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Coming Out of the Shadows: Raising the Profile of the Programme Leader in Business Schools

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As another French Prime Minister resigns, signalling further turmoil amongst the country's political elite, some familiar phrases are being used to describe his downfall. In echoes of successive leaders, Michel Barnier has railed against 'dark forces' bringing about his downfall. The nebulous nature of these forces means their names are not specified, other than they are in the shadows, far removed from the political funfair being played out in the *Assemblée Nationale*. The French have a descriptive phrase for these forces, they are described as an *éminence grise*, words that describe those who wield actual power in any gathering, rather than those that appear, at first glance, to have power (Bolouki et al, 2017).

The origin of the words is ecclesiastical. Lower order monks traditionally wore grey robes and deferred to superiors, who wore red and delivered key messages (Pattenden 2024). Whilst the superiors wielded power through their status, role and presence, those in the shadows were the ones that decided if things were actually done and indeed, if those in red needed to be replaced.

Within a British Business School a similar hierarchy could be seen to exist. Whilst policy announcements are delivered by those whose status is attested to by their titles, dress and attendance at key meetings, implementation lies elsewhere. The potential power those implementers wield has been explored in a previous blog (Allen and Wolstencroft 2024) but there is one group who are fundamental to the success of the organisation.

The Role of Programme Leaders

A Programme Leader is an individual responsible for the day-to-day running of an academic programme (Murphy and Curtis, 2013). Their tasks may include being responsible for:

- the performance of the programme,
- wellbeing and guidance of students,
- ensuring programme specifications are updated,
- leading monitoring processes,
- having oversight of; attendance, admission, progression, completion and a range of other metrics,
- attending exam boards,
- meeting External Examiners and
- ensuring that Professional, Statutory, and Regulatory bodies are kept happy.

In many ways, compiling this list is easier if we look at what they are not responsible for that impacts on programmes. That list would be headed by the creation of the regulations and policies that impact on the programmes that they lead. Yet, despite that, given their role as implementors of policy, it is in their hands whether decisions made higher up the organisation are seen as a success or failure. And hence, whether the senior person responsible for the creation of what is being implemented, is viewed as having failed or succeeded.

Essential Skills

Many skills have been attributed to successful Programme Leaders including the ability to know when and how to ask for support, knowing when to go to the line manager, looking for win-win solutions and ensuring consensus of ideas and demonstrating willingness to put in the effort to make the relationship with their team run smoothly (Ruben et al., 2023). All of these skills are invaluable in ensuring that Business programmes run smoothly but there is one skill that is often neglected when compiling key attributes needed for this role.

The skill of dealing with those nominally superior in the organisation chart is vital for any Programme Leader. This can be characterised as 'managing upwards' but it is more than that. It is about the communication flow between levels. Senior leaders who maintain positive relations with Programme Leaders are far more likely to see their initiatives succeed given that in any Business School there are always multiple initiatives being pushed and it is in their power as to which ones to prioritise.

Why Recognition Matters

So, what we are calling for is greater recognition for this vital group of academics. Most will work at a Senior Lecturer (Assistant Professor) role, although it is not uncommon for many Programme Leaders to be Lecturers, looking for promotion. Yet their potential influence far transcends this status. They wield power and it wise for senior leaders to pay attention to them and laud their transformable skills and their expertise in ensuring things get done and indeed, their ability to make or break the metrics of a programme. A good Programme Leader can transform the metrics and make the whole department look good, whilst poor programme leadership has the power to bring down senior leaders when problems occur. Just like in French politics, they are the true power behind the throne, the *éminence grise*, of Business Schools.

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