

Supporting the role of Associate Dean in universities: an alternative approach to management development

Article

Accepted Version

Preston, D. and Floyd, A. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2008-7831> (2016) Supporting the role of Associate Dean in universities: an alternative approach to management development. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 70 (3). pp. 264-280. ISSN 1468-2273 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12099>
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To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12099>

Publisher: Wiley

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PAPER SUBMITTED TO THE HIGHER EDUCATION QUARTERLY

JOURNAL (December 2015)

**Supporting the role of Associate Dean in universities: An alternative approach to
Management Development**

Diane Preston and Alan Floyd, Open University

Abstract

Located between senior management and academic staff, the role of the Associate Dean in Universities appears to be growing in number, complexity and importance in recent years. A role arguably fraught with complexity, it remains largely undefined and under-researched. While little is known about the role in general, less still is known about their leadership development experiences. This paper reports on a Leadership Foundation funded UK study to explore what training and role preparation Associate Deans have had. Data were collected from 15 interviews with Associate Deans from 5 different institutions and a follow up on-line survey of Associate Deans (n=172) throughout England and Wales. The study found that 60% of respondents had received little or no formal management training and that 24% of those who had received training reported it to be only moderately useful or of little or no use. In contrast, however, the respondents identified the establishment of informal learning and support networks with other Associate Deans as being a vital source of support. The paper argues that an alternative model of management development, based on relational and social learning theories, might be a more appropriate way to help support this group of academic middle leaders.

Key words:

associate dean, training, development, management, leadership, learning

Biographical note:

Diane Preston is a senior lecturer and Head of Department at the Open University Business School in the UK; Alan Floyd is a senior lecturer in leadership and management in the Faculty of Education and Language Studies at the Open University (40 words)

Introduction

Changes occurring within the Higher Education sector in the UK and elsewhere have been well documented over the past few years (see, for example, Deem *et al* 2007; Bolden *et al.*, 2009; Fredman and Doughney, 2012) with the focus being mainly on what Pollitt (1995, p. 134) originally called 'new public management' (NPM). Over the last two decades it has been argued that universities around the world have been “fundamentally directed” by the tenets of this approach (Deem *et al.*, 2007, p. 1). NPM focuses upon cost cutting, transparency in resource allocation and increased performance management of both staff and resources. Whilst viewed negatively in much of the literature, this approach has been implemented internationally across the Public Sector as a way of increasing efficiency (Dan and Pollit, 2015). In many Higher Education Institutions across the world, this approach has resulted in a major review of organisational infrastructure and the systems of administration and management. One of the consequences is that middle leadership roles such as the Associate Dean have increased in number, complexity and importance (Bryman , 2007; Preston and Price, 2012; Floyd and Preston, 2014). At the same time, however,

the role of Associate Dean remains relatively under researched with previous studies tending to focus on relatively small data sets from single institutions (see, for example, Preston and Price, 2012; Pepper and Giles, 2015). While little is known about the role of the Associate Dean in general, less still is known about the leadership development experiences of academics who hold such positions. This is surprising given the perceived importance of these new leadership positions in the current higher education climate, a climate characterised by complexity and uncertainty. The purpose of this article is to fill this gap and contribute to the knowledge base in this area by drawing on data from a Leadership Foundation for Higher Education funded study which aimed to explore how the role of Associate Dean was defined, perceived and experienced across a range of universities in the UK. The focus specifically in this paper is on issues of training and development for Associate Deans whilst acknowledging that, for example, motivations for taking on the role and future careers plans will also affect their experiences. This broader context is considered elsewhere (Floyd and Preston 2014) whilst the specific research questions addressed in this article are:

- What training and role preparation have academics who become Associate Deans in the UK had?
- What support, training and development would help them in the future?

In answering these questions, and drawing on recent theoretical ideas regarding leadership and management development practice, the paper makes an original and important contribution to the literature on academic leadership. The theoretical framework adopted in this article is that of looking at management learning and development as a more social and relational process, and the social constructivist

methodology employed in the study also reflects this approach. This framework and methodology are developed in more detail in later sections. Through this research, it is hoped that a more thorough understanding of the support, training and development needs of Associate Deans will emerge which is important for policy-makers, managers and researchers. Such knowledge, for example, could help tailor specific training, development and support for academics who aspire to, or who are in, Associate Dean roles and help to build their leadership capacity potentially allowing them to take on more senior roles in the future.

This article is organised over six sections. Following this introduction, the role of the Associate Dean is explored in more depth. Next, the theoretical framework is outlined. Then, an account of how the research was carried out is given. Finally, the findings are presented and discussed, with some recommendations for policy and practice highlighted.

The Associate Dean

The Associate Dean role is arguably a role that is still not well understood in higher education with previous research focusing more on more clearly defined academic manager positions such as the Head of Department (Sarros *et al*, 1997; Floyd, 2012, 2015), the Professor (Rayner *et al*, 2010; Evans, 2014), the Dean (de Boer and Goedegebuure, 2009; Harvey, Shaw, McPhail and Erickson, 2013) or the Vice Chancellor (Bosetti and Walker, 2010). Below the level of Dean, but above the level of Department Head, Associate Deans can work in a number of different areas such as teaching and learning, research, and enterprise but the roles are often not well defined (Floyd and Preston, 2014). In supporting the Dean, they should provide a link between the academic voice and the ever-changing demands being placed upon

Universities. Indeed, a previous study of Associate Deans (Preston & Price, 2012) suggested that it was the opportunity to represent colleagues and an overall sense of duty that were the main motivations for academics agreeing to take on such management positions. As a conduit of the academic voice, the Associate Dean is a middle management role that should be crucial in university planning and organisational structure and a key part of recent calls for a move toward more distributed leadership models within the higher education sector (Bolden *et al* 2008, 2009; Corrigan 2013). In many countries, specific investment has been made in establishing training and development programmes for individuals in these complex middle management roles. In the UK, for example, the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) was established in 2004 offering executive level training courses for those new to management and leadership in higher education. Despite this, most of the Associate Deans in this study still report that they have received very little training and development and that which had been provided appeared to be based on normative models that are not sensitive to needs that vary by function and level (Hill, 2004). Provision appears to be sporadic and of a ‘firefighting’ nature, which seems to suggest that, firstly, Associate Deans are assumed to need little support in a role that they report to be fraught with complexity (Preston and Price, 2012, Floyd and Preston, 2014) and, secondly, that universities are still not embracing the important premise that support and training should be structurally and culturally embedded. If, as the study reported here suggests, there is an absence of induction, training and development before and throughout the Associate Deans’ tenure, how can they be expected to play a part in organisational change? The question remains: what type of training and support do they need or want and what works best for them given their experiences in the role?

Theoretical Framework: Re-thinking Management Development

In the area of training and development, recent literature has questioned the need for a traditional set of training courses to be provided within organisations. This is accompanied by calls for more alternative and critical approaches (Edwards *et al*, 2013) which draw on experiential theories of learning. Indeed, recent research in Australia has called specifically for universities to reflect on these issues when designing appropriate learning and development opportunities for novice middle leaders (Franken et al., 2015). This thinking is influenced by a recognition that studies of leadership and management should be viewed through a relational, social and situated perspective (Cunliffe, 2009; Kempster and Stewart, 2010) where learning and experience is very much embedded in practice. This area of research has encouraged training and development practices to become more contextually situated, drawing on the work of such as Burgoyne and Stuart's (1977) on naturalistic leadership learning and on wider notions of situated leadership learning (Bennis and Thomas, 2002; Janson, 2008). Ideas about management development have moved away from a traditional, directive and 'training needs analysis' (TNA) approach to one which focuses on individual and practice based learning. The work on communities of practice - a model of situated learning based on the idea of engagement in learning communities - by Wenger and Lave (1991), for example, is a critique of the ways in which learning has traditionally been seen as something that is individually based and has a clear beginning and end; much like our understanding of a training course at work. The idea of a community of practice is intended to encourage an alternative or complementary view of learning as an ongoing, social and intersubjective experience. It is proposed that individuals will come together and form communities based on common interests and a desire to enhance their own learning and development. This

notion is closely associated with the concept of the 'learning organisation' which draws on the work of Senge (1990) and Argyris and Schön (1992). One of the key tenets of the learning organisation is that learning becomes part of the very fabric of the organisation and its policies and strategy, rather than just seeing learning as what happens when employees get sent on training courses. There has been an increasing focus on the need for individuals to develop a sense of ownership of their own learning objectives, methods and outcomes rather than relying on these being set by their employer. This means looking at overall support, development and learning rather than specific training courses on specific subjects being seen as a panacea for all. As Vince (2011, p.44) puts it, instructional designers now think that "passive approaches to learning reinforce passive approaches to managing". Individuals need to be encouraged to question whether a particular training and development programme is right for them and/or, as found in this study, look at the more informal and alternative aspects of learning and development. Consistent with this shift from training to learning is to try and get individuals to situate learning in the 'real world' – or in the job they do - where there are greater opportunities for practice-based learning. The basic philosophy of this kind of 'action inquiry' traces its roots back to Kurt Lewin (1946) where learning is assumed to be best achieved within practice, rather than learning about practice through training courses. A core component of this approach is peer learning (Boud, 2001), related practices of peer coaching (Parker *et al.*, 2008), and peer assessment (Brutus and Donia, 2010). All these practices are based on the idea of individuals learning from one another, as development moves beyond independent towards interdependent or mutual learning.

Despite all these developments in the field of management and leadership development, in this study it was found that, where Associate Deans had been offered

training and development, it appeared to be based on a traditional and masculine model, emulating normative, and somewhat outdated, conceptions of leadership. Mirroring more recent literature, what Associates Deans in this study had established for themselves were informal support networks with other Associates Deans. These key ideas will be developed later on in this paper.

Method

In line with the theoretical framework outlined above, the whole study was embedded within a social constructivist framework (Cresswell 2014); to answer the study's research questions, an exploratory, sequential mixed methods design was adopted. In the first stage of the study interviews were conducted with Associate Deans from five different institutions. As one of the aims of the study was to compare results between traditional and modern universities, each institution was categorised as either a "pre 1992" or "post 1992" University – in the UK former polytechnics and colleges of higher education were given university status in 1992, hence the phrase. There were 15 participants overall (7 from pre and 8 from post 1992 institutions) and the sample contained male (n=11) and female (n=4) staff with a range of ages, levels of experience and discipline backgrounds.

Following ethical approval (which included ensuring anonymity for people and institutions, and developing detailed information sheets and consent forms) participants were invited to take part via email. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour and were recorded. The interviews were based on a semi-structured schedule, linked to the study's key research questions and developed from a literature review, and included questions on each participant's experiences of leadership preparation and development, such as "what training did you have for the

role?” and, “how might you have been better prepared for the role?” The schedule was peer reviewed before use. The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis techniques outlined by Lichtman (2010) which involved reading and coding each transcript, merging and reflecting on these codes to form larger categories and emerging conceptual themes, and then further analysing these themes by comparing and contrasting them to the reviewed literature.

In the second stage of the project, a survey of Associate Deans was undertaken using an online questionnaire (Survey Monkey) and , in keeping with the study’s overall theoretical framework, it contained both closed and open questions. The survey was developed following guidelines put forward by Gehlbach and Brinkworth (2011) and was subject to an initial peer review followed by a full piloting exercise involving Associate Deans in the two researchers own universities. Subsequently, an invitation and link to the survey was sent out via email to 472 Associate Deans across the UK (England, Scotland and Wales only). Participant names were gleaned from websites and phone calls to University Human Resources departments. The survey consisted of both closed and open ended questions. In total 172 Associate Deans completed the survey giving a response rate of 36%, although not all of these respondents answered every question. The results of the survey were analysed and cross tabulated to compare data from those who were Associate Deans in pre 1992 Universities with those from post 1992 Universities. The survey participants came from a range of faculty areas and academic disciplines with 21 (15%) representing Physical and Natural Sciences, 35 (25%) representing Life Sciences and Medicine, 16 (11%) representing Humanities, 29 (21%) representing Social Sciences, 8 (6%) representing Arts, and 32 (23%) representing Business. 31 participants worked in large faculties

that had more than one distinct focus, for example, “Education, Arts and Business” and “Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences”.

The findings from both stages of the study have been combined and organised thematically, and are presented in the following section.

What training and development have Associate Deans had?

The first key message to emerge in relation to training and development experiences was that the majority of Associate Deans in this study had received no or very little training to help prepare them for taking on the role. For example, in response to being asked whether they had received any formal training one of the interviewees commented:

Certainly not initially. There have been sporadic bouts of, ‘let’s do this for all senior staff’, but they rarely last any length of time and are rarely seen through.

Similarly, another said:

Not really, no, and in fact that is something we started to look at recently...I ended up arguing that because it is a bit of a step up for almost anybody, some training is necessary.

These findings were also reflected in the survey, with 60% of Associate Deans reporting that they had received little or no training. The details of these results are shown in Figure One below.

INSERT FIGURE ONE HERE

The second key finding to emerge from the interview data was that, for those participants that had received training, it was felt that most of it had been of fairly low quality and perceived to be of limited value. For example, one Associate Dean commented:

What we have done is paid a lot of money to have an external organisation facilitating this stuff with us. What tends to happen is there is some really useful stuff in the first couple of sessions but actually after that there is not an awful lot more added value. Then it is sometimes compounded by the fact that they tend to put their best people on first and then they disappear and it is not so good after that.

While another explained:

There's a management staff development program that's sort of mandatory for people in senior jobs in the University, so you have those to go to and I have to say they were atrocious for the most part. Not very good at all and either pointing to the bleeding obvious or putting things across in such a tedious way that didn't really relate to anything in a helpful manner.

Another interviewee felt that any training needed to be more intellectually challenging:

You think, ‘just raise the intellectual level a bit about this, make it a bit more sophisticated’ rather than just re-arranging the bullet points that you have seen before.

Although slightly more encouraging than the interview data, the survey results also suggest that training and development experiences were fairly mixed and a cause for concern for many Associate Deans across the sample. For example, from the 40% of Associate Deans that had indicated that they had received training, it appears that a lot of this training was focused on procedural and process issues. For instance, 30% had experienced training on budgets, 58% on University procedures, 48% on Human Resource Management procedures, and 25% on chairing meetings (Table 1).

INSERT TABLE ONE HERE

Furthermore, as can be seen in figure 2 below, only 20% of Associate Deans perceived the training they had received to be extremely useful, with almost a quarter of the sample (24%) perceiving that it was only moderately useful or of little or no use.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

What training do they feel they need?

One of the most powerful findings that emerged from the interviews was that informal support networks with other Associate Deans were seen as crucial, as one explained:

Well, we deliberately meet as a group very regularly, but also there will not be a week passes where I don't meet up with the other Associate Deans because we're on the same committee, two or three times a week usually. ...So there's a regular interchange of ideas and we co-author things together and that sort of thing. So that's a great support.

The Associates Deans interviewed seemed to work together and stay together, often working on the same committees and/or projects forming a social group where they could meet and discuss work matters. One explained how:

With the group, you have a richer experience, you are testing it out a bit more with a much wider community of the university and you are probably arriving at solutions and proposals that are really going to work well because of all that background. So I would say that they are definitely the people that help most.

One of the universities had instigated regular meetings of Associate Deans and the members had kept it going. The moral support, sharing of problems and being able to ask someone in the same position what they would do was a very important form of support for Associate Deans. For example, one said:

Often, in confidence, emails will go around, what are you doing about widening participation? What grade is your learning and teaching co-ordinator at? So, rather than be picked off individually we try to have a

cohesive response to things. We also enjoy each other's company and if you don't laugh then you'd cry really, wouldn't you?

From the interview data, there appeared to be a need for a programme of training and support about the role itself, working with others doing the same job, rather than generic management skills. As one participant said by way of advice for someone considering the Associate Dean role:

As part of it, negotiate an appropriate lengthy programme of staff development, personal staff development because it is isolating, it is lonely, it is very challenging and so having that I think is very important. And get yourself networked with the others at the same level. If formal networks don't exist within your institution, create them. Get that regular contact with people doing the same job as yourself, some of whom will be more experienced, some of whom will be new like you and find out how they deal with situations and learn from it.

Another suggested that the university should consider the training needs of their Associate Deans on a 'case by case basis' about their training needs because "different people will come with different experience".

Networking with senior colleagues around the university was also considered by most interviewees to be crucial to success. One Associate Dean advised:

Exploit the networks that are being presented to you because it's really the only way that you can keep the Faculty fully integrated with the university.

The survey data also reflected the fact that many Associate Deans would appreciate leadership development opportunities that involved working closely with other colleagues and across the University and beyond. As shown in table 2, when asked what training would help them in their role, the most popular choice that the Associate Deans identified with was that of strategic leadership (51%) with the next most popular being coaching and mentoring (32%) and working across different academic disciplines (32%). Other important and related needs that emerged through the analysis of responses to open ended questions included networking with Associate Deans elsewhere in the sector and attending update meetings (on a national basis) to determine national trends in UK higher education sector.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Interestingly, and rather worryingly, 21 Associate Deans in the survey (14%) felt that they did not need any training in their role with two adding the following comments:

Most 'leadership' training in higher education creates drones who are not able to think outside of the box

I am sceptical about training in these domains. I am leading an academic mission; it is a particular nuance that is distinct from general management and I believe we don't have enough of this nuance in universities."

These findings may reflect the fact that these respondents' past experiences of training courses have been too generic and that the events and associated learning activities were not made specific enough to the context in which the Associate Dean was working, thus putting people off further training opportunities. This finding also emerged from the interviews, with some participants bemoaning the fact that any training and development they had experienced tended to be too generalised and lacking acknowledgement of context, role and individuals. For example, one said that it was, "Very broad; I call it sheep dipping."

Discussion

The data collected in this study suggest that the training and development for the role of Associate Deans in UK universities is still not as Burgoyne & Turnbull-James (2001) purported it should be; that is, driven from the top, culturally attuned and supporting and driving business need. This is in the sense that leadership development and training is perhaps still not seen as a priority in universities and generic training is offered rather than acknowledging the culture and situation of the individuals concerned. The Associate Deans who were interviewed lamented the lack of management development and overall support they had received in their roles and the most prominent theme in the advice they would offer to others considering the role was to "negotiate an appropriate lengthy programme of staff development". Over a decade ago, Deem (2000) found in her study of managers and administrators in higher education that two thirds had not received any formal training and that the majority felt overwhelmed with the pace and scope of the role. Our study, some fifteen years later, suggests little has happened to allay this pressure in the case of

Associate Deans. We would argue that not only is the role a difficult and complex one but it is operating in a very context specific setting, higher education, where change has been rapid and complex. In this study we found that, where formal training had been offered or undertaken, it tended to be sporadic and unsatisfactory. We found that Associate Deans had in a sense moved away from this and had found their main source of learning and support to come from others in the same role. This aligns with an earlier study (Scott *et al*, 2008) of the development needs of Australian academic managers where it was concluded that informal mentoring was the most effective way of learning about management and leadership.

Based on the results of our study, Associate Deans naturally look for informal peer group learning. An absence of training courses might reflect the move from traditional training needs based analysis to a more individualised and contextualised learning but this does not appear to be in place either. Where Associate Deans had formed support groups they seems to have been despite of, not because of, the provision being offered to them. In short, individuals in roles like the Associate Dean not only need universities to understand their role better but to acknowledged the 'dual-ness of it in terms of coping with the move out of the 'dressing room' and into management. As Currie (2014, p.14) noted, this move from academic to manager can be:

A distressing experience, where they have to pursue organisational interests in a way that potentially impacts negatively upon their academic peers. Hence, they may retain their orientation towards the interests of their academic peers. Despite the above, there appears little organisational support for incipient hybrid managers.

The types and level of support and, more specifically, the training and development for Associate Deans has to take place in the particular context of the university; at best, it requires an involvement in, and knowledge of, not only one's own university but of the higher education sector in general and the changes within it. We argue that academic manager roles need to be more clearly defined, so that targeted and relevant support is available. This study seems to suggest that this is not yet happening. What Associate Deans are asking for reinforces these current debates about management development in that rather than a 'sheep dipping' and firefighting approach to learning and development, they want sustained support and, in particular, learning which involves other individuals doing the same job.

What for the future?

Based on the results of our study, and reflecting on our theoretical framework of relational and social learning, we offer six recommendations for university senior management teams regarding the training and development for Associate Deans.

Firstly, training, development and wider support needs to be focused specifically on the particular person, role and context and incorporate the participation of others in similar roles and contexts from both within the same university but also from across the Higher Education sector to allow key issues to be compared and contrasted.

Secondly, the creation of the group of Associate Deans across the institution needs to be formalised with an attempt to tie this into a network of Associate Deans at other institutions so that comparisons can be made regarding developments in the sector both in terms of general and specific problems.

Thirdly, to ensure that any development activity based on Associate Deans working together also has an element of continuity, a social group and/or network to draw on and communicate to/with afterwards. This appears to be extremely important to individuals in the role in terms of moral support and coping with the job, both in terms of understanding the job and dealing with its breath and complexity and also to propagate good and consistent practice regarding change across the sector.

Fourthly, there appears to be a need for a programme of training and development about the role itself, rather than solely generic leadership and management skills. Effective training and development needs to be contextualised within the dynamics of changing higher education context.

Fifthly, any development plan should provide some training for Associate Deans before taking on the role which should help them to understand more about what the role entails, particularly from other current or previous incumbents. It seems important that, in order to motivate individuals to do these roles, it would seem sensible to promote the individual and organisational benefits of taking on the role and find practical ways of supporting individuals doing the job. In addition, any training and development programme should be individually tailored to each person, as incumbents come to the role from a range of backgrounds and with a range of prior experiences as an academic, and a leader and manager.

Lastly, it seems sensible to have in place not only a clear programme of training and induction so that Associate Deans can get into their new roles relatively swiftly, but also to have some sort of succession planning. This could be done in the form of

appointing deputy Associate Deans who could be involved in some aspects of the work, perhaps lessening some of the workload. As it may become more difficult to motivate academics to step into Associate Dean positions, given the current higher education climate, framing it as a positive - seeing the role as forming part of a clear career or development plan - could incentivise people. Academics could gain insight into the role as deputies and then be in a position to know whether they would want to carry on or whether (for them or the institution) this would not be a good idea. Having a deputy Associate Dean role might also go some way to addressing the isolation of the job felt by the individuals in the role. Furthermore, it might also help engender trust from other colleagues who, not always knowing exactly what the role entails, see Associate Deans as just another member of the senior management team rather than – what it is at best – a crucial link between academics, senior managers and administrators.

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APPENDICES: FIGURES AND TABLES

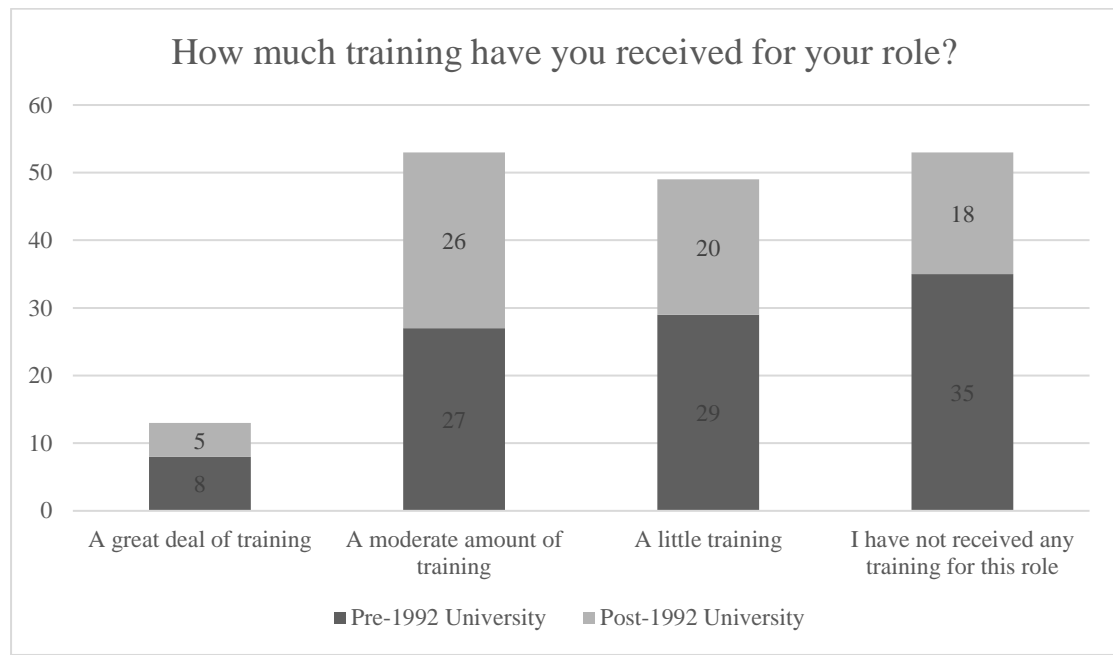


Figure 1 – Training Received

Table 1 - Focus of Training

| <i>The focus of the training that Associate Deans had received</i> | | | | |
|--|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | Pre-1992 | Post-1992 | Response | Response |
| Budgetary training | 13 | 20 | 30.0% | 33 |
| Leading and managing staff | 42 | 33 | 68.2% | 75 |
| University procedures and systems | 36 | 28 | 58.2% | 64 |
| HR procedures and knowledge | 24 | 29 | 48.2% | 53 |
| Strategic leadership | 40 | 32 | 65.5% | 72 |
| Time management | 10 | 10 | 18.2% | 20 |
| Chairing meetings | 13 | 14 | 24.5% | 27 |
| <i>answered question</i> | | | | 110 |

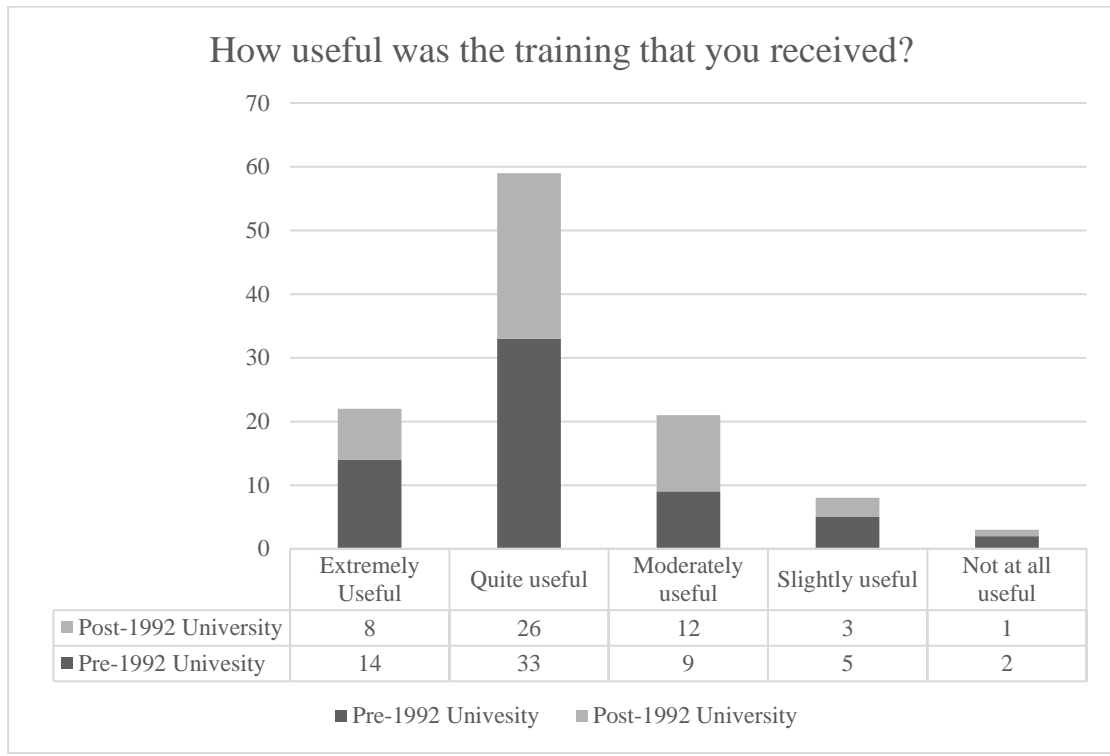


Figure 2 – Perceived usefulness of training

Table 2 - Training Needs

| What training would help you in your role? | | | | |
|---|----------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| Answer Options | Pre-1992 University | Post-1992 University | Response Percent | Response Count |
| Budgetary training | 14 | 24 | 25.0% | 38 |
| Leading and managing staff | 19 | 16 | 23.0% | 35 |
| University procedures and systems knowledge | 25 | 11 | 23.7% | 36 |
| HR procedures and knowledge | 15 | 12 | 17.8% | 27 |
| Strategic leadership | 45 | 32 | 50.7% | 77 |
| Time management | 17 | 5 | 14.5% | 22 |
| Chairing meetings | 17 | 6 | 15.1% | 23 |
| Working across different academic disciplines | 28 | 20 | 31.6% | 48 |
| Coaching and mentoring | 25 | 23 | 31.6% | 48 |
| I don't need training | 17 | 4 | 13.8% | 21 |
| answered question | | | | 152 |