FINAL

Programme Leaders Submission

Conference strand:
Learning (Academic and professional identities and roles within a massified, diversified and globalised higher education sector; teaching, learning and widening participation developments)

Conference theme:
'Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?'; Exploring Meaning, Identities and Transformation in Higher Education

Paper Title: Degree Programme Leader roles and identities in changing times

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150 word summary

This paper empirically examines the pivotal role of degree programme leaders as change agents in higher education. Programme leaders are responsible for managing whole degree programmes, including a complex combination of curriculum, administrative and staff coordination roles. The paper analyses responses from 176 programme leaders in three multi-campus Australian universities, investigating their role conceptions, sources of role stress, and institutional factors influencing role enactment. Challenges of leading academic programmes in multi-campus university settings were also explored. The majority of respondents found the role rewarding, yet expressed frustration at the lack of role clarity and recognition, accompanied by high administrative burdens. The paper explores the significance of these boundary-spanning roles that combine academic and administrative functions, leaving many incumbents uncertain about their role identity and its contribution to future career paths. Implications for supporting programme leaders to achieve a balance between managing information and engaging in wise, strategic thinking are explored.

1000 word paper

Introduction
This paper focuses on the role of degree Programme Leaders who are responsible for managing and directing curriculum in a context of rapid and unpredictable change (Kogan & Teichler, 2007; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). In this paper, the term

'Programme Leader' refers to those responsible for managing whole degree programmes, including a complex combination of curriculum, administrative and staff coordination roles. The Programme Leader role represents a salutary case study for exploring meaning, identities and transformation in the academy. It is identified as a pivotal leadership role (Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008), particularly with respect to effecting curriculum change. As such, the role is evolving in response to such factors as: changing policy contexts; the sector-wide focus on quality, performativity (Blackmore, 2008) and accountability mechanisms; changing student populations; and demands for flexible modes of programme design and delivery.

The presentation will examine conceptions of the Programme Leader role in changing times. In particular, it focuses on multi-campus university contexts and the challenges of managing teaching teams, programmes, standards and outcomes across campuses. In the Australian context, multi-campus universities play strategically important roles, often having one or more campuses strategically placed to support regional or local community needs, yet little work has been done to address the unique needs of staff and students in these settings (Scott, Grebennikov, & Johnston, 2007). Current conceptualisations of programme-level leadership in higher education remain narrowly defined and fail to account for the range of leadership roles, contexts and challenges of this key role, particularly in multi-campus institutions. This paper addresses some of these gaps in our knowledge of the Programme Leader role and its significance in multi-campus contexts. It argues for the value of recognising Programme Leaders as strategic change agents who need time, resources and strategic support to enable them to make wise decisions as they manage key curriculum transformations and lead complex teams of colleagues.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study comprises three dimensions. First, the project is underpinned by distributed leadership theories (Spillane & Diamond, 2007) which provide a frame for analysing the multiplicity of Programme Leaders' relationships across and beyond the university. Theories of distributed leadership guide the analysis and interpretation of Programme Leader responsibilities which span many boundaries, including physical campus boundaries, disciplinary boundaries, organizational boundaries, vertical management boundaries, year level boundaries, and university/community boundaries. Managing increasingly blurred boundaries between academic and professional roles (Henkel, 2007; Musselin, 2007; Whitchurch, 2009) adds further complexity to the role.

Second systems theory and an organisational learning approach (Senge, 1990) is central to the study, where Programme Leaders are depicted as pivotal to transforming culture (Middlehurst, 1993) and managing "change-focused learning" (Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008, p.108) that nurtures complex relationships and enhances the quality of learning. Role theory is a third theoretical strand informing the study's methodology. Our interest lies in exploring the Programme Leader role as part of a system of interdependent roles in multicampus universities (Katz & Kahn, 1978). In our data analysis, we explore respondents' role mastery, conflict and ambiguity (Collier, 2001) and the extent to which Programme Leaders in our sample understand and manage the explicit and implicit aspects of institutional cultures and processes (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Role conflict and role strain emerge as key challenges, as outlined below.

Indicative findings

Programme leaders in three Australian universities responded to an online survey comprising closed and open-ended responses. Indicative findings are presented here, with further details in the presentation.

The majority of Programme Leaders found their role intellectually stimulating and professionally rewarding. However, they expressed frustration at the extent of administrative work involved. This duality illustrates some of the blurring boundaries between roles identified by Whitchurch (2009). Respondents perceived the role as an academic leadership role comprising multiple dimensions and requiring a complex skill set including: administration and trouble-shooting; curriculum design; quality assurance; pastoral care; staff mentoring; external relations with industry partners and professional bodies; and close collaboration with academic and professional staff across the institution.

The three most highly rated capabilities and skills were transparency and honesty in dealing with others; the capacity to learn from experience; and the ability to manage time effectively. On the whole, Programme Leaders reported strong and positive relationships with administrative staff. However, noteworthy institutional differences emerged regarding academic supervisors' and colleagues' perceptions of the Programme Leader role. These findings highlight cultural differences, particularly at department level, that clearly play a role in shaping Programme Leaders' experiences in the role.

Half of the respondents found the role stressful and only one in five reported receiving adequate professional development in the role. Lack of clear role statements and inadequate workload recognition constituted significant sources of role stress for these respondents. A minority also reported that managing programmes across campuses was more demanding than expected. Other multi-campus challenges included communication, travel time, maintaining consistency across multiple campus programmes; challenges of team building and communication; and negotiating diverse student and staff cultures on each campus. Workload tended to be proportional to extent of multi-campus responsibility and the majority agreed that the amount of time allocated for their Programme Leader role was significantly less than the number of hours actually spent on the role each week.

Implications

This study has significant implications for policy makers and university managers who need a deeper understanding of the pivotal role of Programme Leaders as key change agents in universities. The study is a timely reminder of how these boundary spanning roles are evolving in universities and the frustration often experienced by Programme Leaders who are kept busy with administrative tasks that potentially leave them bereft of time to apply wisdom to decision-making and relationship development with colleagues across and beyond the university. University managers and discipline heads need to support Programme Leaders in developing skills to lead with wisdom and influence, for these are the people who provide thought leadership to curriculum transformation in the interests of students, universities and the broader

community. Programme Leaders will benefit from this research as it provides an instructive framework in which to interpret their multi-faceted role.

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