Distributed leadership: a collaborative framework for academics, executives and professionals in higher education

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New models of leadership are needed for the higher education sector to continue to graduate students with leading edge capabilities. While multiple theories of leadership exist, the higher education sector requires a less hierarchical approach that takes account of its specialised and professional context. Over the last decade the sector has explored new leadership approaches based on public and private sector models accompanied by an increase in managerial control, market competition, government scrutiny and organisational restructuring. These changes have increased the gap between academics and 'other' staff as academic autonomy has been reduced. This paper presents a distributive leadership approach that places emphasis on collective collaboration rather than individual power and control. It describes a self-enabling tool developed from the experience of four Australian universities that used a distributed leadership approach to build leadership capacity in learning and teaching. The authors identify that while the intent of the original project did not include building collaboration between academics and executive and professional staff, the outcome was recognition of the importance of both a multi-level and cross-functional approach to leadership.

Keywords: cross-functional; distributed leadership; multi-level collaboration

Introduction: Leadership in higher education

New approaches to leadership in higher education are being explored as universities face the dual challenges of competing in a globally competitive world while at the same time designing opportunities to build and develop sustainable leadership. While similar challenges are experienced in all industries, higher education occupies a unique position given its role in the development of new knowledge and dissemination of existing knowledge. The higher education sector has been subject to a plethora of change over the last 20 years that has several elements: an increase in managerial control (managerialism); an increase in competition (marketisation); increased scrutiny alongside greater devolved responsibility (audit); and a remodelling of structures and operations on corporate organisations (corporatisation), (Szekeres, 2004). This has resulted in increased academic staff resentment as their autonomy has been reduced and new administrative units have been established and an impending crisis of leadership facing the sector (Coates et al., 2009). This led Lumby (2003, p. 283) to describe this as 'waves of managerialism' that vary from 'overt oppression to subtle manipulation'.

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Existing research in the UK into effective leadership for higher education has been unable to identify a single successful approach although it has identified the need for leaders to 'create an environment or context for academics and others to fulfil their potential and interest in their work' (Bryman, 2009, p. 66). It also identified the need for leaders to 'consult; to respect existing values; to take actions in support of collegiality; to promote the interests of those for whom the leader is responsible; to be involved in the life of the department/institution; to encourage autonomy; and not to allow the department/institution to drift' (Bryman, 2009, p. 68). It concluded that there is need for 'systematic research that directly examines the connection between leaders behaviour and effectiveness' (Bryman, 2009, p. 68).

This paper argues that for universities to build sustainable leadership a new, more participative and collaborative approach to leadership is needed that acknowledges the individual autonomy that underpins creative and innovative thinking. It proposes a distributed approach to leadership (Gronn, 2000) that, while acknowledging traditional leadership focus on the traits, skills and behaviours of individual leaders, encompasses the need to take account of contexts, situations, environments and contingencies in which leadership occurs. Marshall (2006, p. 5) argues that a distributed leadership approach takes account of the particular challenges of leadership higher education that is 'not a simple process . . . rather, it is a complex, multifaceted process that must focus on the development of individuals as well as the organisational contexts in which they are called to operate'.

The distributed leadership approach advocated embraces all institutional employees, engaged both in direct academic roles of teaching and learning and research or in indirect roles of designing new environments for learning and teaching, supporting students and providing the specialist and professional activities that underpin contemporary universities. While the paper does not revisit the debate about the relative contribution of academic and 'non academic employees' in detail (Conway, 1995; Dobson, 2000; McInnis, 1998; Szekeres, 2004), it does acknowledge the challenge created for cross-functional collaboration by the historical differences between the groups. That much of this is deeply rooted in cultural, structural and power differences in the source of authority (for professional staff based in their work role, while for academics it is based in their discipline) as well as differences in perceptions about working in collaboration between the more individualistic academics and the more collaborative administrative staff (McInnis, 1998; McMaster, 2011; Szekeres, 2004), is pertinent to the potential success of a multi-functional distributed leadership approach. Accordingly it is argued that distributed leadership will be most successful when supported by those in formal leadership roles and by the provision of resources, infrastructure and professional development in more collaborative approaches.

There is some evidence of cross functional support for a more inclusive, collaborative approach to leadership provided in statements such as Ramsden's (1998) that leadership in higher education is:

> a practical and everyday process of supporting, managing, developing and inspiring academic colleagues . . . .leadership in universities should be by everyone from the Vice Chancellor to the casual car parking attendant, leadership is to do with how people relate to each other. (Ramsden, 1998, p. 4)

In the UK, Whitchurch (2008, p. 1) has more recently proposed that a 'third space' is emerging in which less 'bounded professionals work alongside academic colleagues in an expanding institutional community of professionals'.

To illustrate change being made to explore new leadership approaches the next section turns to the Australian experience.

Leadership in higher education in Australia

In Australia, Marshall (2006, p. 5) has argued that higher education institutions will be assisted by an integrated, inclusive university-wide approach that is anchored in the overall strategic direction and budgetary provisions of the university. He states that failure to recognise that changes made in one part of an organisational system impact on other parts of the system will 'inevitably lead to organisational environments that stifle rather than enable the development of leadership capability'. He acknowledges and emphasises the contribution made by senior executives and service providers such as student learning services professionals, librarians, IT specialists, facilities managers, laboratory managers/technicians and administrators. He describes these groups as including staff who:

> do not hold academic appointments but who are actively involved in the planning and decision making processes associated with the development of the organisational context in which learning and teaching occurs . . . .*[and provide]* . . . expert advice and support in their area of specialist expertise to enable others with more specific responsibilities for learning and teaching . . . to make informed decisions. (Marshall, 2006, p. 9)

The lack of a clear framework for effective leadership in higher education led the Carrick Institute now Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) in 2005 to establish a 'Leadership for Excellence in Learning and Teaching Program'. The overall aim of the program was to 'fund projects that could provide empirical evidence on which to base new understanding and definitions of effective leadership in the context of Australian higher education learning and teaching in which there is need to promote and support strategic change' (Parker, 2006, p. 6).

The ALTC Leadership for Excellence Program classifies projects into two priority areas – institutional and disciplinary and cross-disciplinary, leadership (ALTC, 2011). The first priority area – institutional leadership – is broadly defined as leadership that contributes to an institution's capacity to effect change in learning and teaching either through specific roles and structural arrangements or through the support of staff with expertise and passion who engage with colleagues to strengthen learning and teaching as part of their general duties. The institutional leadership classification is further separated into two categories of leadership. Positional/structural leadership includes persons with particular responsibilities for learning and teaching or supporting the development of systems that assist leaders to effect change in learning and teaching. Distributed leadership offers a framework which encourages the active participation and partnering of experts and enthusiasts and the networks and communities of practices that are built to achieve organisational change.

A number of projects (61) have been funded since 2005 with over half (37) projects using a distributed leadership approach. The diversity of these projects and their outcomes was recently described by the ALTC as enabling 'the testing of a number of approaches to the development of the capacity and capability for leadership to effect ongoing improvements in outcomes for both undergraduate and postgraduate students in Australian Institutions' (ALTC, 2011, p. ix). Many of these projects acknowledge the leadership role of both direct teaching academics and staff who support the development of

systems that effect change in learning and teaching (ALTC, 2011). One project that identified the capabilities that make an educationally effective higher education leader (Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008) is currently being modified to identify the capabilities most important to effective practice for experienced leaders in professional and executive roles in tertiary education institutions in Australia and New Zealand who are not employed under a teaching classification (McKellar, 2011, p. 9).

The paper focuses on the second of the institutional leadership classifications, distributed leadership.

Distributed leadership in higher education

Distributed leadership is being recognised as an emergent leadership concept relevant to the culture of the educational sector (primary, secondary and higher education). In the USA, the focus has been on empirical examples of the operation of distributed leadership in primary and secondary education (Leithwood, Mascall, & Strauss, 2009; Spillane, 2006; Spillane & Diamond, 2007). This has embraced both the teacher as a leader in the school setting as well as the administrative roles they undertake, both within the school and between the school and the community. In the UK, research has focused on the theoretical conceptualisation of distributed leadership in all three sectors of education (Bennett, Harvey, Wise, & Woods, 2003; Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2008; Harris, 2004, 2008a, 2009b; Woods, Bennett, Harvey, & Wise, 2004). In Australia both the secondary and higher education sectors have provided opportunities to explore distributed leadership (Dinham, Brennan, Collier, Deece, & Mulford, 2009; Gronn, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2009; Gronn & Hamilton, 2004). As an early advocate Gronn (2002) described distributed leadership as a new architecture for leadership in which activity bridges agency (the traits/behaviours of individual leaders) and structure (the systemic properties and role structures in concertive action.

The ALTC Leadership for Excellence program in Australia supported projects that bridge the gap between conceptual theory and empirical practice by adopting a praxis approach and focusing on the operationalisation of distributed leadership to build leadership capacity in learning and teaching (ALTC, 2011). Projects funded to use a distributed leadership approach to learning and teaching have taken either an issue-based focus (leadership and assessment, on-line learning, emerging technologies, student feedback, peer review) or targeted leadership development (indigenous research, indigenous curriculum development and indigenous women, building communities of practice and networks, developing faculty scholars). While most of the projects focus on the role of academics, several involve professional staff, one is exploring the role of professional staff as leaders in enhancing student engagement through emerging technologies (ALTC, 2011, p. 49), another aims to design a framework for the quality management of online learning (ALTC, 2011, p. 52).

In 2009, the ALTC sponsored a consolidation project to identify the synergies between four completed projects funded as Institutional Leadership (distributed leadership) (Jones, Applebee, Harvey, & Lefoe, 2009). Three of these projects used an issue-based approach (assessment, on-line learning and student feedback) while the fourth targeted leadership development (faculty scholars) (Harvey, 2008; Jones & Novak, 2009; Lefoe & Parish, 2008). A critical factor identified during this analysis was the need to encourage a complex interplay of participation between formal and informal leaders at all levels and functions across the institution. It is this finding that provides the basis for this paper.

Research

The methodological framework that underpinned the consolidation project built on the common methods and strategies of action research and participant reflection that was used in the four initial projects. Over an 18 month period, the project used a participatory and inquiry-based action research methodology of reflexive inquiry (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). This provided the opportunity to implement and research change simultaneously using an action research cycle of plan, act, observe and reflect. The action research methodology offered the benefit of an emphasis upon collaboration and collegiality considered essential to the multi-dimensional, interdisciplinary, multi-university and multi-campus project. The great strength of the model was its inherent flexibility that enabled adaptation of the project in response to ongoing evaluation that was achieved through reflective practice of the project team and the reference group at each project phase.

The project team leaders consisted of three academics and a professional staff member (Director) from centralised learning and teaching units in each of the partner institutions. An early project action was to collect and share the reflections of each of the project team leaders of the original projects. The resulting scoping document was validated by a cross section of leaders of learning and teaching at an ALTC Leadership project meeting. Based on the reflections and feedback from these leaders the project team identified a series of further questions that required detailed responses from participants representing the four original projects. These participants met as Community of Practice reflective workshops in each of their respective institutions to discuss their responses to questions related to what contextual conditions and leadership skills are needed to achieve an effective distributed leadership approach. The responses were then used by the project leaders to develop two distributed leadership matrices. The matrices were then reviewed by the project reference group of national experts in distributed leadership with their feedback used to design an Action Self Enabling Reflective Tool (ASERT) for distributed leadership. This tool was then assessed by a second group of ALTC leaders of learning and teaching for its potential to assist universities to design distributed leadership approach on issues relating to learning and teaching. Given the relevance of the findings for executive and professional staff it was also presented at the 2011 Tertiary Education Management Conference.

Results

The project report described distributed leadership as:

> a form of shared leadership that is underpinned by a more collective and inclusive philosophy than traditional leadership theory that focuses on skills, traits and behaviours of individual leaders (Jones et al., 2011, p. 4).

It confirmed UK theoretical research that distributed leadership consist of five dimensions–context; culture; change; relationships; and activity. The context is one which combines external (government) and internal (executive) influences for change. In several cases, the importance of developing closer collaborative relationships between academics, executive and professional staff engaged in quality management systems and surveys was identified as important in order for effective analysis and reporting of quality in learning and teaching. Accommodation of the academic culture of autonomy was achieved by encouraging participants to self-select for the project based on their interest and expertise rather than their formal leadership positions. Integration of change and development was achieved through a process that involved multi-level engagement of senior leaders, committee members and

informal experts from both academic and professional departments. This provided each of the projects with a range of 'lenses' (Brookfield, 1995), or perspectives, to better inform innovation and project decision making. An action focus was taken by the establishment of cross-functional teams of academics, executive and professional staff with expertise in a broad range of relevant knowledge, ideas and values in collaborative processes of change, supported by resources to enable networking and communicating opportunities. Finally, the importance of relationships, encouraged by an action research methodology that enabled potential conflicts to be resolved early, was identified.

The inputs that would best support these dimensions and values were identified as: the involvement of people on the basis of their expertise, the establishment of systematic processes; the provision of professional development to encourage shared or distributed leadership, the resourcing for collaborative activities and working conditions to support individual participation. Each of these inputs relied on academics, executive and professional staff working in close collaboration.

Finally, the project identified values and practices considered most effective in encouraging collaboration. These included: trust; respect; recognition; collaboration; and commitment to reflective practice; associated with personal behaviours that include the ability to: consider self-in-relation to others; support social interactions; engage in dialogue through learning conversations'; and the opportunity to grow as leaders through connecting with others.

These findings became the basis of the design of an Action Self Enabling Reflective Tool (ASERT) to be used as a framework to assist institutions to implement a distributed leadership approach. The ASERT has two parts – an action matrix and a self-enabling reflective process that in tandem provide a useful tool to assist institutions to implement a distributed leadership approach. Part 1 (Appendix 1A) of the ASERT is as an action matrix of activity that links the philosophy and principles that underpin distributed leadership (that is the dimensions and values) to criteria for distributed leadership. The cells that are created through the intersection of these dimensions, values and criteria identify activity that will best assist the implementation of a distributed leadership approach. For example, a context in which trust rather that regulation is emphasized involves people on the basis of the expertise they can offer to inform decisions. This, in turn is supported by processes through which leadership becomes a collaborative process that involves many people rather than being invested in a single person identified by their formal position. In turn this is encouraged by the inclusion of a component on distributed leadership in professional development for leadership. Finally, resources such as space, time and finance, need to be provided to support collaboration for collaboration. Part 2 (Appendix 1B) of the ASERT is an identified self enabling reflective process of scaffolded reflective prompts to assist participants to identify action needed to move towards a more distributed leadership approach.

The importance of collaborative relationships between academics, executive and professional staff is highlighted in the ASERT. This provides the assurance that all levels and functions have input into policy development and implementation, that flexibility is built into infrastructure and systems and that distributed leadership as a component of leadership development is highlighted.

Discussion

Given the learning and teaching focus of the ALTC projects, it is not surprising that the focus of attention has been on engaging academics in the distributed leadership process. What is interesting, however, are the findings that place emphasis on the importance of

engaging academic, executive and professional staff in collaborative processes for distributed leadership to be effective. Although this is not a new revelation, its importance is highlighted. While acknowledging the challenges for collaboration between the more collectively focused executive and professional staff compared to the more individually focussed academics (McMaster, 2011) the experience of each of the project was that this is not only possible, but is positively embraced by the participants.

Examples of this include the RMIT University Project Team that oversaw the initial project which consisted of a diverse group that included academics and professional representatives (heads of academic schools, managers of IT systems, Property Services and the Survey Centre, and administrative staff responsible for academic development assistance). Similarly, the reference group of experts included academic, professional and executive representatives. The plenary sessions that operated as communities of practice also attracted academic and professional participants from Human Resources and Student Services.

During the project there were clear roles for the different groups to ensure satisfactory teaching spaces were available to support aspects of teaching. The infrastructure service group to make sure that teaching spaces were appropriate and timetabling of classes was effective and by the IT and multi-media departments to ensure that each teaching space had functional facilities and technical support was emphasised. This resulted in a number of changes, such as clearer signage in each teaching space on how to use the equipment and a 'hot line' to IT technical support during classes. In turn, the positive changes that resulted led to one of the major outcomes of this project being the establishment of an ongoing cross-functional leadership group consisting of formal leaders from academic departments, student services, infrastructure, multi-media and IT and the library to provide effective maintenance of existing teaching spaces and to advise on future teaching spaces (Jones & Novak, 2009). It also led to the adoption of a cross-functional as well as multi-level distributed leadership approach being adopted in a further major project on assessment (Jones & Lang, 2009).

In the second project at Australian Catholic University (ACU), the importance of instructional designers, academics and IT experts working collaboratively to build and operate an effective approach to on-line learning that was both technically capable and pedagogically anchored, was emphasised (Chesterton et al., 2008).

In the third project at Macquarie University, the focus on leading assessment engaged academics across all levels (from sessional to senior full-time staff) with professional staff that included policy developers as well as departmental, faculty and organisational administrators inclusive of human resources and IT services (Harvey, 2008).

In the fourth project at University of Wollongong (UOW), academics crossed faculty and disciplinary boundaries to implement change to assessment practice though multi-level interactions with professional staff, central academic development units and senior executive staff. They then crossed institutional boundaries to influence change in assessment practice at the international level through a challenging process of developing and leading a national forum which engaged both professional and academic staff, as well as external groups, across a number of institutions (Lefoe, 2010; Lefoe, Parrish & Smigiel, 2007).

The question of how to engage academics, executive and professional staff in an inclusive participative approach built on collaboration up, down and across institutions remains to be researched in more detail. The ASERT identifies both the need for, and action that can be taken, to involve interdependent, top-down, bottom-up and multi-level out processes. This includes policy and practice to be mutually supportive through the engagement of experts from multi-levels and multi-functions together with encouragement by the senior executive to for all stakeholders to be involved and systems and infrastructure to be

designed to support engagement. How this may occurs and the challenges involved, including differences in work methods between autonomous academics and more structured professional and administrative approaches, has to date remained largely unexplored.

Future research that links these findings to the UK research by Whitchurch (2008) may be particularly useful. The ASERT may prove to be a useful tool to explore future collaboration between academics, executive and professional staff in what Whitchurch has identified as the emerging 'third space', as may collaborative relationships be useful to support teamwork, partnership and networking in the 'fifth-dimension' she has identified.

Conclusion

While multiple theories of leadership exist, the higher education sector requires a less hierarchical approach that takes account of its highly specialised and professional context. This paper has argued that there is need to develop a more distributed and collaborative leadership approach for the sector to continue to provide leading edge change. This collaboration will be best achieved if it includes academics, executive and professional staff.

In so arguing the paper does not eschew the important role of formal, structural leadership, but rather argues for a dual, or hybrid, approach in which formal leaders and informal experts are recognised for the leadership contribution they make. Nor do the authors wish to minimise the challenges that will be created, particularly given the different cultures and values held by academics, executive and professional staff. While the focus of the project that informed the tool was on building leadership capacity of academics in learning and teaching, the findings demonstrate the need for an inclusive participative approach by which academic, executive and professional staff collaborate to build systematic, multi-facetted leadership.

The paper presents the Action Self Enabling Reflective Tool as having potential to identify action that will be most effective in the adoption of a distributed leadership approach. Further research is required into how academics, executive professional and administrative staff may be supported to develop more effective distributed leadership approaches to change.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix 1A. Action Self Enabling Reflective Tool (ASERT) for DL

Part 1: Action

Criteria for Distributed Leadership (X Axis)	Dimensions and Values to enable development of Distributed Leadership (Y Axis)			
	CONTEXT Trust	CULTURE Respect	CHANGE Recognition	RELATIONSHIPS Collaboration
People are involved	Expertise of individuals is used to inform decisions	Individuals participate in decision making	All levels and functions have input into policy development	Expertise of individuals contributes to collective decision making
Processes are supportive	Leadership is seen as a shared process not a position	Decentralised groups engage in decision making	All levels and functions have input into policy implementation	Communities of Practice are modeled
Professional development is provided	DL is a component of leadership training	Mentoring for DL is provided	Leaders at all levels proactively encourage DL	Collaboration is facilitated
Resources are available	Space, time & finance for collaboration are available	Leadership contribution is recognised and rewarded	Flexibility is built into infrastructure and systems	Opportunities for regular networking are supported

Appendix 1B. Action Self Enabling Reflective Tool for DL

Part 2: Self Enabling Reflective process

STEP ONE: Identify where (ie level of the Institution) at which a DL approach is to be enabled
   NOTE: If the Institution as a whole desires to introduce a DL approach at multiple levels the question needs to be asked about each level.

STEP TWO: Identify the Criterion for DL on which to focus (*eg Involve People*)

STEP THREE: Identify the Dimension (*eg Context*) for DL in relation to the chosen Criteria

STEP FOUR: Reflection on action NOTE: The examples in brackets relate to the Action statement.

What is the extent to which the identified action item occurs currently? (*eg extent to which the expertise of individuals is used to inform decisions*)

EG Individuals (both academic and professional) are asked for input on their experience as a means to inform Policy

STEP FIVE: **Reflection for future action**
   i)   What action could be taken to **identify existing opportunities** that have not yet been taken advantage of? (*eg for individuals to contribute their expertise to decision making processes*).

EG Individuals (both academic and professional) could be asked for feedback on areas in which their expertise is not currently utilised

   ii)   What action could be taken to **identify new opportunities**?

EG Individuals (both academic and professional) could asked to identify areas in which their expertise could be utilised

   iii)   What action could be taken to **generate new opportunities**?

EG Professional development could include exploration of issues that could benefit from input of expertise more broadly

   iv)   What action should be taken to **ensure these new opportunities are sustainable**?

EG Develop a culture in which new ideas are celebrated

STEP SIX: Reflection to ensure integrated concerted, supportive action
   i)   How does the proposed action arising from these reflective prompts affect the other criterion and dimensions?
   ii)   What change is needed in the other four Criteria to ensure that the proposed action is implemented?

EXAMPLES OF ASET from the Lessons Learnt project in relation to:
. . . .*Extent to which the expertise of individuals is used to inform decisions*
Individuals were encouraged to contribute ideas with meeting notes acknowledging contributions
More regular communication and consultation was encouraged using both F2F and electronic media

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*Newsletters were established to share practice on a regular basis

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STEP SEVEN: Identify a plan of activity to achieve the identified desired Action outcome
STEP EIGHT: Reflect on the outcomes of the action taken in terms of the desired Action outcomes
STEP NINE: Adjust the Reflective process as needed to flexibly accommodate the specific institutional context and culture