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Research report: Interview of senior academic leaders

Coalface subject coordinators – the missing link to building leadership capacities in the academic supply chain

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Executive summary

The research undertaken and documented in this report was part of a project titled *Coalface subject coordinators – the missing link to building leadership capacities in the academic supply chain*, which was funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). The project focused on the increasingly complex role and leadership responsibilities of subject coordinators¹ in higher education, a function that is common to the majority of academics, who receive little or no professional development before assuming the role.

This report details the findings from semi-structured interviews at Deakin University, Edith Cowan University, the University of Southern Queensland and Victoria University in 2009. Although the focus was on these four universities, the interviews provide a snapshot and overview of the thoughts of senior academic leaders in formal roles on the complexities of the subject coordinator role and the responsibilities and skills linked to this role.

Data collection and analysis

A multi-institutional, mixed-methods action learning approach was used to collate data from a sample of fifty-two senior academic leaders from the four universities who participated in individual face-to-face interviews. The findings presented in this report resulted from a coded and thematic analysis of the interview data.

Key findings

Key findings from the data showed that subject coordinators were considered managers or low-level leaders. There was also a lack of consensus about what aspects of roles and responsibilities involved management, administration or leadership capabilities. However, there was general agreement that the subject coordinator required disciplinary expertise and advanced learning and teaching capabilities above that of research ability.

Findings also revealed a wide range of institutional and role-based factors that impacted on a subject coordinator's work and how the increased scope and scale of the subject coordinator role had expanded associated workloads and responsibilities. In particular data showed that:

- The subject coordinator role was often the first stage in an academic's career path.
- The work undertaken by subject coordinators was context-specific.
- The amount of authority given to subject coordinators did not match the level of responsibility asked of them.
- The scope and scale of subject coordinator responsibilities had broadened with the increasing numbers of sessional academics to supervise; advancements in online learning; and greater student expectations. Subject coordinators needed to comply with university policy; quality teaching and learning principles; and have current discipline knowledge about theory and practice and, in some instances, industry standards.

Senior academic leaders suggested professional development topics should include those related to teaching, learning and assessment; duty of care for students; time and priority management; and management and leadership responsibilities. They also considered that the preferred professional development approach was peer mentoring, including whole school in-service, one-to-one mentoring and linking new subject coordinators with experienced colleagues.

¹ A subject coordinator is equivalent to the following roles at each university: Unit Chair at Deakin University; Unit Coordinator at Edith Cowan University and Victoria University; and Course Coordinator at the University of Southern Queensland.

Project background

The research undertaken and documented in this report was part of an Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) funded project titled *Coalface subject coordinators – the missing link to building leadership capacities in the academic supply chain*. This project shone the spotlight on the role and capabilities required of subject coordinators² in higher education.

The area of 'subject coordinator leadership' is a topic of national interest in the Australian higher education sector. Investigating and building subject coordinators' leadership capabilities has constructive consequences for the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. Subject coordinators are responsible for managing and leading the constituent subject components of a course or program of study; for example, the organisational, administrative, curricula, teaching and learning, and overall quality of a subject. The subject is likely to be part of a sequence of subjects in a program or course. Its cohesion within the program or course is likely to depend on institutional emphases and priorities.

It was argued by the project's team members that subject coordinator's work represents 'the coalface of educational leadership' and that the widespread acceptance in academia that it is appropriate to entrust resources and staff to untrained academic leaders and managers is not supported in industry contexts. The project team members believed that these largely informal roles required formal recognition and training to provide a strong foundation and base for further leadership capacity building.

This report details the findings from semi-structured interviews at Deakin University, Edith Cowan University, the University of Southern Queensland and Victoria University in 2009. Findings from the report were used to assist in the construction of a survey instrument administered to those occupying the role of a subject coordinator.

The subject coordinator must be differentiated from staff that have formal leadership responsibility for course/program-wide curriculum development and delivery. The term 'leader' is seldom applied to the subject coordinator position and rarely has the Australian higher education sector provided leadership training for this group – yet they are required to manage and lead staff and students. Evidence from this survey suggested that subject coordinators required specific skills and competencies to be effective in their role and that there was little relevant professional development to build their leadership capacity.

² A subject coordinator is equivalent to the following roles at each university: Unit Chair at Deakin University; Unit Coordinator at Edith Cowan University and Victoria University; and Course Coordinator at the University of Southern Queensland.



Introduction

This report details the results and findings from semi-structured interviews at Deakin University, Edith Cowan University, the University of Southern Queensland and Victoria University in 2009. Although the focus was on these four universities, the interviews provided a snapshot and overview of the thoughts of senior academic leaders in formal roles on the role of the subject coordinator.

This interview data report was part of the work undertaken in the project to examine and document the complexities of the subject coordinator leadership role. Those interviewed may or may not have undertaken the role of a subject coordinator. This factor was not crucial in the selection of the interviewees.

It was beyond the scope of this paper to position the subject coordinator as a leader or manager. Subject coordinators themselves were deliberately omitted from this round of interview process. Rather, they have been surveyed separately online.

Research method

The rationale for this project stemmed from the recognised opportunity to build institutional leadership capacities of subject coordinators as they had the most immediacy to influence a university's quality of learning and teaching.

Using an action learning approach, a total of fifty-two senior academics in formal roles at four multi-campus Australian universities in three states were interviewed as part of the study. The senior academics involved had a professional interest in work undertaken by subject coordinators and were therefore keen to assist in investigating the key role(s) of subject coordinators in leadership capacity building. Preliminary project team discussions revealed that the role of subject coordinators was significantly shaped by institutional policy and administrative structures. There were similarities and differences in how subject coordinators fit within a leadership framework at the four universities involved in the interviews. In its initial discussion, however, the project team shared the belief that there was a notable gap in institutional professional development processes for subject coordinators. This was significant in light of the increasingly complex functions demanded of subject coordinators.

Data collection

Each senior academic leader participated in a face-to-face interview of semi-structured questions. In order to obtain uniformity of data, interviews were conducted by members of the project team. The full interview questions are listed in Appendix 1. The questions examined the complexities of the subject coordinator leadership role, including participant beliefs about the nature of the 'leadership' role, the responsibilities undertaken by subject coordinators, the skills required by them, whether subject coordinator capabilities match the skills needed to complete their duties, and the function of professional development in equipping subject coordinators to complete their work.

The sample included Deputy/Pro Vice-Chancellors (Academic), Deans, Associate Deans of Teaching and Learning (ADTL), Heads of School/Department, and Course/Program Coordinators³. The proposed sample was thirteen academics from each university. At the conclusion of the interviews, 50 usable responses had been received. Table 1 shows the 50 interviewees' level of academic appointment.

³ A Course Coordinator (as the position is titled at Deakin University, Edith Cowan University and Victoria University) is known as a Program Coordinator at the University of Southern Queensland.

Table 1: Sample, level of academic appointment

Level of academic appointment	Sample number
Deputy/Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic)	4
Dean	8
Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning	7
Head of School/Department	15
Course/Program Coordinator	16
Total	50

Data analysis

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Interview responses were electronically coded to match interview questions (Bazeley & Richards, 2000) and thematically coded to reveal major themes and sub-themes (Ezzy, 2002). Data was tabulated and manually cross-matched to individual interviewees, themes and sub-themes, and institutions. These levels of coding provided a means of separating and combining data, and finding similarities and differences across and within the participants and institutions.

Whilst the questions asked of Deputy/Pro Vice-Chancellors (Academic) (DVC/PVC) generally targeted the same themes as those asked of other interviewees, the wording did differ. Therefore, the number of participants responding to a particular question may be less than 50.

Discussion of findings

Roles undertaken by subject coordinators

The work undertaken by subject coordinators, as described by interviewees, required them to manage the teaching team; manage and coordinate the subject in which the team taught; manage subject curricula; lead the teaching team and students; maintain relevance and consistency of subject curricula and practices; and maintain the quality of the subject. These roles were considered 'leadership' roles by over two-thirds ($n=34$) of the interviewees who responded to this question ($n=48$). The leadership ideas put forward by them suggested that the subject coordinator 'leads from behind' as she/he motivates, shares ideas, works collegially and encourages the teaching team to develop their individual strengths. In the words of one Course/Program Coordinator: 'I think it's a kind of leadership when you encourage people to work to their strengths within the parameter of a course'.

Notions of leadership

Forty-two of the 48 responding interviewees (88 per cent) perceived the subject coordinator position as fitting into the following levels of leadership:

- low level leadership ($n=17$)
- team leadership ($n=16$)
- management ($n=12$)
- academic leadership ($n=11$)
- discipline-specific ($n=5$).

Low level leadership

The idea that 'the subject coordinator is the lowest level of leadership an academic would take as part of their career path' was expressed, in various ways by 17 interviewees (35 per cent). Responsibilities taken by subject coordinators were considered part of the normal work program of a lecturer and that they attended to the day-to-day work in delivering a program of study. One Dean explained: 'their day-to-day responsibility is to make sure our bread and butter business works as well as we hope'. Nine interviewees believed that this role was at 'the bottom of the pyramid' of a hierarchical structure. Interviewees were quick to praise the work of subject coordinators in organising subject content and delivery and maintaining a cohesive teaching team. At the same time, they positioned the subject coordinator as a low level leadership role because they lacked the authority to employ or question staff, or negotiate with colleagues about subject content and processes.

Interviewees' beliefs could not be generalised to a specific group (e.g. Dean, Head of School [HoS]). Crude matching of results to home universities suggested that 69 per cent of interviewees from one university and 38 per cent of interviewees from another university believed that the subject coordinator fits into a low level leadership role. Thirty-eight per cent of interviewees from a third university considered the subject coordinator matched a managerial role. Interviewees from the fourth university yielded a broad spread of results. These findings suggested that the positioning of a subject coordinator as a low level leader was influenced by the culture and/or practices of individual universities, possibly a top-down, hierarchical culture.

A concern for some interviewees was the lack of authority subject coordinators had when managing teaching teams and one interviewee expressed this as 'a lack of teeth'. This issue is open to debate as a subject coordinator may be required to supervise tutors at an administrative/operational level but lacks authority 'to question difficult staff'. The line of authority in this case often rested with a more senior academic. An ADTL explained: 'subject coordinators have lots of responsibility but no authority because it is, for a school, a flat structure where everybody just reports to the Head of School'. It was suggested during an interviewee that the practice of managing people at a subject coordinator leadership level only occurred when the role was formalised in a subject coordinator's job description.

Leadership linked to management, academic and team responsibilities

The notion of leadership was largely matched to 'management-related' responsibilities by 12 of the 34 interviewees who considered the subject coordinator a leadership role. They attributed two or more management-related responsibilities to subject coordinators; in particular, 'academic leadership' and 'team leadership'. One ADTL captured the multiple roles as follows:

When I say it's a leadership role... that person will be managing the staff and the development delivery of that subject. It's a leadership role academically in terms of what the content is, how it's taught, the pedagogies, the management processes, all of the ways in which that subject runs, are clearly the responsibility of [the subject coordinator], and they've got a team of people they work with, and people will do that in different ways. Clearly, in schools some are going to be autocratic or distant... everybody just runs their own show.

Academic leadership

When managing a teaching team, the subject coordinator was seen to provide 'academic leadership' ($n=11$) by making decisions about a subject's:

- curriculum and disciplinary content
- learning and teaching strategies, approaches and pedagogies
- management processes (e.g. staffing, meetings, moderation)
- professional development activities for teaching staff.

Leadership that encompasses many or all of these areas was relevant to the responsibilities undertaken by a subject coordinator. One Head of School suggested that these responsibilities fitted under the broad umbrella of 'curriculum development' and were leadership roles as subject coordinators were:

Leading their students/deciding what they might be learning, and if you are running a big team there are elements of leadership that keep a group happily running... dealing with problems... [deciding on] skills you might need in a larger area... and bringing about change in an effective way if the subject needs refreshing.


Academic leadership was also given in the form of 'support' for sessional and casual teaching staff. The growing number and turnover of sessional and casual academics now teaching in degree courses had increased subject coordinators' responsibility to ensure that all lecturers and tutors had the required disciplinary knowledge to teach a subject and also that they understood the university's culture and practices. One Course/Program Coordinator explained: 'you naturally have to take a leadership role for people who aren't, who may not be a part of the University [new teaching staff], so you have to lead them to understand'.

Team leader

In leading the teaching team, the subject coordinator took responsibility for establishing and maintaining a cohesive and collaborative team; liaising with and coordinating others and dealing with subject, staff and student issues. Nineteen interviewees stressed the importance of the subject coordinator in creating a unified and effective teaching team. The subject coordinator was described as 'the lead person on a subject' who organised and coordinated academic staff and guest speakers. This organiser/coordinator role could extend beyond the lecture or tutorial classroom to include practicum and/or laboratory work. The subject coordinator was considered a role model for staff and students and someone who guided their teaching and learning. A Course/Program Coordinator commented:

The subject coordinator is a leader for all the tutors. It can be considered a leader for the students as well... that is you're normally leading the people. You're not only leading the people who are directly involved in the teaching but you're also leading the people who are being taught – the actual students themselves. So, in essence you're not only just a leader in the sense that you're showing people the direction to go in but you're also acting almost like a role model for your tutors. So, in that respect, you have not only the responsibility to your students to act as a leader for them, but you also have a responsibility as a role model to new people coming up through the ranks.

The idea that the subject coordinator 'leads' separate groups within a collective of lecturers, tutors and students was held by 14 interviewees (44 per cent), all of whom believed that the subject coordinator was a leadership role. One HoS noted: 'by definition, it is the lead person which means they ought to lead'. This



leadership role, a Course/Program Coordinator suggested, was linked to their management of curriculum development responsibilities where they led the students ‘through a path of learning knowledge; a learning process about a particular area’. Echoing this belief, an ADTL stated that the subject coordinator led ‘the students’ learning journeys’ and the role occurred regardless of the number of students or staff involved in a subject. The subject coordinator was the ‘link person’ between the students, teaching team and colleagues working in the course. In the words of a Dean:

Subject coordinators are critical because, in a way, they often lead the coalface work, they often lead, they ultimately take the responsibility for student learning, so, if anyone’s going to lead innovation change, flexibility, student sensitiveness, that’s the person who’s going to have those conversations with more teams or colleagues. They’re the ones that I think have the closest link to students probably through their colleagues but also through their own work and should be driving up how we behave as an organisation or a course, you know. That’s where you should be getting the students’ sentiments driven up from.

Subject coordinators who interacted with other coordinators provided ‘an interface’ between subjects with the aim of ensuring relevance of their and other course-based subjects, one HoS revealed. The need to review the relevance, consistency, delivery and assessment of a subject in relation to an overall course was another responsibility attributed to subject coordinators ($n=7$). One interviewee extended this responsibility to include consistency of subject ideals to its school’s philosophy of teaching and learning. A HoS observed that subject coordinator insights on the relevance and consistency of the subject to the course were the exception and typically, their keenness to align subjects to specific courses occurs when they were interested in teaching and learning.

The grassroots work undertaken by subject coordinators required them to lead the ‘academic’ aspects of the subject (e.g. learning and teaching approaches and curriculum development) and draw on their ‘communicative’ team and interpersonal skills when working with colleagues and students. This was especially evident when they organised and maintained a cohesive and collegial team. The responsibilities of a subject coordinator required them to operate at a discipline, pedagogic and interpersonal level, and in some instances at a quality of course level. There was an assumption that subject coordinators had the professional background and capabilities to undertake the role and a tacit expectation that they would fulfil their duties. This understanding prompted the question: who monitored the capabilities and outcomes of subject coordinators whilst they undertook this role?

Management role

The work undertaken by subject coordinators fitted within a ‘management’ structure for 10 interviewees, with four of them explicitly stating that the subject coordinator was a manager not a leader, and one of them believing it was a combined low level leader and manager role. There was much overlap in the ‘low level leadership’ and ‘management’ role data sets. The key difference was shown in management data where the subject coordinators’ work was referred to as ‘managerial’, ‘organisational’ and/or ‘administrative’. At a management level, the subject coordinator, for example, was accountable to the teaching team and the subject through responsibility for the tutor and class lists, subject content and delivery, online information, moderation processes, exam content, marking guides and practices, assessment results and annual reports. They organised, made and implemented operational decisions. Subject coordinators were encouraged to exercise leadership in proffering a vision and ideas but, as a Deputy/Pro Vice-Chancellor suggested, a subject coordinator rarely had the experience or the remuneration to work at ‘a visionary leader’ level.

Similarly, seven of the forty-eight interviewees (15 per cent) believed the subject coordinator role reflected the work of a ‘manager’ rather than ‘leader’ – their ideas suggested that a subject coordinator organised and implemented aspects of a subject at an administrative rather than leadership level. Typically, the subject coordinator was perceived as an academic who oversaw the cohesiveness of a subject. A Course/Program Coordinator noted that subject coordinators were critical to the ‘functioning of the program’ but not in a leadership capacity. In this instance, the subject coordinator coordinated the teaching team and possibly shared roles with colleagues but did not, for example, independently design subject materials or strategies to advance the subject.

Another group of interviewees ($n=7$) noted that the question of whether subject coordinators were managers or leaders was determined by the size of the student and staff groups they coordinated. A Course/Program Coordinator commented that a solo academic teaching a subject was not a leader as this person was not involved at a staff leadership level, and an ADTL stated that a small subject run by one

academic with no external markers required the academic 'to look after the subject' as opposed to leading groups of tutors, markers and students. This view was reflected in all seven interviewees' comments.

Discipline-specific role

In two of the participating universities, Deans ($n=3$) and Heads of School ($n=2$) located the subject coordinator role within a school 'discipline' rather than as a leader or manager role. Typically, the subject coordinator received directives from the discipline coordinator and managed the subject and teaching team accordingly. This was an effective structure in small schools but as one ADTL noted: 'where there are many subjects involved it is more unwieldy and perhaps doesn't work as smoothly as it should'.

The role of the subject coordinator as leader or manager appeared to be context specific. The interviewees' subjective identification of the leader, manager or discipline role was dependent on the interviewee's and the institution's expectations as well as the size of the course and/or subject. There were no apparent institutional or formal criteria matched to expected subject coordinator roles.

The ongoing and changing nature of responsibilities

Forty-six interviewees revealed ideas regarding the static ($n=4$) or changing ($n=42$) nature of subject coordinator responsibilities. Thirteen of them believed that the subject coordinator's 'core responsibilities' were to design subject content and assessment and prepare, manage and deliver disciplinary knowledge. 'Good teaching is good teaching', an ADTL stressed. These basic elements of subject coordinator work had not changed substantially over the last decade. What had changed, nine interviewees stated, were the increased number of off-campus students (e.g. offshore and distance); the inclusion of partner institutions and/or industry stakeholders; the need to meet partner requirements; and the technological complexities associated with teaching online and organising and electronically posting materials prior to student contact. A Dean noted: 'the basics of subject coordination hasn't changed – the sophistication of it has'.

Some of the key changes to subject coordinator responsibilities included:

- increased use of technology ($n=22$)
- compliance issues ($n=18$)
- academic workload ($n=16$)
- teaching duties ($n=14$)
- administrative duties ($n=12$).

These increased responsibilities were mentioned by 25 per cent of the interviewees and are discussed in further detail below.


The electronic analysis of the interview data ($n=48$ respondents) revealed four main responsibilities undertaken by subject coordinators; in order of frequency mentioned by participants, these were:

- subject ($n=48$)
- staff ($n=30$)
- students ($n=25$)
- course ($n=18$).

Responsibility for the subject

All interviewees who responded to the question believed that the subject coordinator was responsible for the day-to-day running of the subject. A deeper analysis showed that they considered the subject coordinator was responsible for:

- managing and coordinating administrative aspects of a subject ($n=28$)
- maintaining relevance of discipline content and consistency across a course ($n=19$)
- evaluating the subject, collating student results and providing feedback to students ($n=17$)
- organising subject curriculum ($n=14$)
- overseeing the quality of the subject ($n=13$).



These five responsibilities were discussed at both an individual and combined level as the interviewees described the links, for example, between coordinating a subject, maintaining consistency and relevance of discipline content, and generating a quality product. Subject coordinators were responsible for the timetabling, structure, content, delivery, materials, quality and review of their individual subjects. They worked independently of, and collaboratively with, their teaching teams in achieving this work.

Management and coordination of a subject

The subject coordinator's leadership responsibilities described by interviewees ($n=32$) varied across the four universities included in this study. The subject coordinator was considered by some to be 'a leader' who took responsibility for a broad range of issues (e.g. staff, curriculum and professional development). Other interviewees were emphatic that the subject coordinator worked at an operational level in managing a subject and coordinating students and staff. Typically, these subject coordinators are delegated responsibilities by senior academics (e.g. HoS). Other subject coordinators were described as having a micro-level of leadership or management – they concentrate on subject teaching and learning and a more senior academic attends to staffing and/or student matters.

There was no consensus regarding how leadership was positioned for subject coordinators and the responsibilities undertaken by them. A crude cross-matching of institutions and leadership/management sub-themes (i.e. manage teaching team, manage/coordinate subject, manage curriculum) indicated that individual universities emphasised certain management-related responsibilities expected of their subject coordinators. Two universities focused on the three areas of management; one university required subject coordinators to manage the subject and curriculum; and one university required its subject coordinators to manage the teaching team and the subject. These results indicated the expected diverse features of the subject coordinator role and, again, pointed to institutionally specific beliefs and/or practices for defining subject coordinator responsibilities.

Subject coordinators were responsible for communicating ideas and practices to the students and the teaching team. They were 'the first port of call' for the students. A key addition to subject coordinators' responsibilities in this area was the increased use of electronic technologies for delivering information and interacting with students and staff. Interviewees ($n=22$) discussed the changes that had occurred in teaching and learning at university due to the use of information technology and the positive and negative characteristics of it. Participants from three universities ($n=20$) stressed this issue, but it was not as prominent at the fourth university ($n=2$).

On the positive side, technology had advanced subject coordinators' capacity to communicate efficiently and effectively with students. In particular, it aided them to communicate with large numbers of students and, at the same time, lessened the need to organise printed material, re-write transparencies or acetate sheets, and physically distribute information to students ($n=6$). PowerPoint allowed lecturers to revise content efficiently and provided a flexible teaching environment. Having subject information online also enabled students to download material if they had missed a lecture or lost information, a Course/Program Coordinator suggested. This in turn reduced the subject coordinator's need to provide additional meetings or materials for non-attending students. A Course/Program Coordinator believed that the use of technology to deliver information enabled 'on campus, external, offshore and distance students to have the same learning experience because they have access to the course home webpage and video conferencing'.

The use of technology in the university teaching and learning environment increased academics' opportunity to engage with students. A Dean stated that technology provided 'a lot more flexibility in the teaching and learning systems (e.g. [learning management systems], email, chat rooms)' as opposed to a paper-based environment that relied on lecture notes and text books. The Dean believed that a technological environment enabled staff 'to interact with students to get that learning outcome'. However, another Dean revealed that student feedback showed that they liked 'a mixture of electronic and face-to-face' delivery.

Similarly, the use of technology created a flexible learning environment for students. This was highly relevant when students needed to combine study and employment ($n=3$). To address student demand for online information, one ADTL commented that he had organised recordings of lectures and practicum tutorials and created online quizzes; she/he was cognisant, nonetheless, of the need to manage online resources differently from face-to-face interactions. Other interviewees stated that they had organised online laboratory work.

On the negative side, the demands placed on subject coordinators to communicate electronically had greatly increased their workload ($n=8$). This was a particular concern for staff who worked with offshore, distance or external students. The need to manage parity of access to staff when communicating with on-campus and off-campus students 'is draining', an ADTL said, as '[off-campus] students have basically twenty-four hour access to the subject'. Off-campus students could have unrealistic expectations of staff and expected an immediate response from them and this was a concern when these demands were placed on sessional staff, the ADTL noted. Similar concerns were raised by seven other interviewees. A Dean summarised interviewees' worries:

Who is monitoring [the distance education program]...we haven't addressed an increase in workload [due to this program]...I think the problem is compounded by the number of sessional teachers we have who also feel compelled to respond to student queries...and they're not paid for the time to do that. I think technology has increased the workload significantly.

Did the use of technology benefit student learning outcomes? One ADTL stressed the importance of asking students whether information technology was 'making any difference; is it actually changing of what you're doing, is it making life more useful better for you, is it helping you work and study at the same time?' Another interviewee noted that online learning was appropriate for theoretical units but questioned its relevance to practice-based units. In light of these teaching and learning concerns, did the effort required of subject coordinators match student learning outcomes achieved; and what was the role of the subject coordinator in managing and leading technology-based learning?

The time allocated to subject coordinators to complete their work was also a concern for nine interviewees. Whilst student numbers had increased and access to professional assistants had reduced, there was little evidence to suggest that the effects on subject coordinator workload had been considered. The interviewees commented that typing, collating student results, duplicating information and dealing with correspondence were once tasks completed by professional assistants, but that this work now rested with subject coordinators. Two Course/Program Coordinators noted the 'multiple lines of reporting' that were now required when submitting student results had also added to their administrative workload.

The diversity of jobs undertaken to organise a subject had increased subject coordinators' workload. A Dean mentioned the demands of organising theoretical, laboratory and practicum work, as well as liaising with technicians and industry partners, book rooms and organising equipment. Interviewees explained that subject coordinators' duties such as marking, assessment recording, sessional staff consultations, student communications and organisational/administrative tasks had all added to their workload with no or little extra time being allocated to complete these duties. A concern for one Course/Program Coordinator was that the increased workload would have 'a detrimental effect' on the quality of teaching delivered to students and the course as a whole. Similarly, the above Dean believed that the current 'workload doesn't really fit the bill anymore'.

Relevance and consistency of individual subject

The relevance and consistency of a subject largely rested with the subject coordinator. She/he oversaw the subject's relevance to knowledge; practice; subject rationale, objectives and curriculum; and, in some instances, course curricula. A Deputy/Pro Vice-Chancellor explained:

It's to make sure that the subject he or she is in charge of is current, it's relevant, it's the right unit, so they in fact play a large part in looking at what it is in that unit and it's actually teaching. If they think it is not going in the right way, they're the people that can tell us, 'there's a problem here'.

It was important that subjects were relevant to the students' needs and achievable for them, otherwise, as a Course/Program Coordinator suggested 'it is easy to set something that's unachievable, and it's easy to set something's that's a waste of time'. The subject coordinator was responsible for creating an ongoing fit between subject content, subject assessment practices and student learning outcomes. In the words of a Dean:

I actually think [the subject coordinators'] primary responsibility is for the learning of students, so understanding our students and what their learning needs are. [To ask] what informs the construction of appropriate content and appropriate learning and teaching practice and appropriate delivery?... Those decisions I think pretty much sit with subject coordinators: the day to day engagement with the learning practice, the learning outcomes, and the assessment practices.

Quality of a subject

Continuous improvement occurred, in part, when the teaching team, led by the subject coordinator, considered ways of 'advancing the subject' and was 'flexible enough to adapt it along the way'. It required the subject coordinator to attain 'currency of the subject...and meet the needs of [their] own students', one HoS revealed. Echoing these ideas, a Dean suggested that 'currency of content' was achieved when materials, readings, resources and platform(s)/media of delivery were changed or added to meet student requirements:

We would expect subject coordinators to be looking quite critically at the material, at the outcomes and being very reflective on whether this is going ahead and putting in place processes to make sure that that's actually in an improvement cycle, so they're really at the heart of quality.

Echoing these ideas, other interviewees had actively encouraged subject coordinators to lead and collaborate with their teaching teams when 'framing a subject and considering the broad issues of curriculum, assessment, learning objectives...and ongoing management [of the subject]'. One Course/Program Coordinator stressed:

Yes, it's, it's leadership. I mean it's certainly management at the sort of micro level, leadership – yes in terms of broader reflection and thinking about ongoing strategic issues: where you are going with the subject; ... are you realising your goals?

One Deputy/Pro Vice-Chancellor suggested that consistency and quality of practice across an institution produced the 'best [possible] learning experiences for students'. Whilst interviewees had accepted the notion of compliance and the need for quality, four of them bemoaned the 'tick-box' and 'hollow' nature of some accountability and administrative procedures. One ADTL believed that these procedures had distanced subject coordinators from their core work of updating their expert disciplinary knowledge and sharing this knowledge with colleagues and students. Instead, subject coordinators were now 'compliance police', who, the ADTL suggested, 'sign off on documents without really being the catalyst for learning'. In the words of one Course/Program Coordinator:

In terms of the changing responsibilities I feel that we have become more responsible for administrative work...I don't know the real rationale behind this shift but perhaps it may be one of minimising administrative staff, I'm not sure. But ... over time, I have seen a dramatic decrease in numbers of staff that perform this administrative duty, but by the same token the workload with regard to the actual face-to-face teaching hasn't dropped so in effect we've given probably less time to do work with teaching and learning; innovative learning and teaching.

Interviewees' beliefs and ideas about the subject coordinators' subject-based responsibilities were consistent across all levels of senior academic leaders interviewed and institutions. All interviewees emphasised subject coordinator responsibilities for either managing or leading a subject of study. This data illustrated the high priority other academics gave to the role of the subject coordinator in meeting teaching, learning and subject-related responsibilities.

A significant matter in maintaining relevance and consistency of a subject was the need for its compliance to university, school, faculty and course policies, standards and practices. The need for the subject coordinator to oversee and obtain compliance and therefore improve quality of practice and outcomes had added a new dimension to their work ($n=18$). Interviewees explained that, due to subject coordinators' increased accountability for teaching and learning outcomes, they were required to align subject practices to relevant policies and standards and then audit their respective subject(s). The aim of this initiative was to consider student feedback and use this information to advance the student learning experience. The underlying assumption was that subject coordinators have the knowledge, expertise and time to map and align their subject to its respective course. This was not always the case as illustrated by a new subject coordinator:

It was just mind blowing and I am still trying to find everything. So you know, it [information] needs to be somewhere that's user friendly that they can just go and think: 'okay, fine I need to know how to put results in, okay fine, so this is the process for results'. It's written in an easy fashion that people can understand...so they can go and click on it and it's easy to find.

In respect to teaching and learning, interviewees noted the collective change in academics' awareness of teaching and learning issues and practices over the last twenty years. This increased knowledge had advanced their pedagogical practice, but, at the same time, had placed additional demands on subject

coordinators to be competent information technology users and present their work in a variety of formats (e.g. learning management systems, CD-ROMs, and e-lectures).

Responsibility to staff

A tabulated analysis of interviewee comments showed that all interviewees considered 'staff' to be an important responsibility of subject coordinators. 'Staff' was the second most frequently cited responsibility, in particular, their responsibility to 'manage the teaching team' (48 per cent of interviewees). Specifically, 75 per cent of Pro and Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Deans and Course/Program Coordinators, 46 per cent of Heads of School, and 43 per cent of ADTLs attributed staff-based responsibilities to subject coordinators. This result was similar across three of the four institutions; the exception was one university which had 'staff' as the least cited subject coordinator responsibility.

When managing the teaching team, subject coordinators recruited, managed and organised staff and/or delegated academic work to them. The subject coordinator managed the day-to-day running of a subject and decided the role undertaken by individual staff. One HoS believed that subject coordinators were responsible for ensuring that all staff were 'doing what they're supposed to be doing'. This responsibility increased subject coordinators' workload ($n=3$) as they were now required to implement and monitor 'quality assurance' practices within individual units (e.g. compliance and moderation); provide individual consultation sessions for sessional staff; and check that sessional staff have access to professional development. In the words of one interviewee:

We only pay sessionals on the formula for their actual contact time. We need to, you know, with all the extra compliance and moderation process that have been added, there's an issue there that has to be addressed in terms of funding the additional consultation. I think overall on sessionals there's extra responsibilities, there's greater expectation of us as subject coordinators that we are ensuring that our sessionals are getting access to training.

At a teaching and learning level, the subject coordinator ensured that subject information (electronic and hard copy) was current and available to all staff and students; that staff had a collective understanding of subject content and processes; and that the work completed by staff aided student learning. A Course/Program Coordinator summarised the interrelated responsibilities of the subject coordinator:

The subject coordinator draws up casual contracts which are then given to our heads of department and also there's...a leadership in that as to determine whether that casual staff is the right person to teach the course, whether they're competent. And when you've got your teaching team under you, it's just the day-to-day running of the course, touching base with them on a regular basis as to seeing how students are going with the content, which is...a learning and teaching aspect.

A small number of interviewees ($n=6$) highlighted the 'mentoring' responsibilities of the subject coordinator, especially in regard to new staff. A Course/Program Coordinator believed that it was the professional responsibility of all ongoing academics to mentor new or junior colleagues: 'It is behaving professionally...it is just part of the responsibility of all staff'. Some mentoring strategies implemented at university included peer mentoring, whole school in-service, campus-based mentoring on a one-to-one basis, and matching new staff with experienced colleagues. If mentoring was to be successful, it required professional development for subject coordinators, a Dean explained.

Subject coordinators were now expected to provide a level of 'stewardship' and 'model' best teaching practice for colleagues. One HoS claimed:

It really does come back to where the subject coordinators fit...the example's got to be set, that's what a stewardship has got to be. That's the kind of model for teaching and pedagogy: it's stewardship, it's mentoring and it's modelling.

When a subject coordinator took on the responsibility to inform staff, assist them to work collegially and provide them and students with updated resources (i.e. electronic and hard copy), these actions often led to relevant and meaningful learning for students. Managing a teaching team included responsibilities beyond that of administrative/managerial work, such as balancing student, staff and institutional needs; communicating these needs to all appropriate parties; and, in some cases, mentoring junior and new colleagues. So where did these responsibilities fit within a manager or leader position, or did it really matter as long as the duties were fulfilled?

Responsibility to students

Twenty-five interviewees (52 per cent of those who responded to the relevant question) believed that subject coordinators were responsible to students in their care. Remarkably, however, less than 47 per cent attributed importance to this duty. This responsibility was rated as important by one Deputy/Pro Vice-Chancellor, three Deans, two ADTLs, six HoSs, and 13 Course/Program Coordinators. At an institutional level, there was a slight difference of opinion, with almost 60 per cent of interviewees from three universities believing in the subject coordinator's accountability to students. Only 38 per cent of interviewees from the fourth university believed subject coordinators were accountable to students in their care.

Even so, there was a strong belief amongst 50 per cent of interviewees that the subject coordinator had a duty of care to students when evaluating and improving subject content, delivery and assessment. This duty of care extended to 'building relationships' between tutors and students, 'meeting students' needs and expectations', counselling students to assist their academic progress, responding to student queries, preparing relevant curricula, providing access to necessary resources and ensuring that all students had equal access to the learning experience. One interviewee suggested that the subject coordinator was responsible for the 'package' presented to and studied by students. Others noted ($n=3$) that attending to student needs was the 'primary responsibility' of subject coordinators. In the words of one Dean:

Subject coordinators have responsibility for content and delivery, and I think, that comes ahead of most other things, but I think that's a mistake. I actually think their primary responsibility is for the learning of students; understanding our students and what their learning needs are. So, to help should be what informs the construction of appropriate content and appropriate learning and teaching practice and appropriate delivery. It really should be about the learning of students, and then we make decisions about content, but essentially those decisions I think pretty much sit with subject coordinators: the day-to-day engagement with the learning practice and the learning outcomes, and the assessment practices.

Another important responsibility for subject coordinators was responding to student feedback, especially if they were to improve the overall quality of their respective subject ($n=2$). A Course/Program Coordinator argued that there were two levels of responsibility here: one to the students and the other to the overall program. The interviewee explained:

The first responsibility is obviously to the students in terms of delivering a line of education that the students expect... [and] if a particular subject is not pulling its weight in terms of evaluations then obviously something has to be done because it affects the entire program.

A concern for two interviewees at separate universities was the requirement to adhere to 'a model'; a prescriptive means of meeting student needs. 'We are being asked to fit someone else's model', one of them argued. The one-size-fits-all approach was deemed nonsensical as it could stifle academics' creativity and their opportunity to enthuse students through their preferred pedagogic approach(es). The importance of providing student choice of resources and mode of delivery was highlighted by one of them. A one-size approach also ignored the breadth of student backgrounds.

The diverse range of students (i.e. mature age, international, first-generation to study) had required subject coordinators to adapt past teaching and learning approaches. A Course/Program Coordinator reflected on recent experiences of teaching students from diverse backgrounds and commented that this level of teaching had required subject coordinators to implement pedagogic approaches that match student learning styles and advance their standard of work. This in turn, had increased subject coordinators' workload, the Course/Program Coordinator stated.

The interviewees' ideas regarding the subject coordinator's responsibilities to students were remarkable in the breadth of opinion presented, especially the different points of view shown by senior executive and teaching-level academics. Whilst these results could be interpreted to suggest that senior executives are somewhat out of touch with classroom practices and concerns, caution is needed when interpreting these findings due to the low number of people interviewed and the differences in questions asked of to the group of Pro and Deputy Vice-Chancellors interviewed. Nevertheless, this topic might be worthy of further investigation.

Responsibility to the course

The subject coordinator, it was believed ($n=18$), has a responsibility to ensure subject coherence within the subject itself and also, the totality of a course, including course and subject objectives, content, materials, resources, assessment, and student attributes and skills. A Dean revealed that subject coordinators 'have to ensure that the whole thing fits together'. It was argued that a well-aligned subject added to the integrity and quality of work produced and to the whole course or program. It also helped to achieve consistency in the learning experience across groups.

A key responsibility of the subject coordinator was to communicate with discipline groups and other subject and Course/Program Coordinators with the aim of mapping content across the course. This process reduced the risk of omitting or repeating content. A Dean summarised the subject coordinator's responsibilities regarding subject coherence:

Subject responsibilities need to include informing courses and informing whole schools and so they need to be connected to either professions or disciplines. That's really critical – the ability to translate, if you like, learner needs into a curriculum and that requires an enormous skill. That is, actually, the work of the subject coordinator.

Where relevant, it was important that the subject coordinator matched aspects of a subject to industry standards, a Course/Program Coordinator said. Professional accreditation bodies require units to meet their professional standards and subject coordinators are accountable to the subject, course, partner institution and students in ensuring that this had occurred.

Subject coordinator responsibility to map, plan and review subject coherence was considered an additional 'pressure' placed on them as they might lack the funds and time to carry out this duty. A Course/Program Coordinator believed that the limited time and funding available to them reduced subject coordinators' opportunity to consider and locate their respective subjects in the 'larger picture' (i.e. the course). This then became a workload matter that challenged subject coordinators' capacity to meet their responsibilities.

Skills required of subject coordinators

The four overarching skills required of subject coordinators when completing their responsibilities to the subject, staff, students and course were interpersonal ($n=39$); management ($n=37$); learning and teaching ($n=37$); and information technology ($n=14$). These skills/capabilities were reported by approximately 25 per cent of the interviewees from all four participating universities and across all participant groups.


Interpersonal skills

Interpersonal skills involve subject coordinators in developing and implementing 'communication' and 'people' skills. These capabilities were discussed interchangeably by the interviewees ($n=39$) and were considered vital to the effective running of a subject, including work undertaken with academics, sessional teachers, general staff, colleagues and students. Results showed that interpersonal skills were one of the core attributes required of subject coordinators. A HoS captured the ideas presented by others:

We need to have good communication skills. In planning for the whole course to be run smoothly over the semester, communication is vital, particularly if you've got a large enrolment and you are coordinating a number of academics who teach into your course along with casual staff and, therefore, to meet on a regular basis to determine how things are running is good.

Subject coordinators communicated when writing, speaking and listening to others, via face-to-face, telecommunications and electronic delivery. Two interviewees highlighted the importance of listening to student concerns and indicating to the students that they had been heard and understood. The subject coordinator was considered a person with whom they could share information. A Course/Program Coordinator explained: 'They [the students] should go out of the room feeling okay that at least some of their views are being understood and shared'. Similarly, interpersonal skills of counselling, conflict resolution, patience, objectivity and empathy were required of subject coordinators when dealing with and resolving problems ($n=14$) with students and staff.

Eight interviewees linked well-developed interpersonal skills shown by subject coordinators to effective teaching and learning. In the words of one HoS:



Teaching is about interpersonal relationships. It's about interacting with people as people relevant to their age and stage, things like that, and that's why I can say that there is a set of skills that goes with teaching no matter whether it's pre-primary, primary, secondary or tertiary. It's about personal relationship, so for me, a subject coordinator is doing that because they're doing it not only with their students, they are doing it with the University's structures of a course that are built around them, and with sessional staff and the guest lecturer.

Another HoS explained the need for subject coordinators to develop 'pedagogic tact'; that was:

To have a sense of who the students are, how they learn, what their interests are, and [then] construct learning experiences with their colleagues, [and] negotiate learning experiences with students [which meet their interests].

Management skills

'Classical management' capabilities were emphasised as skills that were core to subject coordinators' work ($n=14$). Subject coordinators needed to implement 'soft' and 'hard' management skills when they organised, managed and coordinated the teaching team and assisted with interpersonal relationships. A Course/Program Coordinator explained these skills:

All those...classical management skills of organisations and being able to coordinate a team, manage a team, both...soft and hard management skills, looking after these...nitty gritty details but, also, those...more interpersonal skills and making sure people are happy. Dealing being aware of any...points of conflict; I should say friction are coming up before they become conflict.

One HoS believed that the subject coordinator was 'somebody who keeps an eye on the ball all the time cause there's never a time when there's nothing happening'. This required the subject coordinator to pay attention to major and minor subject-based details and to be systematic in dealing with issues; for example, room bookings. Organisational management skills combined with effective and efficient time management practices enabled the subject coordinator to prioritise, follow clear and consistent processes, make processes transparent to students and staff, and reflect on student feedback. A Dean suggested that these organisational management qualities: 'set up a consistent way that the students can be expected to be treated'. Time management was considered a 'crucial' characteristic of competent subject coordinators ($n=14$).

A Dean aligned the management role of subject coordinators to an apprenticeship in their research and teaching as in this role they were supported by senior faculty academics when carrying out subject-based duties. The subject coordinator role presented an apprenticeship (i.e. a learning curve) for other positions in a school or faculty.

Learning and teaching skills

Subject coordinators required 'pedagogic' skills ($n=25$) and expertise of 'subject knowledge' ($n=12$). At a pedagogic level, subject coordinators were responsible for aligning aspects of a subject to assessment points and to student learning outcomes. An ADTL explained that subject coordinators needed a 'distinct set of skills to understand the learning process...what the students are going to learn in that subject...and how to teach to do that'. In a nutshell, the subject coordinator required skills that enabled him/her 'to be analytical about the teaching and learning process'.

Interviewees commented that a good teacher was one who created a rich learning environment – a teacher who was effective in 'translating' knowledge for students and then 'packaging' and 'presenting' this knowledge. A Course/Program Coordinator considered these pedagogic practices as 'a big challenge' but one that reflected 'the old scholarship of teaching'. Several interviewees placed the need for 'exemplary' pedagogic skills ahead of research capabilities when they selected a subject coordinator to lead a team. One HoS illustrated this point:

Sometimes you won't let a really good researcher go and give this person a try [at the subject coordinator position] but if this person is just a reasonable researcher and appalling teacher I'll do everything I can not to appoint them as I don't want to bring problems.

Similarly a Dean noted the importance of teaching ahead of other academic qualities: 'First and foremost I think [a subject coordinator] needs to be an exemplary teacher, cause it's about leadership'.

Expertise of subject and professional knowledge were qualities that are considered obvious and essential to the work undertaken by subject coordinators. Subject coordinators used this knowledge to understand content and deliver knowledge to students and staff. One HoS noted that subject coordinators should:

Know the relevance of the content of a subject that is based on the discipline itself, changes [within the discipline] and the various demands within the discipline [as well as] responding to student evaluations and general responses from classes.

One Dean thought that a subject coordinator who held and delivered disciplinary and professional knowledge provided 'an exemplary model for colleagues'.

Information technology skills

Use of information technology to teach and conduct subject coordinator responsibilities was considered a core skill by 14 interviewees (32 per cent). They represented a broad range of participant groups across the four universities. In particular, technology was used by subject coordinators to organise a subject of study (e.g. liaise with students and staff, plan and document information) and for teaching and learning purposes. Two interviewees commented that technology had enabled academics to modernise their lectures as 'they've got extra whistles and bells and things' to advance their work and this, in turn, assisted them 'to meet Gen Y expectations'. One of them noted, nonetheless, that academics needed to find 'a balance' between electronic and non-electronic delivery when teaching:

There is some balance needed... Yeah, so there are the innovations that are happening but there's also kind of the reality check – is it making a positive impact on your teaching rather than just something new and gee whiz?

Technology was more significant to contemporary university teaching and learning than it had been twenty years ago, an interviewee noted. This was largely due to the use of information technology to deliver knowledge in face-to-face and distance modes. It was important, therefore, that academics understood and used technology to produce, deliver and record information. There were challenges for academics, however, in keeping up with the rapid and ongoing technological changes and for older academics who had taught in the pre-computer era.

Interpersonal, management, time management, teaching and learning (including pedagogy and subject knowledge) and information technology skills were all core capabilities required of subject coordinators and ones that should be fostered. Three or more of these capabilities were noted by approximately 50 per cent of the participants. Interviewees discussed the combined relevance of these skills to subject coordinator work. A Course/Program Coordinator explained the importance of these skills:


So they need human relation skills, they need cultural awareness to be dealing with some of these partners, you know, so the knowledge of the discipline, the academic skills, the technical skills and more of the people skills would be the four key skills.

Fit of subject coordinator attributes to required skills and responsibilities

Twenty-two interviewees believed that the capabilities shown by subject coordinators matched the skills and responsibilities required of them. Another 17 participants considered that this match 'varied', and was influenced by subject coordinators' individual capabilities, level of interpersonal skills, commitment to the role, and handling of competing demands. There was a similarity of responses across the four universities and the five levels of senior academic leaders interviewed.

Interviewees attributed the good match of subject coordinator attributes to role to a variety of reasons; for example:

- the requirement for subject coordinator applicants to meet job description criteria regarding specific skills and responsibilities
- enthusiasm of subject coordinators to take ownership of their units
- an awareness of the academic standards required of them
- a desire to work with new technologies
- an understanding of the importance of positive student evaluations to the well-being of a subject
- knowledge of how best to apply skills effectively.



One HoS revealed that 'ownership' of a new subject produced notions of 'excitement' and 'vibrancy' from subject coordinators. In continuing these ideas, another HoS believed that knowledge of teaching and learning responsibilities, the technologies required in attaining them, and the ability to judge how to apply the technologies assisted in the overall fit of subject coordinator skills to responsibilities.

A HoS captured some of the enthusiasm shown by subject coordinators when embracing new ideas and/or technologies:

I think the overall match is quite good so individuals may find their niche area... I think it is usually probably not skill so much as expectations where staff are wanting to try something and use the technology or do something that's more unusual. That's not really the skills issue. They're enthusiastic and they're trying and they often feel let down if the thing doesn't work the way it was supposed to or if a course does not run as it was supposed to.

Five of the interviewees suggested that finding a match between skills and responsibilities did not happen automatically for some subject coordinators. This fit occurred after they had experienced two or more teaching periods in the role and discovering 'how the University operates'. These interviewees stressed the importance of supporting new subject coordinators at a team level by talking to them, offering a lecture format to them or asking: 'How are you going? What are you doing? What are your issues?'

Professional development: what does and doesn't work and why

Professional development was considered a necessary strategy to advance subject coordinators' management and/or leadership of a disciplinary subject. Forty-five interviewees commented on the nature of professional development conducted for subject coordinators and suggested ways to change or improve professional development to better meet the needs of subject coordinators; three of them noted the limited relevance of professional development for subject coordinators.

Professional development for subject coordinators included formal in-services and meetings and informal discussion groups and workshops. Professional development was conducted university wide and within a faculty, school, course or subject. In-services and workshops were organised by university-based instructional designers, senior academics, colleagues and peers. The exact nature of professional development was dependent on directives from senior academics (e.g. Dean, HoS) or the immediate needs of a subject teaching team or individual academic. In some instances, staff members had identified a weakness in their work and self-selected to participate in professional development (e.g. using the electronic student record system). A Dean suggested that subject coordinators should be encouraged to participate actively 'in training as a normal part of their appointment process ... [not] 'cause they happen to be interested in it'. Likewise, another Dean noted that at annual staff appraisals the subject coordinator could identify areas of professional weakness and nominate professional development that would assist to advance her/his work. The ideas expressed by interviewees were similar across the four universities and five interviewee groups.

Relevance of subject coordinator specific professional development

Professional development was discussed as a relevant strategy that assisted subject coordinators to meet their responsibilities ($n=16$). Successful subject coordinator professional development had included skills-based workshops and in-services; peer mentoring; a graduate certificate qualification; faculty-specific 'new teacher' programs; faculty, school, collegial and peer discussion groups; university wide, intra-faculty and school meetings; and electronic networks. Interviewees revealed the importance of providing subject coordinators with a range of programs and opportunities to undertake relevant professional development. A HoS also stressed the significance of relying on evidence-based literature when designing professional development. Another HoS, who observed academics' limited use of online technologies when teaching, organised a program to advance their online capabilities.

The role of informal peer mentoring to advance subject coordinators' leadership and/or management capabilities was valued by the interviewees. They highlighted the benefits of providing new and/or inexperienced subject coordinators with a peer who acted as a 'model', 'confidante' and 'colleague' with whom subject coordinators could learn from and share ideas. One HoS noted that a peer mentor: 'shows

them the ropes...rather than leaving them to sort of flounder around'. The teaching team also provided another source of support for the subject coordinator and as a Course/Program Coordinator explained:

You need a helpful and friendly team of players who will sit with you and go, 'oh I know how to do that; I've got a great idea, let me show you'. That really works well, but it's an informal basis and it's built upon networks and trust.

Team meetings were considered an appropriate and effective means of conducting collegial professional development and a way for the subject coordinator to collaborate with the team. This was especially important, a Dean noted, when their subject was embedded in a course. The Dean further explained:

When there is a program in which those [subjects] are embedded together there is a need for subjects to interrelate so there's material taught as a pre-requisite for some other subjects. It is important to have those groups within those programs in which [coordinators] meet to ensure that the pathway is maintained.

Whilst many of the interviewees felt that current professional development programs were relevant and adequate, eight of them considered that current practices could be improved. Some of the key criticisms were difficulty in accessing information about the available professional development sessions; overcoming difficulties in organising meetings for 400 or more subject coordinators at one time; systematically organising sessions rather than conducting them on an ad hoc basis; and considering the availability of staff to participate in professional development.


Suggested professional development topics that the interviewees considered were highly relevant or lacked attention included:

- Teaching, learning, and assessment
 - The importance of course-based philosophy and how to embed this in individual units of study.
 - How to develop curriculum.
 - Key teaching, learning and assessment issues and practices.
 - Ways to deliver a subject that achieves 'good results' for students.
 - How to deal with poor student evaluations.
- Duty of care for students
 - Ways to enhance online and electronic delivery of content.
 - How to 'care' for students, for instance, international and first-year students.
 - Understanding how new generations of students, especially Generation Y, approach study at university.
- Time and priority management
 - Time management issues when coordinating a subject.
 - Project management.
 - How to streamline aspects of subject coordinator work so as to complete work in a timely manner.
- Management and leadership responsibilities
 - Management and leadership as combined responsibilities.
 - How to liaise with partner institutions and external parties.

Two interviewees suggested the benefits of seconding part-time, outstanding academics to teach new and interested subject coordinators, particularly as these people would model good practice for others. A Dean stated that professional development 'needs to model the kind of practice we want our subject coordinators to exercise in both their management as well as teaching and learning practice'.

Three interviewees believed that the subject coordinator role was best learnt on the job rather than by undertaking professional development. They believed the position was one where: 'the only way you can really know [it] is by doing it', and one HoS noted the difficulties in attempting to teach this complex and changing role, especially 'judgement issues'. These interviewees claimed that professional development was not relevant in helping subject coordinators to acquire the skills and knowledge required to undertake this work.

Subject coordinators' 'workload' and 'time poorness' were two issues that hindered them from participating in professional development activities ($n=11$). Work commitments and limited time to meet with colleagues stopped them from attending professional development or organising informal collegial meetings. Interviewees commented that it was the responsibility of individuals to enrol in professional development



and that it was often those who would benefit the most that were least likely to attend. It was suggested that universities organise incentives or work rewards for subject coordinators who participated in relevant professional development.

Challenges and directions: university leadership structures and recruitment process

Four Deputy/Pro Vice-Chancellors were questioned about the:

- challenges and directions they perceive for their home university in respect to academic leadership structures
- academic recruitment processes that consider competencies appropriate for subject coordinators.

Although the group was small, the participants' ideas shed light on the role of the subject coordinator from a university executive perspective. As these two questions were not asked of other interviewees they are discussed separately in this section of the report. The two main factors that influenced the directions of leadership structures and challenges to them were the opportunity to establish and maintain consistent structure and the quality of the subject.

The outcomes of appropriate structures

Two interviewees argued the need to develop appropriate institutional structures if they were to achieve, first, consistency of processes and practices and, second, develop a shared culture. One Deputy/Pro Vice-Chancellor believed that structure gives rise to culture and that this culture must be developed before any professional development or other activities were conducted. He/she further explained that it was important to have a working understanding of committee processes, position descriptions and a shared culture. It was these elements of structure that then enabled an academic to, for example, consider and map policy and guidelines, translate policy for staff or organise work to meet policy and guidelines. A key challenge for one Deputy/Pro Vice-Chancellor was to 'get the structure in place and embed learning and teaching into all of the processes within the University ... [that is] to get the context right to support learning and teaching'.


Quality of the subject

The quality of a course was, in part, dependent on the enthusiasm of staff and their capabilities to maximise their talents, a Deputy/Pro Vice-Chancellor explained. One of the key challenges experienced by a university, she/he continued, was to 'improve the quality of teaching within course delivery.' She/he believed that improved teaching was threatened when individual academics 'do not perform to the level which they might be capable of or at the level which is required to achieve excellence'. These academics were 'the weak link' that threatened subject outcomes.

Academic recruitment processes and competencies

Typically, subject coordinators were employed on the basis of their disciplinary expertise rather than their fit to a series of pre-determined competencies. One Deputy/Pro Vice-Chancellor commented that when appointing a subject coordinator, the selection panel should be mindful of the applicant's capability to develop leadership skills in the future. Interviewees noted that leadership attributes were not a pre-requisite to becoming a subject coordinator. One of them stated that it was subject coordinators' 'awareness of what is expected' that was important and for senior academics to make them aware of these expectations.

The qualities of a subject coordinator that were highlighted by interviewees included an enthusiasm for teaching and learning; capabilities to teach disciplinary knowledge at a level of expertise; cutting-edge research experience and knowledge; and the capacity to 'develop as an individual' within a disciplinary area. The interviewees stressed that there was no definitive 'skills set' required of a subject coordinator; rather that they sought someone who had the capacity to grow professionally and personally in the position.



Interviewees' comments suggested that the qualities that underpinned a good subject coordinator were the person's disciplinary expertise; capability to teach this knowledge to student groups; and enthusiasm and capacity to develop as a leader. It was the subject coordinator's abstract and practical understanding of what was expected of this role and the interest to perform accordingly that was paramount to excelling in the position.

Conclusion

The work presented in this report stemmed from the collation and thematic analysis of 50 semi-structured face-to-face interviews which explored, in depth, the specific role(s) and capabilities required of subject coordinators working in the complex and dispersed teaching and learning contexts which constitute the emerging contemporary environments in higher education. This leadership capacity building was contextualised within department/subject-based collegiate arrangements in each university. This research approach has enabled the unique characteristics of discipline and institutional policy to be investigated, with the aim of embedding this new knowledge into each university's professional development environment.


Key findings showed that subject coordinators were considered managers or low level leaders who attended to the curricula, teaching and learning, the teaching team and/or discipline-specific needs of staff and students. At a university executive and senior academic appointment level, interviewees believed that the subject coordinator required disciplinary expertise and advanced learning and teaching capabilities above that of research ability. Whilst there were differences of opinion about the exact manager or leader roles and responsibilities of subject coordinators, interviewees agreed on:

- the interpersonal, management, teaching and learning and information technology skills required by subject coordinators
- the changing nature of subject coordinator responsibilities due to advances in information technology
- the increased workload demanded of subject coordinators that stems from increased student enrolments, diverse and flexible modes of delivery, increased compliance to quality/best practice teaching and learning inputs and outcomes, increased number of sessional staff and reduced administrative support.

What are the complexities of the subject coordinator leadership role?

Project findings showed tensions between the roles and responsibilities asked of subject coordinators, the skills expected of them, and the expectation that they had the capabilities and time to fulfil their responsibilities. The points below captured the key complexities. In particular, they illustrated an array of institutional- and role-based factors that influenced subject coordinator work and how the increased scope and scale of the subject coordinator role had expanded their duties.

- The subject coordinator role was often the first stage in an academic's career path and was considered by some to be a low level of leadership. The idea of 'levels of leaderships' pointed to a top-down, hierarchal notion of leadership roles and responsibilities. The idea that university executives executed visionary ideas whilst subject coordinators were only expected to proffer them indicated a belief that vision only occurred at a macro/executive level and not a course or subject level.
- The work undertaken by subject coordinators was context-specific. There was no one-size-fits-all subject coordinator role. The role was determined by the structure, practices and culture of an institution and the personal characteristics of individual coordinators. For consistency of the subject coordinator role to exist, the three features of structure, practice and culture were required.
- The subject coordinator role required an academic to manage, advise and/or lead staff and students at a personal and professional level, yet typically the amount of authority given to subject coordinators did not match the level of responsibility asked of them. The disparity between role-responsibility and authority needs to be addressed if subject coordinators are to perform their role in a confident and consistent manner. A suggested means to achieve consistency of role was to formalise the leadership responsibilities asked of subject coordinators.
- Some subject coordinators took responsibility for the discipline and pedagogic aspects of a subject as well as liaising with and guiding students and staff. The scope and scale of these responsibilities had broadened with the increased number of sessional academics teaching in a subject; developments in face-to-face and online teaching and learning practices; the diversity of media available for online delivery; and student expectations of staff in responding to their online queries. Subject coordinators were expected to implement new teaching and learning practices, yet interviewees questioned whether these practices would lead to improved student learning



outcomes. A further issue was the logistics (i.e. the who and how) of providing subject coordinators with the knowledge to teach and communicate in an online learning environment.

- The need for a subject to comply with university policy; quality teaching and learning principles; relevance of disciplinary knowledge to current theory and practice; and, in some instances, industry standards had added to subject coordinator workload, but to what outcome? Subject coordinators, it was argued, were currently being removed from teaching and learning responsibilities to focus on administrative roles. If subject coordinators were expected to complete advanced administrative duties they required knowledge of and access to university policies, systems and information.
- Regardless of whether a subject coordinator was considered a leader or manager there were key skills and responsibilities expected of them. The assumption that individual subject coordinators would grow into the role and learn through experience set up a 'sink or swim' experience for them. A preferred approach was peer mentoring including whole school in-service, one-to-one mentoring, and linking new subject coordinators with experienced colleagues. Suggested professional development topics included those related to teaching, learning and assessment; duty of care to students; time and priority management; and management and leadership responsibilities.

The report illuminates the factors that individually, and sometimes collectively, influence the role of the subject coordinator, the skills expected of and implemented by them, and the responsibilities allocated to them. It emphasises deeply held views about the leadership and management roles and capabilities of a subject coordinator. Due to the context-specific nature of this role, rather than stating imperatives or practices, the report offers a lens for readers to consider the complexities involved when building the leadership capacity of subject coordinators.



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Appendix 1

Semi structured interview questions were asked of Deputy and Pro Vice-Chancellors, Deans, Heads of School, Associate Deans of Teaching and Learning, and Course/Program Coordinators.

Pro Vice Chancellor or Deputy Vice Chancellor with Learning and Teaching responsibilities

1. What key challenges and directions do you see for the university in terms of academic leadership structures?
2. There are obviously many levels of leadership within universities. Do you have a view about what the responsibilities of a subject coordinator are?
3. If yes, has your view changed over time and in what ways do you perceive it has changed?
4. Do you believe that academic recruitment processes currently give due regard to the competencies appropriate for subject coordinators?
5. Do you believe that adequate professional development processes exist to ensure that subject coordinators have the required skills to appropriately complete their roles?

Dean

1. Do you consider a subject coordinator to be a leadership role?
2. Where do you think subject coordinators fit within leadership structures?
3. What responsibilities do you think a subject coordinator has?
4. Have these responsibilities changed over time? If yes, how and why?
5. What skills do you think a subject coordinator needs?
(b) Are those the skills that they need to meet their responsibilities as you describe them?
6. To what extent do you believe that the required skills you have outlined match the skills of existing subject coordinators?
7. Do you believe that adequate professional development processes exist to ensure that subject coordinators have the required skills to appropriately complete their roles?

Head of School

1. Do you consider a subject coordinator to be a leadership role?
2. Where do you think subject coordinators fit within leadership structures?
3. What responsibilities do you think a subject coordinator has?
4. Have these responsibilities changed over time? If yes, how and why?
5. What skills do you think a subject coordinator needs?
(b) Are those the skills that they need to meet their responsibilities as you describe them?
6. To what extent do you believe that the required skills you have outlined match the skills of existing subject coordinators?
7. Do you believe that adequate professional development processes exist to ensure that subject coordinators have the required skills to appropriately complete their roles?

Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning

1. Do you consider a subject coordinator to be a leadership role?
2. Where do you think subject coordinators fit within leadership structures?
3. What responsibilities do you think a subject coordinator has?
4. Have these responsibilities changed over time? If yes, how and why?
5. What skills do you think a subject coordinator needs?
(b) Are those the skills that they need to meet their responsibilities as you describe them?
6. To what extent do you believe that the required skills you have outlined match the skills of existing subject coordinators?
7. Do you believe that adequate professional development processes exist to ensure that subject coordinators have the required skills to appropriately complete their roles?



Course/Program Coordinators

1. Do you consider a subject coordinator to be a leadership role?
2. Where do you think subject coordinators fit within leadership structures?
3. What responsibilities do you think a subject coordinator has?
4. Have these responsibilities changed over time? If yes, how and why?
5. What skills do you think a subject coordinator needs?
(b) Are those the skills that they need to meet their responsibilities as you describe them?
6. To what extent do you believe that the required skills you have outlined match the skills of existing subject coordinators?
7. Do you believe that adequate professional development processes exist to ensure that subject coordinators have the required skills to appropriately complete their roles?