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Abstract

Leadership is a practical skill that should be incorporated into psychology training. Graduates who show leadership in the workplace are highly valued for this attribute. In Australia, however, the Australian Psychology Accreditation Council (APAC) which oversees the accreditation of all psychology degrees specifically does not permit practical, workplace-related experiences to be part of the undergraduate psychology curriculum. Instead, a psychology degree from an Australian university is based on the scientist-practitioner model and involves much theoretical knowledge being taught throughout the three years of the degree. Hence, a consequence of this approach is that when our students enter the workforce, they may not immediately demonstrate their leadership potential. It is against this background that the Edith Cowan University (ECU) School of Psychology and Social Science developed a programme aimed at addressing the lack of leadership training. The programme was designed to provide 12 months of theoretical and practical experience in leadership that was over and above students' normal course requirements. We designed the programme which included a series of workshops and seminars to consist of three curricular components: Leadership Knowledge, Leadership Skills, and Leadership in Action. The curriculum included understanding the theoretical components underpinning leadership such as management theories, participative theories, and relationship theories. Students were then provided with the opportunity to develop and practice their leadership skills by participating in a series of expert-driven seminars, through role-playing, perspective taking, and management of groups. Finally, students worked with local industry-leaders to provide strategic leadership in developing and implementing a community project. This paper outlines the components of the programme and a qualitative evaluation of the students' experiences, the development of their leadership capacity, and their participation in respective community projects.

Enhancing psychology students' experiences: The development of an undergraduate

leadership programme

Psychology, as a science and profession, is typically located within a dominant Western paradigm, emphasising a 'scientist-practitioner' model of training, the goal of which is to apply psychology knowledge in the workplace and society. The development of an undergraduate leadership programme described in this paper was motivated directly by gaps in the teaching of psychology where students gain little experience in the practical application of psychological principles during their undergraduate studies. The main focus of the undergraduate programmes, therefore, is to understand the theories and gain professional knowledge of psychology, but with little 'hands on' or practical experience. In Australia, the teaching of psychological science and the training of psychologists are controlled under a strict accreditation system by the Australian Psychology Accreditation Council (APAC). All students who major in psychology are enrolled in either a three- or four-year degree programme and the most important function of APAC is that it establishes the content of the curriculum taught in these programmes. At present, 36 out of 38 universities in Australia offer APAC-accredited programmes in psychology. The typical curriculum as specified by the APAC guidelines includes content relating to biological psychology, social psychology, developmental psychology, cognitive psychology, abnormal psychology, psychological assessment, research methods, and statistics.

What solutions are there to address the fundamental gap in Australian psychology teaching where students have little or no opportunity within the accredited curricula to gain practical experience in the workplace relating to the practice of psychology? Our approach was to develop a leadership programme in which students could participate in extracurricular activities that taught practical leadership skills relating to their psychology studies. In our leadership programme, we aimed to develop undergraduate students' leadership capacity that

we defined as the ability to articulate a vision and inspire all the participants to commit to a common set of goals. Our leadership programme was designed to allow participants to develop values, integrity, trust, and model ethical behaviour in decision-making processes. We encouraged students to develop authoritative leadership that was not coercive, autocratic, or democratic, but evolves from participatory decision-making processes under the aegis of an experienced industry mentor. The programme encourages potential leaders to develop an approach that inspires and motivates group members to organise and prioritise their activities, taking into account the needs of each individual within the group. This is paramount to its success. Our Leadership Programme assists leaders to develop their own competence to reinforce the capabilities of those with whom they work. In addition, the programme aims to enhance the personal characteristics of an individual to become an effective leader within professional psychological practices. Examples of these traits include being able to tolerate conflict, to be reliable and consistent, and to problem-solve effectively using psychological principles. In developing individual leadership capacity, we formally taught each of these traits based on leadership principles identified in the research literature.

There is an extensive body of knowledge on leadership from which we developed our leadership programme. Initially, we examined leadership theories such as trait, behavioural, and contingency theories as well as participative, situational, transactional, and transformational leadership (Straker, 2008). In developing our programme, for example, we considered trait theory which suggested that leadership characteristics are embedded in the personalities of leaders. However, research has also suggested that leadership knowledge and skills can be formally and explicitly taught. In another example, we considered the ideas proposed by Bolender (2007) that leadership was relational in the sense that leadership capability can be acquired from interactions within a social and professional network. In another example, Chang, Cohen, Pike, Pooley, and Breen (2003) emphasised the qualities of

mentorship which included being a role model, guide, advisor, supporter, trusted counsellor, leader, friend, and listener in developing leadership capacity. For our purposes, however, the central tenets of Bennis' (2003) work seemed to best encapsulate a range of existing leadership theories, as described above, which then formed the underlying framework and content of our leadership programme. Bennis focused on developing the individual capabilities of leadership. He considered leadership to include personal traits such as self awareness, developing trust when working with others, having a vision which is effectively communicated with others, and being aware of one's leadership strengths. For example, concepts such as integrity, and dedication, openness and creativity were explicitly taught to students.

The development of our leadership programme was also based on a desire to apply the core set of graduate attributes that all universities now seem to have adopted. Academics at universities are expected to comply these graduate attributes in which the development of leadership skills is *implied*, but is not explicitly taught in undergraduate curricula. In other words, in our experience, universities do not generally list 'leadership' as a distinct graduate attribute. Instead, it is assumed that students will leave universities with these skills when they enter the workforce. For example, these skills include oral and written communication within a workplace environment, being the team leader and assuming the responsibilities for the actions of group members, applying concepts of cultural diversity to group members, professional skills, applying ethical consideration, and critical appraisal and independent thinking in problem-solving activities. However, in our leadership programme we aimed to explicitly teach leadership to undergraduate students, instead of expecting them to 'absorb' these skills during their undergraduate studies. In other words, we viewed leadership as part of these graduate attributes, and sought to address the gap in the curriculum that relates to formal leadership training. Thus, when our students complete their undergraduate degree they

will enter the workforce with basic leadership skills and some experience in applying them to the workplace.

There has been considerable emphasis on developing leadership capacity in academic staff within the higher education sector, yet we are not aware of any discussion or review that evaluates student-focused leadership programmes. We developed a psychology-leadership programme grounded in research and enhanced by mentoring relationships with successful leaders in the community who provide psychological services (Carruthers, 1993). While the programme does not currently form part of the standard psychology curriculum, it involved extracurricular seminars, workshops, and placements within an integrated leadership training programme that was facilitated by the academic staff in psychology.

Method

Design and Procedure

The ECU Leadership Programme was designed to run over 12-months and focused solely on 2nd year undergraduate students. The programme was voluntary and extra-curricular and comprised of three distinct phases. In Phase One, students attended five workshop sessions where leadership skills were formally taught, explained, and practiced. The initial workshop lasted a full day, and subsequent workshops were between three to five hours long. Prior to the commencement of the formal sessions, students completed a pre-programme questionnaire that measured their leadership knowledge and skills. In Phase Two, participants were paired with a leader/mentor from industry. These leader mentors provided a specific project giving students the opportunity to apply and develop their leadership skills under expert guidance. The projects were diverse and sourced from government and nongovernment agencies and provided students with a range of practical experience in these settings. Examples of some of the projects included working in disability settings, domestic

violence prevention clinics, health promotion in schools aimed at parents, and teenage mothers in playgroup settings. The industry mentor acted as an advisor to guide the student.

This supervisory relationship operated in a similar way to how postgraduate clinical psychology students are supervised during practicum placements. Students met with their industry mentors, on average, about once a week. In addition, students attended at least three formal support sessions with the programme leaders. Other sessions were arranged as required. Finally, in Phase Three, students attended two sessions designed to debrief and evaluate their experiences. In the debrief session, students engaged in a focus group and completed a survey designed to examine the success of the relationship with their industry partner and how their own leadership capacity had developed during the project. In the evaluation session, participants attended focus groups and completed questionnaires that examined the success of the entire programme, including the formal workshops to determine the change in their leadership knowledge and skills.

Recruitment of Participants

Recruitment of participants was highly selective and involved a global email message sent to all 2nd year psychology students. In addition, programme leaders attended lectures to personally outline the nature of the project to prospective participants. Interested participants were required to submit a formal one-page application detailing their interest and motivation to being selected for the programme. Applications were assessed by the programme leaders. Selection was based on the concreteness of people's goals and their reflection of their own personal strengths and weaknesses. The main point was to select highly motivated participants who would commit to completing all facets of the programme. The programme, over two iterations, has involved 30 2nd year psychology students who completed a minimum of 30 hours of work on their respective projects.

Analyses and Results

Prior to, and at the end of the Leadership programme, we asked the participants to complete a questionnaire which sought to determine the change in their leadership knowledge and skills, and evaluated the programme. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. In section A, items were framed around issues of integrity, abilities, and insight. The responses were indicated on five-point scale (ranging from Always, Frequently, Occasionally, Seldom, or Never). Examples of the items included the following statements:

I view problems as opportunities.

I am an effective team member.

I am good at negotiating.

I do support others through the change process.

I engage in goal setting.

I am strategic in my thinking.

I understand how to lead a group effectively.

I know the process of change.

Section B evaluated the programme and responses were provided as "yes" or "no." The items included the following statements:

I found the leadership program useful.

I would recommend the programme to others.

My leader/mentor was a useful resource.

In Section C, students were invited to provide qualitative comments regarding their experiences.

A thematic content analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes and issues in a logical and systematic way (Liamputtong, 2009). This was achieved by analysing the pre- and post-questionnaires separately, arranging the data into similar or diverse statements, and determining meaningful patterns that captured the students' experiences of what had changed for them regarding their skills and knowledge of leadership. These themes were verified and redefined through an iterative process by cross-checking the emerging list with relevant psychology staff.

Findings and Interpretations

Overwhelmingly, the difference in responses between the pre- and post-knowledge questionnaires demonstrated that prior to commencing the programme, students were not aware of leadership knowledge, or the skills required to be an effective leader. After completing the programme, students reported increased skill development and enhanced employment prospects. The issues raised from the responses pre- and post-programme were encapsulated into three major themes, which reflected the integration of Bennis's concepts into the leadership programme. These themes that emerged were Personal development and development of confidence, Communication, and application of leadership skills in the real world. Examples of the quotes from student participants that illustrate these themes are provided below.

Personal Development and development of confidence.   Throughout the program, students were provided with information and practiced their skills and gained confidence, both within and outside the leadership programme. The teaching strategies included

workshops, discussion of case-studies, and mentoring. The role of mentoring cannot be stressed enough. Participants cited their relationship with their mentor as having the greatest impact on their personal development. For example:

My mentor has helped me overcome barriers and work on readjusting my plans. I think elements of this leadership program should be included in all curricula.

My leadership skills have made a difference to my confidence levels and seeing the results of action is encouraging. As I lead, I have experience the benefits of being part of a team. This has given me encouragement, support, and the motivation to strive. I see this step from the leadership program as the beginning of better things that I can make happen.

Effective listening, have passion, being flexible, showing interest and stepping out of my comfort zone. My mentor made me feel important in what I had to say.

I gained confidence in the ability tot communicate my thoughts, assertively and simultaneously valuing the opinion of others.

The leadership program has provided me with self confidence and skills to develop further. I am no longer afraid of taking the lead.

Communication.   The leadership program specifically targeted the improvement of oral and communication skills of students. An essential part of the process was to focus on developing the skills for successful public speaking, as well as to be able to communicate effectively. As part of the program, each student was required to submit a written report documenting their mentoring experiences and reflecting on their own skill acquisition. For example:

> *I've overcome my barrier of speaking to groups of people who are more knowledgeable than me. The leadership program has helped me with the ability and empowered me to speak for myself.*

> *I learnt that leadership requires the ability to recognize and admit when you need help.*

> *I got to conquer my public speaking fears within hours starting the program.*

> *I learnt a lot, both in formal class time and during my project. I learnt to be flexible and used this as an opportunity to improvise.*

> *The program really helped me develop my verbal communication skills. This was a fantastic program and I am grateful for the opportunities provided.*

Applications of leadership skills in the real world.   The leadership program viewed leadership as transformational and through the course, we emphasised the importance of

recognising one's values and developing strategies to identify their goals and implement ways in which to achieve them. For example:

> *To make changes in my life required effort and these things don't just happen. I was once told that avoidance was my worst enemy. Through the leadership program, I have acquired skills which I can apply to my everyday challenges. I don't avoid doing things. I now take action and follow them through with my plans because I have a goal and can make things happen.*

> *During my project, as I had done all the preparation work, I was confident to present without too much stress.*

> *Now that I am out there working in the real world, I cannot believe how much the leadership program has helped me. I would never have developed the skills and abilities without the program. Thank you to all the staff who made this available. Everyone should be doing it.*

Conclusion

The leadership program addressed the development of leadership skills in undergraduate psychology students. This program extended beyond the standard curriculum and aimed to equip students with skills that will help them to lead in their future community of practice. The components of the program were delivered through workshops, seminars, and participation in an industry-related project.

The strength of the leadership program is that it combined a formal teaching program enhanced by mentoring relationships with successful and recognised leaders in the community. The program was extracurricular, and was facilitated by the academic staff in psychology. The programme was widely regarded by students as an integral aspect of their discipline studies. In essence, the program value adds to their degree.

Leadership knowledge within the programme was formulated around key leadership attributes in the literature. In effect, our approach of basing the leadership programme around Bennis's focus on developing individual capabilities of leaders was successful. Bennis's (2003) framework provided a model for developing leadership knowledge and the practical teaching of graduate attributes such as self awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses, effective problem-solving, designing strategies and setting priorities. Mentoring played a valuable role in the transfer of information and the sharing of knowledge needed by the student participants. The model required participants to demonstrate 'leadership-in-action' by being linked with a leader-mentor who acted in an advisory capacity to guide them in their industry project. The involvement of key industry mentors has enabled the placement of students in major government and nongovernment agencies. The growth of industry partners has raised the profile of our graduates and the leadership program itself.

Leadership, as a graduate attribute, is a skill that is not formally taught in accredited psychology programmes in Australia, and part of the reason for this is because of accreditation issues that prohibit students gaining workplace experience during their undergraduate studies. However, in providing such a program as an extracurricular adjunct to their formal psychology studies, we have found that it has enhanced our psychology graduates in several ways. Students who completed the program demonstrated the ability to influence, persuade and motivate others. Furthermore, students developed effective written and oral communication skills and the ability to work in teams and collaborate with their

colleagues. Finally, students learnt problem-solving and perseverance skills to overcome challenges they may face in the workplace. Thus, this programme may provide a model that may be transferred to other discipline areas, such as nursing, engineering, and business. In addition, the programme provides a framework for formally embedding the graduate attribute of leadership into a student's undergraduate studies, a practical skill that may ease their transition into formal employment.

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