# **Building a competence-based model for the academic development of programme leaders.**

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The programme leader is crucial to the success of a higher education provider’s educational portfolio. However, programme leader development is under-researched and is too often conceptualised in a negative way, as the solution to a problem. Here we adopt a positive approach by undertaking an Appreciative Inquiry with programme leaders to understand their development needs. Our work identifies domains of reward and responsibility intrinsic to the programme leader role. Mapping these against a Competence-Based Higher Education Framework, we propose a holistic model for the academic development of programme leaders. We encourage others to adapt this model to their institutional contexts.

Key words: academic leadership; educational leadership; competence-based Education; course leader; programme director; programme leader

## **Introduction**

The programme leader takes academic, educational, and administrative responsibility for a Higher Education course or programme of study. They might also be referred to as programme director, course leader, convenor, or manager (Mitchel, 2015). Programme leadership has immense import in the contemporary higher education landscape (Lawrence, 2021; Robinson-Self, 2020) and the programme leader is often who senior leaders look to when seeking to understand programme success or, more often perhaps, to enhance a programmes’ performance (Cunningham & Wilder, 2020). Recognising the important role that programme leaders play in institutional success, senior leaders are increasingly investing in support for them. While historically programme leader development has focussed on policies and practice (perhaps more accurately labelled training), or leadership skills (as opposed to management – programme leaders seldom hold managerial ‘authority’), more recent work seeks to define and develop the role (programme leadership), not just the person (the programme leader), and to evolve the organisational context in which the programme leader works (e.g. Maddock et al., 2022; Lawrence, 2020a; Lawrence & Ellis, 2018). Further, there is a movement towards recognition and reward for programme leaders, given their crucial role (Lawrence et al., 2022; Scott & Lawrence, 2022) and to support programme leaders to thrive and deploy academic agency to enhance programmes and student and staff experience (Lawrence et al., 2022).

Senior et al’s (2002) ‘manifesto for programme leadership’ calls for a comprehensive model for the holistic development of programme leaders, which outlines what the programme leader must know and be able to do, and how they might embrace the role as integral to their academic identity. We believe this means making explicit the role’s professional responsibilities and the personal rewards inherent to undertaking them, and that such a model has yet to be formally articulated. Here, we use the framework for competence-based education developed at the University of Hull (Lawrence et al., 2020), to propose a novel competence-based model for the holistic development of programme leaders, that has been developed with programme leaders, and which we believe will have practical application in a wide range of higher education contexts. To be ‘competent’ is to have the experience, knowledge, and self-awareness to attend to a task effectively; with agility, under any circumstance, and to do so ethically (Lawrence, 2020b).

To assure programme success programme leaders must navigate networks of stakeholders (Vilkinas & Cartan, 2015) and inspire their academic peers’ and professional service colleagues’ commitment to the programme (Lefoe et al, 2013; Moore, 2018; Senior, 2018). They must understand and work to institutionally specific practices, keep abreast of national policy and be increasingly agile, responsive, and resilient (Lawrence, 2021). Despite their importance programme leaders typically operating in the ‘second tier’ (Tight, 2009) or ‘disesteemed’ (MacFarlane, 2007) space of university service, at the interface of the knowledge creation/transmission and managerial/administrative functions of the academic role (Parkin, 2017). While some programme leaders hold their role for a significant period, others have a temporary arrangement (Irving, 2015); and whilst some programme leaders are ‘accepted’ members of the departmental team, others have difficulty negotiating the peer/leader space (Marchiando et al., 2015). It is well documented that the role is demanding in time and intellectual energy, and that it may stymie an academic career (Cahill et al., 2015; Robinson-Self, 2020).

What makes a “successful” programme leader is not clearly defined in the literature (Cahill et al., 2015). Definitions tend to be based on tasks and responsibilities associated with programme leadership (van Veggel & Howett, 2017), or more general ‘leadership skills’ (Milburn, 2010). While some tasks, such as student recruitment, student satisfaction and course quality, may lend themselves to metrics-based definitions of programme success (Burgess, et al, 2018), these are narrow, and do not reflect the wider activities of a programme leader in course development and management, nor the wider context of programme leadership as part of an academic career (Lawrence, Morón-García and Senior, 2022). Consequently, we recognise that ‘it can be difficult to demonstrate success in the role’ (Forsythe & Powell, 2022, p. 30). Our goal, therefore, is to support academic developers in the work they undertake to support programme leaders in both discharging the responsibilities of their roles and in understanding the value of programme leadership as part of (rather than in conflict with) a successful academic career in HE’s ‘prestige economy’ (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011). We do this by:

1. Working with programme leaders at a mid-sized (16000 students) UK university to gain a shared understanding of the rewards and responsibilities of the programme leader role.
2. Using this shared understanding to develop a holistic competence-based model for the academic development of programme leaders

**Methodology**

***Programme leader networks at the University of Hull***

Programme leaders do not exist in isolation. They are members of a range of local, institutional, and extra-institutional networks and communities. These might be formal or informal and/or they may be centred on disciplinary identities (Scott & Lawrence 2022). In our institution several overlapping networks of programme leaders exist. Here we report work with participants from two; a centrally organised formal network (hereafter “central-formal”), and a locally organised informal discipline-based community of practice (“local-informal”). The central-formal network is open to all programme leaders (approx. 160), and the focus of its activity is directed by institutional strategic priorities and informed by annual surveys of the programme leaders themselves. A regular bulletin provides information about network events and updates on programme leader-relevant matters at institution and sector level. The network facilitator invites senior leaders and chairs of cross-university working groups to monthly facilitated discussions to address topics identified by programme leaders, providing an opportunity for a two-way sharing of intelligence (enabling intellectual, educational, and academic leadership (Parkin, 2017, p. 52).

A local-informal network exists in the Department of Biological and Marine Sciences. Instigated and led by programme leaders it is an example of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), membership of which affords programme leaders opportunities for situated learning related to their development within the programme leader role. Membership of the community is fluid. At its core are 5 current programme leaders, who are joined by up to 5 ex-programme leaders - holders of academic leadership roles who share their disciplinary background. Unlike the central-formal network they meet irregularly and when necessary. Group meetings involve discussion of a broad range of programme specific issues that mirror those discussed by the central-formal network, but always begin with an opportunity to share common problems or celebrate recent success. They are an example therefore of the type of non-threatening environment considered by Cahill et al. (2015) to be a prerequisite of programme leader development. Between meetings members communicate via email and Slack to facilitate group discussion and file sharing (www.slack.com). This enables rapid exchange of information and expertise and provides an opportunity for ‘administrative leadership’ (Parkin, 2017 p. 52).

All members of both networks were invited to participate in the research. Six members of the central-formal network and 4 members of the local-informal community of practice volunteered to participate (author 2 was a member of this community and a subject of the research. They were invited to be an author after the research had been completed, and thus played no part in project design or data analysis. They provided a ‘sense-check' of the alignment of our results to the domains of the competence-based education framework and contributed to the manuscript). Participants were a mix of established, mid, and early career academic staff on both teaching & scholarship and teaching & research contracts from 3 of the 4 academic faculties of the university, with experience of programme leading varying from a few years to over a decade and were therefore representative of the breadth of programme leadership at the institution.

***Stage 1: Appreciative Inquiry***

The culture of Higher Education can be one that problematises enhancement, framing academic development as training, and part of a strategy to address deficiency (Scott & Lawrence, 2022). This deficit model of programme leader development can result in the experience and agency of programme leaders being overlooked and may lead to their becoming disengaged or even to ‘become the problem’ in the eyes of their managers (Cunningham & Wilder, 2020). Mindful of this it was important to us to consciously move away from the deficit model and focus instead on working with programme leaders to build a holistic model for their development firmly grounded in their personal and collective experiences of the positives of their role. To achieve this, we used Appreciative Inquiry (AI), a methodology developed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) as a means by which organisational improvement can be affected through a positive social constructivist approach unhindered by a problem-solving focus. It is also an approach that places an emphasis on the transformative benefits of change (Bushe, 2013).

AI is widely used in the business community and has recently received more attention as a valuable methodology in the public sector, including in higher education (Collington and Fook, 2016; Dematteo and Reeves, 2011; Kung et al., 2013). Our AI process mirrored that advocated by Bushe (2013) as a 4-stage sequence that encouraged participants to: share their individual experiences of what works well (*Discovering* phase); imagine how things could be better (*Envisaging* phase); discuss (and agree) what should be (*Engaging* phase); and finally, set out a plan of action to make change happen (*Innovating* phase). This methodology is useful when participants have a breadth of experience and seniority because it supports the balance of voices that contribute to the discussion. Effective facilitation (by authors 1 and 3) of AI sessions ensured that all voices were heard and listened to.

Through the *Discovering* and *Envisaging* stages of the AI we worked with programme leaders within their separate networks in 2 facilitated workshops to understand the positive benefits of their role in the context of their network or community membership. Transcripts of the workshops were subjected to inductive thematic analysis by author 1 and author 3 (independently) who then coalesced their findings through iterative discussion. We then brought all of the participants together in a single facilitated workshop where we reviewed the themes that had emerged during the first 2 workshops. These themes underpinned the *Engaging* and *Innovating* phases of the AI, during which we co-created a holistic institutional model for the development of programme leaders, within a conceptual framework of competence-based education. The model was refined by the authors through a second phase of iterative thematic discussion.

***Stage 2: Developing a holistic model for the academic development of programme leaders***

*Competence-based Higher Education*

The conceptual framework we used to develop our model was the University of Hull’s competence-based model for higher education (Lawrence et al., 2020), used across the institution to shape programmes of study, academic development activity, and resources for staff and students. This competence framework consists of 3 elements: *Disciplinary and Professional Experience*, *Knowledge Management*, and *Self-Awareness*.

*Disciplinary and Professional Experience* is ‘the practice of applying knowledge and understanding borne from study or personal experience to a given task’ (Lawrence, 2020b).

Given the pace of disciplinary developments and fast evolving methods of creating, storing, and sharing information, *Knowledge Management* is to ethically and securely source, select and create information or knowledge. Finally, *Self-Awareness* is the seat of self-directed, lifelong learning. By instilling the benefit of reflective practice graduates may recognise when, how and where to focus their developmental energies and, ‘find confidence to make difficult decisions, strength to commit to challenging unethical or brute behaviours and resolve to embrace personal stretch’ (Lawrence, 2020b).

*Using the competence framework*

Recognising that institutionally specific programme leader role descriptors may vary, but that the role and function of the programme leader remains constant, an effective competence-based model for programme leadership must support the programme leader in understanding these 3 elements and their role in realising their programme leading competence. Each of the rewards and responsibilities (figure 1) identified by the central-formal and local-informal networks, was examined by the authors to determine whether it could be defined as *experience, knowledge,* or *self-awareness.* Initial mapping was carried out by author 1, and then verified in discussion with author 3 and refined through discussion with the members of the 2 networks, including author 2, through the *Engaging* and *Innovating* phases of the AI.

This work was given ethical approval by the host university and informed consent was given by all participants.

**Results**

***Stage 1: Appreciative Inquiry***

The AI revealed 4 domains of responsibility and reward within the programme leader role which can be understood as 4 dimensions served by the role: the programme, the student, the community, and the individual (figure 1). Key responsibilities of each domain identified by bothnetworks included:

· Programme: Shaping the programme in response to disciplinary needs and experience, and having “control” over the programme, in response to quality assurance, rigour, appeal and sector standing.

*I have been trying to think … if the* [programme leader] *role was taken away from me … the ability to shape the programme … is the thing that I would miss the most -* central-formal network member

*It* [the programme] *has got to be appropriate in this modern world so you constantly change, you constantly develop and it’s* [programme leadership] *keeping on top of that* - local-informal community member

· Student: The need for the programme to appeal to current and prospective students, and the impact on student satisfaction and sector standing.

*My focus us improving the programme for the students and getting accreditation which would be good for their* [the students] *future careers* - central-formal network member

· Community: Sharing of expertise, leadership of programme teams, and advocacy for the programme and programme team

*It’s not just all about student enhancement it’s about helping and supporting staff as well* - central-formal network member

· Individual: A sense of academic agency in leading the programme, and collaboration in programme revision.

*When I joined the institution I wanted to develop a new programme, so this is the reason for me* [to become a programme leader]- central-formal network member

*The opportunity to feed in and potentially be listened to … there is scope for having a voice* [to shape the programme] *within the* [community] *that I certainly very much appreciated* - local-informal community member

In contrast, rewards were identified by both networks in only the programme and community domains. These focused on a sense of personal pride in the programme (programme domain) and in improved standing and membership of a community (or communities) for the programme leader, both externally in their discipline, and internally as part of a learning community (community domain). The domains are not mutually exclusive – for example, the sector standing of a programme can appear in both the programme and student domains. Standing in, and membership of, a community provides both an individual and community reward.

*When I had to change my email signature to programme leader, I mean there was a nice warm feeling inside of me* - central-formal network member

[as programme leader] *I have been responsible for reading on accreditation … linked into the accreditation body, which has opened another network … through my role as programme leader I have other contacts and again a wider community beyond the university as well and kind of a status element* - central-formal network member

[Programme leadership provided] *opportunity to be in a leadership role and therefore career development* - central-formal network member

In contrast to the central-formal network participants, the local-informal community of practice participants focused more strongly on elements of the role linked to student support and communities. Helping new students navigate the university, securing success for individual students, building a sense of student community, and acting as mentors for new programme leaders were raised only by the local-informal community of practice.

[Being programme leader] *is about being responsible for a community of students and their pathway through university isn’t it? And that is really why you do it, and if you aren’t interested in that then you probably shouldn’t do it* – local-informal community member

*It is about the students as a body, but it is also about the individual students that you can particularly help and support* [as programme leader] – local-informal community member

*One of the most useful things about being programme leader was learning how the programme worked and how the institution worked … understanding and being able to use the tools of the institution to help the students … these are all things that you learn whilst* *programme leader* – local-informal community member

This community also identified a wider range of individual rewards associated with their role, ranging from personal thanks from students through to the value of the role for career progression.

[Being programme leader] *did contribute to my promotion* [it] *led directly to Director of Student Experience and both of those roles were integral in making Senior Lecturer for me* – local-informal community member

Author note, Figure 1 here please

**Stage 2: Developing a holistic model for the academic development of programme leaders**

#### Figure 2 summarises our competence-based model for the development of programme directors, demonstrating the 3 elements of competence: *Disciplinary and professional experience, knowledge management and self-awareness.*

Author note, Figure 2 here please

#### *Disciplinary and professional experience: working for the learning community*

Programme leaders bring to the role their disciplinary and professional experience of *what* and *how* they teach as individuals and members of module, course and programme teams. Our competence-based model for the development of programme leaders will support them to grow their expertise through experience in the role, and to deploy and share knowledge to benefit the programme, community and practice of programme leading. This might include:

· Shaping the programme according to disciplinary experience and within the local disciplinary context

· Developing and enhancing programme content

· Sharing expertise of programme leadership

#### *Knowledge management: of HE, the institution, discipline and learning community*

Programme leaders should be supported in developing and managing the knowledge necessary to practice effectively. Quality assurance, rigour, and appeal, identified by participants, are grounded in knowledge of the discipline, institution (policies and practice), students (prospective, current and alumni) and the wider context of higher education (global trends and national drivers), including understanding where to find information, advice, and guidance on:

· National and international trends and policies in higher education, and their integration with disciplinary knowledge

· Institutional strategic decisions and initiatives and their application to, and impact on a programme

· Organisational structures, policies, and procedures, and how to navigate them effectively for the benefit of the programme/students, including programme leader networks that exist formally or informally within the institution or discipline

· The role and responsibilities of programme leaders, and the benefits programme leadership can bring to the individual, programme, student body and institution

· The views of prospective and current students, and alumni, and their influence on programme design and deployment

*Self-Awareness: Responsibility to and standing in the learning community*

Crucial to the self-awareness dimension is an appreciation of the *value* of programme leading, at the levels of the programme, institution, learning community, and individual. These reward elements were recognised as a fundamental part of the role in both networks. Programme leaders should be supported to develop an awareness of:

· Responsibilities to students, programme, academic area, and institution

· Standing in the academic area, institution, discipline, and sector

· Motivation for undertaking the role, and rewards for doing so

· Pride in the programme and successes of students on the programme

· Value of the role for professional development and career advancement

· Value of membership of networks and communities

It is in this awareness that programme leaders will come to some intrinsic motivation to embrace the role as integral to their academic career trajectory and lean into its academic and administrative demands.

**Discussion**

Working with programme leaders we have taken a positive approach to the co-development of a holistic competence-based model for the academic development of the programme leader. Recognising that programme leadership is inherently situated within disciplinary contexts (Shulman, 2005; Wenger et al., 2002), and institutional environments (Hubball & Pearson, 2010), it may be necessary to develop a compromise position between the hopes of individuals undertaking the role and the needs of the university, balancing the art, science, and politics of programme leadership (Burt & Hubball, 2016). Through a holistic focus on experience, knowledge, and self-awareness our competence-based model for the development of programme leaders can be used by academic developers to achieve this. As a scaffold around which to build an institutional strategy for the support and development of programme leaders, our model enables focus upon the needs of the individual programme leader and the institution. As a lens through which the reflective programme leader can examine their personal competence it has value in the development of personal identity and agency in a way that can be central to academic career development and progression.

Our AI reinforces the notion that no single intervention will wholly support programme leader development, and attests to the significance of socially-mediated, locally-situated professional development activity. Our work highlights the significance of complementary networks and communities. A focus solely upon formal institutional development opportunities would serve to inculcate programme leadership and the programme leader within institutional contexts providing access to the institutional intelligence necessary for some elements of role success and career progression. But a holistic approach also prioritises the nurturing of the self through active participatory membership of organic communities of practice providing access to easily relatable near-peers and mentors/role models. The value of personally constructed socially mediated, inherently situated networks in curriculum design and leadership is established within the literature (e.g., Hubball et al., 2013; Hubball et al*.,* 2017). S. Ellis (personal communication, June 21, 2019) identified a paradox in that participants in his study (Ellis & Nimmo, 2018) valued the collegiality of the locally situated ‘personal’ development activities he offered, but ‘missed’ the feeling of institutional belonging fostered by the relatively impersonal centrally mandated didactic ‘training’ they had replaced. Taylor et al. (2021) suggest that academic developers and institutional practice foster pan-institution integrated networks of individuals and local sub-networks, or *microcultures,* to ensure the effective sharing of learning across the wider community.

Our approach, the positive framing of an AI, precluded discussion of the barriers and challenges experienced by programme leaders. These are well rehearsed in the literature (Aitken & O’Carroll, 2020; Lawrence & Ellis, 2018) and appear to be common to programme leaders in most contexts (Senior et al, 2022). Our competence-based model offers programme leaders and academic developers an opportunity to reflect upon and respond to these barriers in the local context. By placing a sharp focus on the development of the programme leader it brings the role and those who hold it ‘out of the shadows’ (Murphy & Curtis, 2013, p. 34), anticipates the tensions inherent within academic leadership (Bolden & Longsworth, 2021), recognises the significance of membership of networks and communities and supports the concept of the collegiate programme leader (Moore, 2018). Our model sets out clearly the competences that are required to successfully navigate the complexity of the role (Senior, 2018), and emphasises the import of critical self-reflection (Senior, 2018) and appropriate recognition and reward systems (Bentley et al., 2013; MacFarlane, 2007, Senior et al, 2022).

**Conclusion and Implications**

By identifying the positive domains of benefit inherent to the complex and demanding role of programme leadership with current programme leaders, we have built a model for their academic development that transcends extrinsic and professional motivations. Our model taps into the intrinsic and personal motivation of the programme leader: their sense of personal reward as their programme, teams, and students’ progress. The personal is as powerful a motivator as the professional when considering engagement with academic development, especially in demanding roles and contexts (Lawrence & Herrick, 2020). Our competence-based model of professional development insists on raising programme leader self-awareness of these domains of benefit and responsibility and so offers explicit opportunity to nurture intrinsic motivations.

We acknowledge that our competence-based model may be limited by the context of our study. However, as the function of the programme leader is similar across institutions irrespective of size, mission group or focus (Senior et al., 2022), we believe the model has potential to be generally applicable, and of value, throughout Higher Education internationally. We encourage academic developers to adapt and apply the model in their contexts.

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**Figure 1:** Responsibilities and rewards of programme leadership in 4 primary domains: programme, student, community, and individual (by both groups (text not-italicised) and by the local-informal community of practice only (text italicised)).



**Figure 2:** Competence-based development of programme leaders, based on the University of Hull Competence Framework (Lawrence et al., 2020), reflecting the 3 elements of disciplinary and professional experience; knowledge management and self-awareness, applied to programme leadership.