

## DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

*Lessons Learnt: Identifying Synergies In Distributed Leadership Projects*

### **The Action Self Evaluative Reflective Tool (ASERT)**

#### **Background**

The Action Self Evaluative Reflective Tool (ASERT) is one of the major outcomes of the ALTC project *Lessons Learnt: Identifying Synergies in Distributed Leadership Projects*. The aim of the project was to develop a set of tools to assist universities to build leadership capacity in learning and teaching using a Distributed Leadership (DL) approach.

In the first stage of the project the four partner universities (RMIT, Australian Catholic University, Macquarie University and the University of Wollongong) shared the lessons they had learnt from using a Distributed Leadership (DL) process to build leadership capacity in L&T in four initial ALTC Leadership Projects. An early outcome of the project team's considerations was that a description of DL was more appropriate than trying to produce a definition. The team felt this approach allowed for a less prescriptive approach that is accord with the philosophy underpinning DL. By identifying synergies between the projects a descriptive scoping document was produced that confirmed the United Kingdom theoretical research that there are five dimensions to DL, There five dimensions are:

- Context in which DL is developed
- Culture in which DL is developed
- Change that is implemented
- Relationships that are developed
- Activity that is undertaken.

A scoping document was presented to a workshop of leaders of learning and teaching at the ALTC Leadership Project meeting in February 2010, and the project reference group in March 2010. A number of additional issues were raised including:

- What is the nature of the relationship between the formal and informal leadership structures and processes (particularly in relation to power issues)?
- How should DL be identified so that it allows for diversity within and between HE institutions?

#### **Distributed Leadership Matrix**

Based on the feedback from the scoping document, a series of questions were developed to identify whether, and how, these descriptive factors were actioned in the initial projects. These questions were discussed with the four Communities of Practice, which were made up of participants from the initial four projects in each of the partner institutions. Based on these responses two Distributed Leadership Matrices (DLM) were produced.

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DLM 'A' identifies the dimensions and inputs of DL, in terms of the elements that contribute to the dimensions and the inputs required to achieve DL. A second matrix was also produced known as DLM 'B' which identifies the values underpinning DL and the practices required to participate in DL.

### **The Action Self-Evaluative Reflective Tool**

Based on the combined DLMs the Action Self Evaluative Reflective Tool (ASERT) was developed as a tool to enable institutions to build leadership capacity in learning and teaching. The ASERT consists of a grid (see Appendix 1) that provides a description of the philosophy and principles that underpin DL and a series of reflective prompts (see Appendix 2 for an example) that illustrate the actions required to undertake the actions described in the grid. The ASERT grid consists of the dimensions and values of DL and the criteria for DL. The reflective prompts identify for each cell of the ASERT grid the approaches that institutions will need to undertake to first evaluate what currently exists in their specific setting that is enabling a DL and then to identify future action.

The ASERT grid consists of:

- Dimensions and values of DL:
  - Context in which trust rather than regulation exists (Trust rather than regulation)
  - Culture of autonomy rather than control (Respect for expertise)
  - Change that recognises a variety of inputs (Recognition of contribution)
  - Relationships that built collaboration rather than individualism (Collaboration)
  - Activity based on shared purpose rather than individual purpose (Reflective practice through Action Research Cycles)
- Criteria for DL:
  - People are involved
  - Processes are supportive
  - Professional development is provided
  - Resources are available.

The cells of the grid identify the actions needed to enable DL to build leadership capacity in L&T. For example, a context where trust rather than regulation is emphasized, enables the expertise of individuals to inform decisions. This in turn requires processes in which shared leadership occurs. It requires professional development in which DL is a component of leadership training and it requires resources such as space, time and finance for collaborative activities.

A series of reflective prompts implemented through cycles of action research underpin the ASERT grid cells. These prompts should lead to institutional processes which may assist in the process of continuously expanding leadership capacity building in learning and teaching. The cycles of action research needs to be supported by professional development to scaffold reflective practice and resources to support collective reflective activity (such as work allocation time).

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The ASERT places emphasis on the importance of action by many people working collectively across the institution for a DL approach to building leadership capacity in learning and teaching. This differs from other, more traditional approaches to building leadership capacity in which the traits, skills and behaviours in individuals identified as leaders is emphasised.

**Appendix 1**

**Action Self Evaluative Reflective Tool grid**

Criterion for Distributed Leadership	Dimensions and Values to enable development of Distributed Leadership			
	CONTEXT Trust	CULTURE Respect	CHANGE Recognition	RELATIONSHIPS Collaboration
People are involved	Expertise of individuals is used to inform decisions	Individuals participate in decision making	All levels and functions have input into policy development	Expertise of individuals contributes to collective decision making
Processes are supportive	Shared leadership is demonstrated	Decentralised groups engage in decision making	All levels and functions have input into policy implementation	Communities of Practice are modeled
Professional development is provided	DL is a component of leadership training	Mentoring for DL is available	Leaders at all levels proactively encourage DL	Collaboration is facilitated
Resources are available	Space, time & finance for collaboration are available	Leadership contribution is recognised and rewarded	Flexibility is built into infrastructure and systems	Opportunities for regular networking are supported

**Appendix 2****Reflective Prompts**

**ONE:** Identify where (ie level of the Institution) at which a DL approach is to be enabled

NOTE: If the Institution as a whole desires to introduce a DL approach at multiple levels the question needs to be asked about each level.

**TWO:** Identify the Criteria for DL on which to focus (*eg Involve People*)

**THREE:** Identify the Dimension (*eg Context*) for DL in relation to the chosen Criteria

**FOUR – Reflection on action**

What is the extent to which the identified action item occurs currently? (*eg extent to which the expertise of individuals is used to inform decisions*)

*EG Individuals (both academic and professional) are asked for input on their experience as a means to inform Policy*

**FIVE – Reflection for future action**

- i) What action could be taken to identify existing opportunities that have not yet been taken advantage of? (*eg for individuals to contribute their expertise to decision making processes*).

*EG Individuals (both academic and professional) could be asked for feedback on areas in which their expertise is not currently utilised*

- ii) What action could be taken to identify new opportunities? (*eg for individuals to contribute their expertise to decision making processes*)

*EG Individuals (both academic and professional) could be asked to identify areas in which their expertise could be utilised*

- iii) What action could be taken to generate new opportunities? (*eg for individuals to contribute their expertise to decision making processes*)

*EG Professional development could include exploration of issues that could benefit from input of expertise more broadly*

- iv) What action should be taken to ensure these new opportunities are sustainable?

*EG Develop a culture in which new ideas are celebrated*

**SIX: Reflection to ensure integrated concerted, supportive action**

- i) How does the proposed action arising from these reflective prompts affect the other criterion and dimensions?
- ii) What change is needed in the other four Criteria to ensure that the proposed action is implemented?

EXAMPLES OF ASET from the Lessons Learnt project in relation to:

.....*Extent to which the expertise of individuals is used to inform decisions*

*\* individuals were encouraged to contribute ideas with meeting notes acknowledging contributions*

*\* More regular communication and consultation was encouraged using both F2F and electronic media*

*\* Newsletters were established to share practice on a regular basis*