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Course leadership in small specialist UK higher education – a review

Course
leadership

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to review the literature with regard to the course leader in small and specialist higher education in the UK.

Design/methodology/approach – First, the role of the course leader is explored, followed by an evaluation of the barriers to effective course management. This is then followed by a discussion of mitigating solutions to the barriers identified. Course leadership is then reviewed in the context of small and specialist higher education. Finally, areas for future research are suggested.

Findings – First, the role of the course leader is explored, followed by an evaluation of the barriers to effective course management. This is then followed by a discussion of mitigating solutions to the barriers identified. Course leadership is then reviewed in the context of small and specialist higher education. Finally, areas for future research are suggested.

Originality/value – Course leadership is an underappreciated area with little academic literature available, even though issues have been reported since the 1990s. This paper critically evaluates and summarises the issues, and shows that they are still current. It also proposes solutions and areas of further research so that issues can be resolved for betterment of the higher education sector.

Keywords Professional development, Higher education, Course leadership, Small specialist education

Paper type General review

Introduction

Course leaders, also described in the literature as course scheme leaders (Wisker, 1996), programme leaders (Krause *et al.*, 2010; Murphy and Curtis, 2013), programme directors (Milburn, 2010; Carr *et al.*, 2013), course managers (van Veggel, 2017) or junior academics-managers (Mercer, 2009), play a pivotal role in the effective operation of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK. Despite this, there is very little academic literature available on aspects relating to this role. Generally, course leaders occupy a vague institutional position where they usually take responsibility for managing courses or course schemes, but not for managing staff (Murphy and Curtis, 2013). This does not, however, reduce the range of tasks course leaders are responsible for: responsibilities include course management, staff and student timetabling, curriculum development, quality assurance at course level, marketing, admissions, student pastoral support and mentoring new academic staff. The scarceness of literature is therefore surprising, given the importance of these topics for the various benchmarks the modern managerialist UK HEI is measured against. In particular the student experience, a concept central to the National Student Survey and indirectly linked to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), is of importance. Due to their position within the institution, course leaders are ideally suited to translate institutional policy into appropriate curriculum and pedagogy strategies (Milburn, 2010) and to bridge academic and pastoral care for both cohorts and individual students (Blackmore *et al.*, 2007). However,



this crucial role is under-recognised by both the institution and the wider academic community (Murphy and Curtis, 2013). Although the literature makes distinction between “management” and “leadership” (Middlehurst and Elton, 1992), this distinction goes beyond the scope of this review. Instead, for the purposes of this paper, a course leader is a member of academic staff responsible for the leadership and management of a higher education course or multiple related higher education courses and the academic leadership of their related course teams. This paper aims to review the literature surrounding course leaders and course leadership in the UK, with a particular focus on small specialist institutions. It starts with an exploration of the role of the course leader, followed by barriers to effective course leadership. It will then evaluate proposed strategies to mitigate these barriers. Finally, course leadership will be discussed in the context of small specialist HEIs and areas requiring further research will be highlighted.

The role of the course leader

In most cases, UK course leaders are responsible for academic leadership, as opposed to the head of department-level role, where staff hold line management and financial responsibility (Milburn, 2010). Although there are differences in institutional practice across the UK when it comes to the course leadership, Murphy and Curtis (2013) found there is a relatively standard set of tasks which course leaders undertake as part of their role. In 1992, the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) first published a comprehensive overview of the role of the course leader (Bradley *et al.*, 1992). Since that publication, many changes in the UK higher education landscape have taken place, such as the modularisation of academic courses, the introduction of various levels of tuition fees and the marketisation of and change to mass higher education (Sotirakou, 2004). However, the types of tasks undertaken by course leaders are still very much the same, albeit with extended administrative responsibilities and serving a consumerist-minded student population which is less numerate, literate and knowledgeable (Milburn, 2010). In general, course leaders provide a bridge between students and staff, and between institutional and external structures the course relies on (Wisker, 1996; Milburn, 2010). Based on the limited literature available on the topic, the main areas of responsibility of the course leader are student recruitment, induction, student experience and pastoral care, course management, quality assurance and curriculum development (Bradley *et al.*, 1992; Wisker, 1996; Marcella and Smith, 1998; Blackmore *et al.*, 2007; Mercer, 2009; Krause *et al.*, 2010; Milburn, 2010; Murphy and Curtis, 2013).

Course leaders are generally responsible and accountable for marketing of courses, admissions decisions and student number projections on which budget decisions are based (Marcella and Smith, 1998). In addition, they also carry a shared responsibility for student experience and pastoral care, which influences student retention and success (Murphy and Curtis, 2013). In the current marketised and competitive UK higher education environment, student recruitment and retention are an essential source of income for institutions, which adds additional pressure on the course leader (Blackmore *et al.*, 2007). Although this is not a new development (Paterson, 1999 described struggles with course viability and student numbers), the introduction of the TEF and increased emphasis on various other benchmarks and performance indicators the course leader is accountable for will only increase pressures. The increased use of external benchmarks has also resulted in a stronger institutional focus on student-related metrics and course evaluations (Temple *et al.*, 2016). Whilst the availability and use of specific metrics depends on individual institutions, course leaders are generally responsible for analysing admissions profiles, student progression and achievement data, and employment figures. These metrics feed into course evaluation reports, which also contain various student experience-related surveys. In most UK institutions, it is the course leader who is responsible for writing these evaluation reports, and who bears accountability for their content on behalf of the course team. These evaluative reports contribute to institutional and

external quality assurance activities, which means the course leader has an important role in quality assurance at course level: liaising with external examiners and academic standards departments, chairing course meetings and responding to external quality assurance requests and contributing to institutional policy development are all activities undertaken by UK course leaders. Finally, from a student experience perspective, course leaders influence all aspects of what Temple *et al.* (2016, p. 34) described as the “student journey”: they carry responsibility for the application experience, academic experience, campus experience and graduate experience. Milburn (2010) argued that due their wide range of responsibilities, course leaders are crucial to the functioning of higher education courses, something which Marcella and Smith (1998) related to the course leader’s closeness to the course and therefore its success or failure.

Barriers to effective course leadership

Most literature on the role of the UK course leader reports a range of barriers to effective course leadership. Respondents in research by Wisker (1996) and by Marcella and Smith (1998) reported various different types of difficulties: uncertainty regarding the scope of the course leader role, managing other staff, administrative burden and recognition and appreciation of the course manager role. It is remarkable that more than a decade after these publications, respondents in work by Blackmore *et al.* (2007), Milburn (2010) and Murphy and Curtis (2013) all still reported similar difficulties. This phenomenon in itself could be interpreted as an underappreciation by the academic community of the importance of the course leader role. The causes of the neglect of the course leader role over time, however, fall outside of the scope of this review.

The vague definition of the role of the course leader is a frequently mentioned barrier as perceived by course leaders. Murphy and Curtis (2013) described the role as paradoxical: course leaders possess responsibility and accountability, but not authority. In other words, course leaders are responsible for course management, but are not line managers. This paradoxical nature was also perceived as a difficulty by respondents in UK HEIs in Wisker (1996), Marcella and Smith (1998), Blackmore *et al.* (2007) and Milburn (2010), and by their Australian counterparts in Ladyshevsky and Flavell (2012). Milburn (2010), however, argued that this lack of “power” is only significant where other contributors to influencing chance (e.g. expertise and appropriate personal characteristics) are not present, and that the main method of effecting change is by influencing, coordinating and acting as a good role model. The author described this style as participatory leadership (Milburn, 2010), which is further enhanced by the close association of the course leader with the teams they are part of and their ability to influence policy implementation. This makes course leaders a “critical point of influence” (Milburn, 2010, p. 94). This interpretation of leadership agrees with Yelder and Codling (2004), who argued academic leadership can be founded on “authority” being placed in the individual’s personal characteristics and expertise, and in an ability to win followers in the collegial culture of academia. Although there is merit in these arguments, which are in line with the idea of academic harmony, the politics within UK HEIs and the institutional focus on teaching or research mean that course leaders can find themselves low in the pecking order when it comes to decision making (Murphy and Curtis, 2013), especially where there are tensions regarding status and reputation. Meyer (2007) indeed argued that HEIs can be very uncollegial environments.

Milburn (2010) and Murphy and Curtis (2013) also reported that course leaders often lack training for their role. This is not limited to the UK. Participants in Australian research by Krause *et al.* (2010) perceived a lack of professional development opportunities, whereas Vilkinas and Ladyshevsky (2012) found that Australian course leaders often describe feelings of frustration because of an inability to confidently perform the tasks which are part of their role, and that they are rarely considered in the institutional leadership development programmes. The lack of professional development for the role is expected yet surprising at

the same time: expected, because of the lack of recognition of the course leader role in the sector, but surprising given that the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) and the CNAA offered a range of opportunities in the early nineties (see e.g. Bradley *et al.*, 1992; Johns, 1996; Wisker, 1996). Generally academics are asked to take on course leadership positions based on their competence as senior academics who have an interest in curriculum development and/or pedagogy (Yielder and Codling, 2004). However, course leaders often find themselves underprepared for the demands of the role, especially in light of the pressures in the current higher education sector and the fact that quality and student experience are mostly measured at course level (Ladyshevsky and Flavell, 2012; Temple *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, the changing nature of the higher education student has resulted in a larger degree of responsibility towards pastoral support, something which academic staff are not prepared for (Murphy and Curtis, 2013). Although HEIs offer pastoral care and support through specialised departments and staff, the bridging role of course leadership (Wisker, 1996; Milburn, 2010) results in course leaders frequently being involved in pastoral support of students (Paterson, 1999; Murphy and Curtis, 2013). Blackmore *et al.* (2007) identified student well-being, the boundaries of the role of the course leader and referral of students to support departments as an area which course leaders particularly struggled with due to a lack of training.

A further barrier perceived by course leaders is the lack of recognition and appreciation of the course manager role. Participants in research by Murphy and Curtis (2013) found the status attached to the position of the course leader a real challenge and that course leaders' line managers did not appreciate the importance of the role. Scott *et al.* (2008) argued that the position of the course leader is least recognised for its essential role, which is overseeing whether desired institutional changes are actioned at a **level**. Furthermore, the constant conflict of course leadership and the more prestigious teaching and/or research responsibilities leads to course leaders struggling to maintain a balance between their academic profile, whilst also being required to undertake time-consuming leadership tasks (Milburn, 2010). Postgraduate course leaders interviewed by Marcella and Smith (1998) felt a lack of support from senior management teams, and course leaders reported little allowance in workload in work by Wisker (1996). The perceived underappreciation of the course leader role results in course leaders worrying over their career prospects (Wisker, 1996; Paterson, 1999), and discourages other academic staff from taking on course leader roles (Murphy and Curtis, 2013). This conflict is not unique to UK course leaders, as demonstrated by Krause *et al.* (2010) for Australian course leaders. Vilkinas and Ladyshevsky further argued that course leaders are often neglected and overlooked in HEI leadership development programmes and the academic promotion system. The lack of support is also illustrated by a lack of administrative or secretarial support. Where heads of department or similar roles often have access to personal assistants, course leaders report bearing the administrative burden in addition to their day-to-day responsibilities (Marcella and Smith, 1998; Milburn, 2010; Murphy and Curtis, 2013). Occasionally, course leaders have access to shared departmental clerical or secretarial staff; however, in these cases there is often a trade-off between delegating work and the timeliness of the work being done (Paterson, 1999; Blackmore *et al.*, 2007).

Mitigating barriers to effective course leadership

Whereas current literature offers a reasonably clear illustration of difficulties face by course leaders in UK higher education, there are nearly no suggestions for negotiating these barriers, and improving the position of staff in course leader roles. However, based on the barriers discussed previously, and on the available research evidence, there are a few proposed solutions. First of all, a clear definition of the role of the course leader should be developed on an institutional level (Blackmore *et al.*, 2007). Murphy and Curtis (2013)

reported that course leaders do not always have a full understanding of what their role entails, and how it fits in with institutional procedures and policies. Especially staff new to the course leader role need to have a full appreciation of the obligations, before they take on the role. The only way to ensure this information is consistently available to all staff is by way of formal role description, something which is often lacking (Milburn, 2010). The development of this descriptor could start with the CNAA definition written by Bradley *et al.* (1992) and then adjusted for modern day higher education. These role descriptors have proven helpful in other fields of higher education, such as postgraduate medical education (see e.g. Bradford Vocational Training Scheme, 2012 on GP training programme directors. Although the context is rather different, the clear role descriptor supports staff in these roles). A clear role description would also assist in course leaders being recognised for the important function they perform in the institution. If course leadership becomes a recognised role on par with teaching and research with the associated career progression opportunities, the stress caused by attempting to balance course leadership with teaching and research could be minimised (Paterson, 1999; Milburn, 2010; Murphy and Curtis, 2013).

Furthermore, a transparent role description would allow professional development opportunities to be tailored to the course leader. Marcella and Smith (1998), Blackmore *et al.* (2007), Mercer (2009), Milburn (2010) and Murphy and Curtis (2013) explained that UK course leaders struggle with finding professional development opportunities, even though Bradley *et al.* (1992), Johns (1996) and Wisker (1996) described and recommended professional development programmes some years earlier. It is currently unknown why these recommendations have not been adopted by the UK higher education sector in general. Blackmore *et al.* (2007) specifically recommended course leaders should be provided with opportunities to learn from others, both formally through leadership development training and informally through mentoring programmes and institutional networks. Respondents in research by Murphy and Curtis (2013) also highlighted the need for opportunities for skill development, with particular emphasis on “people skills”. This is hardly surprising: one of the main barriers identified in most literature is the lack of authority, but the requirement to lead. The acquisition of communication and interpersonal skills therefore forms an essential pre-requisite to the role and would reduce the effect of the lack of authority as argued by Yelder and Codling (2004) and Milburn (2010). Additionally, training in supporting students with pastoral needs has become essential in modern day higher education. Simply an awareness of which services an institution offers, and some clear guidelines on referral and role boundaries could prevent course leaders from becoming too involved in student pastoral support (Blackmore *et al.*, 2007). This could be supplemented with formal training courses, such as mental health first aid (MHFA England, 2017), something which few institutions in the UK offer to course leaders. Course leaders generally influence the whole “student journey” (Temple *et al.*, 2016, p. 34): application experience, academic experience, campus experience and graduate experience. This wide range of student experience areas highlights the range of knowledge and ability a course leader must possess in order to effectively contribute to the institutional goals. This also includes the administration which is required in these areas. Murphy and Curtis (2013) wrote that course leader would benefit from more systematic guidance and support with administrative workload, something which was also reported in Marcella and Smith (1998) and Paterson (1999). As mentioned previously, course leaders generally do not benefit from personal assistant-type support like middle and senior managers do, although they sometimes do have access to shared departmental secretaries. Considering the administrative burden reported in the literature, provision of administrative support appears appropriate and perhaps the UK higher education sector should consider strategies from other areas of education: the DfES (2003) (now Department for Education) developed a list of 24 (later 25) administrative

tasks which teachers were no longer required to do. However, in current competitive and financially difficult times, an increase in clerical or administrative staff is unlikely to be justifiable, and of course this list might not be completely applicable to course leaders and higher education. Nonetheless the idea is worthy of discussion, if only to come up with more appropriate solutions. Finally, no matter what the solutions to the described barriers, in order to effectively enhance the role of the course leader, a sector-wide cultural shift is needed whereby course leaders become empowered to lead and the course leadership role becomes recognised as a critical role in its own right.

Course leadership in small and specialist HEIs

Although definitions vary, small and specialist HEIs in the UK generally have between 3,000 (Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, 2005) and 5,000 (Kanji and Tambi, 1999; Bhardwa, 2017) full-time equivalent students. This is similar to Kezar (2006), who used a maximum of 5,000 students as the definition of a small US institution in her research on the effect or HEI size on student engagement. Small and specialist HEIs normally have a strong regional role with an emphasis on translational research (Brockhurst *et al.*, 2014), and offer courses with a more vocational nature (Pickard, 2016). Seagraves and Dean (2010) also argued that these institutions have some further unique qualities: they generally have a small physical campus and employ a small number of staff. Pickard (2016) found that although small specialist HEIs might employ less core staff, they employ a much higher proportion of part-time specialist teaching staff from industry. This is underpinned by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (2005), who wrote that students in these institutions are often taught by practising industry specialists. This employment practice supports the translational, vocational and applied focus of small and specialist HEIs, and is one of the drivers behind the higher employability rates for graduates of these institutions (Pickard, 2016).

The regional role of small and specialist HEIs is a simultaneous strength and weakness. The regional role is core to the institutional identity and forms the backbone of the recently introduced Local Enterprise Partnership funding and Knowledge and Innovation Catalyst funding, both of which are aimed at HEI and industry collaboration (Brockhurst *et al.*, 2014). However, the regional focus also leads to a limited recruitment base and a lack of critical mass for “elite level” research, compared to larger universities who often serve a national market (Arbo and Eskelinen, 2003). In the current higher education climate this means small and specialist HEIs most often have a teaching focus, and rely on tuition fee income and the associated student retention and progression to meet budget forecasts (Seagraves and Dean, 2010). The reliance on tuition fees is something which has become especially critical for UK HEIs since the introduction of the tuition fee system. Although this criticality is similar for large and small HEIs, large HEIs have generally responded through creating larger units of management by merging departments into schools and schools into faculties (Taylor, 2006). These organisational changes created a larger critical mass, which is more resistant to market fluctuations cause by the competitive nature of modern higher education in the UK. Small and specialist institutions lack the ability to generate this critical mass, and thus find themselves in a much more vulnerable position. This places much greater importance on marketing and recruitment, which as argued previously is part of the role of the course leader. The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education argued that a further unique feature of small and specialist HEIs is that staff in general often have multiple roles within the institution, and staff in leadership positions often combine strategic and operational roles. As discussed previously Marcella and Smith (1998), Milburn (2010) and Murphy and Curtis (2013) all reported that course leaders perceived a high workload and administrative burden as one of the barriers to effective course leadership. The increased workload for course leaders with multiple other roles in small and specialist HEIs then would only increase this barrier.

The better graduate employment rates observed in small and specialist HEIs (Pickard, 2016) are useful for marketing courses and competing with courses at other HEIs. Especially since the UK Government made graduate employment data mandatory information on the relevant course website in the form of Key Information Set statistics from the Destination of Leavers of Higher Education survey, it has become much more important for institutions to maintain or improve the employment metrics. This link between graduate employment and student recruitment places course leaders in small and specialist institutions under increased pressure because they are responsible and accountable for these metrics which affect the institution's financial position.

Course leaders in all HEIs have a great influence on the student journey (Temple *et al.*, 2016); however, due to their closeness to the course, staff and enrolled students, course leaders in small specialist HEIs possess this influence to a greater degree. Furthermore, due to the environment of collegiality in small and specialist HEIs, institutional changes tend to be immediately visible to individual students, which requires a more careful approach by the course leader, who is the bridge between the institution and the students (Seagraves and Dean, 2010). These authors also argue that although student numbers in small and specialist HEIs are smaller, students have the same needs as their counterparts in large institutions. However, administrative and support departments are generally thinly staffed due to a lack of resources (Antons and Maltz, 2006), which leads to additional pressure on course leaders to "pick up the slack". The understaffing of support departments also leads to a limited use of institutional data or of advanced data analysis techniques and to a lack of systematic use of this data by course managers. uit Beijerse (2000) amongst others reported a similar lack of strategic and operational knowledge management policy in small and medium enterprises, which suggests this situation is not unique to small and specialist HEIs and is caused by institutional size and resources, rather than a lack of interest. It does, however, put course leaders in a difficult position, as they often require institutional data for various benchmarking reports. This therefore leads to increased pressure, either because course leaders need to analyse the data themselves, because they feel there is no option but to lower the standard of their work (Gillespie *et al.*, 2001).

Conclusion

Small and specialist HEIs in the UK rely heavily on course leaders for the effective delivery and management of their courses. However, there is very little provision of resources, training or support on offer. Course leadership is a stressful role with a heavy workload, but carries little recognition or reward. It is high in responsibility and accountability, but lacking in authority, and a lot of routine, but time-consuming work is not recognised by institutional management teams as course leaders "pick up the slack" to ensure a positive student experience. What the lack of research literature on this topic makes clear is that in order to support course leaders in small and specialist HEIs, a clear definition of the role and activities of a course leader needs to be established. In addition, based on currently available literature, the training and support needs of course leaders should be determined in order for effective professional development strategies to be developed that support both the course leader and the institution. Finally, course leaders and their motivations and decision-making processes are areas that need further investigation if course leadership is to become a recognised and rewarded role on par with teaching and research in the UK small and specialist higher education sector. The Australian higher education sector appears to have recently made a start investigating these issues, so UK HEIs cannot fall behind. Based on the currently available literature, the authors recommend small specialist UK HEIs develop and implement a formal description of the course leader role. This will not only enable potential course leader candidates to make an informed decision towards the role, it would also lead to institutional recognition of the critical nature of the position. Furthermore, we


suggest streamlining of institutional reporting processes and ensuring easy access to institutional data sets will enable course leaders to perform their duties more efficiently. Finally, further research into the role is required so that the academic community develops a better appreciation of the course leader role as an academic career path.

Course leadership is an essential role in a rapidly developing higher education environment. Course leaders make important contributions to both short- and long-term goals related to pedagogy, curriculum development and institutional benchmarking and they form the link between modern higher education stakeholders. Therefore, HEIs, and especially small and specialist institutions, cannot afford to ignore the criticality of the course leader role or the professional development for course leaders.

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