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Towards a professional development framework for leaders of degree programmes (0519)

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Introduction

The UK Higher Education sector is experiencing change at unprecedented speed and our institutions are working in increasingly competitive environments. The curriculum is a key site of the student experience and, as such, interventions aimed at influencing design and managing outcomes are selected and imposed in the pursuit of institutional excellence. We argue that more support must be provided to the academics leading the curriculum, those leading whole degree programmes or courses. These course leaders have to deal with a range of competing demands: administration, quality assurance, educational enhancement, curriculum development, evaluation and reporting to a range of different audiences, as well as undertaking the standard teaching, research and service of their colleagues.

Context

The limited number of studies to date (Clark et al, 2011; Krause et al, 2010; Murphy and Curtis, 2013) emphasize the complexities of the course leader (CL) role, particularly in terms of workload and agency. CLs themselves report, with some consistency, that they were unaware of the remit when they took up post, that their role lacks clarity, status and authority to effect change, and that there are inequalities between workloads even within the same institution. Often, too, the administrative burdens of the job overshadow the academic leadership aspect of the role, on which there is very little research (Milburn 2010). The pivotal contribution they make to running degree programmes and the influence they can have on the 'student experience' is acknowledged by universities such as our own, signalling a review of the role and a desire to create development activities (Murphy and Curtis, 2013).

Recent listserv discussions (for example on Staff and Educational Development Association and Heads of Educational Development lists) and a pilot study conducted at one of our institutions highlight what anecdotal evidence from our colleagues suggested: that there is a clear need for better support for course leaders (CL). Their roles, we would contest, are ill defined and highly dependent on local (university and / or discipline) custom and practice and there is variety in the experience of agency and 'performance' of this leadership.

Our study aims to:

- Investigate how course leader (CL) roles are allocated and defined by higher education institutions (HEIs);
- Explore the professional development needs of course leaders;
- Propose a professional development framework for educational development programmes aimed at supporting CLs.

Our key objectives are to:

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- Explore whether and how in fact course leader (CL) roles are defined by HEIs;
- Explore how the role is described, understood and performed by CLs;
- Examine the developmental needs of CLs;
- Make recommendations related to the remit of these roles, allocation processes, structural positioning, and developmental support;
- Develop an outline of a professional development framework for CLs;
- Test this framework against any existing CL educational development programmes that are available to the research team (via regional events &/or professional networks).

Methods

Following recommendations made by McAlpine and Amundsen (2015): we are combining a variety of methods longitudinally to capture and unpack responses to a range of course leader experiences. This will involve data triangulation and method triangulation.

We plan four collection points across three different types of HEIs in the UK (a research intensive, a post-1992 and a specialist institution):

1. Scrutiny of existing role documentation from the sector using the lens of Winch's framework,
2. Group interviews (focus groups / workshops) mapping out the CL role as experienced and understood by CLs,
3. Narrative accounts of role-related activities (online diaries collected monthly from CLs used to identify the range of tasks linked to the role and any developmental needs). We will provide focused questions to guide participants - diary logs,
4. A second round of group interviews reflecting on and seeking comments on the key findings with respect to developmental and support needs.

Conceptual framework

We have identified Winch's (2015) framework for professional curriculum design as the basis for our conceptual framework. We find his framework of knowledge, know-how and personal characteristics alongside his critique of the narrow way in which the terms skill and knowledge are used in the UK context an important way to guide our explorations. We are using the framework to examine institutional expectations (through an analysis of job role descriptors and current development frameworks) and to guide our interrogation of the way in which roles are performed and development needs perceived.

At the time of writing, we have undertaken a pilot study that highlights course leader desire for support and development and confirms the oft-reported difficulty of leading others from a non-line management position. We are working on a shared understanding of Winch's framework and considering its relationship to other well-known work on professional knowledge (Eraut, 1994) and reflective learning (Schön, 1983, 1991). We will discuss and seek feedback on the way in which we have interpreted and are applying this framework.

Proposal

This paper aligns with the Academic practice, work, careers and cultures research domain of the conference. Our discussion will:

Set the scene: how did we know this was an area of need? Brief discussion of the outcomes of the pilot study

The conceptual framework: Explanation and exploration of the conceptual framework used – participants will be asked to review and reflect on its usefulness in their own context. Does it bear any relationship to frameworks already in use?

Emerging findings: What does the data tell us so far? We will report on our analysis of role documentation and emerging findings from the group interviews.

References

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