Commentary

The use of management trainee schemes in higher education institutions

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Bionote

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Introduction

This paper arises out of responses to a survey of three management trainee schemes, analysed by the author in response to a request by the scheme organisers, and builds on the work of Allan Bolton (2008). Based on four responses from two pre-1992 institutions, and three responses from one post-1992 institution, some clear themes emerged from the survey. Firstly, it confirmed the sense of university management as an 'accidental' profession (Wild and Woodridge 2009: 6), although individuals for the most part knew that they wanted to work in the public or not-for-profit sectors. Overall, there was a strong sense of satisfaction with, and a desire to stay in, higher education, with appreciation of the opportunities offered by the trainee schemes. In fact a majority of respondents mentioned strong competition to get onto their scheme, and a desire to make the most of the opportunities it provided. The questionnaire used in the survey is at Appendix A.

The schemes

It was clear that, while much appreciated, the three schemes were not yet fully mature in terms of the infrastructure that they offered. This sometimes created frustrations for individuals, most notably the fact that line managers, non-trainee scheme peers and other colleagues did not always fully appreciate the aims and nature of the scheme, about which there could be 'uncertainty' and even 'confusion'. In fact trainees themselves were not always clear about purposes. Training and briefings could be hit-and-miss, and one person reported not having office space for an initial period. As one respondent remarked: 'The scheme is only as good as the roles within it and the organisation on which it is based.' There was also a sense, in a number of cases, that the work given to trainees was not challenging enough, both in terms of tasks and the amount of autonomy/authority given to an individual.

Valued aspects

Aspects that were particularly valued were opportunities for work shadowing of more experienced, especially senior, colleagues (not just a single line manager), and for a variety of placements. One respondent had greatly valued the opportunity to meet the vice-chancellor on a regular basis. There was a sense that schemes were most successful when work on a specific project or function was combined with experience across the university, although sometimes this could lead to tensions. One person mentioned a lack of rotation into specialist functions such as finance or human resources:

'The scheme should take recent graduates and teach them about the core functions of the university … particularly for the very focused graduates who wish to experience jobs in certain areas to see if they are potential career paths.'

Membership of a team that worked well and conferred a sense of belonging was also appreciated, as well as wider institutional networks that provided 'potential contacts for future opportunities'.

The most tangible advantages of participation in such a scheme were perceived to be access to work shadowing and mentoring opportunities, attendance at AUA and in-house programmes, and the opportunity to undertake qualifications such as master's programmes, PRINCE 2, and certificates in management and leadership. All this provided 'valuable insight into the wider world of university administration'. Keeping a learning log during the period of the trainee scheme was seen as being a valuable way of reinforcing the opportunities provided. Areas where it was suggested that trainee schemes could be reinforced included the provision of opportunities for staff management Experience of managing staff and also for more general reflection on roles and institutional contexts. was also highlighted as an area of under-provision. Others suggested that more time for general reflection would be welcome. [query: these last two sentences appear to be disadvantages, rather than advantages as introduced at the top of the para. I suggest a putting them in a separate para introduced by something like 'On the negative side, …']

Challenges for scheme organisers

Feedback from the survey suggests that there remains a challenge for scheme organisers in ensuring that the infrastructure is in place to support trainees in all aspects of their roles, and even more importantly, that all colleagues at all levels of the institution, both academic and professional, understand the rationale behind the scheme. A number of respondents mentioned that line managers did not appear to be clearly 'plugged in' to their responsibilities vis-à-vis trainees. There also appeared to be the possibility that the needs of trainees with some work experience, inside or outside higher education, differed from those of trainees who were more or less 'raw' graduates; schemes could perhaps be more 'dovetailed' to fit individual needs and backgrounds, as well as potential career paths.

Professional 'identity' of trainees

A number of respondents felt that there was ambiguity about their status as 'trainees'. This could lead to difficulties with both senior colleagues and their own peers, particularly in relation to their authority and autonomy. There was a sense that in some cases they were seen as junior partners, with their judgements and opinions not as valued as those of their 'mainstream' colleagues. In a few cases it was also felt that they were not welcomed by members of their peer group, and were seen as unfairly 'favoured':

'At many points the role of graduate trainee was I felt too highly profiled amongst the other staff at the university. This led to some resistance from other members of staff who felt threatened by our presence.'

'I felt we had good contact with senior staff [and it] was great to learn off them. I do know, however, that we were viewed negatively because of that at the university, and so we had to work hard to get a good impression out to the rest of the staff body.'

'A lower profile should be given to trainees in order to protect them from sceptics.'

General comments

It appears that there are two key aspects to trainee schemes. Firstly, and most obviously, they are intended to give a broad range of early experience to newly recruited staff to enable them to move quickly into a career in higher education administration/management. In this sense the schemes are

geared to fast-tracking talented staff via a 'smorgasbord' of experience. Secondly, they should also provide an opportunity for individuals to consider how they might develop their careers in future in the light of their interests, talents and aspirations, and also the approach that they might take to future roles and careers (for instance, the extent to which they might see themselves as crossing functional and institutional boundaries [Whitchurch 2008: 13-14]). Schemes might, therefore, helpfully take account of the possibility that individuals may create new spaces and activities at the same time as carrying out their given roles, as exemplified by the author's concept of 'third space' (Whitchurch 2008: 27). This more active engagement can be stimulated and encouraged by, for instance, career development plans, mentoring arrangements, and the use of learning logs. It appears that this aspect is particularly appreciated, but as it is resource-intensive it can become neglected when senior staff are busy.

At the same time as there is a movement towards greater 'professionalisation' of university administration and management, together with increased functional specialisation, there is also a growing diversification of staff roles and identities. This is accompanied by the movement of professional staff into 'blended' roles that may involve some academic elements of activity in areas such as outreach or research partnership. Existing trainee schemes tend to assume a homogeneity of professional careers, and scheme organisers therefore may wish to consider how the schemes might be loosened up to accommodate people who may, for instance, move in and out of higher education but still make a valuable contribution. Although career pathways within the sector, through which people progress onwards and upwards by moving between institutions, are likely to continue to exist, they are increasingly likely to be accompanied by pathways that are less linear or clear cut, characterised for instance by an accumulation of projects or portfolios of activity.

At a time when management skills tend to be required at an earlier stage of people's careers, particularly in institutions with highly devolved structures (Whitchurch 2010: 249), management trainee schemes (as opposed to traditional rotational general administrative service schemes) are likely to be an increasingly significant element in the career development of individuals, and the management development plans of institutions. One person mentioned that they had expected a scheme focused on general *management* training, more like those in industry, and scheme organisers might like to give some thought to whether and how generic management training might be incorporated.

Thus it appears that trainee schemes are likely to be most successful when they incorporate:
- a range of types of functional experience;
- exposure to national and international higher education contexts;
- experience that takes account, as far as possible, of an individual's previous experience (if applicable) and career aspirations;
- project work/transferable skills;
- integration with a planned professional development scheme, accompanied by a learning log or portfolio;
- work shadowing and mentoring schemes.

Recommendations

The following checklist might help organisers of management trainee schemes to anticipate the types of issues raised by those responding to the survey. They might wish to consider whether their scheme is characterised by:
- A clear relationship between the experience offered to trainees, their individual development plans, and institutional management development processes.
- Consideration of how breadth and depth of experience might be assured, particularly in relation to generic (management) and specialist (functional) training.
- Clear communication between the person with institutional responsibility for the scheme and line managers, with a published and well-publicised code of practice to raise and maintain awareness.

- Adjustment of processes to cater for 'raw graduates' and those with work experience either in higher education or another sector.
- Experience that involves a balance between membership of team(s) and opportunities for trainees to use their own initiative, so that they feel that their individual contribution is valued, and that they are not isolated.
- Integration of work shadowing and mentoring into rotations.
- Encouragement of the use of learning logs (possibly for submission to the scheme organiser) to stimulate ongoing reflection about practice and contexts.
- Regular meetings with member(s) of the senior management team as appropriate.

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Appendix A

Survey questions on experience of management trainee schemes

1. Was your application a move towards your career of choice or for a job that seemed preferable to the alternatives at the time?

2. How did the process of application and selection change your attitude towards the job of management trainee?

3. How did the induction process (first two weeks) change your attitude towards the job of management trainee?

4. How did the induction process (weeks 3–26) change your attitude towards the job of management trainee?

5. After the first three months, in post how would you compare your experience with your previous expectations, ie those you had after selection and induction?

6. Looking at your role as it is now, please outline what you regard as its main:
   (a) positive features
   (b) negative features

7. Considering the management trainee scheme as a whole, please outline what you regard as its main:
   (a) positive features
   (b) negative features

8. Looking ahead over the next six months, how do you expect your experience to change? To what extent do you regard those changes as positive for you?

9. Do you consider that you have had sufficient appropriate training and support? If not, how could it have been improved?

10. Looking ahead two years from now, would you prefer to have:
    (a) continued in/developed your current job?
    (b) moved to a related job in higher education?
    (c) moved to a substantially different job in higher education?
    (d) moved outside the higher education sector?

11. If moving outside the higher education sector, what field(s) would be your preference?

12. If remaining within the higher education sector, and looking ahead 2-5 years, what areas of work would you prefer?

13. Is there anything else that you would like to say?

Suggestions for exploded quotes, if needed

'the … schemes were not yet fully mature in terms of the infrastructure that they offered' (para 2)

'schemes were most successful when work on a specific project or function was combined with experience across the university' (para 3)

'there remains a challenge for scheme organisers in ensuring that … all colleagues … understand the rationale behind the scheme' (para 6)

'management trainee schemes … are likely to be an increasingly significant element in the career development of individuals' (para 10)