ALL THE FUN AT THE FAIR: THE ONLINE CAROUSEL - 200 POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS IN 10 MONTHS: A LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVE

S. McCotter
The University of York (UNITED KINGDOM)

Abstract
As higher education institutions (HEIs) seek to diversify their income streams amid unprecedented competition for students and ever challenging funding opportunities, so the sector has embraced a range of flexible approaches to provision including Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS), distance learning, virtual learning and online learning, all with varying degrees of success. But as competition for students now moves to a global frontier, the pressure on innovative online provision to not only remain successful, through delivery of quality provision, with effective quality enhancement measures in place, it must do so in an environment where governance structures were designed with traditional campus provision in mind, which cannot always cope with the accelerated timeframes, and near continual student admissions points, needed to support online learning provision. This paper, whilst adopting a UK focus, draws upon leadership theory to examine the successful practices adopted in embedding online master’s provision in a UK university through an external partnership approach and a carousel mechanism which allows students to step on and step off provision multiple times during the course of their studies. The paper primarily considers the leadership role needed to support not only this approach but also to support an expert academic team of online instructors, making their first soiree into online provision. In so doing the paper also highlights the adjustments, developments and continuous professional development practices needed to maintain excellent postgraduate provision consistently, against the accelerated pace of a carousel system which delivers 200 students (and rising), incrementally, but rapidly, across a 10 month period.

Keywords: Online learning, leadership in higher education; moocs, distance learning, virtual learning environments, team leadership; online support.

1 INTRODUCTION
A carousel is defined [1] as: a cylindrical revolving system, often bedecked with chairs of a novel design aimed at providing frivolity for fair goers. Historically, too, the term referred to jockeys riding in a particular pattern. Whilst this paper does not seek to infer higher education (HE) is pursued solely for fun by students (though it is hoped when approached for the right reasons all students, on the right programme and with the right academic leadership, would always get enjoyment from their studies in tandem with the related challenges), this paper does, however, seek to use the carousel metaphor as a novel mechanism in illustrating how online provision, within a UK HE system, can provide accelerated postgraduate education. The metaphor also denotes an actual carousel process of organising the formation of modular delivery which enables students to step on and off the cycle of study on a modular basis where fees are structured per module, not by year. Modular delivery is in a virtual forum, not simply distant, and with a particular predictive formation. This approach attracts home as well as global students; in a format designed to be compatible with contemporary lifestyles where all study and contact is virtual - not campus based. It enables HE institutions (HEIs) to diversify income streams and attract scalable student numbers amid a challenging and increasingly competitive sector. This paper also highlights, that in order for such an approach to be implemented effectively, it depends upon successful leadership in order to deal with the complexity, scale, accelerated pace and a varied stakeholder arena in which the learning occurs. It must also meet the challenge of relevant, quality HE provision – whilst being seen as value for money by fee paying students. Importantly, the scope of this paper does not deal with leadership decisions or rationale at senior university level surrounding the choice or model of online provision. (That rather, is considered here as a successful and informed strategic leadership decision, already taken, and one that provides an important backdrop to this paper). The paper does, however, seek to adopt a deeper but much narrower focus through its examination of the importance of leadership in implementing contemporary online provision within a traditional academic School / Department context. It focuses primarily on the initial growth of the implementation phase and as such is an exploratory case study in nature. It does not seek to be a compendium of the leadership
approaches which should be adopted, but rather aims to be an initial step in researching and making recommendations on practices to support an exciting and contemporary area of postgraduate provision through an evolving leadership lens. As such it seeks to take a different but nonetheless related perspective on the approach adopted by Australian universities [2] and their examination of distributed leadership in online provision. The focus on the Australian context is also relevant here given online provision in many universities there, is now considering what the second generation of such provision will involve.

A near versus far leadership approach [3] and principled leadership [4] is particularly pertinent to this paper given the focus here on the proximity of programme leadership and in-School online directorship, to both online students and to online academic design and lecturing teams. But the near leadership preference is also considered to be particularly relevant given it seeks to challenge more historical stereotypes of leadership. Northouse’s definition [5] of leadership presents a practical foundation on which to begin to scope relevant aspects of leadership within an online education setting. e.g. its reference to relationships and influencing momentum toward an agreed and jointly accepted aim. Whilst distributed leadership is important [2] [6] a cautious note is raised here given it focuses less on behaviours and more on task and role holders per se. More recent research of distributed leadership has also contrasted the term with shared leadership [7] noting the frequency for research on the former to have been focused on larger groups and CEOs etc. while the latter, has been researched mainly within smaller group contexts. There is too, a tendency for the term leadership to be used to refer to different aspects of leadership depending upon the context – an inference that greater clarity is still required within the definition and use of the term. Earlier work [8] recognises while there is shared space between distributive leadership and shared leadership frameworks, they are not one. Feng et al [7] offers clarity by determining distributed leadership is best seen as an umbrella term. Further, the number of authors endorsing the virtues of distributive leadership is increasing in recent times including: [9] [10] [11] as well as a pertinent reference to its influence on organisational change [12]. Whilst some [7] also highlight that shared and distributive leadership have blurred boundaries as well as giving way collectively, to a blend of approaches and insights. Of note, is work based within an educational setting [13] which points to distributive leadership in challenging times. The view of vertical and horizontal leadership, and how specific tasks may be allocated to different leaders is also noted [14]. Of particular relevance in this paper is the determination that it is unplanned events which impact employees and which fail to bring reassurance to those involved in such events that tend to evoke more spontaneous collaborative leadership where role holders seek to help one another [15]. But research also contends that leadership cannot be adhoc but rather still requires focus in order to benefit organisation performance [16]. It is proposed here too, that the leadership approach considered here contributes to Thorpe et al’s (2011: 246) [17] call for wider research in to leadership approaches advocating the research arena can provide scope for niche case studies “which allow for different configurations of leadership, requiring a multi-voiced and multi-layered approach where influence can be exerted by anyone present, at any time”.

The educational domain of distributive leadership also evokes the work of Harris 2009:5 [18] who speaks of interdependence and the reciprocal nature of effective distributive leadership – points later endorsed by Northhouse [10]. But it is the work of Marshall 2006 [19] which connects both teaching and learning as well as online education, to distributive leadership, calling for leadership approaches which are inclusive of everyone involved in online university education, with particular importance placed on the online environment. Spillane [20] calls for the need to allow leaders to have opportunity to lead while Hargreaves and Fink [21] extoll how a sustainable approach within distributed leadership can replicate itself and thus be maintained. But they also infer it is similar to an eco-system i.e. needing the leadership of others in order for it to continue to evolve when it is practiced and shared, in a manner in which others can witness, experience it and ultimately emulate it as a leadership approach. But it is the recognition by Holt et al [2] as well as work of Fullan et al [22] which resonates most with the complexity of online provision, wherein these researchers emphasise the importance of distributed leadership in maintaining excellence and developing aptitude across all aspects of an online education process. The extent of this complexity, they advocate, is ongoing and covers areas of staff and student diversity; technology; role of micro, macro stakeholders within an increasingly competitive area of the HE sector. Adding the looming effects of Brexit on the UK HE sector and this complexity, it is considered, will be prolonged - requiring a particular policy and lobbying focus [23]. As such the work of O’Toole et al [24] seems particularly apt within the context of online learning and the complex system needed to sustain it. That is, the authors highlight that when leaders working within the online system are particularly interdependent, such interdependence calls for greater levels of activity by them in order to actively seek information and converse with others involved in the same system. That said, the authors also
emphasise the need for those interdependent leaders to be equally active in how their interdependent activities are orchestrated.

Given the complexity of online learning systems, role clarity is vital among all players, but particularly if distributive leadership is to be effective. The innovative and virtual aspects of online learning, whilst having many similarities with campus based provision, are distinct in other ways, not-least, due to new roles required, including instructional designers (IDs). It is the IDs who ostensibly navigate the pedagogical space between the lead academic responsible for module content and structure and the articulation of how best to present same for students learning via a virtual platform with no face to face contact. In that vein, Brigance [25] and Clark and Gottfredson [26] endorse the need for a swiftness of response to the eclectic and accelerated pace of the market which online learning providers find themselves in. This in turn adds to the design and implementation of modules compared to campus based provision, given the level of detail which needs to be considered before materials and technology can be released to students who are learning without face-to-face contact [27]. It does however, present a new challenge within the online HE environment that of creating a culture whereby space is created and collaboration with IDs is nurtured. As such time must be invested in ensuring such collaboration can foster, grow and be sustained [25]. One approach to help is offered by Kotter 2008 [28] who calls for a distinction between managing the intricacies of a situation versus leading faculty toward a vision. It is the latter, he suggests, that online faculty may be more responsive too, a suggestion which Brigance [25] encourages online leaders to take note of if, that is, HEIs are to meet the existing as well as expected challenges of this new era in university provision. Coupled with that Goodnick [29] advocates the need for paying careful attention to the continuous professional development (CPD) of academic OL faculty, in order for online learning to have a better chance of succeeding in the long-term. It is not, as Brigance points out [25] enough to assume that simply investing in technology and transferring approaches and materials from campus based provision to online provision – rather it is much, much more than that.

As with taught provision (or campus based education in a face to face, taught environment) quality online provision is not just expected but demanded from students and institutions, and while a plethora of measurements exist nationally and internationally to measure the extent of such quality ‘taught’ HE provision – e.g. The National Student Survey (NSS) [34]; Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) [35]; as well as league tables such as The Times Higher (THE) [36], The Guardian [37] etc. not all universities may extend newly introduced online provision to such measurements. As such increasing importance is placed upon the quality of the leadership of such online provision, particularly in-School at the implementation stage – where project management and module build, meets the reality of the student experience and academic teaching expertise.

Increasingly, efforts to minimise bias and widen access to HEIs by applicants who might otherwise have avoided university level education, are being pursued by UK institutions. In 2015, a report by a consortium of UK universities and agencies to the Higher Education funding council for England (HEFCE), now the Office for Students (OFS), [7] highlighted a number of factors impacting continuation and attainment gaps in UK HE, including, ‘social, cultural and economic capital,’ how students’ finances, networking and how well support is experienced by students and how frequently, all impact their study experiences. All adding to the already complex arena which is higher education – now with a burgeoning online aspect – and growing at a speed of knots.

2 METHODOLOGY

Feng et al [7] ask the question, ‘what exactly is distributed within distributive leadership?’ As such, literature offers some suggestions in terms of identifying the content of such distribution including observation as a basis of identification Pohland [30] where he states: “Through the collection of documents the participant observer establishes his kinship with the historian … in the search for ‘best evidence’. Still further that “…typically the researcher does not enter the field with a specific set of hypothesis and a fixed design in this methodological approach.” However, such an approach is not applied here given the inherent weaknesses and ethical issues it presents. Given 2008 [31], however offers an alternative through the historiography approach to methodological design. Here he suggests [31] it offers a reflexive approach which can involve (though not an exhaustive list) “critical reflection of the authenticity, subjectivity, and authority of various information sources”. Yin 2016 [32] emphasises how not all research requires a methodological design framework beforehand – that it is the decision of the author as to the extent to which such detail is presented at the outset of the study. Given the exploratory and initial scoping aim of this paper, Yin’s [33] guidance is considered to be particularly appropriate. In addition, Yin [33] considers the key principles of qualitative
research including “explicitly attending to real world contextual conditions” whilst further pointing to the importance of a variety of sources of evidence as opposed to one singular source. As such, this scoping paper, also seeks to draw on Yin’s guidance on an exploratory case study .i.e. an area of investigation of events in real time and their constituent parts, their patterns of rotation, approaches and “organizational and managerial processes”, etc.

3 RESULTS

As the scoping nature of this paper is set against Yin’s [33] case study methodology and Given’s [31] historiology approach, this section presents a reflection of some key responsibility areas for online learning, as a mechanism for articulating what may form the content of distributed leadership. As such it is intended this will form the basis of future study – it is not intended to be exhaustive. In doing so it is intended this section will give a hint as to the complexity and challenges which online learning leaders consider on a regular basis.

Table 1: Key areas of focus within Online Learning Leadership – a reflection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Reflection</th>
<th>Key considerations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategic congruence</td>
<td>Accurately interpreting organisational and department strategic direction</td>
<td>Support and understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forward planning</td>
<td>Anticipating resourcing needs</td>
<td>Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment</td>
<td>Rapid change</td>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment and Selection</td>
<td>Facilitating multiple admissions entry points across the OL programme cycle</td>
<td>Understand the applicant and the market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Supporting CPD needs with a range of academic expertise</td>
<td>Constant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Agility [26]</td>
<td>Creating collaborative networks of support</td>
<td>Creating virtual support platforms as opposed to campus based.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple stakeholder arena</td>
<td>Investing time in building stakeholder relationships</td>
<td>Respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role clarity</td>
<td>The need to split / merge some traditional academic roles</td>
<td>Consulting and rationalising making the case.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Experience</td>
<td>Vital</td>
<td>Quality, Quality, Quality – continuously.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Traditional vs Contemporary</td>
<td>Embrace, train, collaborate and reflect.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: The merry-go-round / carousel analogy – key reflections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Multiple entry points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cyclical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapid growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condensed and accelerated decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Learning Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 CONCLUSIONS

Drawing upon the literature review as well as upon reflections in this case study, a number of conclusions are drawn which it is intended will form the basis for future research developments in this area.
1 Feng et al [7] whilst investigating distributive leadership and its benefits, encourages the need not to lose sight of the impact of formal leadership practices on same.

2 The changing nature of online learning as referred to by Holt et al [2] should not be underestimated.

3 Recognition of the positive contribution which distributed leadership can have in an educational setting [2].

4 That distributive leadership involves influencers as well as followers but also allows for such followers to in turn influence the leader(s) as well as one another. Northouse [10].

5 The need for leadership to be applied and for those in leadership roles to have opportunity to act as leaders Spillane [20] Hargreaves and Fink [21].

6 Interdependent leaders needing to plan and orchestrate their interdependent activities whilst actively courting the opinions of other stakeholders within the online system O'Toole et al [24].

7 That online learning is complex and fast paced often requiring new expert roles, as such it is not a mere transferring of campus based approaches.

8 Online learning is ever changing and there is scope to look to other national context to learn from their experiences, as they approach the next generation in online learning provision.

9 The need to constantly focus upon a quality student experience as they too will often be interacting with an online learning platform for the first time, whilst being more familiar with traditional education formats.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Professor Peter Ball, the epitome of best practice distributive leadership. The York Management School Senior Management Team. The University of York Online Implementation team; Project Leaders and affiliated project colleagues. The York Management School Online Academic Teams.

REFERENCES


