

Higher education leadership for teaching and learning enhancement: Shared insights from the Australian context

Abstract:

As the changes impacting on Australian higher education continue to intensify, there is a spotlight on the leadership of the enhancement of teaching and learning within universities. A national investigation combining a thematic analysis of a representative sample of reports from a national initiative to promote excellence in teaching and learning; interviews with 24 key teaching and learning leaders and staff from a range of Australian universities; and an online survey of 88 leaders and other staff engaged with enhancement was undertaken. This paper reports on the findings from this national study of 'what works' in teaching and learning leadership. Seven interlinked insights related to institutional strategic alignment; symbolic and fiscal support; workload management; the reduction of tensions between research and teaching; research and scholarship; coordinated support structures; and mechanisms to recognise and reward excellence are outlined.

1000 word paper

Research on higher education leadership by Fullan and Scott (2009) and Scott [et al.](#) (2008) highlights the enormous complexity of the role of leaders in teaching and learning and of the contexts in which they operate. These authors point to the impacts of:

- the IT revolution and the related changes in student expectations and the opportunities for changes to learning;
- widening participation movements and the resultant challenges in managing the transition to university of students who are in the first generation of their family to attend university;
- changes to university funding arrangements including increased expectations of revenue generation;
- rapid growth and increased competition in the higher education market;
- increases in user pay expectations for those who attend university and the impact of paid work on student attendance and engagement;
- increased student diversity; and
- the increasing focus on standards.

The impending impacts of the aging academic workforce are also important to note. The report of the 2008 review of higher education by Denise Bradley and colleagues (Bradley *et al.* 2008) acknowledges that we must address "Australia's looming shortage of academics" (p. xvi) as the "baby boomer" generation progressively retires in considerable numbers over the next decade, presenting a significant senior leadership succession challenge for Australian higher education.

Distributed leadership frameworks in Australian higher education are the norm in most institutions and negotiating pathways through these networks within various

contexts requires leadership approaches that are innovative and relevant to those contexts.

This paper takes the theoretical position that successful leadership and management of the enhancement of teaching and learning within universities is contingent on the context, environment and circumstances in which it occurs. That is, a contingency theory of leadership is adopted (Fiedler (1967) and Hersey and Blanchard (1988)).

The use of a contingency theory of leadership to explore outcomes of efforts to lead the enhancement of teaching and learning recognises that while Australian universities all operate within a national framework, each university is unique as a consequence of the way in which it interprets government policy, allocates resources and determines the emphasis given to enhancing teaching and learning (Devlin, Smeal, Cummings and Mazzolini, 2012). The insights drawn from the findings are deliberately not specific to particular contexts. Instead, they have been designed to be considered and adapted with a wide range of contexts and variables at play.

The paper reports on the findings from a national Australian research project on the leadership of the enhancement of teaching and learning within higher education. The research project focused on the teaching and learning leadership lessons that could be learnt from a nation-wide initiative funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC).

Method

This project collected data using a mixed method research approach that has a long history in the social and behavioural sciences (Silverman, 2006), combining qualitative and quantitative methods. This approach allowed the project team to combine different sources of data collection and compare results from each while also drawing on the diverse and relevant expertise of each member of the team. The use of triangulation between data sources helped to reduce the deficiencies and biases of each of the individual methods and improved the reliability and validity of the findings (Blaikie, 1991); Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). The approach also facilitated a deep and rich explanation of the elements of effective leadership of teaching and learning enhancement across a wide range of Australian universities.

Data for the project was collected from three major sources:

1. A thematic analysis of final and evaluation reports on an initiative to promote excellence in teaching and learning from a representative sample of 18 Australian universities;
2. Interviews with 24 key teaching and learning leaders and staff from a representative sample of 10 Australian universities; and
3. An online survey of 88 teaching and learning leaders and practitioners at the four partner universities involved in the study.

Some universities were represented in more than one major data source. A total of 22 Australian universities were involved in providing data for this project.

Results

The study found that there are seven interlinked insights characteristic of sustainable, positive change in teaching and learning in universities. These insights are that:

1. Efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning are aligned with the strategic direction of the university;
2. Senior executives support teaching and learning enhancement, and resources for those improvements are allocated as part of the university's planning and budget cycle;
3. Staff workload allocations allow time for innovation, enhancement and improvement in teaching and learning;
4. Effective institutional leadership proactively manages tensions between discipline research endeavours and efforts to improve teaching and learning;
5. Teaching and learning are supported by relevant research and scholarship conducted within the institution and in collaboration with other institutions and relevant bodies;
6. A distributed teaching and learning support structure exists within the institution and is coordinated from the centre; and
7. Mechanisms to recognise excellence in teaching and learning and to enable teaching and learning career pathways are in place.

Conclusion

Focusing on the teaching and learning leadership lessons that have been learnt from a nation-wide initiative funded by the ALTC, this project has uncovered seven evidence-based insights into successfully leading the enhancement of teaching and learning in Australian higher education institutions.

The study found that there is strong merit in future research on the potential of mentoring for leadership capacity development. Mentoring emerged as a very strong theme in the project in relation to sustainability, which is a critical aspect of effective university leadership. The sector would benefit from an investigation of peer and other mentoring as one potential, cost-effective mechanism for achieving the successful development of the next generations of leaders.

The study found it is critical to understand and learn from "what works" in the leadership of teaching and learning in a context of shrinking resources and one that incorporates a "growing list of change forces in the environment that are challenging universities with ferocious intensity" (Fullan and Scott, 2009, p.1).

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