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Lessons in programme leadership from two cases of designing new interdisciplinary master's programmes

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Abstract

Drawing on an adaptation of Quinlan's (2014) model of leadership for learning in higher education, we analyse two case studies of the process of designing postgraduate interdisciplinary taught programmes in a research-intensive university in the UK (Gantogtokh, Quinlan 2017), focusing on the leadership required for interdisciplinary curriculum design. First,

we focus on the organisational structures and processes these leaders put in place to support programme development. Second, we consider the personal characteristics of the leaders, focusing on how they built relationships with module leaders representing diverse disciplinary communities. Finally, we identify examples of knowledge about learning, teaching and assessment these programme leaders used. We conclude with implications for programme leaders and educational leadership development.

Introduction

Programme (degree course) leaders are well-positioned to effect changes that can affect whole cohorts of students, as well as providing team-based professional development opportunities for other teaching staff (Gast, Schildkamp et al. 2017). Yet, little research exists on leadership at the programme level in higher education.

This paper draws on a framework of educational leadership (Quinlan 2014) derived from a review of literature on educational leadership in higher education. Its focus on leadership of teaching for student learning makes it particularly useful for educational programme leadership. We apply it to two cases of interdisciplinary programme design at the MSc level.

There are particular challenges involved in interdisciplinary curricular design: a) intellectual challenge in creating coherence across multiple bodies of knowledge; b) the social challenge of interaction across diverse individuals and perspectives; and c) a focus on making knowledge relevant beyond academia (Gantogtokh and Quinlan 2017). These challenges may place specific demands on leaders of these programmes during the curricular design phase. Thus, the context of this study amplifies elements of programme leadership that focus on coherence, coordination, communication and relevance, which may also be important (and, perhaps, overlooked) in leading disciplinary programmes.

Conceptual Framework

According to Quinlan (2014), three main spheres of leadership are needed to promote student learning and personal development (see Figure 1).

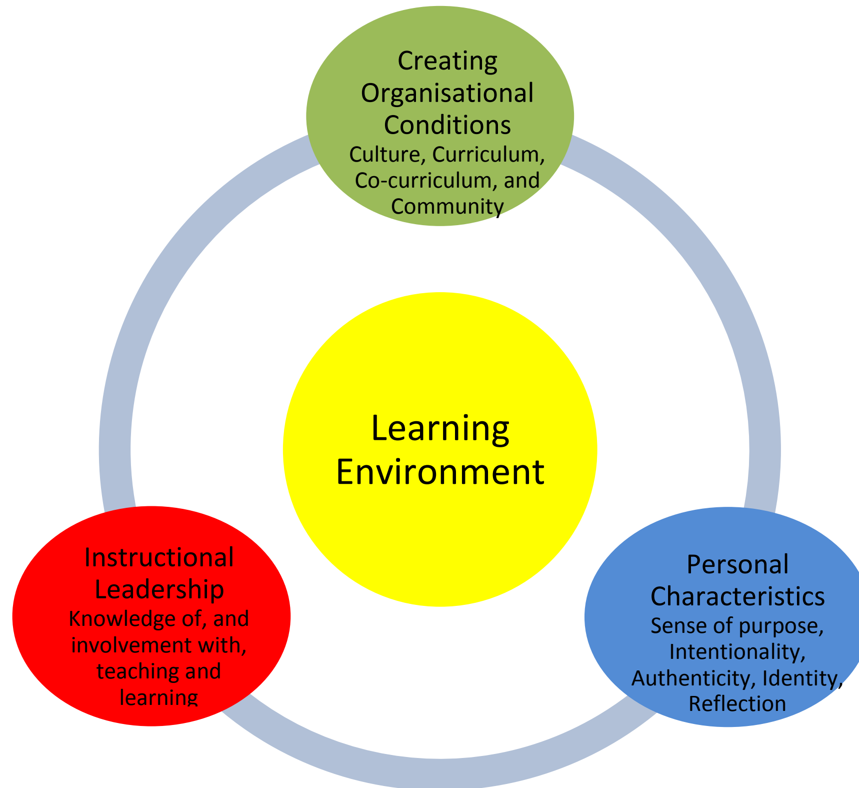

Figure 1. Creating an environment for learning (from Quinlan, 2014).

Creating organisational conditions

First, leaders need to create supportive environments for student development by fostering supportive organisational conditions. To do so, it is important to attend to and align the culture of the institution, the curriculum, the co-curriculum, and the sense of community (Braskamp, Trautvetter et al. 2008).

Curriculum is the most significant aspect of the socio-cultural environment for students and is the focal point of programme leadership. The co-curriculum, concerned with creating intersections between formal learning and opportunities that connect and extend classroom learning, are generally outside the purview of programme leaders. However, out-of-class experiences (such as interactions with peers) are important contributors to student growth that programme leaders may be able to promote through careful curricular design. Culture indicates the general ethos of the institution, reflected in a clear mission and vision articulated by leaders and across the institution, supported by induction and ongoing development of teachers. Culture also includes the physical environment and other organisational structures and processes that foster interactions between and among students and academics. Programme leaders can create a general programme ethos by promoting a strong cohort effect in which a group of students studying the same programme work closely together and feel a sense of community (McCarthy, Mary et al. 2005). Programme leaders might focus on creating communities through activities such as involving students in governance.

Leaders need to articulate a clear agenda with consistent messaging, backed up by rewards and reasons why colleagues would want to engage, such as financial pressures, student learning, government mandates or a focus on graduate attributes (Blackmore, Kandiko 2010). Leaders of change in academia need to be able to set clear priorities; make hard decisions; clearly designate responsibility; involve all staff; emphasise human rather than hierarchical, bureaucratic processes; and operate in responsive and collaborative ways (Scott, Coates et al. 2008). Evidence-based decision-making and engaging in smaller-scale pilots focusing on outcomes (not merely inputs) are all vital (Scott, Coates et al. 2008).

Personal characteristics

Second, leaders need to be role models of integrity and authenticity to earn the trust and respect of colleagues and students (Scott, Coates et al. 2008, Fullan, Scott 2009). To be successful in bringing others along with them – no matter where they are situated in the organisation – leaders must be credible, demonstrating clarity of values, building unity of vision among the community and holding these values intensely themselves (Kouzes, Posner 2011). These ideas are represented in literature on values-based leadership (Badaracco, Ellsworth 1989, Badaracco 2002), authentic leadership (Bhindi, Duignan 1997), and higher education leadership (Palmer, Zajonc et al. 2010, Wepner, D'Onofrio et al. 2008, Temple, Ylitalo 2009). Personal integrity and trustworthiness are the characteristics academics most value in higher education leaders (Bolden, Petrov et al. 2008).

Instructional Leadership

In the school sector, there is more research linking leadership with student outcomes. The key debate is whether leaders' influence (i.e. principals or headmasters) is a) primarily indirect by using transformative leadership to create positive relationships and environments in which teachers can positively affect students (Leithwood, Harris et al. 2008) or b) primarily direct through instructional leadership (Robinson, Lloyd et al. 2008). The transformative theory of leadership is closely aligned with the personal characteristics described in the previous section, while the instructional leadership model is focused on tasks and hands-on involvement with teaching.

Based on a meta-analysis of 27 studies, the instructional leadership type has three to four times more effect on student outcomes than a model of transformative leadership (Robinson, Lloyd et al. 2008). The strongest effects were found for leaders promoting and directly participating in formal and informal teacher learning and development alongside teachers; a) establishing goals and expectations; and b) direct involvement in planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum through actions such as coordinating

across classes and years, regular classroom visits and giving feedback to teachers. They conclude that “the more leaders focus their relationships, their work and their learning on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their influence on student outcomes” (Robinson, Lloyd et al. 2008 636). Quinlan’s (2014) model incorporates attention to both the personal characteristics associated with transformative leadership and a focus on curriculum and teaching.

Methods

We (Gantogtokh, Quinlan 2017) used a descriptive and interpretive (Merriam 1998) case study design (Yin 2013) (Yin 2009), focused on two case studies of interdisciplinary master’s degree programmes. Both programmes were new in the past three years, and they represented contrasting disciplinary clusters in the same research-intensive university. One programme is in applied social science (SSP), with 5 core modules; the other programme is in health science (HSP) with 13 core modules. Both programmes are intensive, one year full time programmes that cultivated a cohort culture (McCarthy, Mary et al. 2005).

In the health science programme, we interviewed informants responsible for different aspects of the programme, including Programme Leaders, Head of Administration, Module Leads, and a Teaching Fellow. Although we could not gain access to some of the key departmental leaders in SSP, we interviewed the current programme leader and module leads. All informants were experienced academics and represented a range of disciplines included in the programme; most had at least five years of teaching experience.

Interview questions focused on participants’ interpretation of the curricular approach they used, the curriculum coherence desired, the interactions they had with academics from other disciplines, and the challenges and barriers. We reinterpreted the original data through the leadership of teaching conceptual framework (Quinlan, 2014), using approaches suggested by

Miles and Huberman (1994).

Findings

Creating organisational conditions

A key role of programme leaders in curriculum design is influencing the organisational conditions that support student learning across the programme. In these two case studies, program leaders lined up and supported the right people to lead different modules and consulted key stakeholders to make decisions about programme and module priorities.

In the HSP programme, interviewees emphasised the importance of assigning responsibilities and being clear about the roles of different members of the team. For example, while module leaders were responsible for detailing the learning outcomes and session content for their own module, programme leaders took decisions about the overall assessment method. Likewise, although there was emphasis on module leads and lecturers making decisions at their level, when there was conflict between different modules, the programme leader needed to exercise a final say after hearing all sides. This "final say" is particularly important in an interdisciplinary programme where academics may tend to "fight their corner" due to the limited time for any given discipline.

In the case studies, it became apparent that programme administrators play a key role in managing the administrative aspects of the programme, including managing timetabling, room bookings, electronic virtual learning environment, minutes, agendas and reports required by the university, and timely routine communications with students and lecturers. Experienced administrators are an asset to such programmes; programme leaders need to learn how to work effectively with these colleagues.

Programme leaders also need to determine the best structures for communication across members of the team, including setting up a hierarchy of committees (e.g. module

committees reporting to programme level committees) and chairing effective meetings that supervise the programme as a whole.

Leaders on the HSP wanted module leaders to take more overall responsibility for the programme as a whole, to learn how their module intersects with, builds on, contradicts or supports what is being taught elsewhere. Programme leaders, therefore, sought forums that demanded such collaboration. While academics teaching on the SSP programme emphasised the importance of communication across modules, they seemed to accept that each module was distinct and "we each have our individual responsibilities, which are our expertise, so there is relatively little coordination needed". That said, both programmes created occasions during the design process in which module leaders presented their own modules to others teaching on the programme. They also created opportunities for educational development of staff, including pilot-runs of new lectures and staff development workshops in HSP and incorporating instructional innovations into annual retreats in SSP. In addition, on both programmes, the leaders' role involved taking an overview of the entire programme, looking for ways to make things work more smoothly such as adjusting a problematic assessment or finding ways to pull together disparate pieces under an umbrella module.

Personal characteristics

Programme leadership is challenging, in part, because it is not accompanied by formal authority over other team members. As the SSP programme leader explained, "I have many responsibilities for the programme, although I am not a boss… I couldn't [be] even if I wanted to because I don't have a fist to rule with. It is much more ruling or guiding by consensus, commitments…" One of the HSP programme leaders explained, "you can't dictate to professors how he is going to do his lecture…I can't say to a professor who seems senior to me 'you have to do that.' I can advise to do that. I can request to do that…'"

Therefore, programme leaders must be able to present a compelling vision of the programme and enroll others in that vision. An SSP module leader argued, “it is absolutely imperative you have someone with overall strategic vision on top”. On both programmes, all interviewees were able to summarise the vision of the programme and how their module or activity fit within it.

Interestingly, this initial strategic vision came from higher up in the organization. With HSP, the department head created a sense of urgency around preparing future doctoral level researchers in the field. In SSP, the Head of School collaborated with donors who wanted a programme in public policy leadership that would support positive change in the world.

The programme leaders were enthusiastically committed teachers and translated the programme’s broad vision into specific learning outcomes. In both cases, leaders credited a postgraduate qualification in teaching, learning and educational leadership in higher education with providing vital knowledge and skills. The SSP programme leader, who started as a module leader before being promoted to programme leader explained, “real experience of science and great experience of teaching were my selling my points…Teaching has never been [a] backup position, but the thing I am always interested in. I’m more excited about my teaching than my research.”

In addition to emphasising the vision, programme leaders coached newcomers and modeled desirable behaviors. The leaders also shared good practices at annual programme meetings, used their networks to identify inspiring individuals to contribute, built respectful, collegial and friendly relationships with team members, and drew on experts (from the profession or from education) to support them as needed.

Instructional Leadership

While the programme leaders demonstrated elements of transformative leadership in building trust and good will across the team, they were also hands-on in instructional development activities alongside colleagues. These leaders had oversight of the programme as a whole and how it fit together to build students toward the overall programme learning outcomes. In both cases, they worked closely with module leaders and, within the own modules they led, with individual lecturers, to ensure and enhance quality and coherence, a key challenge for interdisciplinary programmes.

The programme leaders, who also led the admissions process (and adjusted admissions requirements in one case example, were most familiar with the backgrounds of their students. They communicated a general profile of the cohort's background to various team members to support curricular design. On the HSP programme, with attention to university policy on the matter and data protection requirements, lecturers on the programme were given a packet with photos of each student including their country of origin, undergraduate degree programme and specialty. Module leaders found this helpful because, "if you know *a priori* who the audience is, then you can fine tune, even the examples used." Programme leaders, whose role was explicit to students, also led on communicating expectations to students and signposting the structures, workload issues, and resources available.

In both cases, student feedback on the programme was seen as essential to fine-tuning the design, with programme leaders playing a key role in designing ways of gathering student input, interacting with students informally, and creating systems for collecting, reviewing and acting on formal student input. For example, in SSP, the programme leader held a regular coffee time between students and staff where he could discuss students' experience in a more informal way to identify issues arising as they happened. In the HSP, programme leaders worked with module convenors in analyzing student feedback to identify areas for enhancement

such as more early formative assessment. According to a module leader, programme leaders also analysed student work to “show us things we had done well, showed us the areas where we hadn’t done as well as we hoped”.

Discussion

Quinlan’s (2014) educational leadership framework provides a useful starting point for understanding the requirements of programme leadership. However, programme leaders are limited in the extent to which they can effect organisational conditions. For example, rewards and recognition for teaching were raised. In HSP, interviewees noted relatively limited reward for teaching. In SSP, the programme leader was able to make teaching his primary role, and other staff members were recognised for their teaching through various monetary and contractual arrangements. That said, allocating responsibilities, clearly defining roles, and setting up structures for effective meetings and staff development within their own team all seem to be key success factors for programme leaders in the curricular design phase.

Programme leaders focus on the curriculum, rather than the co-curriculum or broader culture. Nonetheless, in an intensive, full time programme with a strong cohort effect (McCarthy, Mary et al. 2005), programme leaders can influence the overall culture of the programme. They also communicate and implement the programme vision. In both programmes, a broad vision was established by department heads, and programme leaders were then hired to enact it. The programme leader’s success, then, depended upon their ability to communicate that vision to a large number of individuals involved in teaching on the programme, as well as having the educational expertise (either directly or with assistance from educational developers) to translate it into learning outcomes and effective methods of teaching and assessment.

This finding suggests the importance of instructional development for programme leaders, as well as the importance of being able to shift focus between the proverbial forest and the trees. Curricular alignment (Biggs 2002), a key principle embraced by both programme leaders, was a particularly valuable conceptual tool guiding their work.

Given that programme leaders did not have line management responsibility for staff on the teaching team, they worked through soft influence and persuasion, inspiring and getting colleagues' buy-in. As such, personal development and various communication skills, including a focus on outcomes, persuasion, negotiating, coaching, giving feedback, and chairing meetings are vital to successfully performing that role.

Finally, this study demonstrates the importance of instructional leadership at the programme level, consistent with research on educational leadership in secondary schools (Robinson, Lloyd et al. 2008). These programme leaders worked closely alongside colleagues in developing module and session learning outcomes, designing assessments, promoting and coaching on appropriate teaching methods, and reviewing, interpreting and acting on student feedback.

In conclusion, this study confirms the importance of programme leadership to the design of new educational programmes, particularly multi-disciplinary programmes. This study also offers a framework (Quinlan, 2014) for developing educational leadership support for programme leaders, focusing on organisational conditions, personal characteristics, and knowledge and skill in teaching and supporting learning. Educational developers could structure their own curriculum or coaching conversations around these three broad areas. This study also provides specific examples of activities and behaviors that successful programme leaders engaged in for these three areas which can be used to create checklists, specific tools and resources. Further research on more programmes in a larger variety of contexts (e.g. disciplinary, undergraduate, part-time, maintaining versus designing a curriculum) could test the

relative importance of these areas and identify further specific knowledge, skills and attitudes that influence programme success.

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