circle of contacts within which are situated those whose professionality needs to be enhanced, then their responsibilities must surely include ensuring that such role models are placed within the sphere(s) of every potential ‘developee’. Moreover, by drawing up the specific content of the illustrative characteristics of both the ‘restricted’ and ‘extended’ professionality models that they intend to influence the development of their institution-specific culture of ‘extended’ researcher professionality, and by publicising these models and
promoting them at every opportunity, research leaders will communicate something of their visions of the research cultures that they are committed to building.

Returning to the draft theoretical model of the professional development process in individuals, it is at each specific development stage that research leaders, or their delegated representatives, may potentially influence individuals’ development. Their input may be needed to prompt recognition on the part of potential ‘developees’ of inadequacies or deficiencies in current practice, which may represent specific ‘restricted’ professionality characteristics. They may, too, point the way towards, or even demonstrate in their own practice, a ‘better way’, and by the application of well developed interpersonal skills and understanding of what influences people’s work-related attitudes, they may effectively motivate others to want to adopt the ‘perceived “better way”, and then facilitate its adoption.

The key point about a culture of ‘extended researcher professionality is that it involves a commitment to development – continued, career-long development – on the part of everyone, research leaders included. For, like the mythical end of the rainbow, the elusive ‘extended’ extreme of the continuum may never actually be reached; it will always remain just out of reach to even the most ‘extended’ of professional researchers. This should not serve as a deterrent; rather, it should provide the stimulus for the recognition that there is always something within our current practice that may be improved, something that is, even if only slightly, inadequate. Awareness of this fact alone reflects the kind of healthy attitude that characterises ‘extended’ professionality. ‘Restricted’ professionality is characterised by the complacency and arrogance that there is nothing more to learn.

References


Pollard, A. (2006) ‘So, how then to approach research capacity building?’, Research Intelligence, Issue 97, pp. 18-20

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