

How to Facilitate Effective Transition into a Head of Department Position and How to Appraise the Position Holder's Function

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Introduction

This paper is based on two studies. The first is a multiple case study comprising three individual cases at Oranim, an Initial Teacher Training College (ITTC) in Israel. It concentrates on the socialisation process of beginning Heads of Departments (HoDs). The main interest in this study was to understand the difficulties better, to find ways of improving the feelings and performance of HoDs during their socialisation process and to improve the support given to them by the organisation.

The second study is based on a final assignment of an Academic Management Course, which was held at the MOFET Institute – A Research, Curriculum and Program Development for Teacher Educators in Israel. We see the second paper as a further step focusing on standards and performance monitoring for management roles. It suggests two “soft” appraisal tools which emerge from a professional attitude and a culture of trust and support. We believe that a combination of the two papers has the potential of providing us with a keener glance into the difficulties experienced by novice HoDs, as well as reflecting the scope and contents of the occupation.

The following steps provided us with a clearer view of the themes discussed in the case study:

1. We identified the specific features of the college's academic management roles and the demands they make on ITTC HoDs.
2. We studied the official job description, and examined the reasons for the gaps between the official role definition and the individual's perception.
3. We examined difficulties within the socialisation process stemming from the entry stage and institutional work patterns.
4. We looked for ways of facilitating the entry stage.

The research findings reinforced the premise that beginning managers experiencing the difficult entry stage, paid a painful

price in terms of the cultural tension within the institution, the role ambiguities deriving from it and the local management culture. The lack of a clear role definition, role standards, structured preparations and attentive support was significant during the induction period.

As mentioned above the first study concentrated on the entry stage, identified specific areas to be re-considered and suggested ways of facilitating a more effective transition into the position. The second study took a further step and looked for ways of designing and monitoring standards for assessing the performance and professional development of ITTC academic managers.

Performance standards for teacher educators and their leaders should be coupled with support strategies and point to specific ways of monitoring continuing professional development. We suggest here two vehicles for documenting professional development, which might also serve as evidence for assessment: portfolios and periodical interviews (Middlewood 1997, Foreman 1997). In both the emphasis is on self-awareness and critical reflection.

Monitoring a manager's development is a complicated task, and doing it in a structured manner is an innovative notion within the Israeli context. Well planned appraisal is another potentially significant change. Both are strong resources and have the potential of contributing to the efficiency of an educational organisation.

The discussions regarding monitoring management roles, organisational culture (Hutchinson 1999), characteristics of developmental stages (Weindling 1999) and standards for effective support are assumed to be common to new entrants in educational and other institutions, thereby making the findings and suggestions of both studies applicable to broader contexts.

Theoretical background

Initial teacher training in Israel takes place in universities and colleges. Universities qualify teachers for junior and senior high schools. ITTCs prepare teachers mainly for early childhood and primary school systems. Ever since Israeli ITTCs received academic recognition (in 1981), they have been obliged to follow the guidelines of the Israeli Council for Higher Education. That reality forced two different cultures – Teacher Training College and university – to operate in the same institution and in a way caused a cultural struggle within the colleges. The ambiguity deriving from the mixture of the two cultures plays a major role in the manager's role definition and role perception (Golan 2003).

In addition to that higher education has undergone significant changes in recent years (Volansky 2005). The external and internal changes can not be ignored and the turbulent reality calls for a re-examination of managerial roles (Ramsden 1998).

The changing reality created or rather enhanced, internal tensions between senior and middle management. The first tends to adopt the political and marketing language and the second struggles to remain loyal to professional considerations. These changes and others dictate conceptual changes and impose constraints and uncertainties on position holders. The fact that beginning managers are not properly qualified to fulfil the roles is becoming increasingly evident. All management levels undergo transitions, experience a lack of balance and clarity, and need to reconstruct identities (Trowler and Knight 1999). The layer of middle management, which was the subject of the two studies, took over many new responsibilities without receiving professional recognition (Harding 1990). A distinct unsuitability exists between the centrality of these roles and their status within the organisation and outside it (Taylor, 2000).

Management roles in Israeli ITTCs received very little attention. Zieden (1992) states that Israeli ITTCs, which used to be intimate institutions based on informal relations, have undergone organisational and cultural changes in recent years. These changes have influenced the complexity and nature of middle management roles. She notes that beginning managers lack basic organisational and administrative knowledge and have no appropriate frameworks to acquire them. The notion of standards in educational management is very new in the Israeli context and culture. It might derive from the premise that the profession is viewed as a kind of mission, and position holders fulfilling it are highly motivated and devoted. They might experience a sense of conflict between their values and those underpinning the more tightly controlled management standards.

The issue of beginning stages of headship draws on the broader subject of professional development in general and on socialisation theories in particular (Weindling 1999). Studies show that despite their rich experience in other areas, academic managers entering new positions have the need to reconstruct their professional identity. They experience developmental stages, and their specific needs should be more accurately identified and addressed (Ramsden 1998, Ribbins 1997, Weindling 1999, Middlehurst 1993).

The issue of appraising educational managers is relatively recent. Middlewood mentions two major purposes favouring the need for it: developmental and evaluative. Both are in the interest of individuals and organisations. He concludes by saying that "The integrating of appraisal, whether through a formal scheme or not, into a whole organisation approach to manage its people seems a prerequisite to effectiveness..." (Middlewood 1997).

Hutchinson (1999) addresses this issue from the more

instrumental angle. He suggests four types of appraisal interviews: Developmental, Managerial, Judgmental and Laissez-faire. Each type or combination thereof represents a different appraisal style and encompasses strengths and weaknesses. It seems that the main question is how to carry out the process rather than if to enact it.

Clear role description and role demands are most helpful for beginners. Standards and assessment criteria reflect the expectations diverted to position holders and therefore can serve as crucial benchmarks for the professional performances.

Methodology

The leading approach of the two studies is qualitative (Shkedy 2003). The first is a multiple case study (Stake 1994, Yin 1985, Yosifun 2001).

Three research tools were chosen for the data collection of that case study: semi-structured interviews, narrative writing and written documents. The interview was the main tool since a well-planned semi-structured interview enables and enhances open mutual dialogue, vital for the flow of information, and having the potential of making the best use of the limited time available (Sabar-Ben-Yehoshua 1990). The three tools chosen were intended to complement each other, to balance between the data collected in a direct and indirect manner, to use data influenced by the researcher to a greater or lesser extent, to incorporate personal and more objective sources, and to include structured and less structured sources. Transparent and open analysis processes and constant re-examination of the data with regard to the relevant literature were other components aimed at supporting this aim.

Ethical considerations were followed carefully due to subordination relations, familiarity with the researched site (Karniely 2002), the temptation to attain desirable information suitable to pre-assumptions (Sabar-Ben-Yehoshua 1990), and more. The leading analysis approach was content analysis (Gibton 2001, Harel 2001).

The second study was a project written as a final assignment for an Academic Managers course held in the MOFET institute in Israel. Its main purpose was to suggest ways of appraising the college's management position holders. The main research tools were written documents and open-ended interviews. The written documents included position papers and institutional recommendations. The researchers interviewed three middle managers and three senior managers in various colleges. The leading analysis approach was content analysis (Gibton 2001, Harel 2001).

Findings, conclusions and suggestions

Two inter-related terms were prominent in the first study – culture and ambiguity. The first research question dealt with the two academic cultures co-existing in the college, the second revealed the aspect of organisational culture, the third emphasised the influence of the kibbutz-like culture, and the fourth highlighted inter-personal culture. In all cases, this picture was marked by many kinds of ambiguities, some inherent to the issues discussed (Hall 1997, Bush 1997) and some typical of the researched site (Golan 2003).

A similar picture was reflected from the data of the second study. None of the researched colleges has a systematic procedure of appraising academic position holders. A contradicting feeling of crucial need for this exists on the one hand, and a fear of the atmosphere it might create on the other. The roots of familiarity and a devoted small college culture

still echo while the need for a more professional and formal attitude is already emerging.

A discerning glance into the findings of the case study supplies us with important information and a data base for achieving the project aims.

Summary of findings

The first question of the case study was aimed to identify special features of academic management at the researched site. The picture emerging from the data pointed to four major characteristics:

1. Tension is caused by the co-existence of two different cultures in one place: college: holistic-oriented and subject-matter: university-oriented.
2. There is a difficulty in implementing the holistic attitude in the fragmented system.
3. The need to comprehend and master various practical and theoretical knowledge bases sets high demands on position holders.
4. The centrality of inter-personal encounters is very demanding.

The need to function within a multi-cultural environment, comprising mixed perceptions and subsequent role overlaps, the need to be familiar with a diversity of contents and contexts, and the need to serve as a role model through daily interactions set high demands for position holders.

Position papers dealing with the issues of the differences between universities and ITTCs in Israel (Avdor 2001, Dror 1999, Kfir 1999, Keinan 1999) reflect the differences and cultural struggle, and express the need to reduce tensions within the different institutions and consider the unique contribution each culture brings to teacher education.

The changing reality in Israeli ITTCs, including the clear demand to make a shift to a more university-like structure, points to the necessity to define clearer criteria for appraisal at all levels. The project group suggested that steps towards implementing institutional appraisal patterns should be taken gradually and designed by position holders in a collaborative manner.

In the second research question, the official job description and the HoD's personal role perception was examined in an attempt to understand the reasons for the gaps and the ambiguities. The official job description appeared to be most inclusive. In some domains, it does not clearly define authority and responsibility, and overlaps with other positions are distinct. The job definition reflects a tension between the two cultures, the local traditions, and management structure and culture.

The HoDs in this study perceive their roles as inclusive and holistic. Their main concern appeared to be about the students, the pedagogical staff and curriculum planning. Their attitude is supportive and integrative. During the beginning stage, they concentrated primarily on internal departmental matters for which they had relatively extensive autonomy according to their official job definition. They were very frustrated with the limitations that the fragmented system and the unclear institutional job definition determined for implementing their holistic attitude in terms of curriculum.

The HoDs in this study perceive their academic obligations as fulfilling their roles rather than their academic careers. The clash between management role and academic career finds very little expression (Ramsden 1988, Ribbins 1997), and unlike university faculties, they perceive the management role as being a professional promotion. This finding correlates with the differences between college and university cultures mentioned in the previous question (Keinan 1999, Kfir 1999).

Role ambiguity was attributed to two major reasons:

1. Lack of attention paid to management matters combined with the mixed cultures and the informal management style.
2. Basic differences between formal job definition and actual implementation.

Studies on management structures (Bush 1997) and management roles in education (Hall 1997) stress the essential differences between formal definition and actual implementation. They place importance on protecting and preserving the frameworks on the one hand, and enabling personal interpretation on the other. Understanding or accepting this differentiation was not discerned in the findings. The participants attributed differences in the formal and implemented definitions mainly to local management drawbacks. Following the research participants' suggestions, the faith in the natural flowing relationship could be attributed to the kibbutz-like culture. Dar (1995) notes this as being one of its leading values.

The ambiguities appeared to play dual roles: enabling freedom of action, and lacking anchors to stick to. This was significant in the induction and socialisation process.

The findings of the project group indicated that role ambiguities seem to be common to other ITTCs in Israel. The fact that practical steps were not taken in any of the researched sites might point to changing barriers or to an uncertainty deriving from the turbulent times the Israeli systems undergo. The group suggested that clear criteria might serve to assess functions for defining the profession rather than posing a threat.

The third research question of the case study examined the difficulties experienced by the participants during their entry stage period. The findings showed that this period was very sensitive. Despite the impression that considerable blame for the difficulties was directed at the organisation, an analysis of the findings indicated that they evolved primarily due to the beginning stages. The participants discussed feelings of loss, fear, low self-esteem, flooding and confusion. They also reported about functional difficulties caused by the need to study routines, manage time, prioritise, reconstruct identities and fully understand the scope and content of the job. Two kinds of difficulties were attributed to the organisation: local management style and lack of support, both due to a large extent to the kibbutz-like culture.

The entry stage characteristics were examined in light of the professional development socialisation theories relating to managers in education (Weindling 1999, Bullock et al. 1997, Eraut 1997, Bennett 1997) and institutes of higher education (Knight and Trowler 2001, Trowler and Knight 1999, Bone and Bourner 1998, Ramsden 1998). A strong similarity regarding the essence of the stages suggested by the researchers and the beginning managers was prominent. The effect of the new situation was especially problematic for them, since all were experienced professionals who found it hard to be 'thrown' into situations like this at the peak of their careers. Despite their awareness of the unavoidable situation, the notion that the college provided no intentional support was very annoying and unacceptable to them.

It was evident that management work patterns are rooted in the kibbutz's cultural features and values (Dar 1995). The readiness to invest in work regardless of any type of reward, and the co-operative attitude obscuring social status and stressing informality and collegiality, find strong expression in the local management style, for better or for worse.

The project's findings diverted our attention to the notion that college position holders' in fact perceive themselves

as working in a small familiar organisation having a strong commitment to the mission and finding it hard to introduce formal procedures into the system. A clearer role description and role standards might serve as a kind of intentional support if they are designed in institutional teams and reflect local accumulated practical and theoretical knowledge and know-how (Middlewood 1997).

The issue of support was significant during the entry stage, as previously mentioned. This aspect was studied in detail, determining what is considered as support, what is available and what is lacking and recommended by the position holders. The findings showed that the organisation provides very poor planned support and the HoDs used or created informal frameworks of reference. Unlike recent tendencies to pay more attention to tacit and cultural organisational knowledge (Trowler and Knight 1999, Eraut 1997, Bennett 1997), the participants of this study were eager to have much more formal and well-organised support. This desire exposed the drawbacks of the local system, which lacked clear job definitions, procedures and work patterns so vital for beginners. The extensive use of informal support testifies to the extent and power of the collegial co-operative atmosphere mentioned above.

Researchers emphasise the urgent need to relate to management in institutes of higher education as a profession (Ramsden 1998), to define its unique features and knowledge base (Middlehurst and Elton 1992) and to design appropriate professional programmes (Bone and Bourner 1998, Trowler and Knight 1999). They stress the need to go beyond the traditional, competence-based courses in terms of both content and learning strategies, and make more room for individual needs and informal knowledge. Most researchers are rather sceptical concerning the readiness of senior position holders to adopt this line of thought, attributing it to a lack of awareness and the constraints they face. Both conform to the situation at the researched site.

The project group suggested criteria for appraising position holders in Israeli ITTCs. We might perceive this both as benchmarks for incumbents serving in the positions and as directions for professional development. They pointed to several areas: personal attributes, intellectual skills, team and institutional accountability, and management skills. The detailed picture presents the scope and content of the position and draws guidelines for reference. This, together with performance standards, might lead to a more professional function, making a significant contribution to the individual, the organisation and its different target audiences.

Conclusions and suggestions

The conclusions and suggestions deriving from both studies will be combined here. Data for the first were collected during the year 2001 and for the project during the year 2005. We consider the data collection to be a hierarchical and continuous process, starting from identification and proceeding to the practical steps of standards and appraisal design:

1. Practical steps should be taken to promote the recognition of the managerial profession in ITTCs. Special attention should be paid to middle management. The steps towards recognition should include research activities, internal and external 'marketing' activities.
2. Not all needs can or should be addressed. Some difficulties are unavoidable, and the extent of awareness of their existence as well as the availability of support should make the difference.
3. Deliberate actions and activities should be taken to reduce the tension between staff members belonging to the two cultures within the learning programme. The

dialogue should be based on co-operative curriculum planning and an overall view of the needs of the task.

4. Careful thought must be given to clarifying the management structure and institutional regulations.
5. Job definitions should be re-examined and overlaps and ambiguities elucidated.
6. Regulations should be checked, written and openly manifested.
7. A structured programme for the preparation before entry and the mentoring of new positions should be designed. The programme should include formal and informal components, individual and group sessions, and internal and external courses.
8. The responsibility for the programme's design and implementation should be shared by the beginners, their experienced peers and the faculty dean, who should supervise this process. Strong emphasis should be placed on internal issues.
9. More information and research is needed in order to determine the best ways of monitoring, appraising and providing support simultaneously. It is recommended to include "soft" and collaborative tools in a holistic manner.
10. The appraisal pattern should be designed in a collaborative manner, involving senior and middle managers. Special thought should be given to the question of local features and components common to all ITTCs.
11. In-depth appraisal interviews and professional portfolios might serve as complementary assessment tools. These two ways of collecting evidence can provide rich materials for flexible enough standards as needed in the educational management arena.

With the help of these kinds of information and the design of standards, we could make the appraisal process a perpetual procedure (Globerman and Kula 2005) accompanying HoDs during their appointment and afterwards.

Some of the first study's findings, especially those regarding organisational aspects, emphasised distinct relationships between work patterns and local management culture. This fact might limit the possibilities for a broader generalisation. The evidence that these ties always exist is important to consider in any context. We believe that the more universal aspects will be relevant for other beginning managers in Israel and elsewhere. The small sample size is another factor to consider in the context of generalisation. The practical implications will relate to the concrete situation of the researched site but the principles behind them might be applicable to other contexts.

Further research is required on issues regarding the essence of ITTC management, the structure and the uniqueness. The appropriateness of the caring, dialogical attitude to students is another issue to be discussed. And last, but not least, the connection between management and student performance received considerable attention in research regarding schools but was hardly discussed in terms of ITTCs, which should serve as a role model for its graduates.

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