Thriving on the winds of change:
Repositioning programme leadership as a career thriller!

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To thrive is to 'grow or develop well or vigorously' (according to the Oxford English Dictionary), or is thought of as 'a condition beyond mere survival, implying growth and positive development' (according to Wikipedia). However, Vocabulary.com offers the most apposite definition when thinking about leading programmes: 'You have a thriving cupcake business if you can hardly bake enough to keep up with your customers' orders'. Nevertheless, there is tension here: if we can hardly bake enough programme leadership cakes to keep up with the demands of students and senior leaders, how can we grow or develop vigorously?

Over the last few years, as I look at work in Australia, Canada, Ireland and the UK, I see subtle changes to the status, standing and practice of programme leadership that the global COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated. I make an assertive call here for the 'reimagining' of programme leadership (Robinson-Self, 2020) as an aspirational position, prized for its opportunity to exercise academic agency, understood as integral to contemporary academic career progression (Forsyth and Powell, forthcoming; Lawrence, 2020) and an opportunity to attend to social justice (Lawrence, Moron-Garcia and Senior, forthcoming; Scott and Lawrence, forthcoming). What can we learn from those progressive institutions which ensure that the 'invisible super heroes of learning and teaching' (Cunningham and Wilder, 2020) can thrive?

For programme leaders (PLs) to grow and develop vigorously – to thrive – certain professional and academic factors must align in what my colleague Graham Scott calls an 'ecosystem' (whilst at the same time recognising that any biologist would challenge this use of the term). This includes the following elements.

Organisational context: The institution the PL works in, the systems they must navigate, the contracts they work to, the reward and recognition they enjoy, the workloads they carry.

Development opportunities: Institutional investment in building necessary competencies that enable PLs to meet their responsibilities.

Academic development supports wellbeing, in part because it offers opportunity to connect with a learning community (Lawrence and Herrick, 2019). The most successful, efficient and preferred methods of educational development for PLs are socially mediated (Lawrence and Ellis, 2018; Lawrence, Moron-Garcia and Senior, forthcoming; Scott and Lawrence, forthcoming; Caddell, Ellis and Haddow, forthcoming). This means PLs working with, talking to and building professional relationships with other PLs and those invested in and giving service to the programme. Programme leading is in itself dependent on relational leadership (Moore, 2018; Moore, forthcoming) and professional relationships are central to not only effective programme leadership, but also to the heartening, meaningful practice of programme leadership. PLs should be given every opportunity to connect, learn from and learn with colleagues (Diamond, forthcoming).

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Clearly defined responsibilities: A role descriptor establishing clear expectation and boundaries, ideally co-created by HR departments and PLs, and defining programme leaders as academic leaders (Forsyth and Powell, forthcoming).

Trust and freedom: Organisational trust in PLs' academic practice and decision-making.

Academic practice is the exercising of academic agency: having the freedom to use disciplinary and pedagogic expertise to create a programme of study to be proud of, that PLs can put their name to as previous generations of academic colleagues put their names to a body of academic work. Designing and developing a programme of study is as career defining and creatively rewarding as any other academic endeavour, and in some instances may have a greater and longer-term impact than some avenues of research as students on a programme travel toward their graduate future. It is in this exercise of academic freedom I have seen PLs embrace the role as integral to their positive academic identity and recognise programme leadership as a desirable step forward in their academic career.
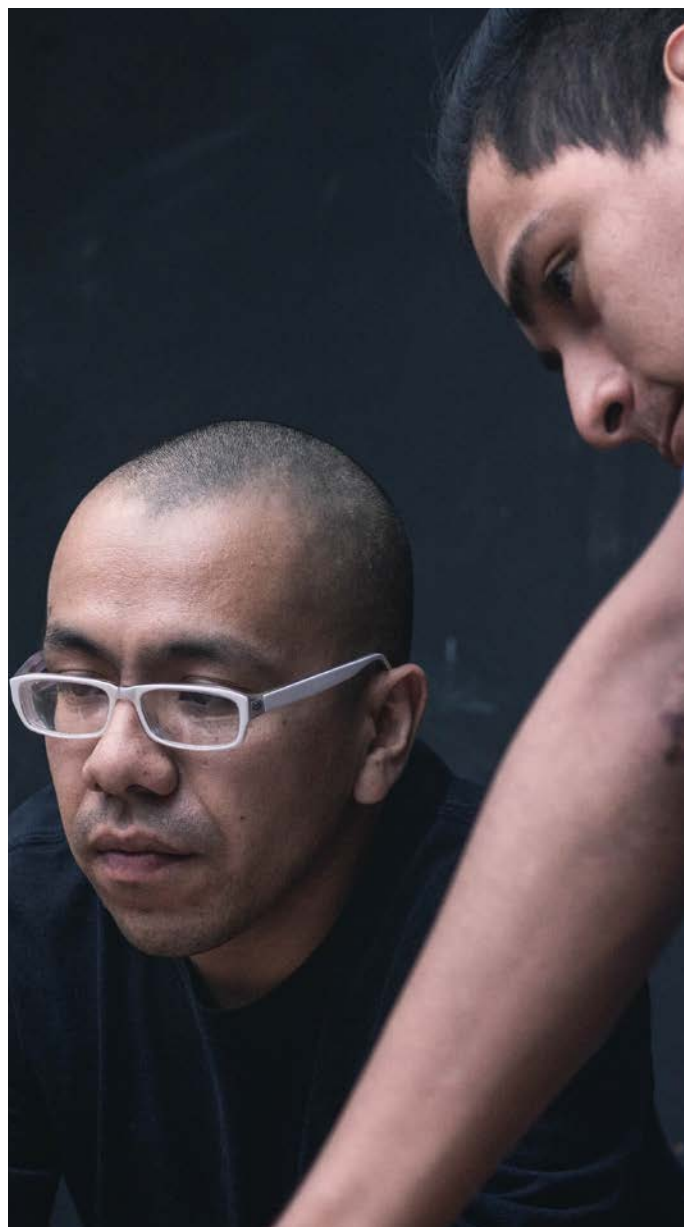
As Cunningham and Wilder (2020) note, the purposeful reflection necessary in compiling an application for Senior Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy facilitates PLs' recognition of their high level of responsibility. In an overly managerialised sector, decision-making must be nurtured; academic developers are turning their energies towards this with some success (Forsyth and Powell, forthcoming). It is here that PLs' service to students, navigation of institutional process to the benefit of the most vulnerable, ability to shape programmes to be inclusive to students under-represented in HE or with protected characteristics, and leading programme teams to do likewise, is a huge source of personal reward, if not pride (Lawrence, 2020; Lawrence and Scott, forthcoming).

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A whole-institution approach

Institutions that have taken a whole-organisation approach to better understanding how a PL can succeed are those that have considered all of the elements above. For example, in the UK, Forsythe and Powell (forthcoming) have worked with PLs to understand the role, write a role descriptor and map programme leadership into their institutions career pathway. Petrova (forthcoming) has established a comprehensive programme of development. Maddock and Carruthers (forthcoming) have attended to similar work in Australia, establishing PLs as agents of positive change, who may use their experience to refine institutional practices. This is deeply important in our current context.

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Acknowledgement

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