

And now for something completely different – a NEW HoD!

If you are a new Head, we would like to offer you our congratulations on your position!

The challenges and opportunities you will face in the coming weeks and months will change you, so it would be prudent to do all you can to ensure that the changes are positive. You should be feeling excited at the prospect of starting something new, but it would also be reasonable to have some anxieties and doubts about the role. If you are a typical New Head, you will have had no “management training” and will be expected to learn while doing the job.

The first 100 days are said to be a critical period in which impressions are made, opinions are formed and the tone of your Headship is set. It is important to manage expectations in this period – it is better to promise less than you deliver than to try to please too many and disappoint everyone.

At an AHPD workshop a few years ago, experienced Heads identified the following as the most important things for new HoDs to consider in this period:

Get informed. You think you know the department and the University, but from the vantage point of Head there is more to see. Key information that you need to know includes, for example, confidential information about colleagues (a briefing from the outgoing Head will bring you up to speed on the current – or past – sensitive issues that were dealt with, appropriately maintaining confidentiality, so that other staff (including you) had no idea there was an issue). You will also need to know how the University ‘works’ – which are the key offices / officers who can help you get things done. Read (learn!) the financial regulations; the University planning/strategy documents; key HR policies and so on. Doing this preparation will help you settle into the role more rapidly: your confidence will grow as you become increasingly effective.

Develop your working relationships: You will be working with Senior Managers (and their P.A.s), many of whom may not have known your name before you became HoD. There may have been introductory meetings for new Heads with senior management and managers of central Units (Library, Finance, Estates and so on), but it could be helpful to arrange other meetings in which you set the agenda. In particular, you need to be sure that mutual expectations are clear. It is understandable for you to be thinking about how you will cope, and it is easy to forget that other people need support from you to do their jobs just as you need their support to do yours. You could ask them to explain what is their job and how you, as a HoD, can help and support them. The non-academic managers may not understand all the nuances of academic life, but they – like you – work for the Institution and you can assume that they want to do a good job too.

Your relationships with your colleagues will change now you are ‘The Boss’ – even if (perhaps especially if!) you think it will not. This does not mean that you should make it change, but rather that you accept that you now have a particular kind of power which can cause damage if clumsily wielded to the coffee room. It may take some time to learn to carry it around carefully.

Assess your own skills and competencies and make good (or compensate for) deficiencies: There are many ‘How to’ books available about various aspects of managing a department which apply equally in an academic environment as elsewhere. Make a full and frank assessment (getting feedback from others if possible) of your skills/competencies and current knowledge and identify specific areas which you may need to improve quickly. Ask for help when you need it: obvious people to ask are the outgoing head, senior colleagues, your line-manager, other Heads (use the AHPD website for details).

Good luck!