When is a leader not a leader? Experiences of programme leadership in a post-92 university.

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Introduction

This paper explores the experiences of a group of eight Programme Leaders at a 'modern' or 'post-1992' university which was formed following the amalgamation of several technical colleges after the introduction of the Further and Higher Education Act (1992).[1] The primary research sources were drawn from a Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) funded project. The original, larger project comprised a case study evaluation of a pilot support initiative for Programme Leaders (Sanderson, Crawford & Pepper, 2017) and a subset of findings from the qualitative data were worthy of further consideration. These findings relate specifically to an area of interest in contemporary higher education research: academic leadership. This paper considers these findings in the context of contemporary literature on academics' experiences of leadership within Higher Education institutions in the UK and further afield, seeking to establish a greater understanding of this little studied but influential academic community and their experiences of leadership within a 21st century HE institution.

Programme Leaders: Their Role And Significance

Programme Leaders, also known as Programme Chairs, Convenors, Co-ordinators or Course Directors, are a vital part of the HE landscape both within and without the UK (Johnston and Westwood, 2009, np). As leaders of an undergraduate or postgraduate programme of study, Programme Leaders will typically take on a diverse range of administrative, technical and pastoral duties including teaching,

curriculum design and development. This staff group are increasingly recognised as strategically significant since their activities can impact powerfully on programme quality and student experiences (Murphy & Curtis, 2013, np; Ladyshewsky & Flavell, 2011, 2). In their 2010 study Krause et al. (np) emphasised the importance of Programme Leaders, describing them as pivotal 'change agents.' The majority of academics who take on Programme Leader duties and responsibilities do so in a voluntary capacity, and will continue with their existing teaching and/or research roles. Although some institutions do offer incentives and support to Programme Leaders, for instance in the form of CPD programmes, work load adjustments or one-off payments, the term 'Programme Leader' is rarely a substantive position.

Despite their 'complex and challenging' situation (Ladyshewsky & Flavell, 2011, 2), Programme Leaders are usually considered to be academic leaders. Academic leadership may sometimes be understood as 'traditional' leadership (that is, emerging from positional authority, as in the case of a Vice Chancellor or Head of Department), but it may also be associated with a requirement to lead outside of the organisational hierarchy (cf. Lumby, 2012). Bolden et al. (2013) and Lumby (2012) have highlighted that the current research on academic leadership tends to be focussed only on those with formal managerial responsibilities within HE, and despite a 'plethora' of papers on academic leadership, the Programme Leader role has been neglected, 'paralleling its institutional status, the role of programme leader is for the most part an invisible aspect of academic leadership in the research literature' (Murphy and Curtis, 2013, np). Murphy and Curtis argue there is a need for further research, as programme leadership is 'ubiquitous and essential to effective university operations' and there is 'surprisingly little research on the role' which 'should be taken more seriously at both a research and institutional level (Ibid).'

Methodology

Research interviews were carried out at a post-92 English university during the summer of 2017. Following receipt of approval from the relevant university Ethics Committee, purposive sampling methods were utilised which aimed to ensure a sample that reflected the diversity of the Programme Leader community within the institution by including views which represented, for example, a variety of disciplines,

levels of experience, programme level (undergraduate and postgraduate), genders and ethnicities. Informed consent was obtained to use collected data for internal and external publications and 14 Programme Leaders were identified and approached. Of these, eight agreed to take part, with others unable to participate due to work commitments.

The original study comprised a case study evaluation of a pilot project which trialled several interventions to support Programme Leaders within the institution. This study did not originally seek to explore the leadership experiences of the participants. Semi-structured interviews were selected as a method which has been used by other researchers exploring Programme Leader experiences (for example, Mitchell, 2014; Ladyshewsky and Flavell, 2011). This method allows the participants to be comfortable in providing an honest and detailed account of their views and experiences, and the interviewer the flexibility to explore issues as they arise. Utilising grounded theory as a strategy supported an inductive approach in which patterns and meanings emerge from the data. The interviews generated rich data and a deeper understanding of the lived experience of the Programme Leaders who gave their time to take part in the study. Interview transcripts were coded using NVivo, and during the analysis the concept of 'leadership' emerged as a theme which was present within all of the interviews and influenced many aspects of the experiences of the participants. This subset of data fell out of the scope of the original study but warranted further consideration given the limited research on programme leadership discussed above. The findings are considered in the context of existing literature, a device employed to identify areas of congruence and divergence with the current research and narratives which are expressed within the limited body of contemporary higher education research on Programme Leadership.

To protect the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms have been used throughout the text. To ensure anonymity, these pseudonyms have not been related to particular departments or programmes. Although the emphasis and priorities of each individual were diverse, no evidence of emerging trends or patterns related to gender, experience or disciplinary background were noted during the analysis of this small sample. A participant list including the pseudonym used and some high-level information is included in Table 1 (below).

Pseudonym	Gender	Length of experience of programme leadership
Cathy	Female	<1 year
Anita	Female	2-4 years
Ahmed	Male	2-4 years
Richard	Male	N/A
Deborah	Female	2-4 years
Erica	Female	2-4 years
David	Male	<1 year
Adi	Female	2-4 years

Table 1.

Results And Discussion

Three dominant themes emerged from the analysis. The first relates to the motivations of academic staff to become Programme Leaders, the second is concerned with the participants' attitudes towards and experiences of leadership and the third theme to emerge relates to the challenges they experienced in carrying out the leadership aspects of their role. Although there is, of course, a degree of overlap between these themes, in order to support the clarity of the narrative and arguments the themes are presented beneath separate headings below.

Motivations To Become A Programme Leader

It would seem, superficially at least, self-evident that the motivation to pursue a Programme Leader role would be related to a desire for leadership responsibility. However, none of the participants explicitly cited a desire for leadership or management as a motivating factor. Several participants stated that they had not

sought out the role, but had been asked by a senior manager within their department to take it on. In fact there were several instances described where it had been difficult to persuade anyone to take it on. When Emma approached a colleague to discuss this possibility, she found the person had little interest in programme leadership.

> When I approached a staff member to ask if they would like to take over the programme leader role I got an exceptionally emphatic 'no'. They had no intention of taking on that role.

Another participant, Ali, described a similar reluctance on the part of colleagues to get involved.

> I don't know of anyone who's put up their hand and said to [the Head of School] 'can I be a Programme Leader?'

At the institution in which the participants were working Programme Leadership was associated with a number of benefits and was formally linked to academic promotion pathways. Despite this, most of the participants alluded to what they felt was a negative perception of the Programme Leader role amongst some colleagues. One experienced academic, Deborah, articulated it thus:

> People have said to me "why would I do that? It's just a headache and you get no recognition for it."

Another participant, Anita, was even more emphatic.

> A lot of people view this as career suicide. I don't think there's status, no, not at all. There might be within the team, as you're the 'fount of all knowledge,' but it's not status.

Anita went on to describe the inconsistency of the attitudes she had experienced.

I've had people say "oh well, if you do that it might lead to a Principal Lecturer." I've also had people say not to touch these sorts of admin roles with a barge pole as it will never get you anywhere.

The perception of programme leadership as a 'career killer' has been discussed by Vilkinas and Ladyshewsky (2012, 121) in their study of the related role of academic Programme Director within Australian universities. The perception of the participants within this study was usually related to the 'onerous' workload which came with the role, and the resulting impact on the key academic activities of teaching, and in particular, research. Study participant Richard has a senior leadership role at the university and works closely with Programme Leaders, and he spoke about the conflicting demands they experienced.

I think there can sometimes be a challenge with the administrative burden associated with being a Programme Leader […] Most academics [within the department] are very research active […] so I think there's always that tension and conflict.

According to Henkel (2005, 166), administrative and teaching responsibilities 'set back' the academics in her study by moving their focus away from research and causing them difficulties in obtaining research grants. Richard went on to express a similar concern at the impact of this conflict between administrative, teaching and research activities:

When there's a lot of focus on the REF, on performance indicators in terms of research, I think that's held people back from taking on that [Programme Leader] role.

Other studies have shown that Programme Leaders and other related roles tend to be performed by more experienced academics (for instance, Ladyshewsky & Flavell, 2012, 128). But study participant Cathy challenged this and believed that programme leadership had helped her to secure a recent promotion by giving her an edge over her competitors. However, she also highlighted the need for these activities to be rewarded by the institution.

> I think programme leadership in this institution is often done by quite early career academics […] and they might want to develop their career and think that programme leadership will help them. If it's not rewarded I think there is a danger of people… "well what am I getting out of taking on all this work when maybe I should be focussing on my research?"

Yet the notion of research as the primary output of, and status builder for, an academic has been changing for some time, albeit more so in some disciplines than others. Becher and Trowler, in their influential book on academic culture, state that 'what counts towards success in an academic career may vary from one field to another' (2001, 76). They also believe that:

> Close engagement with the disciplinary knowledge core through research is only one academic activity among many […] For a good proportion of academics it is not a significant aspect of their work at all. The idea of the ivory tower, still current in popular discourse, will today elicit a wry smile from almost every faculty member everywhere (xiii-xiv).

But studies have shown that there is still disagreement within HEIs on the status and importance of the different roles and activities which an academic may take on. Murphy and Curtis (2013, np) cite a lack of recognition of the importance of administrative duties which logically results from the institutional priorities of teaching and research as a key difficulty for Programme Leaders. In the current climate, where Research Excellence Framework (REF) and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) data can make or break a UK HE institution, it is difficult to imagine these attitudes changing any time soon. Yet the administrative aspects of programme leadership relate so closely to student success and experiences and so ultimately to key TEF metrics that the notion of a separation between teaching activity and 'administration' seems unconvincing. Long term, UK HEIs will have to align these 'conflicting' interests to successfully navigate the HE policy landscape.

Despite this strategically significant association between programme leadership and institutional rankings, it was the notion of academic citizenship (as explored by Bolden et al, 2013), which was apparent in the motivations described by participants, in addition to the genuine satisfaction they derived from their interactions with their

students. Although participants spoke openly about their frustrations and difficulties with the role, the majority were keen to emphasise the satisfaction it brought to them. Erica felt some discomfort with the leadership aspects of her role, but had also wished to contribute more to her programme.

> I guess I felt it was naturally a way of taking on more responsibility […] I've taught on the programme for a long time and I care a lot about the programme.

Most spoke of their enjoyment of student interactions and the pastoral care they could offer their students. Richard felt that the Programme Leaders with whom he worked:

> Really enjoy teaching and interacting with students, they just enjoy that role. It's their own personal intrinsic motivation […] they enjoy enthusing their students […] and they do a fantastic job.

Attitudes Towards, And Experiences Of, Leadership

Within the existing literature it is widely recognised that most Programme Leaders have no positional authority over their colleagues, and that this presents challenges for effective leadership in practice. Programme Leadership 'is an ambiguous and complex form of leadership, existing as it does in the space between standard academic and manager profiles', and this may lead to the academic perceiving themselves as a 'toothless tiger' (Murphy & Curtis, 2013, np). The participants in this study were acutely aware of these challenges. Deborah, an experienced Programme Leader, articulated her experience thus:

> It's a difficult role because you don't have any authority, yet you have to ask people to do things. And that's very tricky because people don't want to do things, and stuff's done on the basis of goodwill. And sometimes, when people are under pressure, that runs out.

Cathy, a less experienced programme leader, expressed similar sentiments.

> I think there are some issues around, […] like if colleagues are not doing their job properly but you're not the line manager […] you don't have any direct power.

Despite this lack of formal authority, all of the study participants demonstrated a conscientious approach to their programmes, but this sense of responsibility without formal authority was something that they all, to a greater or lesser extent, were troubled by. Experienced Programme Leader Anita spoke about her concerns:

> If you asked me anything about the job, it's about my responsibility. Looking at this role description [for Programme Leader] I think 'oh my goodness' […] It's almost like I feel that I'll be held accountable. So NSS scores, as Programme Leader, I'm accountable. How much does it reflect on me? If I am, it's a huge ask of me compared to another colleague who's paid the same and doesn't even lead a module […] But I still do it. I enjoy it!

Nevertheless, there is growing awareness, both within and outside of the HE sector, of the importance of leadership outside of the management hierarchy (Bryman, 2007, 16; Johnson, 2008; Kuhl et al., 2005), and indeed there are many roles (for instance many project managers) who must operate in this way. According to IT industry specialist Roberto Guanique 'neither authority nor position will make you a leader' (Weaver & Guanique, 2012, np). Despite the concerns of the study participants, the majority did feel that they had found ways to work with and lead by influencing their colleagues. Those that expressed confidence in their ability to do so also described positive working relationships and a degree of respect from their colleagues. One new Programme Leader, David, talked of how the positive developments he had implemented within his programme were facilitated by constructive relationships with professional service colleagues and informal mentoring by more experienced academics. Another participant spoke about how the working relationships between Programme Leaders and administrative support staff in his department were helping him to make effective changes and improvements to the resources available to students, and how the willingness of the most senior staff in the department to meet with, talk with and listen to the Programme Leaders felt supportive and empowering. These narratives correspond well with descriptions of 'collegiate' working within academic departments by other researchers (e.g. Bryman,

2007, 19), and show the ways in which successful Programme Leaders were finding ways to circumvent their positional disadvantages through the use of interpersonal skills, professional relationships and peer networks.

In counterpoint to the above, it was noted that several participants conveyed unease or ambivalence with the notion that they would or could possess authority. During our conversation, Ali asked rhetorically:

> Can we [Programme Leaders] have any more power? Do we want any more power? Maybe we do, maybe we don't, I'm not sure.

Cathy considered herself as a leader within her department and the discomfort inherent in that notion:

> Yeah, I think there are opportunities to shape the course and to have a vision […] but I also think that it's actually maybe quite good for it [people management and programme management] to be separate, so you're responsible for the programme itself rather than who's teaching it […] because I think it's really dangerous for one person to have all of the power over a cohort of people.

Erica also recognised her own discomfort with her obligation to influence the staff involved with her programme, some aspects of which she felt were 'alien' to disciplinary experience and knowledge. She had found herself caught up in a tricky micro-political situation with programme colleagues whose experience she valued, which made the navigation of department politics particularly difficult.

> I don't want to boss anyone around, but I'm trying to have some leadership. But [my colleagues] have lots of experience so they can help and advise […] I don't think I've ever made a decision on my own.

These contradictions between the strength of the commitment to leading their programmes well with the frustration at their lack of formal authority and the discomfort with wielding authority in practice may derive from a number of possible causes. It may be indicative of a weakness in the collegiate approach to leadership

for this group of staff, which, based on the definitions provided by Bryman (2009, 48) seems to rely heavily on pre-existing networks and relationships; it may be outside of the scope and influence of a Programme Leader to create these conditions in some circumstances. Alternatively, it may be symptomatic of the complexity of the multiple roles (teacher, researcher, administrator, student support and so on) which the Programme Leader must inhabit simultaneously, particularly given that many of the participants had not actively sought out a leadership role. This complexity has been framed by a number of authors as an identity conflict (for instance, Bolden et al, 2013), and the idea is considered in more detail below.

Challenges To Effective Programme Leadership

The study participants described various challenges which they felt had a negative impact on their programme leadership. Time and competing priorities (research, teaching, pastoral care of their students) was cited by all of the Programme Leaders as a significant issue. Although several participants wanted to attend 'soft skills' training to further develop their leadership skills, this issue with time pressure was frequently mentioned as a barrier to engagement with professional development programmes at the university, some of which were designed specifically to support Programme Leaders in their role. This concern over the time available and, in particular, the impact upon an academic's ability to engage with support and development, has also been echoed by Clark et al (2011) and Ladyshewsky & Flavell (2011, 130). Various authors have written about the common pathways into formal and informal leadership within the academy, which typically reward those with disciplinary knowledge, but who rarely have any leadership experience or qualifications (Detsky, 2011, np). These leaders are expected to learn 'on the job' despite a mounting body of evidence that this negatively impacts on their effectiveness and ultimately on organisational priorities such as productivity: 'there may have been a time when being a leader in one's discipline or technical area was sufficient preparation for academic or administrative leadership within a college or university: those times are gone' (Gigliotti & Rueben, 2017, 97-98).

When Krause et al (2010) surveyed 178 Programme Leaders at Australian universities, they concluded that programme leadership was perceived as an

academic leadership role requiring a complex skillset which was poorly supported by institutions, for example in terms of the time allocated for carrying out their duties and for support and development for this group. Although professional development and work load allocation was part of the offering for Programme Leaders at the institution in this study, the theme of support emerged during the data analysis as a significant factor which could enable or inhibit their leadership confidence and efficacy. The positive effects of operating within a supportive working environment have been described above, and this finding corresponds with existing studies of leadership within HEIs (Bryman, 2009, 48). New Programme Leader David spoke of the help he had received from informal mentors, some of whom were from outside his own disciplinary area. Erica also felt that a 'leadership mentor' would help her to further develop her skills, and expressed a preference for a mentor from outside of her discipline who could bring fresh insights and would be removed from the local 'micro-politics'.

A further challenge centred on the participants' understanding of their role. Murphy and Curtis (2013, np) reported that a major source of difficulty for the Programme Leaders in their study derived from a lack of understanding of the scope of their role and extent of their responsibilities. Despite the availability of a role descriptor for Programme Leaders at this institution, some did allude to instances of confusion about the extent of their responsibilities. Uncertainties were usually due to differing departmental approaches to tasks such as programme administration and the degree of variation between individual programmes and the resulting impact upon the Programme Leader. For example, the differing distribution of workload in a large undergraduate or small postgraduate programme ('the size of the role varies according to the size of the programme' according to one participant). In fact, a certain 'fuzziness' is characteristic of Programme Leader roles at most institutions (Mitchell, 2014, 717).

These arguments could be considered within a broader and more existential framework. One dominant narrative in contemporary HE literature relates to the idea that academics and their institutions are experiencing an 'identity crisis' (Fischer, 2006) as a result of recent policy developments in the UK and abroad. Some authors have argued that these developments have led to a fundamental tension between the 'traditional' academic culture and the apparently more recent development of a

'managerialist' culture within Higher Education institutions (for example, Becher & Trowler, 2001; Henkel, 2005; Lomas & Lygo-Baker, 2006; Winter, 2006) and the 'massification' (see Courtney, 2013, 40) of higher education.

Numerous arguments have been made that these reforms have had profound consequences for academic staff, and given that Programme Leaders are situated at the institutional coalface, we would presumably expect that they would be affected. The question is how, and to what extent, this impacts upon Programme Leaders and their practice of leadership? Some studies have discussed the impact on academic leadership, for example Krause et al (2010) suggest that policy developments have led to a rapid evolution of academic roles, while Bolden et al. have stated that the practice of leadership within HE 'may be experienced as conflicting with ideals of collegiality, academic freedom, education and scholarship' (2013, np), a tension which may result in academics being discouraged from seeking out or fully embracing academic leadership roles (Bolden et al, 2007, 1). Meyer's (2007) case study of institutional change and participation in university governance concluded that the rapid reforms experienced by New Zealand HE institutions risked, amongst other things, disengaging and disempowering academics and their sense of being agents of change (232) and ultimately the inability to attract and retain high calibre staff (233).

An assessment of whether this broader context is fundamentally responsible for some of the challenges experienced by Programme Leaders falls outside of the scope of this paper. However, it is noteworthy that despite the body of work discussing the issue that exists, rarely is this considered specifically from the viewpoint of programme leadership or related roles.

Summary

Programme Leaders have been recognised as a strategically significant group of academic leaders by Higher Education researchers within the UK and further afield. Although their leadership practice is not underpinned by positional authority, nonetheless they can effectively use their influence to positively impact upon key agendas such as programme quality and the student experience.

The analysis considers the experience of leadership of a small group of Programme Leaders from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds at a single HE institution.

The participants' motivation to engage with programme leadership were examined, and it was clear that a desire for a leadership position was not necessarily a factor for those interviewed. Participants described the negative perceptions of some colleagues of programme leadership, and these were linked to the impact of the additional duties undertaken on the more traditional academic activities of teaching and research. This finding is congruent with existing literature, where activities related to academic citizenship or administration tend to be 'trivialised' (Bolden et al, 2013, np) due, in part, to the existing academic culture and also the current policy environment (for example TEF and REF) which direct institutional focus onto these areas. However, the study participants also expressed enjoyment and job satisfaction.

With regard to the attitudes towards and experiences of leadership, the existing literature documents a lack of positional authority as an issue for Programme Leaders. The study participants expressed some frustration about this, but described the practice of collegiate and collaborative leadership practices to mitigate the challenges this presents. The ambivalence about their position as leaders was notable amongst some participants, and while a full explanation of this ambivalence was outside of the scope of the study, factors considered include the complexity of the role, differing motivations for adopting the role and associated wider concerns over academic and institutional purpose and identity.

Various challenges were identified by the study participants. A lack of time and competing priorities were frequently cited, particularly as a barrier to engaging with soft skills training which might support them in their role. Evidence indicating that support from colleagues was helpful in developing leadership confidence was also found. A dominant narrative in contemporary HE literature focusses on the tensions between 'traditional' academic culture and the more business oriented culture which many HEIs have adopted in response to the changes in government policy. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to assess whether or not this is fundamentally responsible for the challenges described by study participants, there is a gap in our

understanding of this issue from a Programme Leader perspective which should be addressed.

Several other areas for further study may be recommended to enhance understanding of Programme Leadership and informal management within HEIs more generally. It is clear that a greater understanding of the behaviours of successful, effective Programme Leaders and the conditions which support or inhibit their ability to lead is needed. This gap has also been identified by Bryman (2007, 3). Longitudinal studies to examine the perception and reality of programme leadership as a 'career killer' by considering the career aspirations and pathways of programme leaders would also be of great value both in terms of assisting institutions to better support these staff members and potentially in improving recruitment and support for this influential community.

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