An Institutional Review of the Course Leader Role

Will Bowen-Jones, Sarah Greer, Suzanne Lawson, Carolyn Nisbet, Catriona Robinson and Helen Scott, **University of Worcester, England**

1. Introduction

At the end of their paper which explored the role of the programme leader in English universities, Murphy & Curtis (2013: p42) asked two questions: "What is to be done: how to support programme leaders"[1]. The research described in this paper outlines how institutional research has provided insights on how best to answer these questions at the University of Worcester as part of a two-phase institutional project. This project aimed to review and explore the role of the course leader (CL) and create a new, institutional framework for course leadership and, in particular:

- To enable and empower CLs to excel in their role
- To ensure a consistent standard of good practice across the University
- To develop a CL role descriptor
- To develop a support structure and training programme for CLs
- To improve lines of communication and flows of information across the University, to support the role of the CLs
- To create and maintain a repository of information which may assist CLs in their role, and encourage consistency of practice.

This paper focuses on how an institutional research CL survey in the consultative phase (2015-16) helped to identify the priority actions and recommendations in the second, implementation phase (2016-17).

2. Background and context

The project was based on an institutional recognition that the responsibilities of the CL had developed significantly in recent years and had become pivotal to many of the University's key, strategic aims. The responsibility for delivering a high-quality student experience has increasingly has resided with the CL. The role is at the heart of the university academic structure. Internal and external evaluation of the student experience would suggest that students identify primarily with their chosen subject and the

---

[1] It is worth noting that Johnston & Westwood (2007) and Murphy & Curtis (2013) referred to a *programme leader*, rather than a *course leader*, however it is essentially the same role.

modules or units within it, rather than with a School or Faculty. The challenge in taking on such a role is that it often comes with little formal 'authority' in the form of line management and CLs are required, instead, to use their influence to lead, encourage and inspire.

The role is exceptional in the sector in that very few CLs are appointed following a formal selection process. Instead, it is a position which many academics are 'offered', once they have become established at their institution. It is also a role, which has, to date, attracted little attention from institutional researchers (see reference list and further reading). Johnston & Westwood (2007:p6) accurately describe the nature of the role a '…an academic member of staff who has primary responsibility for the (re)design, delivery, monitoring and review of one or more programmes of study within a higher education institution'. It involves leading a subject area, and may very well include leading a programme team; managing and participating in the delivery of teaching and setting high standards in pedagogic delivery, assessment and feedback practices and quality management. Also, the CL is often required to undertake many routine, or administrative, tasks.

3. Phase One - The Consultation (2015-16)

The project began with the creation of two groups to drive the project: a Leadership Team (LT), comprising of a small number of senior staff from across the University; and a larger Steering Group (SG), consisting predominantly of CLs, but also included professional support staff and colleagues from the Students' Union. Both groups focused on making recommendations for action in five work-streams: Role and Responsibilities; Administrative Support; Quality Enhancement; Recruitment and Marketing and Developmental Leadership

a) The Course Leader Survey

An online survey of CLs conducted in April 2016 using the EvaSys survey management software informed the work of both groups. It comprised of a consultative questionnaire that would provide CLs with a 'voice' based on a mix of quantitative and qualitative responses. Staff were not obliged to complete the survey and could elect to withhold any information that may identify them, such as their academic department, size of course and length of service. At the time of the survey, there were 220 courses, with 149 CLs. Eighty-nine responded to the survey, giving a response rate of 60%, and 15% elected not to disclose their academic department but did complete all other sections of the survey.

The project was not designed to test explicit hypotheses, but the survey was structured around three key areas where the Leadership Team had identified the potential for specific interventions in the implementation phase: the understanding of role and responsibilities; the adequacy of support mechanisms; and personal satisfaction with the role.

b) Survey Results

Quantitative responses.

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a range of statements using a using a 5-point Likert scale. A selection of the findings, as they relate to the three key parts of the survey, is provided below:

i) Role and Responsibility

CLs reported very high levels of motivation to enhance the course. In five out of the six academic institutes, 100% agreed with the statement: *"I am highly motivated to enhance the programme I lead".* Respondents also reported relatively high levels of agreement that they understood the role: ranging

from 64% (the lowest scoring institute) to 87% (the highest scoring institute). However, there was much lower agreement from respondents that they had been set clear objectives: ranging from 15% to 67%.

NB: These figures do not include the 15% who chose not to disclose their institute

ii) Support Mechanisms

Only 27% of CLs reported that they had received a formal induction into the role, or been allocated a mentor. The awareness of, and engagement in, staff development opportunities was variable. Most respondents agreed that they were aware of the availability of sessions, but far fewer had attended them. There were differing levels of agreement with the statement: "*There are regular opportunities for me to receive constructive feedback from my line manager*" (from 29% to 93%). Satisfaction with administrative support was divided. It appeared to be adequate in three institutes (mean = 60%), but was far less so in the others (mean =25%).

iii) Personal Satisfaction

The majority of CLs felt that they made a positive contribution to student learning (all academic institutes recorded a figure of at least 86% agreement). There was far more variation when it came to those who saw course leadership as a means of career progression (from 29% to 80%). In the area of reward and recognition, there was again variation across academic institutes. For overall satisfaction, half of the institutes reported high levels of satisfaction (mean = 80%), while the figure for the other half was much lower (mean = 40%). This division was the same as that for the perceived provision for administrative support

Qualitative responses:

The survey asked four questions to help to identify priority actions and recommendations for the project's implementation stage:

- What does the role of course leader mean to you?
- What are the aspects of the role that you **MOST** enjoy?
- What are the aspects of the role that you **LEAST** enjoy? Please give details below:
- What, in your view, could the University do, in a practical way, to help you succeed in your role as a course leader?

An inductive, thematic analysis of the qualitative responses identified six key themes related to course leadership: 1) Role and Objectives; 2) Training and Staff Development; 3) Administrative Support; 4) Academic and Curriculum Development; 5) Reporting and Data and 6) Career Development (recognition and reward).

Figure 1 on the next page shows the percentages of comments received that related to each of these themes. The chart does not differentiate between positive or negative comments, although it demonstrates the relative level of interest in each of the areas. It also does not mean that this is the incidence of perceptions in these areas.
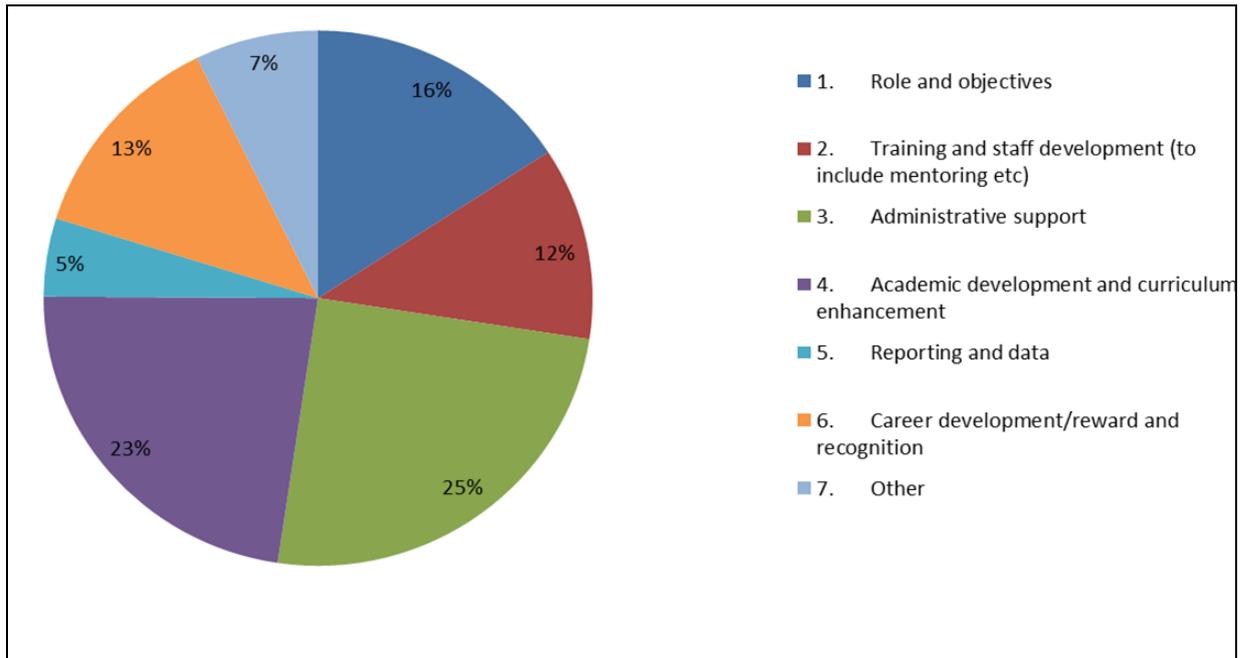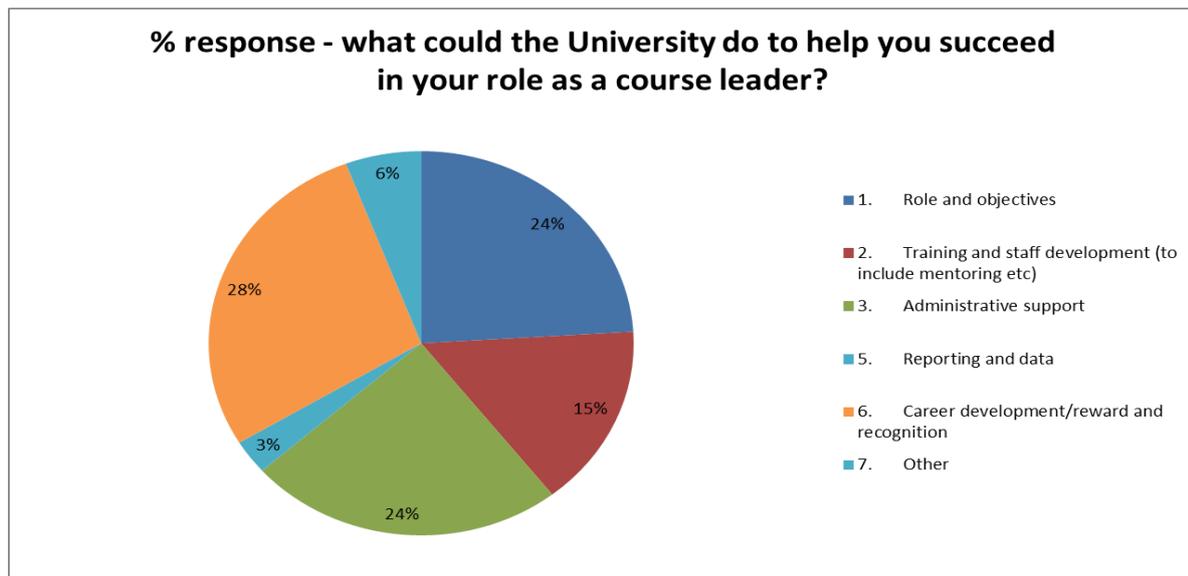
Figure 1

Figure 2 focuses on what the University could do to better support CLs, and the responses suggested three clear priority areas: Role and Objectives; Administrative Support and Career Development (recognition and reward), the three taken together accounting for 76% of all responses.

Figure 2

The challenge for the second phase of the project was to develop and implement a series of initiatives around these considerations

4. Phase Two – The Implementation (2016-17)

The two project teams developed the following actions and recommendations, which reflect the priorities identified by the CLs in the survey:

- Establish a clear University-wide indicative role descriptor
- Explore a means of explicitly recognising and rewarding the valuable role of CLs
- Review administrative support and structures to support CLs
- Introduce additional staff development sessions, including a bespoke induction programme for new CLs and the introduction of a regular university-wide CL forum.
- Establish a central repository of resources/links to assist CLs in their role
- Present new ideas to help CLs produce smarter Annual Evaluation Report (AER) action plans
- Undertake project evaluation and establish any further work needed

Interventions introduced in Phase Two

1. A **University-wide CL Network** was launched at the beginning of 2017 which functions both as an organisation on Blackboard and as a series of 'live' staff development events. It serves as a key communication system, by which information is transmitted and where supporting resources are stored. It also brings CLs together from across the University, leading to the sharing and adopting of good practice and the creation of new ideas.

2. There is now a **folder of resources** that support CLs in developing recruitment and marketing strategies: an 'Image' library, market research data, 'how to guides' for organising events, advice on how to make best use of graduate ambassadors and a calendar of key dates and events highlighting internal and external deadlines.

3. An indicative, institutional **role descriptor** for CLs has also been created. It outlines the responsibilities that a CL might typically be expected to undertake across three key areas: Academic Leadership, Student Experience and Quality Assurance and Enhancement. Its main purpose is to inform and facilitate the professional development of CLs.

4. A questionnaire-based **self-appraisal tool,** derived from the role descriptor, has been created to enable CLs to reflect upon their experience and skills. This also enables CLs to identify areas for development during the annual appraisal process.

5. Each academic institute now produces an annual **'CL Calendar'**, detailing all relevant deadlines and the administrative support available against the key areas of responsibility identified in the role descriptor.

6. An **induction programme** for new CLs was introduced in January 2018. It covers, among other things, an overview of the role and associated responsibilities, an introduction to the Network, an outline of all the support available, comprehensive guidance for completing the Annual Evaluation Report (AER) and signposting of the available resources.

7. There is a **'live' list of all the University's CLs** on the staff portal. Built into it is the functionality to email CLs and this system also 'plugs-in' to the Network so the 'participant' list updates automatically.

8. Plans are in place to **undertake project evaluation** and establish any further work needed. This will involve three methods, which aim to collect data without adding to the workload of CLs: a re-run of

the original survey for new CLs, feedback from live Network events; and posts on a discussion forum on the Network Blackboard page.

5. Conclusion

From the outset, the project's primary purpose was always to create the best possible working environment for the University's CLs, while at the same time putting in place *sustainable* systems of support and communication. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor and I believed that IR should be the cornerstone of the project and, on reflection, this was a key reason behind the project's success. The high response rate to the questionnaire was a testament to our stated intention to involve CLs in the consultation phase.

It would not have been possible to identify the priorities for implementation without the evidence collected in the survey and the work-streams. This approach has definitely influenced our commitment to ensuring that IR underpins all future university-wide projects.

References and Further Reading

1. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/johnstonv_and_westwoodj_academic_leadership_developing_a_framework_summary_3.pdf
2. Bolden, R., et al, Developing and Sustaining Shared Leadership in Higher Education, LFHE, 2015
3. Cahill, J., Bowyer, J., Rendell, C., Hammond, A. & Korek, S. (2015) *An exploration of how programme leaders in higher education can be prepared and supported to discharge their roles and responsibilities effectively.* Educational Research, 57 (3), 272-286.

About the authors

Will Bowen-Jones: *Head of Strategic Educational Projects and Project Lead*

Professor Sarah Greer: *Deputy Vice Chancellor and Project Sponsor*

Suzanne Lawson: *Principal Lecturer and PGCE Secondary Course Leader*. Suzanne was responsible for the recruitment and marketing resources element of the project, she also took a lead role in the *implementation* phase and has led a CL Network event.

Carolyn Nisbet: *Project Manager Student Surveys and Quality Enhancement*. Carolyn managed the survey and produced the follow-up reports, was a member of the project Leadership Team during the *consultation* phase and the Quality Enhancement work-stream

Catriona Robinson: *Deputy Head of Institute of Education (Quality and External Inspection/Verification).* Catriona was a member of the Leadership Team during the *consultation* phase, she led the Role Descriptor work-stream and co-wrote the application which secured ethical approval.

Dr Helen Scott: *Principal Lecturer in Occupational Psychology*. Helen was a member of the Role Descriptor, Quality Enhancement and Administrative Support work-streams, she also created the CL reflective tool-kit, took a lead role in the *implementation* phase and has led a CL Network event.

Note: The views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect those of the HEIR network or its members