

## **Investigating the capabilities of course and module leaders in departments**

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# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Existing literature</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Methods</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Results and Discussion</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<i>Interviews – Critical Incidents</i> .....	14
Professional learning .....	14
Organisational Context .....	18
Leadership and Management .....	21
Student-related matters .....	25
<i>Focus groups</i> .....	28
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	<b>32</b>
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	<b>36</b>
<b>Dissemination activities</b> .....	<b>36</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>38</b>
<b>Appendices</b> .....	<b>40</b>
<i>Appendix 1a: Invitation letter</i> .....	40
<i>Appendix 1b: Follow-up letter</i> .....	41
<i>Appendix 1c: Pre-interview questionnaire</i> .....	42
<i>Appendix 1d: Face-to-face interview questions</i> .....	44
<i>Appendix 2: Dimension codes</i> .....	45
<i>Appendix 3: Sources of support</i> .....	46
<i>Appendix 4: Case Studies</i> .....	47
Case study 1: the static course leader .....	47
Case study 2: the embattled course leader .....	49
Case study 3: the emerging course leader .....	50
Case study 4: the improvising course leader .....	51
Case study 4: the improvising course leader .....	51

## Executive Summary

The leadership of modules and courses is a little studied and poorly supported aspect of the academic role. Staff tend to learn the process 'on the job'. Expertise is tacit, situated in a specific context and learned through observation of others.

This project sought to understand the nature of the learning involved by exploring the experiences of those in course and module leadership (CML) roles, asking what was being learned in the workplace, how it was being learned and what factors affected the level and direction of the learning. It was intended that this would enable staff and educational developers to provide appropriate support for those undertaking CML roles within their institutions.

CMLs at two institutions, Coventry University and the University of Warwick, were studied through 27 semi-structured individual interviews and three focus group and workshop activities. Interviewees referred to experiences at seven universities. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed.

Transcript analysis identified 47 issues grouped into 17 dimensions. Four key themes were: professional learning; organisational context; leadership and management; and student-related matters.

The study found that:

- none of the CMLs interviewed had received any professional training prior to taking up a CML role
- staff were often allocated leadership of courses and modules at first appointment, usually with limited administrative support and with little time for preparation
- staff tended to lack strategic approaches to problem solving. The majority of helpful support came from colleagues and was often serendipitous. Mentoring was considered desirable, while pay and reward structures were often felt to be unhelpful
- in some areas there was little tradition of course teams working together
- CMLs felt they had encountered unsupportive and overly bureaucratic administrations
- effective communication between the teaching team, the administration and the students were important for success
- many CMLs indicated that they had been handed a leadership role but without the necessary authority to act, particularly when required to manage more senior staff
- interviewees often felt unprepared for the types of student-related issues that could arise. Judgement about when to involve other support agencies was seen as crucial.

The following recommendations are made:

at an individual/departmental level: provide induction into the CML role and make continuing mentoring available; clarify the nature of the CML role and others' roles in relation to it, taking account of the tensions between collegial cultures and authority; work to develop a course team culture, with shared understandings of course purposes and processes; provide feedback and an opportunity for CMLs to reflect on their own learning process; ensure adequate administrative and clerical support and that relationships are effective.

at an institutional level: make a single source of guidance available; ensure administrative support and effective change process management; provide opportunities for CMLs to learn from others at a range of organisational levels; review data and information needs; make use of recognition and reward but note their potential disadvantages.

## Introduction

The leadership and management of teaching is important at departmental level and increasingly significant across disciplines within HE institutions. The project examined the roles of those with curriculum responsibilities that extended beyond their own teaching and involved the co-ordination of the work of at least one other colleague. The terms “course” and “module” vary considerably in meaning from one institution to another. Indeed, some modules on large programmes may involve more staff and be more complex to administer than some small courses. Therefore it is probably not very meaningful to separate “course” from “module” leaders. In the project, course and module leaders were considered as a single role, whilst acknowledging that the extent of the role might vary considerably from one individual to another.

It is likely that supporting and improving the performance of CMLs could benefit the student learning experience substantially. CMLs often take up the role at first appointment and usually without prior or concurrent professional development for the role. It is very much on-the-job learning. This area of expertise is highly tacit (Polanyi, 1966), social (Bandura, 1977) and situated (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in nature, much of it concerning interpersonal relationships in complex and locally defined situations. No recent study has been undertaken of the nature of the role, so development support is likely to be founded on beliefs and assumptions about its nature, rather than on firm evidence.

This project asked identical research questions to those in Eraut’s study of mid-career professionals’ learning in the workplace (Eraut, 1999; Eraut *et al.*, 2000):

1. What is being learned in the workplace?
2. How is it being learned?
3. What factors affect the level and direction of that learning?

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of those who undertake CML roles so that we can understand better how the role works in practice and how CMLs’ professional learning can most effectively be supported. It has made a contribution to an understanding of the role, framing it as a tacit and situated area of expertise, as it is best understood, and bringing the insights and techniques of knowledge development research to bear, to achieve fuller understanding.

Our objectives were:

1. To test and extend tools for the analysis of professional learning.
2. To apply the tools in the context of course and module leadership in HE.
3. To identify what is being learned and how, along with how the role could be learned more effectively.
4. To provide a model for analysis of professional learning processes for related roles and settings.
5. To make recommendations for policy and development practice nationally in relation to the role.

This work was needed because, although there is literature on embedded capabilities, it is seldom used methodically within a single framework to inform practical analyses. It is more common for variants of functional analysis to be employed in vocational settings. In addition, most analyses of professional expertise focus on developed expertise rather than the process of professional learning that leads to it. This work has tested and extended existing tools for investigation and analysis, for a role that has been little analysed to date.

A sample of departmental curriculum leaders at HE institutions were invited to undertake a semi-structured interview, to draw out aspects of the role. Critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) was used to investigate the more embedded aspects of expertise, owing to its potential for revealing contextualised and less obvious aspects of performance. Interviewees explored aspects that they have found most challenging, to consider how they frame and solve problems (Blackmore and Wilson, 2005), to make clear their sources of help and to consider what aspects of their environment have helped or hindered them to come to learn the role. The role is usually highly collegial and the study particularly considered the extent to which the concepts of 'learning community' and 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) offer value.

Interviews were transcribed in full to facilitate detailed analysis and to make the data available for subsequent research in the same field.

Three approaches were taken to the analysis:

1. Contextual analysis
2. Case study, permitting an exploration of the richness of the data.
3. Factor analysis to enable more general conclusions to be drawn about the sample.

Becher and Trowler's (2003) characterisation of practice in disciplines was used to help inform the contextual analysis:

1. Organisational – in what ways are individuals' and departments' working lives organised?
2. Cognitive – what are the epistemological features of the area of work?
3. Social – what are the features of the community of practice?

In addition, interviewees' responses to the key research questions were gathered and analysed.

The project's development materials that have emerged during the project will enable staff and educational developers in institutions to frame appropriate support for those in their institutions. The self-evaluation toolkit and other practitioner-focused materials that will be available on-line at the project website, when delivered via face-to-face sessions, will be of benefit to role holders, in enabling them to review and enhance their practice.

## Existing literature

The general literature on leadership is extensive and indicates that the term is highly contested. This may be accounted for partly by the highly values-based nature of the term but also by the fact that writers may draw from a range of disciplines or from practice or both. Analyses of conceptions of leadership tend to recount a range of ways in which leadership has been viewed. Middlehurst's (1993) overview of the general literature includes: trait, behavioural, contingency, power and influence, cultural and symbolic and cognitive theories which she suggests have, broadly, followed one another from 1920 until the time of publication.

The organisational level at which leadership is held to occur varies. At one extreme is what has been termed a "great man period" (Van Seters and Field, 1990), containing an assumption that leadership occurs at the highest organisational levels and is a quality or capability possessed only by a few; at the other is the suggestion that it may be highly distributed. Ramsden, writing of academic leadership, suggests that it "can and should be exercised by everyone, from the vice chancellor to the casual car parking attendant" (1998).

Where it is accepted that leadership may take place at a number of levels, it has been suggested that it may change in nature in relation to level, classically by Dixon (1976), writing of military leadership. Perceptions of what constitutes leadership may also vary from one organisational level to another. A small-scale study in higher education (Marshall, Adams and Cameron, 2000) indicated that "unpromoted" staff conceived leadership to be principally about people, while heads of department focussed on the achievement of tasks.

There is also considerable variation in the ways in which the terms "leadership", and "management" are considered to be related. Sadler (2003) cites three viewpoints: that leadership is a competence among others required by managers, that leadership is separate from but related to management and that there is overlap between the two terms. Commonly, leadership is held to be something that is particularly needed in conditions of change rather than continuity. Knight and Trowler (2001), for example, suggest: "Leading, as opposed to management, is intimately connected to change interventions". It may be held to involve the shaping of cultures, the persuading of others to follow a lead and the exercise of imagination. Schein (1992) argues that "leaders create and change cultures, while managers and administrators live within them". Kotter proposed that academic leaders concentrate on entrepreneurial and pastoral roles whilst academic managers dealt with planning, coordinating and controlling (1990). Marshall et al found that interviewees believed that "while *leaders* establish goals, *managers* manage resources". Ramsden presents both in a single model: he proposes domains of academic leadership, around two axes: academic leadership-management and academic work – people.

The study of leadership behaviour has had a long history and has been of particular interest to practitioners who seek guidance as to what they should actually do in their work role. Orientation to "task" and to "people" were early on held to be significant (Stogdill and Coons, 1957). The addition of a team dimension and acceptance that informal leadership may be offered by someone who did not have a formal leadership role led to well-known models such as that of Adair (1973) who structured "action-centred leadership" around "achieving the task", "building and maintaining the team" and "developing the individual". Contingency theorists have concentrated on variability in situations meaning that leadership behaviours, indeed the permissions that leaders had to lead, were dependent on context (Fiedler, 1971). Ramsden's (1998) relatively recent definition of academic leadership as "a practical and everyday *process* of supporting, managing, developing and inspiring academic colleagues" emphasises the interpersonal and behavioural aspects.

The literature of occupational analysis reflects similar differences in view. Some approaches to analysis are normative and seek to be generalisable, as exemplified most clearly in recent years by the competence movement (Jessup, 1991; Hyland, 1994), which sought to express expertise in the form of statements of behaviour that were held to be universally applicable. Others take far more account of context and interaction, and acknowledge the socially constructed and situated nature of role (Biddle, 1979; Blackmore, 1999a, 2000a). The choice of approach to analysis of expertise also inevitably entails implicit or explicit choices about conceptions of organisation and the nature of human interaction that inevitably have a basis in beliefs and values (Blackmore, 1999b, 2000b).

Views on the nature of organisations also have a long history and associated literature. Whilst some writers have emphasised and advocated regularity and predictability (Weber, 1978), others have taken an opposite view. The idea of organisation have been portrayed as highly contestable, and one that may be understood from many perspectives (Morgan, 2006). The limitations of what today may seem hyper-rational approaches to organisations have been critiqued by Fullan in education (2001), Cuthbert in higher education (2002) and, more generally, Mintzberg (1994). Within higher education, a tradition of collegiality has been increasingly challenged in recent years, leading to claims of managerialism (Deem, 1998). All of these make normative definitions of leadership, including those enshrined in job or role descriptions, seem highly problematic and suggest that a more subtle approach is required.

As Jarzabkoski (2005) argues, in her advocacy of an activity-based view of strategy as practice, “the growing shift from static, parsimonious and generalised forms of theorising to dynamic and complex explanations that reflect action ... may be practically attributable to an ‘after-modern’ or ‘post-industrial’ phase in the management sciences. ... Meaningful relationships between theory and practice will be better assisted by dynamic, locally-contextualised theories that can reflect the complexities of practice in an after-modern world (Pettigrew, 2001).

A significant body of literature has explored leadership and management in universities in the years since the Jarratt Report (1985) drew attention to the need for more support for such roles. However, most attention has been paid to more senior roles. Knight and Trowler (2001), writing about departmental leadership in higher education, claim that their work is relevant also to “other teams that can be treated as communities of practice in higher education”. Interestingly, they claim that much leadership *must* take place lower down the organisation, at departmental level or below because: “much of the work of leading is contingent, by which we mean that it involves dealing with the specifics of a time, a place and a set of people”. They describe their approach as more “particularistic” than “universalistic”. Significantly, Knight and Trowler connect leadership with learning, emphasising that “Learning takes place within communities of practice and activity systems that have their own sub-cultures and discursive repertoires”. Learning is situated, not always easy to transfer, requires engagement and involves challenge. Knight and Trowler are clear that effective leaders need to understand and to work with these, and other, aspects of learning, in a specific situation.

Course and module leaders have had little consideration. The Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) – SCED at the time – organised course leader conferences in the early 1990s. A few institutions provided course leader training at that time – Edinburgh being a good example (CTLA, Edinburgh, 1996). Since then, relatively little attention has been paid to this area by educational developers.

The literature that does exist makes points that have remained relevant for at least twenty years. A 1992 report, “The role of the course leader”, stemmed from a series of workshops in which 300 course leaders from the UK and 80 from Hong Kong met in 1990-91 to explore the

course leader role. The report suggested that the course leader alone saw the “big picture” of a course and that the role was significant for the quality of the course. There was wide agreement that the most important role was academic leadership, followed by management and, some way behind, pastoral care, but in fact administrative and pastoral matters tended to dominate. Overall, participants felt that they were “under-trained, under-paid and under-valued”. Participants reported that modularisation was leading to the breakdown of traditional boundaries around courses, so that “staff, students and curricula come together fleetingly for particular purposes”, without shared goals and understandings. Curriculum content was specified less in disciplinary terms than previously. Initiatives to do with enterprise and competence were cutting across boundaries. The growth of regulation meant that course leaders were supported now by administrators more than by academic colleagues. Conflict was reported between the academic and managerial parts of the role and between doing the role well and career advancement. The report concluded that the main problems were responsibility without power, rewards, career development, work overload and disparateness in the role. It made recommendations accordingly.

“Leading academic programmes and courses” (Wisker, 1996) is a collection of essays on the role. Writers noted that it requires many skills. Modularisation had greatly complicated the role. Either academic leadership or practical management may dominate. Case studies described programme managers dealing with situations where they had responsibility but no power. Suggestions for professional development were offered, including force field analysis and role clarification. An informal analysis was undertaken of key aspects of the role and of tensions and contradictions. A course leaders’ support group was described and the experiences of a consultant working with course teams were recounted.

A more recent study of Library and Information Science course leaders (Marcella and Smith, 1998) reported on a telephone survey of 25 course leaders. Questioning concentrated on the ways in which formal aspects of the role, such as decisions on applications and the management of inductions, were dealt with. Interviewees commented on their course management and administrative duties. Interviewees called for more administrative support, reduced paperwork, less bureaucracy and more resources. Once again, respondents referred to “responsibility without authority”.

There is an extensive literature on professional learning, which can only briefly be summarised here, but it offers a theoretical context for the ways in which learning was conceptualised within the project. First of all it should be noted that conceptions of professional expertise have considerable political significance, since they are closely related to entry to and the practice of professions (Perkin, 1989). Practitioners, institutions and staff developers all have vested interests in conceptualising expertise, its bases and the processes that generate it in particular ways (Blackmore, 2000a).

Elliott (1993) offers a three-part categorisation of the nature of professional expertise. A “rational” approach” is preferred by those who hold a body of generalisable theory to be central; a “social market” view emphasises expertise as a commodity and seeks to quantify it, often in the form of specified behaviours; a “practical science” view, often linked with the work of Stenhouse (1975) which sees practitioners continually making personal sense of and improving their practice.

Michael Eraut’s work has been central in the last twenty years to exploration of professional knowledge and competence in which he distinguishes between propositional knowledge “which underpins or enables professional action” and practical know-how which “is inherent in the action itself and cannot be separated from it” (1994).

Dreyfus and Dreyfus’s (1986) work, in which they offered distinctions among the work of novices, the competent and the expert has been very influential. It is open to the criticism

that it is simplistic but it does contribute the valuable idea that a metaphor of mechanism is not adequate to describe expertness. Donald Schon's work on the reflective practitioner has also been immensely influential, emphasising practice-generated "knowledge-in-action" and offering an overview of the claims of various professions to expertise.

Further dimensions are added by Lave and Wenger (1991), whose much-cited work on communities of practice locates expertise in a wider social context; Polanyi (1966), who argued that knowing is personal and tacit, so that we often know more than we are able to say; and Bandura (1977), who emphasised the role of modelling or imitation of others in learning behaviours. There is also an extensive literature on problem solving and framing; some of the general literature (Blackmore and Wilson, 2005) and some specifically medically-related literature (Eraut, 1993) has been summarised and critiqued.

Cheetham and Chivers (2005) offer an empirically-derived overview of how professionals learn informally and the implications for the support of the development of practice.

## Approach

This investigation takes the view that leadership is best understood in higher education settings to be highly distributed, reflecting the relatively collegial environments reported by interviewees and the high degree of autonomy of many academic staff, despite trends towards increasingly direct management.

It is also believed that leadership is highly situated, that the context in which leading takes place influences the leadership approaches and actions that are likely to be appropriate.

It is also best understood by studying what people actually do and what are their intentions. Interviewees are vital witnesses in this. It is they who experience their role, indeed negotiate it into existence, on a day-to-day basis. Their actions and their interpretations are central.

Distinctions between leadership and management are extremely hard to make. In framing the investigation, we wanted to explore the extent to which role holders learnt to take the initiative, organisationally and intellectually, to shape their role and the activities for which they were responsible. Therefore we were principally interested in leadership, as it is commonly defined. The roles researched were sometimes explicitly named as course or module leader in job descriptions, although very few roleholders had formal descriptions that referred to this aspect of their overall work. At others, interviewees chose to define what they were doing as course or module leadership. It might be argued that some of what we examined was not leadership at all, but simply management or even administration. To argue thus would be to impose external definition on the experiences reported by interviewees. Instead we permitted interviewees to define for themselves what they took leadership to be, not by asking them to measure themselves against pre-existing notions of leadership but by recounting and exploring what they actually did.

In taking an interactionist and socially constructed view of role we did not believe that it would be particularly meaningful to try to abstract a few actions as being “leaderly”. We believe that leading and managing is a subtle and complex performance and that actions may have multiple causes and unanticipated effects. In so doing we are taking note of the tendency towards consideration of practice that has become more common in social theory in recent years.

We took an activity-based and self-reporting view of leadership. As Johnson et al comment “Activities ... are the day to day stuff of management. It is what managers do and what they manage” (2003). We believe this applies to leadership too. We deliberately did not ask interviewees to define leadership explicitly; nor did we invite them to consider existing definitions of leadership. We invited them to take part in an investigation into course and module leadership learning and to identify themselves as course or module leaders. We then asked them to recount and to explore critical incidents that related to that leadership role and its learning. So it is reasonable to assume that much of what was recounted was believed by the interviewees to be relevant to leadership. Thus the method captures views of leadership embedded in accounts of practice. It supports an inclusive and situated view of leadership. This is not to say that leadership is whatever the interviewees say, or infer, that it is. We believe we have taken care to report the breadth of interviewees’ perceptions of leadership through extensive direct quotation so that a reader has “thick description” in which they can discern those embedded views. However, we have also offered our own evaluative comment on the nature of the conceptions of leadership revealed .

## Methods

Academic staff at the neighbouring, but contrasting, institutions of Coventry University and the University of Warwick were invited to participate, to provide a representative survey of a range of CML roles. Initially, targeted CMLs at the two institutions were contacted by telephone to invite them to a preliminary pilot-phase workshop at Coventry University. The workshop was used as a focus group to trial activities and, in particular, to test a semi-structured interview, designed to draw out aspects of the role. Seven staff participated in this preliminary focus group and three interviews were conducted. This allowed the workshop approaches and interview schedule to be refined.

Subsequently, an e-mail invitation (see Appendix 1a – Invitation letter) was sent to academic staff at the two institutions, inviting those who were CMLs to participate in one of two further workshops, held on the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> December, 2006 at Warwick and Coventry Universities, respectively. Staff who booked to attend these events were sent a follow-up letter (see Appendix 1b) advising that they would have a face-to-face interview as part of the process on the day and a preliminary questionnaire (see Appendix 1c) accompanied the letter. The questionnaire was designed to gain some background information about the individuals involved and to concentrate their thoughts on a challenging (critical) incident that had occurred at some point while they were carrying out a course or module leadership role and which they could describe during the subsequent interview. It was stressed that it was the leadership activities that would be the focus of interest.

Some staff opted not to attend a workshop but were willing to be interviewed. These were also sent a preliminary questionnaire and were interviewed, either face-to-face, or, on a few occasions, by phone.

The template used for the semi-structured interviews is presented in Appendix 1d. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. 27 CML interviews were conducted, transcribed and analysed. Of these 16 were with staff from Coventry University, 10 were with University of Warwick staff, and one of these interviewees was from a member of staff at Loughborough University. However, since interviewees were often reflecting on their initial CML experience, they frequently referred to previous institutions. In all, seven institutions were described. Therefore comments in the report do not necessarily refer to the two institutions initially involved in the study.

Eighteen of the interviewees also met in three focus groups. Comparative research on methods of evaluating roles (Willett and Hermann, 1989) has concluded that approaches to role analysis are likely to highlight some aspects and not others, suggesting that a range of approaches is likely to produce a rounded picture. Therefore over a four hour period, participants were offered a range of prompts that were intended to stimulate discussion and to generate a wide range of evidence that would enhance the data collected from the interviews. Another benefit of holding the focus groups and running them as, in effect, workshops, was that it offered participants a personal benefit, in that they were thus able to discuss aspects of their role with colleagues in similar situations. Participants strongly appreciated this aspect of the research.

### **Analysing data**

We asked our interviewees what they had learnt, how they learnt it and about the context for that learning. There are conceptual and methodological difficulties in exploring learning in a non-formal situation. It raises a number of questions that have to do with choosing what we select as being significant, generating categories, identifying that something was of a particular kind and making judgements about the quality and extent of a factor or event. These include:

1. What do we mean by a context?
2. What are the boundaries of a context?
3. Where we attempt to identify influencing factors, on what grounds do we consider something to be a factor?
4. What do we mean by learning – including whether we see it as a process or a product?
5. Who is to judge that learning has taken place?

There is an inevitable tension between what we as researchers bring as compared with what our interviewees bring. We acknowledge that interviewees' understandings and interpretations of their own lives are of immense value. In a number of ways, the interviewee is better placed to explore the meanings of learning events for them, not least because only the interviewee has the opportunity for introspection. We therefore used fairly open interview prompts and also used critical incident technique, where the focus of discussion is decided by the interviewee.

However, that fairly open opportunity for the interviewee to explore aspects of their working life exists inside a structure devised by the research team. It is the research team who devised the research questions. It is also the research team who undertook the analysis. The team is attempting to move beyond individual accounts and to generalise. The team has conceptualised, contextualised, interpreted and categorised. An early attempt by the team to categorise using Becher's categories of cognitive, social and organisational failed for several reasons. Firstly, the categories are overlapping: the same phenomenon may have both a social and an organisational aspect. Secondly, the categories were too coarse. Thirdly, a number of aspects that seemed to us to be significant did not fit well into any of the categories.

We therefore took a grounded approach, allowing meanings to emerge from the data as far as possible. Aware that each of us may bring our own preconceptions, we elected to read a sample of transcripts independently, marking them up for significant factors and dimensions. The initial definition of a factor was anything that might be construed to have a possible effect on the nature and extent of the learning. Dimension refers to any qualitative aspect of that factor. So, for example, one factor might be colleagues who also contribute to a course team. Dimensions might include their number, their disciplinary affiliation or a number of other issues. We were aware that we had available to us a number of approaches to inquiry and analysis. We were unwilling to subject all our analysis to the use of a single perspective or approach. By marking transcripts independently, comparing notes and having to offer a rationale for our choices we felt able to remove the idiosyncratic. To be included, an interpretation had to convince the whole team.

The qualitative data analysis software package Atlas.Ti was used to assist in the transcript analysis process. The analysis of the interview transcripts involved several iterations of the dimensions that were being observed. The final code listing of the various dimensions identified is presented in Appendix 2. Ultimately four key themes emerged from reviewing the interview transcripts using these dimensions:

1. Professional learning
2. Organisation - context
3. Leadership and management
4. Student-related matters

The dimension codes (refer to Appendix 2) that were then analysed in detail for each theme are presented in the following table:

<b>Professional learning</b>	<b>Organisation - context</b>	<b>Leadership and management</b>	<b>Student-related matters</b>
'C' Contract	'B' Communication	'F' Leadership	'A' Academic responsibilities
'D' Development	'J' Resources	'H' Management	'O' Student related
'E' Expertise	'M' Stakeholders	'I' Performance related	'H 19' Management (students)
'G' Learning	'N' Structures	'L' Staff related	
'K' Role socialisation	'P' Support		
	'Q' Values		

# Results and Discussion

## *Interviews – Critical Incidents*

The four key themes that emerged through an iterative analytical review of the interview transcripts: Professional learning; Organisational context; Leadership and management; and Student-related matters have been reviewed below with liberal recourse to comments made by interviewees. The comments have been largely un-edited, with the exception of rendering them anonymous. The numbers in brackets preceding each quote refer to specific interviewees.

### **Professional learning**

#### **Approach**

The focus on critical incidents and reflection upon them was deliberately chosen because of the nature of the learning to be investigated. Our starting point was that learning was likely to be highly tacit (Polanyi, 1966), in that the lack of formal preparation and practical nature of the expertise made it likely that the capabilities would not have been explored in words. We also expected to find examples of social learning, in which learning takes place by watching others perform a role and noticing their actions and the apparent effects of those actions (Bandura, 1977). Once again, such learning may never have been expressed verbally. We also expected that learning might be highly situated (Lave and Wenger, 1991), in that the expertise might be tailored to a particular situation and embedded in it, with limited generalisability to other situations.

#### **Commencing the role**

Interviewees noted that they and their colleagues would prefer to avoid such roles, described as “duff jobs” or “the last thing ... to be committing their time to”. One interviewee reported that the pressures of other work made the role undesirable even though it might have been attractive to do:

(7): *“somebody said to me would I be interested in taking over the course leadership of the undergraduate programme next year? And my reaction was: “Oh god no, I’ve got two books to finish”. Which was sad really because, as I say, it’s something I would like to do.”*

There was strong confirmation from all interviewees that they had received no formal preparation for the role on entry. The following was typical:

(2): *“Not a single one of my colleagues ever had anything formal.”*

This lack of support seemed to extend into more extensive and senior leadership roles:

(6): *“I hadn’t had any kind of formal training to be a Director of Undergraduate Studies or to lead a team into QAA review.”*

A number of interviewees had undertaken postgraduate certificate courses. They were believed to be of limited use at this higher level, sometimes because they were regarded as being generic in focus. Several respondents noted, however, that issues of concern to CMLs, such as being strategic, marketing and managing, all of them hard to learn and with no obvious source of help, were not available. In defence of those offering such programmes, several interviewees noted that these were not the intentions of such programmes – it was

just that those were often the only programmes available on which to comment. As one interviewee noted:

(8): *"The PGCE might have counted ... and in terms of teaching skills it was alright, but in terms of managing, leadership and academic things, it lacked in that."*

A significant number of respondents reported picking up the role at very short notice, often a week or less. They found it a difficult transition, especially as there was often little structure or material on which to draw. One interviewee whose experience was fairly typical commented:

(2): *"I was asked the day before term started would I be prepared to do it. It was literally just the title of the module and lots of empty folders. I had just three days to get the first lecture sorted."*

### **Learning the role**

There were very few examples of staff knowing well in advance that they would be a CML or being prepared for and inducted into the role. Where this did happen, respondents noted how helpful it was to them:

(13): *"We're going to take it in turns to be the module leader. So the first time I'm going to sit in, the second time I'll help, third time I'll run it, and someone else will help me."*

Another respondent was critical of the lack of preparation and praised the support that had been given by colleagues, noting the highly situated nature of the knowledge that had to be absorbed:

(16): *"It's not a job that just anyone can do, it takes a very long time to learn and know about and unfortunately there seems to be a culture now whereby people are given a title and assumed that they can just do the job, and it's just not possible to do some of these jobs without the very long history of a lead up to it. I had a lot of guidance and lead-in to my roles working alongside senior colleagues, watching what they did and learning from them, and that's why I know the things I know, and a lot of things are not written down."*

For a number of interviewees, opportunities to work alongside and observe others had been crucial in their skills development. For them it was really a case of 'learning on the job' rather than CPD which, whilst useful at specific points, was seen to have limitations because it could not always anticipate the kinds of issues which may arise on a day to day basis:

(16): *"A lot of things are there because you know what it's like because you've seen people do it, and I have learnt from really good colleagues and that's what I'm attempting to do now, to pass that information on to other people, but it does take a long time. Because you can't possibly train somebody to do this job, it's only when the issues arise that you need to know these things."*

(15): *"I suppose [the workshop] helped in the sense of talking over what I was doing..... Most of my development that I have undertaken has been very much thinking about things myself and reading but mostly in content."*

Those staff who acquire academic roles by non-traditional routes may be unfamiliar with the territory and procedures:

(14): *"I've never seen myself as being an academic."*

In these situations support for CMLs would be beneficial, particularly for those new to the role. Effective mentoring support, however, often seems to happen serendipitously rather than be organised through Heads of Departments or line managers.

(11): *"I just happened to come across one or two people which, it's been good for me to know, it's just worked for me"*

When effective support for novice CMLs is provided within departments it is appreciated:

(22): *"I was really terrified when I started and I was terrified of failing, I was terrified of not getting it right, I was terrified of making some serious mistakes of judgement and so on, but I must admit that the Head of Department and other members of staff in the University have been very helpful, so that was good."*

Interviewees commented on the situations that helped them to learn. One spoke of sharing a room with a more experienced colleague. He was thus able to learn what he should do in an informal way, by modelling his behaviour on that of his colleague. This can be contrasted with several observations that CMLs never met other CMLs in some institutions. Therefore there was no forum to exchange experiences and no opportunity for modelling behaviour. On the other hand, some formal processes were valuable. One interviewee spoke of participating in university committees as a means of broadening his understanding of teaching issues. Another found participating in course re-writing useful and several made extensive use of existing documents in preparing their own, particularly course or module descriptions.

Many respondents, however, found the requirements of quality assurance processes to be irksome and to be of little assistance in dealing with the reality of the role. One in particular neatly summarised the difference in view between her own perception of teaching and learning and that of the administrators and the system with which she was interacting:

(15): *"I have a very social constructive view of learning...that I don't believe that everything we teach is learnt. I don't think that everything learned is something that has been taught so I find a great frustration in the kind of way that everything has to be prescribed in advance, as if there is some kind of natural cause and effect between teaching and learning."*

Several interviewees referred to an annual cycle as a valuable structure to help learn the job. One referred to it as *"an important organiser"*. Another interviewee referred to a yearly cycle that had provided the structure for a handover:

(16): *"What I have is, in my brain, I have a yearly cycle of things that needs to be done. And in fact I have written it down, because if I'm handing the role over I had to write lots of things down because people aren't aware of what needs to be done at what times."*

Several interviewees stressed that the local context had to be thoroughly understood and that this aspect made it necessary to work in ways that would never appear in any formal list of duties and responsibilities. One interviewee noted that this contextual knowledge meant that it was very important to have a handover from a CML to a successor but that it was really quite difficult to convey such information. This respondent also referred to the yearly cycle as the main means of providing structure.

### **Problem solving**

Not surprisingly, critical incident technique tended to produce a focus on problems and how they were solved. The finding of solutions was not reported by any respondent as involving any conscious consideration of a problem solving strategy. Interviewees did not refer to, or appear to use, any problem-solving techniques, such as force field or stakeholder analysis.

Some respondents reported looking for an answer “whole” that could be transferred from another situation: The following were much more typical descriptions of the learning process:

(8) *“So I was just ... picking and using ideas that I came across until I found one that worked then I stopped looking. So maybe I shouldn’t stop looking ...”*

Interviewer: *“How did you arrive at this solution?”*

Interviewee: *“Simply because I couldn’t think of anything else to do.”*

One interviewee noted that he was unlikely to spend any time on solving a problem, even when he had identified it, until it was near the time to do the work again:

(9) *“...That didn’t work well ... Well it’s not needed till May, I’ll think about it in April. I’ve identified a problem and I will do something about it but I don’t know what.”*

### **Group learning**

Given the social, tacit and situated nature of the knowledge required, it seems likely that much might be learned informally through incidental interaction and also through more formalised team meetings. There was, however, surprisingly limited evidence of such meetings taking place. Indeed one respondent, who had recently moved from Further Education, noted that this was a significantly different part of the culture:

(4): *“... in Further Education ... we were very much course teams so if you taught on a course, the people who taught on the course would often come together. That doesn’t seem to be part of the culture here at all.”*

The lack of informal support systems and sense of being part of a ‘team’ could also create anxieties and leave individuals feeling unsupported:

(13): *“I’d got no sort of informal support there. So the whole thing was a lot of late nights ... there was no one I could ask about it.... if I’d been a bit stuck with something and another member of the team couldn’t help me ... there was no sort of body of knowledge. There was nothing to draw on, there was just this module handbook.”*

Another commented that only informal meetings took place. Finally, one respondent drew attention to the extent to which professional differences could impede communication and team working in their environment:

(14): *“The biggest eye opener again for me is the politics across the professions, particularly in midwifery; nursing; adult nursing; child nursing; and mental health nursing. I had no idea how much politics there was between those professions. Some won’t even talk to each other in a meeting room. And how can you run a module with that group?”*

A number of respondents referred to what might be thought of as group learning, in which colleagues within the department, or elsewhere in the institution, needed to learn to work together in order to achieve desired ends. Often communication was not very effective. There was criticism of central administrators, who were felt not always to be helpful. Structures and processes had to be negotiated; they seemed to be more onerous at some institutions than others. Local administrative support, at departmental level, was on several occasions reported to be overstretched and therefore inadequate. On the other hand, one interviewee referred to the vital role that a well-trained departmental administrator could play in providing continuity, especially when teaching leadership roles change.

## Organisational Context

### Administration

Institutional administration provides the framework for the activities of CMLs. This framework can vary from being supportive through to being bureaucratically overburdening:

(3): *“One of the things that I was confronted with when I arrived at X [university] was the administration structure...all the hoops that you have to jump through in order to carry out your modules... so it was the main thing I struggled with in the beginning was the structure, as it stood then...module administration.”*

It was reported that in some cases the nature and extent of the bureaucracy involved can make individual CMLs think that the teaching and learning processes are being stifled. In the following comment it is clear that the person felt that the administration was too prescriptive in its approach, in its request for rigidly-defined learning outcomes that the CML has to follow:

(15): *“I believe very strongly in teaching and in learning and in the centrality of learning and I believe very strongly in what I do but when I got the paperwork I found that I was required to do things which struck me as bureaucratic, box ticking, just a restrictive framework. I had to produce outcomes. I felt it was more about trying to find things that fitted more about how the university wanted a piece of paper to be filled in than really reflecting the reality of learning.”*

Again, in the following comment there was a strong sense that the administration was at variance with the CML:

(4): *“I feel probably having taught for a while you resent sometimes pressures which are often set by targets I suppose, which sometimes you wonder whether the targets are leading in the right direction.”*

On occasions CMLs felt that the administration was not being as helpful as it could be. Here the CML was trying to efficiently organise their module but important and necessary information was being withheld, possibly unwittingly, and requests for assistance met with prevarication:

(9): *“They were administration and the central sort of departments not talking to the academics, not letting us know what was different, what to expect. And I was very pro-active, sending out e-mails and trying to chase things up, but I just wasn't getting any responses, or responses that really didn't help, like: ‘Oh, we're looking into that one. So-and-so is working on that’.”*

Overall, interviews indicated a need for effective support for new CMLs by those in strategic and managerial positions and also for effective office administrative support underpinning the role. Here again, these only become critical incidents when efficient secretarial support was not available:

(13): *“I've taken over running another module... and the very good secretary has left, so the administrator who is left is very overrun”*

Sometimes such effective support had to be nurtured and this can then provide sustained improvements to the support of the CML process:

(6): *“...probably the most significant achievement for me was essentially training our undergraduate administrator so that she fully understands, well, at least she understands as well as I do, and probably much better now, all those issues. So the changes were embedded in the departmental culture through the administrator and they are now cultural.”*

## **Appraisal and reward**

Rigid appraisal and reward systems were felt by several interviewees to be negative influences. It was generally recognised that appraisal and performance review opportunities tended to be somewhat formulaic and not always relevant to their needs as CMLs. Although performance review systems had undergone review and development as part of national changes, interviewees had, nevertheless, not found them as useful as they could be. One interviewee's comment is typical of responses:

(17): *"We've just been through the first formal appraisal process and I have to say that my teaching didn't really figure very much in that. It was just assumed that it was going OK, it wasn't incentivised or anything else. The incentive is a negative one ... if you don't do everything right and get the students through, then you get slated by the board at the end of the year."*

The effect of such systems on colleagues was often not positive either. It was reported that close specification of duties and expectations and their clear linkage with financial reward meant that colleagues would concentrate on the specified activities and would be less inclined to work in a flexible way. One interviewee commented:

(21): *"In fact I think it's a very negative thing in my experience in leading within the team. There are the experiences when you say to someone: 'Oh do you think you could do that?', whereas in the past they'd say: 'Yes, no problem' because they know that you would do something else to help them out, and now they will say: 'Well its not on my appraisal, it's not one of my targets, so I'm not going to do that, so there'."*

## **Communication**

Communication was felt to be a significant element in the establishment and maintenance of the delivery teams. Intra-team communication may not be as effective in Higher Education as it seems to be in Further Education. Effective communication is particularly crucial though when leading and delivering joint degree programmes and these are becoming increasingly common:

(2): *"One of the difficulties we have is because the Business School do a lot of joint degrees. The strategy modules I teach and the business organisation one I teach are on nine different programmes from dedicated degrees to joint degrees."*

Effective communication in these situations can facilitate course viability:

(16): *"...it's understanding that you can't just have a course that's got its own modules, unless you know you're going to get a viable cohort of students, you have to be able to share across programmes to make things viable."*

When there is not good communication between the team in these complex teaching situations, often again where re-structuring is involved, extremely basic problems can arise:

(2): *"...four of the lectures are identical, not even similar, but identical because one person had taught on the other module last year and they've basically just lifted those out into their own module this year. There's no formal system to make sure this is avoided."*

Getting good team involvement can be problematic though, particularly when members of the team are part-time staff, or when staff know in advance that they will not be involved in teaching on the same course or module during the next academic session. The following two comments highlight this issue:

(8): *“My module is supported by a variety of other tutors, who have other roles, which include module leadership and every time I run the module that team of tutors is different. So it requires me to communicate with them, to be available to answer queries, to support them with marking, or giving advice to students and I have a module team meeting to which none of them come, because they change so much and every time I run the module it could be a different 13, or so, tutors. By the time the module’s finished, they won’t be doing it again next time, so they’re not so interested.”*

(8): *“...there’s one set of personal tutors who do need support, but who don’t visit the module again for some two or three years, and there’s the core team who I find very helpful and supportive and we work together well.”*

Finally, in terms of communication, several CMLs in the survey indicated that the introduction of an institutional forum whereby effective and good practice aspects of the CML role could be shared would be desirable:

(8): *“I do think it would be very nice to have a working party or a focus group or some...what would the word be...not society but somewhere where you could go and meet, not on a monthly basis but meet on a three-monthly basis with other module leaders and course tutors from other parts of the university, so that you can discuss and share.”*

(8): *“I’m sure every department has its differences and I think that sometimes we ought to be aware of the other ways in which modules are being run, so that we can get help from them but perhaps share our best practice as well.”*

(22): *“More training... formal training. I would say in-house, department level, but also at university level. Maybe a network of course managers, you know, like a discussion group of course managers at the university.”*

[Like a forum?] *“Like a forum would be helpful I think.”*

### **Course design**

For a number of reasons the requirements of course design often change. Even in a period of stasis, course and module content may require redesign to remain current. The requirements of external bodies were sometimes at odds with those of the institution, adding further tensions. In this field, the administration played a significant role. Interviewees often felt that it was difficult to become technically proficient in these areas, especially without induction into it.

(3): *“Since then we’ve gone through two changes of curriculum design... one that we upgraded our course and had to have it approved by a professional body and then of course within the University there was a restructuring of the modules to a 666 structure, so that’s when I really learned about the different structures that we had to go through. I had no training at all.”*

### **Valuing teaching**

Interviewees spoke of a culture in which teaching was not valued. This could be seen in a number of ways, including attitudes to recruitment:

(7): *“I have been party occasionally to discussions about: ‘We need to bring somebody in to teach a particular area’, but that’s always been seen as a sort of a...how can I put it...a marginal concern normally in terms of recruitment.”*

The low esteem in which teaching was held, in comparison with research, is encapsulated in a comment recounted by the interviewee, who was told:

(7): *“It’s just teaching. Get on with it, don’t worry about it.”*

## Leadership and Management

As noted earlier, the project did not seek to present interviewees with pre-specified definitions of leadership or management. Instead it sought to allow the meanings attributed to the terms – particularly leadership – to emerge from the data. Interviewees described the performance of the role as a day-to-day process, involving a considerable amount of informal contact and negotiation with other staff and with students. Some actions seem relatively transactional and of little strategic significance. As mentioned earlier, this might be construed as being better characterised as management or administration. However, some apparently trivial actions clearly did have a “big picture” significance and involved careful positioning for future achievement of significant and different desired outcomes – all of which the project team believed were features that tended to indicate leadership, whilst acknowledging that an absolute separation from the concept of management was probably over-pedantic. This supports Ramsden’s (1998) propositions that leadership can occur at all levels and that it is “a practical and everyday process”. Knight and Trowler’s (2001) conception of the centrality of facilitating learning in leadership is also supported. Many actions had the intention of changing behaviours of individuals and groups, presumably through enabling learning. One may view this positively, as evidence that at a “grass roots” level leadership is taking place through these informal actions. However, the study also indicates that CMLs often feel – and are – unable to influence some of the environmental factors that would make a strategic difference.

Academic leadership, whether at module or course level, is generally perceived by interviewees as a difficult and complex role. Because it is not usually supported by training or development opportunities, such a role tends to be undertaken in a somewhat *ad hoc*, learning ‘on the job’ manner, utilising personal experiences in combination with a recognition of departmental and institutional cultures and traditions.

### Approaches to leadership

Whilst for most people there was a sense that they had taken on their leadership role on a ‘buggin’s turn’ basis, a number of interviewees had willingly accepted the role and responsibilities because they wished to demonstrate their leadership capabilities, felt they could do an effective job and were committed to improving opportunities for students and their colleagues/disciplinary area. As one interviewee with fairly extensive experience of leading and managing in a non-higher education context commented:

(2): *“There was a frustrated leader inside me”... “I think I was attracted to this because I love the teaching element .... I made a conscious decision that over the next year I’d do anything I could to help with the modules but, anyway, it turned out that a position came up”*

The importance of retaining a principled, ideas- and values-driven approach to the role was emphasised as crucial by a number of participants. As one interviewee commented:

(14): *“My own values and beliefs guide what I do and impact what I do. I’m quite principled in that respect....quite disciplined. If somebody asks me to do something I make sure it gets done, which is not the case across all the professions. These are my own values and beliefs, which I can’t change. Yes I think that’s what impacts, my own values, beliefs and my professional ... what’s the word ... integrity.”*

The strategic implications of their leadership roles were referred to relatively infrequently. Comments focused on the notion that ‘strategy’ is generally a good thing:

(16): *"The other area where you need leadership is in kind of strategy ... if you don't have that strategy, you don't have the kind of strategic view of where you're going and what's required and also know how to design well so that things fit together and work well."*

There was a recognition of the importance of people management skills in ensuring successful outcomes:

(1): *"From a module leadership point of view the difficulty was really personnel and personal judgement"*

The approach taken to leading colleagues varied considerably. Interviewees' descriptions of their own leadership style illustrated the full range from non-interventionist to managerial. As one interviewee commented:

(2): *"Some do it without managing anything, others manage like control freaks"*

Some felt that module or course leadership required a somewhat *'laissez-faire'* approach and was more about 'pointing in a direction rather than a leadership role' in order to enable fellow academics to pursue their own solutions to issues:

(4): *"...my assumption is that academics are able to take the problem on themselves without me needing to lead them through, so I don't see that as a need really to lead"*.

Another interviewee saw the role as an opportunity to pursue a more personal agenda and interests in order to resolve sometime longstanding problems or issues:

(6): *"I had sort of been involved in various initiatives to review how we were teaching certain things over the years and I suppose I had opinions on what needed doing. So when I took on the role I think just it was my kind of personal crusade really, this is what I think needs sorting out and just getting on with it."*

In several cases, interviewees commented on the difficult balance to be achieved between consulting one's colleagues on the one hand and directing them on the other. There was recognition that the role sometimes increased the pressures to be directive with colleagues even though the CML might desire to be more collegial. As one noted:

(6): *"It's looking for consent, so it's not trying to impose things on people, it's consulting but leading I guess"*

For many, there was a precarious challenge in balancing what was often seen as a range of competing demands laid upon course or module leaders:

(8): *"In your role as module leader, or even as course tutor, you're bridging the gap between the students and the university systems."*

### **Working with colleagues**

Regardless of institution, issues of academic autonomy and what might be called 'academic conservatism' were important totems - both for interviewees themselves and for those colleagues whose work they were expected to coordinate or lead within a teaching context. One participant referred to the:

(5): *"innate conservatism" ...which characterised:... "the newly qualified tutor as well as the older tutors because they've learnt to do things in a specific way".*

Whilst some saw the solution as being formal development...

(3): *"A course on leadership is basically what I need to do. If there are courses I will attend them"*

...many interviewees emphasised the importance of autonomy and individuality in decision-making both for those leading and those in the course team, even if this might inhibit 'leadership' responsibilities, or add to the workload.

There was a relatively strong emphasis on expectations regarding the person in the leadership role. Taking the lead role often meant being seen as responsible for 'protecting' colleagues from a range of (often institutionally or nationally-driven) demands. For a number of interviewees this had resulted in the view that, as a course or module leader, you would be expected and left to undertake much of the work yourself. As a consequence, the most effective *modus operandi* seemed to be a combination of two elements. Firstly, the need to acknowledge what appears to be one's colleagues' almost inalienable rights of control over their teaching, subject area or specific subject-related tasks; and secondly, a recognition that in undertaking a leadership role, one also needs to maintain a general sense of collegiality with others and protectiveness for them if things are to run smoothly.

This balance reflected a pragmatic view that it was often easier to do things oneself as well as idealism about the nature of academic life, involving autonomy on the one side and collegiality on the other. A number of those with academic leadership responsibilities saw a key aspect of their role to be the acceptance of all the minor and burdensome tasks which may not clearly fall to others. Those colleagues would then be expected to do the same when their turn came. Whilst some found the experience restricting - feeling 'squeezed' or relatively isolated - others found that it gave them a sense of personal control, or power, and autonomy as decision-makers, giving scope to do things 'their way'. The rationale offered was that it may be easier to change things (usually relatively small scale) as well as more satisfying to undertake a task oneself rather than have to negotiate with others or impose change on people, not least if it was not going to be handled appropriately or successfully in the eyes of the person in the lead role.

This aspect of academic leadership meant that those who tended to prefer to 'work alone', would instinctively limit the degree to which they would call upon others. For one interviewee, this approach to task allocation was not about leadership but about collegiality. It was reasonable for him to take major responsibility for a piece of work, limiting the degree of colleagues' involvement to 'helping out' with marking and thus, in his eyes, avoiding the notion of 'leadership' entirely. Rather than engage in discussion and negotiation, a *modus operandi* had been agreed which appeared to suit everyone:

(3): *"I'm more research-orientated, so I typically tend to work alone .... All my experience of Higher Education is that you have to rely on yourself..... I virtually wrote all of the lectures. I have a good working relationship with my colleagues. Basically they help me with marking, the second year module, where I'm leader ... there are four of us and again two of us do the lecturing and a couple of staff who help out. The third year module, which is mine ... and I just do that myself. I wouldn't call that leadership. In a sense because we get on so well together, both personally and in a work environment, that no leadership is required."*

The concept of 'being expert' also tended to be used as a rationale for minimising team-based approaches to problem solving and decision-making. The emphasis on individual academic expertise and leadership meant that the role of the course or module team was diminished. Comments from research participants, however, indicate that the concept of 'academic' expertise (e.g. an individual's disciplinary, teaching or research skills and abilities) is often taken as a proxy for that person's professional expertise (e.g. leadership and management capabilities). In other words, there is a tendency to assume that capable academics will also be effective leaders. As interviewees commented:

(17): *“Apparently I’m wanted on the course leadership team/role because of my skills with students”*

(7): *“There is such a high level of academic autonomy that is at least professed, you know, that the group does what the group feels right, and the group says to the module [leader] ... ‘you do what you feel is correct because you’re the expert’”.*

### **Mentoring**

A relatively large number of interviewees also recognised the value and importance of mentoring. Even so, it was clear that participants had experienced varying degrees of success in both their own mentoring of others and their own experience of being mentored by others. One interviewee noted in particular that mentoring colleagues who had relatively limited professional/academic experience demanded clear leadership behaviour:

(3): *“There are some staff members who are more nervous than others so I guess I have to demonstrate leadership there.”*

Another had found that having a mentor had been helpful in prompting specific actions or tasks and in encouraging the development of more effective professional ‘habits’:

(8): *“I found my mentor very helpful but things like she would say to me: ‘Yes, you have to write a module report’ but she wouldn’t write it for me, obviously that was for me to do. .... So the mentor was good at telling me what I had to do, but not sort of being there to do ... you were left very much on your own to do those things yourself”*

### **Managing within the system**

For many, working within and with the ‘system’ was a real concern. A number had spent time grappling with the ‘bureaucracy’ either on their own, their team’s or their students’ behalf. For many, getting it right so that students have maximum opportunities to succeed is the key to successful course or module leadership:

(17): *“A number of things are vitally important in terms of how the module runs – one is that it runs full stop. The students and people delivering know what they’re doing, when they’re doing it, that they know who to talk to if they’ve got a problem and that they go away from it feeling its worth their while ... so I try to make sure all this happens, to be the key figure who can’t give the answers but can find them and kick people to be in the right place at the right time so that they get the material they need.”*

The skills required for finding ways through, or round, the prevailing bureaucracy and organisational culture within which they operated was something that, in several cases, had not been anticipated. For several, the *“realisation that the system was too big to fight”* had been a key learning point which had led to a recognition of the need to recognise that they had limited power to effect change and that they needed to acknowledge and work within, or around, a range of limitations:

(15): *“I guess there was the realisation that the university had a particular way of doing things and that there was a historical need for them to do certain things and that made sense to someone even if it didn’t necessarily make much sense to me .... although it didn’t make sense to me ... that was OK because ... there was a disjuncture but I could still do a good job even though I had to do this paperwork.”*

(14): *“...I can’t change it. I have the responsibility [for others’ work] but no authority to change staffing, and that is a huge challenge for me, because I just have to say: ‘I can’t change that.’”*

## **Student-related matters**

Given the diverse and complex nature of the role, it was interesting to note the lack of preparation CMLs had to deal with student-related matters.

(3): *“When I was a year 3 tutor... one of the things I wasn’t prepared for, was having to deal with students’ problems.*

Feedback from students to CMLs was an important factor. In some cases, adverse feedback from students was something the CMLs worked actively to avoid, suggesting that managing students’ perceptions and expectations is a significant part of the CML’s job, necessitating good communication skills.

Issues identified as significant relating to student matters included student well-being, assessment and student performance.

### **Student well-being**

There was strong evidence that CMLs felt responsible for student well-being:

(4): *“Now I’ve had no training or anything to deal with this, and when he comes into my room with his staring eyes you’re not quite sure, well how should you handle this? Should you have somebody else in here.... Well, who has the responsibility? But to me as a course leader it tends to come back to my plate.”*

A lack of preparation for the role was highlighted by interviewees:

(3): *“In dealing with things like serious illness, mental illness, unwanted pregnancy.... I’m not really trained”.*

There was a diversity of approaches indicating CMLs’ interpretation of the nature of the role and its boundaries. Some would attempt to deal with issues, whilst others would refer the student to a counsellor. One CML stated:

(4): *“I find myself phoning social workers and various, and the police and phoned lawyers, over this particular individual I’ve phoned so many different people and had to talk to them, and they are issues I don’t think necessarily are my responsibility, but seem to come back to me”*

In some cases CMLs adopted a strong role in mentoring, or counselling, students with difficulties but it was apparent that these CMLs had previous attributes or interests in this aspect of the role. Another CML commented:

(16): *“Therefore, in that case, I just referred the student to a counsellor, and then I communicated with the counsellor and supported her through the counselling”.*

A key requirement for CMLs would be the ability to judge when referral to support services was an appropriate step to take for managing a student’s well-being.

### **Assessment**

A number of interviewees reported difficulties with the management of assessment. Whether assessment was an issue appeared to be related to the module size, the number of assessments and their timing. One CML learnt experientially from problems associated with

over-assessment where a high number of assessments over-ran into the examination period, feedback was late and this led to student dissatisfaction. Another issue raised by a CML was the inequitable workload put on students by CMLs who required more than was reasonable of their students. This could have an adverse effect on performance in other modules. One interviewee noted that if assessment were managed carefully it could have a beneficial effect on students' performance. In one case, the revision upwards of the pass requirement led to improved performance on a module, and this was interpreted by the CML to mean that students now realised they had to work harder to achieve the higher pass rate, thereby producing greater effort.

### **Student performance**

Approaches to the management of student performance differed markedly. Some saw their role in this area as the devising of challenging and meaningful activities, as part of students' learning process. Others used systems such as attendance monitoring to identify students under-performing, whilst another devised their own strategy of naming and shaming. Few if any of the CMLs interpreted their role as one of leadership in the area of students' learning experience, yet they were clearly trying to manage students' performance.

Many of the interviewees alluded to the performance criteria against which they were judged in their role as CML. These included student performance, shown in pass rates, attrition rates and attendance.

One had established a clear connection between attendances and pass rates in their module:

(17): *"They don't sign in for lectures but registers are taken in seminars, and that is a decision I've taken across the whole module this year. So what I've been doing now is monitoring that and trying to identify the students who haven't been turning up, which is a new initiative on this module.....so having established there is a correlation between attendance, it's not even participation, but attendance and pass rates, ...(they) stand more of a chance .... to scrape even a bare pass."*

There was a predominant view that CMLs were responsible for pass rates in their modules or progression rates in the courses but interviewees noted variation in the extent to which pass rates were scrutinised. One CML recounted a low level of concern:

(2): *"Every year we have a meeting in a room and read out every single student's name and whether they've passed or failed and that's it."*

Another commented that it was regarded as a central concern and this affected the interviewee's attitude and behaviour:

(3): *"The department is monitored according to the attrition of students... drop out rates...progression rates, etc. So I know that I have to take it seriously and do something about it."*

Many CMLs recognised the need to carry out their role to improve student pass and progression rates but critical incidents highlighted differing approaches. One CML expressed reluctance to embrace autocratically imposed attendance monitoring processes:

(8): *"...fundamentally I don't think we should be monitoring attendance in the way that we are because these are adult learners and we are treating them like school children, which goes against the ethos of the university education I would have thought."*

One interviewee noted that it was not always easy to act to improve the situation:

(3): *“ I find it difficult because I don’t want to chase them, but that’s what the department expects them to do, and I do find it difficult, especially with female students. I’m not the kind of person who tells people off. I never responded to it myself when I was young. However, there are some situations when it is necessary.”*

Key assumptions affecting the role were the CMLs’ attitude and expectations of their students. One CML expected students to turn up fully motivated:

(8): *“If a student enrolls on the course then it’s up to them to have responsibility for their learning”*

Others considered issues more reflectively:

(14): *“You know, do they pass, how many fail? How is that reflected in their overall marks across the year? Is it just my module that they are failing in, or is this something which is happening in many of their modules?”*

## ***Focus groups***

### **Activity 1**

Participants were invited to depict visually the role in any way they wished, provided it was not as an organisation chart. The intention of the exercise was to discover how the role overall was experienced, by observing participants' uses of visual metaphor. A rich and varied response was obtained. The role was depicted as a:

- Radio transmitter
- Plumbing system
- Electrical flow chart
- Spider in a web of networks
- Sponge, soaking up and dispensing knowledge
- Punchbag
- Octopus
- Juggler
- A wearer of many caps
- A bee among flowers

Subsequent discussions emphasised the many-faceted nature of the job and the need to be undertaking a number of activities simultaneously. It was interesting to observe the differing emphases here: some metaphors are about individual agency, even if they involve responding to the environment; the role holder is at the centre of activity. Others stress the importance of structure, within which the role holder operates. For many, the job is principally about managing flows of information. Students' learning does not feature directly in most of the metaphors.

### **Activity 2**

Participants were invited to depict the role visually in terms of people and connections. The intention of the exercise was to probe the extent to which participants felt that they were in a community of practice and also to begin a process of stakeholder analysis. Prompts included:

- With whom are you connected?
- What are your most significant contacts?
- To what extent are you part of a team?
- Who is in the team?

Participants were then invited to identify those groups and individuals they had depicted, as members of their team, as a resource or as a stakeholder.

Items of note that were discussed included:

- That some included students in the team (in one case the students had a formal teaching role)
- That the university was sometimes portrayed as external and in some cases meant little to the participant
- The stakeholder is an important concept but it is in tension with a disciplinary knowledge base. It was maintained by some that students had no part in defining the knowledge base; students had a legitimate interest in quality but not content
- That a map of research connections would be very different. It would be less complex and the role of colleagues would be increased.
- That the nature of some of the mapped relationships would change over time, with increasing experience.

### **Activity 3**

Participants were asked to undertake a simple functional analysis of the role. We wanted to know what participants felt were:

- the extent of the role
- its component parts

- their relative importance

Participants stated the purpose of the role in a single sentence and then showed how it broke down into key areas of activity or concern, in as many levels as seemed useful. Each item was marked as high, medium or low importance. Participants estimated the proportions of time spent on each activity, insofar as was meaningful.

Overarching purpose items were:

- ensuring the smooth running of the course or module
- leading and managing the provision of opportunities, challenges and appropriate levels of support
- delivery, assessment, quality
- maximising the rate of student achievement
- designing
- co-ordinating
- communicating

Another list included the following:

- students (management, retention)
- content (subject content, module descriptions, materials)
- assessment (exams, moderation)
- resources
- delivery
- assessment
- quality
- design
- co-ordination (both timetabling and teams, motivation etc)
- communication

Discussion focused on the practical nature of the way the role was seen. It was widely viewed as a pragmatic activity. The item “leading and managing the provision of opportunities, challenges and appropriate levels of support”, offered by one member of a group, was observed by participants in that group to be different from their own initial responses; it was noted by the particular participant that this might reflect her background in Education as a field of study. The attainment of quality was widely viewed as important. This included achieving ownership by the course team of its quality. This was a leadership task related to motivation and requiring the distribution of responsibility. Managing the external examiner was seen as a significant task.

In some courses graduates stayed nearby and influenced long-term perceptions of the course. This included graduates from medical and allied professions, who might come from and return to nearby professional communities. It also included graduates of university-based postgraduate certificates in teaching and learning, who stayed within the same institution. Whilst undergraduate programmes were subject to the effects of students’ views, it was not in such an intense and immediate way.

It was striking that this, admittedly very crude, functional analysis concentrated on tasks to be done and therefore did not capture the knowledge and understanding that enabled performance, nor the hidden aspects of the role, including participants’ emotional responses to it, that were captured by other means. This confirms what has been noted before - that approaches to analysis will tend not to reveal some kinds of information (Blackmore, 2000a) and that a combination of approaches may be desirable, to achieve a richer description.

#### **Activity 4**

We asked participants about the extent to which formal descriptions exist and, if they did, to what extent they reflect the reality of the role. Our prompts were:

- Is your job formally defined, either in your original job description or in subsequent documentation?
- Is there a gap between formal and informal role?

Only one participant knew of a formal role description for their course leadership role. This had been produced in the Faculty in anticipation of external academic audit. For all other participants the role was not, in their knowledge, formally described, either in their original job description or in subsequent documentation. Several pointed out that their institution's academic role descriptors had recently been revised extensively but that they did not contain any reference to course and module leadership. Therefore this was not likely to be a major focus in performance review. It follows that it was not possible to describe a difference between formal and informal role. However, it was clear that the role required complex abilities to manage people and situations in ways that tend not to be reflected fully in role descriptions that are framed at a procedural level.

### **Activity 5**

We wanted to find out whether the disciplinary or professional aspect of the participant and the context made any difference to the nature of the role. To offer some terms for discussion we introduced Biglan / Becher's categorisations of disciplines

- Hard – soft
- Pure – applied
- Urban – rural

noting that disciplines could thus be described in the following ways:

- Comp Scienceu/g hard/pure; p/g softer/applied
- Medicine hard; applied; urban
- Accounting hard/soft; applied; urban/rural
- Built environ. Hard/soft; applied; urban
- Education Soft; applied; urban/rural
- Bio Sci Hard/soft; pure/applied; urban/rural

The proposition that disciplines make a difference met with immediate agreement, but much subsequent discussion explored the limitations of that view and considered the influence of other factors. It was noted that some subjects are sequential and require regular progression. There are implications for staffing patterns.

Teaching and learning methods are often very different from one discipline to another. However, it should be noted that most participants had experience only of teaching and learning in their own discipline, or professional grouping, and were not in a position to make fully informed comparisons.

We also offered McNay's management styles quadrants (1995), in which he lists directive, supportive, coaching and delegative approaches, linked with tight-loose policy definition and control.

On management culture, there was variation in the ethos that participants believed they were experiencing, from co-operative to competitive and from directive to collegial. It was felt that the management style you adopt depends very much on the individual you are dealing with, particularly the extent to which he or she is established in post. Some felt that you may start in a directive way and move outward from that position. Others commented that you need to stop things slipping away. One way of doing this was to have control of objectives and have good feedback about what is happening. One participant commented that you can control circumstances even if collegiality does not give you direct control of staff. There was wide

support that it is generally better to respect people and to trust them but there were many stories of situations where this did not work.

### **Activity 6**

Participants were invited to complete a table by ticking relevant boxes to indicate the likelihood and frequency of seeking support from a range of sources, such as their Head of Department (HoD), other colleagues, reference materials etc. The table and the combined results are presented in Appendix 3. There was a strong tendency to use informal rather than formal sources of support and to prefer local to distant support. The HoD was not likely to be a source of support. There was a widely shared view that HoDs were rather distant, too busy to be involved, often protected by secretaries and appointments and sometimes did not know the answer anyway. Several said that HoDs had come through the system in another era so they did not know how to do the job now.

Some commented that you form your own little network to solve problems. One participant referred to “key helpers”. Trust was very important. You might not want to admit you did not know how to do something.

Some very practical suggestions for support were made. An induction and a handbook would both be useful, with some simple “how to” guides for some aspects of the role. It was noted that sometimes information existed, such as in the form of core handbooks, but that it might not be known about.

## Conclusions

Analysis of interview transcripts that mainly reviewed critical incidents relating to course and module (CML) leadership roles of voluntarily participating staff at Coventry and Warwick universities involved an iterative process of identifying the dimensions involved. This established 47 separate codes across 17 dimensions (Appendix 2). From this work and from preliminary discussions held during three workshops with 18 staff, four key themes have emerged. These are 'professional learning', 'organisational context', 'leadership and management', and 'student-related matters'. The information gained from academic staff has been assessed under these themes. The use of critical incidents tends to highlight situations where systems have failed and so areas of existing good practice may have been missed. The conclusions reached, however, have been used to define some recommendations for improved future practice. The following main conclusions have been derived.

Established staff often expressed the desire to avoid, or commit time to, what were considered unappealing jobs, including the leadership of large, non-specialised courses. Consequently, newly-appointed staff were sometimes assigned these duties.

All staff indicated that they had not received any formal training for a CML role on entry to their academic position. Post-graduate certificate courses were not designed to fulfil this function but were helpful with improving teaching capability and with aspects of curriculum design that would both have a positive influence on subsequent CML activity.

It was clear that many academic staff took on CML roles at very short notice, often at first appointment. There were very few instances where staff were given adequate time to prepare for a CML role. This possibly indicates a lack of strategic planning by departments.

Staff indicated that they received good support from colleagues in helping to learn the situated knowledge necessary to lead courses or modules within their departments. Some found that observing colleagues was particularly helpful in developing these leadership skills. On the other hand, quality assurance processes were seen to be of limited value in enhancing CML capability.

Departments tend to be organised on an annual cycle that can provide a useful framework in which to learn the role but it was clear that much of the crucial information to maintain these cycles may not be documented. Consequently, some staff achieve 'linchpin' status and can have a serious detrimental effect on departmental systems if they were to leave without passing on their knowledge.

Without adequate support, CMLs tended to lack strategic approaches to problem solving. If something worked it would be retained with little thought given to whether it was the best solution. Additionally, the need to address a problem may be delayed until that time in the annual cycle, when it would be likely to re-surface.

Team learning for CML roles was not in evidence. This was distinctly different from the situation in Further Education courses. Many indicated that team meetings would be beneficial. A number of reasons were given for the failure to organise effective team meetings. The lack of commitment of staff who had transitory teaching roles on a course was commonly observed. The employment of part-time staff as part of the course teaching team raised a number of issues. Their contractual obligations for specific numbers of hours often precluded their involvement in ancillary activities, such as team meetings. This was often due to the difficulty of getting all the part-time staff involved in a course, on campus, at the same time.

Degree programmes that span departments in order to offer joint degrees are becoming more common and it was felt crucial that effective communication channels are in place when co-ordinating and leading courses on these programmes. In fact, communication and a degree of plasticity within the system may be necessary to ensure that sufficient students are recruited to maintain programme viability. Poor intra-team communication can sometimes be reflected in student feedback.

University administration can have a huge impact on CML activities. There were many negative comments about interactions with the administration. The use of critical incident technique is likely to highlight only negative aspects of overarching administrative frameworks. The smooth operation of an efficient, supportive system is not likely to be remarked on and other approaches would be needed to identify and define such environments. However, the level of dissatisfaction does suggest that the issue warrants attention. Many CMLs that came into the role at first appointment, commented that they inherited course structures and curricula that could not be changed with any rapidity. Others had problems with targets set by the administration. In some cases, there were restrictions imposed by outside accrediting bodies that were relayed to CMLs via the conduit of the university's administration. Often staff found it difficult to reach the pertinent member of the administration to deal with these issues.

The activities of CMLs were often subject to organisational change, whether from within or beyond the institution. There was little evidence that institutions were checking whether the effects of the changes were beneficial or whether there were unintended adverse consequences.

It was felt that getting the relationships right between the course team, the bureaucracy and the students, so that the students have maximum opportunities to succeed, is the key to being a successful CML. In some cases, it was necessary to recognise that 'the system' was too big to fight and that successful leadership needed to carry on within, or around, prevailing systemic limitations.

Pay and reward structures, where present, were not always considered helpful, either being formulaic or not especially relevant to needs. In some cases, it had even reduced the altruistic nature of colleagues. If it was not something that was part of an appraisal target, it would not now be done

Faculty or campus-wide fora were considered desirable, either as electronic discussion boards, or preferably as face-to-face meetings, where course leadership issues could be aired.

It was widely agreed that good team management skills were important in running successful courses or modules. The way CMLs lead and manage their colleagues varies widely from allowing the team members to get on with their section of the programme, to being in tight control.

While some had CML duties thrust upon them, others had actively sought these leadership activities and all seemed keen to do a good job and improve their performance. It is likely, though, that the invitation process by which interviewees were obtained would attract those CMLs with this attitude.

It was clear that there was a delicate balance required between consultation with colleagues and being directive. This could be particularly problematic with more senior colleagues, where some CMLs indicated that this caused difficulty with leadership. They felt they had been given a leadership position but without the necessary concomitant authority.

There was clear interest shown by interviewees in the process of mentoring, although there was not such a level of clarity in their appreciation of its effectiveness.

Many CML interviewees seemed unprepared for the variety of student issues that could arise. Staff were not trained to deal with serious aspects of student well-being, such as physical and mental illness, unwanted pregnancies etc. There were no clear boundary definitions for when CMLs should act alone, or involve other parties, such as academic superiors, or non-academic support, for example counsellors. The ability to judge when other support should be accessed would seem to be a key skill for a CML.

Judgement was also a key component in ensuring an adequate level of student assessment on a course. Students needed to have timely assessment processes so that they could improve, while excessive assessment could lead to compounded problems of delayed feedback, student dissatisfaction and poor performance in examinations and on other courses.

Managing student perceptions and expectations is a significant part of the CML role but it was largely unrecognised that leadership skills were necessary for this. There were also differing attitudes to the imposition of attendance requirements. While there were often positive correlations between attendance and performance, some CMLs were reluctant to enforce attendance, believing that students should be free to determine their involvement level. CMLs, though, clearly wanted to be proactive towards gaining positive student feedback and achieving improved pass rates.

Overall, the investigation has been valuable, both in terms of its activities and the outcomes. The approach to investigation has been very fruitful. The use of semi-structured interviews enabled a focused approach that seemed to allow space for participants to explore their own role and express their own perceptions freely. The use of critical incident technique was very helpful in prompting discussion of some of the hidden aspects of the role. Focus group discussion yielded valuable data, prompted by the range of activities that were undertaken. These data added richness to the information derived from interviews and permitted triangulation. The close working of the research team was a major strength, ensuring that the emerging categorisations and the conclusions drawn were submitted to scrutiny from several perspectives. Full transcription of all interviews was an essential part of this process, providing a valuable resource that was available to all.

Many, although not all, of the comments made by participants were rather negative, about their context, induction, relationships with administrators and colleagues, recognition and reward and so on. This may reflect reality of course. It may also be the result of offering participants a first opportunity to discuss quite a demanding role in which there is seldom a forum for such a discussion. It may also be a feature of critical incident technique. Our prompt invited participants to choose a challenging situation, an apparently neutral request. The purpose of it was to highlight challenges and the performance and learning associated with it. However, it is perhaps not surprising that it prompted discussion of areas of difficulty, in which unhelpful structures and the negative attitudes and actions of others often featured. It would be interesting, in parallel with this, to take an appreciative inquiry approach, in order specifically to capture what works as well as what does not.

One of the most valuable aspects of the research process was the focus group discussion. This was not part of the original proposal but was added because we believed that it would provide rich data and also that it would provide something of value to those participants who were giving their time to the project. It was very successful in both these intentions. Participants were highly appreciative of the opportunity to discuss their role and two groups

requested a further session so that outcomes of the project could be reported to them and the discussion could continue.

The investigation showed that role holders often do not find it easy to articulate the basis or processes of their own expert performance. Much expertise is tacit and will often not have been reflected upon. It is also highly situated. Participants reported that they worked in particular ways because of very local conditions which might be structural, social or interpersonal.

The extent to which participants felt that they were part of a community of practice was particularly interesting. There were many examples of participants feeling well supported by informal contacts with colleagues, which enabled them to learn their role initially and to sustain it. However, there were just as many examples of participants feeling unsupported, of there not even being an opportunity to discuss the role with others doing similar work or even of discussion among the course team. This does seem to be an area where deliberate community building would be valuable.

An understanding of the context in which the role exists was essential for analysis of the factors that participants reported were significant for them in either helping or hindering them in performing the role. The overall conclusion drawn from the data presented is that the expertise of the role is indeed highly social, tacit and situated. Perhaps therefore the absence of formal training is not a concern. However, the widespread lack of attention to the facilitation of informal approaches to learning seems rather more serious. Interestingly, putting this right would not necessarily be financially costly (although there will always be a cost in time) and could be dealt with in a sustainable way at local level, perhaps after a brief intervention to review practice and agree improved ways of working. The conclusions indicated above form the basis of recommendations for future action.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations relate directly to factors that would enhance the professional learning of course and module leaders in relation to the role, rather than the broader issues of performance in the role and organisational issues connected with it, although these are clearly related.

### At an individual/departmental level

- 1 Provide induction into the CML role and make continuing mentoring available.
- 2 Clarify the nature of the CML role and others' roles in relation to it, taking account of the tensions between collegial cultures and authority.
- 3 Work to develop a course team culture, with shared understandings of course purposes and processes.
- 4 Provide feedback and an opportunity for CMLs to reflect on their own learning process.
- 5 Ensure adequate administrative and clerical support and that relationships are effective.

### At an institutional level:

- 6 Make a single source of guidance available, possibly online, organised around an annual cycle. Include clear guidance on when and how additional student support, such as counselling, should be accessed.
- 7 Ensure a sufficient level of administrative support for curriculum leadership and that change processes are managed and monitored effectively.
- 8 Provide opportunities for CMLs to learn from others at a range of organisational levels:
  - Individual mentors
  - Course team (inc part-time staff)
  - Forum in Faculty
  - Network in institution
  - Leadership and management development and training.
- 9 Review data and information needs of both the CML and the institution and its provision.
- 10 Make use of recognition and reward as a means of fostering motivation, but note their potential disadvantages.

## Dissemination activities

Results from this project have been disseminated at the following events:

26<sup>th</sup> June 2007

Exploring the course and module leadership role  
ELATE conference, Coventry University

3<sup>rd</sup> July 2007

Investigating the capabilities of course and module leaders in departments  
Higher Education Academy Conference, Harrogate

12<sup>th</sup> July 2007

Course and module leadership: research findings  
Standing Conference on Academic Practice, University of Warwick

10<sup>th</sup> September 2007

Lessons Learned from investigating the capabilities of course and module leaders in departments  
Second International Coventry iPED Conference, Coventry University

9<sup>th</sup> November 2007

Course and module leadership: a lost opportunity for development?  
Staff Development Conference, Brighton

9<sup>th</sup> May 2008

Course and module leadership in departments  
Society for Research in Higher Education Academic Practice Network, Chester.

23<sup>rd</sup> October 2008

Convening modules and directing programmes: investigating academic leadership  
University of Kent

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1a: Invitation letter

Dear Staff Member,

Are you a Course Leader? Would you like to be involved in a Higher Education Academy-funded research project on Course and Module Leadership being run jointly between Coventry University and the University of Warwick. If so, there are two ways you could become involved:

1. You could attend one of two professional development events, where you could discuss your role and your own development with other course or module leaders from Coventry and Warwick, and share issues and solutions. These events are being run on Wednesday 6th December at Warwick, or Thursday 7th December at Coventry. Each event will last for five hours, with a free lunch provided!

or... particularly, if you are unable to make the above dates...

2. You could be interviewed, either face-to-face or over the phone, at a time convenient to you, to explore aspects of your role that you have found challenging and approaches that you have found have worked for you. The interview process would take about one hour.

If you are able and willing to participate in this research, or would like more information, please reply to Dr Richard Dales, Research Fellow, CSHE [aa0320@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:aa0320@coventry.ac.uk) or extension 7906.

### **Course and Module Leadership: Opportunity**

*The role of Course and/or Module leader (CML) at a departmental level in universities is of central importance for the delivery of high quality learning opportunities for students. Depending on circumstances CMLs may be asked to take up their role with varying degrees of preparation or support: for many, the role tends to be 'learnt on the job'.*

*The aim of the study is to try to better understand how the role actually works in practice and how CMLs' professional learning can most effectively be supported. The project asks, for example, what is being learned by those doing the job (whether newly appointed or experienced), how is it or has it been learnt, and what factors affect the level and direction of that learning.*

*The CML Project Team is seeking to involve a small group of staff from both universities who have a course or module leadership role in order to explore with them the nature of the role/work they undertake. The project will offer those who participate in a one-day session a professional development opportunity to discuss their role with others in similar roles and explore issues, problems and solutions. We anticipate that the project will be useful to participants in helping them to develop their approaches to their course or module leadership role and will also be enjoyable and valuable personal professional development.*

## ***Appendix 1b: Follow-up letter***

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am delighted that you are able to join us at the course and module leadership workshop. The purpose of the workshop is to offer you the opportunity to explore aspects of your role and to share with colleagues aspects that you have found challenging and approaches that you have found worked for you. We do not intend to offer formal inputs – we believe there will be great value in the sharing of experience, and we have designed the day accordingly. You will see from the attached programme that we intend to have a one-to-one discussion with each member of the workshop, together with a number of group activities. We anticipate that the workshop, and others that we have planned, will provide us with some insights into the role and the different ways in which people undertake it. We will of course share these with you in due course.

It would be very helpful if you could complete the attached brief questionnaire and send it back to us before the workshop. We ask you to tell us a little about your background and your role, and to identify, in as much or as little detail as you wish, one or more aspects of the role that you find or have found challenging. We will use these during the one-to-one discussion. All comments, written or spoken, will be entirely confidential and will not be shared beyond the project team, other than in an entirely anonymous form.

I look forward very much to meeting you at the workshop.

## **Appendix 1c: Pre-interview questionnaire**

Coventry University and University of Warwick

### **Course and Module Leadership Project Pre-Interview Questionnaire**

Thank you, in advance, for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. It forms a vital part of our research and will enable us to map out some key features of your work in advance of the interview.

The questionnaire is in two sections.

#### **Section 1**

Your current role and experience of course and module leadership.

<b>Background Information</b>	
Your name	
Your e-mail address	
The Department or Centre where you work	
The Institution where you work	
How many years have you worked in higher education?	
How many years have you worked in a course or module leadership role in HE?	
How many students are enrolled on the course or module you currently lead?	
How many other members of staff contribute to the course or module you currently lead?	
Did you have any formal preparation? If so, was it useful?	
Do you currently take part in any organised CPD? If so, what?	

## Section 2

### A challenging incident

During the interview, you will be invited to discuss an incident or aspect of the role that you have found particularly challenging. The interviewer will use the following prompts to explore the incident with you:

- Why was it a challenge?
- What did you do?
- What did you draw on?
- What happened?
- How successful were you?
- How do you know?
- What would you now do differently?
- What do you know now?
- How should you have prepared, given what you know now?

**In the box below, please, as a minimum, describe briefly the incident or aspect that you have chosen – probably in two or three sentences. If you would like to, we would welcome a fuller description, responding to the prompts above. However, we fully recognise the constraints on your time, so a brief description only will be fine!**

**Challenging incident / aspect:**

**PLEASE NOTE. All questionnaire responses are confidential and findings will be anonymised and themed before publication.**

Thank you very much. Please return the completed questionnaire as an email attachment to [Richard.Dales@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:Richard.Dales@coventry.ac.uk).

## Appendix 1d: Face-to-face interview questions

Question	Answer
<b>Entry</b>	
How did you get into the role?	
What were you doing before?	
In what ways did it prepare you or otherwise?	
Did you have any formal preparation? If so, was it useful?	
Do you currently take part in any organised CPD?	
<b>Expertise</b>	
Describe a challenging situation.	
Why was it a challenge?	
What did you do?	
What did you draw on?	
What happened?	
How successful were you?	
How do you know?	
What would you now do differently?	
What do you know now?	
How should you have prepared, given what you know now?	
<b>Role</b>	
Does your role require leadership?	
If so, give examples.	
<b>Actions</b>	
What influences what you do?	
What impact do appraisal and reward systems have?	
<b>Future</b>	
How would you like to develop in the role?	

## **Appendix 2: Dimension codes**

- A**     1. Academic responsibilities  
          2. Academic responsibilities (students)
- B**     3. Communication
- C**     4. Contract (F/T v P/T)
- D**     5. Development (career)  
          6. Development (CPD)  
          7. Development (staff)
- E**     8. Expertise (background)
- F**     9. Leadership  
          10. Leadership (authority)  
          11. Leadership (becoming leader)  
          12. Leadership (envisioning change)  
          13. Leadership (facilitating change)  
          14. Leadership (judgement)
- G**     15. Learning (formal v informal)
- H**     16. Management (Quality Assurance)  
          17. Management (self)  
          18. Management (staff)  
          19. Management (students)  
          20. Management (time)
- I**     21. Performance related
- J**     22. Resources
- K**     23. Role socialisation  
          24. Role socialisation (induction)
- L**     25. Staff related (diversity)  
          26. Staff related (health)  
          27. Staff related (line management)  
          28. Staff related (workload)
- M**     29. Stakeholders
- N**     30. Structures (department)  
          31. Structures (institutional)
- O**     32. Student related (assessment)  
          33. Student related (attitude)  
          34. Student related (curriculum)  
          35. Student related (diversity)  
          36. Student related (feedback)  
          37. Student related (peer pressure)  
          38. Student related (perception)  
          39. Student related (performance)  
          40. Student related (retention)  
          41. Student related (well-being)
- P**     42. Support (colleagues)  
          43. Support (department)  
          44. Support (head of department)  
          45. Support (mentoring)
- Q**     46. Values (culture)  
          47. Values (motivation)

### **Appendix 3: Sources of support**

Please estimate the likelihood and frequency of seeking support from the sources listed below, ticking the box that applies:

	Often	Sometimes	Occasionally	Never
Head of department	4	3	4	1
Other course/module leader	4	5	3	0
Member of course team	1	7	4	0
Other colleague	4	3	5	0
IT Services	0	5	6	1
Library	0	1	9	2
Educational development centre	1	1	4	6
Higher Education Academy	1	0	2	9
Books	5	3	2	3
Journals	5	2	1	5
Web-based materials	6	1	3	2
Other (Please specify)				
Admin / secretary	5	1	1	2
Technical staff	1	0	0	0
Students	1	0	0	0
Colleague at other HEI	3	1	1	3
External Examiner	0	0	1	0

Name:

## **Appendix 4: Case Studies**

Case studies have been devised, making use of the situations that were described to interviewees. Each of the case studies is a composite picture; therefore it does not depict either a single individual or a particular institution. The case studies have the purpose here of illustrating, in a rounded way, some of the situations that CMLs may find themselves in. They will also be used as stimulus material in the development workshop that has also been devised as part of the project.

### **Case study 1: the static course leader**

An Engineer, Peter, became a module leader immediately on gaining his first post at the university, having spent some time in another institution as a research assistant, a role that he felt gave him some sense of what parts of the role entailed. He could not go to the teacher training that was provided because it was on a day when he had teaching commitments.

He had a university-level induction but there was no induction at department level and no mentor was appointed. He was lucky enough to have a brief handover session with the previous course leader, who was departing for another institution. He learnt that two other established members of the department contributed to the course and would continue to do so.

He was thrown in at the deep end and it was hard work but he got through it successfully. He learnt simply by talking to more experienced colleagues. He also learnt from working on other people's modules and seeing how they set about it. Module specifications and other rules and deadlines were very helpful to him. He felt that if he followed them he could not go wrong.

Two years on, he is course leader of a module with up to six staff contributing, a mix of permanent and part-time. It is complex but students mainly like the variety of staff they see. However, it does need to be well co-ordinated - students would soon notice if it were not. The programme team is important in talking through and sorting out problems. Together they carry on the module in much the same way as it has been taught and assessed for fifteen years, but with occasional updating of content. There is no incentive to change anything because it isn't broken - the students do not complain and he would gain no credit for it if he did.

Peter is in full agreement with the dominant departmental view that teaching simply has to be despatched efficiently, so that it takes up only its rightful amount of time and does not impinge unduly on other activities. It should be noted that this sits alongside a concern that students are taught properly and that student feedback is attended to.

Ensuring that assessment is fair is a main concern. The questions need to reflect the teaching that has been done. Finding the right balance of support for the students was also an issue - this had changed over the years. It was also a problem when too much coursework was set by a member of staff, because students tend to overemphasise the importance of coursework, so it could have a disproportionate effect on other activities. So far he has always managed to find a way through these issues by talking informally with staff members.

Performance related pay has not yet been implemented in the University. A developmental form of appraisal should take place on a three-yearly cycle but in practice it seldom happens.

There appears to be no enthusiasm in the department for anything that takes up time and doesn't directly and immediately help to get the job done. He feels that the best feedback came from students and this was the way it ought to be.

Peter does not engage in any formal continuing professional development activities and does not see any reason to do so. He cannot see his module leadership role developing. It is a well-established core course so, apart from some subject updating, there is no need to change anything.

There is no incentive to train to teach. His work is of an adequate standard anyway and he would not be recognised for it. Research has all the brownie points.

He does not see the need for management training. He knows enough to work at the level he is at, and has picked that up informally through experience. If he wanted to go to certain other jobs then formal training might be useful. If, for example, he became a head of department then he accepts that he would benefit from a short course of advice and guidance. However, in his current position everything is under control.

## Case study 2: the embattled course leader

Judith leads a course with 250 students and is also leader of two modules, with 250 and 60 students, the first of the modules being mandatory. This involves leading and managing 10 staff. She also organises the induction week for new students. Her workload is never less than fifty hours per week. When Judith's teaching is at high volume, she can be working more than 80 hours over a seven day week. The demands on her time seem endless: students coming with questions, staff and teaching accommodation issues to manage plus all associated administrative duties. Judith maintains an open door policy for both students and staff but feels that her own teaching quality deteriorates at these peak times because there is no time to prepare adequately.

Judith can claim only a very small proportion of a departmental secretary's time to help her. She does not like to ask the secretary to help because she is one of eight course leaders and she knows that the secretary is always very busy. As a result, any tasks that are given to the secretary are not likely to be completed for some time. In any case, because the secretary's time is so divided, she does not know Judith's course very well and does not know the students at all. Judith finds that it takes so long to explain what needs doing that it would be quicker in the long run if she did it herself.

Judith has a new head of department. The previous one didn't appear to be interested in providing any support. She feels the new one, being newly appointed, would be unable to offer anything contextually she doesn't already know. In any case, she too has a heavy workload that she is finding it hard to deal with.

Judith's institution is keen to encourage e-learning and has therefore required that all staff should make their lecture notes available on line and should engage their students in on-line discussion. Judith is in principle in favour of the use of e-learning tools but this just seems an added complication when it is hard enough just to get by with existing systems. She also feels responsible for ensuring that colleagues who teach on her course comply with the requirements but she knows that some do not, in some cases because they do not have the skills to do so.

Recent organisational changes only seem to make matters worse. Last year Judith's department became part of a different faculty. Central administrative structures and job roles changed. As a result of these staffing changes, information on crucial aspects affecting Judith's course and module leadership were not communicated to her. In particular, the timetabling and room booking system had changed. In its first year of operation there were numerous timetabling clashes and double bookings of rooms. Additional work was required by Judith to resolve these issues. Judith feels that the central administration failed to communicate changes to academic staff, were too far away from the "chalk face" to know what was happening and would not learn from the problems that ensued, so the same issues would arise next year. They seemed unaware of the high working commitment that has to be made to overcome the problems they have caused. Judith believes she will have to repeat the 80-hour working weeks next year, as to refuse to work these hours would be detrimental to the students and she feels that would be unprofessional.

### **Case study 3: the emerging course leader**

Frances became a course leader three years ago, inheriting a course that had run successfully for many years under a highly experienced senior member of staff who has now retired. Her course team consists of: three staff from her own department, all full-time but teaching on other courses too; three staff “borrowed” from other departments because of their specialist expertise; and two part-time staff who attend only for the hours for which they are paid. Traditionally the team has met only at exam boards. This reflects the other commitments that each of them has but also the personal style of the retired course leader. There are no major problems at present. All the staff are very experienced and have been doing the job for some time. Student feedback is satisfactory, although rarely excellent. However, student applications have been static for some time and there is some evidence that the most able students are starting to choose other institutions.

Frances is aware that in a number of ways the course is looking dated. Lectures and seminars do not reflect some of the latest changes in practice. Cutting-edge research is not finding its way into the curriculum. Teaching methods are also looking tired in comparison with those she sees colleagues in her discipline using in other institutions. Teaching styles are fairly didactic and seminars tend to be extensions of lectures. Although there have been several e-learning initiatives in the University, none has ever made any impression on the course or its staff.

In contrast, the department as a whole is an active one but most staff energies go into research. Staff are appointed for their research expertise and know that the clearest and most prestigious route to advancement is through research. So, although teaching is accepted as a significant part of the department’s activities, it must be despatched without unnecessary effort so that the department’s research effort will not be hindered.

The head of department has been in post for ten years and is widely felt in the University to be doing a sound job. He is pleased to have maintained the department’s position in successive Research Assessment Exercises. He is highly pragmatic and regards his job as keeping administrative burdens off the backs of his staff so that they can get on and do the job. He is aware that the applications situation needs monitoring but does not believe it is yet such a pressing issue that definite action is needed.

Frances knows very well that the easiest course is to work on a “care and maintenance” basis and to change nothing. She feels at a disadvantage because she is one of the younger members of the department, having only just completed five years in a full-time academic post. However, she enjoys teaching and would like to see it done well. She is concerned that students on the course do not seem to be very stimulated by the experience. She also fears that, if nothing changes, the warning signs of weakening recruitment might herald a more serious downturn in the quality and quantity of student applications.

Frances wants to make some changes but knows that if she is not careful she could jeopardise the cordial relations she has with colleagues and with her head of department.

## Case study 4: the improvising course leader

Bill entered teaching having trained and worked as a nurse and was employed to run two modules, becoming a year tutor, and it was expected he would become a course leader when settled into the role.

He had taken a PGCE in his first year of employment and this was useful for developing his teaching skills but it lacked any development of skills in managing and leadership. He had attended seminars on supervising dissertation students and had found these helpful.

Bill had a mentor for his first year, to whom he could go and ask anything and he found the person very supportive. The mentor would outline what needed to be done but would not do it for him and he found he was very much left alone to get things done.

When he became a course leader, Bill found the strict attendance requirements for the course to be something of a challenge to manage and considered that other courses at the university did not have such requirements, which were a condition of the external validating body. If a student was absent for four consecutive sessions, Bill was required to write to them expressing concern and get them back on track. As he had 250 students, broken down into small groups, he found this difficult and felt that this was an administrative task which should be carried out by office staff. In particular, it was very time consuming, so he devised his own strategy, which was to produce a list of non-attenders and publicly display this list in his lectures. Bill stated that he just tried ideas he came across until he had found one that worked. He had not mentioned it in meetings as it might go against university policy. Since he started publicly identifying offenders, the list of names had shrunk.

The registration system had been imposed on staff without consultation and seemed to ignore the problems experienced by those with large enrolments on their modules. Some students had left the course, or were difficult to trace, or keep track of, and it was a challenge to him. He argued that, as adult learners, his students should not be treated like schoolchildren and that monitoring attendance in a climate where on-line learning is encouraged was odd. In any case, paper registers which were issued to him were open to abuse, as students could sign for each other. Exhibiting a list of names in lectures was easier to do and did seem to work, although there had been a mixed reaction from students.

Bill found that standing up in the module and saying "You must attend" was ineffective, but publishing the list of names communicated to the students that he did mean business. He had not researched whether grades improved as a result of this but that was because the pass requirement had been increased from 40% to 70% by the external validating body and, surprisingly, this had improved student performance on the module.

Bill is influenced by his own standards and self-motivation. Some things enforced by the university he can agree with, but others he can't. He wants to do a good job and particularly for his students, and sees himself as the link between students and the university systems, getting the students to jump through the appropriate hoops.