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# Exploring the role of unit coordinators within universities

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A high level of professional competence is required for leaders within academic programs. Such leaders are required to be competent in teaching, learning, management, and administration, and yet there appears to be little or no training for these positions. Unit coordinators are responsible for managing the units within a university course. This paper notes the current lack of research into the leadership role of unit coordinators and investigates current university policy and the role of unit coordinators. A pilot study was conducted to explore the role of unit coordinators in order to develop an understanding of their experiences and needs. The participants in the study were 19 lecturers recruited from randomly selected Schools within the Faculties of Edith Cowan University. All participants coordinated large units with more than 75 students and were responsible for at least three staff within the unit. Using a grounded theory framework, semi-structured interviews were used to elicit the required information and data were thematically analysed. Findings identified that the key aspects of the role include responsibility for overall quality of the unit, curriculum design, managing staff teaching into the unit, supporting students and becoming familiar with university systems. This paper will present an overview of the pilot study, emerging areas of responsibility as well as insights into the challenges faced by unit coordinators.

Keywords: Unit coordination; Leadership.

Australian higher education is currently faced with increased challenges, some of which have arisen due to the movement to a system of mass education. Together with a more diverse student body, escalating administrative duties for academic staff and the reality of decreasing federal funding, many universities are facing difficult decisions. For some of these universities (especially the ex- Colleges of Advanced Education) this situation is made even more complicated due to the lack of financial security compared to some of the more traditional universities. However, a combination of the movement towards a more commercial type of management of Australian universities, and a trend towards enhanced teaching and learning, has raised the profile of leadership and especially academic leadership in higher education (Winter & Sarros, 2002). The positions of course co-ordinators (Kessell, 1995) and heads of Schools (Marshall, Adams, & Cameron, 2000; Moodie 2005; Wolverson, Ackerman, & Holt, 2005; Yelder & Codling, 2004) have been recognised and explored as roles requiring leadership abilities. There is evidence of the effectiveness of these positions in achieving change not only in the management arena, but also in learning and teaching (Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC), 2003; Kessell 1995).

The AUTC (2003) states that a high level of professional competence is required for leaders within academic programs who are required to be competent in teaching, learning, management, and leadership. Yet there appears to be little or no training for these positions. Moodie (2005) suggests that, as with many managerial positions in universities, peer recommendation is often the only basis for selecting coordinators and further, the pool of potential coordinators is limited due to the lack of people who are interested or capable of fulfilling the role. With this in mind, it comes as no surprise that academic program coordinators may face a number of difficulties when they are appointed to the role. Kessel's (1995) experience of being a course coordinator suggests that the management of student (personal and academic problems) and staff difficulties (inadequate teaching, student-lecturer relationship problems), and addressing incidences of academic misconduct can be challenging. Course coordinators may also struggle to cope with dual roles; the managerial and the academic (Jackson & Kile, 2004). These roles may conflict as the managerial and administrative duties are often quite time-consuming and prevent academics from maintaining their personal research and discipline knowledge, which is expected of them within their academic duties (Moodie, 2005). Unit coordinators can be identified as academic leaders as they are responsible for coordinating and managing the units (and individually they may actually manage multiple units) within a university course. However, a search of the literature found little research exploring the explicit role of the unit coordinator in the university setting.

The research that examines the role of course coordinators may be useful in understanding the unit coordinator position. Unit coordinators are responsible for managing a unit, while course coordinators oversee the course (Kessell, 1995) and are therefore the next leader above the unit coordinator in the hierarchy in the university. Kessel divides the role of course coordinator into administrative duties and student interaction duties. Administrative duties include "...counselling, record keeping, policy advice, verification of course documents, managing enrolments, discipline etc" as identified in a draft duty statement to which Kessel (1995, p.135) refers. Student interaction duties are focused on the course coordinator's relationship with students; communication, mentoring, and counselling (Kessell, 1995). A case study examining the role of unit coordinators of large units at The University of Queensland suggests that the role of unit coordinators is similar to that of course coordinators as previously described by Kessel (1995). According to the AUTC (2003), the unit coordinator role encompasses administrative and academic duties. Unit coordinators require diverse skills and knowledge in order to effectively fulfil their duties which include designing curriculum, supporting the sessional academic staff, working collaboratively with their colleagues, teaching and supporting students.

The appointment of the unit coordinator and the qualifications required for the position are unclear. Kessel (1995) suggests, based on his subjective experience of the course coordinating role, that physical and personal approachability with students, diplomacy, and resilience are important qualifiers. Further, the pool of potential coordinators was limited due to the lack of people who were capable of fulfilling the role. Unit coordinators were required to be competent in teaching, learning, management, and leadership, and it seems that these skills are prerequisites yet there appears to be little or no training for the position.

With this in mind, it comes as no surprise that unit coordinators may face a number of difficulties when they are appointed to the role especially if they have no prior experience. It appears that the role of the unit coordinator within the university warrants investigation. As

the leaders of specific units, unit coordinators are responsible for guiding the learning of students enrolled in their units. This occurs directly through unit design, assessment and evaluation, as well as indirectly through support for sessional and other staff teaching in a unit. Effective unit delivery is important to students' learning, thus barriers that prevent unit coordinators from fulfilling their role will also inhibit students' learning. Exploring the role of unit coordinators will assist in understanding the challenges that prevent them from fulfilling their role, and their need for professional development.

Initially the paper presents an overview of the aims of the research and outlines the research methodology. Through content analysis of the data, areas of responsibility emerged which reflected the diverse nature of the role of unit coordinators. Each of these areas is discussed, followed by their implications for theory, policy and practice.

## **Research objective and purpose**

This pilot study undertook to explore the role of unit coordinators within the university setting. This was to enable us to develop a greater understanding of the unit coordinators' experience as *they* perceive it. The research questions were:

- 1) What are the experiences of unit coordinators within Edith Cowan University?
- 2) What are the challenges that impact upon the role of the unit coordinator at Edith Cowan University?
- 3) What are the needs of unit coordinators for successfully fulfilling their role at Edith Cowan University?

## **Methodology**

### **Research design**

This study employed a qualitative methodology, utilising a phenomenological approach in order to develop an understanding of and describe the personal meanings of each individual unit co-ordinator's experience of their role (Liamputtong & Ezzay, 2005). This approach studies people's experiences throughout their daily life. A semi-structured interview is well suited to the phenomenological approach as it allows participants to self-report on various issues, generating data that is at a deeper level than other measures such as short-answer questionnaires (Polkinghorne, 2005). The research also sought to determine if there appears to be any similar themes that describe the experiences of unit co-ordinators (Burgess-Limerick & Burgess-Limerick, 1998). Semi-structured interviews do not have a rigid format, allowing the interview to be guided by the responses of the participants (Liamputtong & Ezzay, 2005). Furthermore, the technique is known to facilitate rapport between the researcher and the participant, leading to rich and accurate information (Irwin, Waugh, & Bonner, 2006).

### **Participants**

To ensure that saturation of the required information occurred (Miles & Huberman, 1994), 19 unit co-ordinators were interviewed in total. Participants were recruited from randomly selected Schools within three faculties of Edith Cowan University (i.e., Faculty of Education and Arts, Faculty of Computing, Health and Science, Faculty of Business and Law). Fifteen heads of Schools were asked to identify unit co-ordinators within their school. The criteria for inclusion in the study included that (a) the unit co-ordinator was responsible for at least three sessional staff within a single unit; (b) there were at least 75 students enrolled in the unit. Information letters and consent forms were provided either electronically or in hard copy to all of the unit coordinators who met these criteria within the school.

## Procedure

After unit coordinators received the information letters and consent forms, they were contacted by one of the researchers to ascertain whether they were interested in participating in the research. If permission was obtained, a mutually agreed upon time and place was arranged for the interview. Permission was sought to tape-record the interview to allow for data analysis. Five interviewers were involved. Initially the three researchers conducted two interviews each. They then met and trained two research assistants who conducted the rest of the interviews. The length of each interview was approximately one hour. The data was gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each unit co-ordinator. An interview schedule was used as a guide. However if issues arose that appeared to be of particular importance to the participant, this line of enquiry was followed (Smith, 1995). This methodology enabled the development of an understanding of the unit co-ordinator role from the participants' perspectives (Smith, 1995). A funnelling technique was adopted to ensure the interviews progressed smoothly and to build rapport with the participants (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995). The interview started with general questions such as 'How many units do you coordinate each semester?' to more specific questions such as 'Can you identify some of the challenges in administration that you face as a unit coordinator?'

## Analysis

The interview tape-recordings were analysed using thematic content analysis by listening repeatedly to each recording. Thematic content analysis involves examining the data in search of common themes that answer the research question (Van Manen, 1990). The analysis process began by recording any thoughts that come to mind. Next, key words, concepts, and sentences that describe the participants' perceptions of their unit co-ordinating experience were noted. Participant responses were then coded. Finally, themes that help to describe the unit co-ordinators' experience of their role were identified by combining common codes. This process of reflexivity brings the researcher's closer to the data by becoming more aware of the biases that influence their interpretations (Breakwell, Hammond, & Fife-Schaw, 1995).

## Findings

As noted earlier, staff in the initial sample were purposefully chosen from academic staff coordinating large or multiple units. It was assumed that these staff would have a sound understanding of the nature of unit coordination and have worked out ways of managing the task. The emerging picture of unit coordination suggests that lecturers conceptualise some aspects of the unit coordination as legitimate academic tasks, other tasks are seen as administrative. Academic tasks draw on understanding of the discipline, the profession, student learning, pedagogy and a concern for the students' and progress. Non-academic tasks are the lower level data entry tasks and interfaces with university systems.

The findings suggest that the responsibility of unit coordination was often thrust on new academic staff and much depended on the quality of the handover of the unit from one coordinator to another. Coordinating a unit for the first time is often fraught with difficulty:

*"I got a handover in two days back in January from the previous coordinator, but after that not a thing. It was real guesswork. I suppose the good thing was that I had been a student in the unit and worked as a sessional a few years before, so I knew my way around. If it was anybody else, I'd fell sorry for them!"*

However, this is not the case when staff feel part of a supportive network of colleagues or when they are mentored as a new staff member:

*“When I started I had the privilege to work with (x) who had been here 30 years. So they really new what happened in unit coordination. You could just walk down the corridor and you were there.”*

In addition to a suitable induction to unit coordination and the quality of the unit handover, other areas that impact on their ability to coordinate a unit effectively include when unit coordination work is not acknowledged by the university; when there is a lack of induction to unit coordination; when staff are coordinating units outside their area of specialisation.

### **Areas of responsibility**

The following five areas of responsibility for unit coordinators emerged from the initial analysis of the taped interviews:

1. organisational skills,
2. designing curriculum,
3. managing teaching staff,
4. supporting students,
5. dealing with systems

Table 1 indicates the five emerging areas of responsibility. Under each theme is a list of typical tasks identified by unit coordinators as part of their role. Clearly a diverse range of skills and knowledge is required for these different elements of unit coordination. The issues associated with each theme are elaborated below.

#### **1. Organisational skills**

It is essential to have good organisational skills in order to successfully coordinate units. For example, there are periods during the semester which are more demanding than others, such as periods when assignments are due. Some unit coordinators indicated that during these times they did not participate in extensive research activity. Similarly, in order to manage large groups of students, some participants limited their availability to students out of class time to specific times. Through the interviews, it became apparent that some staff did not have the skills to manage their workload effectively. It was also clear that some staff were aware of these shortcomings.

#### **2. Curriculum design**

Curriculum design requires current understanding of the discipline, understanding of current and future issues in the profession, an effective discipline based pedagogy, and understanding of the students' perspective. An example of effective curriculum design is having clear assessment rubrics and moderating meetings for markers:

*“I tend to have a very prescriptive marking key because there's so many of them [tutors] and I need the tutors to be marking at the same level, so we don't have any discrepancies, though we still have some.”*

In addition, a number of relationships need to be maintained including those with publishers of text books and learning resources and with professional and discipline affiliations.

Articulation between unit and the course requires effective course leadership from course and year coordinators to provide a focus on the unit and its relationship to the course. Data from the interviews suggested that many unit coordinators received little leadership from year or course coordinators. This clearly impacted on their ability to design an effective and comprehensive learning experience for the students.

### 3. Managing staff

Whilst the Head of School is responsible for the formal performance management of staff in the School, unit coordinators need to manage the staff teaching in the unit. This requires communication, coaching, team building and conflict management skills. Where sessional staff are involved, in the teaching of a unit, unit coordinators also require knowledge of relevant human resource processes and procedures. Participants commented on the need to develop, support and maintain an effective teaching team; including training and keeping sessional staff:

*“The tutors all get given a very detailed tutors’ file with all the activities set out so they don’t have to go hunting – it’s all pre done.” And “I have a good team – they have good skills to offer. There’s a core - ... and sometimes we’ll only change one or two. We’ll meet every couple of weeks and go through specifics.”*

A frequently noted problem was where the unit coordinators had full time colleagues teaching in the unit and no line-management responsibility for them, for example, where an Associate Professor is teaching in a unit coordinated by a level B lecturer. Often the power dynamic in this relationship impacts on the delivery of the unit.

Staff continually reiterated the importance of maintaining good relationships with technicians and other non-teaching staff:

*“I have got a team of technicians that sometimes are difficult to deal with, but technicians are known to be difficult - they like everything to be straight and neat”.*

### 4. Supporting students

Supporting students requires communication skills, counselling skills, knowledge of student responsibilities and of university services. Students approached unit coordinators with a wide range of problems, not just learning issues:

*“I talk to them, work through it and counsel them, ... it becomes quite confronting having to argue with them about their grades ... it’s a lot of emotional energy”.*

Staff expressed concern that sometimes they were advising students on issues outside their academic role and that they did not have the expertise to do this. Much time was taken up talking with students and deciding whether and where to refer them.

### 5. Dealing with university systems

This requires knowledge of current procedures and systems, access and technical competence. Staff were frustrated by the reduction in administrative support:

*“I have 12 boxes on the floor here. I personally I don’t think I should be [entering data] because I am a lecturer, I get paid good money ... to be inputting data when a data clerk could do it .. but we don’t have one. I could spend my time better matching up with my qualities as a teacher”*

A solution offered by participants was to employ staff to help with data entry and administrative tasks in large units and practicum units, where funding was available.

Further frustrations arose from being allocated inappropriate teaching spaces, for example having to split a lecture into two because the lecture theatre is not big enough; and when the tutorials are scheduled before the lecture.

Unit coordinators were concerned that they utilised many of the university systems infrequently. These systems are often subjected to changes and updates, especially to administrative systems, processes and procedures. Training was not meeting their needs:

*“workshops, well they didn’t give you anything ... I they were totally irrelevant. No school orientation, no guidelines. Had to go on own experience.*

Many of the participants considered that knowledge of these systems was not relevant academic work.

## **Discussion**

The experiences of unit coordinators identified in this research are similar to Kessel’s (1995) experiences as a course coordinator and clearly suggest the diverse nature of the unit coordinator’s role, as discussed by Moodie (2005). The various aspects of the role: organisational skills, curriculum design, managing staff teaching in the unit, supporting students, dealing with systems, and ensuring quality within a unit, illustrate the complexity of the role and the range of skills and knowledge required to undertake effective unit coordination. These findings support the intricacy of the role noted in the literature (e.g., Jackson & Kyle, 2004). However the conflict associated within the different duties of the role is not addressed in the literature, nor is the conflict with other academic duties and the impact on workload.

Whilst the unit coordinators described similar accountabilities, there was variation in how they spoke about their role as unit coordinator. All discussed and raised the issue of the large amounts of administration, the need to keep up to date in the discipline and the time-consuming nature of counselling and advising students. However there appears to be variation in which particular aspect of unit coordination is considered most salient to the role of unit coordination and for which they would like more support. Some coordinators appeared to be more concerned with recording and accountability and the associated amount of administration which reflects the findings of Moodie (2005). These staff wanted better university and administrative systems that were integrated and easier to use. Others appeared to be more cognisant of a teaching-research nexus and discipline based pedagogy and expressed a desire to keep themselves current in the discipline. For other staff another area of focus was individual student development and insufficient time for effective individual feedback, advising and counselling. This diversity may reflect variation in conceptions of teaching and be worth investigating further.

Asking staff how they can be supported in the role may provide a meaningful focus on what the unit coordinator perceives as their greatest need. Clearly some of the skills and knowledge involved are more obvious than others. Perhaps most obvious is the ability to manage university systems efficiently. Perhaps less obvious is the need for expertise in designing learning, academic counselling and managing casual staff. Therefore, a straightforward needs analysis may not identify gaps in knowledge and skills. For example, some staff viewed their role as coordination of marks and finding good staff, where ‘good’ meant autonomous. These staff appear to view unit coordination as a fairly technical activity. As one participant stated, it is about appointing sessional staff

*“who can look after themselves - if you pick the right staff unit coordination is easy”*

This contrasts with other staff members who had a stronger focus on the quality of the student learning. Their concern was to develop and support a team of tutors. As one unit coordinator explained:

*“It all starts with the tutors working for you – going over their role, what they should be looking for, where they can get help.”*

These staff members appear to regard unit coordination as building and supporting a team of teachers. Emerging from this initial research study is an hypothesis that the challenges and needs identified by staff may reflect and be limited by their understanding of the role.

Another question that arises is whether policy level role descriptions match the reality and experiences of unit coordinators. For example, the Edith Cowan University description for unit coordination, which is embedded in the University policy on academic leadership and administrative roles in faculties (Edith Cowan University, 2007), describes the role of unit coordination as a series of accountabilities: teaching and learning, community and professional engagement and service to the university. The findings from this research study support this list of accountabilities but also identifies others. Participants acknowledged responsibilities in recruiting and managing staff teaching in the unit, their role in designing and delivering the unit and the need for interaction with other key staff. However, the participants saw one of their key roles as counselling students both on academic and personal matters, even though they felt unqualified to counsel on personal matters. This important and time consuming area of their work as a unit coordinator is not explicitly identified in the role description policy. The only reference to students is to create “an environment that nurtures student progress and achievement”. In addition to this omission, the policy does not reflect the demands and complexity of the role of unit coordination. Neither does the policy identify the skills and knowledge required to be an effective unit coordinator.

The current reality emerging in our study is that the role is time-consuming, and undertaken for little reward or recognition and requires specific skills, knowledge and expertise. In addition unit coordinators are expected to engage in the full range of academic work. Little induction and training is available to undertake the role. Where it happens it appears to be *ad hoc* and dependent on the course coordinator’s understanding of the critical nature of the role. Formal training, where offered, tends to be more generic and systems based. Whereas what unit coordinators have identified is a need for ‘just in time’ and contextualised training opportunities.

### **Implications for theory, policy and practice**

The role of unit coordinator is seen as critical to the quality of the student learning experience. This exploratory study supports the view that unit coordination is an academic leadership activity. One of the compelling arguments for further investigating the role is the simple fact that almost every full time or part time academic is a unit coordinator of one or more units. It is the sheer magnitude of the unit coordinator presence at a university that makes the role pivotal for course and unit quality control and thereby the student learning experience.

The leadership literature identified by the AUTC (2003) indicates that expertise in teaching, student learning, management and administration is critical to the success of academic programmes. These programmes are comprised of individual units managed by a range of academic staff, many of whom have not received adequate induction or training in the role. Clearly the role of unit coordinator needs to be acknowledged as a leadership role in learning and teaching. The challenge then is to build the leadership capacity of staff coordinating units through developing their skills and knowledge in curriculum design, managing staff, supporting students, dealing with systems, and ensuring quality learning experiences. A flexible model of effective leadership in teaching and learning for unit coordinators is required, with associated policy, training and development.

## Conclusion

This pilot study has highlighted the lack of clarity in understanding the role of unit coordinators. This research supports the notion that unit coordination is a teaching leadership role with similarities to course coordination. The role is diverse, complex, demanding and time consuming. Success within the role depends on leadership from course coordinators, Heads of School and a supportive network of colleagues. In addition, the skills, experience, knowledge and personal characteristics of the coordinators themselves contribute to effective coordination. This study has identified a need to clarify the role of unit coordinators and ensure that staff are adequately prepared to undertake their role.

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**Table 1: Unit coordinator roles: emerging areas of responsibility and associated tasks.**

Theme	Designing curriculum	Managing staff teaching in the unit	Supporting students	Dealing with systems	Personal organisational skills
Tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration with other lecturers and industry</li> <li>• Ensuring integration with course/year</li> <li>• Writing unit outline</li> <li>• Planning curriculum</li> <li>• Designing assessment and exams</li> <li>• Teaching and learning activities</li> <li>• Choosing text books and readings</li> <li>• Planning unit schedule</li> <li>• Keeping curriculum relevant and up to date</li> <li>• Reviewing unit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruiting</li> <li>• Training</li> <li>• Supervising</li> <li>• Allocating specific duties</li> <li>• Communicating with teaching team</li> <li>• Organising and facilitating Meetings</li> <li>• Managing workload demands on sessional staffing line with remuneration for sessional teaching</li> <li>• Developing and maintaining a quality teaching team</li> <li>• Moderating marking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being available</li> <li>• Being inclusive</li> <li>• Setting and managing expectations</li> <li>• Giving effective feedback</li> <li>• Responding to student queries</li> <li>• Counselling and advising</li> <li>• Tracking progress and reporting</li> <li>• Managing appeals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promoting unit internally</li> <li>• Ensuring access to library collections</li> <li>• Timetabling</li> <li>• Employing of casual academic staff</li> <li>• Organising sessional staff access to systems</li> <li>• Assisting with enrolment</li> <li>• Obtaining and managing class lists</li> <li>• Managing plagiarism</li> <li>• Managing exam. processes</li> <li>• Reporting</li> <li>• Responding to student evaluations (UTEIs)</li> <li>• Recording and entering marks</li> <li>• Dealing with Boards of Examiners procedures and decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time management</li> <li>• Prioritising</li> <li>• Delegating</li> </ul>