Academic Networking and Collaborative Leadership

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Introduction

- Aim: to provide some insights into the different forms of academic network and the importance of leadership in their development and management.

- Based on recent research and personal experience.

- Studies from around the world, including Latin America, Africa and Asia

What is Academic Networking?

Academic Networking has been defined as:

"The development and facilitation of authentic mutually beneficial professional relationships"

The words are important:

- Development – creating something
- Facilitation – making it happen
- Authentic – something genuine, not simply 'a paper exercise'
- Mutually beneficial – all parties should gain
- Professional – related to the core activities
- Relationship – based on trust, 'give and take'

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Forms of Academic Network (1)

- Groups of individual members of staff, academic or managerial, with a shared interest, perhaps in a field of research or a management issue. Often informal and self administered. Often based on the work of "enthusiasts". May be short-lived or longer-term. Important base level of international collaborations.
- Networks of research groups or departments. Again, based around shared interests. May be more formal, with clear aims and objectives, shared undertakings and responsibilities. Normally with some form of written agreement. Possibly with timescales and performance indicators. Often associated with external funding. Also benchmarking "clubs".

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Forms of Academic Network (2)

- Networks of institutions (universities). Based around a common mission (eg research universities, technological universities, "modern" universities). Wide range of departments; covers many different activities. Highly formal, normally with clear agreements and protocols. Often "top-down" Highly managed. "Exclusive" membership – applications or "by invitation".
- An example: Worldwide Universities Network – 25 universities, 6 continents (Canada, New Zealand, Norway, UK, South Africa, China, Ireland, Ghana, Switzerland, Netherlands, United States, Germany, Mexico, Brazil, Australia, Thailand, Kenya). Research-based, common themes with groups of institutions.

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Forms of Academic Network (3)

Academic networks may be local (eg between individuals or universities in one city); or regional within one country; or they may be international across neighbouring countries; they may be worldwide.

They may be based on a single form of partnership or they may be multi-functional.

They may be short lived or they may last for many years.

Membership of networks may change.

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Academic Networks for Individual Members of Staff (1)

Why is it important?

Good teachers and researchers must be aware of the wider context for their work. Benefits of networking:

- Extends awareness of existing knowledge and scholarship – what are others doing?
- Provides a test for your own ideas; provides informal feedback; obtaining a different perspective
- Source of informed advice and suggestions
- Builds possible future collaborations
- Part of a community – give support, receive support
- Opportunity for self-promotion; important for career development

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Academic Networks for Individual Members of Staff (2)

The social side of networking:

- Developing friendships as well as contacts
- Sharing news
- New opportunities

Benefits may be immediate or very long-term.

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Academic Networks for Departments

Extension of benefits for individual staff.

- Potential partnerships to extend base of knowledge – important for teaching and research; access to different resources.
- Broadening of academic and cultural experiences
- Important to understand different issues and different perspectives
- Issues of status

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Academic Networks for Universities

Extension of benefits for staff and departments.

But, also:

- Important questions of status
- Political considerations

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The Need for Leadership

- Most universities want to encourage internationalisation – status, diversity, income, enriches teaching, research collaborations, making a wider contribution to society.
- At base level, most universities are happy for staff to develop their own contacts (conferences, writing etc). But this still needs leadership to create a supportive environment.
- But, other forms of international network often require more proactive leadership. Issues of status, cost, quality, risk.
- No individual or department or university can do everything! Need to make choices. Where do international networks fit within personal or university priorities?
- What to do and what not to do?

Members of the Network

- Who do you want to work with?
- Can anybody join? Normally based around common interests. Also, status. "League tables" and networks. Looking for perceived upward mobility.
- Tends to favour established universities.
- Can work against particular subject areas.
- What criteria are used? Who judges?
- But, networks need to be selective if they are to work effectively. Danger of too many members and losing focus and direction.

Costs

- International networks can be expensive to set up and maintain. Every university faces scarce resources.
- Travel expenses – often requires personal, face-to-face contacts; conferences, hospitality.
- Legal costs – research contracts, teaching agreements, shared courses.
- Possibly most important, the time factor. Networks can be very beneficial, but they require the commitment of time. Sometimes a particular issue for senior leaders, but applies to everyone.
- Again, requires focus and choice.

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Quality and Value for Money

- It is important for a network to deliver enhanced quality and value for money, and be seen to do so.
- Requires specific objectives, timescales, performance indicators
- Requires regular review and scrutiny.
- Don't be afraid to leave if objectives are no longer being met – membership must be justified.

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Risk

- Membership of international networks involves risk. This must be managed.
- May lead to significant benefits. But possible financial and reputational risks.
- Again, underlines the need for strategy. Keeping the "escape route" open.

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Conclusions

- Membership of international networks can bring huge benefits for staff and students. New opportunities for collaboration in teaching and research. We can all learn so much by sharing experiences and knowledge.
- But, it is impossible to do everything. Time and resources are limited at all levels. Some contacts may be flattering, but are they really helpful? Decisions and choices have to be made. Who to join with and why? What will be the benefits and what will be the costs. How will this be measured? Importance of accountability.
- Internationalisation needs effective planning and strategy, leadership and management.

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Small Group Discussions (1)

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In small groups, please will you consider

Either (1)

You are a Head of Department, responsible for developing academic networking in your department. How will you take this forward? How will you help young staff? What measures of performance will you use?

Or (2)

You are the University Vice-President, responsible for developing academic networking across the whole University. How will you achieve this? What are your priorities? What measures of performance will you use.

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Small Group Discussions: Feedback and Plenary (2)

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I will ask for responses and comments.

Think about actual examples from your own experiences. What worked well? What did not work so well? What can we learn?

Some broader issues:

- How do (1) and (2) link together?
- What styles of leadership are most effective in considering academic networking?
- Think about issues of staff development, both for academic staff and for their leaders.

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Thank You

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