Programme Leadership: A Review of Evidence and an Agenda for Action

Sam Ellis (Glasgow Caledonian University)

A recent study of ten years of sector-wide NSS data appears to confirm what many have long suspected – that the questions which best predict overall satisfaction are those concerning teaching quality and management of the programme, *not* assessment and feedback (Burgess, Senior and Moores, 2018). Analysis of data at institutional level also suggests the strong influence of responses around the nurturing of a learning community. All these matters – the quality of teaching, students feeling part of a learning community, and especially programme management – are experienced by students primarily at the programme level. This places significant responsibility on the figureheads of these programmes, namely programme leaders.

Across the higher education sector in Scotland, a reinvigoration of programme-oriented approaches to pedagogy has led to a refocusing of attention on programme teams and programme leadership. Several different terms are used by Scottish HEIs to distinguish the programme leader role. These include programme convenor, programme director, course leader and course director (Mitchell, 2015). The term used most frequently in the relevant literature is 'programme leader', and for clarity this will be adopted here.

With these issues in mind, the UK-wide Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) assembled with some urgency a volume as part of its *Specials* series (Lawrence and Ellis, 2018). This in-depth exploration of the programme leader role confirmed earlier observations regarding its 'fuzzy' nature (Mitchell, 2015), the significant variations in the role both between and even within institutions, and that day-to-day leadership activities remain 'largely in the shadows' (Murphy and Curtis, 2013). This is perhaps surprising, given the linchpin status that programme leaders occupy: they largely determine the coherence of the student experience, and are often tasked with translating university policies into practice (Milburn, 2010).

Krause et al. (2010) have identified some components of the skill set required of successful programme leaders: 'administration and trouble-shooting; curriculum design; quality assurance; pastoral care; staff mentoring … and close collaboration with academic and professional staff across the institution'. Similarly, Murphy and Curtis (2013) outlined some of the more pressing challenges, such as managing others (often without direct authority), role confusion, and bureaucratic burdens.

In the SEDA Special, Senior (2018) proposed a new framework for programme leadership, outlining some of the main categories of activity as reported by programme leaders at Aston University. It is striking how many of these involve either generating or responding to institutional data. Of Senior's nine categories, five could be said to be 'data driven'. These include activities around quality assurance, cascading information to and from various committees, organising exam boards, making sense of student evaluations, and devising subsequent enhancements.

Programme leaders and the data landscape

Emerging from recent interviews conducted by Ellis and Nimmo (2018) is the desire on the part of programme leaders to devise and lead enhancements in response to various data. This should not be surprising, as programme leaders are required to navigate and respond to a complex data landscape at the levels of university, discipline and individual students. In short, they not only engage with evidence *for* enhancement, but also produce evidence *of* enhancement.

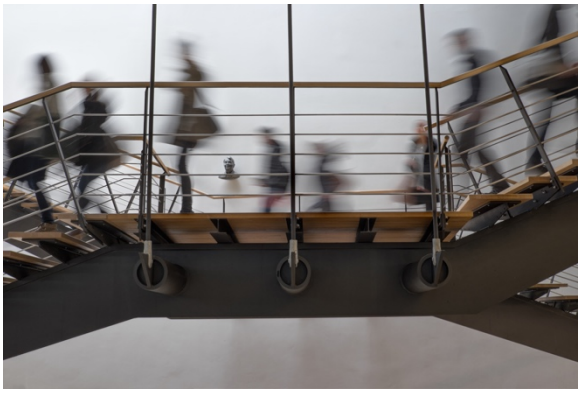
Empowerment around enhancement has been identified by programme leaders as one of a range of significant prestige rewards (following Blackmore and Kandiko, 2011). Programme leaders are motivated by the intrinsic reward of seeing their students succeed, and derive a great deal of pleasure from this. But there are many other less celebrated aspects to programme leadership, many of which are evidently rewarding, such as contributing to the future of a profession or discipline, enjoying a platform with an external community, and mentoring less experienced teaching staff.

Some issues other than those of prestige are raised when programme leaders are placed at the heart of the enhancement cycle. These include issues of autonomy and compromise. Many academics experience a loss of agency when required to engage with metrics; some programme leaders have reported an appreciation of the function of metrics, but wish simply to engage with the metrics on their own terms – perhaps by devising and leading programme-level enhancements rather than feeding into wider institutional initiatives.

There are also issues of geography to consider. Planners – that is, those who produce and interpret much of the student-related data – are seldom in physical spaces which easily facilitate face-to-face communication with programme leaders. This raises a further issue of communication: when both parties *are* brought together, there is no guarantee that they will speak the same language.

Supporting programme leaders

A secondary, though important issue relates to supporting the development of programme leaders more generally. In some institutions, programme leaders are taking a 'bottom up'



approach and leading their own communities of professional development. Elsewhere, the months either side of becoming a programme leader have emerged as of central importance (Harkin and Healy, 2013), with the intention of keeping lines of communication open and retaining as much corporate knowledge as possible. Informal mentoring is similarly vital (Ellis and Nimmo, 2018).

The current picture is mixed, with many programme leaders across the UK reporting no structured induction into the role; however, several institutions in England offer a Masters-level work-based module to new and aspiring programme leaders. The transition into the role is now receiving more attention, largely because the student experience depends upon a new programme leader hitting the ground running. Indeed, several Scottish universities have prioritised support for programme leaders as part of their Enhancement Theme activity for 2017 to 2020.

An agenda for action

Building upon the refreshed focus on the programme leader role outlined above, a Scotland-wide programme of work is recommended to address some of the associated challenges. These challenges, identified in the literature, include leading without authority, role confusion, working with programme-level data, and a lack of role-specific opportunities for professional development.

Knowledge from across the sector should now be brought together in order to explore evidence for enhancement from the vantage point of programme leadership. This action must encourage sharing of practice and resources that focus on linking evidence with support for practical pedagogic action for enhancement. The span of involvement should be wide, encompassing programme leaders, educational developers, planners, those with responsibility for learning analytics, and all other relevant roles. Sharing expertise in this way can facilitate greater understanding of the diversity of approaches taken to programme leadership across institutions.

An appropriate forum in which to initiate conversations about current institutional practice is a series of roundtable events, digested intermittently in written ‘think pieces’. These roundtables may address the following themes: hearing the student voice within programme enhancement; using programme data to make enhancement decisions; creating cultures of enhancement within programme teams; institutional processes to support agile enhancement; and institutional support for programme leaders.

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