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Enhancing higher education through leadership capacity development: Progressing the faculty scholars model

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Abstract

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Keywords

Distributive leadership, capacity building, faculty development

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Enhancing higher education through leadership capacity development: Progressing the faculty scholars model

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This showcase provides an overview of a leadership capacity building initiative for the scholarship of teaching through a faculty-based scholars' network, which supports strategic change through leadership, activities embedded in authentic learning tasks. The new leaders developed through this initiative will provide a critical mass for extending the network by adopting a cascade model for distributive leadership through mentoring of future implementations within and across institutions. This showcase will provide a review of the literature, and an overview of the work in progress. It will conclude with a presentation of some guiding principles for discussion and a call for expressions of interest for cascade partners.

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Introduction

In Australia the establishment of funding sources through the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, with a mandate to facilitate the advancement of learning and teaching, has meant that the scholarship of teaching is firmly on the agenda of tertiary institutions. This carrot, combined with the strong stick of accountability through the Australian Universities Quality Agency, has opened the doors for new initiatives directed to a more scholarly approach to improving teaching. The focus of one aspect of the grant scheme through this funding body is the development of Leadership for Excellence in Learning and Teaching. This paper provides a case study of the first year of implementation of a strategy to use distributive leadership as a framework for a cross institutional collaboration to enhance leadership capacity development.

Managing change and leading institutes in new directions can no longer be supported strategically by a hierarchical leadership organisation that supports the notion of heroes or born leaders. In order for a new generation to lead universities, we need to prepare them to take on leadership roles for a very different higher education system (Knight & Trowler, 2001). McKenzie et al (2005) in their recommendation to the Carrick Institute identified the importance of professional development for leaders at all levels, not only to improve skills and share practice but to "value teaching and teaching innovation" (p171) and to "encourage the development of cross-institutional networks" (p172). In addition, Southwell et al. (2005) recommended in their dissemination strategies the need to: "Develop and support leadership

and management capacity building programs that incorporate a distributed and multi-level concept of leadership practice in the higher education sector" (p.61).

In this first stage (2006-2007), the project is developing a distributive framework to enhance leadership skills for a small cohort of scholars in learning and teaching in two partner universities. The two universities have agreed to partner due to similarities in size, regional positioning, and current mission i.e. developing a learning-intensive culture within a research-intensive culture. In the second stage (2007-2008), two additional Universities will be involved, as the leadership framework is trialed and refined using a 'cascade approach', whereby the leaders from the first stage universities mentor the second stage universities through the implementation phase (Fullerton & Bailey, 2001; McKenzie et al, 2005). One other university has already agreed to participate as a cascade partner in the second stage of the project and one additional cascade partner will be sought through a call for expressions of interest at the HERDSA conference.

This project builds on current university strengths as each of the first stage universities had implemented an internal Faculty Learning & Teaching Scholars program, which partnered a small network of faculty based academics with a mentor in a central academic development unit to achieve strategic change initiatives related to learning and teaching both within faculties and within the institution. This project expands the Scholars model to include the development of leadership capacity via cross institutional consultation and collaboration, whilst maintaining the importance of the use of authentic projects as vehicles for change.

Literature review

The literature on leadership for learning and teaching in higher education indicates that current frameworks for leadership capacity building will not meet the changing needs of institutions in the future (Knight & Trowler, 2001, Southwell et al., 2005). Bennett et al (2003) provide a comprehensive review of the related leadership literature that indicates that there is a lack of consensus for the terminology and limited research in the area, with the central focus on school-based research, a not uncommon source for leadership models in higher education (e.g. the work of Michael Fullan). Terms of use related to this model include dispersed leadership, distributed leadership (with a focus on delegated roles), and distributive leadership (with a focus on negotiated roles) (Bennett et al, 2003; Gronn, 2002; Knight & Trowler, 2001). We use the term distributive since it implies a distribution of power within the sociocultural context of universities, and a sharing of knowledge, of practice and reflection through collegiality (Dinham, 2006; Knight& Trowler, 2001).

This aligns with theoretical frameworks for building networks and communities of practice and situated learning theory, both of which underpin the Faculty Scholars model (Lave & Wenger, 1991, Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). Although talking about leadership in the school system, West-Burnham (2004) identified "… emphasis on the leader (as individual) is inappropriate and needs to be replaced by recognition of leadership as a collective capacity that is reflected in structures, processes, and relationships", (West-Burnham, 2004, p. 1). The added dimension of a distributive leadership framework moves "the focus from leaders to a focus on leadership" and West-Burnham (2004) identifies four key factors to be addressed: "building trust; redesigning jobs; changing organisational structures; and creating a learning culture" (p. 2). This project provides opportunities to address these factors.

Aligning with this belief in a distributive leadership model are the principles of authentic learning such as authentic contexts and tasks, multiple roles and perspectives, the collaborative construction of knowledge, coaching and scaffolding [by a mentor], and evaluation (Herrington & Herrington, 2006). This project provides support for the development and understanding of such a framework at many levels in the institutions, which already display a readiness for change through their Scholars' programs. Authentic tasks for the second phase institutions will be determined by their own university's needs and alignment to their learning and teaching strategic plans.

Whilst the Faculty Learning and Teaching Scholars program is a relatively new initiative at both institutions, it is not a new phenomenon in higher education where as early as the 1990s academic developers were identifying the need for more strategic partnerships between faculties and central units to provide leadership for improving learning and teaching. Descriptions of such implementations are reported in the literature as the devolution of academic development to the faculties though limited evaluation has been conducted to provide evidence of the impact on leadership for improving teaching and learning (Radloff, 2000; Southwel1 & Gilding, 2004).

Others report similar schemes for supporting the implementation of new learning technologies (McNaught and Kennedy, 2000; Ingram and Thomson, 2001), however we found no reports in the literature on the authentic learning approach through a distributive leadership model. Ingram and Gilding (2003) do provide a comparison of a developmental leadership model and draw on the literature of communities of practice, an approach that is closely related to the distributive model whereby the supportive development of networks underpins the leadership development (Ingram & Gilding, 2003; Wenger, 1999; Lefoe, Hedberg & Gunn, 2002). They also compare earlier teaching associate schemes with the CATLyst model and report lack of support from more senior management and particularly lack of funding to support a workload balance often means the demise of the scheme (Southwel1 & Gilding, 2004). Their evaluation of the CATLyst model identified the strengths to include faculty ownership of staff development, a better understanding of disciplinary differences, improved relevance for other faculty members of staff development activities and resource sharing through the network (Southwell & Gilding, 2004, p 172). This project has provided opportunity to draw on such current developments and to begin to evaluate the implementation of this strategy within a distributive leadership framework.

Approach

The project design includes two stages: the development & implementation stage (2006-7), and the cascade stage (2007-8) with an iterative evaluation process to support ongoing improvements. Each of these is described in turn.

Stage 1: Development and implementation
In the development phase, a project manager was employed and the project plan was refined. Each university will identified six participants to engage in the project, selected from academics with the potential to be change agents in learning and teaching within their faculties and institutions. Each university provided additional funding to reduce the workload of the scholars in recognition of the time required to participate and complete their projects.

Each institution provided a strategic leadership mentor, a senior person in their university to support the leadership scholars in addition to a facilitator based in the academic development

unit. Scholars engaged in a task, which used an action learning approach, involving a cycle of action and reflection (Dinham, 2006). As part of the reflective focus in the implementation phase the Leadership scholars were invited to maintain a reflective journal and participate in communication and resource sharing through a cross institutional online collaborative space. An evaluation plan that includes both formative and summative activities was developed in collaboration with all members of the team, based on an eclectic evaluation model (Reeves & Hedberg, 2003). A member of the external reference group was invited to contribute to facilitate this development and to provide feedback on its progress.

Initially during implementation, the six scholars from each institution attended a three day residential leadership program (March, 2007) to develop relationships with the other institution, to formulate and discuss the aspects of their assessment project, and to participate in leadership training. They also started the initial planning for a Roundtable on Leadership for Improving Assessment that they will coordinate and present to invited national guests during August 2007. An external evaluator attended as part of the evaluation process and this will be reported at a later stage in the process.

At the end of the implementation phase, the scholars and the facilitators will coordinate and facilitate a roundtable in the chosen area, involving other academic staff from their own and other universities, leaders in the field identified through professional associations as well as invited participants from other universities who indicate an interest in participating in the next stage.

Stage 2: Cascade
The participants from each university will mentor and support implementation in two partner universities during 2008. The second stage of the program will ensure the knowledge and understandings for both leadership development and the authentic tasks will be cascaded to a further two institutions. This stage of the program will be based on the distributive leadership framework resource developed during the developmental stage, which will be continuously evaluated and validated during the project.

We believe that the collaboration across two universities plus the next stage of mentoring the second generation is the context in which our Learning & Teaching Leadership Scholars can develop their national leadership skills. If the model is successful then the cascade should continue, involving eight universities in the third year and so on.

Conclusion and future directions

The three day retreat involved eleven Scholars/Fellows with a team of facilitators in a regional location away from both universities. The energy developed during this collaborative phase was extremely rewarding for all involved. The group created some draft guiding principles for the project for distributive leadership and identified a number of essential components (See Column 1, Table 2). We have mapped this beside some examples of the activities they are engaged in during the process.

Table 1: Distributive Leadership principles with a project example of the kind of activities and tasks the Scholars/Fellows undertake.

Distributive leadership	Examples at Faculty/Institutional and National Levels
Generates engagement	Each scholar/ fellow is responsible for leading a faculty based initiative in their home institution related to improving assessment (their 'authentic task')
Acknowledges and recognizes leadership irrespective of position	The participants range from Associate Lecturer to Senior Lecturer and do not hold formal positions of power
Is negotiated not delegated	The Scholars applied for their positions through an EOI process and then negotiated an action plan for implementation. Their projects had to demonstrate relevance to the University/ Faculty strategic plan to improve assessment
Focuses on people's strengths	Roles in Roundtable planning are negotiated by the scholars at all levels.
Incorporates shared responsibility and accountability	Development and implementation of a National Roundtable with invitations to key assessment practitioners. Dissemination through publication of their scholarly endeavors.
Is different things in different contexts	Each faculty/school and university provides a different context and requires different aspects of leadership to implement the project.
Is enduring	The improving assessment task needs to engage others in the faculty in order to be sustainable. Also through mentoring and coaching of future participants during cascade stage
Requires the development of strong relationships and networks	Within the faculty for their individual projects; within and across the institutions as Scholars/Fellows; nationally through the Roundtable
Is about capacity building and development	Through mentoring and coaching by senior executive and facilitator in the academic support unit.
Assists and informs succession planning	Capacity development provides opportunity to trial leadership methods/styles before engaging in formal positions.

The showcase for this project will present a draft list of principles for distributive leadership in higher education and will seek interaction with the audience, through discussion and feedback. We will also seek to determine the implications for this kind of leadership within the sector, in particular within the current hierarchical structure which is embedded in most institutions. Following the overview of the project, invitations for expression of interest will be made for future cascade partners.

Acknowledgements

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