Life on the Academic Front-Line

A Case Study of a UK Higher Education Institution

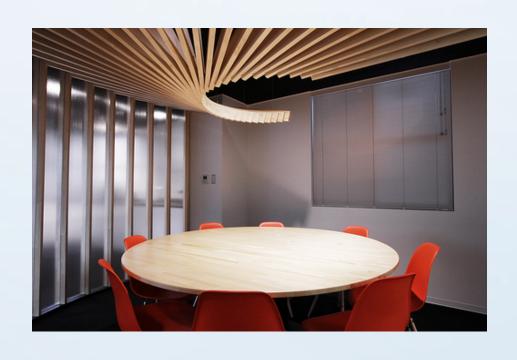Kelly Hand
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Content

- Why the research was important?

- Research question and methods

- The case study institution

- Discussion of the key findings

- Conclusions

- Limitations and further research

Why the research was important?

- Ever-increasing levels of competition and external scrutiny

- Focus on performance metrics, teaching quality and students' perceptions of value for money

- Leadership in HE had been generally overlooked

- Traditional leadership perspectives in HE i.e. those based on collegiality are often viewed as too permissive

- Alternative approaches, such as managerialism, do not always provide a viable alternative in HE settings

Why the research was important?

- Research suggests that academics are often reluctant to manage, avoiding tasks which are at odds with their personal values

- A potential challenge for institutions who wish to focus on goals based on the current competitive market

- Much of the published research focusses on formal senior management roles. Limitations…

- The need for effective leadership in departments is increasing. Research needs to include consideration of cultural context and informal leadership roles

Why the research was important?

- Programme leaders are situated at a crucial position, where teaching excellence can be observed

- Programme leaders also face unique challenges such as accountability in the absence of authority

- Little is provided by way of management development and support

- Lack of role clarity

- Perceptions of the importance of tasks typically associated with programme leadership often differed between groups of staff

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How do the perceptions of the programme leader role and its associated activities differ within a UK Higher Education Institution?

The research question was investigated via a qualitative approach, through consideration of documentary evidence, online surveys and a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with programme leaders and senior managers

- Granted taught degree awarding powers and university title in 2006;

- It has in the region of 10000 full-time and 3000 part-time students at undergraduate level and approximately 5000 postgraduate students;

- It has recently held the THE's UK University of the Year award; and,

- Is currently ranked gold in the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF).

Case Study Institution

Results

- Institutional approach, expectations and goals
  - Pre-appointment support and induction
  - Role clarity
  - Reality as an informal front-line leader

- Competing priorities
  - How activities are perceived in terms of importance
  - Influencing factors on decision-making

Pre-appointment support and induction

- No role specification, however a guide was available for PLs

- Described as "a vital link between students, peers, HoDs, and various internal and external stakeholders" (CSI, 2016:2)

- The accessibility, clarity and quality of supporting documentation painted an alternative picture

- Fundamental principles and expectations were not explicit

- PLs and SMs were not able to consistently, concisely and/or clearly describe the institutional expectations of programme leaders

- Practical advice accompanied by numerous caveats

- None of the programme leaders surveyed received an adequate induction

- The Institution's assumption that details were being provided at a local level was false

- Suggestions of the types of activity that would have helped during induction were simple, achievable and a reasonable expectation

Role Clarity

"The role is well understood in departments." SM

"What would be helpful would be a discussion of what my responsibilities are. Everything seems to be communicated as a 'oh by the way, this is your job now,' which I'm finding hard to deal with." PL

"I'm not sure that I know of anywhere where actual expectations are set out or the role described. You learn from other programme leaders about what is expected, but I suppose in the absence of clarity it's just guesswork." PL

Failure to specify clear expectations or provide a reasonably accurate description of the role and its duties, leaves a void that will inevitably be filled

The Four Perspectives of the Programme Leader

Reality as a Front-Line Leader

- SMs had a broader, more strategic view of the role
  - PLs commented on their lack of authority, autonomy and influence
  - This included the more strategic elements of the role which did not feature in PLs' open comments

- Steepest learning curves were:
  - the volume of administration associated with the role
  - providing direction module leaders.

- Both groups of staff agreed that there was a mismatch between the level of responsibility and the recognition and reward associated with the role.

- The role was perceived to have grown with no clear sense of strategic direction

How activities are perceived in terms of importance

- A ranking exercise showed that PLs and SMs placed a similar level of importance on tasks, despite the differences in how the role was interpreted.

- Generally, PLs gave most tasks a higher priority than their SM colleagues and this was particularly evident for programme leaders with less experience.

- Although the more strategic elements of the role did not feature in PLs' open comments, when presented with issues directly, PLs average ranks scores were similar to those of senior managers.

- The more strategic elements of the role are the first to take a back seat during times of increased pressure as they react to the more operational urgent tasks

Influencing Factors on Decision-making

Interview data exposed academic identity and values were influencing factors

The average rank scores therefore only presented a partial picture.

- Professional identity – Academic or academic manager?

- The managerial aspect was seldom met with joy and associated tasks were viewed with caution

- All PLs interviewed claimed to have occasionally witnessed other academic staff neglecting the more managerial aspects of their role in preference for other work

- Coping mechanisms were adopted to help navigate through challenging situations, such as stepping in for others or re-interpreting policies.

Conclusions

- Four perspectives where identified - all could bring advantages and disadvantages regarding how the role is enacted

- More to do to provide PLs with greater role clarity, achievable expectations, an induction and bespoke professional development, particularly in leadership and management of programmes and the informal management of professional colleagues

- A convincing argument that expectations on programme leaders are unrealistic

- PLs are often busy on tasks not necessarily central to the role, and this diverts attention from the more strategic elements that SM expect to see

- Many PLs never make the transition from implementer to shaper or driver of the curriculum

- Could lever real advantage by taking a more holistic look at the expectations and responsibilities placed on programme leaders in context of the current regulatory environment

Limitations

- Generalisation and the application of findings to other institutions

- Findings would be strengthened by drawing on the perceptions and experiences of a larger number of programme leaders and senior managers

- Tasks selected for the ranking exercise represented only a percentage of the totality of tasks associated with the role

- Perceptions relating to the importance of certain tasks may vary depending on the time of year

Future Research

- The four perspectives would benefit from further investigation with a broader sample to corroborate findings and to understand their implications more fully

- PLs were reported as front-line staff placed at a strategic location, however this theory can be extended to the module leader

- The relationship between programme and module leaders may provide additional insights into ways in which organisational effectiveness can be improved

Thank you for attending

Any Questions?