Stories of Hope

Reimagining Education

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47. Avengers Assemble! Working together and valuing professional services staff expertise in programme design

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Abstract

This chapter examines the traditional divide between academic and professional services (PS) staff in universities, where academics are positioned as subject experts and PS staff are often viewed as mere operators. It argues that greater collaboration between these groups can address shared challenges in programme design and enhance student outcomes. Drawing on research that highlights the positive impact of PS staff involvement, the chapter proposes the "Programme Heroes Model"—a transformative approach that fosters collaboration, values diverse expertise, and reimagines programme design as a collective, inclusive process.

Keywords: programme design; collaboration; interconnectivity; cultural capital; professional services

Introduction

There has recently been a growing appreciation for the value of professional services (PS) staff within UK Universities. Roles like educational developers and digital education staff have gained recognition for their contributions to the enhancement of teaching and learning. Despite this progress, there remains a notable absence of involvement from both departmental and Registry[1] staff in the critical processes of new programme development, and programme review and amendment, other than to provide administrative services. This exclusion has led to significant gaps in understanding, and hindered important developments, ultimately impacting both the student and staff experience.

Academics traditionally hold a privileged position in universities as subject and content experts, wielding significant influence over the design and delivery of academic programmes. However, their ability to innovate and navigate the complexities of administration and the realities of a marketised sector can often be hindered by perceived bureaucracy. In contrast, PS staff often find themselves relegated to the role of "mere" operators and bureaucrats. This can lead to a self-imposed disempowerment, where their expert knowledge and insights are overlooked or undervalued. By accepting this limited role, both academic and PS staff contribute to the creation of a fragmented landscape, characterised by gaps in understanding and limited collaboration (Whitchurch, 2008).

The lack of meaningful engagement between academic and PS staff creates conflicts and inhibits the establishment of productive working relationships. These conflicts can manifest in a variety of ways, from misalignment in programme design to the failure to adequately address the needs and aspirations of students (Graham, 2012). The negative consequences of these conflicts echo throughout

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1   In the context of UK Higher Education, the "Registry" refers to an administrative department within a university. Sometimes referred to as Academic Services, this department is often responsible for the maintenance of university academic regulations, student records, education administration, and examination arrangements. It plays a crucial role in ensuring the smooth operation of the university's academic functions and upholding its regulatory compliance.

the educational ecosystem, compromising the quality of the student experience and hindering the realisation of desired educational outcomes. The negative consequences of such divisions have previously been explored by Celia Whitchurch (2008), who suggests the concept of the "third space professional" as being a useful link in facilitating effective communication and understanding between different stakeholders. However, despite the potential of third space professionals to bridge these gaps, academic programmes are not always directly included within the third space. This exclusion limits the involvement of PS staff in programme development, review, and amendment processes, further perpetuating the disconnect between academic and professional spheres.

In this chapter we aim to address these pressing issues by highlighting the expert knowledge and contributions of PS staff in programme design and development. Building upon the works of scholars such as Basil Bernstein, Pierre Bourdieu, Dilly Fung, and Carroll Graham, we explore the concept of cultural capital and the validity of PS staff's knowledge. By synthesising existing research and theories, we propose a model of interconnectivity that emphasises collaboration and equal status among all stakeholders involved in programme development and amendment. Drawing inspiration from the Avengers™ (Marvel Characters, Inc.), we believe that by working together as a cohesive team, harnessing the diverse knowledge bases of different staff members, we can achieve the greatest impact and foster an environment conducive to effective programme design.

Why does it matter?

To understand the significance of involving PS staff in programme design, review, and development, it is crucial to examine various factors that affect and highlight the importance of their contributions. This section explores the following factors: definition; power; process; people; impact; evaluation. (See Figure 47.1—for the connections between these factors.)
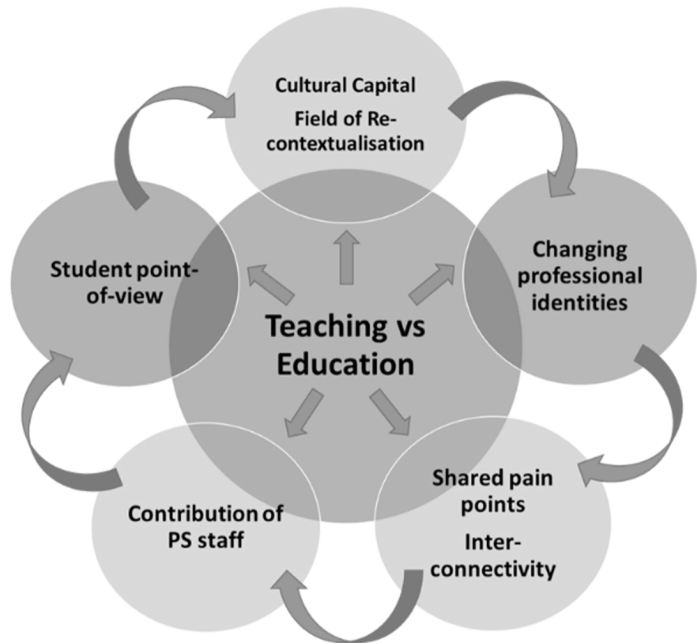
Fig. 47.1 Connections between the factors affecting PS staff contributions to programme development (image by author, CC BY-NC 4.0).

Definition: Teaching vs education

Within the UK Professional Standards Framework (AdvanceHE, 2019), a distinction is made between teaching and education. Teaching refers to the delivery of subject-specific content, while education encompasses a broader scope, including the design, development, and enhancement of learning experiences. By involving PS staff in programme design, institutions can tap into their expertise to create more holistic educational experiences that extend beyond subject-specific teaching.

Power: Cultural capital

Bourdieu's (1993) concept of cultural capital emphasises the value of knowledge, skills, and experiences that individuals possess. PS staff bring diverse cultural capital to the table, rooted in their expertise in administrative processes, understanding of student support needs, and knowledge of institutional structures. Similarly, Bernstein's

(2000) concept of the field of recontextualisation recognises the power dynamics involved in knowledge transmission. Involving PS staff in programme development allows for the recontextualisation of academic knowledge within the administrative and support structures, leading to a more comprehensive and inclusive educational environment, as well as smoother functioning institutions.

Process: Shared pain points and interconnectivity

Collaboration between academic and PS staff can address shared pain points and challenges faced in programme design. By fostering interconnectivity and meaningful dialogue, these two groups can identify and address gaps in understanding, streamline administrative processes, and enhance the overall effectiveness of programme development and amendment. Helen Matthews (2019, p. 10) expressed this idea as follows:

> Focusing on connections between processes and making connections between the different groups of people who deal with them provides a new perspective on process improvements that can lead to real progress.

People: Changing professional identities

Whitchurch's notion of changing professional identities is particularly relevant in understanding the importance of involving PS staff in programme design. As professionals adapt to evolving Higher Education landscapes, their roles and responsibilities expand beyond traditional boundaries. Recognising and utilising the expertise of PS staff in programme design acknowledges their changing professional identities and the valuable contributions they can make to the educational ecosystem.

Impact: Contribution of PS staff to student outcomes

Research has shown that the involvement of PS staff in programme design positively impacts student outcomes. Graham (2012) emphasises the role of PS staff in enhancing the overall student experience and supporting student success. Jenny Roberts (2018, p. 151) highlights the importance of administrative and support structures in fostering student engagement

and satisfaction when she says, "a holistic institution-wide commitment to successful student outcomes necessitates the coming together of academic and professional staff in support of the student learning journey". By actively involving PS staff, institutions can leverage their expertise to create student-centred programmes that meet the diverse needs of learners.

Evaluation: Student point of view

A key aspect of evaluating the importance of involving PS staff in programme design is considering the student perspective. The National Student Survey[2] (NSS) and similar feedback mechanisms often measure student satisfaction with the organisation and smooth functioning of the course. Involving PS staff in programme development can contribute to well-organised and smoothly running courses, ultimately enhancing the student experience.

The factors we have outlined above show why it is important to involve PS staff in programme development. Their operational expertise, understanding of student support needs, and knowledge of quality assurance may contribute to an inclusive educational environment and degree programmes that have integrity. Collaboration between academic and PS staff can address shared challenges, enhance student outcomes, and create a more positive student experience. Acknowledging the changing professional identities of PS staff and their valuable contributions can lead to a more holistic approach to programme design, benefiting both staff and students alike.

The Programme Heroes Model

To address the challenges and enhance collaboration between different stakeholders involved in programme design and review, we propose the implementation of the "Programme Heroes Model". This model aims to create a collaborative and inclusive environment where key

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2   The UK NSS is an annual survey for final-year undergraduates in the UK, established in 2005. It evaluates student satisfaction with courses and overall experience, influencing university rankings and quality assurance. Administered by the Office for Students and other UK regulatory bodies, its results are publicly available.

players, including expert PS staff and other "heroes", contribute with equal responsibility and authority. This approach contrasts with the traditional approach of single named academic programme leads responsible for all elements of the programme, including internal quality assurance processes. Whilst ultimately there will likely be an assumed leader of any team, the Programme Heroes Model offers a framework that brings together currently fragmented discussions and ensures continued engagement among all stakeholders to avoid "civil war".

Recognising and uniting our heroes

Each of the characterised roles can contribute to programme development and review in their unique ways, and collectively they form a diverse and powerful team. Here's how each role could contribute:

Academic/teaching staff (*Iron Man*)*:* With their expertise and intelligence, academics bring subject-specific knowledge to programme development and review. However, they can lack a willingness to work as part of a team.

PS staff (*Captain America*)*:* Local PS staff (particularly those working in education administration and student experience) contribute by using policy and process as a shield, to protect quality and standards. They bring a planning-oriented approach and contribute to the practical aspects of programme development; however, balance is needed to avoid dogmatic restrictions.

Registry services (*The Hulk*)*:* Powerful enablers or blockers, these staff play a crucial role in ensuring compliance with regulations and operational efficiency. However, their potential disconnect with other teams highlights the importance of fostering better communication and collaboration.

Digital education staff (*Thor*)*:* Digital education staff "fly in" with powerful tools and possess knowledge beyond the local understanding. Their contributions to programme development involve integrating digital pedagogies, designing blended or online learning experiences, and supporting the adoption of learning technologies. A whole team approach will help apply this to the reality of the "on the ground"

experience.

Education development unit staff (*Black Widow*)*:* They possess a deep understanding of pedagogical theories, learning design principles, and curriculum development. Although they may be underpowered in terms of institutional authority, their ability to adapt and integrate into different teams makes them invaluable for promoting effective teaching and learning practices.

Students (*Hawkeye*)*:* Whilst often overlooked, their perspective, insights, and feedback are crucial to stay on target for programme development and review. They contribute by offering valuable input on curriculum design, teaching methods, assessment approaches, and the overall student experience. Engaging students as active participants in programme development ensures that their needs and aspirations are considered, leading to more student-centred educational experiences.

Bringing together fragmented discussions

The Programme Heroes Model aims to bridge the gaps between different stakeholders by fostering the type of interconnectivity described by Matthews (2019). Discussions related to teaching, assessment, student experience, and regulations and operations, and associated factors are no longer fragmented. Instead, the heroes collaborate to ensure that these areas are addressed holistically and coherently in programme design and review processes.

The Programme Heroes Model is designed to be applicable in both programme design and review. During the initial design phase, the heroes collaborate to create programmes that align with agreed objectives related to teaching, assessment, student experience, regulations, and operations. Each of our heroes contribute their own perspective to each of these areas, rather than enforcing traditional siloes. (See Figure 47.2, for the themes and factors for group discussion.) In the review phase, they assess the effectiveness of the existing programmes, identify areas for improvement, and work collectively to make necessary amendments.
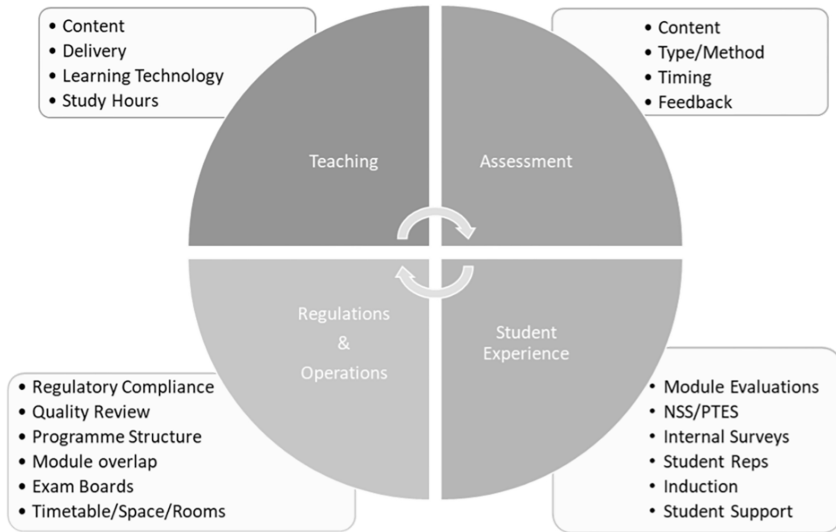
Fig. 47.2 Interconnected themes and factors to be addressed by collective programme heroes (image by author, CC BY-NC).

Key features of the model

Shared space: The Programme Heroes Model emphasises the importance of continued engagement between the heroes. Regular meetings and open channels of communication must be established, whether physically or virtually, to ensure that all stakeholders have a platform to contribute their expertise, address challenges, and share best practices. This ongoing engagement fosters collaboration and creates a sense of collective ownership over programme development and review.

Rotating meeting chairs: To promote inclusivity and shared responsibility, the role of meeting chair rotates among the heroes. This practice ensures that different perspectives are represented and provides an opportunity for each stakeholder group to lead discussions and decision-making processes. By rotating the meeting chair, power dynamics are mitigated, and the contributions of all heroes are valued.

Modelling at the senior level: Successful implementation of the Programme Heroes Model requires support and modelling at the senior level of the institution. Senior leaders must recognise the importance of collaborative programme design and review processes, champion the

involvement of PS staff, and actively promote interconnectivity among all heroes. By leading by example, senior leaders can inspire a cultural shift towards more inclusive and effective collaborative practices.

In summary, the Programme Heroes Model offers a comprehensive solution to enhance collaboration and interconnectivity in programme design and review. By recognising the expertise of all stakeholders, including professional services staff, and providing a framework for their equal participation, this model creates an environment where diverse perspectives are valued and integrated. When these roles collectively contribute to programme development and review, their diverse expertise, perspectives, and experiences create a well-rounded and comprehensive approach. By fostering collaboration, effective communication, and mutual respect, the team can leverage each hero's strengths to create impactful and student-focused programmes.

While the model suggests a core team of heroes in "Phase One", this can be adapted to the institutional structure and allow flexibility for other heroes to join when required such as external examiners (Black Panther, always coming from somewhere better than our own institution where things apparently "just work"), or the social media savvy marketing and communications team (Spider-Man).

Conclusion

The challenges that UK universities face in programme design and development necessitate a transformative solution that fosters collaboration, recognises the expertise of all stakeholders, and promotes interconnectivity. The Programme Heroes Model, inspired by the Avengers' unity and strength, offers precisely that. This collaborative approach aligns with Whitchurch's (2006; 2008) concept of changing professional identities, recognising that both academic and professional services staff play vital roles in shaping the educational landscape. By embracing the diverse cultural capital and knowledge base of all stakeholders, as proposed by Bourdieu (1993) and Bernstein (2000), the model ensures that programme design encompasses a broader scope, moving beyond teaching and integrating various educational aspects.

The model's flexibility to include additional heroes, such as external examiners and marketing teams, as needed, allows institutions to

adapt to changing needs and contexts. This adaptability aligns with Matthews' (2019) and Fung's (2017) ideas on the importance of making connections between different groups of people and processes. The Programme Heroes Model encourages interconnectivity by breaking down silos and bringing together discussions that were once fragmented, as highlighted by Graham (2012) and Roberts (2018) in their studies on the contributions of various staff members to student outcomes.

Moreover, the emphasis on modelling at the senior level aligns with Fung's (2017) concept of shared pain points and the need for cooperation and collaboration among different staff categories. When senior leaders champion the Programme Heroes Model, they demonstrate a commitment to inclusive decision-making, reflecting the idea of a "level playing field" with equal status for all stakeholders.

As the heroes within the Programme Heroes Model work together, harnessing their diverse strengths and expertise, they create a well-rounded and comprehensive approach to programme design and review. By embracing interconnectivity and fostering a culture of cooperation, the model aligns with the research and theories of the referenced scholars, enabling universities to overcome challenges and achieve excellence in education.

In this journey towards effective programme design and review, the Programme Heroes Model serves as a beacon of unity and empowerment. By recognising the importance of all heroes—academic staff, professional services staff, and students—and promoting their active participation, UK universities can elevate their educational offerings and positively shape the future of Higher Education. Like the Avengers, working together as a cohesive team, they can overcome obstacles and create an educational environment that truly values the contributions of all, leading to enhanced student outcomes and a transformative student experience.

Steps toward hope

- Encourage meaningful collaboration between academic and professional services (PS) staff to address shared challenges and enhance programme quality.
- Acknowledge the critical contributions of PS staff alongside

academic staff, shifting perceptions from operators to co-creators in the educational process.

- Adopt a transformative framework such as the Programme Heroes Model to empower all stakeholders, foster mutual respect, and improve student outcomes through collective expertise.

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