

**Leading University Teaching:  
Exploring the uses of higher education research**

**SRHE Research Grant Final Report**

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### Summary of the research

This research examines the leadership of teaching from the perspective of senior and mid-level leadership and those responsible for supporting and carrying out teaching. It considers how leadership is defined, what makes for successful leadership of teaching and what evidence is used to inform the leadership of teaching. It is a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews with staff at two institutions, one in the UK the other in Australia. The study concludes that leadership of teaching can be described as distributed but that this does not go far enough, either as an analytic tool or as a means of informing leadership practice. Rather, this study proposes an integrated model of leadership of teaching that brings together the elements of good practice that have been identified. The study also found that research evidence is only used sporadically in the leadership of teaching and that there is scope for considering ways in which education research can be better utilised by leaders in higher education.

### Aims and objectives

The aim of the study is to develop a clearer understanding of the leadership of teaching in universities. Despite a growing emphasis on leadership in higher education there is little evidence about how teaching leadership is conceptualised and practiced and what lies behind decision-making regarding institutional teaching policies. The project has two key objectives: the first is to understand how teaching leadership is defined, distributed and practised; the second is to consider what forms of evidence influences those with leadership responsibilities for implementing changes in teaching policy and practice.

### Background

Teaching has changed considerably in recent years. Modularisation, assessment practices, on-line teaching technologies, the introduction of graduate certificates for new academics and quality assurance procedures are some key examples of a mosaic of changed assumptions, procedures, policies and professional practices at institutional level. They are also areas of substantial research enquiry, part of which at least has been a response to explicit efforts to raise the status and quality of teaching in universities (for meta reviews of this research c.f.Haggis, 2009; Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2009; Silver, 2003; Tight, 2004).

Alongside these activities, the nature of government expectations about the purpose and funding of undergraduate education has changed substantially. Once taken for granted assumptions about the roles and orientations of academics to teaching have been eroded (Collini, 2012; Macfarlane, 2012). The idea of the (largely) autonomous expert concerned in some measure with learning for knowledge, self-formation, citizenship or, even, democracy has been challenged by different models based around ideas of the managed academic, student employability and austerity to provide a new orientation to teaching and learning in universities. There are reconfigured expectations about the purposes, quantity and value of teaching, graduate attributes, the rise of the student as consumer, an increased focus on student satisfaction and indicators to demonstrate how teaching leads to an improved student experience.

A key issue in the changing context of higher education is the leadership of teaching. In particular this study is concerned to examine what informs policy and decision-making. While there is a growing body of research into teaching in higher education, it is not clear to what extent this is informing policy or more specifically at what level of the decision-making hierarchy this research is having an impact. There has been research in the field of leadership in higher education (Bryman, 2007; Coates, Dobson, Goedegebuure, & Meek, 2010; Middlehurst, 2008; Middlehurst & Elton, 1992; Ramsden, 1998; Smith & Adams, 2008, 2009; Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010) and the management of change and development in teaching (Blackwell & Blackmore, 2003; Knight & Trowler, 2001; Martin, Trigwell, Prosser, & Ramsden, 2003; Trowler, Saunders, & Knight, 2003). However, the leadership of teaching and the role of research in shaping the development of leadership policies for higher education remains an under-researched area. Recent work into the leadership of teaching (Gibbs, Kapper, & Piccinin, 2009) considers what leaders do, but there has been little detailed empirical investigation exploring what is underpinning this, how it can be theorised and how research evidence about teaching is used by leaders and what (if any) is the

influence of educational research on decisions about the re-design and implementation of teaching policies and practices.

One aspect of thinking about teaching that has surfaced is the idea of links between research and teaching which has variously been referred to as the research teaching nexus, research informed teaching and research led teaching (Brew, 2006; Deakin, 2006; Mason & Schapper, 2012; Trowler & Wareham, 2008). This concept, however, is understood in a number of ways, for instance the integration of disciplinary research into teaching, the use of student research in teaching and teaching informed by educational research (Jenkins & Healey, 2005; Jenkins, Healey, & Zetter, 2007). There is a body of literature exploring research-led teaching (Deakin, 2006; Mason & Schapper, 2012; Miller, Sharp, & Strong, 2012) although Mason and Shapper (2012) contend that the term research led teaching valorises research as the more prestigious activity. While there is some uncertainty regarding the use of the term research-led teaching, it tends to assume that disciplinary research is used as part of teaching content rather than that teaching is led by reference to or understanding of educational research. Other work, (Jenkins et al., 2007) is concerned with means of promoting closer connections between research and teaching at disciplinary, departmental, institutional and national levels but does not specifically consider how teaching is led and what is informing decisions about teaching nor how educational research can inform decision-making.

The notion of Scholarship of Teaching (SOTL) argues for teaching to be seen as an intellectual puzzle (Huber, 2002; Hutchings, 2000). This movement argues for an integration of disciplinary and educational research aimed at the improvement of practice. However, while interest in the research-teaching nexus and in the scholarship of teaching may have had some impact on research-informed teaching at a course or curriculum level (Miller et al., 2012), it is less clear to what extent educational research has influenced or informed the leadership of teaching given that there is little work that has explored this aspect of leadership specifically. Indeed Ramsden (2013) argues that national policies enforce a greater division rather than synergy between teaching and research. While leadership of teaching should be systemic, multi-faceted, coherent and use a variety of policy instruments, it should also be critical and subject to review on the basis of scholarship rather than assumptions about best practice (Marshall, 2006).

### **Leadership**

In a review of the literature on leadership in higher education, Lumby (2012) points out that there is little research into the outcomes and effectiveness of leadership, little observational data, few means to assess effectiveness and impact of leadership on research, enterprise or teaching and learning. She also suggests that there is little research that examines the failures in leadership, nor the micropolitical tactics used by leaders to achieve their ends. She points to the great divergence in formal leadership roles and beliefs about who and what universities are for. Recurring themes include tensions between academic autonomy and control, between the values of equality of opportunity and universities as a competitive business. The literature points to the complexities of leadership in higher education, for example the difficulties in balancing vertical and horizontal leadership, providing clear guidance while enabling autonomy, balancing external and internal pressures, the multiple roles of a university, financial constraints and accountability in an increasingly pressurized environment. A number of problems have been identified in the current

leadership of higher education, such as that it relies on outdated models (Bacon, 2014), relies on corporate language that is at best bland and over-general or at worst alienating to those being led (Lumby, 2012; van Ameijde, Nelson, Billsberry, & van Meurs, 2009), that it inhibits organizational effectiveness and responsiveness (van Ameijde et al., 2009), that innovation and creativity can be restricted by decision-making processes (Neary, 2011) and that that academics do not feel their voices are heard (Bacon, 2014). In considering the policy and strategy landscape in post-Dearing UK, in particular how it has the potential to enhance learning and teaching in Higher Education, Trowler et al (2005) conclude the links are 'disjointed and partial' (p440).

One model of leadership that is frequently evoked is distributed leadership and this is a concept that has much currency in the higher education literature. Distributed leadership occurs when decision-making power is 'stretched' (Spillane, 2006). It is a shift from a hierarchical view of leadership that centres around the behavior of individuals towards a more collective view based around multiple players (Bolden, 2011). For example, change happens from a middle out approach (i.e. heads of department) rather than a top down approach (Trowler et al., 2003). However, there are multiple definitions of distributed leadership and its operationalization can take a number of forms (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2009). Moreover, while it appears to be the mode of leadership that is seen as the ideal, it can be as much aspirational as normative and descriptive (Harris & Spillane, 2008). Indeed a focus on distributed leadership may mask increasing concentration of power and resources at the centre (Gosling, Bolden, & Petrov, 2009). The notion of distributed leadership performs a rhetorical function in higher education because it softens the contradiction between academic and manager and between collegiality and hierarchy (Bolden et al., 2012). Distributed leadership can be formal, through a devolution of authority; pragmatic using a division of responsibility across different areas; strategic through the use of external expertise; incremental via committees; working groups, module leadership; opportunistic via people who are willing to take on extra responsibility for project teams; and cultural, for example, collaborative research and teaching development (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2008).

The question of the kind of leadership required for enhancing teaching (and hence possibly learning) is beginning to come under scrutiny. Ramsden (2013) notes that there is little in generic leadership advice that takes account of the particular nature of higher education. The organisational literature tends to assume a more structured organisation than exists in universities and so is not always helpful in informing leadership (Knight & Trowler, 2000). Bolden et al (2012) distinguish between 'academic management', which has an institutional focus and centres around the organisation of tasks and processes, and 'academic leadership' which focuses on values and identity. They suggest that management activities such as ensuring institutional outcomes, performance reviews and research output monitoring are quite different from the leadership activities that occur when people influence and inspire one another. The latter, they suggest, emphasises the role of self-leadership in academic work, since being an academic involves independent self-direction and autonomous scholarship. Thus people are unlikely to be regarded as leaders (although they may be seen as managers) unless they are perceived to be working on behalf of others, furthering the interests of their group, however defined (Bolden et al., 2012). This distinction between leadership and management is an important one. Both are necessary and both can be exercised by the same individual, however, they should not be conflated as they serve different purposes.

In pointing to the clear gap in the research on the leadership of teaching Quinlan (2014) suggests a potential model of educational leadership in higher education for holistic student learning and development. Ramsden (2013) argues for a move away from a highly bureaucratic, managerial leadership culture to one of shared responsibility, involving students and support staff as well as academics. He points to the need for strategic leadership that focuses on what is distinctive about the institution's vision for student learning. In laying out a set of recommendations he suggests that what is important is the notion of transformational leadership in which academics have a sense of ownership, there are meaningful goals and rewards, collaborative management and devolved leadership that avoids micro-management, minimises top-down control and allows faculties or discipline areas to shape their own delivery of the strategic vision. Similarly, Bolden et al. (2012) conclude that a hybrid approach to leadership which recognises both formal and informal processes and has contextual, hierarchical and distributed elements is likely to be the most successful in a higher education context. Looking more closely at what leaders do, Gibbs et al. (2009) suggest that the features of leadership that are associated with excellent teaching include: a culture characterised by an outward looking orientation, a readiness for continuous learning, devolved management, dispersed leadership, flexible decision-making, a preparedness to draw on academic expertise, establishing credibility of the leaders and involving students in real decision-making.

A recurring theme is the importance of the local context with no single 'recipe' for successful leadership of teaching but rather different combinations in each context. Taking up this line, Roxå and Mårtensson (2011) argue that attempts to influence teaching have been directed at either individuals or at the level of formal structures and policies. Rather, they suggest we should consider leadership at the local level of microcultures. They argue that leaders above the level of microcultures lack a shared value system regarding teaching and learning and hence cohesiveness. In contrast, in successful microcultures there are high levels of trust, teaching is taken seriously and valued collectively rather than as an individual activity. These microcultures are based on internal rather than faculty or institutional values and are externally as well as inwardly orientated, collaborative and have a strong enterprise culture. They point to a number of problems in the leadership of teaching such as a lack of a functioning value system and resources that have been invested without sufficient knowledge of what is central to academic teaching. They suggest a focus on the quality of education rather than quality of teaching and a consideration of the whole environment that influences learning.

### The study

This project addresses a gap in our understanding of the leadership of teaching. It does so through an exploratory study of how leadership of teaching is conceptualized as part of policy and strategic considerations at institutional level. It examines how these approaches are translated into the provision and support of teaching, contextualizes how the research-policy-practice 'loop' operates in relation to teaching and examines by whom, how and with what purposes research or other forms of evidence is used.

The study explores the ways in which the leadership of teaching is conceptualised and enacted through both policy and practice in two institutions. Two universities were selected because they had similar characteristics, both being established in the 1960s with visions of innovation and imagination in teaching and research. Currently both have a good track record for research and are popular destinations for students. The two institutions have a somewhat 'rural' feel being on the edge of towns or cities rather than inner city. Both are medium size. The project was able to utilise another trip by the principle investigator in order to conduct one of the case studies in Australia, thus broadening the context and giving the project a more international perspective. The decision to choose two similar institutions was a very deliberate one as we did not want the findings to be clouded by examining two institutions with very different cultures or missions and for the study to be a comparison of differing types of universities. That said, each institution has its own distinctive culture, vision, strategy and priorities.

The study was given ethics clearance by Glasgow Caledonian University. Permission for the study was sought from the Vice Chancellor of each institution. The method in each case study is semi-structured interviews with key academic staff. Sampling was both purposeful and snowball as many participants suggested others. In all 24 interviews were conducted. Participants included:

- PVC Teaching and Learning/DVC Academic
- Deans/heads of target schools or faculties (science/technology and humanities/social science) at each institution
- Heads of department in target schools/faculties
- Teaching staff in target schools/faculties (2-3 in each)
- Heads of academic development/teaching and learning unit (or equivalent)
- Academic/educational developers involved in on the ground delivery of programmes (e.g. postgraduate certificate of academic practice)
- Heads of Quality/Registry (or equivalent)

Discussions with interview respondents covered a range of themes including:

- Who is responsible for the leadership of teaching
- How the leadership of teaching is interpreted and enacted
- Use of evidence to inform decision-making
- Teaching policies and practices
- Innovation and the introduction of change in teaching



Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed in full. Participants all gave voluntary consent and were de-identified for the purposes of analysis. Analysis was emergent and coding involved re-reading and validation through cross-checking across all transcripts. From this coding, patterns and themes were identified and refined. Hypothetical relationships identified in the initial coding were confirmed and modified on the basis of this recursive process. In reporting the findings, the institutions or roles have not specified in order to protect the anonymity of the participants since it is a relatively small sample (particularly at the senior management level). All participants will receive feedback as to the progress of the study and will be sent any publications arising from the study.

The study has generated a vast amount of very rich data and there is not space to do justice to it all in this report. All participants expressed a great interest in the project, commenting that it explored questions that had not, to date been answered and all suggested that they would be most interested in the findings once the project was complete and many had suggestions for other ways of continuing the study.

Different terminology was used in each institution, for example faculty, school, deputy vice chancellor, pro vice chancellor, PVC for teaching and learning, DVC academic and so on. I have deliberately not used the precise terminology from each institution in cases where I did not want to easily identify the particular institution. However, where it is important I have used general terminology that will be understood by readers.

## Findings

The findings suggest that while teaching is considered very important in both case study institutions, the ways in which decisions regarding the leadership of teaching are made are not always informed by research evidence. Furthermore, the rationale underpinning decisions regarding teaching vary, depending upon the role of the decision-maker (i.e. whether the decision-maker is part of the senior executive or 'on the ground' teaching staff). While research evidence, in particular the use of research into higher education is used by some leaders of teaching, this is patchy. Some participants were aware of the research but did not use it in their decision-making or leadership practice. In contrast, others were very aware of educational research and it was an integral part of the decisions and practice regarding the leadership of teaching.

### *What is leadership of teaching?*

The leadership of teaching in the two case study universities is described distributed (although not all used this term) but all pointed out that leadership of teaching was spread across a range of positions and levels and was complex and sometimes conflicting. Those with senior leadership positions referred to the unique nature of university leadership, outlining high levels of intrinsic motivation of academic staff, the desirability of academic autonomy, the role of disciplinary knowledge and of external professional bodies, the tensions between departments and the centre, the role of students, the complexity of universities as institutions. Participants suggested that successful leadership of teaching required a multi-perspective, detailed vertical and horizontal understanding as it required a strategic view and understanding of the institutional vision and parameters, an understanding of pedagogy and teaching practice and an understanding of the particular disciplinary cultures.

Decision-making regarding teaching resided in various locations with broad policy-driven decisions usually residing with central decision-makers (for example at PVC/DVC level). These decisions included module/subject credit policy, assessment policy, graduate attributes, strategy and teaching frameworks although in some cases these were made at the school or faculty level. Formal decision-making pathways usually involved either a top-down recommendation made from senior executive which was passed for ratification to Senate/Academic board and then communicated to schools/faculties and discussed and implemented. Alternatively a middle or bottom-up decision can be made at department or school level, discussed and ratified at teaching committee level and implemented more locally. Key players in decision-making include the PVC/DVC for teaching and learning, school or faculty heads of teaching and learning (or equivalent), deans, heads of school and heads of department. In one university the head of registry was also important. Other key players who provide advice and support although are not always involved in the formal decision-making are the academic development units and learning technologists. In one of the institutions, the head of the teaching/learning centre had a key strategic role in shaping high level decision-making regarding teaching.

Participants suggest that the formal decision-making structure, while allowing the possibility for power to reside at a number of levels, is highly problematic.

*'the idea that the centre is leading is a joke'*

*'things get bogged down...So I think one limiting factor in terms of change in universities is you can have a veto effect, there are different committees that things have to go through. It's anti innovation.'*

*'everyone will say it right up the chain, I have all this responsibility but no power, it's a big thing of the universities, deputy vice chancellors say that, everyone says it. I mean everyone's a subject coordinator, or everyone's an academic coordinator, has got schedules to supervise. Even casuals say, I've got all this responsibility in leading teaching because I'm teaching a thousand students every week.'*

*Well, you have the control in the classroom, but for the slightest, sort of, change, to say, the assessment pattern, you have to do it by a certain time, you have to fill a form and need to go through a committee. That committee might turn around and say, no, you can't do this, even though that committee knows absolutely nothing about maths and physics*

Many participants suggest that much of the constructive leadership of teaching such as the introduction of new practices, the consideration of particular pedagogies and transformation of courses occurs through informal means. What participants suggest is key are personal connections and networks. Changes that were successful were introduced through interactions at staff meetings, teaching retreats, regular meetings between an academic developer and particular staff members around a particular innovation (e.g. inquiry-based learning). Others saw their disciplinary community outside the institution as important and seek advice from, for example the Physics or Engineering Institutes. For many, the first point of contact when a planned change is being designed is always a close colleague.

*If you have a problem with your teaching or a question, where would you go? ... I would go to the person next door because I get on really well with him.*

At one institution, the importance of the regular but informal meetings of the heads of teaching and learning in each school was stressed. This was an opportunity for people from across the disciplinary communities but within the same institution to talk about issues away from the purview of senior management. Each mentioned that the meetings were important to provide inspiration, advice and support but that they had to be outside the formal structures. Others suggested that leadership of teaching was often undertaken informally by professors who had experience but not necessarily formal managerial positions for example in mentoring junior staff. In contrast, others suggested that it was the very junior staff who suggested and were prepared to introduce changes as they had energy, enthusiasm, less administrative responsibility and had often been exposed to new ideas about teaching and learning through, for example, participation on graduate certificate programmes.

Several staff, particularly at one institution, discussed the importance of targeting the people who are enthusiastic about innovation and who will act as champions and change agents. One university has a set of programmes designed specifically to promote innovation in teaching. The person responsible for introducing this programme suggested that what was required in order for people to introduce innovations in teaching was support from senior staff, in particular the permission to take risks. Change leaders needed contact with other innovators, a means of managing the bureaucracy and encouragement.

*It is permission. It is the biggest thing I found...People don't need much, they don't need a lot to change. And if someone says, let's see what happens, that is really exciting they will dedicate every minute of their lives to it.*

The more formal structures for leadership of teaching allow for distributed leadership in that the responsibility for leading teaching exists across a range of roles from senior management to membership of committees. Thus, in theory at least, leadership exists both centrally and at a school or department level. It means that there is the possibility for input from most teaching staff and that there is the possibility of scrutiny of decisions and the option of voicing concerns. However, this structure can be unwieldy and the rewards system does not promote an interest in teaching.

There are a number of problems that were identified in the existing ways in which leadership of teaching functions. The most over-riding problem that most participants identified was the system is highly bureaucratic and inflexible and so hampered innovation and risk taking. Committees were often used simply as a means of communicating decisions made at the top. Another problem is communication. This is in part because the chief means of communication is email but most people found that it was not possible to digest all the material transmitted in this way and so much was lost, overlooked or deliberately ignored. Moreover, a distributed system relies on each member of a chain to pass ideas and information both upwards and downwards. A further problem with communication is the use of language. Even quite senior staff suggested that the language of strategy documents was vague and somewhat meaningless. Another participant pointed out that centrally, generated, generic statements such as policy needed to be general but this made them rather empty. Several participants objected strongly to the use of corporate language.

*'The language of strategic plans kills everything'*

*There is this endless flow of emails which are clogged with jargon. I mean, it is a simple point but the language which management express themselves ... provokes cynicism and I think that if anyone else says stakeholders or we're going to pluck some low-hanging fruit or whatever, I'm going to kick them in their own low hanging fruit because it's so moronic but it's also...what it suggests is a real lack of understanding of what a university is.*

Participants gave examples of good leadership of teaching that ranged across the hierarchy. They gave examples of leadership such as very junior lecturer who introduced a particular teaching method in her own class, enthused others and went on to promote this technique across the school. Other senior staff described being impressed by new academics who were 'young, hungry, keen and willing to listen' and who promoted change in teaching practices. Others referred to members of senior management who were knowledgeable about and interested in teaching. However, particularly when considering the more senior levels, some participants argued that leadership was not always ideal and that they did not often work with senior managers who had an understanding of teaching (either in their current or previous workplaces) – few were familiar with the research, some had been on a management career path for many years and no longer had involvement with teaching, some were 'overbearing' in their management style without understanding the particular disciplinary issues.

Leadership of teaching broke down or foundered for a number of reasons. The factor most commonly identified was change fatigue. Participants suggested that the endless cycle of change –

often seen as change for its own sake, combined with increasing pressures for research and a target setting, 'box-ticking' culture had made people demoralised. Moreover, many suggested that change was used cynically and that senior management sometimes used change as a way of making their mark and moving on.

*Well, as I flagged from the start, there is a lot of negativity and a lot of just change fatigue at the coalface, and they're the most important people, so obviously something's not working the way it should and the other point I flagged was information often goes only so far down the food-chain.*

The continual churn means that important social connections are broken through restructure, coupled with a seemingly endless need to change and innovate without a clear rationale and a sense of instability which left staff feeling a need for certainty that promoted a resistance to change. Several participants suggested that too much direct control prompted a backlash, others that academics were experts at subversion and passive resistance and so suggestions and directives were often either ignored or treated in a cursory manner – compliance rather than change. A significant barrier to leading teaching was the group of 'nay-sayers' who were actively resistant to change. Some could be persuaded with time and evidence, others would never change.

*And then in terms of there's always a group of people that will never get on board ever. And there's a bit of that my whole career I've had this sort of view that there is nothing you can do to some people, there is nothing you can say, there is no amount of data, there is absolutely nothing that you can do. And I see so much management wasting time. If they're not destructive to the organisation – sometimes they are and that's when you need to manage them – but if they're not destructive to the organisation leave them for now and just get on with the job. So I've a very strong view about that.*

Some participants argued strongly that one of the serious barriers to effectively leading teaching was that there is very little serious thought about the big questions in higher education and that senior management do not engage with more fundamental philosophical issues.

*And the most important thing I think universities stand for is that we should be committed to the idea that there are things that are immensely important in life that we value and should value, which cannot be measured in purely financial terms, and obviously how we value those things and how we compare competing sets of values in society is a very complex issue. How do we value the aesthetic over the ethical or vice versa? I mean, these are very complex philosophical questions. But if the universities aren't going to think about these things, who the hell is?*

*I want a vice chancellor who is a little more philosopher and a little less businessman, who's going to say, look, we have no choice but to play the government's silly game in terms of student numbers and funding and all this stuff, but let's not for one moment pretend we believe this nonsense. We have to play this game to our advantage so that we can do the things that matter to us as a community of scholars, which is teaching and learning and engaging in critical thinking with our students where we work together to address the world's problems, which are chronic by anyone's estimation. If we can't turn out citizens who are going to be excited about the future...*

#### *Drawing on evidence?*

The use of evidence to inform the leadership of teaching is patchy. Internal, institutional evidence is used in the form of student satisfaction surveys, progression, retention, completion data, audits

carried out by external bodies such as QAA. Benchmarking is also used as institutions compare themselves with their counterparts and competitors. There is some use of published research and some suggested they used it whereas many (both at senior management level and further down) stated that they did not.

*I: To what extent is thinking about teaching informed by research into teaching?*

*R: Little in this school, to be perfectly honest.*

*And I think that what's strange for a research intensive university is that many things have got no evidence base whatsoever to the policies that are created.*

*Roy Tasker, he has this very good point that you wouldn't dare to do science without knowing, nor would you go and say that's what I did 20 years ago, because things move on, and there's new equipment and new techniques and you find out what's up-to-date...but then whether it's leadership, management, teaching, you tend to just say this is what works because that's what I believe. And I'm in danger of that, so that's something I need to do for 2014 is really engage with literature, really be involved in the scholarship myself.*

*None of us have the time to read the literature on what is shown about things like student feedback, engagement in large classes, use of technology in the classroom, all these many, many issues we confront.*

In the UK institution, participants drew on work by the HEA. Some suggested that they had found this particularly helpful when there were HEA subject centres as the work was targeted and relevant to their discipline. Others went to disciplinary organisations for research evidence. In one institution, the academic development unit provided access to research evidence and worked in close collaboration with academic staff in designing and developing teaching and introducing quite fundamental changes. Some participants suggested that there was a view (which they did not necessarily share) that higher education research was not credible or was not 'real' research. This was either because teaching was seen as 'common-sense' and hence not requiring evidence or because it is a relatively new and low status research field and so not taken seriously. Others suggested that there were problems with translation as education research was not always accessible to those from other fields and so it was difficult to access and use the research in meaningful ways.

*We need to know what's happening through educational research. Having said that, I mean educational research in Australia is...as an outsider coming into this it's another...it's not designed for the normal person. It's like any technical field.*

Some suggested that because those who were not experts in the field used the research, sometimes it was interpreted simplistically or applied inappropriately.

*What bothers me is that we've hung onto one way. Its one man isn't it, Biggs, or whatever his name is. Yes, and it's often a really simplistic reading of Biggs, yes, and becomes mechanistic and instrumental.*

In one institution, the PVC for teaching and learning referred to the literature to inform her decisions (and this was supported by other members of staff who pointed out that she had a good understanding of the educational research).

*I am an enthusiastic reader about all sorts of things, whether it's to do with elements of leadership and how that operates across universities, the structure of universities. But, we've just finished a piece of work...at least in draft, on the creation of teaching fellows, which are intended to be very prestigious positions that will be focal points for teaching and learning innovation. And that work, so far and the recommendations that are being made within it, rely very strongly on a research base*

In this institution, published educational research was used to inform a recent reform of the curriculum. Participants referred to the literature or stated that they had spoken extensively to people (for example from the teaching learning unit) who were very familiar with the research to inform their thinking.

*So it [a curriculum change] felt like it was an informed discussion, and we were fed bits of information and key articles and things, as we worked through the process. I liked it because I learned stuff about teaching and learning. I'd just finished the Graduate Certificate in Higher Education and my project was all about constructive alignment, so I understood the basic stuff behind it, and I believed in it, because I'd read about it.*

Many staff from both institutions argued that in their careers, it was unusual that those in the senior executive were knowledgeable about teaching and learning and were familiar with education research.

*...every university has a PVC teaching and learning...how they're chosen, what's their background, I mean, it's not because they've done great teaching or because they've done a lot of research into pedagogy*

However, participants suggested that new academic staff, coming through graduate certificate programmes, were much more familiar with the research.

#### *The boundary crossers*

In one institution there was an active academic development unit with good links both to senior management and to teaching staff. In the other institution this had been disbanded and a new unit was being formed with a focus on learning technology. These interspace staff (in some cases academic in others support or professional staff) provide an important conduit for educational research. In both institutions, teaching/learning/technology staff were involved in curriculum design and re-development at an 'on the ground' level and were also integral to the strategic initiatives.

*What we are here to do is provide strategic support to schools to support innovation and learning and teaching. So my role is to advise senior colleagues and also colleagues in the schools about emerging trends in the sector to try and promote the sharing of good practice in learning and teaching.*

*They probably know as much and maybe more about designing a curriculum than the academic colleagues do just from a practice based approach but it's bringing the practice alongside the theory and how to bring the two things together. So, for example in curriculum design one of the things I'm*

*really anxious to do is to try and get to a product design type approach where you get professionals working together to get the best possible curriculum design in terms of content, inclusiveness, efficiency, compliance with all of our rules and regulations*

In both institutions the staff in teaching/learning or learning technology units were the people with an expert understanding of the research literature on teaching and learning and on higher education more generally. Participants saw these people as sources of advice and support and the members of these centres saw their role as 'horizon scanning', keeping in touch with current developments, keeping in touch with networks, promoting innovation and development, supporting central changes in disciplinary sensitive ways and doing so in ways that were supported by the literature. Many participants (from the departments) had either been involved with some form of Graduate Certificate themselves or worked with junior staff who had. Most saw it as a positive introduction to informed and scholarly thinking about education although one said 'it is a waste of time. Everyone hates it'.

### *Students*

Students were seen as central to the leadership of teaching. Several participants actively sought out their viewpoint and involvement in designing and planning teaching and in gaining feedback during term-time. Others referred to student participation in committees and student representation on boards of studies. Others discussed the changing expectations and learning patterns of students including the time they now spent on paid employment and discussed how this had changed teaching. Some participants argued that there was a need to consider the student view but also to have confidence in their own decisions as teachers and to explain to student why, for example, just giving them the answers would not help them in their life after university. Yet there was a clear view that students should be involved in the leadership of teaching although not necessarily dictating it nor that it should just be from the perspective of 'satisfaction' but rather a more considered dialogue.

*And then there is the student agenda and one of the problems with the student satisfaction agenda generally is that students really genuinely don't know what's good for them. They all think it would be lovely to have less work to hand in, fewer essays to write, more time to do them and no lectures in the first four hours of the day or something, but actually three or four years out of university, they would have a very different perspective on those issues but we don't survey them three or four years out.*

*You need to say to the students, look, the day you start work, you can't go to the boss and say what was it you wanted me to say about this topic? You have to say what you think and research it and come up with a good argument for it. That's part of what we're teaching you. So there's a sense in which me holding your hand all the time is actually counter-productive. But I don't want them to feel neglected or ignored or that they're unimportant to me. They're not unimportant to me.*

*All this talk about students as customers and student satisfaction and so on, when you think about relationships that businesses have with their customers in general, they are characterised by two things. One is they're characterised by mutual suspicion. The customers treat the businesses as something that is trying to defraud them and they want the maximum value for the minimum money... The business is always actually contemptuous of its customers and this is becoming part of*



*university culture in the last decade and it's pernicious and vile, but I see no prospect of changing it for the foreseeable future, so we have to learn to live with it.*

*we haven't really utilised social media as a means of engaging with our students. So, students as change agents in this context are key but the mechanism...I think the student reps thing is something we have and we could use better and we are trying to put the students more at the coal face in terms of the curriculum.*

### Conceptualising the leadership of teaching and learning

The study suggests that in the leadership of teaching there is a disconnect between bottom-up and top-down leadership. Participants cite instances where bottom up leadership works extremely well – usually at a very local level with innovations being introduced and then spread horizontally and taken up by those in leadership roles and promoted more widely. There are also examples of successful top down leadership for example quite senior staff promoting and enabling innovation in ways that aim to enthuse rather than control or corral into a particular monolithic vision. In this study much of the active leadership seems to occur at the middle levels – Heads of teaching and learning, Heads of Department, teaching staff active projects or in working groups, echoing the findings of Knight and Trowler (2001). To be successful much of this leadership seems to be local yet even here the innovators and change leaders are hampered by bureaucratic processes – for example unwieldy and unhelpful templates that are centrally driven and hence inflexible, committee structures, marketing departments who do not understand the context. Much leadership seems to follow the pattern outlined by Bolden et al. (2009) that middle level leadership often enacts or operationalizes the directives of senior management rather than having actual power.

The distinction between leadership associated with values, identity, outward looking perspective and management as task, process and outcomes driven with a more inward looking perspective (Bolden et al., 2012) is reflected by participants in this study and many were ambivalent or critical of a management approach that was seen as constraining or overly prescriptive. Others, however, were equally critical of leaders who were too outwardly focused and who were more concerned with their presence on the global stage and the furthering of their own careers than interaction with colleagues or making changes that really mattered. The idea of distributed leadership, while referred to by many participants in the study was in many cases as much an aim as the reality. Leadership of teaching in the two case study institutions is distributed through (not always very effective) committee structures, through heads of teaching and learning in faculties/schools who had perhaps more influence than real power, through energetic individuals volunteering to take on responsibility for teaching development projects (at department or school/faculty level) and in one institution through an active and well-connected academic development unit. However, as Bolden et al. (2009) suggest, while distributed leadership may be an ideal, the reality at least for the two institutions in this study is that the much of the key decision-making is conducted at senior management level (PVC/DVC) and carried out through devolved and delegated mechanisms. The degree to which these can be shaped at the local (school or department) level varies.

The importance of collegiality and personal interconnections cannot be underestimated. When participants identified instances where leadership of teaching was successful, one consistent element was human factors such as good communication, supportive teams, trusted colleagues, disciplinary or departmental communities where there was an interest in teaching and a will to work together, teams of people who worked together to develop a new framework, strategy, innovation etc. Those who spoke enthusiastically about leading teaching often (but not always) spoke of the space for risk-taking and creativity, mentoring (and learning from) junior colleagues the need for space (both physical and temporal) to meet and discuss although this was characteristic of mid-level leadership (deans, heads of department, heads of teaching and learning) rather than senior (PVC/DVC).

Several people referred to the power of coffee in the leadership of teaching – individual discussions over coffee, organised coffee meetings to consider and develop a new plan, informal meetings. This may seem flippant but was not. One person pointed to a significant innovation in teaching that had been implemented as a result of a series of meetings (over coffee), another to a deliberate strategy of ‘coffee meetings’ that were more informal and more productive. Another suggested that comfortable staff common rooms and informal meeting places were very productive spaces that had been undervalued by many institutions which had done away with them. One participant, referring to a conversation he had had with a former senior manager said his best leadership achievement was providing good coffee and biscuits because it meant people talked to one another. Trust is central to successful university leadership (Middlehurst, 2008; Roxa & Martensson, 2011) and in managing and maintaining social interaction. When successful trust extends from students through to senior management and involves trust in one another and in the idea of a shared enterprise (Roxa & Martensson, 2011).

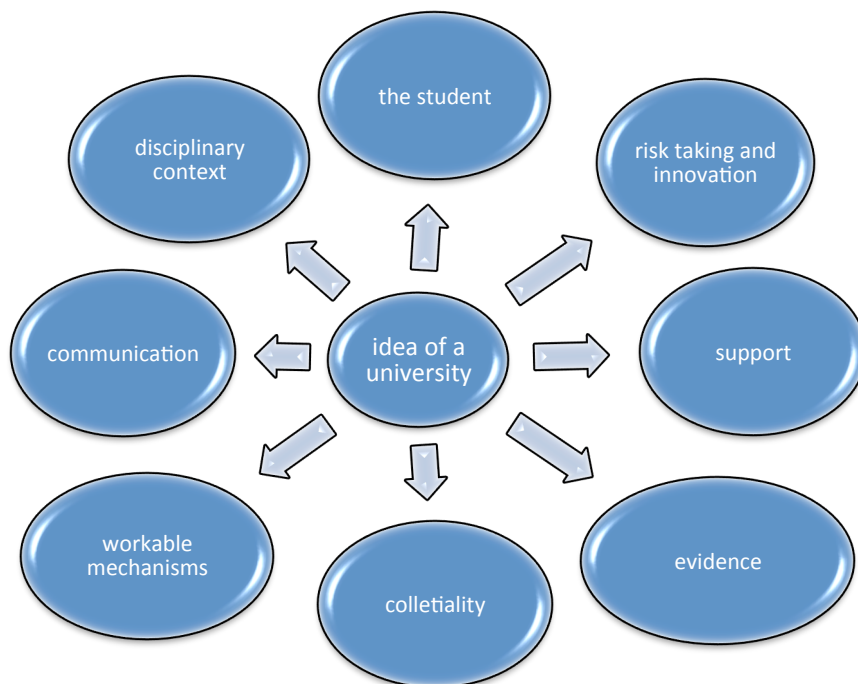
When positive leadership which supports innovative activity happens, it appears to be because there is a confluence of support or more active engagement from senior management, clear and honest communication, collegiate connections between staff and active relationship building, horizontal support such as from academic development units, IT, administration, space for risk taking, a means of negotiating the bureaucratic structures and strictures and an engagement with the research.

Figure 1 identifies the key elements in the leadership of teaching which were identified in this study. There is a general agreement that leadership of teaching is valuable and requires the following:

- Space, support and encouragement of innovation, allowing for risk-taking. In overly managed and audited cultures this tends to be stifled either by real constraints or by the perception of constraint. What is required is clarity about what is possible in order to encourage new teaching practices, many suggesting that there were often firmly held beliefs regarding regulations that were not necessarily real but based in the caution created by an over-managed environment.
- Support from university infrastructure. Without the support from sections such as IT, estates/facilities, marketing, registry, quality and timetabling, the leadership of teaching can founder and these sections of the university although often set up to support teaching can sometimes work against change as they develop their own systems and mechanisms. Infrastructure such as large lecture theatres, awkward furniture and facilities policies forbidding the movement of furniture in classrooms are examples cited. Another element of support is in the services provided by academic development units in supporting curriculum design and teaching.
- Evidence. This is both the form of local information based on institutional data and peer-reviewed research evidence, which provide an empirical and theoretical basis for the leadership of teaching.
- Collegiality that works both within and across departmental communities. For example collaboration between heads of teaching and learning, peer mentoring, joint teaching projects, collaboration with teaching staff and support staff or between teaching staff and teaching/learning specialists, open and positive involvement of senior management, opportunities for discussion of teaching such as teaching conferences, seminars, workshops, graduate certificates.

- Formal mechanisms and bureaucratic structures that work for leadership of teaching rather than against it such as flexible systems, clear and open processes,
- Communication that is direct, honest and accessible. Documents that were written in language that was so general as to be meaningless or were designed to obfuscate rather than communicate or where written in overly corporate language were regarded with suspicion (or derision).
- Understanding of the disciplinary context. This does not mean leadership is limited since much fruitful leadership occurs across disciplinary communities.
- Dialogue with students that is about education rather than more superficial satisfaction

However, what is important is that each of these is understood as part of an ongoing and difficult conversation about the idea and purpose of a university. This is the central and pivotal element that holds the notion of the leadership of teaching together and the aspect that is missing in much of the thinking about the leadership of teaching. Without a consideration of what teaching in a university context means, what a university education means and what the whole university enterprise entails the leadership of teaching becomes simply process-oriented rather than goal and values focussed.



**Figure 1: Leadership of teaching elements**

Quinn (1996) outlines a competing values framework for leadership which is comprised of four quadrants: internal processes, human relations, open systems for innovation and growth and rational goals. However, while acknowledging the complexity of leadership in higher education and the need to constantly balance competing agendas the findings of this study suggest that the elements identified in Figure 1 can be organised into the four elements of the framework but rather than being competing elements, each can be seen as a necessary element of a more holistic, integrated understanding of the leadership of teaching.

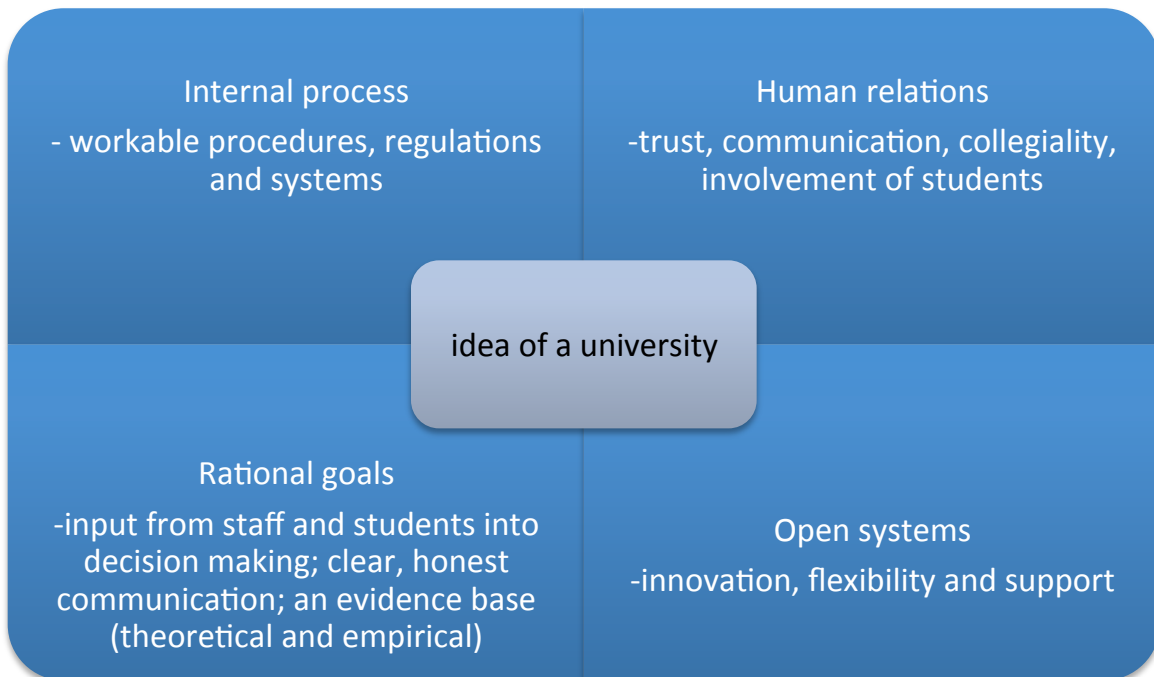


Figure 2: Leadership of teaching matrix

## Discussion

This study asked two related questions – the first about the nature of the leadership of teaching and the second the degree to which leadership of teaching is informed by evidence and if so what that evidence is. Leadership of teaching is messy and characterized by breakdowns in communication and trust but also by good practice. The findings of this study suggest that there is the need for both leadership and autonomy, which is a complex mix (Middlehurst, 2008). For teaching to flourish, develop and change, universities need leaders who can provide permission for innovation and for this to be informed by research that can provide inspiration, theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence.

The value of the human dimension of leadership was a recurring theme. Leadership succeeded because of trust, communication, space for risk-taking, because of successful horizontal and vertical relationships between people, and because of leaders who were interested, informed and aware of the context. Thus there is a degree of tension. The discipline or field are the place where teaching and research are conducted. Meanwhile, the institution provides the broader community, requiring the academic to fit with more central allocation of tasks (Smith & Adams, 2009). The institution in this sense exerts a controlling influence because in defining jobs and employment relations, it provides control over how people work together. When the university gets the balance right it secures willing consent; when it gets it wrong, merely compliance or subversion. In the latter circumstances, high discretion and high trust relations based on consent are eroded and a more dangerous combination of high discretion but low trust infused by coercion emerges (Fox, 1974).

A further question regarding the leadership and management of teaching pertains to the issue of the evidence underpinning the decisions made about teaching. While there is a substantial body of research into teaching in higher education, it appears that only in some cases does decision-making draw upon an informed understanding of this research and at other times decisions are based on strategy, fad or belief (Marshall, 2006).

Given that educational research is not necessarily a shared field for all staff (leaders, managers, teaching academics and support staff) this requires boundary crossers (Jones & Markless, 2010) who are able to access, transmit and in some cases translate the research so that it can be widely used. There is also a need for boundary crossers who can communicate up and down the hierarchy and who can understand the disciplinary contexts but see beyond them and so bring ideas in and out of each disciplinary or departmental community. Often these boundary crossers reside in academic development/teaching and learning or learning technology centres. This comes at a time when these centres are in a state of flux (Holt, Palmer, & Challis, 2011). This study points to the vital role of these centres in providing a conduit for research to inform teaching and to inform policy-level decisions about teaching. The role of academic developers or teaching and learning specialists, some who are active researchers themselves others who are scholars with a good understanding of the literature, is vital in pointing those responsible for leadership to evidence that may inform decision making. However, this can only occur in an environment in which evidence is considered relevant. It also

requires a sophisticated understanding of educational research, an acceptance that it is often contradictory and an ability to provide easily digested versions that do not over-simplify.

What is required is a shift so that leadership of teaching becomes a consistently rather than patchily informed act. This is no simple aim. In a field such as education there are multiple variables and contextual factors, an eclectic mix of methodologies and no clear or simple answers. Locke (2009) writes of the ways in which research is used (or misused) in policy development suggesting that it is often either not used, oversimplified or misused in the development of government-level policy regarding higher education, citing a number of instances in the UK. Thus at the highest levels of levels of leadership of teaching, evidence is only sporadically well used. Locke (2009) suggests that this is in part because policy-makers want clear and simple answers in order to make decisive decisions. However, he also suggests that researchers themselves are partly responsible as higher education research is characterised by a lack of methodological and theoretical coherence and a reluctance on the part of researchers to engage with the policy sphere for fear of compromising their academic independence. Yet, if universities are to consider one of their roles to be the production and scrutiny of knowledge then it would seem curious if those responsible for leading teaching in these institutions did not themselves avail themselves of some this knowledge. Alongside this call for leaders to understand teaching is the associated call for research that is accessible and useful to those who teach and lead teaching.

The need for more high level discussion of the idea, purpose and meaning of a university is something that participants saw as fraught but essential. The driving beliefs and values behind the university are contested (Lumby, 2012; Smith & Jones, 2013; Watson, 2013) but increasingly it appears that there are assumptions about universities yet little intelligent conversation. Winter (2009) argues that there is now a schism in academic identity with conflicting expectations regarding the role of the academic and the purpose of the institution. This is based upon value incongruence between, put crudely, a view of the role of the academy to enable scholarship for its own sake, knowledge creation, contribution to the discipline and education of students; and, a view of the institution as based upon an economic performance imperative that must subordinate everything to bottom-line efficiency. Managed academics disengage with their institution because 'they express more commitment to their disciplines and less commitment to their organisation's management and business direction' (Winter, 2009 p127). One solution is to bridge the chasm is for the institution to reconcile the competing identity claims through 'generative conversations' (p128) which enable frank, meaningful and collaborative exchanges and promote an institutional identity that allows more than one voice. Since universities comprise multiple perspectives, then it follows that leaders should articulate several interpretations of institutional problems rather than insist upon a monolithic corporate perspective. Winter recommends that university leaders must be seen to understand the academic value system and the 'crafting of a vision for the institution that is both acceptable and meaningful to both academic managers and managed academics. This means taking a 'principled stand in relations to core academic values and at the same time allowing for appropriate contextualisation of teaching and research activities according to current circumstances' (p129). This is also articulated, albeit in a slightly different form by Bolden et al (2012) when emphasising the importance and desirability of academic identity and values in leadership.

### Conclusions and future directions

This study presents a detailed picture of the leadership of teaching and of the ways in which this leadership is (and often is not) informed by research evidence. The study suggests that successful leadership requires a balance between process, human factors, goals and flexibility which are informed by evidence – internal data collection, empirical and conceptual research. Moreover, this balance needs to centre upon a consideration of the purpose and idea of a university, a concept that is highly contested at the present time. This study provides a model for understanding the leadership of teaching in universities that describes successful practice in an integrated manner.

One very important element that is missing from this study is the concept of learning. Any understanding of the leadership of teaching should encompass student learning. That the participants did not discuss student learning at great length is not necessarily a reflection of their lack of interest or knowledge but rather that my questions did not focus on this. A study such as this needs to be bounded somewhere and while I acknowledge that learning is a crucial part of this discussion, my focus in this particular study was teaching. There are limitations in any study and while this project is in-depth and international, as it only considered two institutions there is a need for further investigation to consider a broader range of institutions and to test the findings, possibly through survey which would be more broad reaching and could build on this in-depth study. Moreover, the student voice is the one significant perspective missing from this study. Nonetheless, this study points clearly to the need for more informed, evidence-based and theoretically framed thinking about the leadership of teaching.



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### Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

We are interested in the leadership of teaching and learning in universities and so are considering the ways in which new policies and practices have been introduced in your university. Can you give me an example of something which has been introduced in the last say 5 years?

What prompted this change?

What informed it? By this we mean was it informed by government policy or by innovations occurring in other universities or by changes in educational research or pressure from students or driven by academic staff or perhaps a combination of some of these factors.

When changes, particularly those which will affect teaching are introduced in your university, what is the pathway for change. In other words, what process is usually followed?

What do you understand the leadership of teaching to be? If we refer back to (your earlier example of XX), how is the leadership of teaching enacted? Can you give an example – for example what happens, who is responsible, how is it communicated?

Who is involved in the leadership of teaching? To what extent are academic staff (other than those in senior management /executive) involved in the leadership of teaching

How is teaching led? How effective is this do you think?

Do you think the changes in your own institution's teaching and learning policy have been influenced by educational research? Has your own teaching practice been influenced by any educational research in particular? (Thinking about the HE sector more generally - to what extent do you think the leadership of teaching is influenced by educational research? How does this happen?)

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