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Functional Diversity of Programme Leaders in four European Countries

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ABSTRACT

This contribution sets out to discuss programme leaders' (PLs) tasks and responsibilities at four European higher education institutions (HEIs). It is sought to carve out their different roles, formal and informal power and resources with regard to the implementation of diversity management in their institutions. The four institutions that are the focus of this study are the University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria (FH Upper Austria), Laurea University of Applied Sciences in Finland (Laurea), Birmingham City University (BCU) in the UK and TH Cologne (THC) in Germany. Despite seemingly similar functional portfolios, it became obvious throughout the study that PLs are not only differently embedded in their organisations; they also operate with differing roles and resources.

In general, PLs at FH Upper Austria are largely responsible for the overall success of their study programme (in terms of student intake, student success, employability rates). By means of predominantly informal power they seek to promote a spirit of cooperation amongst their functionally diverse (administrative and academic staff) team. Although being rooted in academia they need to act as an interface between the academic and the administrative mind-sets of HEIs.

At BCU - similarly to FH Upper Austria – PLs take responsibility for the day-to-day delivery of a designated academic programme. They act as advocates for the programme and foster a sense of student community and 'belonging'. They work collaboratively with academic colleagues, professional services teams and students to offer an excellent student learning experience. They also monitor, review and seek to enhance programme content and delivery.

At TH Cologne, in contrast, PLs role is much more informal. They are appointed by their peers – in some cases they even appoint themselves – and are not like in Austria officially announced after a lengthy hearing. PLs tasks at TH Cologne are mainly coordinative and geared towards a smooth and efficient processing of study programmes.

Similarly, Laurea does not have a designated PL for each study programme. Educational leadership is shared to support regional strategies and a strong knowledge-based approach in each study programme. Development managers work closely with several academic specialists – such as degree or module co-ordinators and heads of student affairs to support a study programmes' development, student intake, student success and employability.

1 INTRODUCTION

Over recent years, a shift from collegial to more entrepreneurial and managerial approaches has been taking place in the structural foundations of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

(Bolden et al. 2008). Thus, HEIs experienced major challenges in developing operational and organisational structures and decision-making processes. Academic middle management is central to the effective operation of the vast majority of universities (Scott et al. 2008; Thorpe and Garside 2017). As Jones (2011, p. 281) states, “there is no way in which the university’s expectations will be realised if HODs [head of departments] as ‘middle managers’ are unable or unwilling to put them into action. „However, academic middle managers face an ambiguous and complex form of leadership, operating in the space between academic and manager profiles (Murphy and Curtis 2013). This is all the more relevant in view of an increasingly international and intercultural university environment where PLs are in need to make informed and context-specific decisions and have an extensive knowledge base of the multitude of diversity paradigms, their underlying rationales, prescription and focus (Gaisch et al. 2019).

Programme leaders (PLs) - being part of HEI’s lower middle management - play an important leadership role within universities (Vilkinas and Cartan 2015). Usually, they are academic staff with responsibility for the delivery of teaching programmes (such as bachelor or master degrees) within their HEI. They most often have a broad range of responsibilities. First, they are accountable for the academic health of their programmes and need to ensure that their programmes are of high quality and that they meet any educational standards that are set. Thus, course management, curriculum development and staff timetabling are central in their role description. In addition, they inevitably come into contact with the personal experiences of students, and therefore need to understand the student perspective (Murphy and Curtis 2013) and ensure positive learning outcomes for students.

Second, they need to work with external bodies such as secondary schools, professional bodies and employing organisations. Consequently, marketing and liaising with key stakeholders is central in their daily activities. As the work at the frontline of HEIs, they are a hub linking central stakeholders like students, lecturers, central services, industry as well as representatives from the vocational fields.

Third, they need to provide leadership to those teaching on the programme and to professional staff that assist with the delivery of the programme (Vilkinas and Cartan 2015). They have influence on their colleagues (both teaching staff and administrative/ support personnel) although they often dispose of only informal authority to seek out and secure support for the implementation of high quality teaching and learning. Hence, programme leaders do not have the authority that comes with official line management responsibilities, and either lead staff without official power or make use of their line manager’s support (Vilkinas and Cartan 2015). Additional to their leadership and management position, PLs may also operate as researchers and teachers (Ehrenstorfer et al 2015).

Overall, a PLs role is demanding and displays challenging characteristics. It is frequently not clearly specified or even documented, and may not be rewarded or well resourced (Vilkinas and Cartan 2015). As PLs different roles commonly are in competition with each other, even serious role conflicts may occur (Ehrenstorfer et al 2015). Existing literature on PLs roles highlights such ambiguity as a major source of stress and cause of inefficiency (Murphy and Curtis 2013).

All in all, PLs role still remains largely in the shadows. There is a plethora of research on the role of academic leadership generally, and some research devoted to middle management incorporating heads of department and deanery level (Murphy and Curtis 2013; Floyd 2016). Hardly any research deals with leadership on the study programme level. In addition, as programmes vary widely in terms of size and complexity, there is little equity or comparability

between programme leader roles (Murphy and Curtis 2013). This is even more so, when different institutional as well as different national backgrounds come into play.

2 METHOD

This study aims to gain insight into current practices and perceptions of leadership, roles and skills of PLs at four European HEIs. Despite their different national background, these institutions are highly comparable: which take part in a current Erasmus+ project. Three of these organisations are Universities of Applied Sciences. The UK institution – a post 1992 university - became a fully fledged university due changes in the UK governance systems. As a former polytechnic it follows a similar mission as the first three mentioned universities of applied sciences.

To find answers on PLs key roles and tasks within their institutions we opted for an exploratory qualitative approach (Bryman 2012). Three to six PLs discussed their roles in four focus group discussions, which took place between November 2018 and February 2019 at the four HEIs. In our focus groups we encouraged participants to elaborate on their experiences of HE leadership, the nature of their work and activities involved.

3 PLS DIFFERENT ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

This paper sets out to discuss PLs roles in four different European HEIs, namely University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria (Austria), TH Cologne (Germany), Birmingham City University (UK) and Laurea UAS (Finland). It is sought to carve out PLs different roles, formal and informal power and resources with regard to the implementation of diversity management in their institutions.

3.1 PL's role at Birmingham City University (BCU)

At BCU PLs take responsibility for the day to day delivery of a designated academic programme. They act as advocates for their programme and foster a sense of student community and 'belonging'. They work collaboratively with academic colleagues, professional services teams and students to offer an excellent student learning experience. They also monitor, review and seek to enhance programme content and delivery.

More precisely, PLs responsibilities refer to (1) leadership, (2) programme management and programme delivery, (3) programme assessment, programme evaluation and quality assurance.

- Leadership:

PLs are meant to promote a spirit of cooperation and ownership amongst the teaching team. In addition, it is up to them to enable academic and administrative colleagues to understand their contribution to the effective delivery of the programme. Finally, it lies within their responsibility to encourage excellence in performance and attainment by celebrating success amongst staff and students alike.

- Programme management and delivery:

PLs need to ensure that all aspects of the programme comply with the academic and institutional regulations and that the programme learning outcomes are fit for purpose and that module learning outcomes are aligned to them. Thus, inclusive practices plays a central role in the effective delivery of the study programme. Furthermore, PLs need to identify staffing needs and allocate staff to modules on the programme. It is within their

responsibility to ensure the course timetables, assessment schedules and other aspects of programme organisation are reviewed prior to the commencement of the academic year to improve the overall programme delivery and to deliver an excellent and inclusive student learning experience.

- Programme assessment, programme evaluation and quality assurance:

PLs liaise with administrative staff to ensure that examination and assessment issues are managed appropriately. Their efforts contribute to a high quality student experience by identifying opportunities for improved practices based on student feedback, module evaluation/performance data. They lead periodic programme reviews in line with university procedures and act as a representative of the university during accreditation procedures. Finally, they monitor student progress, achievement and retention by making full use of all available data.

3.2 PL's role at University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria

Similarly to the UK case, Austrian PLs assume a broad range of different functions. Unsurprisingly, their responsibilities strongly refer to (1) the successful management of their study programme. However, their role has a strong strategic impetus as well. PLs are meant to (2) bridge the study programmes strategic priorities with the institution's strategic focus. Finally, they act as (3) intermediary between study programme and the external/ professional world.

- Management of their study programme:

PLs are the main decision-makers in their own study programmes and act as strategic leaders as well as operational managers. That is, PLs take on both strategic responsibilities and more operational duties. They are held responsible for the academic health of curriculum of their study programme. Therefore, they promote its content-related and pedagogical development and thus need to take inclusive practice into account. They need to ensure that relevant module and programme specifications are maintained. All in all, their duties comprise tasks around the whole student life cycle including outreach activities and targeting of non-traditional students. Overall, PLs point to three most important tasks: improvement of course design and course delivery, consideration or even recognition of prior learning and orientation along industrial/ vocational fields demands.

- Bridging the study programme's strategic priorities with the institution's strategic focus:

This function encompasses the alignment of priorities such as employability, student engagement and student success with the institutional level.

- Intermediary between study programme and the external/ professional world:

In terms of external relations, Austrian PLs highlight the need to keep their programmes up to vocational field's requirements. Aspiration/ claiming high employability are inherent in UAS Upper Austria's identity. Thus, good agreement with industry and vocational fields is rated as major success factor. They are dealing with partners from industry, with policy makers, funding agencies and other external stakeholders.

3.3 PL's role at Technische Hochschule Köln, Cologne University of Applied Sciences

Programme leadership at TH Cologne is not an institution-wide defined task. In some faculties, PLs come into charge by election in others more informally. They are always part of teaching staff and usually do not have any assistants. In most cases, a reduction of their teaching load is granted.

Only in rare cases, a job description exists covering the following aspects which can be summarized as management of study programmes.

- (1) Conception, implementation and further development of study programmes.
- (2) Planning, organization, and evaluation of the curriculum.
- (3) Conducting accreditation processes.
- (4) Running joint public relation activities together with faculty management and student advisory services.
- (5) Informing staff about key figures of the study programme.

More often PL's job descriptions at TH Köln are not clearly specified yet. If their responsibilities rest unstructured, they often take on a wide range of tasks, such as:

- (1) Giving information and advice on the study programme and on the different courses involved.
- (2) Supporting first semester students.
- (3) Offering emotional support.
- (4) Coordinating assessment schedules.
- (5) Dealing with conflicts between students and staff.
- (6) Maintaining contact with professional services.
- (7) Connecting students with alumni.

It seems recommendable to provide PLs with clear role expectations. That would on the one hand protect them from getting into a task overload by being responsible for "everything". On the other hand, this would bear the chance to achieve a more systematic exchange with professional services and even connect them more closely with strategic goals of their institution.

3.4 PL's role at Laurea University of Applied Sciences

There are no directly equivalent "Programme leaders" in charge of sole degree programmes. Laurea's organization is managed and organized as one unified institution. Educational responsibilities are lead on the institutional level by the Vice President, Education, and the Educational leadership team. Student-centeredness as a leading guideline, strategic development and decision-making processes are impregnated by collective reflection and discussions with many stakeholders, including students and external partners. For example, directors responsible for certain areas (such as pedagogical development, internationalization and degrees in English language, teaching and guidance, student well-being) work

collaboratively in development groups. These regularly meeting groups are composed of functionally diverse representatives from the academic and administrative staff, and work closely with work-life and regional stakeholders. A student representative is included in most of the development groups.

The aim of the organizational structure is to enable continuous, systematic and agile development of Laurea's activities. In Finland, Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) have an important role in regional development, and thus Laurea's management model is based on local units in charge of the degree programmes. The local units are supported by a common service unit, RDI activities and regional development experts facilitating the co-operation between worklife, and learning and teaching.

Academic programmes are developed, lead, managed and reviewed bearing in mind the regional development role and drawing on a strong student-centered mindset. Development managers would be the closest equivalent to middle managers called "Programme leaders" in many other European institutions. However, decision-making is often shared among several experts. The emphasis in development managers' responsibilities is on leading and supporting teams to enable optimal learning experiences for the students. Development managers are in charge of staff allocation, tactical planning, and share day-to-day programme management with degree coordinators, module responsables, appointed lecturers and administrative staff. Quality assurance and pedagogical degree content development is shared with development managers and degree coordinators. The shared roles and responsibilities are detailed in a Management policy.

Overall, all management and staff members are empowered to act flexibly and in a self-oriented way. Shared leadership throughout the organization enables flexible development and pedagogical choices. The flipside is, obviously, that role and responsibility boundaries may be perceived confusing, and self-oriented activities may lead to inconsistency.

There is no appointed role for managing diversity or enhancing inclusion at the institutional level. The topic has not been regularly discussed or developed systematically. Diversity management is rather perceived to be included in the responsibilities within each area of expertise. Awareness of and competence for managing diversity and enhancing inclusion is thus very varied within the organization. However, high flexibility in study paths (day-time studies, part-time studies, online degrees, open university access) have paved the way for inclusivity by enabling students to choose a personally suitable way to study.

4 CONCLUSION

PLs (or development managers in Finland) are important decision-makers in their academic programmes and have the capacity to adapt their curricula to contemporary needs. Additionally, they dispose of formal and/or informal authority and thus have influence on their colleagues (both teaching staff and administrative / support personnel) and can highlight the benefits of an inclusive approach. As PLs are in most cases accountable for the academic health of their programmes they are meant to have a keen interest in articulating and delivering effective inclusion and diversity management strategies in the interests of all those involved (tutors, students, central teams) as well as for their university as a whole. Despite some international differences in terms of job profile and definitional scope, the influence of PLs remains uncontested. They have a substantial effect on students and academic and administrative staff and can therefore encourage genuine cross-the-curriculum

implementation of diversity management measures that go beyond stand-alone courses (Gaisch 2014).

Still, insight into roles, tasks and requirements of higher education middle managers are lacking. This comes even truer, when relating to their tasks and responsibilities within diversity management and inclusion.

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