

Leading a team of multiple specialisms

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In our cluster work over the past three years, we have identified several challenges germane to leading a programme team of academics with a breadth of academic specialisms and interests. There is the challenge of task management with no (or limited) line managerial authority. There is the need to nurture productive and positive interpersonal relationships across a wide array of colleagues (as Jenny Lawrence and I noted in our preface to *Supporting Programme Leaders and Programme Leadership*). There is the ‘*intellectual* challenge in creating coherence across multiple bodies of knowledge’ and ‘the *social* challenge of interaction across diverse individuals and perspectives’ (Quinlan and Gantogtohk, 2018: 15; my italics).



SPECIALISM AS CHALLENGE IN PROGRAMME LEADERSHIP

The challenge hinted at here, but perhaps not considered in any great depth beyond Gantogtohk and Quinlan (2017), is the breadth of specialisms and sub-disciplines within a programme, and the leadership challenge this presents. We know that a student’s experience of higher education occurs principally at the level of the programme (or discipline), and yet often a programme of study is often little more than an administrative bundling of (il)logically-related academic strands. Within a university department, a suite of (even undergraduate) programmes may range from the rather broad to the strikingly specialist. Some programmes may be taught by a handful of eager specialists with a well-defined dominion of specialism; others may be taught by almost the whole department, or even the whole faculty (or other larger administrative unit).

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The challenge is present even for programmes that (at least on the surface) offer a sense of coherence and focus. Here, then, I permit myself the luxury of personal vignette. The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland offers two undergraduate music degrees. One is smaller – the BEd, for those who aspire to become music teachers and who wish to be immersed in relevant pedagogy across four years. The other is larger – the BMus, a degree programme for those who intend to become professional *performers* and/or *composers*. I am the Associate Head of the BMus.

As well as being members of the BMus and of the School of Music, my students are members of a specialist department (e.g. Strings, Woodwind, Jazz, Composition etc.). The programme and the department work together in a holistic, non-hierarchical latticework arrangement to equip students with the necessary skills and experience to succeed as professional musicians. While holding my ground as a rankings sceptic, I am delighted that the recent QS ranking placed us as the third-best performing arts institution in the world – so, I feel that we must be doing something right!

THE VALUE OF AN EFFECTIVE GENERALIST

Why am I describing our institutional structure in such forensic detail? Well, it will be immediately apparent that, however many specialisms I convince myself I might have, I cannot claim to be a *specialist* in each remote corner of the BMus. To be sure, I consider myself an effective *generalist* and, in my experience, this label accurately describes many leaders of conservatoire music degrees. But my students and colleagues all know where my personal interests lie: I would be a fool to even attempt to conceal them.

I play the viola, so I have an affinity with the Strings department. Yet, if I have a creative practice at all, then it is in music *composition*, not in performance – is this, then, to alienate my performer colleagues? I both hope and suspect not. I am currently engaged in a project on the analysis of popular music in order, for one thing, to demonstrate through deed to my students that popular music is a worthy art form and a viable source of income. The same question, then – will this alienate my colleagues whose interest lies

solely in 'art' music? Again, I suspect not, although I am surely taking a calculated risk.

This lack of effort to conceal – my head held up, my shoulders proudly drawn back? – reveals some inherent risk. The programme leader is a leader of staff (with all the concomitant problems of responsibility but no authority), and they are a figurehead for students: the person to whom students turn in times of crisis, the person who cajoles them into positive engagement with the NSS, and so on.

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You may have been reading this piece, wondering at times how any of it applies to you. I trust, however, that you will have begun to link the willing nodes that I have set out for you. I suspect that if you are a leader of a large and broad programme, you may already have experienced a flicker of recognition. You will recognise, no doubt, that one's success rests largely on the deployment of personal characteristics to get (and keep) all interested parties 'on side'.

In our latticework model, the *precision* of the feedback that students give us on their learning is always variable (to what *part* of their experience are they referring?), requiring some careful interpretation to discern which specific element of the curriculum is up for discussion. Writ large is the value of being

able to speak almost socially to a selection of representatives (less easy when not routinely sharing physical space), and then to decipher the feedback in a relaxed manner with one's departmental colleagues.

During course review, and when faced with the annual round of enhancement 'tweaks', it seems obvious to engage those students and colleagues who have provided the catalysing feedback. This is especially true in the case of tweaks to assessment, the event in which instruction evidently culminates. (And yes, we do try to inculcate the value of learning for its own sake, which is not always easy to communicate when the paperwork insists on the outcome-driven Biggsian model!)

Like it or not, if you are in the figurehead role, you have at least some influence – and frankly, you may as well use it! Who else will project the vision of the entire programme? Well, no one but you – and the communication of a vision is often one of the key skills on which a programme leader may be appointed.

SOFT INFLUENCE AND THE POWER OF PERSUASION

McCarthy et al. (2005) remind us that programme leaders are the people who are tasked with shaping the overall culture of their programme. Like it or not, if you are in the figurehead role, you have at least some influence – and frankly, you may as well use it! Who else will project the vision of the entire programme? Well, no one but you – and the communication of a vision is often one of the key skills on which a programme leader may be appointed.

To paraphrase Quinlan and Gantogtokh, this really is all about soft influence, persuasion and negotiating. Certainly, in the time of Covid, bi-weekly Zoom-meets (mostly) for social blood-letting have been fundamental to the maintenance of a sense of a core BMus 'team'. My fellow leaders and I can be role models in demonstrating knowledge and skill in our generalist forms of learning and teaching, and we may also articulate our experiences of negotiating the potentially complex politics described above.

And so I return to my own identity as a generalist-specialist (and doesn't this describe all of us as teachers of the undergraduate curriculum?). Simply, I have found it effective to be transparent about my personal interests. In addition, it is essential to show that one is willing to learn and to display a basic curiosity. When I reflect on my first-year theory classes, I feel fortunate that my interest in popular music allows me to remove potential barriers between my students and myself (Miley Cyrus's Wrecking Ball as an illustration of a prepared four-three suspension, anyone?). That said, I'm also rather prone to overusing string quartets by Haydn and Mozart as technical examples, and so I have started to work harder to reach out to brass players and percussionists who may feel left out in the cold. Show me where this device occurs in repertoire more familiar to you, I implore. Teach me something I definitely don't know. They invariably do – thus rapport is built, maintained and nurtured.

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