

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Enacting leadership: Unpacking the work of study program leaders in teacher education

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**Abstract:** How to strengthen the quality of higher education programs - and the responsibility for study program leaders in driving this process forward - is currently a key concern for researchers and policy makers. This paper provides a conceptual and empirical contribution to this debate by examining program development as enacted leadership practice. The analysis foregrounds the emergent, dynamic and negotiated characteristics of efforts aimed at strengthening program quality. It illustrates how program leaders operate as pragmatic problem solvers and innovators who balance multiple expectations, rather than actors driven predominantly by managerial or cultural logics. The empirical material is derived from eight teacher education programs that were in the process of implementing new program structures in response to educational reforms. The paper provides a conceptual contribution by nuancing managerial and cultural approaches to quality development in higher education and contributes to research on teacher education by empirically examining how efforts towards program development are pursued.

### **Paper: Introduction**

This paper examines program development in higher education, with a specific focus on how academics who have been assigned with leadership roles navigate the organisational, epistemic and political expectations related to their work. In many countries, the program level constitutes a key organising unit for educational activities in higher education. The attention given to the program level may not be the greatest among staff though as in everyday work, individual teachers may primarily pay attention to their respective courses. However, the organisational legitimacy of these courses typically rests upon their contribution towards a degree program. Students who enter higher education have usually applied for a degree program, which will shape how they orient towards new knowledge as well as the development of their academic identity.

As part of the Bologna process, degree programs have also been positioned as a key unit of analysis related to institutional quality and accountability (Witte 2008). For example, data providing information related to quality, learning outcomes, retention and completion have increasingly been analysed at the degree level (e.g. Jungblut et al 2015), not least as a consequence of the introduction of national qualification frameworks (Elken 2015). In brief, the program level plays a key role in the organisational structure of higher education institutions, in the formation of students' learning trajectories, and in the governance of higher education.

In spite of its significance, program development and leadership in higher education remains an under-researched topic both empirically and theoretically (Cahill et al 2015), with some exceptions (see e.g., Gibbs et al. 2009). In general, the existing literature tend to underline the complexity of leadership in higher education, and the necessity for leaders to skilfully balance a range of concerns and priorities and exercise 'soft power' in organisations that are described as loosely coupled (Weick, 1976). These challenges associated with leadership in higher education are likely to be accentuated at the program level. For example, program leaders are frequently assigned a coordinating role vis-a-vis their peers, raising questions about how to exercise leadership 'among equals'. Program leaders may also lack budgetary discretion or formal decision-making power over issues that directly affect their degree programs, increasing the need to exercise 'soft' power and negotiation skills as they work on program development. Finally, program leaders are facing increasing demands related to academic development, quality assurance and accountability. Yet, we currently have limited knowledge about how this leadership work is carried out, and how those holding these positions navigate the complexities and challenges associated with this work. On this basis, the research questions addressed in the current article are:

- What tensions and challenges do program leaders experience as they seek to balance the managerial, cultural and political dimensions of their work?
- How do program leaders address these tensions?
- What are the implications for conceptualising leadership enactment at the program level in higher education?

### **Theoretical and methodological basis**

A key theoretical assumption is that program development and educational leadership are characterised by complexity and non-linear processes (Stensaker et al. 2012). This complexity can be illustrated by the different logics that are at play in universities - the *formal* logic, the *cultural/epistemic* logic and the *political* logic (Hermansen, 2019). Combined, these logics create the space where study program leadership is played out. The formal logic refers to the organisational practices that regulate universities as organisational entities. The cultural/epistemic logic refers to practices associated with safeguarding and developing specific knowledge domains. The political logic refers to the fact that universities' governance practices are typically characterised by "soft" governance.

Qualitative interviews and participant logs have been collected from 33 participants at eight Norwegian HE institutions, along with supporting documents. Participants had specific responsibilities for parts of a teacher education program, or for the program as a whole. Their roles include overall program coordinators, heads of program at the faculty level, heads of the professional subject portfolio, and practicum coordinators. In the first step of the analysis, content analysis was applied based on the three analytical categories. In the second step, analytical attention was directed to the tensions and challenges that emerged as these different logics intersected, and how program leaders addressed these challenges.

### **Expected results/findings**

The analysis is ongoing and will be completed in time for the SHRE conference. Initial findings foreground the emergent, dynamic and negotiated characteristics of efforts aimed at strengthening program quality. It illustrates how program leaders operate as pragmatic problem solvers and innovators who balance multiple expectations. Implications for conceptualisations of program leadership are

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