

Title: **Towards a professional development framework for leaders of degree programmes**

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Session Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

- Evaluate an evolving professional development framework for course leaders
- Analyse their own context with reference to the evolving framework

As part of a HEDG funded study, we are investigating the nature and development of a key academic role: the course leader. By course leaders (CLs), we mean academics who are responsible for running whole degree courses. We are focusing on undergraduate level.

Studies to date (Clark *et al*, 2011; Krause *et al*, 2010; Murphy and Curtis, 2013) emphasize the complexity of the CL role, particularly in terms of workload and agency. CLs themselves report with some consistency that they were unaware of the remit when they took up post, that their role lacks clarity, status and authority to effect change, and that there are inequalities between workloads even within the same institution. Often, too, the administrative burdens of the job overshadow the academic leadership aspect of the role (Milburn 2010). The pivotal contribution that CLs make to running degree programmes and the influence they can have on the 'student experience' is acknowledged by universities such as our own, signalling a review of the role and a desire to create development opportunities (Murphy and Curtis, 2013).

Our overall study will:

- Investigate how CL roles are allocated and defined by higher education institutions (HEIs);
- Engage CLs from three institutions in longitudinal qualitative research to track work activity, challenges and perceived development needs;
- Propose a professional development framework for educational development programmes aimed at supporting CLs. We will use Winch's (2015) framework for professional curriculum design as a foundational model for designing our study.

This session will focus on allocation of roles, current support mechanisms with institutions, and ways of framing staff development for CLs that do justice to the complexity of the role.

Session Outline

The first part of the session will involve setting the scene, to include reference to both published literature and outcomes of a pilot study that confirm the timeliness of a special focus on the CL role. Participants will be encouraged to reflect on the CL role, and how it is defined, positioned and supported within their own institutions.

Next, we will briefly outline the aims and dimensions of our research project, in particular focussing on allocation and definition of the CL role, and our rationale for selection of a particular professional development framework to ground our project (Winch, 2015). We will invite participants to evaluate the framework with reference to their own contexts and to identify how it might be useful (or otherwise) as a comprehensive template for staff development programmes; the framework will enable us to facilitate discussion that encourages participants to both make links to current provision and initiatives in their institutions, and to reflect further on the complexities of the role and related staff development needs.

Session Activities and Approximate Timings

- Setting the scene

We will discuss the outcomes of a pilot study with CLs (5 mins) and use some of the workshop materials created to ask participants to reflect on their own experiences of course leadership / the support provided for course leaders in their institutions (5 mins).

- o Do any of the responses resonate with your experience?
- o What support is currently available in your institutions?

- Overview of analysis of CL job descriptions:

We will summarize key features listed in our review of job descriptions (5 mins), followed by whole group discussion (5 mins)

- o How are CLs recruited in your institutions?
- o Do you have formal CL job descriptors (and would you be willing to share them)?

- Outline of conceptual framework to be used in the study

We will present our selected template for professional and vocational course design (10 minutes). Participants will then be invited to review and reflect on the framework's usefulness in their own context in small groups (10 minutes)

Reporting back from small groups (5 mins)

References

Clarke, S. et al (2011) Strengthening the core: Uncovering and meeting the challenges experienced by programme leaders and principal lecturers, SRHE Annual Conference.
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- McAlpine, L. & Amundsen, C. (2015) Early career researcher challenges: substantive and methods-based insights, *Studies in Continuing Education*, 37(1), 1-17
- Milburn, P. C. (2010). The role of programme directors as academic leaders. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 11(2), 87-95.
- Murphy, M. and Curtis, W. (2013) The micro-politics of micro-leadership: exploring the role of programme leader in English universities. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 35(1).
- Winch, C. (2015) Towards a framework for professional curriculum design, *Journal of Education and Work*, 28, 2.