

The Hidden Role of the Administration: – Building a home in international and interdisciplinary programmes

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the often overlooked aspect of the administration’s role in contributing to students’ learning environments in higher education. There are many challenges faced by students, teachers and administrators involved in international and interdisciplinary programmes. Looking at the example of the GDG programmes at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Lund University, this paper draws attention to some of the practices introduced by the administrative staff to address some of the challenges, and in particular, in creating a sense of belonging. It then places these practices in a theoretical context drawing on concepts from microculture in creating a positive learning environment. Finally, it reflects on how harnessing the resources and encouraging the development of administrative staff could play a significant role in improving the overall education of students, especially in international and interdisciplinary programmes.

1. INTRODUCTION

For a university that strives to offer a high level of education to international students, there are many challenges faced when engaging with diverse student groups. It is likely that many needs are left unfulfilled by the basic administration and pedagogical structures in place at the university, faculty level and department levels. In other words, what may have worked for a relatively homogenous group may not be sufficient when admitting international students into complex programme structures. These challenges are likely to contribute significantly to the students’ overall experience and broader learning environment, and can have a direct impact on a programme’s and university’s retention and graduation rates, as well as their reputation.

This paper is based on the experiences of the administrative staff at Graduate School, an organization at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Lund University, which is responsible for three interdisciplinary and international master’s programmes- Development Studies, Global Studies and Social Studies of Gender- henceforth referred to as the GDG programmes. It is written from the point of view of the administrative staff and is primarily a reflection. After problematizing the experiences of the GDG programme students, the chapter bring attention to some of the practices introduced by the administrative staff. These practices are placed in a theoretical context of attempting to create a more positive learning environment for the students. Finally, the potential for administrative staff to contribute to strategic developments in complex student bodies and programme structures is discussed.

This presentation draws on a contribution to be included in an e-book publication by IIIIEE, “Diversity in Education: Crossing Cultural, Disciplinary and Professional Divides” (forthcoming, 2015).

2. MAIN CHALLENGENS OF THE GDG PROGRAMMES

The three GDG programmes were initiated in 2007 after long deliberations at the faculty regarding the thematic content and structure of the programmes. Significant energy and effort was made to create the necessary structures and routines in order for these programmes to become sustainable. Once these main structures were in place, other challenges appeared. These required a different approach, one that regards students in a more holistic and inclusive way. Some of the main challenges that emerged involved: culturally and academically diverse student bodies; a variety of expectations; lack of

common ethos; and complex courses and program structure. These aspects contributed to a negative learning environment, where students could feel dissatisfied, lonely, and lacked a sense of belonging.

Some of these challenges can be addressed by the programme directors or course coordinators. But with other more directly pedagogical issues to focus on, the academic staff is limited in the amount of support they can offer.

3. THE ROLE OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

The overall role of administrative staff is to provide support to students and teachers so that they can focus on the primary goal, which is teaching and learning. Still, the definition of administrative staff in higher education can be broad. Szekeres (2004), who has contributed to the scholarly work on in this field, defines the role of administrative staff in higher education as people “in universities who have a role that is predominantly administrative in nature, i.e. their focus is about either supporting the work of academic staff, dealing with students on non-academic matters or working in an administrative function” (Szekeres, 2004). The main definition of administrative staff thus becomes a negative description: a non-academic.

It is clear though that there is a strong interdependency between students, administrative staff and teachers, where each role is dependent on and has a unique relationship with the other two roles (see *Fig. 1* below). While there is ample research on the purely pedagogical relationship between students and teachers, the relationship between administrative staff and students, as well as students and administrative staff and teachers, though perhaps obvious, has received limited attention in academic literature.

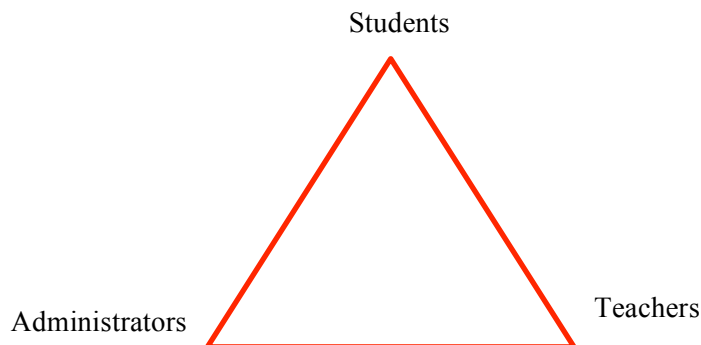


Fig. 1: Triangular relationship of interdependency

Administrative staff have also been referred to as the “invisible workers” Szekeres (2004). One explanation of the invisibility, offered by (Castleman, T. & Allen, M, 1995) is that the role was previously more secretarial in nature, with a supporting function for teachers and a nurturing function for students, and continues to be a predominantly female workforce. It was (and many may argue still is) thus not as relevant to pedagogical issues.

There has however been a growing body of research on the role of administration in higher education, especially from Australia e.g. (Castleman, T. & Allen, M, 1995); Graham, C [2012, 2013]; Szekeres, J [2004], Sebalj, D et al. [2012]) as well as a growing body by professional staff themselves (e.g. Conway, M [2000], Graham, C [2012, 2013], Szekeres, J [2004] and Whitchurch, C [2010]). These authors have made significant contributions to understanding the role of this often overlooked workforce and raising awareness about the implications of professionalization and organizational development. Along with other sectors, there has been a global trend in professionalizing academic staff. In addition there is also a growth in diversity regarding students’ needs, higher expectations when it comes to student-centered services, as well as increased competition from other centers of higher learning. Despite these significant changes in the global makeup of higher education, some of

the more conservative views and structures pertaining to administrative staff remain in place in many organizations in higher education.

4. AN ENABLING LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Creating an enabling learning environment is of paramount importance. According to Ryan and Viete (2009) there are several important aspects for successful learning for international students: feelings of belonging; being valued as a person with knowledge; and being able to communicate effectively, creatively, and with confidence (p. 309). From this perspective it can be understood that an enabling learning environment is closely linked with a student's sense of belonging and meaningful interaction with others. The question remains how actors working at the university can facilitate students moving from feeling a limited sense of belonging at the beginning of their studies to feeling engaged.

A project developed by Katarina Mårtensson and Torgny Roxå looking at organizational cultures at the meso-level at universities focuses on different forms of microcultures. They define a microculture as a culture that exists in the meso level, and where its members are perceived, by themselves and/or by others to share a context over time (Roxå, 2014, p. 39). They develop a model including four different types of microcultures (see *fig. 2* below):

- The Square, based on weak ties and no shared responsibility
- The Market, based on weak ties with shared responsibilities
- The Club, based on shared responsibilities and strong ties
- The Commons, based on strong ties and shared responsibilities

These typologies can be useful in explaining an intended change in organizational culture from one where there is a limited sense of belonging (the Square) to one based on a high sense of connection (the Commons), which also can be understood as a form of enabling learning environment.

5. THE CASE OF THE GDG PROGRAMMES

The primary tasks for the staff managing the GDG programmes include marketing, web administration, admissions, registration, schedules and room bookings, managing learning platforms, reporting of grades, course evaluations, managing syllabi, archiving, and study advising. Within these primary tasks there is a heavy focus on communication with students and teachers through email, meetings and one-on-one consultations by phone or in person.¹ But as noted earlier, in practice the tasks of the administrative staff cover many other components due to the dynamic nature of the student body and the broad range of problems that can surface.

The following section reviews some of the activities and initiatives introduced by the administrative staff to facilitate the change in microculture to be more conducive for an enabling learning environment.

As noted earlier, during the initial phase, the main focus of the administrative staff was to build up structures and routines that would enable the basic functioning of the programs. After this start-up phase, the more complex challenges of creating an enabling learning environment were addressed, and the administration began to actively work on these. All activities were developed and implemented in close cooperation with the director of studies and with support of the three programme directors.

Some of the practices introduced by the administrative staff for the GDG programmes are included below.

5.1 Transition and arrival for incoming students

- The course "Summer Platform" is a voluntary course that introduces students to foundational skills and knowledge that could help in their transition to their studies. Designed with input from the programme directors, it includes literature from their programmatic themes (development studies, global studies and gender studies) as well as an introduction and guidelines to academic writing at Lund University. This academic writing component includes an academic writing quiz where students can assess their knowledge and receive immediate

¹ There are additional tasks (i.e. secretary in the Board), but for the purpose of this chapter the list is limited to the basic administration.

feedback and has been created in close collaboration with the Academic Support Centre. In order to make the platform more engaging and personal, two second-year mentors have also been selected per programme to engage with incoming students. The Summer Platform was initiated in 2014 and has run two years to date. An evaluation is conducted after each round, leading to alterations and improvements. Feedback has been positive in general, and the goal is to make the platform more tightly interwoven with the mandatory courses, and thereby raise the level of engagement.

- Meet your Coordinator Day and Programme Introduction: Along with other programmes, Graduate School organizes a voluntary Meet your Coordinator Day as well as a mandatory Programme Introduction for all arriving students. At Meet your Coordinator Day students have a chance to ask practical questions as well as meet fellow students in a relaxed atmosphere and play a get-to-know-each-other bingo game where students are encouraged to talk and learn more about each other. The Programme Introduction is the official start to the programme where students register themselves and receive important information about their programme. The administration arranges the day, which is divided into three levels: GDG-level, programme level, and department level, providing students with an introduction to the complex programme structure.

5.2 Social events

- Annual potluck (in the autumn)
- Soup lunch with student chaplain and student health counsellors (early winter)
- Lucia fika (coffee/tea)² (mid-December)
- Internship lunch (mid-February, co-organized with student union) where 2nd year students who have come back from their internships share their experiences with 1st year students
- Spring lunch with invited guests (beginning of April)

5.3 Links to Career – life after studies

- Development Practitioner Seminar series: Development practitioners are invited to lead seminars where they share with students specific challenges within a certain field, their career paths, and how they approach a work-life balance. The idea is to give students insight into what careers in the specific positions, fields, and organisations is like, to connect theory with practice, and to help them build up a network with classmates, other programme students, and the presenters. The administration has planned and implemented all seminars in the series.
- Career Development Day: A day organized around providing graduating students more practical tools and skills for their next stage in searching for work in the development field. The day includes a presentation on current trends and how to build a toolbox, a panel of practitioners from different fields as well as workshops on soft skills and networking.
- Master's Thesis Conference: Since 2012 the Graduate School administration has organized an Annual Master's Thesis Conference. This is an opportunity for master's students to present their research to new audiences, gain feedback from PhD students and other academic staff, and experience what being part of an academic conference can be like.

5.4 Reflection Workshops

- Timeline workshop: A time-line workshop is held during the first week of classes where students share with each other what factors have contributed to their choice of studying their particular programme from a personal, regional and global perspective.

² Lucia is considered a hallmark of the winter holiday season in Sweden, and is celebrated around December 13th, St. Lucia. It is often celebrated by dressing up as Lucia wearing candles in their hair, music, and classic foods and drinks including mulled wine, saffron buns, and gingerbread cookies.

- Cross-cultural communication workshop: Another workshop focuses on cross-cultural communication, using a game format to raise awareness about the assumptions and expectations of ourselves and others.

5.5 Communication with teachers and students

- Regular meetings with teachers and programme directors: The administration meets with programme directors on a regular basis to review, evaluate and plan the developments of the programme. In addition, the administration meets with the teaching teams after each course to review the course evaluations and plan for any developments and changes for the next course. This is considered vital since many of the teachers come from different departments and may not necessarily meet otherwise, leading to the risk that the interdisciplinary course does not become cohesive.
- Newsflash: The Graduate School Newsflash is sent out about twice a month with a collection of important, interesting and relevant news, opportunities and deadlines from the Faculty of Social Sciences as well as elsewhere. The main audience of the Newsflash is current students.
- Graduate School Newsletter: The Graduate School newsletter is published twice annually as a means of creating a shared identity by bringing attention to some of the core activities and actors in the GDG programmes. The main audiences of the Newsletter are teachers, current students and alumni.

5.6 Improved Physical Learning Environment

- When the GDG programmes were initiated, the classrooms were based in a separate building from the administration, and were in relatively poor condition. There was no meeting place for the students. With strong urging from the administrative staff, the administrative office of the GDG programmes was moved to a newly renovated building where the classrooms could be adjacent, and students would obtain a Student Lounge with a simple kitchen facility and group room to meet and work.

The initiatives listed here are a selection of those that have been developed and implemented by the administrative staff. Initiatives are introduced and developed on a continuous basis, where those that work are developed or adjusted, while others may be discontinued if the effort required to realize them is seen as not being worth the impact.

6. REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

When the programmes were in their initial years, there were regular complaints about the poor physical studying environment, confusing structure, and poor means of informing students. When students were first admitted to a programme, they had no sense of shared responsibility, where each began their studies with their individual backgrounds, interests, expectations, and life circumstances. Referring to the basic microcultures as proposed by Roxå and Mårtensson, the students during the initial years could be located in the Square. In the figure below, the original model proposed by Roxå and Mårtensson has been adapted to include a visualization of the change brought about through actively introducing new practices. The Square type represents a weak microculture with weak ties and a low sense of shared responsibility, which in turn can contribute negatively to a student's learning environment. By introducing activities and initiatives to build an enabling learning environment, the administrative staff has sought to move the students from the Square quadrant into the Commons. It is important to note that this conceptualization is not based on empirical evidence, but only on a theoretical and ideal form of attempting to create a positive change in the microculture at the level of the programmes.

	<i>Degree of significance to each other</i> High significance Strong ties High trust Sense of belonging	<i>Degree of significance to each other</i> Low significance Weak ties Low trust Sense of coexistence
<i>Experience of a shared responsibility</i> Do things together Negotiate what to do Are impacted by what the others do	The Commons 	The Market
<i>No experience of a shared responsibility</i> Do things in parallel Do not interfere in the others' doings No negotiation	The Club 	The Square



Figure 2: Based on the four basic types of microcultures as developed by Roxå & Mårtensson (2015). This figure adapts this to the microculture for the GDG programmes. Here the administrative staff is placed in the commons along with the programme directors, some teachers and some students. The arrow raises the question of what possible factors can contribute to changing an organizational culture to one from the Square to a Commons.

This experience is based on programmes including students and teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds and disciplines that lack a natural meeting place and faced numerous challenges. Nonetheless, it is difficult to assess to what degree these activities have been successful in moving the microculture from resembling a Square to one resembling a Commons. To make such a claim would require an empirical study over time. What can be noted, however, is an overall improvement in student satisfaction and stability in the programmes based on subjective viewpoints from students and staff alike. There is a noticeable decrease in student complaints, higher satisfaction with the programmes, higher attendance at events and meetings, many of which are also reflected at teacher meetings. While it is difficult to argue that the main reason for this has been the administration, having a solid administrative structure, combined with efforts that actively contribute to building up trust and a sense of identity, has likely played a part in this transformation.

The initiatives included in this chapter were developed with the support of the study director, the programme directors, as well as the teachers. They were developed, introduced and sustained in an organizational culture that allows for administrative staff to take on such tasks and encourages professional development. It can also be argued that the programmes' survival and good reputation depended on the administrative staff's efforts. The administrative staff is seen as a resource to be harnessed and professionally developed in order to contribute to the organizational development and survival. These experiences could be applied to other similar contexts involving complex programme structures and diverse student bodies. The role of administrative staff could be lifted in a new era where working at an academic institution without a PhD should not be a limitation on career possibilities or involvement in strategic decision-making and planning. After all, most administrative staff have at least a master's degree and many have professional experience from outside of academia-

both of which are resources which are not always appreciated or harnessed in traditional academic environments. Instead of continuing with a hierarchy of academics and non-academics, it may be worth considering how administrative staff might play an increasingly important role in the university's strategy to become more international, professional and competitive. It is in the university's interest to attract and retain skilled staff – both academic and administrative- who can join each other in creating a positive learning and teaching environment that encourages a microculture similar to the Commons, where high levels of trust and a sense of shared responsibility are encouraged.

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