Strathclyde Leadership in Learning and Teaching Network: A Reflective Case Study

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The Leadership in Learning and Teaching Network is one of four active peer support networks at the University of Strathclyde. This think-piece is a 'story', told by the network leaders, of how the network was initially developed and implemented, then abandoned and re-established, and is ultimately now thriving. We reflect on the key successes and challenges, and what we have learned along the way. Finally, we recommend a set of resources for educational developers and those with leadership roles who may be interested in establishing or further developing peer support activities within their own institutional context.

PEER NETWORKS IN EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Peer support networks are academic development initiatives that occupy a minimal space between formal provision and the informal, localised and micro-level practices of peer development. Formal academic development programmes have long acknowledged the value of peer support and reflection. However, Boud and Brew (2013) suggest that there is a need to 're-conceptualise' academic development as a social practice, focusing attention away from the development of individual teachers.

Across the sector, new directions in professional educational development often draw influence from the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) in emphasising the informal, situated aspects of professional development. In this context, recommendations for academic development programmes include 'opportunities [...] for informal discussions and shared work' (e.g. Knight & Trowler, 2000) and activities like mentoring (e.g. Boeren et. al, 2015), 'professional dialogues' (e.g. Feiman-Nemser, 2001) and CPD activities that model good practice, supplemented by opportunities for ongoing reflection. Peer support networks, while themselves largely absent from theory and research in academic development, are effective examples of social and peer learning in this context.

Led by the Academic Development team and a small group of cross-Faculty collaborators, the University at Strathclyde has, for many years, offered staff flexible

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development opportunities through a rich and diverse programme of formal and informal training, support and CPD. Peer-support networks have been a particular area of focus (Savage et al., 2021).

RECOGNISING THE NEED FOR AND ESTABLISHING THE NETWORK

The drivers for recognising the need for leadership development in learning and teaching were drawn from a university-wide consultation of learning and teaching academic professional staff in 2014/15 and a university-wide values survey from around the same time. These indicated that learning and teaching staff often felt unsupported, isolated and undervalued, and that they did not identify with the university values to the same extent as other staff groups. This informed and drove our vision to provide leadership support and development for this staff group as well as identifying and nurturing future leaders.

It was also around this time that we realised the potential of staff peer networks at Strathclyde. We had implemented a peer network to support HEA Fellowships and noted the beneficial effects on colleagues' personal and professional development.

This led us to implement support for leadership in learning and teaching in the form of a peer network. We advertised the network across the university (staff newsletter, targeted e-mail advertisers), and a series of sessions approximately every six weeks was established.

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STARTING THE NETWORK … AND CLOSING IT DOWN

The first meeting of the network took place in 2017 and adopted the approach of being participant-led, and with a defined structure that allowed for both formal learning opportunities as well as informal networking. The network was attended by around 20 participants from across all 4 faculties and professional services.

As we reflect on these initial experiences with the network, there were some things we did that worked well. Each session began with two or three colleagues presenting an example to the group of a project or experience in which they provided leadership in learning and teaching. We used these as provocations for discussion with the wider group as well as a means of identifying areas that might need more formal developmental input. For example 'leading without authority' inevitably emerged as one of these topics and we then responded by providing a dedicated network session on 'leading by influence'.

In response to the feelings of isolation expressed by learning and teaching staff, we felt it was important to ensure they had opportunities for informal networking with other staff in similar roles, to share experiences and practices, and that we created the conditions to allow this to happen. To facilitate this we managed the

environment, ensuring lunch was provided in each session and allowing participants time to mingle and get to know one another. While this was successful to an extent, difficulties arose that detrimentally impacted on the success of the network. A number of colleagues came together in these sessions over feelings of discontent with how they felt they were valued by the university and frustrations over the promotions system in place for learning and teaching staff. This became an increasingly difficult intrusion to the network and affected the experiences of all involved. Despite strong facilitation, the voices of this group became louder and significantly detracted from the 'leadership' focus of the group. We noticed that colleagues genuinely interested in leadership were being lost from the group and that the network became less and less about leadership.

Around this time the end of the academic year was approaching and having reflected extensively on the network, we made a decision to close the network.

RE-THINKING AND RE-ESTABLISHING THE NETWORK

We paused the network for a full academic year, and used this time to reflect on our experiences, what went well, and the challenges we faced. We began to re-imagine how the network might be re-established with leadership very clearly at the forefront of this. We did want to support colleagues with feeling valued and in their endeavours for promotion, but we were very clear that we wanted to do this in a practical way though offering experiences and opportunities for colleagues to demonstrate leadership. Our key vision for the re-established Leadership in Learning and Teaching Network became 'doing' leadership rather than 'talking' about leadership. We decided that we would put 'leadership projects' at the heart of the network and build everything else around this.

The network was re-established in September 2019 and a detailed announcement circulated across the university inviting colleagues to attend. A key criteria in attending was that colleagues were asked to bring with them an idea of a 'leadership in learning and teaching project'.

The initial meeting of this network attracted around 40 attendees, again from across the university. Initial meetings focused on communicating the active nature of the network and facilitating everyone in bringing forward their ideas for learning and teaching leadership projects. The projects were grouped into themes, consolidated, and finally 15 projects emerged that would be taken forward by the network. Colleagues self-selected which projects they would like to work on, and we asked groups to produce a project plan that would result in completion of the project or a significant milestone by the end of the academic year.

Within the network we adopted an approach of receiving updates from the groups on their projects and using their experiences to identify short, targeted developmental inputs. We continued with providing informal networking time over lunch, but this was time limited and we focused more on providing the groups with time in the network to meet, discuss their project, and agree next steps.

Strategically, we began formally reporting on the network, initially through Learning Enhancement Committee and then later directly to Education Strategy Committee, the key institutional committee which reports directly to Senate, as the committee saw the value of the network and how it could be incorporated with our institutional Reflection, Enhancement and Development (RED) Project which was created to encourage activity which supports the development of a broader, more flexible and accessible curriculum and to coordinate, prioritise and progress course reflection and enhancement opportunities. A mechanism to support cross-institution reflection and action on curriculum enhancement is a key aim for the RED Project and this is what the network provided. Project outputs have been used to advance and support learning and teaching provision, understand cross-institutional challenges and set future institutional strategy.

Examples of projects undertaken by the network have included,

- Programme Leaders – role definition and support needs

- International student experience

- Practical teaching within distance learning

- Peer observation of teaching

- AFHEA for PGRs and 'junior' staff

- Employability

- Education for Sustainable Development

- Dissertation supervision for online programmes

- Develop online video resources for critical reading and writing for UGs

- Learning Analytics for student engagement

- Podcasts

- Planning for resilience on placement (PROP) – evaluating wellbeing on placement

- Staff Induction

- Placement Coordination Software

A clear success has been that two of the projects (Employability group and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) group) have been elevated to formal institutional working groups with the necessary funding and resource required agreed.

Peer support networks hold significant promise for educational development in higher education, and leadership development in particular. However, the role of network facilitators cannot be understated.

And then there was Covid

As with almost every aspect of university life, Covid had an impact on the Leadership in Learning and Teaching Network. Initially this meant that a few sessions were cancelled as everyone focused on the emergent tasks that needed to be done. However after only a couple of months into lockdown, we asked Network colleagues how they wanted to proceed. Their overwhelming response was that they wanted network meetings to continue.

It was evident that the project working necessarily paused during this time, but the need for the network was there – albeit in a slightly different way. It was clear from talking to colleagues that they needed the support of the network. Many were programme leaders and used the network time to collaborate with and support one another in finding solutions to often complex problems. A need also emerged during Covid for colleagues to have more informal time with one another. They asked for more informal meetings to be set separately from the network meetings and so specific 'coffee and chat' sessions were arranged. These sessions were well attended and provided a fantastic wellbeing support throughout a difficult time.

Our way forward from here

As things stand with the network now, the project teams are back in full swing and re-adjusting to operating within this new environment. Some projects have been left behind because they are no longer strategically relevant while some projects have been adjusted to reflect the post-Covid environment and additional projects have been added to address new challenges. It is a positive of the network that colleagues were able to assess projects in this way and respond strategically.

As agreed with colleagues in the network, our areas of focus for the upcoming academic session are,

- Encourage participants within the network to drive activity forward and be involved in decision making for the direction of travel for the Network.

- Encourage and support colleagues to evaluate the relevance of projects and prioritise accordingly.

- Encourage the establishment of additional Working Groups to focus on strategically important projects.

- Utilise the reporting mechanism developed on Teams to support the recording of project updates at each meeting.

- Provide formal leadership development for participants.

- Ensure Professional Services colleagues are involved in future meetings.

- Report into Education Strategy Committee highlighting the achievements and progress made within each project.

A key success is that meetings are now planned and chaired by a colleague from within the network. We have been able to step back to a supportive and facilitatory role – a key part of our initial vision for the network.

Conclusion

Peer support networks hold significant promise for educational development in higher education, and leadership development in particular. However, the role of network facilitators cannot be understated. In our case, ensuring the network was aligned with institutional strategies and priorities, maintained a clear focus on outputs, and crucially promoted an atmosphere of positivity and encouragement required us to hit the 'pause button' and reflect deeply on the nature and purpose of the network. Ironically, perhaps, this process taught us a great deal about our role as leaders at Strathclyde. We learned firsthand, for example, the importance of what Margie Warrell (2018) has called 'brave leadership' in the willingness to 'take action amid uncertainty', and the value of a collaborative approach to the network, which enables the participants to continually co-create the network (albeit within a reasonably clear framework that gives rise to a shared understanding of the nature and purpose of the network).

Many of our lessons, and a great deal of others, are contained in an interactive toolkit titled 'Peer Support Networks: Fostering a sense of belonging', which was one of the key outputs of an Advance HE Good Practice Grant that we were awarded in 2020 to evaluate the success of these networks. The toolkit can be accessed here (https://strath.pagetiger.com/PSN/tools) and we wholeheartedly recommend it to any colleagues who have an interest in establishing or further growing a programme of peer support networks within their own institutional context.

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