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Exploring the Learning Journeys of Academic Head of  
Department Preparations and Access to Their Roles: The Case  
of a Selected University in Ghana

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**Abstract**

*Leadership training for educational leaders in the academia has been considered paramount to empower them both for leadership and management skills, knowledge and experience necessary to bring about quality in teaching and learning. Majority of the academic leaders are appointed without any preparation for the role and tend to struggle on the role in order to be effective. Most studies carried out on academic leaders in Africa focus mainly on challenges, roles and theories of leadership. This study explores the journeys involved in the preparations of academics who become Head of Departments in a selected university in Ghana in order to enable them play their roles effectively. The case study approach was used to study the journeys involved in the preparations of 16 academic HoDs in a selected university in Ghana, focusing on how they accessed their roles, their understanding about the roles, preparations they have had on the roles and the preparations they would have wished for the roles. It sought to describe, understand and interpret the learning journeys of academic HoDs regarding how they became HoDs and preparations they received to be effective in their roles. Interviews and documentary evidence were employed. Semi structured interviews were conducted with sixteen university head of departments. Using thematic analysis, the study revealed among others that most newly appointed academic HoDs were not given formal training before they began to play their roles. Again, the findings revealed different degrees of preparations which were mainly informal and were not directly linked to the roles of the HoDs, which were consistent with the literature that majority of academic HoDs did not receive preparations for their roles and tended to use their experiences to play their roles. Based on these findings, recommendations are that there should be a formal training*

*on the HoD's duties and their implementations for all newly appointed HoDs to enrich them with the necessary skills and knowledge to make them effective and efficient. There is the need to conduct needs assessment from the HoDs to inform their preparation or training and development of HoDs manual to serve as a reference guide to the HoDs. It is hoped that the findings will contribute to effective preparations of the academic HoDs. The research may also lead to the production of HoD's manuals. More importantly, it may inform policies to identify areas for effective preparations of the academic HoDs.*

**Keywords**

*leadership, management, journeys, preparation, learning*

**1. Introduction**

Over the past years in developing countries, there has been significant shift in leadership and management practice and culture in Higher Education Institutions because of modernization practices enforced by government and funding bodies (Parry, 2013; Jones & Samiei, 2011). These modernization practices include organizational restructuring, demands for increased access to higher education (Bolden et al., 2012), provision of a skilled workforce that can service development needs of a country (Thorp & Goldstein, 2010) and the provision of effective leaders for quality student education (Bush, 2007). This has raised concerns about the quality of educational leadership and management as higher education institutions try to meet these modern practices because studies (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Louis et al., 2010) have indicated that academic leaders plan and implement policies for the attainment of institutional goals.

In considering the importance of educational leadership to universities, Bush (2007) observed that the continually evolving educational reform agenda appears to have seized upon leadership as both an important target for reform and a vehicle for making other changes happen because it sets the tone for implementation of policies in their departments. This calls for educational leaders to be effective in their leadership and management activities.

Smith (2005) opines that the Head of Departments (HODs) in academia plays an influential role in the leadership and management of their duties in the universities. As part of the modernization practices, the HOD is challenged to widen the participation or access to higher education through the notion of cost-effectiveness where student-centered pedagogy is held vital to the social mission of higher education (Dougherty, 2001; Parry, 2013). HoDs are responsible for departmental administration which includes organization of teaching programmes, human resource management, management of other resources and budget which will attract majority of students to their departments.

In Africa, it has been reported that training of educational HoDs will empower them with skills, knowledge and experience necessary to bring about quality in teaching and learning, and commit to continuous improvement standards of education (Bush & Oduro, 2006; Ibrahim, 2011).

Some universities in Ghana have undergone changes such as organizational restructuring in the quest to

meet the modernization practices in leadership and management like widening access to the universities by diversifying their programmes to increase the number of students attending university. The accreditation board monitors and evaluates the university's development through the quality assurance body which ensures internal quality controls by making sure that all activities on campus are done and done well (Antwi, 1992).

“Understanding the learning journeys of academic leadership preparations and access to their roles: The case of the Universities Head of Departments” is major effort designed to throw more light into preparations of a range of HoDs in the case university. Such research, for example, could help in the potential selection process of new HoDs, and could help tailor specific training, development and support based on evidence research for them while at post. This paper aims to fill the gap in the literature on leadership and management preparation of academics who become HoDs in a selected university in Ghana. Once effective processes have been identified, they could offer suggestions to inform policy and practice to ensuring that more departments become vibrant academic centres under the direction of effective HODs.

### *1.1 Statement of the Problem*

Head of Departments are important members of the university's leadership and management structure, playing a critical role in achieving the university's strategic objectives (Middlehurst, 1993; Smith, 2002). The prime role of the academic HoD must be to provide leadership and management in academic (teaching and researching) and administrative issues within the context of the university's statutes concerning departmental governance (Siddique et al., 2011). In providing leadership and management roles to the department as part of a broader leadership and management roles in a faculty, the head of department will have a number of responsibilities.

The ability of HoDs to effectively play their roles may depend upon the background preparations they receive (Chen, 1998). Studies (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1996; Bush & Jackson, 2002; Huber, 2004; Fink, 2005; Gunter & Forrester, 2010 ) indicate that the preparations of academic HoDs play a critical role in helping them to acquire knowledge, skills, experience, and attitudes that will be necessary for their leadership and management roles such as management of staff, teaching and researching to bring about vibrant departments in terms of leading educational effectiveness, improvement and transformation in the university. Muthini (2004) added that HoDs need preparations to enable them to understand the complexity of academic and administrative issues they are supposed to deal with and how to go about them.

It has been established that most heads of department are appointed without any specific leadership and management training, and few receive appropriate in-service training following appointment (Wescott, 2002; Archibong, 2005, Bush & Oduro, 2006; Chu, 2012). Studies on HoDs' management and administrative roles have focused mainly on challenges, theories and career trajectories of academic leadership (Harbey & Dadey, 1993; Oduro & MacBeath, 2003; Bush & Oduro, 2006; Floyd, 2009). In these studies, preparation and development of HoDs is recommended as one of the possible ways of

supporting HoDs to play their roles well.

### *1.2 Aim and Objectives*

The aim of this paper was to describe, understand and interpret the learning journeys of academic HoDs focusing on their accession to the role of HoD and their preparation for the role of HODs in the case university in Ghana.

The paper was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What factors account for academics' movements into HoDs' position?
- 2) How do academic HODs describe and understand their work roles?
- 3) What preparation would they have liked for their roles?

### *1.3 Factors Which Account for HoD's Movements into the Headship Position*

The job descriptions of the academic HoDs give the general picture regarding what is required of the role as well as the person to perform the role. In considering the job description of the University of Essex, the person to be academic HoD is expected to be accountable to the Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellor for the strategic and operational management of the department (University of Essex, 2011). Thus, the person is to be responsible for leading all staff in the department, with a particular focus on leading the academic staff in which he or she advises the School, faculty and other relevant colleagues on discipline specific matters in relation to the development, renewal and implementation of the curriculum, and the student experience, in support of the strategic goals of the University and School. Where appropriate, the person liaises with relevant professional and statutory bodies in relation to the curriculum. Also, the HoD is expected to come out with innovative research and scholarship, provide support to the Head of School in the planning of resources for the School, including staff planning, participation in staff recruitment and selection, and the allocation of work. Contributes as a key player to the School's management team in its planning, implementation, monitoring and review of strategic and operational plans, liaising with other colleagues as appropriate for effective performance of the roles among others.

The University of Ghana generally expects the role of the academic HoD to be to guide and manage the department to achieve its potentials for quality delivery in the entire range of academic activity within the framework of building a world class research-intensive university (University of Ghana, 2016). Therefore, in appointing one for the HoDs' position, a priority is given to the person having a track record of high quality publications which is evidenced by a professorial role with the ability to talk with people and to understand them as he or she leads and manages them for effective departmental performance (University of Essex, 2011; University of Ghana, 2016; McCall, 1998& Hand, 1981). Given the demands of the position of a Head of Department, and the leadership and managerial role they play, Peters (1994) noted that it is curious that little attention is paid to the manner in which HoDs are chosen and trained as they are picked from within the academic staff ranks that have no direct bearing on leadership and managerial skill. Getting to know how one becomes a head of department is very important because it could go a long way to determine how effective a person is for the position.

Thus, any one who vies for a position may have some kind of knowledge about it than the one who for reasons best known to authorities and was appointed for that position (Noe, 2002). This could also inform the decision of authorities to appoint one for the HoDs' position.

A number of factors such as highly experienced and usually male (Gronn, 2003; Pashiardis & Ribbins, 2003) or on the basis of seniority (Bezzina, 2011) as well the job description where demands or expectations of the role of a HoD are shown may account for a person becoming a HoD. Bush (2008) identified clearly two different approaches in which people become academic HoDs as by candidates' application and by a planned approach which leads to central decisions about who should be considered for the position. Considering the first approach, some people are motivated to be a HoD and actively seeking out the role as part of career planning. Through mentoring processes where a leader assigns some of his or her responsibilities to a person to play, a person might identify through a need analysis what his or her strengths are and what challenges him or her might encounter. They may seek the role description of a HoD and then begin to plan their Professional Development to enable them to meet the requirements.

Role descriptions of the academic HoDs have both similarities and differences from the various universities. Taking, for instance, the universities of Ghana, Essex and Case study, they all expect the HoD to lead and manage the department so that it achieves its potential and delivers excellence in the full portfolio of academic activity, within the context of the operation and strategic development of the Faculty and University. Thus, the HoD is expected to be a role model who can lead talk with integrity about research, teaching and administration of both human and non-human resources. However, as the University of Ghana is research focused, the Case University has a speciality in teaching disciplines and is research focused. Therefore, one may be informed by such expectations of the roles of the academic HoDs and prepared for the position.

A research conducted by Dezure, Shaw, and Rojewski (2014) on 19 academic administrators concerning why people take up leadership positions revealed that most people play informal roles such as office staff, graduate programme coordinator, curriculum or search committee member and department or college advisory committee member which serve as stepping-stones to take up any formal academic positions they qualify for. Equally, the academic HoD may have occupied such position or positions before and may be motivated to take up their leadership position as such.

#### *1.4 Head of Departments' Role*

Considering how involving the work of an academic HoD is, it will be of importance to explore how the role of a HoD is constructed in the literature. Northouse (2013) indicated that the Head is the leader of departmental colleagues to help maintain vital and educationally purposeful departmental programmes, in terms of the awards that are offered on successful completion of a course of study. It is this that is arguably the public good that is enhanced by cutting edge research that informs the learning and teaching in the provision of the curriculum that is administered to ensure all quality assurance standards are met at an optimal level. Enyeart (2011a) was of the view that the role and primary tasks

of a HoD remain ambiguous and unclear as the higher/tertiary education system is a complex and unique administrative domain. This view indicates the difficulty in highlighting specific job-related tasks and duties and to classify the position as either an academic or administrative position.

Fitzgerald (2004) asserted that academic HoDs play multiple roles which fall between the element of leadership and management in which they determine and implement policies. This is true because in an attempt to play a visionary role, the HoDs determine policies and visions for the effective running of their departments and may influence the democratic nature of this in terms of enabling participation through committees. In the same vein, HoDs implement policies that are handed down by the university management as well as those formulated within their Departments. Siddique et al. (2011) indicated that the roles academic HoDs play fall under teaching, researching and administration.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Research Design*

The study took an inductive approach so that subjective meaning of respondents' own experiences, interpretations and actions could be developed and to try to generate a theory rather than the deductive approach, which reasons from statements where hypothesis exists and where a theory may be tested by the research (Bryman, 2004). The case study approach was employed to explore the learning journeys of 16 academic HoDs preparations and access to their roles in a university in Ghana. The case study focuses on a range of factors within a "bounded instance" (Merriam, 1988, p. 7). In this study, the bounded instances are set by individual academic HoDs working in different departments in either the same college or different colleges in the selected university which, in ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, is called the Peace University.

To be able to produce the data necessary to undertake this case study, a life history approach was used to get the personal histories of the case. Roberts (2002) believed life histories deal with the collection and interpretation of personal histories or testimonies. For others, life histories provide a rich source of data that enable researchers to explore the life course and to examine the relationships between cause and effect, and agency and structure.

It could be seen that to be able to understand leadership preparations of academics who become HoDs, the above key assumptions linked to this approach fit in very well with the main purpose of this research. Hearing and analysing stories from HoDs of their own experiences are better ways of getting to describe, understand and interpret knowledge about accessing the role of HoD, the professional practice of a HoD, how HoDs are prepared for this role and how HoDs would have liked to have been prepared for this role.

#### *2.1.1 Population and Sampling Strategy*

The target population comprised academic all the 59 academic HoDs in the study area from five colleges. Purposive sampling which is a deliberately non-random method of selecting participants for research and allows individuals to be selected because they have knowledge relevant for the study

(Bowling, 2002) was used to identify appropriate participants. This is because participants are those who have the required status or experience, or are known to possess special knowledge to provide the information researchers seek.

### 2.1.2 Data Analysis

The data was analysed thematically. Techniques from authors such as Bryman (2008), Silverman (2006), Miles and Huberman (1994) and Merriam (2009) considered suitable for life history data analysis were used for the data analysis. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), every qualitative analysis happens to be in three stages. These stages in other words what involvement in the research will entail and what both parties can expect from participation.

I also drew from qualitative researchers such as Merriam (2009) who maintained that analysis of a case study data should find the similarities, dissimilarities and patterns so that a substantive description and interpretations could be provided for the study. According to Aronson (1994), the pattern of experience comes from direct quotations and paraphrasing. The related patterns were combined into sub-themes to obtain a comprehensive view of the participants and supported with excerpts of the data. Pseudonyms were given to all the participants to ensure anonymity. Brief quotations from the data were used to bring out the true reflection of exact words said by research participants (Creswell, 2005) to the description. In addition, Creswell (2007) suggested a linear but iterative analysis. This process began as soon as the first edited

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Research Question One

The first research question explored the factors which accounted for academic HoDs movement into the headship position. The findings revealed that the selection of academic HoD hangs mainly on appointment from the Vice Chancellor of the University in consultation from the Deans but the eligibility of most of the HoDs for the position is limited as they were mainly senior lecturers below the preferred rank (professor) as stated in the policy document of the case university and the literature. To be appointed by these authorities however, is dependent on a number of factors. This connects with accessing the role of a HoD before he or she can be prepared or developed on the role (French & Murphy, 2005; Zaccaro, 2007; Bush, 2008). However, these experiences and characteristics are not directly linked to the roles of the academic HoDs; they are considered to be what the appointing authorities want from academic members who are to become academic HoDs. These factors are seniority, competency, willingness to serve and length of term limits. The study revealed that HoDs are all the time appointed from academic senior members of the department. This is because these members of the academic staff are senior in terms of rank and are also presumed to be competent due to the high level of knowledge, skills and experiences they have accumulated over the years. The study also revealed that willingness to serve in the capacity as HoD can never be overlooked since it determines whether a qualified academic member would want to move to the HoDs' position or not. Hence, the pathway to the HoDs'



position is not that smooth.

### *3.2 Research Question Two*

The study also examined how academic HoDs describe and understand their work practice. The key findings were that academic HoDs in a university broadly play the role of departmental leadership and management. This is in line with the literature on the role of the academic HoD which mainly falls under the element of leadership and management (Fitzgerald, 2004) which stems from the art of getting things done through others by directing their efforts towards the achievement of pre-determined goals and formulation of broad objectives. It was revealed that the work of the academic HoD involves a number of activities geared towards the growth of the department in particular and the university in general. These activities, among others design or plan of learning and teaching activities which involves review and development of good programmes to meet the current demands of human resource base in the country, teach or support learning as they make provisions for teaching and learning materials and supervise both human and material resources in the department towards the standard set to create vibrant academic departments. In supervising the human resources which comprise both academic and non-academic staff, the HoDs make sure that they do their work as expected of them. Again, HoDs ensure that qualified students and academic staff are maintained by recommending the staff for appointment and selecting the students. However, the selection of the administrative staff is done by the central administration of the case university for which HoDs do not have a role in it. The HoDs manage inflows and outflows of moneys in the department with the consents of their Deans as well as managing others such as furniture, stationeries and equipment.

Additionally, HoDs liaise with other departments both within and outside the case university in order to maintain a healthy relationship and good collaboration for their developments. This enables HoDs to lead and manage their departments smoothly. More so is the fact that HoDs in the case university were found to be liaising not only with other departments in the University, but also with departments outside the case university. This aspect of the role though similar to the view of Northouse (2013), their mode of delivery differs. Northouse's view was that the HoDs should have effective liaison between the departmental colleagues and administrative superiors so as to have smooth leading and managing in their departments. However, the data from this study indicated that they liaised beyond the departments in the university. This perhaps gives a fair picture on the horizon within which the academic HoDs work. The HoDs make sure that all policies formulated as well as activities in the department are carried out accordingly by making available the needed resources to implement them. That is, they implement policy decisions relating to maintaining high learning standards.

It was found that academic HoDs play these roles in addition to their mandated duties as lecturers (teaching, researching and community service) and, thus, make their work quiet demanding making lot of them not enjoying the role of HoD. Issues such as time consuming, numerous demands on the role and difficulties in playing the roles have made a lot of them not enjoy their roles. Though few expressed their enjoyment on their roles, they were mainly on the fact that they were leaders to the rest

of staff in whom they all rally behind. It also emerged from the study that HoDs do not play the roles alone but do so in collaboration with other members in their departments and their respective Deans. The HoDs therefore are expected to maintain a good relationship with other members in the department. They are to explain issues to them so that they will understand things better and contribute their quota well. In effect, transparency is paramount to the work of the academic HoDs. Overall, the evidence showed that the academic HoDs play both leadership and management roles but in different ways or capacities which call for them to be more resourced in the areas of leading and managing a department in order to be effective on their role because, they are academic members who have applied to teach in the university.

Clearly, the roles played by HoDs are mainly leadership and management role with many facets which would be daunting for an academic who has not gone through any preparation and achieved an appreciable knowledge on the role. Considering the diverse leadership and management roles that the academic HoDs play, they would need skills and knowledge in leadership and management to be able to perform their roles effectively (Bush & Jackson, 2002; Huber, 2004; Fink, 2005; Gunter & Forrester, 2010)

### *3.3 Research Question Three*

The data on the three research question which deals with the preparation academic HoDs would want to receive for their roles have brought to the fore two different forms. The first one is about the timing of the preparation while the second form deals with the areas for preparation. Regarding timing, the HoDs wished for preparations that come before the assumption of duty and that, during the stay on the role, which is, “on the job training”.

Preparation for newly appointed HoDs before their assumption of duty or role is recommended as one of the ways of making them effective for the task ahead. This will help equip them with the desirable knowledge and skills that will be needed to implement the roles stated in their appointment letters and to ensure a smooth take off else they could mess up in the initial stage. Again, it will offer them the opportunity to ask questions for clarifications on areas which are not clear to them. This background knowledge said to be very necessary in providing the basic skills needed to make the HoD effective in the performance of their roles is similar to what Chen (1998) expressed that the ability of HoDs to effectively play their roles largely depends on the background preparations they receive. Whereas that of on the job training is seen to be a refresher course which goes a long way to remind HoDs of knowledge they acquired earlier on the job. Furthermore, new things keep cropping up as they play the role or new challenges may come their ways which need to be addressed with knowledge from such trainings. This is in line with Bush and Glover (2004) who maintained that if academic HoDs are given training through work based learning, they will be able to determine what they want to achieve and how they will put efforts to achieve them. When they meet together for such trainings, they can share with one another their challenges and success stories on the role. Such training is believed to create a healthy relationship among the various academic HoDs and to establish a network in which they can communicate whenever

possible for effective performance.

In the areas of training, they suggested preparations mainly on the management of administrative issues such as how to respond to correspondences that come to the department, how to manage the finances of the department and how to organise meetings. This indicates that the HoDs mainly want training on the implementations of their roles to enable them play their roles well. Furthermore, some technical areas such as finance management and some office rudiments keeping were not captured in the formal training and as such confirmed the views of the majority of the respondents who received the “on the job training”. Notwithstanding the demands for managerial training, the HoDs also requested for leadership training on their roles in order to effectively lead other members in the department to achieve their goals. This means that the academic HoDs want preparations in diverse areas but not a single role just as Bellamy and Portin (2011) suggested that leader preparation cannot be limited to any single role but rather integration between instructional leadership and administrator preparation

The data confirmed studies by Bush and Jackson (2002), Huber (2004), Fink (2005) and Gunter and Forrester (2010) which indicated that the preparations of academic head of departments play a critical role in helping them to acquire knowledge, skills, experience, and attitudes that will be necessary for their leadership and management roles such as management of staff, teaching and researching to bring about vibrant departments in terms of ensuring educational effectiveness, improvement and transformation in the university.

Considering the preparations that academic HoDs would want to receive, it could be seen that they do not possess adequate knowledge in areas they suggested for training and perhaps could not play the role as they have to help achieve the modernization needs of Peace University.

#### **4. Implications for Theory**

Due to significant shift in leadership and management practices and culture in higher education institutions of the developing countries because of modernization practices such as organizational restructuring, demands for increased access to higher education and provision of a skilled workforce that can service development needs of a country, it is paramount to train the academic HoDs to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge needed to carry or perform their roles effectively because they set the tone for the implementations of policies and activities in their departments but the evidence from the research seems to indicate that the academic HoDs in Peace University are not yet properly trained for their roles. Some HoDs have not received any form of “on the job training” and do not believe something of that nature takes place at the university whilst other HoDs have received ‘on the job training’ but it seems superficial in nature. The first contribution of this thesis is that the Peace University has to train all newly appointed HoDs on their roles and their implementations to equip them for effective performance of their roles.

The study also revealed that the preparation programmes for academic HoDs should be well structured to detail the HoDs about their roles and their implementations before they play the roles so as to ensure

smooth take off in the performance of the roles. This will avoid the initial struggles they go through to perform their roles.

The empirical evidence suggests that the HoDs possess varying characteristics found in the statute of the Peace University which qualified them for the VC's appointment to their HoDs' position. However, it is not all of them who were willing to serve as HoDs. Furthermore, most of the HoDs were not aware of their appointments until the day they received the appointment letter. Therefore, there is the need to seek one's readiness to serve in the capacity as HoD before he or she is appointed. This will get the person more committed to the roles and could be done either through election where they apply themselves for the position or they are contacted first for their approval before the appointment.

### **5. Recommendations for Policy and Practice.**

- 1) Formal preparations on the roles of the academic HoDs should be widely opened to cover all newly appointed HoDs to benefit them all
- 2) Preparation programmes should be informed by their roles, needs assessment and the current practices to help address the leadership and management challenges of the academic HoDs. Furthermore, opportunities should be created for academic members to pursue post graduate education in PhD to equip them to be critical for their leadership roles.
- 3) Evidence suggests that the timing for HoDs preparations should start before they start to perform the roles so as to equip the HoDs to perform effectively.
- 4) The form with which the formal preparation for the HoDs takes should be uniform to all. For instance, if it takes the form of workshop or seminars, it should be the same to all and also the same span of time.

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