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Leading at the Coal-face: The World as Experienced by Subject Coordinators in Australian Higher Education

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Leading at the coalface: the world as experienced by subject coordinators in Australian higher education

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Abstract

This paper is based on nationally funded research into the role, capabilities, challenges and professional development needs of subject coordinators in Australian higher education. The second of three data collection phases involved a multi-institutional survey of staff in the role of subject coordinator with the aim of understanding the role through the experiences of those who undertake it. In particular the conceptualisation of this lowest level in academe as one of 'leadership', and as being the first rung on the academic leadership ladder, formed the underpinning logic for data collection. Results allow for a contemporary picture of leadership responsibilities to be drawn and also highlights some of the challenges which confront staff in this role. The vast majority of staff consider themselves as demonstrating leadership, although they have varying views about how others higher in the management hierarchy understand and appreciate their role. Most see themselves as performing effectively with the key challenges they face highlighted in the paper. Outcomes suggest the need to undertake substantial capacity building of leadership for new and incumbent subject coordinators in response to the ever-changing nature of the higher education environment.

Keywords: subject coordinator, leadership capacity building, leadership development, academic identity

Introduction

As the academy evolves in relation to national and international pressures, the role of coalface academics has significantly changed to include more management and leadership style functions within their roles. The focus on leadership in teaching and learning in Australian higher education has heightened in the last half decade through the leadership grants scheme created by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). The framing of key concerns for this national agenda of funded investigation into excellence in educational leadership can be found in Marshall (2006), and a major national study on leading educational change in higher education covering a broad range of leadership roles by Fullan and Scott (2009). Associated with such national developments, contemporary investigations into leadership and leadership development in teaching and learning in higher education internationally have been reported in the UK by Bolden, Petrov and Gosling (2008).

However, the most recent rounds of funding of investigations into various positions and domains of leadership in higher education acknowledge and build on a tradition of interest in

the topic (see Jameson, 2006; Martin, Trigewell, Prosser, & Ramsden, 2003; Middlehurst, 1993; Middlehurst & Garrett, 2002; Ramsden, 1998; Wolverton, Gmelch, Montez, & Nies, 2001). It can be observed that while extensive work has been conducted around leadership at other levels of education (primary and secondary; see Spillane, 2006), the literature is comparatively smaller in higher education, and in the Australian sector. National investigations appear to have focused on various positional leadership roles that may naturally be seen to fit within organisational hierarchies (including Associate Deans, Teaching and Learning, Heads of School, program coordinators and directors), and on roles that are perceived to demonstrate purely informal distributed leadership. However, there appears to be a dearth of work on those who hold the highest positions of leadership authority (such as Vice-Chancellors, Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Pro Vice-Chancellors, Deans) and those who might be seen to sit at the bottom of the management hierarchy, who have been generically titled 'subject coordinators'. This paper focuses on the subject coordinator – a role that receives limited recognition by institutional leaders and yet has significant informal leadership influence through teaching and learning teams and curriculum development.

Subject coordinators are responsible for leading and managing the constituent subject components of a course or program of study. Collectively they work with staff responsible for program-wide leadership (the next level of leadership in the organisational hierarchy) and a role which has also had attention through considerable ALTC leadership funding to date (D'Agostino & O'Brien, 2009; Jones, Ladyshewsky, Oliver & Flavell, 2008; Vilkinas, 2009). The subject coordinator role is seen as an important, albeit somewhat neglected role, given that more academic teaching staff occupy this role compared to the sum total of all others in formal educational leadership and management roles in the institution. Moreover, subject coordinators, as a whole, are ultimately the key 'coalface' implementers of institutional strategic commitments in teaching and learning with a significant number also involved in major innovation and development. Other levels of educational leadership are dependent on the effectiveness of subject coordinators in achieving their own objectives, and the combined size and distributed nature of this group of leaders, therefore, demands investigation.

This paper examines the domain of subject coordination leadership, as experienced by those in the role, and as elicited through an inter-institutional survey which collected a rich array of quantitative and qualitative data. At its heart, this is a study of the professional leadership identities of those in the role, i.e. who they are, what they see as their major challenges and tasks, how they see their performance as leaders, and how they believe they can best learn and develop. It contributes to other work on academic identities in higher education (see Barnett & Napoli, 2007; Becker & Trowler, 2001; Gordon & Whitchurch, 2010).

To begin, this paper presents a consolidated perspective of the subject coordinator role from those in formal leadership positions in the academic hierarchy (from a separate interview stage of the project). This forms the basis of comparison with the views of those actually in the role throughout the paper. The importance of recognising subject coordinators as providing educational leadership and thus developing and rewarding such leadership, is examined and highlighted as important, particularly for those who are new to or about to enter the role.

The context for subject coordination as leadership

It is argued that universities are under increasing strain to respond to numerous external pressures and imperatives ranging from reduced public funding, greater competition, growing numbers of students, increased diversity amongst students with varying learning preferences and circumstances, greater governmental scrutiny and accountability, generational change amongst staff, increasing demands from industry and the professions for work-ready graduates, accelerating knowledge production and dissemination, and the ever-changing face of contemporary learning and teaching environments underpinned by information and communication technologies (ICT) (see Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999; Currie & Vidovich, 2009; Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008). Universities, it has been argued, must operate in an age of super-complexity of global proportions (Barnett, 2000).

> In Barnett's (2000) age of "supercomplexity", a major challenge for institutional leaders is that of sense making, of understanding trends, identifying patterns, detecting nuances, protecting traditions that should endure, and finding ways of adjusting others to fit more sensibly with the developing needs and expectations that confront the institution (Gordon, 2010, p.70).

Universities must adapt their own internal organisational environments to engage better with the rapidly changing external worlds. Change is inevitable, and leadership is required to best position the institution to achieve some desired future state commensurate with changing external circumstances. Management literature is problematic in that the delineation between management and leadership is unclear. A distinction can be made between management as dealing adequately with the current situation, while leadership is fundamentally about enabling change to a desired future state. Mintzberg (2005) repudiates any such distinction and assumes leadership into his conceptualisation of the nature of management, its practices, and its development. In examining the role of the subject coordinator, the position adopted is to see its management content relating to maintaining the unit of study as is, while the leadership content as moving the unit of study to something new, or a future desired state of offering. A unit of study as is and as becoming cannot be neatly separated. Thus we see management and leadership as so closely aligned as to be inseparable for all intents and purposes and hereafter refer to all relevant activity as leadership. Importantly, in this study, respondents were asked whether they considered their role as subject coordinator to be one of leadership. The possible choices available for responses were yes, no or depends/other. *The majority of respondents did consider their role to be one of leadership (70.8%).* Beyond external pressures, are the ways universities have evolved and reconfigured themselves, or their organisational designs, to adapt to and help shape external circumstances. Marginson and Considine (2000) examined the emergence of a new form of university organisation in the Australian higher education sector which they labelled 'The Enterprise University' characterised by forms of corporate governance and commercially-oriented operations:

> 'Enterprise' captures both economic and academic dimensions, and the manner in which research and scholarship survive but are now subjected to new systems of competition and demonstrable performance (Marginson & Considine, 2000, p.50).

Clearly, external pressure, opportunity and internal organisation redesign, ultimately impact and shape the world of action of subject coordinators. Those in this role must respond to the leadership directions of the formal organisational hierarchies with their external, commercial and entrepreneurial motivations and impulses. And yet, this study suggests subject coordinators have some degree of agency to design and implement creative and innovative solutions in part embodying the entrepreneurial leadership demanded by their more senior leaders. Subject coordinators are many in number and are fully embedded in the vast and diverse contexts of teaching and learning action. They must be enterprising in their own roles for the institution itself to be seen as an enterprise university. Therefore, it is argued that they demonstrate leadership in three important respects:

- astutely interpreting and giving meaning to organisational teaching and learning directions and plans;
- scanning and drawing in new educational models, methods and technologies from broader domains beyond the institution thereby driving innovation and development that in turn contributes to the institution's strategic development;
- finally, and most importantly, leading students in their learning and development by informed scholarly and evidence-based practice.

Research methodology

The research project utilised multiple procedures to gather information and this has a long history in the social and behaviour sciences (Campbell & Fiske, 1959; Denzin, 1978; Dreher & Hayes, 1993; Silverman, 2006) allowing combination and comparison of different sources of data collection. The use of triangulation or multiple measures helps to reduce the deficiencies and biases of one particular method and also to overcome any problem of validity (Blaikie, 1991, Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Emphasis is not placed on one approach rather each approach is viewed informing the methodological framework used in this research.

While this paper reports findings from the survey stage of the research project the survey was informed by an analysis of 50 semi-structured interviews with leaders at higher levels of the management hierarchy. The staff interviewed held formal academic leadership positions and have prior experience of subject coordination and/or current interactions with staff in the role, i.e. Deputy/Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic), Deans, Associate Deans, Teaching and Learning, Head of School/Department and Course/Program coordinator. The interview stage analysis formed a strong impression that collectively formal leadership:

- Do not share a strong and clear understanding of the meanings of leadership, management and administration, nor the desired relationship between these roles, if such distinctions can be made.
- Appear to hold a view that subject coordinators engage in 'low' level leadership
- Appear to under-value leadership contributions from subject coordinators

- Hold little conception of how subject coordinators lead innovation and development in teaching and learning
- Hold variant views depending on their institutional policy context
- Lack a full and strong appreciation of how university change agendas are ultimately being carried/implemented by staff members who need to be highly capable in the role.

The knowledge obtained from the formal interviews (the subject of another paper) provided an important foundation for the formulation of survey questions. The survey also drew on the work of Scott, et al. (2008) and their Academic Leadership Capability framework, as also reported by Fullan and Scott (2009). This framework identifies three capability categories (personal, interpersonal, cognitive) and two competency categories (generic, role-specific). Such work synthesising many specialised studies in the mainstream world of management is affirmed in a similar conceptualisation presented by Mintzberg (2005, p.260) whose list of managerial competencies covers personal, interpersonal, informational and actional domains.

The survey included the following:

- background/demographic information of survey respondents;
- roles and responsibilities of subject coordinators;
- importance and satisfaction of role and specific competencies;
- constraints on the achievement of role effectiveness;
- recognition of role as one of leadership;
- level of effectiveness as a subject coordinator;
- importance and satisfaction of generic capabilities of subject coordinators.

Results highlighted in this paper are drawn from a voluntary, online survey conducted over a four-week period in January and February 2010 at four multi-campus Australian universities. These four universities are located in three States in Australia and represent a diversity of commitments to online, distance and flexible education, and the provision of experiential/work-based learning. The intent was to survey all staff in the subject coordinator role at the four institutions. The *estimated* total population of staff in this role across these institutions was 1645. Accessing staff in certain institutions proved to be problematic with less than the estimated total population being surveyed for reasons given below. There were a total of 445 respondents who participated in the survey from across the four Australian universities. The majority of respondents were from University A and University B (86.8%). Only a small number of participants responded from University C and University D. For the purposes of this paper, only aggregate data are reported; institutional breakdowns are not considered germane to developing a view of various aspects of the role.

Table 1

	Uni. A	Uni. B	Uni.C	Uni.D
No. Participants	266	120	24	20
Percentage	59.8%	27%	5.4%	4.5%

The difficulties of eliciting views from this category of higher education staffing through systematic surveying should not be under-estimated. It was challenging to ascertain precisely the overall response rate as a percentage, as clear information about total numbers of subject coordinators was not available from all of the four universities involved in the survey. Moreover, central databases of people in the role do not have demographic and professional information to allow assessments of the representativeness of the views of survey respondents. There are also levels of permissions required to administer global surveys across an institution with cost/benefit considerations for academic time. These permissions may not be easily negotiated. In any case, other levels of formal leadership may not see it as a high priority to give attention to surveying this level of 'low' leadership in the institution. These limitations must be borne in mind in analysing and interpreting the data.

Subject coordinator demographic and employment background

The study provided the following snapshot based on background and demographic information of survey respondents. The typical respondent, as an academic, is described as: having more than 10 years of experience teaching in tertiary education; employed at Level B (Lecturer) or Level C (Senior Lecturer); aged over 46 years; and with over six years experience as a subject coordinator. They can be seen as an experienced group of academic teachers and leaders in the role.

When surveyed about the leadership and management of their most challenging unit, it was noted that the subject coordinators surveyed taught using various modes of delivery (on- and off-campus, international and online) and, in the majority, were responsible for: between 51 and 500 enrolled students per subject (55%); and coordinating between one and five academic staff (53%).

While the majority of subject coordinators (54.4%) received a workload allocation for their subject coordination duties, it is important to note that about 31.2% of respondents received no specific support or recognition for their subject coordination role. Moreover, 96.6% of subject coordinators did not receive any additional administrative support in the role.
The implication of this result is that subject coordinators considered that this role is nowhere near valued enough or supported by university hierarchy. When they did receive support, it came from either colleagues (38.7%) or course/program coordinators (18.2%).

Significant challenges

Respondents were asked to rate the degree of significance of a list of challenges for the role of subject coordinator. They were asked to rate the degree of significance using a Likert scale of N/A; no significance, medium significance, high significance and very high significance. The challenges were identified from partner experiences and various national projects funded by the ALTC.

The challenges were as follows:

- Recruiting, inducting and developing casual/sessional teaching staff;
- Forming and developing cohesive teaching teams;
- Establishing and maintaining teaching and assessment standards;
- Incorporating flexible teaching and learning environments through information and communication technology (ICT);
- Working collaboratively with other subject teams and Course/Program coordinators in designing and delivering coherent and integrated courses/programs of study;
- Responding constructively to various forms of feedback (most notably student feedback) to assure and improve the quality of the subject over time;
- Integrating learning support services seamlessly into the teaching and learning environment;
- Understanding and managing infrastructure and administrative systems; and
- Other.

Most of the challenges mentioned in the survey were classed as high to very high in significance for the role of subject coordinator. One ongoing issue relates to both the importance and plight of casual academic teaching staff which was highlighted by Coaldrake and Stedman (1999, p.16) and once again highlighted in a more recent Australian and Learning Teaching Council (ALTC) national project (Percy et al., 2008). However, subject coordinators are the first line leaders who support and mentor casual staff and lead the development of teaching teams increasingly made up of significant numbers of casual staff.

The top three most highly significant challenges for the role of subject coordinator across total participants were:

- Establishing and maintaining teaching and assessment standards (68.1%)
- Responding constructively to various forms of feedback (most notably student feedback) to assure and improve the quality of the subject over time (61.1%)
- Forming and developing cohesive teaching teams (56.9%)

Interestingly, dealing with ICT in teaching and learning was not in the top three, and yet this was seen as a critical factor in reshaping academic practices by the end of the 1990s (Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999). While not fading as a major factor in contemporary academic work life and attendant leadership demands, the sector has managed to adapt itself quite well to changes in the technological landscape. This presumes a degree of comfort with the use of big corporate technologies like learning management systems, as well the possibilities offered by social media and networking, and simulated learning environments. The former have demanded greater uniformity of approaches from academic teaching leaders (loss of academic autonomy and teacher agency), while the latter paradoxically have opened up novel teaching practices at the grassroots level of universities (reclaiming a degree of academic autonomy and teacher agency). Either way, we concur with McInnis (2010, p.159) when he notes that ICTs in learning and teaching ‘presents a volatile mix of forces with the potential to transform academic identities.’ We believe that contrary and often conflicting pressures

and influences can empower or disempower academic teachers requiring astute leadership responses from those in subject coordinator positions at the frontline.

Those challenges that rated the highest in significance, reflect the need for contemporary academics to demonstrate team leadership skills in their professional repertoire, to deal effectively with greater demands from students (as reflected in their feedback on the quality of teaching and courses) and in maintaining appropriate standards in the face of shifting expectations from various influential stakeholders. Respondents were also invited to make open comments regarding anything not mentioned in relation to challenges. Only a few suggestions were made and these were surrounding work-life balance as well as student and resource issues.

Time on key tasks

The survey included a question inviting respondents to make qualitative comments about the top three things that they spend most of their time on in their role as a subject coordinator. The results demonstrated that the most time was spent on (in order of magnitude) administration, unit preparation and also student queries/support.

Administration duties included the submission of marks "*admin (grade/data entry etc),*" and also logistical arrangements for the unit such as booking rooms "*including room allocation which is still a nightmare*" and organising materials. Increased administrative workload has been identified by Currie and Vidovich (2009, p.445) as a less than desirable consequence of the move to 'e-technology' in many aspects of the work of academics. This burden falls most heavily on frontline teachers and academic leaders like subject coordinators. As examined above, ICTs have provided a mixed package of possibilities and limitations, and efficiencies and additional burdens for academics over the last decade. Determining the most cost-effective approaches in using ICTs often falls to subject coordinators.

Unit preparation was another area that was reported as consuming a large amount of the subject coordinators time. Individual duties that were mentioned included preparing materials, "preparing learning experiences", planning workshops, online preparation, curriculum design, writing lectures and unit review. Comments such as "*preparation of teaching plans, readings, tutorial materials and resources for sessional teaching staff*" also reflect tutorials as a significant part of the subject coordinators workload.

Thirdly, student queries /support were seen as another area in which time was spent for subject coordinators. Individual duties here included responding to student queries outside of class (face-to-face, online, telephone), troubleshooting for students "*fixing problems, keeping everyone 'on song'* "and "*answering 'what did I miss?' questions.*" Also included here was providing support for students as well as student issues (appeals, late assignments). This is not surprising in many ways as the casualisation of the academy has meant that staff are generally only paid for classroom time. This potentially means that queries generally answered by casual tutors, revert to the subject coordinator for resolution.

Other areas that were also mentioned as something that subject coordinators spend their time on was teaching and marking assessments. These areas of highest time spent in the role give credence to Coaldrake and Stedman's (1999, p.9) observation that changing demands on academics has merely stretched, and some might argue to breaking point, the workloads of academics without fundamentally reshaping the way the work is done. The trend towards coping with larger, more complex teaching and learning environments has continued unabated over the last ten years. While some relief has been found in labour saving technologies (such as those that manage the delivery of learning resources, course

communications, assessment and grading), as many new demands have been created as those satisfactorily resolved through the advent of new ICTs and changing student cohorts.

Perceived level of effectiveness in the role

Respondents were asked to rate their level of effectiveness as a subject coordinator within the context of their own institution. Respondents were to answer using a Likert scale utilizing the options of highly ineffective, somewhat ineffective, undecided, somewhat effective and highly effective. It is interesting to note that despite the challenges highlighted above, nearly 60% of respondents still rate themselves as effective in their role considering their current circumstances. This suggests that even though they are unhappy and frustrated with aspects of their job, they still believe they are effective in performing this role.

Relationships with colleagues

Respondents were then asked to rate the importance of their relationship as a subject coordinator with people in the positions listed below. They were also asked to rate their satisfaction with the relationship in performing their role as subject coordinator effectively. Importance was measured on a five-point Likert scale using Not Applicable, Not Important, Somewhat Important, Important, and Very Important. Satisfaction was measured using a five-point Likert Scale labelled as Not Applicable, Not Satisfied, Partially Satisfied, Satisfied and Very Satisfied.

Respondents were asked to consider a range of 11 positions at the University and these are listed below:

- Other discipline subject coordinators
- Other School/Department-based coordinators
- Course/Program Coordinators
- Associate Heads of School/Department (Teaching & Learning)
- Head of School/Department
- Other Faculty Subject Coordinators
- Associate Deans (Teaching & Learning) or equivalent
- Faculty Dean or Equivalent
- Academic developers (central and/or faculty-based)
- Members of your University Teaching & Learning Centres
- Deputy-Vice Chancellor (Academic)/Pro Vice-Chancellor or equivalent

Based on Importance/Satisfaction grid analysis it is suggested that subject coordinators consider that their relationship with:

- academic developers (central and/or faculty-based) and members of their universities Teaching and Learning Centre are fairly important, yet they were not satisfied with this;
- Course and Program Coordinators as well as Heads of School to be important and they are also satisfied with this relationship they have in performing their role;
- the Deputy-Vice Chancellor (Academic)/Pro Vice-Chancellor or equivalent is of low importance and they are not satisfied with their relationship with this colleague.

Given the closeness of the course/program coordinators and Head of School to the work of the subject coordinator, it is satisfying to see they believe they have productive working relationships with these levels of leadership. The relationship with more remote parties like

academic developers in centres and DVCs is obviously more problematic and reflect a long history of tension about how central divisions or departments can most effectively relate to teachers on the ground.

Required leadership competencies and capabilities

Role-specific competencies

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of each role-specific competency (i.e. knowledge or skill) for them in their role as a subject coordinator. Importance was measured on a five-point Likert scale labelled Not Applicable, Not Important, Somewhat Important, Important, and Very Important. They were also asked to rate how satisfied they were that they have developed this competency. Again, this was measured using a five-point Likert Scale with the choices of Not Applicable, Not Satisfied, Partially Satisfied, Satisfied and Very Satisfied.

Respondents were asked to consider a range of 17 role-specific competencies which were broken up under the headings of Assessment, Curriculum, Teaching, Administration and Support of Students. These role-specific competencies were identified in previous research at a partner institution and supplemented by more recent reviews of position descriptions for subject coordinators amongst the project team. These are outlined below:

- Assessment
  a. Assessment design relevant to learning outcomes
  b. Developing marking guides
  c. Dealing with moderation, comparability and distribution of assessment
  d. Dealing with special consideration
- Curriculum
  e. Ensuring currency of subject knowledge
  f. Embedding graduate attributes
  g. Using appropriate evidence for quality assurance and continuous improvement
- Teaching
  h. Effective teaching skills including use of online technologies
  i. Effective learning design to meet student needs
- Administration
  j. Knowledge of university related software programs
  k. Knowledge of policy and procedure related to curriculum, occupational health and safety (OHS) and equal opportunity areas
  l. Recruitment of staff
  m. Induction of staff
  n. Supervision of staff
  o. Dealing with copyright and accessibility issues
  p. Building and/or leading a successful team
- Support of Students
  q. Counselling or advising students on unit requirements

A useful method of visualising and interpreting data from Importance/Satisfaction scales is to create a scatterplot of the mean of the responses (Aigbedo & Parameswaran, 2004). Plotting the means of the Likert-scale data onto a scatterplot grid shows how the importance data relates to the satisfaction data. According to this method, the grid is divided into quadrants using the overall mean values for all of the importance ratings as a vertical divider and the

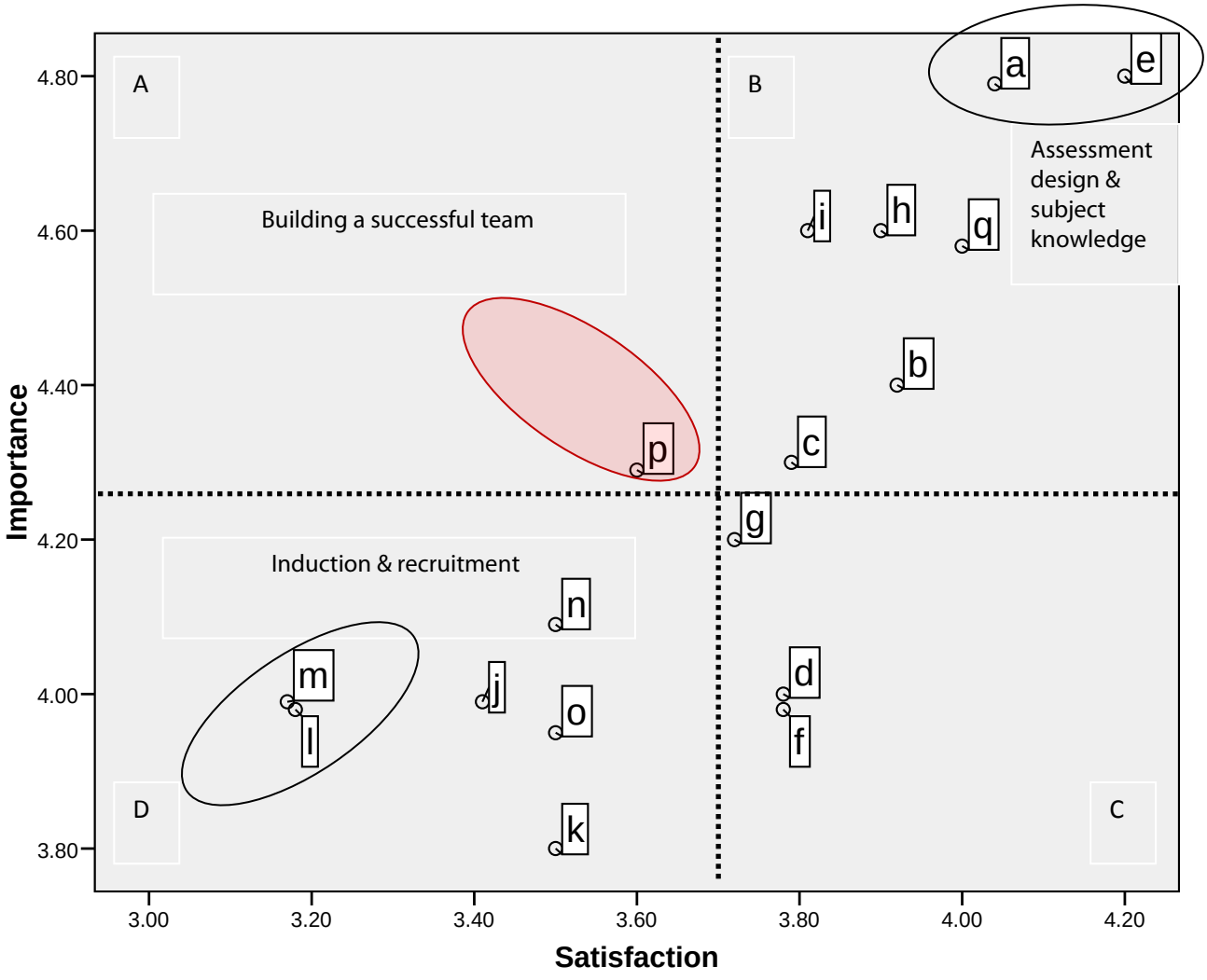
overall mean of all the satisfaction ratings as a horizontal divider. Presenting the data in the scatterplot and interpreting the outliers from the grid provides a way of identifying those role-specific competencies that may be given a higher priority over others.

As this is a self assessment of satisfaction and importance the suggested appropriate interpretation of the grid quadrants are:

- Quadrant D: low importance and low satisfaction – items that could be considered as a low priority by the university;
- Quadrant C: low importance and high satisfaction – not important but they are doing a good job;
- Quadrant B: high importance and high satisfaction – they are doing well
- Quadrant A: high importance and low satisfaction – where the university probably should prioritise improvement efforts (highlighted in shaded oval).

The following Importance/Satisfaction grid indicates the mean importance and satisfaction ratings for the Role-Specific Competency survey data.

Figure 1: Role Specific Competency Importance / Satisfaction Data



The data from the Importance/Satisfaction ratings grid indicates that subject coordinators consider that: building and/or leading a successful team is of high importance whilst they were not satisfied with this; assessment design relevant to learning outcomes and ensuring currency of subject knowledge are important role-specific competencies and that they are also satisfied with their performance in this area; and the induction and recruitment of staff is of low importance to their role and they are not satisfied with their performance in this role.

Looking individually at the role specific competency data, subject coordinators found the following to be most important: ensuring currency of subject knowledge (61.3%); assessment design relevant to learning outcomes (60.7%); counselling or advising students on unit requirements (47.4%). They were most satisfied with: ensuring currency of subject knowledge (26.5%); counselling or advising students on unit requirements (21.6%); and assessment design relevant to learning outcomes (19.6%).

Given the overall experience of respondents, the importance and satisfaction given to the role-specific competencies which relate most closely to good teaching skills, is not surprising. Importantly, concern about capabilities relating to generic leadership skills for the development of effective teams, signals and acknowledges that teaching teams are now a 'standard' feature of contemporary academe.

Generic management capabilities

Respondents were then asked to rate the importance of a list of items of generic capability (i.e., attitude, knowledge or skill) for their role as a subject coordinator. They were also asked to rate how satisfied they were that they had developed this capability. As noted above, these items were selected from the survey conducted by Scott et al. (2008) from their Academic Leadership Capability framework.

Importance was measured on a Likert scale using N/A, Not Important, Somewhat Important, Important, and Very Important. Satisfaction was measured using a Likert Scale labelled as N/A, Not Satisfied, Partially Satisfied, Satisfied and Very Satisfied.

Respondents were asked to consider a range of 21 items of Generic Capability and these are listed below:

a. Admitting to and learning from my errors
b. Maintaining a good work/life balance and keeping things in perspective
c. Remaining calm under pressure or when things take an unexpected turn
d. Being true to one's values and ethics
e. Having energy, passion and enthusiasm for learning and teaching
f. Wanting to achieve the best possible outcome
g. Influencing people's behaviour and decisions in effective ways
h. Understanding how the different groups that make up my university operate and influence different situations
i. Motivating others to achieve positive outcomes
j. Developing and using networks of colleagues to solve key problems
k. Giving and receiving constructive feedback to/from colleagues and others
l. Empathising and working productively with students from a wide range of backgrounds
m. Listening to different viewpoints before coming to a decision

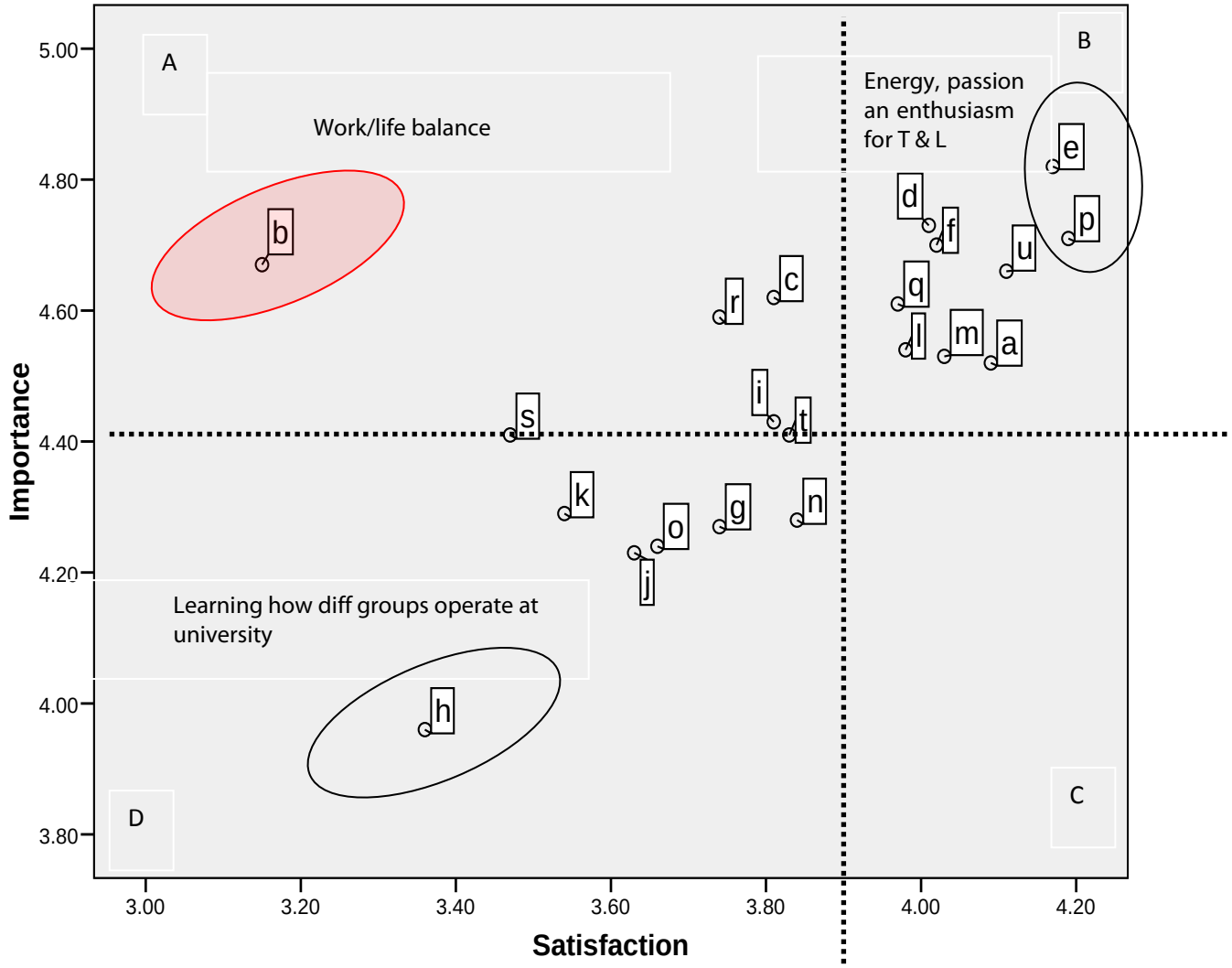
n. Empathising and working productively with staff and other key players from a wide range of backgrounds
o. Developing team-based approaches
p. Being transparent and honest in dealings with others
q. Thinking creatively and laterally
r. Having a clear, justified and achievable direction in my role
s. Setting and justifying priorities for my daily work
t. Adjusting a plan of action in response to problems that are identified during implementation
u. Making sense of and learning from experience

Following on from the previous two importance-satisfaction questions presented in this report, the data is again presented using an Importance/Satisfaction grid. As this is a self assessment of satisfaction and importance the grid quadrants can be interpreted as follows:

- Quadrant D: low importance and low satisfaction – items that could be considered as a low priority by the university;
- Quadrant C: low importance and high satisfaction – not important but they are doing a good job;
- Quadrant B: high importance and high satisfaction – they are doing well;
- Quadrant A: high importance and low satisfaction – where the university probably should prioritise improvement efforts (highlighted in shaded oval).

The following Importance/Satisfaction grid presents the mean importance and satisfaction ratings for the Generic Capability survey data.

Figure 2: Generic Capability Importance / Satisfaction Data



Conclusions drawn from these data are that: high priority should be given by universities to improve and maintain a work/life balance for subject coordinators; subject coordinators consider that it is important to have energy, passion and enthusiasm for teaching and learning and are satisfied with this; subject coordinators consider that it is important to be honest and transparent in their dealings with others, and again, they are highly satisfied with this. As Anderson, Johnson and Saha (2002) report, teaching pressures have intensified in the face of declining resources, along with the expansion of the range of teaching tasks. These have placed greater strain on juggling work and life priorities as is reflected in our more recent surveying of subject coordinators. It is satisfying to note that while pressures have intensified and work/life balance strained, respondents rate highly the need for high motivation and to behave ethically. The work environment, therefore, has not been so eroded as to have caused poor motivation and unethical behaviour, at least as perceived by respondents to the survey. Such motivation and ethical standing is clearly important for subject coordinators.

In addition to the grid, the top three items of Generic Capability that were seen as very important were: having energy, passion and enthusiasm for learning and teaching (59.1%); being true to ones values and ethics (53.7%); and wanting to achieve the best possible outcome (52.4%). The top three items of Generic Capability participants were

most satisfied with were: having energy, passion, and enthusiasm for learning and teaching (27.4%); and being true to ones values and ethics (21.8%)

Professional learning and development

Participants were asked to rate the importance of a number of professional development and learning opportunities for enhancing their performance as a subject coordinator as drawn from the Scott et al. (2008) study. Their assessment could be based on experiences to date and/or what they envisage might contribute to enhancing their performance. Importance was measured on a five-point Likert scale labelled Not Applicable, Low Importance, Medium Importance, High Importance, and Very High Importance. Looking individually at each of the professional and development opportunities, the three most important professional and development opportunities for participants (very high to high) were: learning on the job (65.2%); ad hoc conversations about work with people in the same role within my discipline (53.5%); and attending learning and teaching conferences (37.8%).

While the evidence supporting the views of Scott et al. (2008) was derived from a broad range of teaching and learning leaders in their study, the views expressed also hold true for this cohort of academic leadership :

> This means…that leadership learning programs need to be more learner centred, that they need to focus on relevance and apply the wide range of active learning methods…It means that they have to be more just-in-time, just-for-me; more focused on learning by resolving real-world problems and dilemmas of daily practice as they arise; that they need to use peer support more directly and foster reflection on experience using the capability framework validated in the present study. Finally they need to be change focused. This, said respondents and participants, is a far cry from their current experiences, which tend to be more one-off, workshop based, generic and unfocused. (p.102)

Importantly though, for the youngest group (aged **under 35**) in our study the three most important professional and development opportunities for participants (very high to high) were: learning on the job (M = 4.33; SD = 0.66); ad hoc conversations about work with people in the same role within my discipline (M = 4.05; SD = 0.83); and participating in formal leadership development programs which are tailored to your needs (M = 3.74; SD = 1.00).

The third opportunity listed for this younger age group deserves attention. There appears to be a place for well targeted off-the-job leadership development programs for those staff who are younger and/or less experienced in the role of subject coordination. This suggests that there are opportunities for faculties to work in partnership with their Teaching and Learning Centres and Human Resources Departments to design and deliver such programs (see Palmer, Holt & Challis, 2010 for an assessment of areas in need of greatest professional development improvement, which included educational leadership development, as identified by Australian Directors of Academic Development). It is argued that the development of generic leadership/management capabilities will serve newer generations of academics well in the emerging global higher education context. Middlehurst (2010) suggests that capabilities needed by professionals in the current climate include ICT skills, performance assessment, performance display, networking skills, negotiating skills, intercultural sensitivity, political capabilities, knowledge of better practices and innovations, project and program management skills, teamwork skills, interpersonal skills, and communication and creativity. We believe

that the types of capabilities identified more generally by Middlehurst (2010) have particular relevance to coalface academic leadership as personified by those in subject coordinator roles.

Conclusion

The conceptualisation of the subject coordinator, as a leader, in Australian higher education demands greater attention and this study provides an initial step to understand some of its key challenges and dimensions through the perspectives of those in the role. The majority of those responding to the survey highlighted in this paper regard themselves as bona fide leaders. Earlier research as part of this project concluded that those in more senior leadership positions within the academic hierarchy were not convinced that leadership was indeed a strong feature of capabilities required by subject coordinators to be effective in their roles.

Subject coordinators generally regard themselves as performing effectively within their given contexts and key challenges raised in the survey were affirmed. The importance of acknowledging that good leadership work relies on good relationships between leaders close to subject coordinators in the operational domain was also identified. Despite ongoing change in the context of higher education leadership and teaching, subject coordinators appear to be in coping mode as they respond to ever greater demands upon their time. By specifically seeking data about the capabilities and competencies that subject coordinators have, and regard as important, gaps in these capabilities have been highlighted.

The question this evidence raises is whether the modus operandi governing such complex leadership work can continue without specific acknowledgement and capacity building. The answer lies in a more strategic view of the role as leadership, rather than continuing with an unchanged perspective belonging to the past. Subject coordinators represent the largest group of academics in any university and play a significant part in shaping, developing and creating effective learning environments for students. Increasingly their roles encompass managing and leading people and making strategic decisions about resources. A contribution to the beginning of professionalisation for a new level of leadership in higher education would be a desired outcome of this research. However, further investigation is required particularly in relation to the collective contributions that subject coordinators make not only to teaching and learning plans, but in the way they drive grassroots innovation and development.

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