SECTION 1

Introduction

This report presents the work undertaken for, and the outcomes of, a Small Development Project exploring the potential of adopting an identity perspective for exploring the experiences of individuals entering leadership positions in higher education institutions (HEIs). The project took the form of a research study, based on semi-structured interviews with eleven members of academic staff in a number of different universities.

This report is in two main sections. The first section describes the rationale for the project, outlines the work undertaken, and describes the key outputs. As this report is one such output, the second section presents the findings from the study. This starts with a brief review of the main approaches to leadership theory and research, in order explain the ‘point of departure’ that led to the particular perspective adopted for the study. This is elaborated in relation to two key issues, the problem of viewing leadership as behaviour and the categorisation of individuals as ‘leaders’. Drawing upon interactionist and constructionist approaches within the social sciences, it is argued that socially meaningful (i.e., significant and consequential) human behaviour, including leadership, cannot be regarded as objectively observable; rather, it is emergent through a process of construal of the behaviour as performance of a particular type.

The analysis is developed to show that such construal relies upon notions of the practices and of the identities appropriate to the setting. The discussion then presents a claim-affirmation model of emergent identity, a framework with five ‘modalities of emergent identity’, as developed in other studies and here applied to leadership. This framework
formed the basis for a set of interviews with leaders in academic departments in higher education institutions, exploring their early experiences in such positions. The key findings from the analysis of the interviews are presented, along with recommendations for leadership development in higher education.

**Rationale for the Small Development Project**

The emphasis in leadership studies, and on organisational efforts to ensure the development of effective leaders, mostly focuses on issues of the purported qualities, attributes and competencies deemed to be required by leaders. Less attention has been paid to issues relating to the processes by which individuals selected for leadership positions make sense of their initial transitional experiences (Parker & Lewis, 1981; Wood & Borga, 2010). Moreover, leadership, in its very nature, is both an organisational/ institutional and an interpersonal/ interactional phenomenon (Morley & Hosking, 2003). Thus a formally-appointed leader can only be successful and, moreover, be seen to be successful (eg by managers and peers), to the extent that they are accepted as a leader by others, particularly the ‘followers’. Any newly-appointed leader must seek to gain acceptance as such by those amongst whom they are required to exercise leadership, and by those whose support may help or even be necessary to gain acceptance as a leader.

Yet little is known about how such acceptance is achieved (or not), the extent to which the process is unique to each individual leader or the patterns that might be discerned in the process. Without an understanding of the process of ‘becoming a leader’, it is difficult to design and deploy appropriate forms of leadership developmental support and intervention that address the particular experiences of those undergoing the process.
Aims and objectives

The overall aims of the project were (a) to examine the utility of adopting an identity perspective to identify key features of the early experiences of leaders in higher education, in order (b) to identify potential modes of developmental support and intervention to support such individuals. The project focused solely on academic staff, *formally appointed* to roles in which they are expected to provide leadership to other academic staff.

The key objectives were:

- To explore how leaders articulate their reasons for seeking leadership roles, and their expectations about their early experiences in such roles;
- To compare new leaders’ expectations with their actual experiences of the responses made by the staff with whom they are required to exercise leadership;
- To identify critical events and/or stages in the early experience of new leaders, where they considered that their performance in their role was being questioned (by self or by others);
- To explore how such new leaders responded to perceived challenges to their right to, and/or judgements critical of their performance in that role;
- To identify sources of support on which new leaders draw to warrant their claim to be effective leaders.

Work undertaken

As this was primarily a research-based project, the literature on leadership was explored and reviewed. The main purpose of this was to identify where the extant literature provided limited contribution to understanding the issues of concern, and where it indicated
appropriate avenues for exploration and support for the approach adopted. Section 2 presents discussion based on this part of the work undertaken.

The main project work was a set of semi-structured interviews with individuals in what were judged to be appropriate positions as leaders in academic departments of universities. Eleven such individuals were interviewed. The plan, initially, was to identify appropriate prospective participants by approaching the personnel services/human resource management departments of universities and requesting that they circulate an invitation to participate to relevant individuals. On reflection, this was not considered to be appropriate: individuals might decline such invitations because they saw a risk of loss of confidentiality. Moreover, it was considered that what might be regarded as a declining employment relations climate in some institutions, and more widely across the sector, would affect likely take-up.

So, for pragmatic reasons, direct contact was made to individuals identified, through online search of university websites, as occupying roles that seemed to be relevant. Such roles were generally those designated as

- a course/programme ‘leader’
- a subject field ‘leader’
- a special project/development area ‘leader’.

Initial contact was made with prospective participants and, after confirmation of interest, arrangements made for interviews. This non-probabilistic, convenience sampling approach was considered to be pragmatic and sufficient for what was primarily intended as a preliminary exploratory study.
Eleven of the individuals so contacted agreed to be participants in the research. A number of others contacted were, in principle, supportive but, for a variety of reasons, were unable to participate at the time. Six of the participants were male and five female. Three participants were from universities established prior to 1992 (the date when the UK’s binary divide between chartered status universities and other types of institutions was abolished), and eight were from ‘new’ universities ie institutions that were previously polytechnics or colleges of higher education. Four interviewees were from science and science related subject areas, three from arts and humanities (including performing arts), and four from business and social sciences. Participants had been engaged in leadership roles for varying lengths of time, but the main focus was on early experience in such a role. Most were not in formal managerial positions. Whilst not claimed to be representative of higher education, the set of research participants does seem to be a reasonable range for a small project of this kind.

The interviews were recorded and fully-transcribed, and then analysed to identify key themes. The analysis was aided by the use of NVivo (version 9), the software program for qualitative data analysis. Interviews varied in length but averaged just-under 60 minutes. They were conducted in private locations within participants’ own institutions, generally their own private office or, if a room was shared, with no-one else present. Each participant was invited to choose a pseudonym to be used in transcriptions of interviews and in subsequent publications. Transcriptions were amended to remove or disguise any information that might readily identify individuals (whether interviewees or other individuals referred to by them); amended transcriptions were then sent to participants to enable them to suggest any further changes to maintain their anonymity.
Table 1: Outline Topic Guide for Interviews

**BACKGROUND**

1. To start with, perhaps you could give me a brief biography in terms of how you got to be in your current position.

**CURRENT POST**

2. When? How long? What does it involve?
3. How did you get the post?
4. Why do you think you were appointed?
5. Did you expect to be appointed?
6. What led you to accept the post?
7. To what extent would you say it is a leadership post?
   Staff? Field of responsibility & authority?

**EXPERIENCE**

8. Tell me about your initial first few days and weeks in the post.
9. How did it compare with what you anticipated?
11. What problems did you have? How did you handle them?
12. What do you think prepared you for the post?
13. How is it going now?

**FUTURE**

14. How do you anticipate your career going now?

Final question: what advice would you give to someone else taking up a similar post?

OK, I’ve somewhat directed the conversation through my questions, but is there anything you feel you would like to say that I haven’t enabled you to say?
The topic guide (see table 1) constructed for conducting interviews was largely informed by the identity model presented in section 2 of this report, particularly in terms of the notion of trajectory through various identity positions and the interaction between claims by self and ascriptions by others. The interviews had four main stages, focusing sequentially on biographical background leading to their current post, aspects of the current post, experience in the post (particularly responses by others), future expectations.

Further discussion of the interview process is presented in Section 2.

Outcomes

As indicated, this report forms one outcome of the project. Section 2 discusses the theoretical basis for the project, and presents the findings from the analysis of the interviews.

Other outcomes are:

- Three conference presentations:
  - British Academy of Management conference (September 2012) (Leadership and Leadership Development, and
  - Society for Research into Higher Education conference (December 2012) (Management, Leadership, Governance and Quality track);
  - Irish Academy of Management conference (accepted for presentation, September 2014).

- Invitation to present in public seminar series at Oxford Learning Institute (for 12th June 2014).

- Article submitted for publication in peer-reviewed journal (currently under review);
SECTION 2

Introduction

As stated in ‘Outcomes’, in Section 1, this section presents one of the outcomes of the project. It discusses the main approaches that have been adopted in the leadership studies field, indicating the ‘point of departure’ for the theoretical basis of the project. This is elaborated to explain the role of the concepts of practices and of identity in analysis and explanations social behaviour; the concept of emergent identity is further developed in terms of interaction between identity claims by an individual and identity ascriptions by others. A model of emergent identity is the presented, and it potential utility in exploring leadership is discussed.

Further discussion of the interview process is then presented, followed by the findings from the interview phase of the study. The report concludes with discussion of areas for further research and some proposals in relation to approaches for developing leaders that would seem to follow from the identity approach.

Leadership theory and research

The notion of leadership may be viewed as similar to that of time, of which Augustine of Hippo lamented that he understood what it was as long as no-one asked him to explain it. Within common or ‘folk’ understanding, leadership is generally considered to be vitally important for the good ordering of society, and of parts of society, although there may be a ‘dark side’ to leadership where a ‘strong’ leader is viewed as being the main cause of undesirable social consequences. Opinions may differ, also, about particular persons viewed
as leaders, about their effectiveness or ineffectiveness, and indeed what constitutes leading. But the generally accepted view of the importance of effective leadership, particularly in organisational settings including those of institutions of higher education, has generated a considerable amount of scholarly enquiry over many decades.

It might be anticipated that such enquiry has resulted in a well-established, theoretically-robust, empirically-supported body of scholarship. However, it has become commonplace in reviews of leadership theory and research to point out that, whilst there has been a longstanding interest in ‘leadership’ within the social sciences, the phenomenon continues to elude clarity of understanding. Four decades ago, Miner (1975) noted ambiguity in usage of the concept of leadership, and lack of coherent empirical findings, and called for the concept of leadership to be abandoned, as having outlived its usefulness. Referring to the ‘romance of leadership’, Meindl et al. asserted three decades ago that the concept of leadership “remains largely elusive and enigmatic” (Meindl et al., 1985: 78). However, Bryman (1999) suggests that, whilst the field “seemed to be in a trough in the early 1980s”, and that “there was a sense of despondency about the future direction” (op. cit.: 26), by the late 1990s there was “much greater optimism about the field of leadership in organizations than in the early 1980s (op. cit.: 39). Parry and Bryman go yet further, arguing that new modes of conceptualisation and of empirical investigation (particularly qualitative approaches) has resulted in leadership research becoming an ‘exciting and productive’ field (Parry & Bryman, 2006: 464).

Parry and Bryman divide the history of studies of leadership in organisations into five broad approaches:

- the trait approach (dominant until the late 1940s), followed by
• the style approach (until late 1960s),
• the contingency approach (until early 1980s), then
• the ‘New Leadership’ approach from the early 1980s,
• the post-charismatic and post-transformational approach, emerging in the late 1990s.

Whilst this is admittedly a broad-brush analysis, simplifying a wide range of literature, it is consistent with the framework adopted by many textbook presentations on the subject. What Bryman characterised the field as having a ‘sense of despondency’ clearly related to the first three of these approaches, with ‘greater optimism’ arising along with the newer approaches emerging from the early 1980s.

Bryman had coined the term ‘New Leadership’ to refer to a set of approaches emerging in the 1980s that seemed to address common or similar themes (Bryman, 1986). Writers in this approach emphasise the importance of charismatic leaders in providing vision for those they lead (‘followers’), inspiring these to engage their full efforts to achieve organisational goals, and to do so because of a commitment to those goals (House, 1977; Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Sashkin, 1988). Bryman (1999; see also Parry & Bryman, 2006) adds a separate stream of writings, emerging in part from responses to the New Leadership approach, focusing on leadership as ‘dispersed’ or ‘distributed’ within teams. In particular, the role of ‘followers’ has been emphasised (Kelley, 1988, 1992); for some writers, the leadership culture becomes one that focuses on ‘leading others to lead themselves’ (Sims & Lorenzi, 1992: 295).

In reviewing the New Leadership approach, Parry and Bryman (2006) point out that, for the most part, the approach focuses exclusively on top leaders, with little to say about the great majority of leaders. This is particularly pertinent to this project, which is concerned
with those who enter, and as they enter, leadership positions in higher educational settings. The New Leadership studies were also critiqued by writers in the post-charismatic and post-transformational approach, as over-emphasising the role of leaders and under-playing the role of ‘followers’ (Meindl, 1995) (Kelley, 1988; Baker, 2007; Tourish et al., 2010).

Of course, the very categorisation of persons as ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’ is problematic. It is clear that sometimes, in some particular context, a person may be engaging in behaviour that is normally regarding as ‘leadership behaviour’, and may be viewed by others in that context as a ‘leader’, and yet in another context at another time acting as a ‘follower’. Moreover, whether or not an individual is engaging in leadership behaviour is not a matter for objective observation (Knights & Willmott, 1992): leadership is socially constructed (Sjöstrand et al., 2001; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010).

A key aspect of the social construction of leadership is that it involves the interaction between ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’ (Baker, 2007; Tourish et al., 2010). The implication is more than the idea that, for effective leadership, a ‘leader’ must develop and maintain a positive relationship with the ‘followers’. Rather, “it is a process whereby leaders and non-leaders accomplish each other through dynamics of interaction in which mutual influence is always present” (Tourish, 2014: 87, emphasis added). The category of ‘leader’ has meaning only in relation to ‘follower(s)’.

This emphasis upon interaction and mutuality in the construction of leaders and non-leaders may also be seen to extend to the issue of leadership acts. Much of the literature on leadership focuses upon what the leader does, their behaviour or actions. The leadership styles approaches that dominated in the 1950s and 1960s may be viewed as having morphed into the ‘transactional’ versus ‘transformational’ leadership models that, to a large degree,
still hold sway in much practitioner-oriented literature. Indeed, the development in the 1960s and 1970s of contingency approaches, as no single style proved efficacious in all circumstances, seems to have resurfaced in notions of ‘pragmatic’ approach to leadership (Mumford & Van Doorn, 2001) and of ‘combinative’ aspects of style (Casimir, 2001). Yet such focus on what the ‘leader’ does underplays the significance of responses by others. Indeed, in much social science theorising and research, the assumption that it is possible to make objective observations of any human behaviour is regarded as deeply flawed. Rather, socially consequential human behaviour emerges from and through interaction, whereby the activity of one individual requires ‘supplementation’ by one or more others (Gergen, 1994). So, all that we can say about an instance of behaviour by a particular ‘leader’ is that, in itself, it is an attempt at leadership: it requires that others respond appropriately for it to be an act of leadership.

Such considerations regarding (a) issues regarding the category of ‘leader’ and (b) issues regarding what is to be taken as ‘leadership behaviour’, lead us to the ‘point of departure’ for the approach adopted in the project.

**Point of Departure: Identity and Practices**

The basis of the project is thus related to issues concerning our understanding of human behaviour as essentially meaningful social action. This is an area that has been explored in a variety of social science approaches, including interpretative traditions within sociology, particularly phenomenological sociology (Schutz, 1967), symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934/1962; Blumer, 1969) and social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999), and of linguistic philosophy, particularly in the work of Wittgenstein (1953) and Austin (1962). A key notion that arguably is shared within such approaches is that
meaningful human action is not amenable to direct, incontrovertible observation but is always subject to some form of construal as behaviour-of-a-particular-kind. Mere movement (or sometimes non-movement) is essentially ‘enigmatic’; this includes movement making sounds which may be construed as some form of linguistic utterance, as well as those involved in making physical marks that may be construed as meaningful inscriptions. A key question then is that of how such construal (or interpretation) may be and/or is accomplished in social settings.

In answering that question, we may say that ‘enigmatic’ activity by any individual will only have social meaning and salience, and thus be consequential socially and personally, insofar as it is construed as behaviour-of-a-particular-kind. For this to be accomplished, the various parties to the social situation must draw upon:

- some understanding of the kind of person whose ‘mere’ behaviour is in question; and
- some understanding of what type of behaviour they may be engaging in.

The concept of identity indexes the notion of ‘kind of person’, whilst the concept of practices indexes the notion of ‘type of behaviour’. Figure 1 below attempts to represent pictorially this process of construal of situated activity as performance of a particular type (Holmes, 2000).

The identity ascribed to the individual will be one of a set of possible identities, salient to the setting; similarly, the practice that is taken to be that which is instantiated by the activity will be one of a set of possible practices. For the particular identity to be ascribed, there has to be some consonance between that identity and the practice. For any particular
identity there will be some practices that are prescribed, some that are prohibited, and a range that are permitted but not prescribed.

This analysis merely indicates the basis on which, in any particular setting, the activity of an individual *may* be construed as performance of a particular type (e.g., an act of leadership). However, it is possible that the activity is *not* so construed, that there is disagreement between what performance the individual seeks to accomplish and the construal put on it by significant others. This may arise from either element: the activity is *not* treated by others as an instantiation of the practice that the individual themselves seek to engage in, or the identity that the individual seeks to claim is *not* ascribed to them by others. Put in terms of leadership, this indicates that *attempts* at an act of leadership may not succeed (on the occasion when attempted), and *claims* on the identity of leader may be challenged.
Leadership and identity

The term ‘identity’ has become one of the most widely used in the social sciences and humanities, “appearing in the titles of many thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of books and articles” (Wetherell & Mohanty, 2010: 3), reflecting a diverse, rather fragmented, range of conceptualisations. The discussion will be limited to an identity perspective drawing upon the approaches to social theory and research that seek to explore the processes that emerge through social interactions within institutional settings (Jenkins, 1996).

Within these approaches, identity is viewed as non-essentialist; ‘it’ is not ‘there’ to be objectively observed as a fixed entity; rather it is always ‘in process’ in the interactions between the social actors in the particular setting. Indeed, rather than focusing on the noun ‘identity’ we should rather think in terms of ‘identifying’: someone does not ‘have’ an identity, but rather is identified as being a-particular-kind-of-person (relevant to the situation). Identity is thus not merely the sense of self, or self-perception (self-identity), nor is it the subject of identification by others (social identity). Rather, identity is emergent in the interaction between these, the ‘dialectical interplay of processes of internal and external definition’ (Jenkins, 1996: 25). The term ‘emergent identity’ seeks to indicate that it is always emergent, an outcome of a process of (usually tacit) negotiation. It is essentially temporary subject to possible contestation even in contexts where all parties accept the particular ascription. In complex modern society, of course, we move between and within differing social contexts, and thus have multiple, situated identities, not one single identity.

(We may note at this point that those multiple identities (or modes of identification) include those of social class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and other modes of differentiation between groups in society. It was beyond the scope of this project to explore
how these modes of identification, and intersectional combinations of these, in relation to leadership. However, further developments of the model presented here might include exploration of how such different modes of identification relate to each other in terms of their affordance or disaffordance of opportunity to individuals to become leaders.)

![Figure 1: Claim-affirmation model of modalities of emergent identity](image)

We may usefully consider the ‘dialectical interplay’ referred to by Jenkins (1996) in terms of a claim (or disclaim) made by an individual and the ascriptions by others. These ascriptions are in effect, affirmations or disaffirmations of such a claim/ disclaim. In any particular situation, depending upon the combination of claim/ disclaim and affirmation/ disaffirmation, there may be different ‘emergent identity’ outcomes. Figure 2 attempts to present this, using the metaphor of a map, with different ‘zones’ depicting different possible outcomes of the interaction, different ‘modalities’ of emergent identity. Whilst the two
dimensions, claim/ disclaim and affirmation/ disaffirmation, suggest the construction of a 2x2 orthogonal model, a box with four ‘zones’, the model here takes account of the possibility of a fifth zone, ‘zone X’. This represents the case where a claim may be tentatively made (or withdrawn), and/or identification tentatively ascribed, provisionally affirming or disaffirming an identity claim (Holmes, 2000, 2013). Designating this as ‘zone X’ is intended to reflect not only its positioning in the diagram but also to suggest its liminality (‘X’ as crossing point) and its indeterminacy (‘X’ as ‘unknown’). The model thus reflects the processual nature of identification, that it may change over time (even within a brief instant). It allows us to examine trajectories between the modalities of emergent identity, what are also termed ‘identity projects’ and what Goffman (1961) termed ‘moral careers’. (See Holmes (forthcoming) for application of this approach in relation to graduate entering employment).

An identity perspective has already been adopted in recent leadership studies (eg Lord & Hall, 2004; Karp & Helgø, 2008; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Guillen & Korotov, 2011). Thus, viewing leadership as essentially and inescapably relational (Collinson, 2005) draws our attention to the social process “involved in coming to see oneself, and being seen by others, as a leader or a follower” (DeRue & Ashford, 2010: 627).

DeRue and Ashford also present a model based on identity claiming and identity granting, or grant-withholding. Leadership in this sense thus arises in the relationship, the “reciprocal and mutually reinforcing identities as leaders and followers” (ibid.). Their model is limited to the conventional 2x2, with four cells, and lacks the more nuanced approach afforded by the model shown in figure 2. Their approach does, however, support to the view that an interactionist approach to identity has potential utility in exploring key aspects of leadership.
Taking such an identity perspective enables us, then, to recognise that ‘leaders’ do not just exist, timelessly ‘out there’ amenable to research in terms of purported traits, or in respect of de-contextualised styles of behaviour. Rather, individual persons become (or may fail to become) leaders within certain social contexts, through social processes of identity claims interacting with identity ascriptions. The process of becoming a leader involves a trajectory through modalities of emergent identity, always contingent upon the interaction between identity claim-making and claim-granting (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Moreover, as such an identity is just one of the identities that may be claimed by, and ascribed to an individual, in the various social settings in which they inhabit, adopting an identity perspective affords approaches to research that are not limited to consideration of individuals solely as leaders (or not-leaders) but takes account of how other identities may be significant to the setting under consideration. These include chronologically prior settings, and the salient identities, and the anticipated and/or imagined future settings and identities.

The above discussion suggests, then, that fruitful lines of enquiry may be undertaken to explore this process, to seek to ‘capture’ the key issues faced by those engaged in such an identity project, as they experience and understand them. The project undertaken was established on the basis of the ideas presented above.

**Interviews**

Whilst probably most leadership research tends to regard the participants (or ‘subjects’ in some styles of research) solely in terms of their then-current identity as a leader, the approach adopted in this project sought to explore how the participants came to be in their current position as an identity trajectory. The first stage of the interview therefore explored participants’ biographical backgrounds; as will be shown, these were highly varied.
The second stage started with a more specific focus on how each participant came to be appointed, including issues regarding whether this was by invitation or by open competition and the reasons for their decision to apply, if required, and to accept when offered the post. Only at this point was the question posed as to nature of their position, ie to what extent they would say that it was a leadership post. By this point in any interview, the participant would have spoken at considerable length about themselves in relation to their current post, and it was anticipated that this would avoid possible premature limitation of the scope of the interview if the question of whether or not they ‘truly’ were in a leadership position had been asked earlier. The next stage explored participants’ experience, particularly in the early stages (ie when their claim on leadership faced initial testing in terms of affirmation or disaffirmation). Participants were asked about responses by others, as the participants experienced them, and about how they handled problems. In the fourth stage, participants were asked about how they anticipated their future career might go, the research interest being particularly in relation to the extent to which responses indicated that leadership was a major career aim. A final question invited participants to state what advice they would give to someone else taking up a similar post, aimed at eliciting reflections on their own experience (ie in some sense, the advice they would give themselves, if they could have done so).

As stated in Section 1, the interviews were fully transcribed and transcriptions were amended to remove or disguise any information that might readily identify individuals, ie the interviewees themselves or other individuals referred to by them. Each participant received a copy of their particular transcription to enable them to suggest any further amendments in order to maintain their anonymity. Analysis of the transcripts was aided by the qualitative data analysis programme, NVivo (version 9). As the project was based on a particular
theoretical model, analysis of the transcripts was concept-driven rather than data-driven (Gibbs, 2002), identifying key themes in relation to the issues explored at the various stages of the interview (‘themeing the data’, Saldaña, 2009). Part of the analysis, particularly in relation to background and anticipated future career, involved ‘biographical mapping’ using the emergent identity model (trajectories through the ‘zones’). Sections of the transcripts where the interviews explored initial experience, and issues arising from the responses by others, were analysed in terms of the interaction between identity claim by self and ascription (affirmation or disaffirmation) by others, and particularly in terms of the modes of warranting deployed.

**Findings**

The findings from analysis of the interviews undertaken will be presented in two ways. First, a set of case studies of individuals will be presented, ‘telling their stories’ about how they came to be in their positions as leaders in higher education and key elements of their experiences. Their identity (claimed and ascribed) as leader in their current positions is but one of their many identities, current and in their biographical past. Presenting the individual cases enables us to glimpse (and it is just a glimpse) of the persons and their stories in relation to their positions as leaders, rather than abstracting decontextualized aspects purportedly of ‘leadership’. Four such cases are presented here, selected to show variety of backgrounds of experiences. As previously indicated, the names shown for the individuals are pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves.

The second mode of presentation will be in terms of key themes, ‘cutting across’ the individual stories. The areas discussed are the mode of appointment, reasons for taking up their leadership posts, responses by others, and approaches adopted to leadership.
Individual Cases

David

David had spent a year after his first degree “kind of out-and-about, doing a little bit of travelling”, before being offered employment on a graduate training scheme. This offer, however, fell through because of the economic recession at the time, and so he “ended up being a labourer in a factory”. Like, probably, many graduates, he decided to undertake postgraduate study, a Masters course in travel and tourism management. As part of this, he undertook a placement period with an airline and tourism company, which led to a job offer that he accepted. During his period with that company, he had some responsibilities that he would refer to as leadership, mainly in terms of training other staff and trying to retain ‘good’ staff, because staff turnover was very high.

When that company was itself taken over by another, he decided to leave rather than relocate to another city. He took up a post with a travel agency, a job that involved long hours with pay mainly based on sales commission to build on the basic salary. He had already decided to quit to take up a similar job in his home town, when he saw an advertisement for the post of lecturer in his subject field. He applied for this, was selected and started working in higher education.

A year after starting, he was asked to take on the role of programme leader, which had arisen as a result of re-structuring of roles in the department. The post was not opened to competitive applications. There were just two other members of staff in the course team, one of whom had started a sabbatical. David thinks that the other person was already thinking of leaving, but was unsure what ‘conversations’ were held with them. David experienced no difficulties in taking up the programme leadership post, except for occasional
'chivvying up' and 'encouraging people to do things'. It was a 'very professional team'. He continued in this role for around 15 years, during which time he led the development of a new programme, in addition to that for which he had initially been appointed as programme leader. He also took on various additional responsibilities, including attendance at university-level committees. As part of re-structuring across the university, a number of field leader posts were created. These were open to competitive applications, and David feels that his success of the two programmes for which he was programme leader, and his involvement in other areas of managerial responsibility, were key factors in his appointment to the current field leader post.

**Amber**

Following her first degree, Amber had worked for a short period in a recruitment and selection firm, where she had the role of team leader, before undertaking a Masters course. After her Masters she worked for a company that undertook training and job placement for those who had been unemployed for six months or longer. Her post was initially a temporary one, as a programme manager, and then she was offered a permanent appointment. However, she decided that she wished to find work that was more directly related to her academic background; amongst several jobs for which she then applied was one at the university where she is now employed, working in an academic support role. The post also brought the opportunity to undertake studies for a PhD. She soon started to undertake some teaching duties and when a full-time academic post was advertised, she applied and was appointed. After about two years in this post, her head of department approached her, asking if she would to take on the role of coordinating employability work within the department. She agreed to take on the role, which she had been doing for nearly two years at the time of the interview.
Amber stated that, when inviting her to take on the role, her head of department said that he thought she ‘would be presentable to business’. She thought her own business background had led her to be ‘externally-focused’ and felt that the head of department thought that she would be professional when dealing with employers. Her reasons for accepting the post were that she finds issues regarding employability ‘intrinsically interesting’, fitting in with her own background. She feels passionate about the students, and their relative disadvantage in relation to the graduate labour market compared with those from other, particularly Russell Group universities.

She was surprised at the difficulty she experienced initially in persuading other staff to engage with the employability agenda. She mentioned a number of factors related to this: staff not being open to change, that they had long experience whereas she was a newcomer. Together with a colleague who chairs the departmental working group on student achievement and employability, she organised a one-day event for all staff. By presenting the case for the employability agenda, including relevant statistics, many staff were persuaded, and some are now ‘massively on board’. Support by senior management, and the development of activities that involved staff, increased support, so that there were only little ‘pockets of resistance’.

Amber has finished her probationary period with the university, and well on the way to completing a PhD. She expressed her future aspirations in terms of teaching in her original discipline of psychology, or of moving into academic development work. She does not, however, wish to manage people in higher education: ‘definitely not!’
Jane

*Jane* had worked in the performing arts, as actor and as director, for about 10 years before taking up a half-time post as a lecturer. She had already worked in drama schools directing shows and also running some acting classes. She stated that she had become interested in theory and was ‘tired of living out of a suitcase’ working with small-scale touring companies. A year after starting in her half-time post she was offered a full-time post, which she accepted.

She then worked in that role for about 10 years before her subject leader asked if she would take on that role as he was leaving the institution. Although not the “most senior person in the team by any means”, she accepted, partly because others were unwilling to do so. There was a general ‘sense of rotation’ with regard to such roles, that they were not jobs for life but roles to be taken on for a limited period, the norm being three years. Jane accepted the role partly because she felt she needed a challenge, having been used to having a lot of responsibility in her career as an actor and a director. She also wanted to see what she could bring to the role, and especially to maintain the momentum of the outgoing subject leader had established.

When the university re-structured from departments into schools, the deputy head of department was appointed head of school, and Jane was invited to become deputy head of school. This involved her in wider matters than the subject area. She states that, as the head of department was also new to her own post, she would discuss matters with Jane very frequently. They had, she states, ‘quite a partnership’, that there was a ‘great deal of trust’ between them.
Charles

Charles had even more experience of working outside of a teaching role in higher education. After working as an engineer for about a year following his first degree, he was involved for about six years in scientific research, mostly on an international assignment undertaking research but two years of which were as a research assistant in a university. Following that, he worked in quality management work in the pharmaceuticals industry for around six years, then for a government science service for a further twelve years, in various roles. Foreseeing cutbacks in the service, he applied for and was appointed as a senior lecturer in his current university. About a year later, as part of re-structuring, the posts of associate head of departments were created. He applied when the post were advertised internally, and was selected.

There were other competitors for the post, from within the department. Charles expressed initial surprise that he was, in fact, offered the position, and flattered. He believes that he was selected, despite the fact that he been a teacher in higher education for a relatively very short period compared to others, because the university was ‘looking for someone to rattle the cage’. Also, as he was new to the university, he was perceived as not having ‘baggage’. He framed his application in terms of his ‘passion’, having led change in previous posts outside higher education.

Charles applied for the position because he wanted to take a lead role in improving science teaching, not just through his own personal developments but by encouraging other staff to develop their own approaches to pedagogic innovation, and to promulgate these. He has found staff supportive, and where he has encountered ‘one or two, not very many’ staff who have ‘resisted’ change, they have tended to be isolated by the majority. His head of
department has been very supportive. His main frustrations revolve around the
‘bureaucracy’, particularly in terms of writing reports that ‘nobody’s going to read’.

**General Themes**

**Entry to leadership positions in higher education**

**Previous background and experience**

The conceptualisation of emergent identity adopted in the study recognises that
individuals have multiple identities, salient in differing social settings and over time. The
biographical backgrounds of the participants was considered important, to explore how
these connected with their current positions as leaders in higher education.

Participants had varied backgrounds prior to entry into academia and thus prior to
taking on their initial academic leadership roles. Whilst some had limited working experience
outside of academia following their first degree, others had considerable working experience
before they entered employment in academic roles.

So, for as shown in the case study examples, we can see that both David and Amber
had relatively short period of employment outside of higher education; that employment
was somewhat unstable, ie not as part of a clear career path. Both had undertaken Masters
courses after short periods of employment after their first degrees, and both had further
periods of employment before gaining posts in higher education. In contrast, Jane and
Charles had worked in their chosen professions for fairly lengthy periods before entering
teaching roles in higher education.

There was also variety in respect of the move from initial appointment within a post
in higher education to appointment in a leadership role. Charles and Amber took on their
respective leadership roles fairly soon after starting. However, Jane worked in a teaching role for about 10 years before being approached to take on the subject leader role.

**Mode of Appointment**

As indicated, the mode by which individuals were appointed to their initial leadership roles in higher education differed, with some being ‘asked’ or ‘invited’ to take on the role, others being subject to competitive application and selection processes. In the first situation, we may view the invitation as indicating the ascription by those in senior positions that the individual was ‘worthy’ of being appointed to a leadership position. The *claim* on the identity by the individual may already have been manifested, or may have been tacit; but to the extent that they accepted the invitation, that acceptance may be viewed as such a claim, affirmed by significant others. In the second situation, the individual has clearly presented such a claim, and the decision by the selection panel may be viewed as affirmation of such a claim. From an identity perspective, then it is interesting to explore how such ascriptions/claim-affirmations are warranted.

Participants were asked why they thought that they, in particular, had been so invited, or had been selected when competing with others for the post. The question was posed with an acknowledgement that this was asking them to speculate; however, it may be seen as an attempt to evoke some aspects of their warranting of their claim on the identity of a leader, in relation to the specific posts.

In some cases, the individual appeared to be the only candidate for the post:

“I was the only person that did show an interest. [...] I think some people were more focused on their research and they saw [the role] as being maybe admin-heavy and taking them away from what they prefer to be doing.” (Annie)
“The other people in the team were very reluctant to take on the role... two of them had done the role before, so they knew what it entailed and the third person, in some respects, was too inexperienced. So in a way, it was a kind of marriage of me being quite happy to take it on and then being reluctant to take it on.” (Jane)

Where there was competition for the post, individuals expressed the reason (as they perceived it) for their selection in terms of change desired by senior staff and their own demonstrated ability to work for change:

“I believe that the university was looking for some to ‘rattle the cage’, as it were, and change things. [...] I framed my application just based on my own passion, really. The fact that I wanted the post and the fact that I had that passion, I guess; it just came across in the interviews.” (Charles)

“I’d like to think it’s because of some of my commercial skills, some of my... the ability to interact at all levels with various different people. I think...[some] of the other people are very narrow-minded. They don’t see the bigger picture. [...] They’re not... I don’t think they’re visionary.” (Andrew)

“There was almost a blame culture in the school around our students not performing and at meetings I used to challenge other lecturers [...] So, you know, I challenged the team that we should reverse that trend and start to look at our students in a much more positive light. And that was seen, I suppose, by the leadership in the organisation as a positive stance [...] I suppose they saw me as
instrumental in trying to change the culture of how we looked at our students.”

(Karl)

**Reasons for taking up leadership posts**

The reasons for applying for, and accepting such leadership positions is generally expressed as a ‘vision’ for the way that higher education may be developed, the desire to make a positive difference. This is usually accompanied with expressions of concern for the ‘student experience’ and for the outcomes for students, at university and in their future lives. As might be expected, those who had been in competition for the leadership posts gave reasons for applying and accepting in similar terms to those expressed as their perceived reasons for being selected. For Andrew, there was a particular view about the need to develop the staff team.

“I wanted to take the subject group forward with respect to developing courses and with staffing provision as well. It wasn’t just a case of, right, let’s get more student numbers and let’s get more courses up and running, because that’s just not going to work. You have to develop people through.” (Andrew)

Others expressed the desire to contribute to developments in the approaches to teaching. Charles indicated that he framed his application on his ‘passion’: this, he indicated, was in relation to pedagogic innovation, but also, as with Andrew, through the development of colleagues:

“We do have quite a lot of innovation within the department, quite a lot of sort of pedagogic innovation, we use a lot of technology, but I really wanted to be involved in leading that, wanted to try to improve the way that science is taught,
but not through my own developments but through trying to encourage others to develop their knowledge and their skills.” (Charles)

As indicated above, Karl had a particular concern to help students achieve, contesting what he regarded as inappropriate perceptions by some staff about the extent to which they could help such achievement. This was also expressed by Mohammed, who had course leadership for the foundation course (in a science/technology-related department), i.e., a course preparing students for entry to first degree programmes.

“I enjoyed working with these students […] not everyone enjoyed teaching them. Some of my colleagues thought that it was just a waste of time […] They consider them like college students. So I enjoy working with them, I think especially when you see them doing well and then you see them moving up from year to year, and then they finish and they do, probably some of them, most of them, do even better than those who join directly in first year. So I think that the idea is the little things, probably it’s worth working with them. It gives you that satisfaction when you see them do well.” (Mohammed)

None of the participants indicated that they sought the leadership positions as steps in a career trajectory into more senior management. This may, of course, be explained in terms of the small scale nature of the project, or perhaps by the tendency for people to present themselves as altruistic. But there was no indication in anything else that was said that suggested a deliberate intention and strategy to start on a trajectory towards senior management positions.
Response by others

As indicated above, for some leaders interviewed there suggestions that others (‘followers’) would not be entirely supportive. The two models discussed above include the possible interactionally-constructed identity positions whereby the leadership identity claims by the individual may not be affirmed by others whom they seek to influence, the followers. The interviews therefore included discussion about the response of others. However, none reported that they experienced direct challenge in respect of their position. Andrew stated that he anticipated difficulties from other, longer-serving, colleagues, with whom he had been in competition for the post of head of department. However, these colleagues did not, in fact, cause difficulties.

“...I get a lot of resistance from some people that are very stuck in their ways, whereas some of the people that I thought would give me a hard time because they weren’t successful in the interview seem to be approaching it very differently and actually are trying to get experience.” (Andrew)

For many, there seemed to be little experience of what might be termed ‘resistance’. Where this was experienced, rather than being challenged on the right to act as leader, participants reported that other staff tended to create difficulties in terms of the perceived appropriateness or feasibility of undertaking what the leaders sought to achieve. Often staff concerned would cite time difficulties, but this did not seem to be legitimate.

“They would always say there were lots of other things to be doing, so they would always use time as an excuse, I guess. But when most of the other members of staff can get something to you by a deadline and they’re all equally
as busy as somebody else, I... Do you know what, I don't know if I could actually put my finger on a particular reason.” (Annie)

“[when I ask ...] ‘why haven’t you got time?’ [the response is...] ‘My workload is full’. Well, I explain the workload model to them and I say that there’s [time allocation in which] you should be doing research and course development. They say ‘Oh, but I haven’t got time because I’m doing X, Y and Z’. ‘Okay, but we need to develop that course’. ‘Well, I haven’t got time’.” (Andrew)

For Mohammed, problems may arise because some academic staff were reluctant to teach on the Foundation year course for which he was course leader.

“Some of them are very cooperative. We work with them very well, and it’s very easy to work with them. Those I think who understand this type of students, so they really fully understand the idea of having a foundation course. Some others - maybe they are more reluctant when they get to these modules as lecturers [...] probably they are not happy with it in the first place, and this shows when they deliver. So the challenge is there, to get these people believers.” (Mohammed)

**Approach to leadership**

As noted earlier, the notion of leadership *style* has been the focus of much of the early research on leadership. Often research on leadership style takes the form of a questionnaire administered to either the ‘leader’ of ‘followers’ (or to both, with suitable amendments). In this study, the way that participants approached leadership was considered more tangentially. No specific question of the form ‘what is your leadership style’ was asked, but rather the matter tended to arise at various points, as participants talked about their
experience and their views. Notably, great emphasis was placed on what might be termed a
‘collegial’ approach.

“I see us as a team rather than anything else, and therefore [...] most of the stuff
is done through trying to encourage and, you know, I think we all are pretty much
aware of the fact that we’re in quite difficult times and [...] it’s about trying to
work together rather than anything else.” (David)

“My nature is always to be on the front foot; to always be very positive, to
include them, to ask their opinion. I do that with all members of staff. I ask for
people’s opinion because it’s important. And I’m not a one man band.” (Andrew)

In discussing the situation in which, as associate head of school for learning and
teaching, she might seek support from a head of school or department for some action or
initiative, Annie stated that she generally had no problem with gaining such support as

“I’ve always been through a process of consulting with members of staff on the
particular course or across the school and have a consensus and agreement from
the members of staff that this is a good thing to be doing.” (Annie)

This emphasis on what we may term ‘collegial’ approach should not, however, be
seen as a ‘laissez-faire’ style as depicted by style theorists (Lewin et al., 1939). Often Andrew
would ‘plant’ an idea which later would be brought forward by another staff member as their
own proposal:

“It might be an email about one topic and there might be a throwaway line at the
bottom about a new idea to set the scene. Now, a couple of times [people] have
come to me with the same idea that I articulated in a previous email and I’ve
embraced their new idea even though it may not be their new idea. [...] I set the scene, I let them come up with it, and actually if I had to set the scene in a simple line, they’ll come up with the idea and expand on that idea. [...] They take ownership of it and, if they take ownership of it, they’re going to do it.” (Andrew)

Charles expressed a similar approach, but deliberately approaching certain members of staff

“Well, the other way that we have tried to introduce some changes is to actually [...] pick out some members of staff, go to them and ask them about it first. Where we have been given some forewarning of it, it gives us the opportunity to do that and we can talk to a few influential members. Sometimes, talking to the people that you know will just resist it but to find out, you know, what their feeling is and why they feel that way and try and talk to them on a one-to-one basis to see if we can influence them before you have the general staff meeting.” (Charles)

The notion of resistance is commonplace in discussions of leadership, as inescapably associated with that of influencing. For the most part, when anticipating or encountering possible resistance to proposals, participants indicated that a preference for rational persuasion. Discussing the proposal to undertake a review of modules, ‘tidying up, where there was duplication etc, Mohammed explained that

“Some of them resisted the idea, you know, in the beginning, as you would expect, and some of them were happy with it, and at the end of the day, well, it happened. But trying to explain again why we are doing it, I think that is the key thing. Always try to explain why I would do things, because if you just ask
somebody to do it, if they are not convinced it is the right thing to do, they will always resist it because it will give them extra work.” (Mohammed)

Discussing developments on employability initiatives, Amber explained how ‘doing homework’ to provide sound information was important in dealing with some resistance:

“There are pockets of resistance. Not as bad as I was actually anticipating. When we had that event, and we had a, you know, the majority of the people in that room, I thought we were going to get a lot more resistance than we did. I think the fact that we’d compiled such, you know, a lot of the statistics, looked at a lot of other universities, what their employment figures were, what they were doing, that didn’t...although some staff really tried to unpick it, but because we’d done our homework, and we knew what was going on, I think we had a much stronger case, that we did actually have an issue, and that was quite persuasive for people.” (Amber)

For Charles, sometimes it was persuasion by ‘weight of numbers’ in a non-statistical sense, ie gaining support from the majority so that those who ‘resist’ are “just isolated and therefore they’re not going to die in the ditch over it. They will eventually come round”.

Conclusion

Further Research

The field of leadership research over many decades has been characterised by changing modes of theorisation and empirical enquiry, yet seems still to lack any degree of consensus on the key concepts of ‘leader’ and ‘leadership’. The characterisation of the field as ‘largely elusive and enigmatic’ (Meindl et al., 1985) seems to apply as much today as it did
three decades ago. This project has sought to draw upon recent developments in leadership research, based on notions of identity. Rather than adopting an essentialist view of identity, an interactionist, processual approach has been elaborated, identity as emergent from the interaction between identity-claims and identity-ascriptions. This enables the focus to shift to the study of individuals as they experience the process of becoming leaders, and the sense they make of such experience.

Leadership in higher education is increasingly subjected to scrutiny, and the extent to which the context may be regarded as, in some way, a special case will continue to be a matter for debate. The small-scale study carried out in this project may play a part in such debate. Although it is clearly limited, and can in no way to be regarded as representative, it does arguably demonstrate the utility of adopting an identity perspective. Further research may extend the work in various ways, not merely in terms of scale but also in terms of focus.

As indicated earlier, this study has not addressed other modes of identification, particularly those of gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation. The model of interactionally emergent identity may provide for useful modes of exploring the relationships between such modes of identification and leadership.

We may note that the present study has been conducted with individuals who are currently ‘successful’ in their roles. But we may anticipate from the model presented, and from common experience, that some individuals will not be viewed as ‘successful’; indeed, some participants talked about predecessors who might be regarded as ‘failed’ (‘zone 2’ in the claim-affirmation model in figure 1). Others may decide that what they are called upon to do, and to be, as ‘leaders’ is not what and whom they wish to be, or perhaps feel capable of doing or being (‘zone 3’). Such persons, their experiences and understandings would make
for potentially interesting and useful research: interesting as a counterweight to the perhaps ‘romantic’ overemphasis on ‘successful leaders’, and useful as it may yield insights on how effective interventions may avoid the personal and organisational ‘waste’ that arises from such ‘failure’.

A further area for research might be to explore how ‘followers’ experience that identity complementary to that of leader. How do staff in higher education perceive the identity of leader if they themselves do not claim nor are ascribed such identity (‘zone 1 in the model)? As the leader-follower relationship is a negotiated outcome, we might explore how those who are ‘followers’ construe their own identity as such, and what modes of practice are appropriate to such identity.

**Leader Development**

The limited scale of the project also does not warrant major proposals in terms of approaches to the development of leaders. However, we may note that taking an identity perspective does emphasise that individual leaders, in higher education as elsewhere, have very varied biographies. Key aspects of those biographical backgrounds will affect the extent to which, and the manner in which individuals frame their claims on the identity of leader when in higher education, and the manner in which others ascribe to them such an identity. This is borne out by the case example presented.

We may therefore anticipate that developmental approaches based on ‘biography work’ would be particularly helpful in helping those who are appointed to leadership roles to reflect upon their previous experiences and consider how they move forward in their leadership positions. Such ‘biography work’ is well-established in experientially-based approaches to development, such as the Springboard Women’s Development Programme,
and Navigator Men’s Development programme, both already adopted in many higher education institutions as a general development programmes. Although such development activity may be undertaken on a ‘solo’ basis, it is likely to work better in a paired or group setting, where those new to their leader positions may engage in dialogue with their peers. This is, of course, a common approach with the staff development field. However, it tends not to be framed in terms of ‘identity work’: if it were to be so framed, those undertaking it may be better guided in terms of what they might seek to gain from reflection and dialogue.

An identity approach also emphasises the importance of identity affirmation by others. This suggests that developmental approaches that utilise coaching and mentoring would be very helpful. Again, these are commonly used, but not usually viewed in terms of an identity framing. If coaching and mentoring for new leaders were to be explicitly viewed in identity terms, those who provide coaching and mentoring could seek to ensure that they consider how, in their interactions, they signal to those with whom they act as coach or mentor the affirmation of their identity claim.

Of course, the main source of identity claim affirmation would tend to be the leader’s immediate line manager. Many of the leaders interviewed made explicit comments about the supportiveness of their own line managers. Such support would normally be focused on the substantive aspects of specific issues and initiatives. An identity perspective suggests that line managers should also provide support in relation to affirming identity claims. This would, of course, fit well with the transformational leadership model.

Identity claim affirmation would also come from an individual’s peer-group. Leaders in higher education would engage with their peers in various ways, particularly meetings of various kinds. These normally focus on substantive matters, so it may help to have
established **networks**, within an institution and across institutions, which explicitly enable leaders to meet *as leaders*, to explore matters of joint interest and in so doing provide identity affirmation.

Finally, the **combination** of such approaches is likely to act in a synergistic manner. This may form the basis for programmes at institutional level, or at sector level.
References


Holmes, L. (forthcoming). Becoming a graduate: the warranting of an emergent identity *Education + Training*.


The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.


