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Abstract

Background: Within Higher Education in the United Kingdom (UK), programme leaders are under increased pressure to be more productive and are expected to undertake a complex range of demanding activities. However, perceptions of the role through the lens of the programme leader have not been explored sufficiently. Clearly, a university's ability to enhance and sustain improvement in programme delivery depends largely upon its ability to nurture and foster professional learning, most notably at a programme level. The need for a review of programme leader training and support was reinforced through the experience of facilitators at programme leader workshops at one Higher Education Institution in the UK. Critically, these workshops highlighted a need to review and enhance the preparation and on-going training and support available to programme leaders. Aim: The overall aim of this study was to explore the role of the programme leader, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of what the role involves and a detailed appreciation of the knowledge and skills

18.8.2024

required to discharge the role effectively and efficiently. Such insight would inform the review of the provision of initial and on-going training and support workshops for new and experienced programme leaders. Indeed, the ultimate aim was to drive improvements in programme leader performance.

Method: A qualitative design was selected to allow the complexity of the programme leader role to be explored and captured. A purposeful sample (n = 25) was recruited from a range of newly appointed and experienced undergraduate and postgraduate programme leaders and associate deans with academic quality assurance and learning and teaching expertise across seven schools in one post-1992 university in England. In total, four semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted. A modified version of the data analysis method advocated by Chenitz and Swanson was employed to examine the data. **Findings:** Four dynamic, interrelated conceptual categories form the basis of the emergent findings. These are Operational Diversity, which addresses the different duties carried out by participants, highlighting certain tensions in their ability to meet the demands placed upon them; Interaction with Others, which identifies the diverse range of stakeholders that shape and impact on the multifaceted programme leader role and highlights the importance of collaborative working; Mechanisms of Support, which describes the training and personal development experience of the participants and the extent to which it matches their needs; and Required Knowledge and Skills, which considers the need for initial and on-going training to enable programme leaders to meet the demands of this role. **Conclusion:** Examination has revealed that within an ever-changing Higher Education sector in the UK, the role of a programme leader is not without challenge as most have to deal with complex academic, pastoral, moral, administrative and pragmatic decisions on a daily basis. Moving forward must involve bespoke preparation and on-going training and support. Specific emphasis should be placed on opportunities for self-reflection, debriefing and the sharing of experiences with peers. At the heart of on-going training and support should be the strategic engagement of students, professional staff and other key personnel from services offered across a university. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)