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ARTICLE

Contrasting views of induction

The experiences of new academic staff and their heads of department

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ABSTRACT This article focuses on the induction experiences of new academic staff and the role of their head of department in this process. Respondents reflected on personal experiences and their narratives give a fine-grained account of the same event from two contrasting perspectives. We expected to find that the heads would be key figures in the induction process, but we discovered a more complex situation in which contributions were largely hidden or indirect. We encountered many contradictions as each party recalled events. Meaningful communication had been sporadic at best, and professional and personal relationships were left undeveloped. In all cases, there was little genuine understanding of the potential of induction, and this was particularly evident in the lack of personal action displayed by the new academics. Some heads had developed a deeper theoretical position on induction but few of their ideas were realized in practice. We propose that this was mainly due to the heads' lack of experience and because induction outcomes were not systematically evaluated.
KEYWORDS: *contrasting views, heads of department, induction, new academics*

Introduction

Starting an academic career or moving to a new academic job can be highly complex and demanding (Trowler and Knight, 2000). Academics have to find their place in a new community while preserving their individualism and autonomy, and co-operate with unfamiliar colleagues while maintaining their competitive edge. Furthermore, they need to balance their work and personal lives at a time of major upheaval, often having arrived in a

new city or country, perhaps with the added responsibility of a family. Even experienced academics require support as not all their knowledge is transferable. New starters do not fully understand what their new department or university expects of them and because it takes time to become familiar with departmental cultures, they do not know what is acceptable or permissible in their actions and work. At this time of uncertainty, new starters seek to create a positive first impression as they try to lay the foundations of a new career that they hope will be both professionally rewarding and personally enjoyable.

It seems to us that induction seeks to support an academic's entry into their new organization and enable them to become a productive and long-standing member of their department and university. We have previously argued that new staff need to understand how they fit into their institution, what their institutional responsibilities might be and to have some sense of the many different ways that academic work is practised (Harland and Staniforth, 2000; Staniforth and Harland, 2003). Trowler and Knight (1999) define induction as 'professional practices designed to facilitate the entry of new recruits to an organization and to equip them to operate effectively within it' (1999: 178). Formal activities typically include institution-wide orientation programmes, mentoring schemes and departmental handbooks. Programmes introduce the academic to the university's operating systems and, for those new to academia, may also include some support for learning how to teach. Although there are examples of university-wide programmes that look after the new starter throughout their first year (Staniforth and Harland, 2003), most are quite short and occur soon after arrival. Induction, however, also includes an academic's socialization into a department and university 'created by the discourses and practices of the community in which one works' (Knight and Trowler, 1999: 23), with professional learning mediated through an active dialogue between the new academic and the social system that they find themselves in.

The most important social site for induction is the department and it has been suggested that a pivotal figure for the new academic is the department's head (Bensimon et al., 2000; Knight and Trowler, 1999; Sarros et al., 1997). Heads are not only in charge of recruitment but also have responsibility for managing, supporting and developing academic work through the different phases of induction. They also provide resource support and may take a mentoring role with respect to their new colleague. However, these roles are not straightforward. Heads are in a position of power with respect to new staff and act as gatekeepers in authorizing certain academic activities, such as workloads. They are also responsible for performance evaluation and tenure decisions. Tierney (2003) points out

that all academics are expected to be experts on the one hand but novices in many of their interactions with heads of department (HoDs). This is an uneasy aspect of academic life, especially when it is recognized that the head may have little initial training or expertise in management or leadership, and will usually stand down after a limited term of office. Furthermore, the nature of academic work with its primary allegiances to a discipline may not lend itself readily to direct management. Yet a collegial approach, which might seem more appropriate, can have its own limitations as this requires consultation, persuasion, negotiation, consent, and ultimately the development of consensus. Despite these difficulties, HoDs as managers have to accept some responsibility for new academics.

In the present study we focus on the individual experiences of academics starting work at a university and the experiences of their HoD in this context.

Method

This case study was carried out in a research-led university in the UK. We asked respondents to reflect on their experiences of induction. We were seeking honest and open reflection on experiences and recognized that asking HoDs and new academics to talk about each other would be both ethically and methodologically problematic, particularly if the heads were still in a position of power with respect to the new academic. To overcome this we recruited our sample of heads from those who had recently completed their 'term of office'. We intended that this study design would allow for safe reflection on recent but past events, while permitting a more open response during semi-structured interviews. Special care has been taken throughout this study to ensure the complete anonymity of all who took part.

We identified HoDs who had appointed new staff and completed their term of office within the last two years. Seven former heads fitted these criteria, and six agreed to take part in the study. They had appointed fourteen academics between them of whom nine volunteered. The departments represented were all large. One was in commerce, three in science and two in humanities. The heads had all been of professorial rank and the nine academics all lecturers. Five of the heads were male and one was female. Of the new academics who took part in the research, four were male and five female. One head had appointed three, another two, and the remaining four heads had appointed one new starter each. All new starters were early career academics but only three were new to a university position, the rest having moved from other institutions.

Interviews generated information about induction through an

interaction between the interviewer and respondent, allowing respondents the freedom to talk about their experiences (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004). Questions were focused on the broad theme of 'the role of the head of department in induction' but our priority was to allow conversations to develop that were important to the respondents. Interviews lasted for up to one hour and were recorded and transcribed. Written transcripts and copies of field notes taken at the time were analysed independently by each researcher using grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Pseudonyms that reflect gender are used throughout. For HoDs and new academics the key is as shown in Table 1.

Results and discussion

We report our findings within three emergent themes:

1. *The practice of induction*
   This theme examines conceptions of induction, the role of mentoring and the authority of the HoD.
2. *Personal responsibility and communication*
   The second theme is concerned with who has responsibility for induction and the role of communication for those concerned. It also addresses the issue of personal relationships.
3. *New heads and new academics*
   The final theme frames both HoDs and new academics as professional learners and looks at the role of evaluation in the success of induction.

1. The practice of induction

All HoDs talked about the importance of induction but displayed limited understanding of their own potential in the process. Heads described their main induction responsibility as protecting new starters from excessive workloads and from the 'university', and ensuring that induction protocols were in existence. New academic staff saw the role of their HoD in

Table 1 **New academics and HoDs**

Heads of department	*New academic staff members*		
John, humanities	Amanda	June	Andrew
Bob, commerce	Stanley		
Jill, science	Hannah		
Robert, science	Jack		
Mike, science	Paul		
Ray, humanities	Rachel	Kathryn	

induction as important, but only in an indirect way. Heads provided leadership and good management but were generally not expected to take a personal role in induction. Most (but not all) of the new academics were naive about their own potential in induction, especially with respect to personal responsibility and developing social relationships.

It was clear that Robert and Mike, both science HoDs, had a low value for induction and they tended to take a 'hands-off approach'. For Mike, induction was something done centrally by the human resources department. Because their new academics, Jack and Paul, had both recently completed a long academic apprenticeship through their PhD studies, they were seen as bringing both expertise and cultural capital with them. Rosser (2003) uses the term 'anticipatory socialization' to describe the interactions that PhD students have with faculty before they become full academics. However, postgraduate experiences are inadequate as full preparation for academic life and there are many aspects of academic work that PhD students are never exposed to (Austin, 2002). Both Jack and Paul had a narrow conception of academic work centred first on their research field and then on their respective research groups, and they did not identify with either their department or the university. For Paul, it had not even occurred to him that he needed induction and when he was asked about a possible role for the HoD he thought that whatever it might be 'they should not be heavily involved'.

Jill's views, as another science head, differed from those of Robert and Mike. She had a stronger value for induction, although she described her role in terms of putting in systems rather than being personally involved. She talked about induction being tailored to the individual with a focus on the department rather than the university and she had introduced a department mentoring scheme for new staff. Her main job was to protect them from what was going on in the university. Jill said that she was always accessible, that staff knew that they could bring concerns to her, and that you have to get to know staff before you can induct them. However, Hannah, her new staff member, gave a very different account:

> And the head of department said . . . of course we give the academic staff a very good, thorough induction. And I was sitting there thinking: I've missed it. Where was it? When was it? And I said this to 'Neil' afterwards, the head of the research group, and he said: well you got the staff handbook. (Hannah, science)

Both parties obviously had different expectations of what constituted induction. Hannah was also adamant that she had never spoken to her head of department and her reflections provide an image of how anonymous an academic can be. For Jill, lack of direct contact might not have been be an

issue, as her mentoring scheme was designed to provide alternative support, however, Hannah's mentor had been away on study leave. Hannah, 'out of desperation', 'bombarded' the director of her teaching programme with questions but she felt guilty doing this.

All heads mentioned that they provided mentoring schemes for new staff to support professional development. These had no summative function related to employment but they all appeared to have a priority focus on research, rather than a wider conception of academic practice, or helping the mentee settle into their new job. Kathryn, an experienced researcher, was refused a mentor by Ray:

> I asked for a mentor and it kind of went all round the houses, but actually the answer was no. . . . So in this department I think the notion of mentor is very much related to your research. (Kathryn, humanities)

When Andrew started to work with John, he saw his appointed mentor on a daily basis to talk about research and teaching. However, this did not last or fulfil the purposes of induction:

> I had a period of utter depression, to be dramatic, of two months, where no one was knocking on my door, where there was none of the camaraderie that you had at other places, because where you are all teaching undergraduates, and its shit work, and you are all in it together, and I think here there was more an individualistic culture around research. People all locked in their offices or at home working. (Andrew, humanities)

June was also assigned a mentor by John and this was the only example where mentoring worked well for induction, largely due to the skill and thoughtfulness of the mentor. In our study, the only HoD mentor was Jill and only for staff in her own research area. Mentoring is recognized as an important option for new starters and Bensimon et al. (2000) suggest department chairs should consider mentoring as part of their role. However, we can see tensions between the heads' hierarchical role in management and the need to avoid unequal and possibly exploitative mentoring relationships (see Knight and Trowler, 1999). Sarros et al. (1997) talk about role ambiguity as the head is supposed to both judge and support their staff member. In contrast, Moses (1989) suggests that heads can develop a relationship in the context of appraisal because academics understand that their HoDs only have 'positional authority', which they are typically prevented from using because of academic conventions. New academics avoided causing trouble, in part because they did not fully understand the risks and consequences of their actions.

John had appointed three academics during his tenure. His view of the head's role in induction was to devolve it to senior colleagues and, like Jill, to protect the new appointees from the centre of the university. We were

left somewhat unsure of what John and Jill (and other heads) were protecting their staff from, as this was never made explicit during interviews, although the threat was obviously of concern. Paradoxically, John also felt that he needed to protect new staff from being exploited by other senior academics in the department, some of whom would have been former-HoDs. In this case protection was about new academics being taken advantage of through the unfair allocation of work. John suggested that it would be difficult for a new starter to refuse a request from a more senior member of staff. He recognized that dealing with senior staff was 'an important part of the induction process'.

2. Personal responsibility and communication

Our research showed that academics can successfully assume responsibility and take the initiative in actively co-constructing professional and socialization experiences.

Kathryn was one of the three academics who had taken up their first post. When she started, the most helpful person was not Ray, her HoD, but the department secretary. Kathryn held the view that it was quite acceptable for her to learn by her mistakes but also felt that it had been assumed that she would know what to do. Not knowing what was expected of her or what she had to achieve had been stressful. In contrast, Ray's other staff member, Rachel, was more experienced and active in her own professional learning. She described in great detail the activities that she undertook as part of her induction. Even when she took particular issues to Ray she believed that he, at best, could only point the way while she had to find things out for herself. Her independence and initiative were evident in many of her actions:

> Probably in about the first five or six weeks, we actually had quite a lot of meetings and it was exceedingly enlightening experience for me to have a head of department that was always willing to meet with me and meet with me so often in the beginning weeks. (Rachel, humanities)

Like Rachel, Amanda was also proactive in her relationship with her HoD. She not only contacted John for advice during the early part of her tenure but frequently informed him about her progress during her first year. This strategy gave her a sense of how well she was doing and it helped her to develop a more informal relationship with him. These types of conversation are at the heart of academic life and in particular academic leadership (Haigh, 2005; Ramsden, 1998) yet most academics and heads in our sample hardly spoke to one another. Our analysis showed that even brief or superficial transactions could be very important to the head and the new academic. For example, there are latent aspects of communication that may

serve a variety of different purposes and there were instances when a single intervention by the HoD made a huge difference to the new staff member. One of these concerned June:

> . . . when I had a disaster John came up and said: this is what happened to me and don't worry, it's fine. You don't have to feel terrible, we still like you. Because you know, I think that was one of the lowest points of last year . . . and I think if he hadn't done that, I'd have probably just kind of committed suicide on the spot. (June, humanities)

In contrast to Amanda, June had not bothered John at all and Andrew felt there were insurmountable barriers related to John's personality and leadership style that prevented him going to see him. Although Amanda developed a positive rapport with John, she compared his leadership to that of God and Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, which suggested that she regarded him as occupying an exalted position. It was clear that 'personality' had been a major influence on her induction experiences.

The vastly different ways in which John was regarded by his three academics showed that some aspects of induction have to be tailored to the individual and that a head requires personal knowledge and understanding to be effective in any direct induction task. Heads and new academics simply need to get to know each other.

John wished that new academics would 'make efforts to integrate' and Andrew's depression (that he attributed to no one knocking on his door for two months) might have been ameliorated if he had knocked on someone else's door during this time. Having said this, if John had checked on Andrew he might have been able to offer the kind of support needed. Our data pointed to several explanations for poor communication between heads and their new appointees. For example, HoDs were extremely busy as they tried to fulfil many different roles and this was clearly recognized by most of the new academics who tended to 'get by' without bothering their HoD.

> I didn't really like to bother the head of department. Well there are still things that baffle me about the university but I have not actually asked anybody. I tend to wait and see . . . if the answer emerges slowly. (June, humanities)

Although all HoDs have a role in human resource management, John suggested that 'issues of power in relationships were a key concern' and hierarchical differences made establishing any kind of relationship problematic. The heads had all appointed their new staff and for a period were responsible for the quality of their work, could dictate the nature of that work and, in theory, could make decisions that impacted on employment. At the same time, the new academics described themselves in a

manner that would suggest that they were 'self-employed'. New starters recognized that success in research and teaching was their responsibility and both HoDs and new staff tended to avoid any conflict in this uneasy relationship.

3. New heads and new academics

Induction was not a common event in the university we studied and as a consequence all heads were relatively inexperienced in this role. In many ways they had been in a similar position to their new staff as they were learning about new roles and responsibilities. Bob said that the many problems and tasks he had to deal with during his headship were unique and as a consequence, it was difficult to learn from experience. Mike suggested there was no institutional memory and that every new person (including himself) had to find out a lot of things for themselves. Ray took this observation one step further by proposing that one of his roles should have been to 'very carefully' induct the next HoD. The system of rotating heads may have advantages for departmental governance within a collegial framework, but in terms of developing certain types of professional practices it can be quite limiting. None of the heads in our study had undergone induction as they took up their post and we believe there may be conceptual resistance to professional education at this level. A recent Australian study of academic staff perceptions of management and leadership showed that while academics linked quality human resource management to efficient academic work, they did not believe this was central to a leader's role or that a leader might have development needs in this area (Marshall et al., 2000). Perhaps a recent experience of being inducted as a learner in their new job might have provided heads with more insight into the needs of their new academic staff.

Finally, none of our heads had any way of systematically evaluating the success or otherwise of their actions or induction arrangements. Most new academics were given no regular feedback, except for Amanda, and this was due to her own agenda setting in regular meetings. In the rather anonymous departmental cultures described in this study, it was hard to understand how any evaluative judgements could be made. Knight and Trowler (2000) argue that one of the most important attributes of a department manager is their capacity and willingness to analyse cultural contexts. In any systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of induction, including the HoD's contribution to this, each department would need to establish clear criteria for measuring desired outcomes.

Conclusions and implications

The data from our study revealed numerous examples of practice situations that seemed to disadvantage the new staff member. These included the time wasted on unnecessary activities and an unwarranted investment of intellectual and emotional energy in coping with aspects of the new job. If our study is representative of induction experiences within the broader university system, then we should be very concerned. There are several implications for induction theory and practice, which we feel would be worthy of further investigation.

Our original thought was that the HoD would be a key figure in induction and despite many new reservations, we still feel that they have an important role to play. Heads who took part in our study had low expectations for their personal involvement and typically saw their responsibility as implementing systems. However, some of their strategies were founded on nothing more than clichés. The interview transcripts were replete with examples such as 'new staff are encouraged to talk to each other'. Accordingly, we suggest that heads should systematically monitor the quality and effectiveness of induction processes and outcomes.

HoDs played a key role in protecting new staff from excessive workloads and 'the university' to enable research development. Protection from 'other work' is no doubt beneficial to establishing research, but protection from the university is likely to have long-term impact on the culture of an institution as many work patterns, behaviours and expectations are set early in a new job (Boice, 1992). A real concern is that new academics will become effectively 'invisible' because they do not feel that they have an institutional identity, or any expertise outside of their research and teaching that they can contribute to the wider university community. They may live up to the idea of being 'self-employed' in a university made up of a collection of separate 'businesses' (departments).

New academics had low expectations for induction and the majority, excluding Rachel, showed little proactive behaviour. One can understand why new academics are mostly concerned with the technical problems of practice but someone with experience can guide them to look beyond immediate interests. Such guidance should encourage the new academic to accept some responsibility for using their knowledge and expertise to both learn from and shape their new community. We would also argue that because induction is highly personal and contextual, it needs to be continually re-negotiated with the individual staff member over time. The process should also include support before the academic arrives on campus and extend beyond the first year (Bensimon et al., 2000; Boice, 1992). Most

HoDs in our study saw induction as a brief event that started when the academic arrived.

Our data suggest that looking after a new staff member should be the responsibility of everyone in their community. To realize this would require a new epistemology predicated on the idea of induction as a collective social practice. In our study, human contact and everyday conversation were rare for all but one of our respondents. Perhaps the potential of such a simple act just gets overlooked in our hectic work lives and we might do well to re-evaluate how we engage with others.

Because of the fragmented nature of academic work, even if induction becomes embedded in the social fabric of a department, it will still be necessary to have someone with specialist professional skills and knowledge to ensure that it happens and that it is successful. Although our former-HoDs did not make such a good job of it first time round, given appropriate professional development support in 'how to' induct staff, they could effectively become induction 'experts'. They would have insight into the theories of induction and have knowledge of the university, the department and the HoD's requirements. They would also prevent potential conflicts of interest between a new academic and the current head.

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