

## **Strengthening the Core: Uncovering and meeting the Challenges experienced by Programme Leaders and Principal Lecturers (0162)**

Much of the literature of academic development has focussed on the beginning academic ( e.g.Fanghanel 2004,2008); and on leadership at the Department level and above (e.g. Bryman 2007). At the time of writing, the UK Professional Standards Level 3 are still under consultation with the HEA. This is the standard that the subjects of this study would aspire to.

This paper focuses on one UK post 1992 HEI, and on that middle layer, who are likely to be mid-career and arguably essential to the successful progression of students and thus to the success of the institution.

### **Context**

Programme leaders were invited to well attended meetings in 2008. These meetings explored the programme leader's role and it was found to be significantly more extensive than that described in undergraduate and postgraduate regulations: academic Leadership; programme management; assessment; liaison. In a full discussion with programme leaders it was clear that Academic leadership embraced both curriculum development and leading people. In addition the majority of programme leaders included marketing and supporting students in difficulty as key aspects of their role. This information formed the basis of a development programme for new and aspiring programme leaders which ran successfully 2009-2010.

The staff survey of 2010 demonstrated that programme leaders are the most stressed staff group . There is also a mistaken assumption that all programme leaders are principal lecturers whereas many are not. Principal lecturers play a number of roles (including programme leader) but there is a perception that not all of them are being used effectively as leaders. These three issues have been corroborated by this research.

### **Methods**

The information already gathered outlined above, and the staff survey, was used to identify the main functions and perceived role that programme leaders play across the faculties.

Two focus groups were carried out by an external consultant further unpacking the issues around programme leadership. Two email surveys were then undertaken, one to all principal lecturers which focussed on their role in leadership and innovation, and one to all programme leaders who are not principal lecturers.

Although all respondents were self selecting in that we invited whole populations (principal lecturers, programme leaders to take part) uptake was good in that we have engaged with 50+ programme leaders and 70+ principal lecturers in the course of the project. The analysis of responses to the email survey of principal lecturers identified four types: programme leaders; researchers; those who had taken on a variety of leadership/management roles; those who feel they no longer have a defined leadership role.

The two final focus groups one for programme leaders and the other for principal lecturers without a defined leadership role explored solutions to the issues that had been raised earlier. These were again facilitated by an external to maximise the validity of the responses.

## **Findings**

### **Programme Leaders**

Many programme leaders love their job and continue to undertake it for many years. However the programme leader has no formal authority and has to rely on influencing skills and refer back to line managers to meet the needs of the programme. Their excessively heavy administrative load means that they have little time for academic leadership. There is little negotiation involved in creating a programme team, and the lack of a culture of teamwork hinders effective programme leadership and management.

Programme leaders could be supported to be more effective and thus gain more satisfaction in the role by

- (i) Ensuring that Heads of Department support their programme leaders effectively to create some authority with the responsibility;
- (ii) Developing a handbook (possibly faculty based) including a diary of key events and processes that take place during the year;
- (iii) Inducting new programme leaders into the role, possibly through becoming deputy programme leader before taking on full programme leadership, or mentorship during the first year of role by an exiting programme leader;
- (iv) Encouraging new and aspiring programme leaders to undertake the Programme Leaders Development Programme;
- (v) Increasing dialogue with professional services to ease the administrative load;
- (vi) Examining inequity of workloads for programme leaders across the university with a view to equitable solutions;
- (vii) Continuing with programme leaders forum for established programme leaders;
- (viii) Ensuring exiting programme leaders have a developmental plan so that they can use their leadership skill for the benefit of themselves and the HEI

### **Principal Lecturers without a defined leadership role**

This group experienced a sense of waste, marginalisation and drift once they stopped being programme leaders because of the lack of arenas for them to apply their strategic awareness, knowledge and skills. Some find their own ways of being strategic e.g. by working outside with partners.

They have little scope for academic leadership, even where they could meet a need for it, because of their lack of authority. Leadership and management is concentrated in a narrow set of roles

### **The leadership skills of principal lecturers might be better used if**

- (i) on handing over programme leadership, or at the next appraisal, they were asked to consider where best they might lead in future with regard to the four main areas of work of the university. For example at this HEI teaching, research, external income generation or community partnerships – and then take on a departmental, faculty or university wide role in the chosen area

- (ii) rethinking the model of leadership within the HEI so that it becomes more distributed and inclusive

**Conclusions**

This research demonstrates a number of ways that programme leaders can be effectively supported in their role through their line manager, professional services and through preparing new programme leaders effectively, and giving a forum for existing programme leaders to share good practice. It is also essential to utilise the knowledge and leadership skills of Principal Lecturers who no longer have programme leader responsibility but have much to offer. Strengthening the core will enable HEIs to face the tough times ahead more effectively.

**Acknowledgement**

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**References**

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