QS

Qualitative Studies

Editorial

Educational Leadership in Higher Education

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This special issue highlights the dedicated middle leader role, often outside the formal managerial line in higher education (HE). These roles, whether labelled as study leaders, educational leaders, course coordinators, or programme leaders, are characterised by their formal appointment to handle special organisational responsibility for coordinating and developing education and teaching in collaboration with colleagues and management. They do this without the benefit of formal managerial power, all while fulfilling their roles as teachers and researchers. Despite their long-standing presence in the educational leadership field, their contributions are often overlooked and undervalued (e.g., Stensaker et al., 2019).

One of the critical aspects of the middle leader's role is to influence and handle quality enhancement (Aamodt et al., 2016). Due to the absence of formal leadership authority, influencing must be carried out discreetly. Thus, the role's organisational contribution can become quite invisible. Colleagues are relieved that someone took the role, so they are off the hook. Management is lessened by the pressure of educational development tasks, the competences, and the overview it requires. Students know where to go if they need help, and the administration has a go-to person who can ease the formal procedures and make things run more smoothly. The role is, as such, organisationally appreciated but is often inadequately and implicitly treated regarding acknowledgement, time, and onboarding. The time spent in the role often does not align with the time that follows, and the criteria for selecting roles are unclear.

The role is often caught in the competition between the HE-interlinked offices: research and education (Baecker, 2010). Traditional markers of success and status in academia typically prioritise research publications and securing funding grants as the pinnacle achievements. This often results in overlooking the importance of teaching and learning-based metrics, leading to the undervaluation and lack of acknowledgement of the middle leader role. As a result, aiming for a position in educational leadership often does not lead to a professorship, although it could be negotiated as a stepping stone to a professorship by taking on the role for a certain period.

In research, educational leadership is a broad and messy concept. For example, the idea can be associated with hierarchical structures through distributed leadership based on the promise that management can delegate some of their decision-making power to specially responsible employees (e.g., Kjeldsen et al., 2020). It can also be related to

middle leaders, both with and without formal managerial power, in the same study (e.g., Bryman, 2007; Grunefeld et al., 2017) if these different leaders have to do with influencing the goal-directed behaviour of others (Bryman, 2007). Both examples miss the point that middle leaders have distinct opportunities compared to formal leaders for influencing the behaviour of others within the authority and power structures of HE institutions. Even though individual studies address the role (e.g., Marshall, 2012; Shah et al., 2019) and research is not new, the field is nevertheless sparse and fragmented. There is a lack of a more explicit and focused picture of how these middle leaders are organisationally constituted and how they can handle the role.

In a Danish context, the role has only recently been highlighted formally in *The Danish Framework for Advancing University Pedagogy* (Universities, 2020) developed by the eight Danish Universities. 'The framework's primary target group is the broad group of academic staff who pursue a university career by conducting research and development-based teaching at the highest international level' (Universities, 2020, p. 2). The framework is divided into two competencies: *the operative space* and *the collegial community*. The latter space, which is explained as teaching and education as a collegial community of practice (Universities, 2020, p. 7), the role is mentioned under Level 3 competencies, where they are expected to act as sparring partners with colleagues and develop colleague teaching, e.g., through guidance and supervision.

This special issue aims to kick-start a currently sparse and fragmented research field. The role is still in its early stages in terms of practice and research. We have received three contributions reflecting this early stage. The future intention is to develop comprehensive and cohesive knowledge about this specific middle leader role.

The first article, "Educational Leadership in collegial decision-making? How Course Leaders and Teachers Participate and Influence Decisions in Planning Meetings," is authored by **Ulrika Bennerstedt and Eva Svärdemo-Åberg**. The article examines how leadership is practised and negotiated in real-time during collegial planning tasks involving decisions. Drawing from video recordings and guided by a leadership-in-interaction theoretical framework, the authors examine educational leadership within course-planning meetings involving course leaders and teachers. This theoretical vantage point allows the authors to concentrate on processes of influence, negotiated interactions,

and shared decision-making, surpassing conventional formal-informal leadership paradigms. The article concludes that team members encounter challenges in establishing a common foundation for decision-making regarding educational changes due to extensive teacher turnover, which hampers collective competence. For course leaders, this involves navigating uncertainties and elucidating the underlying assumptions about their role as collegial leaders without formal managerial authority. Consequently, the authors highlight the pressing need for further research on leadership within educational institutions.

Bjørn Ribers' article "Ethical Pressure and Moral Distress in Middle Leadership: Perspectives from Higher Education in Welfare Professions " is a qualitative study focusing on middle leaders in higher education, especially welfare professionals. The study utilises interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and includes interviews with middle leaders from Danish university colleges. The article explores ethical and values dilemmas these leaders encounter, examining cross-pressure stemming from hierarchical organisational structures. The study highlights three primary themes: values and ethical dilemmas, cross-pressure and moral distress, and the significance of trust, corruption, and listening. The author provides insights into the ethical pressures and moral distress experienced by middle leaders due to tensions between professional values and political and organisational governance.

In the third article, "Using Solicited Audio Diaries to Capture the HE Educational Leader's Ad-Hoc Tasks" by **Sanna Lassen**, a methodical perspective is employed to explore the use of audio diaries as a qualitative method for capturing ad-hoc tasks in higher education, through a single-case study. The author finds a gap in the literature linking audio diaries to ad-hoc tasks. On this basis, the article contributes to methodological insights by expanding on previous uses of audio diaries, focusing on educational leaders outside the managerial hierarchy. These roles are often overlooked as they do not fit traditional management or collegial structures. Understanding their function, including ad-hoc tasks, is considered crucial. The article concludes that audio diaries effectively capture educational leaders' ad-hoc tasks, providing in-depth insights

into their roles. Finally, the author points out that future research must clarify definitions and instructions for better methodological precision.

Finally, due to the limited number of submissions for this issue, we have decided to accept an article that falls outside the usual scope. The article "Cornered by Corona while writing a master's thesis," **by Helle Merete Nordentoft, Pia Seidler Cort, and Anne Larsen**, explores the challenges and expectations associated with writing a master's thesis. The authors argue that previous research has overly focused on the supervisor-supervisee relationship, neglecting to consider how students' daily lives and working conditions affect their writing process. The study presents a single case that illuminates the emotional stress often experienced by students, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. It emphasises the influence of everyday life on thesis writing, drawing attention to a female student's struggle to balance her roles as a mother, student, and citizen during lockdown. This struggle resulted in emotional exhaustion and impeded her progress in writing. As a result, the authors suggest a more comprehensive and empathetic approach to thesis supervision.

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Sanna Lassen is a postdoc at the Centre for Educational Development at Aarhus University. The ongoing research focuses on educational leadership in higher education, specifically emphasising leaders outside the managerial line. This research also involves applying research findings to leadership courses to equip leaders with the necessary skills to encourage collegial collaborations based on data-informed insights.

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