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# Distributing leadership for sustainable peer feedback on tertiary teaching

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# Distributing leadership for sustainable peer feedback on tertiary teaching

## **Abstract**

A growing evidence-based literature supports the value of peer feedback as a positive professional learning activity that enhances confidence, builds collegial relationships and supports reflective practice. Less clear is how best to embed such programs in university practices. This paper describes a leadership approach developed to support the scalable and sustainable implementation of peer-based professional development in a large Australian university. Drawing on distributed leadership approaches, we locate responsibility for ongoing implementation at the local level. This approach and its effectiveness are evaluated by analysing the experiences of 10 leaders. Based on the leaders' evaluations and our reflections our approach has potential to support the leadership of sustainable and effective peer-based professional development of academic teaching staff in the tertiary sector. We identify critical success factors, challenges and future directions for the leadership and implementation of peer feedback on teaching in higher education.

## **Keywords**

distributed leadership, peer observation, professional development, peer review

## Background

This paper describes a leadership approach designed to support the implementation of a program of peer feedback on teaching. The program, known as Peer Partnerships (PP), uses voluntary and reciprocal peer observation of teaching to engage staff in collegial and reflective practice. A growing literature supports the positive impact of peer observation of teaching in higher education (Barnard, Croft, Irons, Cuffe, Bandara & Rowntree 2011; Chester 2012; Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond 2004; Hendry & Oliver 2012). Such professional-development programs capitalise on learning approaches preferred by academics; “just in time, just for me, problem-based, with solutions from successful practitioners in their area linked to their skill gaps” (Fullan & Scott 2009, p.66). Our program paired staff from cognate, but different, teaching programs to help build collegial relationships, increase teaching confidence and enhance skills. Chester, Clarke, Wingrove and Denny (2013) provide a detailed description and evaluation of the PP program.

While many such programs exist and have been evaluated in the literature, few of these have identified a clear leadership framework by which the program can operate at scale and in a sustainable way. In this paper we focus on a distributed-leadership approach designed to embed our program within university practices. Our university is one of the largest in Australia, and implementation of professional-development programs requires attention to both scalability and sustainability. Our leadership approach places a high value on distributing leadership to those who are best placed to lead within the local context and supporting those individuals in their leadership efforts. Furthermore, it aims to foster professional engagement with leadership by encouraging leaders to align their individual aspirations to the strategic directions of the university.

## Leadership Framework

With the intent to enlist voluntary engagement of individuals to lead the PP program at the local level, we developed a distributed-leadership approach. Distributed approaches to leadership conceptualise it as a shared, collaborative and context-driven practice. Jones, Applebee, Harvey and Lefoe (2010) recommend such an approach for implementing change in higher education because of its ability to accommodate the deeply embedded culture of academic autonomy and, in turn, foster the kind of autonomous professional development valued by academics.

Distributed leadership can be *additive* or *holistic* (Gronn, 2002). Additive leadership presupposes that leadership may be enacted without connection to the practices and activities of the institution, whereas holistic leadership consciously draws upon existing leadership relationships and collaborative patterns to introduce a change. The PP leadership approach we developed was holistic, designed to operate within formal leadership structures such as the college and school executives and school learning and teaching committees. The school is the smallest organisational unit at our university. The university comprises 23 schools grouped into three overarching colleges: Business; Design and Social Context; and Science, Engineering and Health. Schools typically include several disciplines. The school of Media and Communication, for example, the largest in the university, includes the following discipline groupings: games and animation; advertising, design and photography; media, journalism, screen and music; and writing, communication, public relations and publishing. Each school has a Head or Dean of School and a Deputy Head or Dean, Learning and Teaching. Securing support from all these leaders was instrumental in the implementation of our leadership approach.

As Timperley (2005) notes, “distributing leadership over more people is a risky business and may result in the greater distribution of incompetence” (p. 23). Spilane (2006) adds that it is not the act

of just distributing leadership that is most important, but rather how this occurs. Mindful of these cautions, we took a systematic and strategic approach to the recruitment of leaders. We developed what MacBeath, Oduro and Waterhouse (2004) refer to as “formal and strategic distribution”, with leadership deliberately distributed and delegated. This resulted in the recruitment of some leaders who held formal leadership positions within the university structures. Other leaders were strategically recruited based on their demonstrated informal leadership skills, as evidenced by their peers and our own interactions with them.

We began by identifying the function of leaders within PP: to recruit, train, support and debrief teacher participants as they work through the peer-observation and feedback process. We estimated approximately 10 hours for these tasks. We then identified the characteristics necessary for effective leadership: demonstrable leadership within the school, strong interpersonal skills, sound time- and project-management skills, and established working relationships with colleagues. Consulting with Heads/Deans of School and the Deputy Heads/Deans, Learning and Teaching we identified suitable leaders within schools, engaging in what Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris and Hopkins (2006) term “planful alignment”. Planful alignment involves reaching agreement with existing leadership to ensure the optimal outcome. It is undertaken with the intent to foster a shared commitment to organisational goals. This alignment between personal and organisational goals was then articulated within the formal work-planning process. We provided the following wording to our leadership recruits to help them describe and articulate the leadership work to their line managers and to use in the written documentation of their work plan.

<p><b>Work Plan:</b> Leadership Category</p>
<p><b>Objective:</b> Develop and demonstrate leadership capacity in learning and teaching through Peer Partnerships</p>
<p><b>Performance Indicator:</b> Liaise with Head/Dean of School and Deputy; recruit Peer Partners; establish project schedule; facilitate and evaluate Peer Partnerships introductory workshop &amp; debrief; monitor progress of participants; manage budget.</p>
<p><b>Optimal Performance Indicator</b> Report/disseminate project outcomes; participate in a leadership debrief session with co-leaders in the College; write journal article reflecting on leadership experience.</p>

**Table 1. Suggested text for leaders’ work plan**

Using this approach allowed us to distribute leadership to those best placed to lead. It was also designed to actively build leadership capacity within the local environment of the school. We worked collaboratively with leaders to recruit, train and support the PP participants, respecting the diverse disciplinary ways of knowing each school leader and school represented. In working with leaders in this way, we adopted what Spilane (2006) refers to as a collective distribution approach, with leadership enacted both separately and interdependently between us, as the project leaders, and the school-based leaders. Using a scaffolding approach, we adopted an “incremental distribution” (MacBeath et al. 2004), providing leadership support to develop leaders’ capacity and skills over the course of the semester. This support included presentation material that outlines the PP model (seven guiding principles and a four-step action learning cycle); an induction session and ongoing follow-up, the development of PP email templates for

communication with school participants; a schedule for the semester to track progress of the program against key milestones; co-facilitation of the PP participant introductory workshop and debrief sessions; and the design and production of project artefacts, including a website, professional development workbooks and certificates of participation. This support was vital not just for capacity-building amongst this group of leaders, but also for providing resources for the longer-term scalability and sustainability of PP. The process was designed to support school leaders to take on these responsibilities without our ongoing support in future iterations of the program and to induct and distribute leadership to other participants within the school.

## **Aim and Methodology**

The aim of this study was to evaluate the distributed-leadership approach described above, which was developed to support the scalable and sustainable implementation of peer-based professional development in a large university. This approach was evaluated using a qualitative framework to capture and enable in-depth insight into academics' institutional leadership experiences of PP (Burns, 2000). The study had an intrinsic and instrumental interest: how particular leaders had experienced PP and analysed the implications of these leadership experiences in building leadership capacity within a large, complex tertiary institution.

## **Participants**

During 2012 and 2013 13 schools and two academic-support units participated in the PP program at our university, including 20 leaders and 149 peer partners. An evaluation of the pilot program from the participants' perspective is reported in Chester et al. (2013). This paper focuses on the experiences of 10 leaders who held positions on the Learning and Teaching Committee of their School. Of the ten leaders who evaluated our approach most were at Senior Lecturer level in their school. All had been in their respective schools for at least five years.

## **Procedure**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 (six male, four female,) leaders. We chose to conduct one-on-one, semi-structured interviews, a method that supported the research aim and elicited a depth of data to capture participants' perspectives and "permit one to understand the world as seen by the respondents" (Patton 2002, p.21). The leadership interviews were designed to capture and reflect contextual complexities and the uniqueness of practice and assured confidentiality.

The sample was deliberately selected to provide insight into the phenomena being investigated, not because it provided empirical generalisation to a population (Patton, 2002). Participants' responses reflected the disciplinary and organisational contexts in which they practiced and their individual backgrounds, career level, experience, values and aspirations. Following the 2012 interviews, an additional question was added to the interview schedule with the purpose of identifying whether following its original implementation phase, the experience of leadership in the Peer Partnerships program had delivered professional-development learning. The different questions reflected the different stages of implementation. The impact of the two sets of question was to enable an increasingly deepened analysis of the Peer Observation model and the efficacy of distributed leadership.

The open-ended interview questions were distributed via email to each leader approximately one month prior to the interview. Interviews were conducted by a research assistant who was unknown to the leader. This allowed for the complexity of each leader's experience to emerge, and meant leaders could speak openly without the limitations of confidentiality inherent in a focus-group format or any power dynamic that may have existed between the project leaders and the school-based leaders. The use of open-ended questions allowed the interviewer to understand leaders' behaviour and perceptions without imposing her own values (Denzin & Lincoln 2000). This format was used to capture rich and detailed data that may have been overlooked with a more structured interview format.

A semi-structured approach facilitated identification of themes in the responses, and enabled comparisons between answers using the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Interviews lasted for approximately 25 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

As a qualitative study, our goal was to discern emergent patterns, themes, concepts and understanding (Patton 2002). Viewing knowledge as a social construct, we adopted an interpretivist approach to the data analysis, which, as Patton (2002, p.344) defines, "honours the whole phenomenon via the perspective of those who actually live it and make sense of it".

Our method of data analysis involved an iterative process. A descriptive account of the data was undertaken, along with a higher-level analysis that was concerned with what was suggested or implied. The approach to data analysis encompassed consistency checks whereby patterns and themes were identified, then rechecked through repeated readings and analysis of the interview transcripts. The data was coded to assist the process of discovering the identified patterns and themes, with similarities and differences highlighted. By coding the data we were able to make sense of the data collected and highlight the important findings.

## Data Analysis

All leaders were asked the following questions. This section describes the themes that emerged from those questions.

### 1) What were the benefits for the school, for individual academics and for you as leader?

#### *Benefits for the school*

All leaders recognised the project as marking a cultural shift at both the school and university level. They further acknowledged the benefit of having a specific program within the school that "helps foster a culture of reflective practice". One leader commented that such a program allowed for "more conscious, more alert, more sensitive teachers who are now more reflective on their practice". Five leaders strongly endorsed the idea that supporting PP at the school level sends a clear message that "the School cares about the continuous improvement of teaching". Four leaders identified that PP enriched the School through fostering multi-disciplinary relationships. As one leader noted "it was a great benefit to the school that it brought teachers from different areas together in a project".

#### *Benefits for individual academics*

Leaders readily identified the benefits for individual academics who engaged in PP. All leaders noted that there were positive outcomes for teacher participants, including the acquisition of new skills and strategies. For example, one leader referred to the program as facilitating a process of becoming "better teachers because you're picking up new ideas, new principles, new ways of

delivering” and another leader drew attention to the fact that staff members who were “more junior in teaching experience...gained enormous advantage from being in this program because they have had somebody who has given them constructive feedback”, and this is reportedly “the first time they have ever received [this]”.

Seven leaders observed staff “deeply engaged” in meaningful reflection about teaching practice. Further, it was noted by six leaders that PP successfully created a much-needed “space” for conversation, reflection, and collegial relationship-building. Six leaders also identified that the PP model’s cross-disciplinary approach, whereby participants were encouraged to partner outside their immediate discipline, was critical to delivering useful learning as staff moved beyond their program team. As one leader said, “The cross-disciplinary approach was critical as people stepped out of their silos.”

Six leaders also said the opportunity for staff to give and receive feedback was beneficial and acknowledged the reciprocal nature of learning. Three leaders identified that PP supported the development of a school-wide culture of peer feedback through the developed peer relationships. One leader commented that PP had delivered relevant professional learning for staff because “the School now has eight more” reflective teachers. Sessional staff and early-career teachers were identified as specific key stakeholders by one leader, with PP offering the staff their first opportunity for constructive feedback from colleagues.

#### *Benefits for leaders*

Although leaders tended to focus on the advantages for others rather than themselves, all noted how the benefits to themselves exceeded expectations. Eight leaders felt that leading PP enabled them to broaden their school networks and engage with staff who were passionate about their teaching and who were committed to continual improvement. As one leader observed, “one of the best aspects was to meet a group of young and middle-career teachers who were keen to reflect more on their practice and try to improve in an innovative way through PP”. A different leader stated that “the greatest benefit was that I became acquainted with people that I did not know in the school, I learnt a great deal from others and the team itself was a dedicated group of individuals who wanted to learn about great teaching practice and engage with the students at a very deep level”. Three leaders believed PP enabled them to develop leadership capacity, noting that PP prompted them to think about leadership in a different way, as nurturers of culture change. As one leader said, it was a “fantastic experience that increased my academic leadership skills in the school and college”. Another reported that being a leader was “good for my own personal development”. Five leaders identified that leading PP was fulfilling because it provided the opportunity to be part of a project where change was voluntary and not compliance-driven.

## **2) What were the most challenging aspects of this project?**

All leaders reported challenges with the implementation, most notably around recruiting teacher participants. Seven leaders reported challenges related to logistics; as one leader noted, “the most challenging aspect was trying to get everybody together at the one time”. Logistical issues included trying to get teachers with conflicting teaching schedules together for the introductory and debrief sessions, matching partners when they were located on different campuses and partners leaving their observations until too late in the semester. Solutions suggested by the leaders included being organised well ahead of time and running the introduction session before classes start, getting group appointments in diaries well ahead of time and matching partners within the same campus. Two leaders said they had trouble understanding their leadership role at the beginning because they did not have any formal leadership in the school, noting that they felt

“very much the trainee leader”. One leader found that it was challenging to overcome people’s misconceptions about PP being a performance-management process rather than a collegial-enhancement program.

**3) What level of support did you receive from the leadership team in your school? What impact did this support have on the implementation of Peer Partnerships in your school?**

All leaders reported that top-level support was critical to the success of the program. As one leader noted, “It was critical that the Head of School was supportive of this process as well as myself... and discipline heads – that way staff could really see that this activity was strategically aligned – that is important to our staff.” Another reported that formal approval from the Head of School was important because it “validated the project” and “attracted others to participate because it was official”.

Two leaders highlighted that they welcomed high-level but unobtrusive support, and that they valued Head of School endorsement and the trust afforded to them to implement the project on the ground. Resourcing from the Head of School was viewed as critical to project implementation and viability. Two leaders identified that all levels of learning and teaching leadership needed to engage with the project, so that their understanding of PP could then “be used in work planning, to encourage it in terms of professional development options for staff”. This included the direct involvement of Program Leaders to ensure buy in regarding work-load planning.

**4) Did you encounter any resistance to the concept of Peer Partnerships within your school?**

Three leaders identified that PP had been conflated with the Peer Review program that was being introduced simultaneously at our university. In contrast to PP, Peer Review provides summative feedback on staff performance for teaching-award and promotion purposes. Leaders noted that there was a perception amongst some staff that they would be assessed through the PP process, which led to some caution. These leaders noted that greater clarity about the two processes was needed at the institutional level. One leader noted that there was some resistance due to time; staff were already fully committed. Clear allocation in workloads was considered important to the success of the program; “if staff are formally allocated some time up front they will see that this is being valued”. A further two leaders identified that there was resistance from staff who felt there was no need or scope for improvement. Two leaders didn’t identify any resistance.

Seven leaders noted the importance of communicating that participation in PP was voluntary and, unlike some other initiatives, not driven by teaching scores or performance indicators. It was also noted that making this explicit in promotional material was fundamental to ensuring misconceptions about the program did not arise. The introductory workshop session was regarded as critical in reinforcing the model’s underpinning principles of voluntary participation, reciprocity and confidentiality.

**5) In what ways were you supported by the Peer Partnerships project team? Was this support useful? Why? Why not?**

Eight of the leaders noted how they felt secure in the knowledge that if there were any problems they could always ask “the PP project team for advice”. Seven leaders commented on how important the introductory sessions run by the PP project team were to developing a shared



understanding of the PP cyclical process. The focus on giving and receiving feedback was particularly beneficial, as one leader noted, because it was “interesting to see the kinds of questions that were being opened up” by the PP project team. Six leaders commented on the usefulness of the resources provided by the PP project team, such as the booklets for both participants and leaders and the website. Six leaders also commented on the fact that the leadership process was not an “onerous task”. Five leaders were very keen to make sure that PP was a “relaxed” and “non-threatening” activity in their schools and that this was well supported by the PP project team. One leader commented that it was very good that the PP project team “wanted to find out how we wanted to run it, what we thought would be best”. For another two leaders, working with the PP project team meant that there was no “interference” from senior management other than supporting the process through the budget within the school, and that they “had the liberty to run it [their] way”.

**6) Do you imagine Peer Partnerships will continue in your school? What supports might be needed for this to happen?**

All leaders indicated that they would like to see PP continue in their school. The continuation of the program within the School, however, was perceived to depend on endorsement from Heads of Schools, as they “hold a lot of sway with our staff”. Leaders all identified the need for recognition of participation in PP and alignment with university processes. At a minimum, they noted that the time commitment of both leaders and teacher participants should be acknowledged in the professional development section of work plans. One leader noted that she was keen to continue in the role the following year “because you build up a bit of momentum, and understand what the project actually involves”.

The six 2013 leaders were asked to respond to the following additional question.

**7) What professional learning about leadership have you acquired through your leadership of Peer Partnerships?**

All leaders noted that it was easy to build their leadership capacity through PP because it was “seen as a positive form of professional development” that was “integrated into the university structure”. The leaders all recognised their role in raising awareness about PP as a positive step toward keeping reflective teaching practice at the core of learning and teaching activities within the School, especially as all leaders reported frustration with the propensity for Learning and Teaching Committees to focus on compliance activities. Four leaders felt that while they did not specifically learn new leadership skills, taking on the role allowed them to use and strengthen previously acquired skills. Three leaders commented on the fact that they would like “more guidance” on their leadership role from the PP project team during the process and suggested that meeting with other PP leaders would be beneficial.

## **Findings and Implications**

While the study captured the perspectives of a small number of leaders, its findings provide useful insights into how to embed a sustainable model of peer feedback on teaching in tertiary education. Our distributed-leadership approach was designed to support the continuance of PP within each local School, building cultural change at the local level and delivering professional learning for

our leaders and participants. Findings highlight that whilst there was strong support from our leaders for PP to be led by academics at the local School level, successfully leading and managing sustainable change is predicated upon the provision of systemic and hierarchical support and endorsement, including recognition in workload planning. Leaders also affirmed that leading PP needed to happen in collaboration with the PP project team. In our case it was critical that distributing leadership was paralleled by timely and practical support and guidance.

Change management in tertiary education is often predicated on quality-compliance agendas (Fullan, 2011). As most of our leaders reported, leading PP provided the opportunity to co-lead meaningful change that was not grounded in external compliance agendas, but rather in cultural change that respected the agency of the volunteer participants, who each determined the focus of the teaching observation and feedback for improvement. Our School-based leaders were integral to implementing a model of peer feedback that delivered needs-based professional learning for participants whilst also aligning with the institutional imperative for quality improvement. The satisfaction leaders derived from their leadership experience was fundamentally grounded in the benefits they observed being delivered to the participants. Yet recognition through institutional systems was highlighted as important, as leaders strongly endorsed the alignment of individual professional-development goals to the institutional systems of reward and recognition.

As discussed, the voluntary and reciprocal nature of the PP program facilitated reflection on practice and goal-setting for our participants. Leaders highlighted this as a key outcome that provided a meaningful engagement with their peers. As our data suggests, our leaders' intrinsic motivations were altruistic; they were primarily focused on and concerned with the experiences of the individuals with whom they worked and their local school context. To foster change, distributing leadership and fostering ownership at the grass-roots level is vital, and in our case was a key factor in the recruitment of our 20 leaders and 149 participants.

Most leaders identified some degree of professional learning, though the study highlights the need to investigate in more depth the leadership experience in light of the challenges we have experienced as project leaders (discussed below) to further examine how best to support leaders in developing leadership attributes and acumen. Leading change requires a deeper and systematic investigation of the leadership experience through the next iteration of our program. Leading PP involves leadership without formal power; as a distributed approach, our leadership model transcends hierarchy and relations of power. As PP moves forward, our model will be further refined to pilot and evaluate a focused approach on leadership and on supporting academics to develop, continuously improve and reflect on their leadership capacity.

The challenges identified by our leaders are not new to the discourse of change and change management; resistance and fear are common perceptions of, and responses to, change agendas in tertiary education (Fullan & Scott 2009). Notably, resistance was identified by leaders as a challenge, with uptake more likely when change was not perceived as compliance. Leading change in a large tertiary institution is highly complex and requires the negotiation of cultural change (Fullan 2011). To be effective, embedding sustainable change requires ownership across all levels of the hierarchy. These findings highlight the critical importance of communicating change whilst building trust and ensuring that our core value of collegial respect was emphasised and enacted. Fostering ownership amongst all who participate in PP is critical to its continuance.

## Our Reflections

As project leaders, we have faced key challenges pertaining to the retention of some leaders. We have also experienced differing levels of leaders' ownership of the PP process, with some deeply connecting to and owning the process and others proving more reticent to fully take on the leadership role, instead deferring to our leadership to achieve project milestones. Variances also existed in relation to the time leaders were able to commit to the process, with some leaders managing many other competing accountabilities that affected the time they were able to invest in canvassing and managing PP in their respective schools. All are issues that need to be addressed into the future.

Retention has represented a significant challenge. In the first year of implementation, two leaders resigned from the university, leaving their respective schools without a champion to carry forward the PP work into the following year. As project leaders we needed to recruit and train new leaders for these schools. In the second year of implementation, although leaders didn't leave the university, two leaders reluctantly decided to devolve their leadership role within their respective schools the following year due to competing commitments. Again this meant that these schools were not moving forward in the implementation process as planned. However, in both of these cases the leaders actively helped us recruit a replacement and supported the new recruit in the initial phases, making the transition relatively smooth. Our solution to this challenge is to induct at least two leaders when first implementing the program within a School so that the knowledge and experience related to leading PP do not lie with a single individual. To date, we have been successful in doing so for five of the 13 schools.

The degree to which the PP process became embedded in schools was influenced by the extent to which leaders took ownership of the implementation within their school. Such variances in ownership can, in part at least, be attributed to differing levels of leadership experience as well as perceptions of their own learning and teaching expertise. Such factors raise issues related to the need for universities to nurture and support developing leadership capacity. The few studies that focus on how leaders manage change along with their own learning and development repeatedly identify how "unsure learning and teaching leaders are about what they might best do to lead... and ensure that essential change takes hold sustainably and consistently in daily practice" (Scott, Coates & Anderson 2008, p.7). What our research says learning and teaching leaders want are practical, higher-education-specific and role-specific insights into implementing good ideas (Scott, Coates & Anderson 2008). Whilst the tertiary-education sector invests in senior leadership, of equal importance is a systematic institutional investment in fostering leadership capacity at the middle-management level.

As project leaders it was critical that we were able to adapt and respond to variables in the leadership capability and experience that our leaders brought to the project. As a result, as the need arose, the project team had to invest additional time and practical measures on the ground in supporting the program's implementation within some schools. Along with hierarchical support, ongoing, timely and needs-based guidance and expertise from us as project leaders was critical to a successful PP implementation.

A further issue emerged in relation to workload. Many of our leaders were taking up co-leadership of PP over and above their already full or overloaded work plans because they believed in the program and cared about actively supporting quality teaching. The nuanced nature of each leader's work context and competing accountabilities and responsibilities also played a role in influencing

how much time leaders could invest in their leadership role. Issues of work load highlight the importance of formal recognition of leadership through work-load planning.

Combined, these challenges highlight the importance of: institutional investment in leadership capacity-building; formally recognising leadership activity that doesn't form part of a formal leadership role in work-load planning; and actively building a supportive culture in which dispersed collaborative leadership can thrive to ensure succession planning.

This study has illuminated findings that warrant further investigation. Untapped in this initial study was the longer-term impact for leaders of their involvement in PP, and further work is recommended to evaluate the impact of leaders on teacher-participants. A number of questions warrant further investigation: What is the nature of professional-development learning that co-leading PP delivered for our leaders? Did co-leadership of PP enhance leaders' understanding of leadership for quality improvement in learning and teaching? Did leaders perceive that their experience offered useful career-developing professional learning? What kind of professional rewards did leaders experience? What socio-cultural factors would better enable sustainable leadership for quality improvement and change? A larger sample and deeper exploration in future research will allow for more sophisticated quantitative and qualitative analysis of the impact of the leadership approach for both leaders and participants.

## **Conclusion**

As Devlin (2013) identifies, "The context in which university education now operates demands strong leadership and clever management" (p.234), yet when driving change in higher education there is a tendency to have too little focus on implementation (Fullan & Scott 2009). Resourcing plays an important role in implementation. In our case university funding has supported our appointment as project leaders, the development of project artifacts including web development, funding to ensure our work is embedded in research, research process development, catering, payment for sessional staff, the expansion of the program at offshore locations and the development of context-specific video resources of real-world teaching practice for use in the training sessions.

It is important to be resolute in the face of large-scale change initiatives; patience and persistence are required when things do not go to plan (Fullan 2011). Whilst the PP program was successful in establishing an approach to peer feedback within participating schools/units, and in securing its expansion, key leadership challenges also emerged. These challenges relate to negotiating and implementing change in the mass tertiary-education system, transcending hierarchical and disciplinary boundaries, fostering and formally recognising relevant and outcome-focused professional-development learning, securing buy-in from academics already challenged by competing work-load responsibilities and accountabilities, managing and collaborating to effect sustained change on the ground and accommodating the need for strategic succession planning.

In our context, the next step is to identify and develop suitable leaders within the remaining schools in our university, whilst ensuring that currently participating schools continue in the program. The continuance and enhanced effectiveness of our distributed-leadership approach would be further strengthened were university structures and reward systems to formally recognise more-informal leadership roles such as PP.

With the expansion of our program, including to offshore locations, further investigation and refinement of our approach is required. One of the key challenges for all universities is to ensure

that evidence-based leadership approaches are developed and implemented within a framework that invests in creating the conditions in which leaders can flourish and grow to ensure continuous improvement for all.

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