



Title: Removing the cloak of invisible practices; Programme Leadership laid bare

Conference Topic: Empowering staff and students to use evidence

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Abstract

In the space of the modern University where metrics hold centre stage, we ask much of information management systems, but it is people who interrogate the data to contextualise and make meaning from it in order to enhance the student experience. This paper focuses on one key role embedded in the University system - that of the Programme Leader (PL). We argue that commonly it is a role which has been opaque, overlooked and not always well valued. This paper speaks to a project undertaken at Edinburgh Napier University which resulted in making more transparent the role of the Programme Leader and, as a consequence, enabled the profile of the role to be better understood. At the same time, it facilitated an enhancement in respect of support for those undertaking the role.

Initial consultations elicited the sense of purpose and pride that programme leaders have for their role. Further discussions led to the creation of an operational checklist and a corresponding VLE platform which provides information and resources grouped according to a timeline of the academic year. These artefacts support PLs in their role directing them towards advice and guidance on the use of information management systems and other institutional processes.

The PLs operational checklist serves as a mediating artefact enabling PLs to achieve their objectives for their students. This speaks to a Vygotskian perspective which argues the centrality of tools in the development of knowledge and understanding. Threading through the paper will be an acknowledgement that removing the cloak of invisible programme leadership practices is an exemplar which speaks to the power of collegial activist professionalism and, as such, invites deeper contemplation.

Context

It seems superfluous to say that the landscape of higher education (HE) is complex and ever-changing, arguably never more so than now as we attempt to face down and work through the Covid 19 pandemic. Yet despite the risk of redundancy, it is important at the start of this paper to state what might appear to be the obvious because it is in this dynamic, disrupted context

that the University as an entity seeks to ensure a stability of its function, enabling students to be educated, as well as continuing to drive research agendas. This draws to the fore views in respect of what might afford a sense of solidity. There is the potential to look to structures, the way the University is organised, but we know there is much flux there, sometimes, but not always impacted by financial imperatives. So it is that faculties become schools and then return to the former, departments morph into directorates, and then merge into new divisions. The only certainty presents as the need to work with change. Perhaps it is that in trying to find solid ground, we reach for the familiar, roles which seem to have a permanence and a purpose. One such role is that of the Programme Leader. However, it is apparent that despite the prevalence of the role it is perhaps not as well understood as you might expect. As Ellis (2019, citing Mitchell, 2015), acknowledges, even in the Scottish context, a range of terms are in use – including programme convenor, programme director, course leader and course director. For convenience, in this paper the term Programme Leader is used, reflecting the fact that it is the one in most common usage.

Drawing on Ellis's (2019) review of the evidence in respect of the Programme Leader role, the nature of the role, its purpose and the accompanying expectations, present as being less clear than ideal. Citing the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) special edition (Lawrence and Ellis, 2018), Ellis (2019, p1) notes:

This in-depth exploration of the programme leader role confirmed earlier observations regarding its 'fuzzy' nature (Mitchell, 2015), the significant variations in the role both between and even within institutions, and that day-to-day leadership activities remain 'largely in the shadows' (Murphy and Curtis, 2013). This is perhaps surprising, given the linchpin status that programme leaders occupy: they largely determine the coherence of the student experience, and are often tasked with translating university policies into practice (Milburn, 2010).

The idea of the role occupying a space in which it is both fuzzy and a lynchpin is decidedly scary given the importance which attaches to it in respect of the student experience. Adding to the challenge, again drawing from Ellis (2019, p1) is the question of what the role encompasses:

Krause et al. (2010) have identified some components of the skill set required of successful programme leaders: 'administration and trouble-shooting; curriculum design; quality assurance; pastoral care; staff mentoring ... and close collaboration with academic and professional staff across the institution'. Similarly, Murphy and Curtis (2013) outlined some of the more pressing challenges, such as managing others (often without direct authority), role confusion, and bureaucratic burdens.

Small wonder if academics seeking to progress their careers choose to sidestep the opportunity which might be afforded through such a role. Put bluntly, notwithstanding the potential of the role as it concerns being able to directly influence the student experience, it lacks prestige and seems constantly to be having to operate against expectations which may not be fully transparent and without power.

And then came the Enhancement Theme and an appreciation in the Scottish sector that Programme Leaders not only must 'navigate and respond to a complex data landscape at the levels of university, discipline and individual students' thereby engaging with evidence *for* enhancement', but could also 'produce evidence *of* enhancement' (Ellis and Nimmo 2018, cited by Ellis, 2019). Edinburgh Napier University was not alone in choosing to focus part of its Enhancement Theme energy into the role of the Programme Leader knowing it to be opaque, overlooked and not always well valued, but believing it could be otherwise.

The Programme Leader Project at Edinburgh Napier (EN)

There are always options when it comes to seeking to effect change. Recognising the irony if the decision was to impose a development of the Programme Leader role at EN so that it was better able to work with data so as to enhance the student experience, Dr Julia Fotheringham¹ took a different path. As such, her actions were aligned with the thinking of Sachs (2000) as they concern the activist professional and the construct of collegiate activist professionalism. In summary, Sachs (2000, p77) argued for a new kind of teacher professionalism, rooted in 'expertise (the possession by an occupational group of exclusive knowledge and practice), altruism (an ethical concern by this group for its clients) and autonomy (the professional's need and right to exercise control over entry into and subsequent practice within, that particular occupation)'. For Sachs (2000, p77) this type of professionalism differs from classical views in that:

Its raison d'être is fundamentally political. It brings together alliances and networks of various educational interest groups for collective action to improve all aspects of the education enterprise at the macro level and student learning outcomes and teachers' status in the eyes of the community at the micro level.

So it was that the Project Lead set out to consult with existing Programme Leaders across EN knowing that she had legitimacy in creating the space for these conversations about the role, because it was one, she too occupied. The project's legitimacy was decided because inconsistency and confusion in respect of the Programme Leader remit had been formally reported to the University's Learning & Teaching Committee with work subsequently undertaken to describe the role and its component parts. This role description was used as a stimulus for conversations with the Programme Leaders, but it was only a part of the conversation. The intention to listen to the Programme Leaders in the open space was enacted, enabling aspects of the role which were positive to be illuminated, alongside those which were troublesome. Out of these conversations came a plan, not the one imagined by the Project Lead, but one decided upon by the Programme Leaders. This steerage by the group, and not the individual Project Lead aligns with Sachs' (2000) thinking in respect of collegial activist professionalism and is an important feature of the Edinburgh Napier Programme Leader Project.

The Project in Overview

Aligned with wider University work focused on supporting and enabling leaders to thrive, driven by the Programme Leaders as a collective, a decision was taken to enhance the role itself by (1) turning the opaque into the transparent so as to heighten awareness of its remit and (2) to establish a dedicated space designed to facilitate discussion as well as ensuring the ready availability of resources. The intention was that by 'pinning down' the Programme Leader role, its agency would be better enabled and its capacity to work with data strengthened. The two outputs from the project were:

1. The Programme Leader Operational Checklist
<https://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/dlte/PL/Pages/default.aspx> and
2. The supporting VLE course designed to provide a 'one-stop-shop' for Programme Leaders to guide them through expectations of the role at different times in the

¹ The Project Lead

academic calendar, including providing activities which require them to consider evidence and data, such as NSS analysis; feedback from Staff Student Liaison Committees; consolidating feedback through module evaluation questionnaires etc. to inform programme management, and action planning for enhancement.

In terms of the theoretical underpinning for each of these interventions, Vygotsky's thinking was recognisably in play (<https://www.simplypsychology.org/vygotsky.html>). The Checklist in effect offered the Programme Leaders a tool supportive of their cognitive development in respect of the different dimensions of the role. The VLE space held the promise of supporting professional development in the space of the Zone of Proximal Development, a concept although not explored by Sachs (2000) aligns with the collegial activist professional construct.

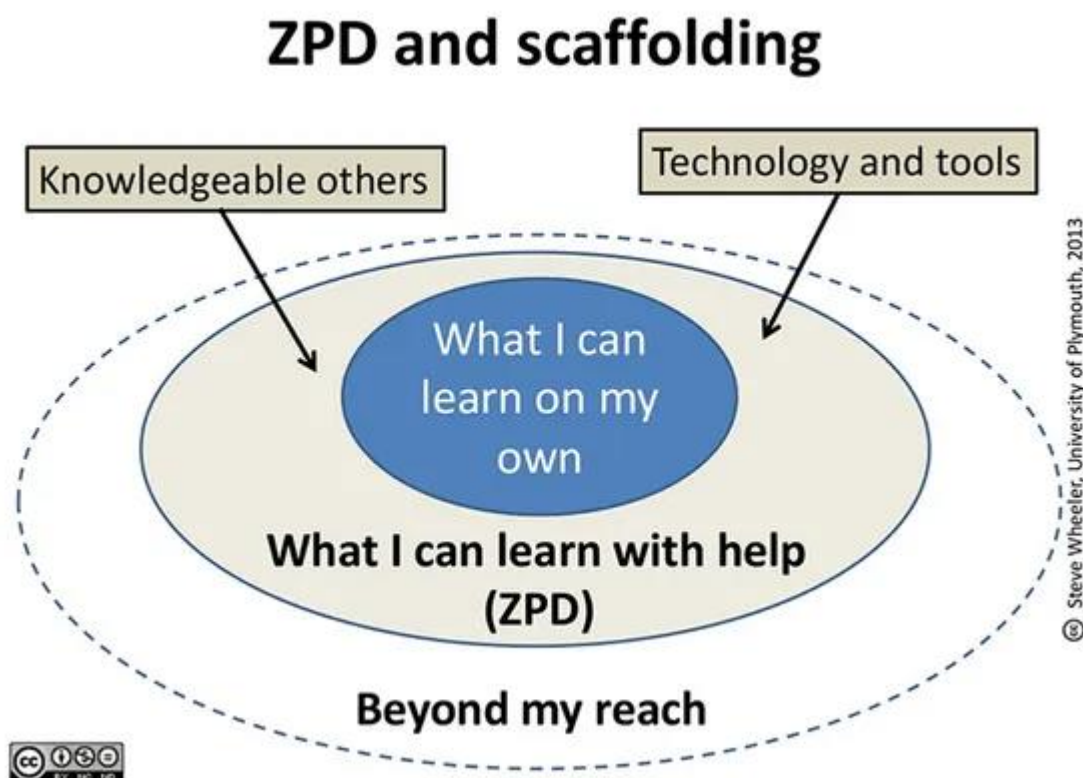


Figure 1: The ZPD

It is easy here to present these two interventions with their ensuing outputs as if they simply happened, however, both were significant pieces of work, with the Checklist in particular proving to be a feat of endurance. Transforming that which is opaque into something transparent took time and required significant collaboration with colleagues in professional services as well as those occupying academic posts.

In-project feedback indicated that the production of the checklist was valued by colleagues, primarily in terms of presenting the evidence of all the tasks and duties required by Programme Leaders, including many tasks that are often overlooked, or actually obscured. Short-term

benefits were primarily captured through informal feedback discussions with the Project Lead. Remarks such as this were commonplace:

“It is quite scary to see all of the responsibilities set out like this in one table. No wonder I am so busy all of the time”

“This is great to see the role set out like this, we should replicate this with other academic roles – like module leader”

An important short-term benefit realised by the project was that Programme Leaders appear to have felt ‘seen’ and recognised because their role had been made visible. However, short term benefits were a part of a wider plan (see Figure 2).

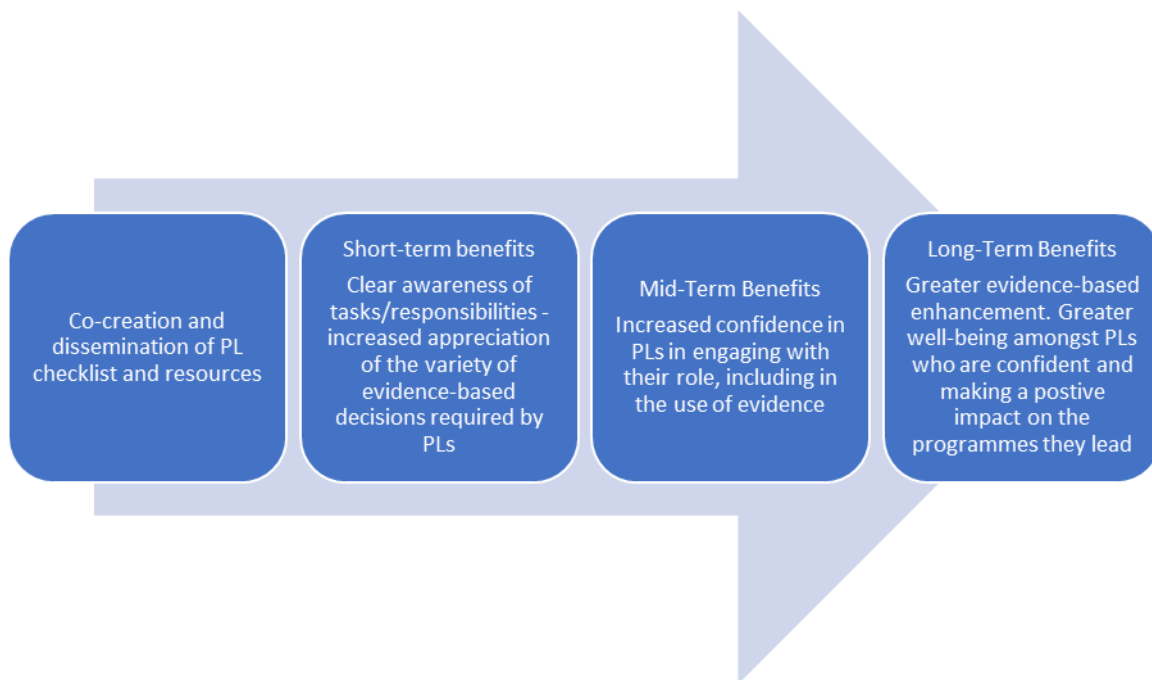


Figure 2: The Project and Its Intended Benefits

Critical Reflections on Learning Thus Far

At this stage it is important to identify that plans to evaluate the project in full and its impact have been disrupted, mostly, but not solely because of Covid 19. Constraints meant that the project outputs were soft launched, and we always knew risked them slipping from sight. The intention to use the intangibles methodology² with a group of Programme Leaders in May 2020 also had to be shelved. We will return to the project, its output and their impact at EN when the time is more opportune, for now, in this paper reflects on discussions which took place in February 2020 when a small group of staff - including the Project Lead for the Programme Leader project – from the University of Abertay and Edinburgh Napier met to explore the role in the context of Robertson et al’s (2019) work on Intangible Assets. It was conversations in this space which proved illuminating because they suggested that the project EN undertook was always going to struggle in one particular aspect, and that is ensuring that the role is

² <https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/evidence-for-enhancement/defining-and-capturing-evidence/the-intangibles-beyond-the-metrics>

properly valued. This is not to say that the Programme Leader Project was flawed, rather, it can now be better understood as a step towards a goal rather than the achievement of the goal itself. Furthermore, our critical reflections on this day returned us again to the work of Sachs, her thinking about the activist professional and the construct of collegial activist professionalism. In brief, we knew that changing perceptions of the Programme Leader role would need more than the development of resources.

The Programme Leadership Project at EN through the Lens of the Evidencing Value Framework

Robertson et al's work on Intangible Assets is underpinned by a belief that not everything which is of value can readily be counted. However, the elusive quality of the so-called intangible asset does not stop it being important. This thinking led to the development of an 'Evidencing Value Framework' subsequently used to map and analyse intangible assets in higher education. This framework draws on the literature including the writing of Katz and Kahn, 1978; Martins and Terblanche, 2003; May and Bridger, 2010 and empirical evidence gathered through the QAA (Scotland) Intangible Assets cluster project. The framework comprises four interrelated organisational domains:

- systems and structures
- resources
- core educational and support components
- ethos, cultures and identities.

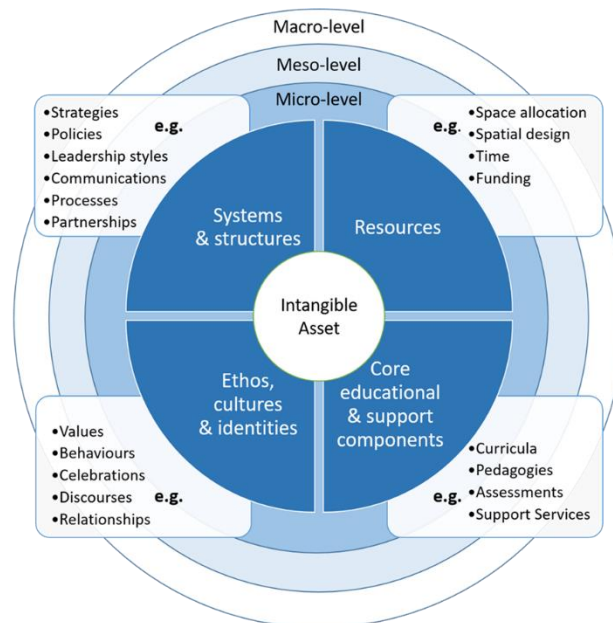


Figure 3: The Evidencing Value Framework (Robertson et al, 2019)

On that day in February 2020, as we sat talking on campus at Abertay, we realised that thus far, the Programme Leadership Project was operating fully in one quarter of the framework – bottom right – core educational and support components, perhaps touching the top left – systems and structures. Its focus was on making the role visible through the creation of a Checklist and by means of a VLE space which would also serve to offer support and to promote role development. What was missing and which we knew needed to be returned to

was the bottom left – ethos, culture and identities – because while it may be that we want to believe that Programme Leaders are the ‘superheros’ of learning and teaching, they still risk, as Cunningham and Wilder (2019) suggest invisibility and lack of value. However, we should be more hopeful.

Concluding Thoughts

As noted earlier, Edinburgh Napier was not the only University to decide on a project focused on the role of the Programme Leader. And it is the Enhancement Theme which created the space for this focus. There are now a range of outputs which together start to challenge the status quo as it concerns this lynchpin role which can no longer afford to be fuzzy. I only need to point to the Top Tips offered in the overview provided by the Programme Leadership Collaborative Cluster team – Caddell et al (2019).

<p>1. Review institutional reward and recognition criteria and ensure programme leadership is appropriately positioned within these structures.</p>	<p>2. Ensure incoming staff have an opportunity to discuss and explore their role with an experienced colleague prior to taking on the PL position. Ensure they have a clear timeline of anticipated activity, linked to specific institutional resources and support to ensure they have the tools to support students and build an effective community around their programme.</p>
<p>3. Establish an institutional Programme Leadership Forum to encourage sharing of practice, enhance institutional visibility of PLs, and open space for individual mentoring or coaching relationships to develop.</p>	<p>4. Build support for programme leaders into your institutional staff development offer.</p>

Box 1: Top Tips (Caddell et al, 2019)

Together these four tips can be seen to infiltrate the quadrants of the Evidencing Value Framework. As a collective, a body of activist professionals, it sits with us to influence the changes which are necessary in our own organisations and the wider HE sector so that the Programme Leadership role can emerge from the shadows. We have a responsibility to help it remove its cloak of invisibility. In so doing, we can lay it bare and truly value it.

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