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Evaluating action-learning and professional networking as a framework for educational leadership capacity development

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Abstract

This article describes the responsive evaluation component of an educational leadership capacity-building initiative developed at one Australian university and implemented by three others. The project aimed to develop, implement and disseminate an innovative framework to address the national strategic goal to increase the pool of qualified educational leaders. The framework reflected principles of distributive leadership, featured individual action-learning plans and fostered engagement in a supportive, scholarly community. Evaluation was challenging on many fronts, which the qualitative and responsive approach of design-based research was used to address. An external evaluator joined the project team and adjustments based on feedback were implemented throughout the process. The leadership capacity development framework is described, and design-based research endorsed as a suitable methodology to evaluate innovative academic development programs.

Keywords

framework, educational, leadership, capacity, development, learning, evaluating, professional, action, networking

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This article describes the responsive evaluation component of an educational leadership capacity building initiative developed at one Australian university and implemented by three others. The project aimed to develop, implement and disseminate an innovative framework to address the national strategic goal to increase the pool of qualified educational leaders. The framework reflected principles of distributive leadership, featured individual action learning plans and fostered engagement in a supportive, scholarly community. Evaluation was challenging on many fronts, which the qualitative and responsive approach of design-based research was used to address. An external evaluator joined the project team and adjustments based on feedback were implemented throughout the process. The leadership capacity development framework is described, and design-based research endorsed as a suitable methodology to evaluate innovative academic development programs.

Keywords: distributive leadership, design-based research, capacity development, educational leadership, program evaluation

Introduction

A strong focus on leadership for change in higher education in the last fifteen years has seen the academy driven by political and stakeholder agendas of increased accountability and improved quality (Birnbaum, 1999; Ramsden, 1998). Funding for initiatives such as the American Council of Education in the USA (Kezar & Eckel, 2002) and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education in the UK (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2009) highlight the need to develop educational leadership capacity. Since 2006, a government-funded initiative, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), has provided competitive grants to promote this national strategic priority. One ALTC sponsored project, 'Distributive Leadership for Learning and Teaching: Developing the Faculty Scholar Model', aimed to create a broadly applicable framework for leadership capacity development in higher education institutions. Embracing the distributive model identified in the title, the project targeted academics who were not in formal leadership positions. As Faculty Scholars, they assumed leadership roles to implement individual action-learning projects within their institutions, and collectively to disseminate their experience through a national

roundtable and other networking activities. This paper focuses on evaluation as a key element of the capacity development initiative. Project implementation is reported elsewhere (Lefoe, 2010; Lefoe & Parrish, 2008; Lefoe, Smigiel, & Parrish, 2007).

An external evaluator contributed to the project, adopting design-based research (The Design Based Research Collective, 2003) as a grounding methodology. The study was challenging on many fronts. Firstly, because the concept of distributive leadership is a radical shift for institutions where hierarchy and positional authority are traditions, and this would influence outcomes. Secondly, capacity development is an organic process without fixed targets or performance indicators, so the objectives were a moving target. Responsive evaluation was used to address these challenges.

The article outlines the theoretical grounding of the leadership development framework and presents an overview of program elements and evaluation events. Details of the project activities are expanded and evaluation findings described. It concludes by relating findings to project objectives and recommending design-based research as a methodology for evaluating innovative programmes.

Notions of Leadership and Academic Development

Distributive leadership is a novel concept in the Australasian higher education sector, where hierarchical traditions prevail. Using a scholarly approach to problem solving, theoretical grounding for the Distributive Leadership for Learning and Teaching (DLTT) framework draws on many sources (Lefoe, 2010). It is situated within theories of leadership and professional development of university teachers.

Leadership of teaching is a core aim of the Faculty Scholar project. Gibbs et al (2008) describe this kind of leadership as ‘multi-faceted’, and involving different

activities to suit institutional and disciplinary contexts. They outline nine areas of leadership activity with context-driven variations in practice, i.e:

- Establish credibility and trust
- Identify teaching problems and turn them into opportunities
- Articulate a convincing rationale for change
- Disperse leadership
- Build a community of practice
- Recognize and reward excellent teaching and teaching development effort
- Market the department as a teaching success
- Support change and innovation
- Involve students

This list provides a useful guide for leadership capacity development programs.

Anderson and Johnson (2006) cite research that demonstrates, given the right circumstances, anyone is capable of exercising leadership. This opposes the notion of the 'born leader' or individual with unique qualities. There are enough examples of people acknowledged as leaders by their peers to show that effective leadership and formal authority assigned to a particular role are very different propositions. The concept of leadership as a 'collective capacity reflected in structures, processes and relationships' proposed by West-Burnham (2004) also challenges the notion of leaders as powerful individuals with authority assigned through hierarchy. While leadership as a collective capacity is a guiding principle for the DLLT Project, this is not seen as an alternative to hierarchical structure, but as a way to increase the pool of scholars equipped to take on formal leadership roles, and to promote the collective capacity model as more appropriate for complex institutions in the 21st century.

For professional development, Knight & Trowler (2001, p 150) stress the importance of contextualized activity and communities of practice to distribute expertise when preparing the next generation of academics, who they anticipate will have substantially different leadership roles. McKenzie et al (2005, p. 172) recommend that ‘professional development for leaders should value teaching and teaching innovation, improve skills, share practice... and encourage development of cross-institutional networks’. The DLLT framework reflects these points, and offers practical ways to ‘develop and support a capacity building program incorporating a distributed and multi-level concept of leadership practice’ as recommended by Southwell et al (2005, p. 61). With these theoretical concepts as guiding principles, the project aimed to develop a process to empower individuals, foster shared responsibility and enable collegial support within multi-level professional networks. These high-level goals informed practical strategies to enhance leadership skills and promote teaching enhancement through individual action learning projects.

The Leadership Development Framework

Design of the DLTT framework is described in detail elsewhere (Lefoe, Smigiel & Parrish 2007). An outline is presented here to put the evaluation process in context. The broad aim was to extend one institution’s successful initiative to address the national strategic objective of building leadership capacity across the higher education sector. An International Steering Group brought diverse perspectives to management of a project that ran in two stages, 1) design and implementation of a distributive leadership development framework, and 2) dissemination of the framework across additional institutions. In the first stage, a group of Scholars from two universities undertook this year-long programme of activities:

- Submit an application and be acknowledged as someone with leadership potential
- Attend an immersive leadership development and action-learning project planning retreat
- Plan and complete an authentic action learning project to enhance teaching practice in an institutional context; Develop and demonstrate leadership capability through this process
- Meet with senior staff to discuss teaching enhancement projects
- Collaborate to plan and disseminate experience at a national Roundtable event
- Engage with colleagues across the sector to foster communities of practice in discipline-based teaching and educational leadership

In the second (dissemination) stage, further institutions were brought on board, and some of the original Scholars acted as mentors to new Scholars and institutions.

The program exposed Scholars to real situations demanding exercise of leadership skills in pursuit of action learning project goals. They had to influence others and exert authority, deal with conflict, negotiate political situations and juggle multiple roles from positions without formal authority, thus enacting distributive leadership in an institutional and disciplinary context. Unlike many newly appointed leaders in institutional roles, they could acquire strategies to deal with matters through leadership development sessions, personal coaching and mentoring, reflective discussions and supportive cross-functional networks as well as direct experience.

Action learning projects were chosen because they are a powerful vehicle for professional learning and leadership development (Revans, 1982). As well as focusing on Scholars' professional practice contexts, they provided a vehicle for networking

across institutional roles, and connecting to national and international disciplinary organizations. Table 1 summarizes the engagement of different institutional players.

Table 1: Stakeholder roles and engagement in the Distributive Leadership Project

| Level | Activity | Players |
|---------------|---|---|
| Faculty | Individual action learning project for teaching and learning enhancement | Scholar, Dean, other faculty, project facilitator |
| Institutional | Mentoring, sharing and reflecting, supporting | DVC (Academic), Steering Committee, past and current Scholars, senior contacts and mentors |
| National | Management and facilitation of roundtable, networking / collaborating within discipline, peer mentoring | All Scholars, cross institutional roundtable participants, colleagues within discipline, institutional leaders, Steering Committees |
| International | Reflecting, sharing, disseminating and consulting | All Scholars, Project Leader, publication referees & readers, International Steering Group members, professional community |

As noted above, the DLLT project was motivated by concerns about the limited opportunities for individuals to develop the skills required for institutional leadership roles. It was underpinned by the belief that a program to develop leadership capacity should focus on authentic tasks and professional practice contexts. In this case, action-learning projects aimed to improve assessment practice, although any other aspect of teaching and learning strategy could be chosen.

The Evaluation Challenge

Evaluation was challenging because of the nature, and the innovative approach to achieving DLLT Project goals, as well as the variety of institutional and individual influences likely to arise. The collective approach to leadership challenges institutions that are by nature hierarchical and by reputation, slow to embrace change (West-Burnham 2004). Goals of organizational learning and transformed practice are hard to measure, particularly in the short to medium term. However, the entire project had to be completed within twenty-four months to satisfy funding body requirements. While effectiveness of the framework could be assessed, an increase in leadership capacity would be hard to demonstrate. On the positive side, the evaluation had clear

parameters to work within, and both current and future implementations of the framework benefitted from the boost and status afforded by that initial funding. The following sections describe the evaluation methodology and its application over two iterations of the DLLT framework, and six months into the dissemination phase.

Design-based Research

Design-based research was the preferred evaluation methodology because it involves theoretical grounding and processes for analyzing educational innovations. Wang & Hannafin (2005, p. 6) describe it as ‘a systematic but flexible methodology to improve educational practices through iterative analysis, design, development, and implementation’. It is ‘based on collaboration among researchers and practitioners in real-world settings, and leads to contextually-sensitive design principles and theories’. It grounds solutions to real world problems in established theory and involves key stakeholders in iterative design, implementation and evaluation cycles. It can accommodate flexible goals and the unanticipated outcomes that are common with educational innovations. As well as an evaluation methodology for the overall project, design-based research supports refinement of activities throughout the project lifecycle. Four stages of the process applied to the DLLT project are summarized as:

- (1) Analysis of practical problems by researchers and practitioners: this involved a review of leadership and academic development practice related to the strategic goal. Practitioner knowledge and experience of the national higher education sector and the culture of institutions was a key contributing factor.
- (2) Alignment with an explicit theoretical framework: initial reviews led to adoption of a distributive leadership philosophy enacted through authentic tasks, professional networking and Scholar initiated action-learning projects.

- (3) Theory driven design and testing of solutions in practice: this underpinned the process to monitor and refine program design throughout each implementation cycle. It guided alignment of theoretical concepts with aims and activities, and produced evidence of effective design.
- (4) Periodic reflection and various forms of documentation: different sources of data were used to document decisions and present evidence to the project team, and to generate reports to the funding body and for dissemination. These activities kept the broad leadership capacity development objective in focus.

Evaluation aims and processes

Two overarching evaluation aims were a) to test design principles, implementation processes and activities applied to practice, and b) to identify factors that supported and challenged leadership capacity development within participating institutions.

Future iterations of the program, as well as reports and recommendations drew on evidence from these sources:

- ALTC reports and documents for the Leadership for Excellence Programme
- DLLT project documentation outlining the aims, objectives and outputs
- Published literature on leadership and academic development
- Fast feedback on leadership programme sessions and activities
- Participant surveys, observations, focus group records, and interviews
- Email transcripts, reflective discussion records and field notes

Evaluation followed two strands of activity that were separated at times. One focused on effectiveness of elements of the DLLT framework, and the other on success of individual action learning plans. These plans provided the authentic context for leadership development, and success depended on a complex web of contextual factors, which Gibbs et al (2008) described in their study of leadership for teaching.

Although there is a relationship between the two strands, it is not a co-dependent one. For example, leadership development can occur even if action-learning goals are not achieved.

The data provided immediate feedback on project activities, descriptive summaries of framework implementation in each institution and qualitative indicators of impact. The evaluation plan is outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Project aims, evaluation objectives and forms of evidence

| Project aim | Evaluation aim | Form of evidence |
|---|---|---|
| Develop and trial a distributive framework to promote educational leadership capacity development across the [Australian] higher education sector. | Ground conceptual design in current theory and best practice models. | Literature reviews to inform design of the leadership development framework and activities. |
| | Monitor project development and implementation processes to identify strengths and recommend areas for potential improvement. | Interview transcripts and notes from discussions with project leaders, facilitators, senior contacts and Scholars on project activities and the experience of working with a distributive leadership framework in various institutional settings. |
| | Identify key success factors and challenges encountered by scholars. | Surveys and informal feedback on resources and activities designed to support leadership development. |
| | Measure effectiveness and comment on alignment of tasks, activities and networks to project aims and objectives. | |
| Develop cross-institutional networks and freely available resources to support the adaptation and adoption of a DLLT framework for multiple contexts. | Review and report on the efficacy of activities designed to disseminate the leadership development framework and project experience across the sector | Interview transcripts and focus group data on activities designed to foster cross-institutional networks and collaborative planning process for an event organized and facilitated by Scholars. |
| | | Interview transcripts with project leaders and facilitators perspectives on adaptation of the framework for different institutional contexts. |
| Produce evidence to inform theory, policy and academic practice based on design and implementation of the leadership capacity development framework | Use design-based research methods to generate principles and guidelines to support policy recommendations and theory development aims; | Peer reviewed publications that describe the theoretical position and rationalize policy implications of the project; |
| | Meet accountability and reporting requirements of the funding organization | Milestone and final reports to the funding body featuring project activities and achievements. |

Evaluating the DLLT Program Elements

A summary of data sources and evaluation findings related to each DLLT element are outlined below.

Selecting and Supporting Faculty Scholars

Twenty-five Scholars from four institutions participated in the first two iterations of the program. The aim was to pick individuals with established academic profiles and recognized leadership potential. Within that guideline, the selection process varied to suit the local context. . Interview data showed that most stakeholders considered the selection process important. One project coordinator commented that:

“We want to identify people across the university who have the potential for leadership in change in teaching and learning.... because it is such an enormous task and it can only be done by a select group of people... to recognise their interest and ability and contribution to teaching and learning and then support and foster that so that they can in turn help other people.”

Participating institutions made a financial contribution to provide time and resources for Scholars to complete an action-learning project. This was a tangible way to demonstrate the value institutions placed on leadership development. Each institution also appointed a Strategic Leadership Coach, usually a Deputy Vice Chancellor, to engage with, and represent the Scholars at management level. One Scholar commented that ‘there is [value] to a point, especially visibility and having a senior person learn more about you and what you are doing.’ Heads of Schools, Deans and Associate Deans provided personal mentoring and various forms of in kind support to Scholars. The Institutional Facilitator role was typically assigned to a senior academic developer. The value of these connections was summed up by one Scholar: ‘the facilitator role is very important, we wouldn’t have had the DVC’s ear without it...it is the hub of involvement between Scholars and the hierarchy and it raises the profile of the project within the institution.’

Evaluating Project Activities

Three sources of data were: 1) feedback during and after events listed in Table 3 as key research activities; 2) interviews conducted near the end of the year of participation as Scholar, Facilitator or Strategic Leadership Coach; 3) observation,

audio recordings and email archives of project activities. Table 3 list data collection methods and key research activities, demonstrating the comprehensive approach that was adopted.

Table 3: Data collection during key research activities

| Key research activity | Description | Data collection methods |
|--|--|---|
| Leadership training | Three day retreat | Individual session and event evaluation forms Interview questions and reflections on perceived value and content of the retreat activities |
| Scholars plan, design and implement an authentic action learning project | Discussion and feedback during retreat followed by implementation within Scholar's institution | Reflective journaling activity Semi-structured interviews with Scholars and Strategic Leadership Coaches Feedback on project planning and presentation sessions at face to face events Participant observation in discussion forums Focus group at roundtable |
| Scholars organize and facilitate a one day event for peer feedback on action learning projects | Roundtable with invited guests and steering group members | Participant evaluation forms Focus questions in interviews Focus group during planning day Observation of planning and presentation sessions Participant observation in discussion forums |
| Formation of cross-institution networks for dissemination of knowledge and ideas | Communication and resource sharing in online space, (The ALTC Exchange) | Focus questions in interviews Participant observation in discussion forums Participation by past Scholars in cascade phase Records of related activities initiated by Scholars |

The leadership retreat

A three-day immersive residential retreat at a neutral location placed equal focus on exploring concepts of leadership, building community and action learning project planning. Both structure and content reflected theories of leadership development and professional learning, providing Scholars with opportunities to:

- Develop relationships and network with other participants and senior contacts
- Contribute to the design of a distributive leadership capacity development framework
- Formulate, develop and receive feedback on an action-learning project plan
- Participate in leadership training activities
- Negotiate and finalize details and deliverables for participation in the project

Discussion focused on the concept of distributive leadership and how it interacts with more established leadership models in the professional context. It was expected to meet challenges, particularly as Scholars were not in formal leadership roles. The group developed a shared language for talking about leadership, and clarified their understanding of a distributive model as one that:

- Generates engagement
- Acknowledges and recognizes leadership irrespective of position
- Is negotiated not delegated
- Focuses on people's strengths
- Includes shared responsibility and accountability
- Means different things in different contexts
- Requires the development of strong relationships and networks
- Is about capacity building and development
- Assists and informs succession planning

Feedback was reviewed daily to inform the following day's activities, so participants could see action arising from their comments and knew their input was useful. On the final day, both participants and facilitators critiqued the program design and the quality of each component. This prompted useful reflection, and assisted with planning for future iterations. Scholars' comments sum up general views of the event:

“The retreat was fantastic...and it was nice to know I could pick up the phone and talk to other Scholars... this was because of the relationships that were established at the first face to face meeting.... I was really struck how well the group came together and I think that was largely due to the retreat... it was a remarkable group development process.”

One Scholar could not attend the retreat and considered this detrimental to later communication.

Monitoring communication

Following the retreat, Scholars used an online community space and video-conferences to discuss individual projects and plan the Roundtable. The project leader and external evaluator were participant observers, so issues faced by Scholars were identified and action taken where necessary. Although the video-conference technology proved unhelpful in facilitating communication, email discussion was constant and phone calls allowed matters to be discussed and resolved as they arose. As expected, much communication took place outside the channels provided.

Focus groups

A meeting before the Roundtable provided an opportunity for further reflection and feedback. In 2007, this was first face-to-face meeting after the Retreat. Some Scholars expressed dissatisfaction about how little communication had taken place in the interim. As a result of this feedback, an extra planning meeting was scheduled the following year. Much of the discussion focused on issues affecting Scholars in different institutions, thus highlighting the influence of context and raising awareness of possible solutions.

The Roundtable

The Scholars took collective responsibility for planning, promoting and presenting the Roundtable, as an opportunity to discuss individual projects and receive feedback from colleagues. It introduced potential participating institutions to the DLLT and discipline-based action learning projects, and provided an opportunity for Scholars to exercise leadership skills. All participants were invited to provide written feedback. The response was generally positive to what was judged an informative and useful networking event. Feedback from the first year resulted in a more interactive and less presentation oriented format the following year. The real proof of concept came when additional institutions committed to participate in the project.

Interviews

Three rounds of semi-structured interviews provided a broad perspective on the perceived success of different elements of the project. Interviews with Scholars eight months after the retreat and two months after the Roundtable explored achievement of action-learning goals and Faculty Scholar project experience. Enabling factors and challenges were explored, along with conceptions of the role of distributive leadership in hierarchical institutions. Interviews with Strategic Leadership Coaches invited feedback on the impact and effectiveness of project tasks, activities and relationships from a senior management perspective. A further aim was to explore the impact that different perceptions and attitudes of senior staff had on the Scholars' progress. Two areas addressed in interviews with the DLLT project leader were a) perceived strengths and areas for improvement in design and implementation, and b) reflections on alignment and effectiveness of project activities and relationships with stated aims.

Summary of Findings

This summary reviews implementation of the evaluation plan and what the process revealed. A full description of findings is included in the project final report (Lefoe & Parrish 2008). The aim here is to reflect on the process, and the value of feedback from various sources for an innovative programme.

Overall, the multi-layered evaluation approach based on design-based research principles served the purpose well. It supported testing, and eventually endorsed the underlying principles of distributive leadership and academic development through action learning in authentic contexts. It supported analysis of the impact of design elements applied to practice. As well as program design and implementation issues, it highlighted the importance of understanding different stakeholder perspectives and brought barriers to implementation of the strategic initiative into focus.

Although no measure of quantitative increase can be attempted at this stage, the findings suggest the DLLT framework is a useful way to promote educational leadership capacity development within higher education institutions, and show how cross-institutional networks can strengthen this development. Interview data revealed perceptions of success from all stakeholder perspectives. A range of Scholar initiated activities and networks are further evidence of positive effects. Since completion of the study reported here, the framework has been adapted for use in further institutions across Australia and internationally (Smigiel, 2008). The focus for Scholars' action learning plans reflects these institutions strategic objectives for teaching enhancement. This is solid evidence that the framework is adaptable for different institutional contexts. Evaluation has continued with additional funding, and is reported elsewhere (Jones et al, 2010). A summary of evaluation aims and outcomes for the original Faculty Scholar project follows.

Monitor project development, implementation and reporting processes to identify strengths and recommend areas for improvement

The participant observer role of an external evaluator, and use of a range of feedback mechanisms across events and participant perspectives provided rich data to serve this objective. Underpinning the project with relevant theory and literature provided useful points of reference for activity design and evaluation.

Identify key success factors and challenges encountered by leadership Scholars

Success factors and challenges were identified through various channels. Monitoring online discussion in the collaboration space was particularly useful, as matters arising at a point in time may have been forgotten or lost currency by the next evaluation event. Discussions were archived and available for reference.

Comment on the alignment of tasks, activities and relationships within the distributive leadership development framework to the project aims

The Scholars provided general data through email discussion and answered specific interview questions on this topic. Triangulation with interview data from Strategic Leadership Coaches, the Project Leader and Facilitators supported the conclusion that, with minor adjustments and allowance for the learning curve associated with new activities, alignment was appropriate and largely effective.

Measure the overall impact and effectiveness of the project tasks, activities and relationships against the stated aims

Scholar interviews elicited conceptions of self as leader, as well as understanding of the novel concept of distributive leadership. Reports of increased confidence, understanding of institutional structures, systems and processes all indicate that the framework was effective in these areas. Ongoing collaboration within and across institutions and Scholar cohorts suggests that the mix of autonomous and collaborative tasks is appropriate for the purposes it was designed to achieve.

“It’s connected the faculties through five Scholars; new connections will be made with the next group... as well as connections to scholars from other institutions.... Overall I think this project has given me a connection and I feel more engaged to the institution”

However, positive outcomes did not result for all Scholars for a variety of reasons, some more directly related than others to their participation in the project. While findings generally endorsed both design principles and implementation processes for the Faculty Scholar Model, they also showed how personal and situational factors could affect outcomes. Guidelines for future iterations of the Faculty Scholar Project and adjustments for dissemination were informed by the findings that a) consistent and tangible support from senior managers within participating institutions and b) the engagement of Scholars in real time project planning and feedback sessions were critical success factors. The collaborative task of organizing and hosting an event (the

Roundtable) was not necessarily popular or easy to complete. However, it is an authentic experience of distributive leadership in action, and therefore valuable for both opportunities and challenging aspects. One Scholar noted, ‘the Roundtable is a good example of what [distributive leadership] means in practice. It wasn’t showcasing individuals. Each person stepped up to perform his or her part then stepped back and let someone else move forward.’

Provide evidence to support policy recommendations and theory development aims of the project

Reflections and evidence supporting the relevance of the selected theories applied to practice served this aim. The concept of distributive leadership worked well in a collegial culture to develop capacity in people not yet in formal leadership roles, and to address the need for succession planning in higher education. The DLLT framework provides a useful addition to policy to address this current gap. It compliments, rather than replaces other types of leadership development programs.

Review and report on activities designed to disseminate the leadership framework across the sector

Various activities were designed to support dissemination of the DLLT framework. A core event was the Roundtable where the project and individual Scholar initiatives were presented to a wider audience. Feedback from Project Facilitators and uptake by additional institutions are evidence of success. Further opportunities arose through conference presentations and Scholars’ engagement in new, and existing professional networks. A list of project-related publications appears in the final report (Lefoe & Parrish, 2008) as further evidence of dissemination. This includes work produced by Scholars on their own initiative, reflecting leadership in true distributive style.

Conclusions

Higher education institutions around the world need to prepare future leaders for a very different kind of educational system (Knight & Trowler, 2001). Distributive leadership provides a useful conceptual framework to prepare for this change. The program evaluation described in this paper features the design and implementation of a largely successful initiative to promote the novel concept of distributive leadership as an individual, institutional and cross-institutional capacity development process.

Comments from senior management participants summarize the outcome.

“The project has achieved a degree of success in terms of the objective of educational leadership capacity development. The people involved are now better positioned to take on formal leadership roles, and to be identified by faculties as potential candidates. Developing people into these roles has been a problem in some faculties, so this is a good potential solution... The Scholars are more confident and able to get others to listen... People have really come to understand the challenges involved in bringing about change”

Completion of an action learning project as a core activity allowed participants to develop skills through enactment of distributive leadership in authentic institutional contexts, while also making a positive contribution to the enhancement of teaching and learning in their discipline. As one Project Facilitator noted:

“The Scholars had to develop a project that was supported by their faculty so mostly they liaised with the Associate Dean Teaching and Learning to develop the project and then that had to be approved... The projects have been of significant importance to the faculties.”

From the Scholars’ perspective, working with senior contacts gave context to projects they were implementing, showed ‘how it fitted into the broader scheme of things’, and ‘brought a bigger picture mentality to the table.’

The evaluation methodology was also theoretically grounded, with the aim to test and develop theory to add to the current body of knowledge. The findings could be read as suggesting the beginning of a shift in institutional culture to acknowledge the need for innovative ways to grow leadership capacity and encourage connections

across levels within institutional hierarchies. The study also revealed barriers, such as outmoded concepts of leadership, yet to be overcome. The importance of supportive institutional contexts for leadership development cannot be underplayed. Gibbs et al (2008) note that leadership of teaching differs across institutional contexts and disciplinary cultures. While their research was unpublished when the Faculty Scholar project was being developed, with hindsight, it endorses the key design features, in particular, action learning projects to engage Scholars in the practice of leadership in their own institutional and disciplinary context, and community aspects to raise awareness and promote discussion of the differences across contexts.

The connection of Faculty Scholars to senior staff offered practical ways to raise awareness of the challenges of implementing teaching and learning enhancement plans, and of the different priorities of teachers and managers within institutional and national contexts. A senior manager commented that, ‘the scholars need to see their projects and their work within the bigger context of the government agenda and OECD standards. If we are developing people to be leaders, this is where it needs to go next.’

The detailed and responsive approach to evaluation served the project well, by identifying a range of influential factors and producing evidence to explain their impact. Design-based research has potential to address some key challenges facing educational research and studies of academic development (Reeves et al 2010). Two major strengths are theoretical grounding of designs, and longitudinal studies, which leadership capacity development aims clearly require. Two further grants supported initiatives that built on the outcomes of the original project. The first used the DTTL framework to extend the program to further institutions (Smigiel, 2008). The second

sought synergies between four completed projects that used a distributive leadership approach (Jones et al, 2010). Both aimed to increase leadership capacity within the Australian higher educational sector and potentially beyond. It will be important to review these initiatives at a time when impact on capacity can be more clearly judged. Design-based research provides a means through which this can be achieved, and the evolving knowledge base maintained.

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