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# Enabling leadership capacity through authentic learning: The Faculty Scholars Program

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An identified gap in the higher education sector is the development of leadership capacity for teaching and learning. Significant funding has been allocated by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) to support the development of academic leadership in higher education. The outcomes of this initiative will ultimately improve the student experience as a more scholarly approach to the many aspects of teaching and learning is adopted. One project funded by ALTC supported four universities to develop and trial a framework for leadership capacity development. Five critical factors for success were identified including authentic learning activities that were situated in real contexts; formal leadership training and professional development initiatives; engagement in reflective practice including opportunities for dialogue about leadership practice and experiences; and activities that expanded current professional networks. In this paper we specifically examine how authentic learning environments enabled leadership capacity development and informed assessment practices within institutional and national contexts.

**Keywords:** leadership, authentic learning, capacity development

We provide an overview of a cross-institutional program for leadership capacity development, funded through the government initiative, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). The Program addressed a need for system wide development of leadership for teaching and learning that moved beyond management and administration. A Faculty Scholars Program provided the context in which multi-level empowerment was promoted to improve the student experience of assessment. This program was facilitated in two stages – the development and implementation stage and the cascade stage. In the first stage a partnership between academics and a facilitator in the central staff development units of two regional universities was established and a framework to develop leadership in learning and teaching through authentic learning was trialed. An iterative evaluation process was implemented to inform and support improvements to the leadership framework. In the second stage two additional universities engaged with the Program and a cascade approach to leadership development was adopted with the modified framework trialed and further developed.

An authentic learning approach was used, enabling academic staff involved in the program to practice and develop versatile leadership skills that would have applicability across a diverse range of ‘real world’ contexts. The Scholars assumed complex leadership roles within their faculties and led initiatives designed to improve assessment practices. They engaged in collaborative and reflective activities throughout the program and reported on the outcomes of the assessment initiatives to their peers at a National Roundtable which they planned,

coordinated and facilitated. This paper provides an overview of the program, defines the terms and theoretical underpinnings for the Program, and explains the methodology for the research and the resultant framework. We then discuss the value of authentic learning environments for staff development through the eyes of the participants and offer some suggestions for future research.

## Background

Managing change and leading institutions 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). We agree with views expressed by West-Burnham (2004) that leadership capacity building must extend beyond the development of individuals to recognition of leadership “as a collective capacity that is reflected in structures, processes and relationships” (p. 1). We acknowledge that in order for this change process to have impact it must harness the efforts of individuals.

The establishment of ALTC in 2004 has seen a major shift in terms of research in the higher education sector. Substantial opportunities for funding teaching and learning related grants have been provided, with one priority area for funding aimed at the development of leadership capacity. The position of ALTC is that academic leadership is a highly specialized and professional undertaking. Consequently, ALTC has established a program focused on Leadership for Excellence in Learning and Teaching to support systematic, structured and sustainable models of academic leadership in higher education.

McKenzie, Alexander, Harper and Anderson (2005), in their recommendation to ALTC, 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” (p. 171) and to “encourage the development of cross-institutional networks” (p. 172). In addition, Southwell, Gannaway, Orrell, Chalmers and Abraham (2005), recommended capacity-building programs in their dissemination strategies that “incorporate a distributed and multi-level concept of leadership practice in the sector” (p. 61).

In their analysis of applications received under the program, Anderson and Johnson (2006) identify a number of common assumptions in the higher education context, specifically that leadership:

- is rarely a matter of chance;
- is inherent in organisations;
- capability can be acquired through training or experience; and
- behaviour can be identified and, using suitable methods, developed in potential leaders.

They state “many academic leaders rely too much on learning on the job” (Anderson & Johnson, 2006, p. 1). They also note, “the concept of distributed leadership is seen by most [applicants] as appropriate for universities” (p. 8). Furthermore, Marshall (2006), in a review of the leadership literature for higher education, contends that there are a number of principles to guide the development of leadership capability within higher education but that “an essential part of the process of developing leadership capability in learning and teaching is to develop an active community of scholars ...” (p. 7).

The Faculty Scholars Program was conceptualised as a growing community expanding each year through engagement of additional Scholars and further universities. It was underpinned by the notion of distributed leadership in order to engage people at multiple levels within the university. We moved beyond the idea of *distributed* leadership, with implications of delegation by a superior, to that of *distributive* leadership. By moving from notions of *leader as individual* to leader as *first amongst peers*, a distributive leadership model acknowledges the ability of people at many levels to take leadership for different aspects of learning and teaching. We define distributive leadership as a distribution of power through the collegial sharing of knowledge, practice, and reflection within the sociocultural context of the university (Bennett, Wise, Woods, & Harvey, 2003; Dinham, Aubusson, & Brady, 2006; Knight & Trowler, 2001). This approach to leadership is not a blueprint for leading more effectively but a way to generate insights into how leadership can be practiced more effectively within the current hierarchical structure of the modern university system. Of significance is the context within which reflection and participation in leadership capacity development occurs. Within this Program, an authentic learning environment provided a context to enable leadership capacity development.

One key aspect of the study examined the scope for professional development in higher education that was embedded in authentic learning environments. Two theoretical perspectives underpinned this: authentic learning and action learning. It has long been accepted that one-off workshops do little to enhance the professional expertise of staff beyond raising awareness. However, programs that focus on ongoing development that transpires over months or even years, such as the one identified here, provide exceptional opportunities for learning in authentic contexts (Carew, Lefoe, Bell, & Armour, 2008; Lefoe, Olney, Wright, & Herrington, 2009). Recent research provides guidelines for implementing and sustaining authentic learning environments (Herrington & Herrington, 2006). These include:

- provision of an authentic context that reflects the use of knowledge in real life;
- authentic activities that involve complex, ill-defined problems;
- access to expert performances and modelling of processes;
- multiple roles and perspectives which allow support for collaborative construction of knowledge;
- provision of coaching and scaffolding at critical times;
- promotion of reflection to enable abstractions to be formed;
- opportunities for articulation to enable tacit knowledge to be made explicit; and
- provision for integrated assessment of learning within the tasks.

We expand these in the discussion of the implementation of the Program.

An action learning model provided a framework for implementation for the participants in the Program through the key areas of plan, act, observe, and reflect (Zuber-Skerritt, 1993). These strategies were continuously used by the Scholars to review their progress with the implementation of their faculty-based projects and a larger National Roundtable Project which we discuss in the following section.

## **The Faculty Scholars Program**

Successful funding from ALTC in 2006, supported by substantial institutional funding, provided an avenue for a partnership between two regional universities to further develop

leadership capacity for teaching and learning within their institutions. A leadership capacity development framework for teaching and learning was developed and trialed and is now available to the sector (Parrish & Lefoe, 2008). It supported strategic change initiatives through leadership activities embedded in faculty-based projects related to improving assessment. Cross-institutional networks were facilitated to support the adoption and adaptation of the framework and its resources. The planning and facilitation of the Roundtable enabled Scholars to establish wider strategic professional networks and promote project resources more broadly. In the second stage, two additional universities agreed to participate as the leadership framework was trialed and further refined using a 'cascade approach', whereby the leaders from the first stage universities mentored the second stage universities (Fullerton & Bailey, 2001; McKenzie et al., 2005). The Program participants now provide a critical mass for extending the network, enabling knowledge and understandings of leadership development and assessment practice to be cascaded within and across institutions through mentoring.

These processes supported the aims of:

- creating and trialing a leadership capacity building framework for teaching and learning;
- facilitating cross-institutional networks to support the adoption and adaptation of this leadership framework for multiple contexts; and
- developing resources to support this framework.

## **Approach**

The Program design included two stages: the development and implementation stage, and the cascade stage, with an iterative evaluation process to support ongoing improvements.

### **Stage 1: Development and implementation (2006-7)**

In the development phase each university identified six participants to engage in the Program. In addition to the \$180,000 grant from ALTC, a significant financial contribution was made by each university to reduce the Scholars' workloads. We focus on one institutional context for this paper. At a regional university, the Scholars engaged in two discreet authentic tasks.

The first task involved the identification of a faculty-based project focussed on improving assessment and engaging a systems level improvement to enhance the student experience. The project was aligned to their faculty's strategic goals and had strong support from the Deans. The Deputy Vice Chancellor provided leadership coaching and was a champion for the Program, supporting and mentoring Scholars throughout the facilitation of their project. Initially Scholars came together for a three day residential leadership retreat designed to: enable them to develop collegial relationships; formulate and discuss aspects of their authentic learning task related to assessment; and participate in leadership training. Scholars then implemented their authentic task in their faculty at the same time engaging in: institutional and cross-institutional communication and collaboration; strategic leadership mentoring and coaching; and reflection. As part of the reflective process Scholars were encouraged to maintain a reflective journal and participate in communication and resource sharing through a cross-institutional online collaborative space.

The second authentic task, at the end of the implementation phase, involved the Scholars from both universities organising and facilitating a National Roundtable, with fifty invited peers. This focused on assessment and was related to aspects of their faculty-based project. It

involved academic staff from their own and other universities, and leaders in the field identified through professional associations and key literature. There were also other universities represented with an interest in participating in the next stage of the Program.

This initial stage of the Program culminated in the refinement of the Leadership Capacity Development Framework (LCDF), following an extensive evaluation that included both formative and summative evaluation activities, that was implemented in the cascade stage.

### **Stage 2: Cascade (2008)**

In this stage of the Program the first generation Scholars, the Program leader and Program manager acted as key supporters for the second generation participants through the provision of mentoring and support for the implementation of the modified LCDF in two partner universities. This second stage of the program continued to evaluate and validate the LCDF.

### **Methodology**

Twenty-four participants (Scholars) engaged in the Program. They were at various stages of their career, ranging from associate lecturer to professor, and assumed a range of leadership roles and responsibilities in their faculty, the institution and the national arena. In addition there were a number of other participants engaged across the institutions, including a Program manager, a facilitator from the central academic development unit, steering committees who provided individual mentoring, and key administrative support personnel.

A mixed methods approach was used within an action learning framework. Data was collected through interview, reflective journal, and anonymous surveys. Additional information was collected through evaluation of key activities such as the Roundtable, leadership retreat and planning workshop. Qualitative analysis methods, using NVivo software to identify key themes, were used to identify successful methods and challenges faced by participants engaged with the activities. This was used to inform the development of the framework for leadership capacity development and associated resources.

### **Outcomes**

The LCDF builds on a Faculty Learning and Teaching Scholars program that was operating in each of the first stage universities. This Scholars program 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 across the institution. The LCDF expanded the Scholars' model to overtly develop leadership skills and capacity via explicit professional development activities and cross institutional consultation and collaboration. The use of faculty-based projects was maintained providing not only a vehicle for strategic change but also the opportunity for Scholars to lead an authentic action learning project.

Organisation of a National Roundtable provided the opportunity for Scholars to lead an additional authentic task. Scholars also engaged in mentoring and coaching by strategic leadership coaches from the senior executive in each institution and an institutional facilitator. A further improvement was to cascade the model through the mentoring of stage 2 participants by the stage 1 participants to further develop a cross-institutional network of Scholars, and to provide opportunities for the Scholars to gain leadership skills at a national

level. Five overlapping domains emerged from a qualitative analysis of the framework and its underpinning concepts. These domains provide the basis for the LCDF.

### **Domain 1: Growing**

Scholars engaged in activities designed to develop their understanding of the social and cultural context of leadership and leadership capacity development in higher education and expand their awareness, knowledge and understanding of leadership and the relevant skills for leading in a higher education context.

### **Domain 2: Reflecting**

Scholars engaged in a cycle of action and reflection. This cycle was a significant factor in the LCDF and its associated activities. Reflective practice is integral for the development of an understanding of the social and cultural context of leadership and of oneself as a leader.

### **Domain 3: Enabling**

Scholars engaged in leadership capacity development that was enabled through the provision of opportunities and experiences that occurred in the authentic, real or actual context in which they reside. Consequently the development of leadership transpired through the enactment of leadership.

### **Domain 4: Engaging**

Scholars established and forged relationships with significant others including other Scholars, senior colleagues, institutional leaders, mentors, and coaches. The opportunities and activities that facilitated engagement in these relationships enabled the Scholars to participate in dialogue that encouraged a deeper understanding of leadership roles and responsibilities.

### **Domain 5: Networking**

Scholars undertook activities and engaged in relationships that broadened their professional networks across the multiple levels of higher education. These activities and relationships enabled the Scholars to engage with a wider group of senior leaders and explore the potential for leadership opportunities.

## **Authentic learning environments for staff development**

We focus on just one domain for the remainder of the paper, the Enabling Domain which looks at how Scholars' leadership capacity was enabled through authentic learning tasks. There were eight overarching activities in which the Scholars engaged:

**Activity 1:** Three day Leadership Retreat

**Activity 2:** Two day Leadership Workshop

**Activity 3:** Extended Authentic Learning Faculty-Based Projects over 6-12 months

**Activity 4:** National Roundtable: Organisation, Facilitation, and Presentation.

**Activity 5:** Mentoring and Coaching

**Activity 6:** Reflective Practice

**Activity 7:** Cross-Faculty, Institutional and Cross-Institutional Communication and collaboration

**Activity 8:** Cascading to partner institutions.

At the individual level, Scholars developed a greater understanding of themselves in a leadership role. At the faculty level they gained a broader understanding of what leadership in higher education entailed and engaged with the scholarly literature in the field to support their implementation of the faculty-based project. At the national level, the experience of planning

and facilitating the Roundtable provided a catalyst for many to engage with leadership at a higher level and to test their leadership ability in a forum of their peers. Table 1 provides an overview of the identified authentic learning guidelines (Herrington & Herrington, 2006). We match each of these to the related framework activities and provide some insights from the Scholars that reflect a consensus from the data.

Table 1: Mapping of activities and quotes across guidelines for authentic learning  
(After Herrington & Herrington, 2008)

Guidelines	Related Activities	Scholar's Comments
Provision of an authentic context that reflects the use of knowledge in real-life	3, 4	<i>Doing the Program is definitely useful ... because it takes you out of your comfort zone.</i>  [T]he Program provided good opportunities for me to learn through experience.  <i>I spent a lot of time working on my action plan ... Then I've absolutely stuck to this plan and ensured I had everything done by the specified date.</i>
Authentic activities that involve complex, ill-defined problems	3,4,7,8	The organisation of the Roundtable has been a way of putting leadership theories into practice which has also enabled learning about them.  <i>The best learning in my circumstance came from coming to terms with my responses to the indifference I encountered ...in effect the authentic learning.</i>
Access to expert performances and modelling of processes	1,2,5,7, 8	The opportunity to invite and meet important people from higher education and to be able to target people we wanted to invite in a sense the bigwigs in assessment and higher education to the Roundtable was great.
Multiple roles and perspectives which allow support for collaborative construction of knowledge	5,6,7	<i>The group communication and collaboration allowed us to reinforce each other and affirm the progress that we were making in taking on leadership roles.</i>  My mentor was excellent; she picked up straight away if there was something that I needed to talk about, reflect on and work through. This helped in dealing with the challenges I was experiencing throughout the Program.
Provision of coaching and scaffolding at critical times	5	<i>I appreciated the words of wisdom from senior academics and policy makers.</i>  We [mentor and Scholar] had regular meetings. She even provided really good advice as I prepared for an interview for a leadership position. I have continued the mentor-mentee relationship.  <i>The support that we received from [mentor] was quite important for advocating us as emerging leaders and there was also quite a bit of support from our DVC.</i>
Promotion of reflection to enable abstractions to be formed	6	I've kept an ongoing record of what has happened in each phase of my project and I have also been writing up a manuscript for a paper that I am going to be delivering at a conference next year. This has been a useful means of reflection.
Opportunities for articulation to enable tacit knowledge to be made explicit	3,4,7,8	<i>One of the main things was to prepare people for what was ahead and that worked well. I think we were all well prepared in terms of having the Scholars from last year attend and that carried on through the whole Program.</i>
Provision for integrated assessment of learning within the tasks.	4,8	[I developed] Confidence in my ability to actually stand up in front of a group of people ... and make sense and have them receive it positively.  <i>Presenting at the Roundtable was a bit of a confidence boost.</i>

## Discussion

Scholars engaged in leadership capacity development were enabled through the provision of opportunities and experiences that occurred in the authentic, real or actual context in which they reside. The experience of leading enabled the development of an appreciation of themselves as leaders and the leadership qualities they possessed or had developed. Engaging in authentic tasks enabled Scholars to:

- experience and practice how to lead;
- assess how they operate as a leader within a group of leaders;
- engage in leadership practices they wouldn't otherwise have had the opportunity or confidence to engage in;
- put into practice leadership knowledge, understandings and skills they had learnt about;
- envision their potential as a leader;
- contemplate leadership concepts and theories;
- appreciate the difficulties and challenges in leading change;
- establish confidence in themselves as leaders; and
- appreciate a broader perspective of leadership in higher education beyond the faculty or department level (Parrish & Lefoe, 2008).

The faculty-based projects proposed by the Scholars provided opportunities for authentic learning; these projects were related to assessment and aligned to faculty and university strategic goals. Scholars designed and articulated the strategic action plan for their faculty-based project and led the implementation of this plan. This implementation provided Scholars with an opportunity to provide and practice leadership within their faculty and institution. Scholars also had the opportunity to provide and practice leadership outside their institution in their organisation and facilitation of the Roundtable on assessment. Herrington and Oliver, (2000) remind us that the best learning takes place when the tasks transpire in the context in which the learning will be applied.

## Future considerations

We suggest a longer period of time for the implementation of the faculty-based projects would be more effective. Many projects were completed in a much longer timeframe because of the challenges associated with the process of effecting change. This would also mean that it would be best to conduct the Roundtable at a time that ensures Scholars have had adequate opportunity to achieve a substantial portion of their action plan.

Future research is required to track the longer term influence the framework had on the Scholars both as leaders within and outside of their institution. We are already seeing the effect of the program with a number of Scholars achieving publication, promotion, externally funded grants and an ALTC fellowship building on the success of one faculty project. One Scholar, who has since taken a formal position of leadership in her faculty, encapsulates the impact of the Program:

I have a better sense of myself as a leader than I did before this Program. I really wasn't sure I could be a leader whereas now I know what attributes I have. I have a sense of what skills I need to continue to develop to be a good leader and I have an appreciation that leadership is not necessarily about the position you hold, or your personal achievements. Leadership is about finding ways of bringing about

sustainable, enduring change to make teaching, learning and student assessment more effective (2007 Scholar).

In order for a new generation to lead universities, potential leaders need to be prepared to take on leadership roles for an ever changing and dynamic higher education system (Knight & Trowler, 2001). Frameworks for leadership capacity development, such as the LCDF, provide a scaffold for preparing potential leaders for formal leadership positions (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). The feedback and evaluations of participants in the Program suggest that the LCDF is a sound model for developing leadership capacity. However, the successful implementation of the LCDF relies on an investment and commitment in the implementation of the program from universities, institutional policy makers and senior leaders.

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