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Valuing the leadership role of university unit coordinators

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In this paper we describe the experiences of 64 unit coordinators across 15 Australian universities, gathered during 2011/2012 as part of an Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) project. Our intention was to gain insight into how unit coordinators (academics who coordinate a discrete unit of study) perceive their role as leaders of learning in higher education and whether the support provided to them by their institutions meets their needs. The study is of international significance given the rapidly changing higher education landscape with larger class sizes, reduced funding and the increasing use of technology occurring globally. Following a brief background to the study, we describe our data collection which involved crafting 78 narratives from semi-structured interviews and their analysis, followed by a brief summary of our search for resources available to support unit coordinators, and the development of a purpose built website to enable widespread access to our narratives and the resources located. Our narrative data represents conversations with academics in unit coordinator positions and we discuss their perceptions of the role after clustering their responses into nine themes. Consistent with international findings, unit coordinators do not self-identify as leaders of learning and instead perceive themselves in terms of their responsibilities in teaching, maintaining and updating unit resources while liaising, collaborating and networking with colleagues. Without exception unit coordinators drew attention to their goal of inspiring students and their strong desire to make a difference to their students' lives. Though they seldom referred to these drives as leading learning they nevertheless exert enormous influence on student learning.

Introduction

In this paper we describe the experiences of 64 unit coordinators across 15 Australian universities gathered during 2011 as part of an Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) project (formerly Australian Learning and Teaching Council). We sought to gain insight into how unit coordinators (academics who coordinate a discrete unit of study) perceive their role as leaders of learning in higher education and whether the support provided to them by their institutions meets their needs. Following a brief background to the study, we describe our data collection which involved the crafting of narratives from semi-structured interviews and our analysis of the themes emerging from the data, followed by a brief summary of the results of our search for supporting resources for unit coordinators, and the development of a purpose built website to enable widespread access to our materials. The final portion of the paper is a discussion of our findings and their connection with contemporary national and international research.

Why undertake the study?

On completion of an earlier ALTC project that examined and clarified the role of the unit coordinator (Roberts, Brooker & Butcher, 2011) we recognised that unit coordinators'

perceptions of their role as leaders of learning in higher education and the avenues of support available to them were missing from the data. We believed this to be significant for both national and international institutions and we wanted to know: how do unit coordinators perceive their role as leaders of learning in higher education? and how does the support provided to unit coordinators in this leadership role meet their needs? These became our research questions. International researchers Juntrasook, Nairn, Bond and Spronken-Smith (2013) argued that academics outside of formal leadership roles remain overlooked, indeed often marginalised, and Australian researchers (Cohen, Bunker & Ellis, 2007; Parrish & Lefoe, 2008; Lefoe, Parrish, Keevers, Ryan, McKenzie & Malfroy, 2013) reported there is little targeted support in place for unit coordinators to handle issues arising from leading a unit of study. According to Tough (1977) the most productive source of (adult) learning is having just-in-time, just-for-me and convenient access to others in the same role, but further along the same learning path. Similarly, Scott, Coates and Anderson (2008) concluded in another major study that:

... the most effective learning programs are ongoing, relevant, focused on 'real world' dilemmas and problems common to a particular role; they involve active learning, are peer supported by people in the same role, and are informed by an overall diagnostic framework that enables people to make sense of what is happening and to learn through reflection on experience and assessing the consequences of their actions (p.92-93).

This team also acknowledged that existing training resources do not fit the 'just in time-just for me' requirement of unit coordinators.

Across Australian universities unit coordinators are required to proactively and professionally lead and support scholarly teaching approaches reflecting contemporary disciplinary content and practice under increasingly challenging conditions (Anderson, Johnson & Saha, 2002). These researchers attribute such challenges as arising from a number of changes to the sector including a combination of large increases in student numbers without comparable increases in staffing, significant growth in communications and information technology permitting 24 hour access and pressure for universities to raise funds and to undertake education and research work under contracts with industry. Many respondents to an earlier questionnaire delivered by Anderson and colleagues (2002) indicated they would not recommend an academic career to others. The necessity for appropriate development for leadership capacity is reported in an Australian study by Parrish and Lefoe (2008) and an international study reported by Inman (2011).

We wanted to provide 'just in time-just for me' exemplars as stories, explore the availability of relevant training materials and resources and link these together for unit coordinators and academic developers to access as a medium for discussion and reflection. We also anticipated that such materials would be highly valued by new unit coordinators. The decision to build a website populated with contextualised narratives and with links to available resources was seen as important for a number of reasons. These included providing a central and specific repository quickly available to unit coordinators to enhance their learning about the role, address issues associated with leading a unit of study and to share the experiences of others.

Data collection

A total of 64 participants from a range of disciplines were interviewed across 15 Australian universities during late 2010 and 2011. Table 1 illustrates the participant spread across disciplines and Table 2 summarises the location of universities included in the study. These were selected due to our academic development networks and ease of access from our Western Australian base.

Table 1: Disciplines represented among participants

Discipline	Number of participants
Science and Engineering	21
Medicine and Health Sciences	9
Humanities	16
Law	5
Business and Commerce	7
Architecture and Building	3
Academic Development	3
Total	64

From the table it is clear the majority of participants were from Science and Engineering and the Humanities. Female academics represented 56% of the participants and 44% were male academics.

Table 2: Location of university where participants are employed

State	Number of universities	Number of participants
New South Wales	4	21
Queensland	1	5
South Australia	3	10
Victoria	4	17
Western Australia	3	11
Total	15	64

Why narratives?

From the outset, narratives were chosen as our means of presenting data accessible via our purpose built website. Narratives permit life-like accounts that focus on experience and are aligned with qualitatively oriented educational research. They are a rich data source upon which a sense of the whole picture is built (Scutt & Hobson, 2013), while also focusing on the concrete particularities of life (Pepper & Wildy, 2012). According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narratives provide a framework and context for making meaning of life situations while also permitting participants' stories and descriptions of experience to be honoured and given status (Conle, 2003). A distinguishing feature of narrative accounts is attendance to the relational components of time (past, present and future) personal and social interaction, and place (situation) simultaneously. Narratives

enable us to focus on the organisation of human knowledge more than merely the collection and processing of data. They support the notion that knowledge is considered valuable and noteworthy even when known by only one person and that knowledge can be held in stories that can be relayed, stored and retrieved (Fry, 2002).

Constructing the narratives

With support from the project reference group and academic development units across Australia we contacted potential participants and invited them to a one hour individual face to face, semi-structured interview with either or both researchers. After welcoming interviewees and completing the required paperwork, including ethics sign off, we invited participants to tell us their experiences of the unit coordinator role. We used a template of generic questions to prompt responses about their background, personal challenges and highlights, working relationships, opportunities and requirements for professional development, in addition to their concerns and experiences of leading others. With participant approval our conversations were audio taped and comprehensive notes written in readiness for narrative construction and analysis. Often our interviews resulted in more than one narrative so we produced 78 narratives in total.

Each of the 78 narratives is written in the first person active voice to illustrate the participants' perspective and has a unique title. Each is between 300 and 500 words in length to permit sufficient contextual detail to describe the situation presented during interview and permit enough credible information to depict the situation while remaining succinct for the intended audience. Once crafted, all participants accepted our offer to forward their draft narrative(s) for their feedback and approval of its use on our website. This practice signalled our willingness to share knowledge and power with the participants while ensuring ethics requirements were met. Rather than ask participants "Have I got it right?" or "Is this what you said?" we asked instead, "Is this you? Do you see yourself here?" All participants approved the use of the narrative(s) developed from their interview sometimes after requesting minor alterations though more often just as we wrote them.

Analysing the narratives

Rich insights into the experiences of participants are revealed in narrative accounts crafted from the semi-structured interviews. Analysing narrative text involves identifying themes and then reducing them to a manageable few (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). We began our joint analysis by becoming immersed in proof-reading and re-reading the narratives while looking for patterns and themes occurring across them. For each iteration we noted key phrases and looked for repetitions of words, topics and ideas, referred to as 'recurring regularities' by Guba (1978), before grouping them together. We also looked for similarities and differences across the narrative phrases called the 'constant comparison method' by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and grouped these together. After sorting and re-sorting the phrases into groups we identified a number of themes, which we regarded as conceptual categories, and named them according to the phenomenon they represented while clearly documenting an audit trail. As not all themes were of equal importance to participants we identified those of most significance to our study and they are described in our results and analysis. We appreciate there can be no single set of correct themes as the data may be viewed in numerous ways (Dey, 1993).

Locating relevant resources

As our major outcome from the project was to be a 'just in time-just for me' website loaded with peer stories in the form of narratives with relevant resources linked for quick and easy access, a research assistant was employed early in the project to build this resource bank. Resources identified previously from the Roberts et al project (2011) though few in number provided a focused starting point for us. Many resources were located by accessing eleven research projects supported with ALTC funding as these had already been peer reviewed and related to leadership in teaching and learning. During the project as the final narrative themes emerged, similarities were sought between them and the themes within the resources we located, which also met the *in-situ* contextualised criteria highlighted as necessary by Tough (1977) so they could be linked.

During the semi-structured interviews we recognised several highly inspiring participants and invited them to also participate in short videos for uploading to the proposed project website. Six interviewees agreed to this request, responded to the same probing questions used to stimulate conversation in their earlier interviews, and were provided with edited clips for review before agreeing to them being uploaded to the website at <http://learningleadersupport.com/>

Building the website

While the project leaders travelled to interstate universities to conduct interviews then craft narratives, our research assistant sourced relevant resources and our web developer designed, built and trialled our project website. The site was organised to provide support for academics who coordinate a unit of study and to ensure user friendliness, rapid access to linked materials and opportunities to communicate with others also visiting the site.

Results and analysis

Participants were encouraged to reflect on their unit coordinator role to share their challenges, concerns, goals, opportunities and successes. After thorough interrogation of the data we identified nine themes which assisted to answer our research questions. These themes are; teaching and assessment, starting out, managing workloads and complexity, working with sessional staff, leading learning, maintaining and improving unit quality, technology and administration, the research/teaching dilemma, and feeling isolated. The themes are listed in Table 3 in decreasing order of frequency. As many participants discussed more than one or two topics we chose to include the first two and on occasion a third topic was expanded upon during interview which resulted in the total thematic frequency of 166. This produced small variations between the frequency of narrative themes at the mid-point and completion of the project (Pepper & Roberts, 2012).

From Table 3 it is clear that comments on teaching and assessment (18.09%), starting out (13.85%) and managing workloads and complexity (13.25%), appeared the most frequently among the data. The research/teaching dilemma (7.23%) and feeling isolated (2.4%) appear as the least frequent themes drawing comment from participants.

Table 3: Percentage frequency of narrative themes

Theme	Frequency	% frequency
Teaching and assessment	30	18.09
Starting out	23	13.85
Managing workloads and complexity	22	13.25
Working with sessional staff	20	12.05
Leading learning	19	11.45
Maintaining and improving unit quality	19	11.45
Technology and administration	17	10.24
Research/teaching dilemma	12	7.23
Feeling isolated	4	2.4
Total	166	100

To identify the nine themes we recognised significant similar phrases for grouping. Phrases such as ‘little teacher coaching is offered and clinicians pick up teaching skills by default’; ‘I used an e-learning platform for assessment as students cannot copy or share answers even when asked the same question’; and ‘I keep accurate current records while working on relationship building’, were categorised as teaching and assessment. Phrases such as ‘I had three weeks to sort out the curriculum, find tutors and text books for students as nothing was left behind’; ‘from the outset I began on a short term contract so received little guidance and had to find out how to do things for myself’; and ‘starting out was not too difficult as I already had an idea what was required’, were categorised as starting out. Similarly, phrases such as ‘I rarely enjoy time off over the weekend and work long days’ and ‘on my return from overseas I faced negotiating with other academics, enormous class sizes and once more surrendering myself to teaching, bruising’ were categorised as managing workloads and complexity. Phrases such as ‘because I am casual, I have taken some risks, such as establishing an anonymous online discussion board to open up discussion on controversial issues’ and ‘sessional staff are often unsure of university processes and leave tasks until the last minute’ were grouped as working with sessional staff.

‘I see my role as leader in my discipline’ and ‘unit coordination at Level A and B is often not viewed as a leadership role’ were categorised as leading learning, while ‘I set up real world engineering problems for students to work through’ and ‘I saw an inappropriate curriculum, texts which were too complex for students to comprehend and too much material superficiality’ as examples of maintaining and improving unit quality. Examples of phrases we recognised as belonging in technology and administration included, ‘most of my responsibility centred on online delivery as technology was embraced on the regional campus’ and ‘I created online units and networks so all students must now complete one unit online’.

While fewer participants mentioned the research/teaching dilemma, we recognised phrases such as ‘I see some tension between research and teaching expectations so I work to be strategic and marry my research and teaching agenda’, and ‘I am keen to find common research threads across disciplines, I must choose between focussing on research

into chemistry or education research or simply move away from both to teach' as closely related to this theme, while phrases such as 'my first years of unit coordination were demanding and I felt isolated much of the time' and 'although I have built some wonderful relationships with them, at time I feel isolated' were clearly expressing a sense of isolation.

Abundant resources are generally available to support learning and teaching in higher education. Our search for current resources linked to our themes and to support unit coordinators resulted in thirteen powerful and generic resources produced within Australian universities, with many resulting from ALTC/OLT funding. In addition we located a further 135 highly relevant resources linked to our interview and narrative themes. These are documented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Summary of resources linked to narrative themes

Theme	No of resources	% of resources	Scope
Teaching and assessment	44	32.5	Scholarship of teaching, assessment styles, first year experience, handling large classes, assessment and moderation, diversity, internationalisation
Starting out	8	6.0	Unit and Course Coordinators handbooks, induction packages
Managing workloads and complexity	4	3.0	Training guidelines to manage workloads, difficult conversations, professional development
Working with sessional staff	12	9.0	Tutors and sessional guides
Leading learning	12	9.0	Project reports, staff leadership programs, goals of professional development
Maintaining and improving unit quality	8	6.0	Improving unit quality, improving student learning
Technology and administration	13	9.5	Compliance, hints on teaching online courses, podcasts
Research/teaching dilemma	15	11.0	Importance of integrating research and teaching, theory of and how to achieve
Feeling isolated	8	6.0	Improving visibility, mentoring, building collaborative groups
Additional topics	11	8.0	Gender, emotional labour
Total	135	100	

The resources located range from lengthy, extensive and detailed reports to individual one issue focused papers. All are current and directly relevant to the themes listed and are in addition to the 42 short videos produced. Unsurprisingly, the majority of resources relate to the teaching and assessment theme (32.5%) which was also the most frequent theme emerging from our narratives. Despite the availability of resources focused on the research/teaching dilemma (11%) this was not a frequent theme emerging from participant conversations. Similarly, while resources focused on technology and administration were plentiful among those located (9.5%) this topic was less frequently

discussed among the participants when compared with starting out and managing workloads and complexity.

All resources are available on the 'Just in time-just for me' website located at <http://learningleadersupport.com/> which is maintained regularly. On this site visitors may access narratives on the basis of the themes to which they relate and where they are listed alphabetically. They may also access narratives by the challenges and highlights mentioned in them. On the website access is also possible to access learning and teaching tips, resources, videos, and there is provision for feedback. As indicated previously though, our focus in this paper is participants' stories and the themes they contain.

How do unit coordinators perceive their role as leaders of learning?

In an earlier analysis of the data to identify emerging trends and prior to the completion of our data collection we identified one quarter of the participants discussing their role in leading learning, however this percentage frequency reduced to 12% by the project's completion. This possibly occurred due to three academic developers participating in our early interviews and though they focused on their former experiences as unit coordinators perhaps considered their leadership roles also. When speaking of leadership the majority of unit coordinators describe their role in terms of their responsibilities in liaising, collaborating and networking with others while maintaining and updating unit resources. Newer unit coordinators were less likely to view themselves as leaders than more experienced academics who on occasion described themselves as informal leaders if not occupying a formal leadership position. Perceptions of leadership generally differed as several unit coordinators drew attention to their goal of inspiring students to learn within their discipline with limited perception that the role involves leadership responsibilities. In general, many unit coordinators' conversation related to teaching and assessment, experiences during their early days in the role and the stresses of managing workloads and the complexity of the role. Many were inclined to view leadership in their unit as a challenge best deferred for another time or person.

How does the support provided to unit coordinators in this leadership role meet their needs?

Few unit coordinators describe strong institutional support for their role. Instead they mention the support of mentors, colleagues and their appreciation for supportive discipline networks. Such coping strategies are designed to build relationships with colleagues and generally compensate for a perceived inadequate orientation. Unit coordinators identify an absence of induction processes, limited time to access professional development opportunities and were often loath to admit their lack of knowledge to more experienced colleagues. While some were aware of and access the institutional programs available to them many were unaware of their existence and in some instances chose not to attend. Clearly the abundant resources we identified as available to unit coordinators require more time than is available to them to locate and appreciate. Many unit coordinators expressed their strong interest in our study, and the website being developed specifically for academics in this role, as a potential resource to support them in a timely manner as a 'just in time, just for me' tool.

Discussion

Participants ranged from being in the unit coordinator role for many years to relatively recent appointments and required little prompting to describe their experiences. Across all states, participants welcomed our visit and most expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to speak confidentially about their experiences. We welcomed such reflections as reassurance that our research qualified as 'good educational research' by contributing to participants' well-being (Hostetler, 2005). In the main, participants recognised our interviews, and our narratives succinctly retelling their stories anonymously, as valuing their role as unit coordinators.

Surprisingly, while many respondents recognised leadership as a situation where individuals seek to influence the teaching practice of others, as described by Debowski and Blake (2004), Bryman (2007), and their leadership focused on many things including 'leading through influence' similar to the view of Scott et al (2008) and Bryman (2007), this perception of themselves was not as widespread among unit coordinators in this study as initially indicated (Pepper & Roberts, 2012). Such findings are in keeping with the recently published work of New Zealand researchers Juntrasook et al (2014) who found that many individuals and groups in academia who do not hold a formal leadership position remain overlooked or unrecognised as leaders, even by themselves. Interestingly, a larger, multi institutional Australian study of four tertiary institutions found the vast majority of subject coordinators perceived themselves as leaders and approximately 60% effective in their role (Holt et al, 2013). According to Nagy et al (2011) unit coordinators often assume their informal roles at junior levels without a clear understanding of the skills and competencies required to be effective in their role. These researchers, who describe their work as 'shining the spotlight' on the informal leadership role of unit coordinators, also describe unit coordinators as located on the first rung of the academic leadership ladder which may lead them to formal leadership positions in future. On occasion it may be sessional staff, inappropriately referred to as 'throw away academics' who assume the unit coordination role (Lefoe et al, 2013). Significantly, while in these situations informal leaders are still positioned with the least amount of authority though wield the greatest influence on student learning (Nagy et al, 2011).

Although in the minority, some unit coordinators in this study did perceive themselves as leaders of learning while speaking about their work, despite an absence of formal recognition as described by Juntrasook et al (2014). Participants commonly state that they look for the best in their students, they are present for their students and two participants regard themselves as a leader while viewing leadership as a role not a position. Several see leadership as something you do and not something that you are assigned, similar to the view of United Kingdom researchers Branson, Penney and Franken (2013). Research undertaken by Inman (2011) another UK academic, emphasises the strong need for recognition of academics when taking on aspects of leadership early in their career through shared or distributed leadership and including periods of informal leadership.

Distributed leadership models facilitate leadership from both formal and informal positions within an organisation. Researchers describe leaders engaged in distributed leadership as visibly supporting others to believe in their own capabilities and offering the opportunity for personal growth (Bennett et al, 2003). According to Spillane (2006) leadership which is distributed also has potential for innovation and building capacity for change. In contrast, it would appear that the majority of participants in this study did not receive such acknowledgement as this perception rarely surfaced during conversations.

Similarly, the reported benefits of completing specific professional development helps individuals to, perceive, appreciate and become aware of themselves as leaders (Parrish & Lefoe, 2008). According to Southwell et al (2008) unit coordinators, as leaders of learning, learn through trial and error in their own leadership experiences and after self-reflection. Nevertheless, almost without exception, participants referred to their strong desire to make a difference to their students' lives, an observation also commented upon by Inman (2011) and interpreted by ourselves as nodding towards leading learning.

While many unit coordinators spoke of the challenges they experienced the majority also discussed how they overcame those same challenges and saw merit in sharing their experiences to provide insight for the benefit of helping others. A strong emphasis on the unit coordinators' core business of teaching and assessment, while managing workloads and complexity, including recruiting and organising sessional staff is not surprising given similarities in the role across Australian universities and is well documented (Parrish & Lefoe, 2008; Hicks, Smigiel, Wilson & Luzecky, 2010; Nagy, et al, 2011). In their study Nagy et al (2011) recommended that the higher education sector acknowledge a broader conceptualisation of the role of the unit (or subject) coordinator as a leader and generator of strong learning value. In addition, Scott et al (2008) comment that while academics perceive themselves as facing unique dilemmas and challenges in fact these same challenges are shared by many others and individuals are encouraged to learn that they are not alone.

Despite some unit coordinators expressing a sense of isolation the majority describe the support they receive from colleagues and mentors while also stating their appreciation for discipline networks. Such comments are consistent with the research we encountered among Australian researchers (Scott et al, 2008; Southwell et al, 2008) and international researchers (Bryman, 2007; Inman, 2011). In general unit coordinators recognise the value of building both informal and formal supportive relationships with colleagues, within networks and among Faculty while also seeking advice from experienced leaders. These coping strategies are designed to compensate for a perceived inadequate orientation and enhance a sense of belonging. Fortunately, it is increasingly common for unit coordinators to complete the institutional professional development offered to them on appointment (Probert, 2014). Indeed in many Australian institutions such focused professional development is considered a condition of employment regardless of previous experience. In addition an academic leadership program developed to build leadership capability at the course level (Jones, Ladyshevsky, Oliver & Flavell, 2008) is available to higher education institutions for implementation.

Our next steps to further this research involve revisiting the institutions our participants were located within, and using the narratives crafted from our interviews, to deliver a series of workshops focused on the leadership role of university unit coordinators. The workshops are being designed to facilitate discussion around the issues raised within the themes identified in this study and explore participants' understanding of distributed leadership. We perceive this activity as a means to affirm the value of the unit coordinator and their leadership role while also investigating the impact of informal leadership on learning and teaching. We also recognise the potential of such workshops to also engage with and support newly appointed academics to 'Teaching Focused Academic' or 'Teaching Focused Scholar' positions within their universities (Probert, 2013).

With further funding the project team will also endeavour to supplement the website with additional narrative accounts, and further contemporary resources as they are published, to ensure the website remains current and reflects the challenging higher education sector. Simultaneously updated materials will be accepted for inclusion by the website manager from academics also contributing to this field of knowledge.

Conclusion

In this article we describe the findings of our study across 15 Australian universities to investigate the perceived leadership role of unit coordinators and whether the support provided to them in this role met their needs. After individual interviews with 64 unit coordinators we crafted their individual perceptions into 78 narratives written in the first person and then made them publicly available on a purpose built website along with linked resources.

We identified nine themes within the data with each clearly representing perceived elements of unit coordinator responsibilities. The themes, in order of decreasing frequency, are teaching and assessment, starting out, managing workloads and complexity, working with sessional staff, leading learning, maintaining and improving unit quality, technology and administration, the research/teaching dilemma, and feeling isolated. Responses ranged between 18% of the narratives including comments about teaching and assessment and 2.5% of the narratives mentioning feeling isolated. Surprisingly, just 11.45% of unit coordinators commented about leading learning. Among these participants, perhaps recognising themselves as leaders when not appointed to a formal leadership position, a minority perceived themselves as leading learning. Perhaps these participants are aware that despite being positioned with little institutional authority they nevertheless exert enormous influence on student learning. Accessing our resource laden website 'Just in time-just for me' and an increase in the uptake of leadership focused institutional professional learning, while maintaining collegial relationships is likely to raise awareness among unit coordinators of their leadership potential and value their significant role. While our study was conducted in Australia our findings are significant in the international higher education context where coordinators of discrete units of study face similar challenges for recognition.

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