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Subject coordinator role and responsibility: experiences of Australian academics

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The subject coordinator role has changed with the implementation of new management practices in universities. Discussions from in-depth interviews with subject coordinators in an Australian university are analysed with a focus on insights into the changing role with reference to Value, Rarity, Inmutability and Organisation (VRIO) and institutional theories. Based on the interviews we argue that sustainable subject coordinator roles need guidelines on the role and responsibilities of the coordinator, collegiality through mentoring and collaboration, training for successful handover of leadership positions, and professional development opportunities. Universities will also need to provide adequate resources and ensure workloads do not inhibit academic performance and work-life balance.

Keywords leadership, training, administration, subject coordinator, interview, Australia.

Changing role of an academic: subject coordinator
The aim of the paper is to present the perceptions of scope of the subject coordinators about their roles and responsibilities, and the challenges faced in the role, especially when universities use mixed modes for teaching and learning. The world of academia has traditionally emphasised collegiality across research and teaching practices where leadership and management were used as frameworks (Spillane, 2006) to develop academics into effective members within their university community. Changes have occurred within the normal daily cycle and responsibilities of an academic, as asserted by Nixon et al (2001:299) "higher education is undergoing a series of complex overlapping changes, which are profoundly affecting its organisational structures, traditional practices, and the way in which its institutions and those who
work within them are viewed by the public'. These changes have a number of drivers and inhibitors, including, the dramatic increase in undergraduate and postgraduate enrolments, changes in work conditions, new courses, advancing technology, the introduction of distance learning, and decreases in funding (Marginson, 2000; Nagy, 2012, Nixon et al, 2001).

Having a distinctive personality, good community networks, and a reputation as a knowledgeable scholar were once the main criteria for recognition, advancement and career progression (Adams, 1998). Over time, this perception has been challenged. Participation in research today increasingly depends upon the ability to generate income through grants and to produce work with measurable outcomes (Ehrich et al, 2011) Research output has become intrinsically linked with the reputation and prestige of academics and their institutions (Hawes and Keillor, 2002; Williams and Van Dyke, 2004). Research policies that aim to measure both the quantitative and qualitative outputs of academics at national and institutional levels have led to questioning of what it means to be an academic (Nagy, 2012; Rowbotham, 2012). The role of the academic has become more dynamic and involves new challenges (Nixon et al, 2001). The contemporary academic has multiple roles such as lecturer, tutor, researcher and service provider to the university and the wider community. Academics must be able to 'support students, support the organisation, and share expertise in the wider sense within and outside the university' (MacFarlane, 2007:265).

From a teaching perspective, Kolsaker (2008) suggests that universities are social artefacts in which managerial systems are laid over the existing collegial system, resulting in a hybrid organisation which is flexible enough to change to meet the needs of the society which it serves. An integral but often neglected role in academia is that of the ‘subject coordinator’. In this paper the terms ‘subject coordinator’ and ‘coordinator’ are used interchangeably, and represent a leadership position in a subject in one or more standard teaching terms. The next section of the paper presents the various definitions of the term ‘coordinator’ as the first stage of this discussion.

The role and scope of the subject coordinator
Several titles equate with a subject coordinator, including, chair, manager, leader, or administrator; the terms represent a person who has ownership and accountability for a single subject of study (Nagy, 2012). The subject coordinator is an academic with a chairing role added to the normal duties involved with being a lecturer, a researcher and an administrator (Paterson, 1999). The subject coordinator may be an
academic ‘who (is) not necessarily in formal management positions, [but] leads by their academic credibility and enthusiasm, and anyone who is willing and able to carry out the initiative’ (Bolden et al, 2009:264). Yet, Nixon et al (2001) postulate that subject coordinators are part of a middle management tier within a university, although not all academics take on the post of coordinator. MacFarlane (2007:267), however, suggests that ‘newer or more inexperienced lecturers are routinely required to execute administrative service roles, such as admissions work and undergraduate course management, as a “rite of passage”’. The diversity and scope in the definition highlight the need to address the collective understanding of the tasks undertaken by coordinators.

The academic subject coordinator’s pivotal connection between students, other academics in the subject, and the administration of the university requires empowerment and support which, for many reasons, is not always forthcoming. The coordination role is layered with administrative complexity. At any given time a coordinator is responsible for numerous administration tasks linked to the key academic functions of teaching, research and service, but an increase in administrative workloads affects the time available for research and service, essentially making coordinators time poor (McInnis, 2000; Sellers-Rubio et al, 2010). Administrative tasks have become more time consuming (Tight, 2010) and crept insidiously into daily academic tasks, becoming an added dimension not always properly accounted for in workload models (Hornibrook, 2012; Kovačić and Green, 2012). In teaching, examples of administrative duties include: consultation hours, preparing coursework; reading journals within the scope of the subject, selecting readings and textbooks; assessment marking; processing results; developing timetables; pastoral care and referral; maintaining technological literacy; and attending open days, amongst other tasks. (Davis, 1998; Paterson, 1999; Sokoloff and Cohen, 2006). The daily routine of a coordinator differs between schools, departments and universities (Paterson, 1999; see also Uhl Bien, 2006) and can lead to ambiguity in codification of the actual tasks undertaken. This is further exacerbated by the evolving role of the coordinator during the challenges faced within their working environment.

The role of the coordinator takes on many guises including leader, educator, and manager, all of which are bundled into administrative expectations by the university. Middlehurst et al (2009:320) explain that ‘the role of course leader typically involves no line-management relationship with individual academics and other professionals, but a requirement to draw on their resources to develop modules and co-
ordinate these to form programs'. This points towards a key attribute of a coordinator: leadership.

The coordinator should ideally possess key personal characteristics including credibility and enthusiasm (Bolden et al., 2009) along with leadership ability. Leadership in higher education occurs and functions in all areas and levels of the university; it may emerge in individuals or groups with formal roles. This point is reiterated by Bolden et al. (2009:266) who comment:

'individual and inspirational leadership is not only required at the top of the organisation with the individuals (whether or not part of the formal hierarchy) facilitating engagement, but is present across the whole organisation.'

According to Kenny (2009), universities should foster a culture of leadership in open communication, shared ideas in innovative teaching and research practices, collegiality, transparency, and flexibility at all levels of the institution. At the personal level, Allan et al. (2006:42) suggest 'a leader should be able to manage and shape the environment in conjunction with attaining goals through the effective use of personal attributes, interpersonal abilities, and technical management skills' (see also Middlehurst et al. (2009) for different leadership types).

Being an educator and a team leader are other attributes of a coordinator. The role of the coordinator in higher education is sometimes shared amongst academics within a faculty or school. This shared role is referred to as 'horizontal' leadership which encompasses collaboration with academics who may also have previously taken on a coordinator role (Middlehurst et al., 2009). The coordinator is ideally a lecturer who is well established within a subject, by way of knowledge and skill, and has been chosen to fulfil duties of a more managerial and administrative nature (Paterson, 1999; Sokoloff and Cohen, 2006). Mulready et al. (2009:1) state that the coordinator must be an academic who holds a 'continuing academic appointment or a fixed term contract' and who takes on the role of leader of the teaching and assessment teams (Mulready et al., 2009) in pursuit of a collective vision (Wilson, 2002).

With all its guises and responsibilities, the coordinator role is clearly a leadership position. The powers and limitations of leadership bring particular challenges. Subject leadership in a university requires champions to ensure the administrative and pastoral care tasks are effectively accomplished (Harris and Leberman, 2012), a view that concurs with some literature on brand champions in business (Uen et al., 2012). Without a champion's desire to stand up proactively and do what
has to be done, a team member can easily leave things to the other team members, or transfer responsibility to other aspects of the bureaucracy (Carlström, 2012). The leader acting effectively as a champion can obviate some of the Ringelmann Effect (social loafing) in a subject team (Moede, 1927) and retain appropriate focus on the key performance indicators that running a university subject entails. This is a difficult balancing act; accordingly increased stress and degrees of unhealthiness emanating from participation in the system have emerged in middle management (Gilbert et al, 2012; Leavitt, 2007).

Whilst the position is strongly administrative, the coordinator still needs to maintain personal academic achievement in research projects, service to the university, and teaching (lectures and tutorials), three professional roles that often overlap. The networked nature of the coordinator role reflects similar observations made about contemporary middle-level leaders in other sectors (Creed, 2011; Sawhney and Nambisan, 2010). The coordinator is a network hub fulfilling an essential switching function in the organisational network. Each key role of the coordinator requires multiple levels of attention, indicated by the numerous two way connections. Embedded within university bureaucracy, the role of the coordinator is predicted either to flow with richness or to falter with blockages, depending on the nature of connections and communication throughout the subject team and organisational network (Cohen, 2012; Pfeffer, 2012). The two way feedback between administration and the performance targets of the university indicates the conduit role of the academic chair (Jarvis, 2012). If performance in any of the three channels: research, teaching or service, is below par, the outcome feeds back to administration. It is also notable that an under performing coordinator directly diminishes key outcomes for the university. The challenge is balancing the multiple streams of responsibility and communication as a lynchpin between frequently overlapping or conflicting roles while serving current priorities. This suggests a continuing need for deeper knowledge about the role of a coordinator.

From an institutional theory perspective (Daft and Weick, 1984; Weick, 2012), the social structure establishes guidelines for professional practice. Resources and drivers pertaining to a strategic competitive advantage need to be integrated into the policies of the institution (Decramer et al, 2012; Bentley and Kyvic, 2012) and are conducive for accessing and enabling the key work roles. The Value, Rarity, Imitability and Organisation (VRIO) model explains the strategic relevance (Barney and Hesterly, 2006) of appropriate higher education policy in relation to subject coordinators, who are themselves one of the primary
resources. Within the higher education sector, the VRIO model highlights the interlinkages of the different components and resources required for an organisation (in this case a higher education institution) to achieve and sustain competitive edge and reputation amongst its peers. Studies of social enterprises, including education providers, support the use of strategic management tools like VRIO in creating successful outcomes (Montes-Stewart, 2013; Turgay and Alhawamdeh, 2013). Competent coordinators are rare (for example, we know that competency here requires skills in all three areas of teaching, research and service), add value to the education experience for students (for instance by identifying opportunities, and continually improving skills), and facilitate overall institutional functioning. It is challenging for competing higher education institutions to imitate the student experience resulting from academics’ skills and organisational culture. The establishment and organisation of all of these valuable, rare and difficult to imitate factors contribute to the overall performance of higher education institutions.

The drivers and inhibitors of effective subject coordination

Massification of universities in the last twenty years along with technological and social changes are altering the social contract between the public and the academy, with universities facing increased competition to attract grants, bequests, good students, and professional and competent staff (Hamilton, 2011). An overarching argument in the literature is that academics’ roles have evolved and they face various challenges (Adams, 1998; Gornall and Salisbury, 2012) from micro and macro elements in the tertiary environment (see, for example, Zutshi and Creed, 2010). Hamilton (2000) identified ongoing trends in higher education, including the impact of information and communication technology (ICT) and the demographic shifts of the student population, which have changed the way universities function and how academics work. Academics must now be able to use new technological advances, teach longer hours, and accommodate the recent influx and changing expectations of international fee-paying students and distance education student cohorts (Adams, 1998; Kenny, 2009; McInnis, 2000).

ICT innovations have changed work roles for coordinators. Higher education institutions routinely use online tools to augment the student learning experience. Emergent cloud technologies serve to increase the rate of change (Gulati et al, 2012). Sufficient time is required for staff to develop appropriate competencies with the changing technology. Genuine support needs to be factored into new work systems (Torrisi and Davis, 2000). Furthermore, processes frequently overlap as tasks are
duplicated (Topolšek, 2011) across simultaneous delivery to on and off-campus (or distance) students. Changes in administrative requirements are rearranging work practices for research and teaching activities (Anderson, 2006), placing further time and outcome pressures on academics to adopt and adapt to more flexible administration systems (Lee, 2011).

Reduced government funding has also led to many changes in the sector, one being the attraction of foreign income through the globalisation of education (Marginson, 2000). The promotion of higher education as an export industry (Marginson and Considine, 2000) has ramifications for designing content and managing student expectations and engagement (Kenny, 2009). The growth of international enrolments through immigration and the attraction of off-shore students in universities has a substantial effect on cultural diversity in the university classroom (Xiaoping, 2006). International students add diversity to the classroom. This has many benefits but also presents challenges for academics in balancing expectations, and possible conflicts (Xiaoping, 2006) in meeting the additional requirements of a culturally diverse cohort. Issues in a culturally diverse classroom can include language barriers, variable writing skills, and assisting students to effectively learn to address academic arguments in written form, often in their second (or third) language (Tran, 2009), not to mention coping with different learning styles (Briguglio and Smith, 2012).

Another demographic shift is the option of distance and online learning programmes. Distance learning via virtual online courses is a lucrative channel for universities, as they attract additional students who may not be able to attend classes in person (Ng, 2006). Given the growth of online and new cloud learning platforms, ongoing research is required into teaching and learning needs, for better understanding of their implications. As compared when the subject is only offered in face-to-face mode. A coordinator for a subject offered online has more tasks than they would face if the subject is only offered face to face. Examples of these tasks include chat and/or blog in online learning management system, and podcasting or recording lectures for upload to the student portal to ensure equity of information between face-to-face and virtual students.

The various university environment issues condensed from the authors’ experiences and related literature resulted in the following two research questions:

What is the current perception of the scope of the role of the subject coordinator?
What are the major challenges and opportunities of undertaking the role of the subject coordinator in a mixed mode delivery (on- and off-campus) university environment?

**Methodology: Semi-structured interviews**

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews recorded after receiving consent from the interviewee. Conducting interviews to collect data within the higher education sector is an accepted method (Bolden et al., 2009). Due to resource constraints, ten interviews were conducted at a single institution. The advantages of undertaking interviews at one institution are that the interpretation of the subject coordinator role would be similar given the same organisational structure and administrative requirements. The benefits of employing semi-structured interviews include: relative flexibility for the interviewer and interviewee; higher response rate; direct attention of the interviewee; and opportunities to observe non-verbal communication.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, the benefits of this method outweighed the weaknesses such as being expensive, time consuming and risking a lack of direction and loss of content due to lack of interviewee experience (Burns, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; May, 1993; Sandelowski and Barroso, 2007).

The interview recordings were transcribed, revealing a number of divergent paths of dialogue in individual cases. The semi-structured interviews enabled open questions to evolve into dialogue, with the intention of deeper exploration of various themes. During the course of the interviews, the interviewees were encouraged to expand on emergent ideas. The interviews focused on experiences in general situations, not on particular subject content or context, or the personal details of individual interactions with team members or management levels.

To improve the representativeness and generalisability of results (Wellington, 2000; Crotty, 2009), both new and experienced coordinators were sought across small, medium and large subjects in the management and marketing disciplines. In this institution, the following classification is used to categorise the size of the subjects: up to 199 students (small), 199 (medium), and more than 500 students (large). In accordance with the University Ethics Committee requirement to protect the anonymity of the individuals interviewed, the interviewees are not identified here. The following section presents the discussion of findings from the interviews.

**Discussion of the interview findings**

The focus of the findings is on the perceived role of the subject coordinator and the resulting challenges and opportunities.
Perceptions of the scope of the role of the subject coordinator

A prominent theme revolved around the coordinator's competence in the role. Some coordinators revelled in the role and others doubted their ability to keep up the demands. Institutional theory is supported in this observation because, irrespective of the perception about interviewees' competencies, essentially, they understood their roles as administrators in the middle level of the university bureaucracy. Interviewee 3 stated:

If you are the subject [coordinator] of a subject which has over a thousand students a [term], and this [term] we have 1,800 you have a lot of student administration, you've got a lot of special considerations and you're always dealing with emergencies, problems. Early in the [term] you have a lot of administrative work with students enrolling...enrolling late, enrolling wrong, getting them up to speed. I would count being a help desk...a computer help desk as that administrative task.

The thoughts expressed in the above comment indicate the awareness, knowledge and skills required to successfully complete the administration tasks. The need to be a communication hub for answering the technical questions of students was evident:

Near the end of a term, of course, you have lots more administrative tasks, but I would say that if your pie chart was going to be for the whole [term] then it would probably be 10% leadership, 20% curriculum development and 70% administrative tasks (Interviewee 3).

Other interviewees reiterated similar points of view. There appeared to be an understanding of leadership in the role:

Five per cent of my time probably overall is sessional management, particularly if I've got new sessionals [casual staff]. And maybe that does slide a little into leadership. I've had new sessionals and so, you know, spending some time with them and just really being ... it's like leadership I guess ... being available if they just want to come and debrief and that type of thing. And, yeah, I spend a lot of time to make sure that they're informed ... (Interviewee 5).

The subject [coordinator] is an important position. It is one of educational leadership and it's one of helping to form the direction and finalise the team of the subject; and it's also, however, the
goalkeeper, the last bastion and the workhorse of the subject. I
laughingly tell my colleagues that my position description as subject
[coordinator] is do all the work, take all the blame ... (Interviewee 3).

Employing staff or having control over the subject team was noted as a
leadership role. The breadth of responsibility goes beyond overseeing
sessional (casual) staff, to ensuring that subject content is up-to-date
with changes and developments in the field.

Being in a leadership role made some interviewees feel closer to
subject design and content decisions. Taking on the role of the planner
or designer was found to be a source of control and meaning, as well as
a motivator for subject coordinators. A number of interviewees
described their role as engaging with students, and indicated how they
were motivated by the tasks they undertook. Keeping students at the
centre of their concerns as a coordinator gave some a sense of purpose
and meaning, as reflected in the following interviewees’ comments:

I love what I do but now, no matter what I do, is to have some sort
of pastoral care over my students and I do consider them my students
and, you know, these guys are, you know, get stressed at different
times and struggle at different times, so, you know, again I’m not
advocating it for anyone else, but what I try and do is be available as
much as I can within reason, you know, for the students. So, you
know, little things like if I’m not in the office, for example, I’ll
forward my office phone to my mobile which means that students
can ring me of an evening and get me if they so choose (Interviewee
4).

You know, my decisions affect their [student] perceptions directly; if
I poorly design an assignment or inappropriately reply to messages
they send me, or if I do anything unprofessionally, it affects that total
experience that they have, and that directly affects the business of the
university. I think of it as a business model (Interviewee 1).

This is linked with the value and organisation elements of the VRIO
model (Barney and Hesterly, 2006). The interviewee said that course
design affects student perceptions, which then influences the value
delivered by the university as a whole. The subject coordinator role,
therefore, becomes dependent upon good organisation skills which need
to be supported by appropriate policies that best distribute available
resources to points of critical need. Engaging with students helps subject
coordinators develop direction in their work. Measures of student
engagement are increasingly applied in academic teaching evaluations and performance appraisals, further compounding this phenomenon. The expectation for universities to be accredited by institutions such as the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA, 2012) and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB, 2012) is putting additional pressure on academics to demonstrate their engagement with students.

Ultimately, the perception of students as customers (Svensson and Wood, 2007) in the hub of a business gave Interviewee 1 an economic model by which to understand the role. The current climate of university administration in Australia is consistent with this type of economic rationale (Rowbotham, 2012). There needs to be a financially balanced consideration of costs versus income in most organisations. While there is some debate about whether students are customers or, in fact, citizens of the university, the interviewees attached greater reference to the customers’ perspectives. There is a connection between the self-interested motives of control, the aim of education to empower students, and the tendency to view students as independent, customer like entities in the educational transaction. If the entire exchange mechanism is perceived by these frames of reference, it may be appropriate in the context of a business studies faculty. However, the frustrations and challenges of being a lynchpin in a bureaucratic structure, while trying to manifest commercial mindsets and behaviours, are quite real. The complex interconnections, therefore, realistically portray the challenges of the daily work of subject coordinators. The pros and cons of being a subject coordinator were also mentioned by the interviewees, and the next section explores the data to develop the analysis.

The challenges and opportunities of being a subject coordinator

Becoming a leader when one assumes the mantle of subject coordinator imbues responsibility and creates a type of position power with opportunities for positive or negative applications. These responsibilities of power and control are encapsulated in the ‘identity’ and ‘social’ properties of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). This is particularly pertinent in relation to the power mechanism of the coordinator as it allows the individual to adapt the learning environment to reflect the multiple identities of self-enhancement, self-efficacy, and self-consistency (Weick, 1995). These attributes allow coordinators to rationalise, organise, and control structures within the learning environment and thus fulfill their personal identity (Daft and Weick, 1984; Weick, 2012). In response to the advantages and disadvantages of being a subject coordinator, the interviewees emphasised the importance
of self-identity via the power they experienced (and even required as leaders) when being handed the role of coordinator. This notion of self-identity and ownership of the subject is reiterated in the following comments:

I suppose the key advantage of being a subject [coordinator] that I like is that I can be in control and that’s very selfish and, you know, I’m a good control freak. I like being able to plan things, being able to provide an answer to any questions about the subject without having to check with somebody else (Interviewee 4).

This is really bad because I’m a control freak ... at least as subject [coordinator] I can kind of do it the way I like it. And hopefully that doesn’t mean that I’m not, you know, don’t bring in people’s ideas but I get almost frustrated when I’m subject [coordinator] because it’s kind of doing it the way I like to do it (Interviewee 5).

I would rather be the subject [coordinator]. Not because I have to be in control ... I’m not a control freak, but if I am the subject [coordinator], then I am the subject [coordinator] -- I am the manager of the subject and I let everyone know that... (Interviewee 7).

The above findings tend to neglect the 'social' property of sensemaking which is important in the horizontal leadership transition process from one term to the next. Overemphasis on the individual is a barrier to sensemaking as it limits team building, interactive dialogue among the teaching team, and the ability to develop ongoing leadership roles (Daft and Weick, 1984; Weick, 2012). However, the importance of the social property of sensemaking was not entirely overlooked. The need to have control (the phrase 'control freak' was repeatedly mentioned by the interviewees) over the subject is strongly supported in institutional theory (Daft and Weick, 1984), but the concept of control is multidimensional, and control can also act as a motivator for leadership and empowerment. The feeling of responsibility and ensuing accountability was accepted and cherished as highlighted by Interviewee 3:

You’re getting everybody into the zone so to speak, and once that levels off then leadership can be attended to by helping empower other lecturers and sessionals to make educational decisions within a certain framework and to have some sense of ownership and empowerment and curriculum development is probably a constant.
The concept of empowerment was explicitly recognised by this interviewee and the connection of the coordinator role to overall feelings of competence was emphasised. Vilkinas and Cartan (2001) and Vilkinas and Ladyshewsky (2012) refer to the academic leadership position being metaphorically like a behavioural control room, thus supporting the points of view provided by the interviewees:

‘... when you’re a subject [coordinator] you’re called upon for everything and you get the feeling of being pulled apart ... from the top and from the bottom. The students...the administration...the deadlines, the time frames ... everything sort of crunches, and it’s either crunching you in or pulling you apart [...] I see myself as the funnel at the bottom, that every part of the university has expectations or demands or needs, depending on whether they’re examinations or whether they’re, you know, KMD [knowledge media division] or whoever they are, or whether it’s the student body, and we’re at the bottom of the funnel because all their demands and needs come down on us and we’re expected to have to respond to everybody’s needs ... (Interviewee 1).

This reflective statement indicates the competence required to address the daily demands of enquiries. The volume of administrative work resulting from the size of the student cohort makes the task more challenging. Scott et al. (2008) and Richards (2011) find the top competencies students expect of an academic leader include the diagnosis of problems and the taking of appropriate actions to fix them, creative and lateral thinking; and being able to admit to and learn from errors. When managing large numbers of students, a coordinator has obvious challenges with expressing these competencies fully and consistently. Interviewee 6 supported this view, stating:

My perception was that I was the key contact for all students, unless they were based on-campus they could go and see their own coordinator, but for things like special considerations, extensions of time, they all had to come to me and I’m looking at it from a student’s perspective, so I was the main point of call for most things

While doing administration tasks appears to enslave the academic to the university bureaucracy, the position power aspects can have the opposite effect of empowering, or providing a sense of control over one’s work. A number of interviewees reflected on the limitations to position power in the coordinator role. For instance, there may have been some time
allocation in the workload, but generally there was no monetary reward, and there was certainly limited ability to control reward and punishment outcomes for positions reporting to the subject coordinator. Factors common to middle management limitations in other organisations and explained by resource dependence theory (Bentley and Kyvic, 2012), were also apparent, with time and budget constraints being significant concerns affecting the desire and ability of interviewees to improve the educational outcomes of the subject. When there was an impediment to good design, or an inhibition to budget, the sense of concern seemed to mount. For example:

We don’t have time to reflect... on our subjects and because we are often forced to move from one subject to another, ownership of subjects becomes a real issue ... and so you don’t have a chance to...well I certainly don’t either research as much as I’d want to in my particular teaching...why? Because I’m spread so thinly across so many subjects you physically can’t research in four different areas..... So, that’s another frustration. You know, if you want to make your subjects better, you need time to research in them, you need time to reflect on them. We don’t get that time (Interviewee 1).

The constraint of time was a recurring issue. The frustration of not being able to include every good idea in the design of a course was strong. Comments such as these challenge the teaching-research nexus (Bhatti, 2012) which reinforces the idea of an academic using their research experience and findings to complement and supplement their teaching content, and vice versa. Ideally, teaching content and the dissemination of knowledge to students should be informed by the latest research developments and findings (Bótas, 2009). However, lack of subject ownership and time constraints can involuntarily drag academics away from improving the subject content. Constant rotation around different subjects, along with changing roles within a subject, inhibit subject ownership as they can diminish the enthusiasm and energy for constructive input by an academic.

Intuitively, the coordinator knows that they are the lynchpin of the different elements of the subject. However, their dependence upon good resource and access to policies for flow can be frustrating when the institutional support does not manifest itself in the way anticipated and expected by them. The tension about dependence is further highlighted in the following sentiments about having ‘ownership’:

I much prefer being a subject coordinator because I get to set the
thing up properly. The two subject guides I wrote entirely and I wrote them just the way that I wanted to do it. I write assignments the way I want to write them. I teach it the way I want to teach it and I don’t have to [animated] yield ... (Interviewee 2).

Being able to control, to manage, to direct the flow of learning, was far preferable to the alternative for most coordinators. The issue of blame, when things ‘fall apart’ or do not work according to plan, translated often to a sense of responsibility and trying to be in control of issues arising from different facets of the role. This middle management conundrum recurred in a number of the interviews with coordinators who expressed different ways of handling tasks given the resource constraints at the time. This tends to support the VRIO model in strategic terms (Barney and Hesterly, 2006) and at the policy level, implies that universities have scope to plan more effectively around the coordinator role.

In summary, the major benefits of being in a coordinator role were identified in the interviews as empowerment linked to: making positive curriculum improvements; engaging students more responsively through course planning and design; satisfaction of the need to be in control; and being seen to be an educational leader. The significant challenges of the coordinator role were found to link with a sense of being overloaded due to time constraints, technological changes, student cohorts being too large, the demands of administration, and the lack of recognition or reward for fulfilling the role.

Concluding thoughts, proposals for improvement, and future research

The job requirements of the academic are changing, thus bringing new challenges and complexities to the role of the subject coordinator which spans boundaries and can be argued to have 360 degree focus and exposure. Positive development of the role calls for a number of improvements and changes in how universities work. These include clear guidelines highlighting the role and responsibilities of the subject coordinator, fostering collegiality to enhance collaboration, leadership development, succession planning, and ongoing training and professional development to assist in career advancement in teaching. This research suggests universities will need to provide adequate resources and ensure workloads do not inhibit academic performance nor damage work-life balance.
Overcoming role ambiguity

It was evident that interviewees were unable to provide a uniform definition of the roles and responsibilities of a subject coordinator. Essentially academics were left to construct the role themselves based on previous experience or *ad hoc* conversations with colleagues. For early career academics very little guidance was provided, with the consequence that they too often saw the role as an administration-oriented extension to their teaching workload. To overcome this perception, it is recommended that ongoing formal and informal training workshops be implemented for current and potential subject coordinators. The tasks and responsibilities must be clear and consistent across all subjects offered at the university. Within this guideline, the role of administration must be de-emphasised, with more importance placed on professional skill development, relationship building, and career advancement.

Collegiality and collaboration

Management of the coordinator role from the interviewees’ perspectives required knowledge and skills in a wide range of areas including teaching, curriculum and assessment development, staff management, student administration, and time management. The role requires greater flexibility in tasks which can be shared (for example, student engagement online, preparing classroom activities). Stronger collegiality can be manifested in greater levels of social interaction and potential development of horizontal leadership by advocating trust in the individual’s ability. Respectful social interaction and professional guidance is not isolated to a specific university discipline but rather can be transferred across faculties and other educational institutions within the teaching and learning framework.

From a collaboration perspective, the coordinator should exemplify a lynchpin role in the university. The importance of collaboration is reiterated by Allan *et al* (2006). In environments that are collaborative in nature, such as subject teams, leadership generally is not restricted to one individual; rather, power and decision-making are shared (Allan *et al*, 2006). This is particularly pertinent when the coordinator role is rotated between colleagues on a regular basis. This suggests, therefore, that academics emerging as coordinators in different terms or years should ideally communicate with each other to develop collectively the course theme and synergies in the syllabus. This approach was exemplified and supported by some interviewees who successfully implemented a shared role between the different coordinators of the same subject over the term and years. Collaborative aspects of the role
can be further enhanced by fostering group interaction across subjects, disciplines, and faculties. This can encourage the learning of new skills and foster professional and research relationships. To focus on a collaborative culture within the teaching environment allows for leadership development amongst its members.

Leadership and mentoring
Strong leadership may be needed if important objectives are to be achieved. Subject coordinators are embedded in the institutional culture and derive their motivation and role identity, their sense making, through complex dialogue streams. To focus effort on achieving institutional goals there must be ongoing leadership programmes. This is reiterated by Davis (1998), who argues that academics assigned as coordinators need cooperation from other academics and access to leadership training to aid in their professional development. Leadership programmes should nurture subject coordinators as role models who ideally possess a clear set of values and a strong sense of vision and identity (Allio, 2005). Academics aspiring to be leaders, irrespective of the institution, need access to professional development opportunities including mentor and leadership training programmes.

It is important to foster potential leaders early in their careers by providing feedback, mentoring and networking opportunities to develop their management and leadership skills (Milburn, 2010). The significance of mentoring and training cannot be overstated. Even if an academic had undertaken the role of a coordinator in an earlier position, they would need to understand the nuances of each new role with the change of employer, or as new technologies are implemented across the university. The lack of structured training programmes surfaced during the interviews in which academics mentioned they had provided informal support to one another. Producing a written document that the coordinator can read and implement is not sufficient. The written document needs to be complemented with training and feedback from a mentor for those who feel there is a gap in their knowledge. This training can be accomplished by, for example, the mentee shadowing the subject coordinator. This will assist in highlighting the complexities of the coordinator role. Similarly, when an academic is new to the coordinator role, experienced coordinators can be assigned to implement mentorship programmes to assist in their personal and professional development (Raines and Alberg, 2003). Best practice mentorship programmes would allow access to multiple coordinators across different disciplines and faculties thus giving the mentee a variety of tools to successfully transition to the role of coordinator. A mentorship programme coupled
with training would alleviate the problem of low staff morale and the perceived lack of support from university management. The latter could focus more on the importance of collegiality and relationships that are at the core of the academic's work (Adams, 1998). Accordingly, the contribution made by course leaders is enhanced whenever leadership is distributed (Bolden et al., 2008) and academics are able to make unique contributions derived from their personal attributes (Milburn, 2010). The successful implementation of leadership and mentor programmes assist in the effective transition to subject coordinator. This article has identified the principles underpinning such programmes but cannot prescribe the implementation because contexts vary between institutions.

Succession planning
The position of coordinator may rotate between academics each term or year so the same academic will not always be selected in two successive terms. The successful handover of leadership positions requires training and a comprehensive understanding of the subject. According to Murray (2007:146), ‘leaders can be “made” and everyone can improve their abilities through training, challenging assignments and experiences that push them to develop new skills’ . Raines and Alberg (2003) suggest that in order for leadership to be effective, careful planning must be involved. Grummon (2007) argues that keeping the same staff and training them to become leaders is beneficial in an economic sense. Further, as Kenny (2009:637) states, academics and managers need to ‘recognise the strengths each actor in the institution brings to the situation and to foster systems that support critical organisational learning’. This can be achieved through the reconceptualisation of academic work in the current context and draws on the strengths of management and academics (Kenny, 2009) in teaching, research and service. This is consistent with institutional theory, which emphasises survival by conformance to organisational rules and belief systems (Weick, 2012). Policy decisions providing resources to support identified roles such as subject coordinator help to achieve institutional objectives.

Resource allocation
Universities are under pressure to increase their research output in order to attract external funding. However, this has led to tension for academics between teaching and research (Anderson, 2006), as it appears research output is more valued and expedient for career advancement (Adams, 1998). As with students, academics need to be
embraced by their institutions. Technological advances have increased the availability of 'online learning environments' in universities (Torrisi and Davis, 2000:166). Such online learning environments include cloud technologies, student and staff portals and library databases. Higher education institutions aim to use these technologies more efficiently to improve the student learning experience (Torrisi and Davis, 2000). However new technology may at times be a hindrance as time is needed for an academic to be retrained and supported (Torrisi and Davis, 2000) to keep up with new developments, thus reducing time for research and other tasks. Educational institutions routinely use online tools to augment the student learning experience, but often students use these tools as the primary source of their learning. The online administrative load can be reduced if student expectations of the role of the technology in the learning environment are clarified and articulated at the start of the term.

Workload equity and work-life balance

Roberts et al (2007) posit that the culture of a university is improved if teaching, learning, scholarship and practice are viewed as being equally as important as research. To improve this perception and to ensure equality between the time contributed to teaching and research, the position of coordinator should be rotated on a regular basis, especially in large subjects. This will ensure that the same academic is not overburdened with the responsibilities of coordinator, and can constructively contribute to the subject as a team member. This would improve the problem of the excessive administrative requirements, and the concurrent reduction in hours devoted to research which affects academics (Anderson, 2006).

As in a growing number of other professions, the differentiation within 'work-life' balance is blurred in academia. Academics regularly use long-service leave, and, in some cases, maternity or paternity leave to further their research, as study leave is less commonly granted (Sallee, 2013; Anderson, 2006). Furthermore, academics regularly work at home on research whenever the workplace is seen as distracting and not conducive to thoughtful creativity (Anderson, 2006). Nor is there enough time allocated in workloads for academics who are burdened with administrative tasks in large and multi-cohort subjects (for example, on and off-campus). Time pressures also result in a further reduction of collegiality which goes against the underlying fabric of academia, namely, an emphasis on collegiality across research and teaching practices (Spillane, 2006). In some cases, academics are forced to make compromises between their self-constructed professional
identity and the professional identity which is assumed by the university, which can lead to certain groups feeling marginalised (Churchman, 2006) Ensuring effective teaching teams and sharing the responsibility of the coordinator role amongst a number of academics will help to improve work-life balance, as will appropriate university recognition of the importance of the role of the coordinator.

Meeting these recommendations calls for adequate resources, workloads which reflect and respect the role of the coordinator and promote work-life balance, and acknowledgment of the importance of teaching and learning in the university's work. The research showed that in this case the role of the subject coordinator was undervalued at school, faculty and university level. The role was consistently seen to be less important than other aspects of academic work. The skill set required to fulfill the role of the subject coordinator is quite distinct from that of teaching but interviewees were left to construct the role themselves, in consequence it was generally viewed as an administration-oriented extension to coordinators' current teaching loads. More proactive management at different levels of the university is needed to emphasise the importance of collegiality and collaboration vertically and horizontally. Individual academics need leadership development, succession planning, and ongoing training and professional development in the practice of teaching and learning to assist in career advancement.

This exploratory research has provided both theoretical and practical outcomes. First, it contributed towards documenting and understanding the demands and dimensions of the subject coordinator role. Second, it improved understanding of the different ways in which academics experience and interpret the role in the context of their broader academic roles. Finally, the findings suggest ways to improve the design, resourcing, conduct and management of the subject coordinator role in universities – a demanding role which coordinators fulfil at the expense of other academic tasks including teaching, service and research.

The research is of course limited, since subject coordinators of only two disciplines (management and marketing) from a single Australian university were interviewed. Future research might use a broader sample of disciplines and universities. The context of this study was an Australian university which delivers learning content in mixed modes which contributed to the perceived duplication of teaching and administrative tasks and as a result an increase in workloads. Future research could usefully explore whether similar problems occur in institutions using a single mode of delivery. In addition, interviews at subject coordinator level might be supplemented in future by investigating the views of staff
at other levels. Finally, although this study is confined to a single tertiary education institution, issues such as unclear job descriptions, the importance of training and leadership programmes, the development of mentoring and professional development programmes are present in other parts of the education sector and across the corporate, government and not-for-profit sectors, which offer further scope for comparative research.

Subject coordinators are expected to take responsibility for student retention and the quality of teaching and learning outcomes. The significance of the coordinator role should be matched by university support in terms of resourcing, training and recognition of the importance of teaching and learning. If that can be achieved then the university will not only improve its teaching and learning, but also help to build its future capacity for creative and flexible academic leadership.

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Note

Information, information, information

John Pratt

According to researchers at the University of Southern California (Washington Post, 2011), the world’s storage capacity for digital data increased from 0.2 billion gigabytes in 1986 to 276 billion gigabytes by 2007 (at the same time analogue storage capacity increased from 2.6 to 18.9 billion gigabytes). This huge growth is often seen in educational data, for example, in the OECD’s (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) series of indicators called Education at a Glance (OECD, 2013a). The (second) 1993 edition, which I have on my shelves, ran to just over 250 pages – with both English and French text in the same volume. The recently published English language 2013 issue is 435 pages long (and there are two other editions for French and German speakers). And before Education at a Glance, OECD used to produce an annual booklet Education in OECD Countries – with only 139 pages in my 1984-85 edition.

Nor is it just Education at a Glance that is getting bigger. The forerunner of the OECD was the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC), created merely to administer American and Canadian aid under the Marshall Plan for reconstruction of Europe after World War II. Now, as its website (OECD, 2013b) puts it:

‘After more than four decades, the OECD is moving beyond a focus on its own countries and is setting its analytical sights on those countries – today nearly the whole world – that embrace the market economy. As it opens to many new contacts around the world, the OECD will broaden its scope, looking ahead to a post-industrial age in which it aims to tightly weave OECD economies into a yet more prosperous and increasingly knowledge-based world economy.’

Yesterday the broken remnants of Western Europe, today the world.
There is more: ‘[OECD’s] scope is changing in other ways too’. If you can cope with the OECD-speak:

‘The matrix is moving from consideration of each policy area within
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