UCL best practice: Job sharing for academic leadership roles

Summary: a report entitled ‘A Tap on the Shoulder’ presented to SMT in 2014 found that many academic staff, both male and female, viewed academic leadership roles as very demanding of their time and potentially detrimental to their research in particular. Currently six UCL academic staff are or have been job-sharing in Head of Department positions (female-male, Ear Institute; female-female, Institute for Women’s Health and female-male the Division of Infection and Immunity) and all consider that these arrangements are effective.

The findings of informal semi-structured interviews and email correspondence with them are summarised below. The focus is on Head of Academic Departments (or equivalent) initially as these roles are notionally part time and combined with the other aspects of an academic career, and therefore are different structurally to splitting a 1 FTE role.

It is proposed that academic leadership jobshares should be actively encouraged by senior management across the university in order to a) broaden the pool of people who can take on leadership roles and b) distribute workload more equitably.

1. Summary of findings

How the jobshares were recruited and how the complementary roles developed:

- In one case, the jobshare idea was a suggestion from the outgoing director, having seen how the 2 individuals worked together already and their attitude towards taking on the full role, so recruitment was an informal, spontaneous process.

- In another case, the previous director was leaving and before this both were playing major supporting deputy roles for different research areas, thus limiting the overall ‘admin’ workload. The deputy leadership roles were useful in this regard in terms of succession planning and trialling of joint working arrangements.

- It was considered that it is important to clarify roles at the beginning, especially as one pair were not Professors. Officially the time commitment for HoD activities was supposed to be 0.2FTE for each member of the job-share but in practice the actual workload was much more, in part because there were long-standing unresolved problems that needed addressing.

- When asked to estimate the time commitment, the interview respondents considered the Head of Department role jobshare ideally should take no more than about 0.1-0.2 FTE per person. Most of the HoDs felt that if the role were double that it would affect their research output too significantly and detrimentally and therefore they wouldn’t want to do the role.
• One pair took different areas of management focus: one on Estates and Research and the other on Personnel and Teaching, both much bigger areas than the post holders anticipated.

• One job-share was a hybrid between job-sharing and job-splitting i.e. both partners took joint responsibility for research and education broadly, with each taking some specific responsibilities e.g. for HR or finance. However, the splits became more shared as time went on.

• The weekly meeting with the Institute Manager has been crucial for continuity and support in one department.

• Openness and communication is very important for all those interviewed, in being able to define roles and establish clear boundaries. It was considered that good communication can help avoid misunderstandings and duplication.

• Moreover, communication is critical in sharing workload and building trust. The division of labour is very important – there must be boundaries, but also cross cover e.g. when one Head is on leave.

• A key factor is that both respect the other’s achievements and truly appreciate the strengths that the other brings to the job share. There needs to be joint ownership without competition.

• Two pairs stated that support underneath the heads needs to be effective e.g. admin support, which can be limited in a small department (although it is unclear whether this is specific to jobshare arrangements or is a more general management issue).

• One pair thought it was important to quantify from the outset how much FTE to spend on the role and who is doing what and to play to people’s strengths.

• It is critical to catch up at least once a week. One pair had a handover in weekly face-to-face meetings with the departmental manager and then picked up the phone for more occasional urgent business.

• One pair used IT to ensure efficient sharing and timely completion of tasks. They kept personal research/teaching and their Director duties separate by having a separate dedicated ‘director’ email. Both accessed the inbox and dealt with it usually twice daily. All mail tasks were triaged to either a common folder for resolution at the weekly face to face meeting, dealt with personally if in area the person was leading or moved into the other person’s subfolder if it was an issue that they were leading on. If urgent, whoever saw it, dealt with it after speaking with the other as required.

• One pair used joint coaching at the start so that they were sensitive to issues that might arise and how to deal with them.
• All agreed that the role of the line manager e.g. the Dean is important in supporting the practice. Further exploration will be needed to understand the specifics of what this support might entail.

• One pair believed the arrangement works very well if colleagues have worked together in some capacity before and have a similar approach to management.

• Another pair who had never worked together before were both enthusiastic about the benefits of job-sharing and their commitment helped ensure success.

**Benefits:**

• Sharing the workload is particularly helpful if one HoD is away for a lengthy period e.g. travelling with work, or during periods when the research demands significant attention.

• It also works well if the two HoDs have complementary research areas of a similar size.

• It was believed that the model could work in a more homogenous i.e. a smaller department with one research area if there was a shared vision, mission, style of working etc.

• It was also believed that it can work with two people who haven’t worked together before if there is a clear vision for the future and similar or complementary ways of working.

• Dual presence can make people from different research areas feel represented at leadership level. It could be viewed by others in the department as more democratic as they will know their research area is perhaps more likely to be effectively represented in management decisions.

• A major benefit is that sharing a leadership role gives an ally for difficult decisions – it is less ‘lonely’, prevents people from above - e.g. the Dean - having to get involved, resolves problems more easily. It can enhance problem solving and share the stress of difficult decisions. It can also lead to more considered opinions.

• No evidence in the interviews of staff ‘playing’ them against each other and aggravating any politics in the department.

• Another major benefit is that, if job sharing were more common it would broaden the pool of people who could take on leadership responsibility and share responsibilities more equitably. Therefore it could enhance the representation of particular groups in leadership roles i.e. women and Disabled people.

**Risks/disadvantages:**

• A jobshare arrangement could potentially make things much worse if the relationship broke down than if there was just one HoD who may be having difficulties. So the quality
of the relationship may be as critical a factor as the skills and knowledge of the postholders.

- One pair were not able to delegate so much because it’s a small department staff which quickly ‘uses up resources of delegates’, although this may not be a jobshare-specific issue and there may even be perceptions that two people can and should do more than one.

- It’s not clear if it works for 2 new external people yet the informal appointment of jobshare heads from the department could unwittingly lead to the perpetration of a ‘Tap on the Shoulder’ culture, which may undermine equality more broadly.

- A lack of adequate admin support could be even more of an issue for HoDs who are job sharing, who have the added work of communicating with each other.

- It may be more complex to recruit a replacement if one member of a jobshare leaves.

- It is likely to be more complex to deal with any performance management issues with those in the job shares, therefore case-by-case HR advice should be sought at the earliest opportunity.