Meeting the demands of a changing UK higher education sector: leadership development for early-career quality assurance professionals

Final report to the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education on the QAA/ARC Quality Practitioners Group Small Development Project.

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Project consultant: Kevin Ford, Chief Executive FPM

Project home: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Project partner: Academic Registrars Council Quality Practitioners Group

Primary aim:
To investigate, identify leadership development needs of the next generation of higher education quality assurance professionals and develop continuing professional development (CPD) provision to address those needs - Achieved
• pre-programme annotated survey of literature produced and augmented throughout the project
• pre-programme individual semi-structured interviews conducted with all participants and mentors by the Project Leader and the Consultant
• pre-programme workshop for participants and mentors facilitated by the Consultant
• leadership development needs identified and bespoke programme of leadership development designed and delivered via an iterative process of experiential learning.

Secondary aim:
To enable networks of experienced senior quality assurance professionals to mentor early career quality assurance professional and facilitate change across the full range of UK higher education providers - Achieved.
• participants and mentors from a range of higher education providers identified and matched
• guidance produced for mentors
• mentoring sessions built in to the leadership development programme at key points
• participants and mentors together encouraged to identify opportunities for the participant to gain new experiences and put leadership skills into practice
• both participants and mentors invited to the initial programme development day and the final evaluation day
Project summary
QAA and members of ARC Quality Practitioners Group had identified among their staff talented early-career quality assurance professionals who had acquired specialised knowledge about changes occurring in the quality assurance of UK higher education but needed to develop the requisite leadership skills and experience to help effect their implementation.

Through an iterative process of experiential learning, participants and their mentors engaged in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating a leadership development programme to achieve three complementary objectives:

- to benefit participants by enhancing their leadership skills in the context of their chosen professional field
- to facilitate development of CPD provision tailored to the leadership development needs of early-career quality assurance professionals in general
- to enhance the quality of leadership provided by more experienced senior quality assurance professionals, including QAA officers and reviewers, responsible for implementing the new UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code)

Intended outcomes/outputs

- specification for blended-learning CPD modules combining online modules and work-based learning with opportunities to exchange leadership experiences and good practice face-to-face with other early-career quality assurance professionals, thus facilitating broad dissemination and improvements across the sector
  
  Achieved:
  Delivered by the Consultant to QAA in August 2014

- documentation of the research which will both contribute to leadership development research in general and provide practical assistance to those providing leadership development specifically for early-career quality assurance professionals
  
  Achieved in part, on track and in progress:
  Full evaluation of the pilot project and the development of a sustainable business model will take place in Autumn 2014, at which point presentations, workshops and scholarly articles will be developed.

- CPD sessions about the Quality Code for QAA officers, reviewers and quality assurance professionals in the sector which will increase understanding about how the Quality Code can help safeguard standards, assure quality and enhance learning opportunities in practice
  
  Achieved in part:
  The report submitted in Quarter 3 noted that, while the dissemination of the Quality Code remained a theme running through this project, participants interpreted this broadly, identifying a range of different activities designed to challenge and develop their leadership skills as quality assurance professionals
Analysis of the benefits of the project

Introduction
This section of the report summarises the main points made in feedback from participants and mentors about the Leadership Development Programme for early career Quality Assurance Professionals in Higher Education. Feedback was given in writing and orally after each module and at an evaluation event at the end of the programme. The points also provided a framework for adjusting and developing the LDQAPHE programme, should it be run again in future.

Positive aspects of the programme
Completion and overall evaluation
10 people completed the programme (4 from higher education providers and 6 from QAA). The overwhelming feedback from participants was positive. All the feedback ratings received were Good or better. From the total feedback ratings 20% were Excellent; 50% were Very Good and 30% were Good.

Contextualised leadership development
The programme created a community of leadership practice specific to early career professionals in quality assurance in higher education. Whilst it introduced a range of models and tools on leadership which are familiar in any programme of this kind, all of the discussion, thinking and action was focused on the context within which the participants operate. There is consistent evidence that a contextualised approach of this sort leads to greater impact and change than occurs in more generic programmes. As Burgoyne et al state in their wide ranging study of the impact of leadership and management development

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"management and leadership development contributes to performance in multiple rather than a single way, and what is effective varies very much with situation and context. Fitting the right approach to the specific context is the key."

The programme created a safe space in which participants were free to explore how they saw themselves as leaders in the context of their daily work and the sector they work in. Feedback from participants reflected the value of the contextualised approach, with over twenty specific references to leadership learning related to the context of quality assurance in higher education. As one participant reported:

“In the context of our focus on HEIs and QA/the QAA, I thought the content was highly appropriate. It would also probably be useful for other people in central administrative positions HE in general who face similar systemic issues.”

The programme was delivered by a training provider (FPM Training) with 15 years’ experience of developing contextualised leadership and management learning programmes, using communities of practice and a blend of learning methods. As one participant reported “

“The distinctive aspect of this programme is its focus on QA in HE...[The trainer] grasped the key issues in relation to the HE context extremely well (far better than any other ‘generic’ trainer I’ve ever worked with)”

Recognisable change in participants
Participants found the programme interesting, stimulating and challenging. There is evidence from self reporting, of significant change in confidence to lead and take initiatives, alongside gains in understanding of the concepts of leadership in quality assurance in higher education and use of tools and techniques for leading. The programme focused on building the participants’ capacities to influence others over whom they had no direct control. Participants reported a wide range of development in this area – from planning to influence (or position themselves) more strategically, to developing practical skills in negotiation or influencing. Areas of recognisable change included:

- more confident about self as leader and own credibility
- great empathy with colleagues from higher education providers (between QAA and provider participants)
- better able to delegate tasks
- more willing to take on challenging issues
- better prepared for key meetings
- using skills and tools from the programme – negotiation, planning, emotional intelligence
- more confident about the quality assurance context
- more strategic in dealing with key people/difficult people
- succeeding in getting others to buy in to change
- applying learning to role of line manager
- better understanding of leaders in higher education providers
- made quality assurance more visible in the higher education provider
- more motivated in role
- increased knowledge and greater confidence about existing knowledge
- more confident about finding allies
- sense of belonging to a community of people facing similar challenges
- pushed out of comfort zone and trying new things
- willing to try things without absolute knowledge (taking risks)

Leadership in quality assurance in higher education
The programme was premised on the idea of building leadership capacity that was particular to the leadership of quality assurance in higher education. Significant progress was made but in the process the programme raised questions about whether quality assurance in higher education constitutes a separate profession. This is discussed as a separate section later in this report.

The input of mentors was hugely valued as was the opportunity to build networks. The linking between QAA and higher education providers was also seen as a strong positive.

Accreditation
Participants were delighted to have the opportunity to complete assessed work leading to an accredited qualification (Level 6 Certificate in Management and Leadership awarded by the Chartered Management Institute). This was provided as an additional aspect of the
programme, through funding provided by QAA itself. The training provider is an approved centre for CMI and was able to expedite the accreditation.

Aspects to be improved in light of experience

Pre-programme
• A number of areas to improve relate to the fact that the programme was a pilot with the areas of study and development emerging as it progressed. Any reiteration of the programme will have the benefit of being able to explain the programme fully at the start.
• Action planned includes: development of programme handbook; provision of pre-programme information about approaches to learning and teaching; workload planning; and accreditation requirements

Virtual Learning Environment
• The VLE operated as a repository for materials rather than a true learning environment. The task of creating real e-learning opportunities was beyond the scope of the pilot and it may be the case that doing so in future would not be justified by the value it might add, unless the development were to take place within the context of QAA’s wider offer.
• Action planned includes: providing access to the VLE at the point of registration; improving navigation; promoting a more interactive engagement by participants

Face-to-face modules
• The balance of exercises, inputs, reflection, groups and individual work was about right. All content was seen as useful but some was only covered in passing.
• Action planned includes: increased focus on fewer topics in more depth, based on participants needs with sufficient time between face to face sessions to allow mentoring and actions to take place between them

Mentoring
• The role of the mentors was highly valued by participants and mentors themselves reported that they had gained a great deal from the experience. However, the process of building the relationship with mentors needs more time and structure.
• Action planned includes: expansion of guide for mentors; pre-programme briefing session for mentors; exploration of operating mentor group as a ‘pool’

Quality assurance in higher education as a profession?
The programme assumed that there is such a thing as a quality assurance professional in higher education. On closer scrutiny it appeared that quality assurance personnel do not currently meet the common criteria for a profession, nor is there any current movement to form them into a profession.

Participants and mentors felt the programme was helpful in building the leadership confidence and capacities of professional staff who carry out the quality assurance role. This requires confidence in their knowledge of their field (quality assurance) and confidence in their understanding of their role and their ability to carry it out.
The programme created a community of practice for quality assurance staff. The future focus should be on further developing this community of practice (rather than developing a separate profession).

What next?
As one participant said:

“This is a very good course from which I have learnt a lot. I hope this becomes a permanent feature as this could do a lot to strengthen the skills of quality assurance practitioners.”

There was a general view that the programme was welcome and worthwhile. It should be revised based on what is now known and should be repeated in future. Responsibility for this lies with QAA, with support from the field (particularly ARC QPG).

Dissemination activities

- presentation to ARC QPG scheduled for December 2014
- ‘graduation event’ with associated publicity planned for Autumn 2014
- opportunities to present to QSN (September 2014), SEDA and AMHEC annual conferences to be sought
- presentation and ‘masterclass’ workshops scheduled to be delivered through the QAA’s Quality Enhancement Network in 2014-15
- scholarly paper to be produced post evaluation and suitable opportunities for presentation and publication identified, including LFHE
- business plan to be developed with a view to offering the second iteration of the programme in February 2015, if possible incorporating accreditation at level seven rather than level 6.

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August 2014

This report was circulated to and signed off by the members of the Project Steering Group

Dr Victoria Lindsay, Director: Quality Assurance Group, QAA and Chair of Project Steering Group  
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