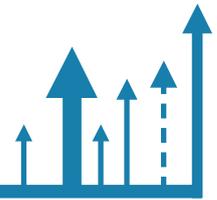# Programme Leaders as Invisible Superheroes of Learning and Teaching

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In our previous gathering to explore how we support Programme Leaders, Dr Margaret King of Heriot-Watt asked us with real honesty whether we – as a sector – are asking the right questions. In this brief paper, we would like to use appreciative enquiry (Watkins & Stavros, 2015) to shed some light and confront the darkness (Bengsten & Barnett, 2017) in which we often dwell in higher education by highlighting the role that Programme Leaders play as change agents in learning and teaching. This mode of change agent is not easily perceived or seen as unnecessary due to a limited scope of what we use to measure their standards of practice and subsequently their innovations.

We know from recent work on academia and prestige (Lawrence & Ellis, 2017; Blackmore, 2016; Blackmore & Kandiko-Howson, 2011) that Programme Leaders do not fulfil this often burdensome administrative and pastoral role for financial reasons and it certainly rarely offers the kind of academic leadership that would be recognised for promotion or institutional recognition. Instead, a lot of the personal and individual reward for Programme Leaders comes from the work that they do with their students (Ellis, 2018). However, other than how students in their final year perceive their student experience through the narrow lenses of the NSS questions (Kandiko-Howson & Buckley, 2017), this work is often invisible and is difficult to measure. In our previous discussions on the work of Programme Leaders and the support institutions can provide, we returned again and again to the measurable metrics despite our own awareness of the 'darkness' and limited answers they provided. Stella Devitt-Jones and Liz Austin offered us alternative ways of creating evidence and what shape this evidence may take in order to consider the complexity of the role of the Programme Leader. In this thinkpiece, we look at another type of evidence that is rarely shared nor explored publicly as we try and shift the focus away from what Programme Leaders need in terms of their role, and consider instead, the impact they are already having. Against a backdrop of numeric data, that is often used as a weapon against them, we suggest that our Programme Leaders are in fact fighting back/defending themselves unknowingly perhaps yet powerfully and effectively yielding their own impact in their role through the ways in which they are successfully co-ordinating, supporting, supervising, managing and/or mentoring others (whether individuals and/or teams) in relation to learning and teaching (AdvanceHE UKPSF D3.vii, 2011).

In the three years since we have had an HEA-accredited CPD framework at the University of Stirling, many of those

academic colleagues who are either enrolled in the process of going for Senior Fellowship or who have successfully become Senior Fellows are in fact Programme Leaders. One of their case studies is often based on their role as Programme Leaders. In initial individual mentoring meetings, we ask these Programme Leaders to reflect critically on their impact as leaders in learning and teaching and to either build or identify evidence for this impact in order to make their case for senior fellowship-ness. This is often a process that is difficult for colleagues to identify and we have noticed three particular challenges:

- How to separate the individual 'I' of the Programme Leader from other L&T colleagues to be able to tease out their own impact and to take ownership of that impact.
- How to identify what they 'just do' in their role as Programme Leader and the impact they have on those teaching on the programme as 'leadership'.
- How to evaluate their impact on the student experience in critically reflective terms.

We would argue that this critically reflective process is indeed the value of the senior fellowship process because it enables colleagues in programme leadership roles to be able to articulate the positive impact and indeed often transformative ways in which they are shaping learning and teaching in their context. We've seen examples of case studies where the role of the Programme Leader in programme review is an opportunity to completely rethink how they engage their students from active learning to different modes of assessment; another case study demonstrates how a Programme Leader is innovating his practice and that of their colleagues through their use of technology across the programme; another is internationalising the programme curriculum through interculturalism. This is a growing body of evidence that deserves research far beyond the sketch we offer here so that we can draw out explicitly how Senior Fellowship claims provide strong and powerful evidence of the impact of Programme Leaders in learning and teaching. However, in this very brief outline, what is clear is that all of this impact remains hidden in their applications – visible only to the applicant and their mentors and assessors within the institution.

One of the ways that the University of Stirling is trying to help those in Programme Leadership roles be more visible in their role as change agent is to start critically reflecting on their programme, and their subsequent impact on the programme, is through the use of Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment (TESTA) (Jessop, El Hakim, & Gibbs, 2014). While the triangulation of data provided by TESTA allows the Programme Leader a chance to map their programme and investigate the strengths as well as areas that can be enhanced to aid in the student experience, it also allows them the chance to critically reflect on areas for development or provide a spotlight to highlight the good practice that might otherwise be pushed to the background in a university culture that is often focused on only what can be done to improve student satisfaction. At the University of Stirling pilot, programmes have volunteered to go through the TESTA process, and are working with a member of the Academic Development team to highlight the bright spots in the programme, as well as the areas that could use some enhancement. The current focus of the TESTA process is to help programmes think about their assessment and feedback practices, and enhance existing practice to
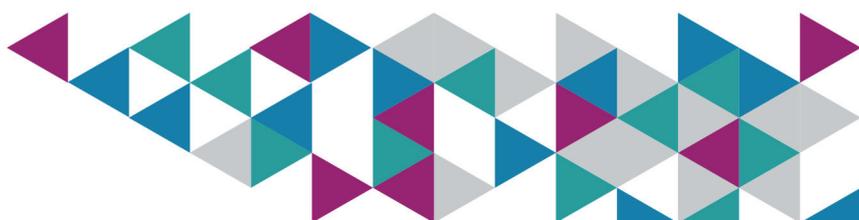
best help students understand how assessment and feedback can be used a learning tool. Workshops with the programmes are a working dialogue, building on the skills that lecturers have and enhancing the areas they feel less confident. These workshops offer helpful hints and things to consider, rather than 'teaching' staff what best practice for assessment and feedback should be. Programmes have a chance to come together and discuss what they like doing, what they would like to do better, and have a chance to make some relatively small changes to their practice that could lead to potentially lasting impact on student learning.

The TESTA process at the University of Stirling is enabling Programme Leaders the chance to begin to critically reflect on areas of their programmes that they wish to enhance, or to focus on how to highlight and duplicate successful practice. It allows them to capture their commitment to continuing professional development for both them and their team, and demonstrate their involvement in teaching and learning initiatives, which is an area of interest for the Senior Fellowship application. This is in direct contrast to some universities where TESTA is used as a punishment, with programmes being told that they must go through the process in order to find out why they are not meeting some unseen university standard of excellence and then what they need to do in order to improve. For these programmes, the audit report is a shameful thing, a scarlet letter hanging around the neck for all to see (Blackmore, 2016; Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011).

This thinkpiece is therefore a plea to make this impact visible within institutions but also in the sector. We would end with this question – how can we (as academic developers? / as institutions / as AdvanceHE) bring out these case studies that so powerfully illustrate evidence of the impact of Programme Leaders on learning and teaching into the light?

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