

A user guide

for benchmarking

distributed leadership

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Abbreviations

ALTC	Australian Learning and teaching Council
ASERT	Action Self-Enabling Reflective Tool
DL	Distributed Leadership
HE	Higher Education
OLT	Office for Learning and teaching
PAR	Participative Action Research

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Purpose

This user guide for benchmarking distributed leadership is the outcome of a project funded by the Office for Learning and Teaching to support institutions in their use of distributed leadership to build leadership capacity in learning and teaching.

The benchmarks for distributed leadership complement the Action Self Enabling Reflective Tool (ASERT) developed as an outcome of a previous OLT funded project to enable institutions to use distributed leadership to build leadership capacity in learning and teaching.

The benchmarks for distributed leadership address the key question of:

how do institutions evaluate the effectiveness of the actions they have taken to enact distributed leadership.

The user guide is designed to assist leaders with institutional responsibility and academics, professional staff and experts with functional responsibility for learning and teaching, to utilise the strategic potential of distributed leadership to build leadership capacity in their area.

Employed in conjunction with the ASERT, the benchmarks for distributed leadership will help to identify action required to enable and evaluate a distributed leadership approach.

Context

Current development and preparation of academic leaders in learning and teaching has been described as:

at best ad hoc or absent altogether in any systematic sense from formal professional development programs, where they are provided, are often focus on either learning and teaching practice, or leadership and management development more generally, with the latter targeting staff already in formal positions of management responsibility (Bosanquet et al 2008, p.3).

It is acknowledged that given the diversity of the higher education sector, together with its uncertain and sometimes ambiguous context, there is need for leadership in higher education that goes beyond conventional models (ALTC 2011).

Academic leadership for learning and teaching has long demonstrated the importance of engaging a broad range of participants at all levels of the institution, from whole of institution to individual delivery levels by describing and identifying actions needed to enable and evaluate distributed leadership, this user guide provides a systematic approach to building leadership for learning and teaching.

Description

Distributed Leadership is an emergent form of shared leadership with its potential being particularly recognised within the educational sector. It is regarded as capable of identifying actions by many people working within supportive contexts.

Distributed leadership has been described as:

a form of shared leadership that is underpinned by a more collective and inclusive philosophy than traditional leadership theory that focuses on skills, traits and behaviours of individual leaders (Jones, Harvey, Lefoe & Ryland, 2011).

Distributed leadership recognises collaborative relationships as the source of, and support for, flexibility for change, particularly in learning and teaching. Despite recognition of the potential of distributed leadership to build leadership in learning and teaching, it has proved difficult to promulgate in a systemic manner. This is because it is a more elusive concept than the traditional focus on the skills, traits and behaviours of individual leaders. It is also sometimes resisted as a potentially competitive decision-making process to leaders in positions of institutional leadership, or as merely a way to increase the workload of already stretched academics. This has led to the potential of distributed leadership to build leadership capacity being less than universally recognised and adopted. It is considered that by providing benchmarks of distributed leadership, existing resistance will be reduced.

Background

Identification of benchmarks for distributed leadership is based in recognition of the need for higher education Institutions to develop a systematic, multi-facetted approach to building leadership capacity for learning and teaching (Marshal 2006; Bryman 2009). While approaches to building leadership capacity outside the sector are prolific, it is argued that academic leadership is different. Academic leadership exists in a highly specialised, professional environment built not simply upon hierarchical relationships. This led Ramsden (1998) to describe leadership in universities as:

A practical and everyday process of supporting, managing, developing and inspiring academic colleagues....leadership in universities should be by everyone from the Vice Chancellor to the casual car parking attendant, leadership is to do with how people relate to each other (p.4).

Exploration of what constitutes an appropriate approach to building effective leadership for higher education has revealed a spectrum of possibilities. In seeking to summarise the various discourses on leadership in higher education, Marshall (2006, p.5) concluded that:

while there is growing literature on “leadership” in higher education, relatively little of this literature focuses on the specific issue of developing leadership capability..... and even less on the development of leadership capability in learning and teaching.

This has led to claims that high-quality, multi-level leadership is fundamental to the promotion and enhancement of learning and teaching in higher education. The Australian Learning and Teaching Council has emphasised this in its statement:

in this dynamic, sometimes uncertain and sometimes ambiguous context, the capacity of systems, institutions and individuals to respond appropriately to change and to facilitate further change requires forms of leadership that go beyond conventional models (ALTC 2011, p.5)

Benchmarks for distributed leadership

Benchmarking is a process by which Australian higher education institutions evaluate their current practices. In this case the benchmarks are designed to evaluate distributed leadership against previously determined reference points. The points of reference have been determined by past practice in Australian higher education institutions.

The purpose of this benchmarking activity can be categorised as ‘good practice benchmarking’ as the comparator selected is believed to be the best in the area to be benchmarked.

The identified benchmarks are criterion referenced in the sense that they define the attributes of good practice in distributed leadership identified from the experience across Australian higher education institutions of using a distributed leadership approach to achieve change to improve learning and teaching.

The method used to undertake the Benchmarking in this instance is a mix of a comparison of performance indicators developed from publicly available information and activity-based benchmarking that identifies a typical selection of activities selected for comparison. These results can be considered in relation to the specific activities of may be used as a proxy indicator of an entire institution’s performance.

The Benchmarks are also classified as collaborative benchmarking as it is focused on processes as an aid to collaborative learning and self-improvement, as part of a continuous action learning/action research enhancement cycle.

The benchmarks are scaffolded upon the information collected from a national survey of the existence and spread of distributed leadership related systems and frameworks currently employed across the Australian higher education sector. This survey revealed a high level of acceptance of the need to take action as identified in the Action Self Enabling Reflection Tool (ASERT). That is - to develop and encourage a context of trust, a culture of respect for individual expertise, a commitment to change and the development of collaborative relationships.

The benchmarks for distributed leadership were designed in accordance with the six tenets of distributed leadership identified in the 6E conceptual model of distributed leadership - Engage, Enable, Enact, Encourage, Evaluate and Emergent.

From these six tenets, five **domains** for benchmarking were identified - Engage, Enable, Enact, Assess and Emergent. The sixth tenet, Encourage, was recast as part of the ‘good practice’ benchmark descriptor.

Each of the five domains were identified by a **scoping statement**. With each of the scoping statements then classified into **elements**. Finally, each of the elements has a **good practice** descriptor.

The benchmarks for distributed leadership are designed to enable institutions to identify and evaluate their own practice.

Benchmark Domains

Engage

The domain of *engage* covers aspects of distributed leadership related to the degree and breadth of involvement of individuals. This benchmark includes measurement of the extent of engagement of leaders with institutional responsibility, informal leaders and discipline and functional experts

Enable

The domain of *enable* covers the aspects of distributed leadership that address the need for a context of trust and a culture of respect that acknowledges the expertise that individuals can contribute. This benchmark includes the extent to which there is acceptance of the need for change from the traditional reliance upon positional managerial hierarchies to more collaborative approaches to developing relationships

Enact

The domain of *enact* covers the aspects of distributed leadership that requires a more holistic process. This benchmark includes the extent to which people, the processes, support and systems are implemented to encourage a distributed leadership approach.

Assess

The domain of *assess* covers the area of distributed leadership concerned with identifying evidence of the contribution of distributed leadership to leadership capacity building. This benchmark includes evaluating cross correlations between distributed leadership and increased engagement in learning and teaching, collaboration and growth in leadership capacity.

Emergent

The domain of *emergent* covers the area of distributed leadership concerned with sustaining distributed leadership over time through action research cycles. This benchmark includes evidence of a participative action research process, reflective practice and continuous improvement.

The Benchmarking Framework for Distributed Leadership is provided in Table 1.

Table 1 Benchmarking framework for Distributed Leadership

DOMAIN	SCOPE	ELEMENTS	GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTOR
ENGAGE	Distributed leadership engages a broad range of participants from all relevant functions, disciplines, groups and levels. This includes formal leaders, informal leaders and experts	Formal leaders (academic and professional)	Formal leaders proactively support initiatives through attendance at meetings, publication of activities and other sponsorship activities.
		Informal leaders	Staff participate in learning and teaching enhancement and are recognised for their expertise through good practice
		Discipline experts	Academics from relevant disciplines contribute their discipline expertise to initiatives either through self-nomination or peer nomination.
		Functional experts	Professional staff contribute their relevant functional expertise to initiatives either through self-nomination or peer nomination.
ENABLE	Distributed leadership is enabled through a context of trust and a culture of respect coupled with effecting change through collaborative relationships	Context of trust.	Decisions made in initiatives are based on respect for and confidence in the knowledge, skills and expertise of academics and professional staff in addition to the relevant rules and regulations.
		Culture of respect	Decisions made in initiatives are shared between all participants based on their expertise and strengths.
		Acceptance of need for change	Initiatives combine formal leadership authority, relevant rules and regulations and the expertise of staff in an integrated top-down, bottom- and middle-up approach.
		Collaborative relationships	Participants in initiatives are provided with professional development opportunities as well as experienced facilitators and mentors to encourage collaborative decision making.
ENACT	Distributed leadership is enacted by involvement of people, the design of processes, the provision of support and the implementation of systems	Involvement of people	Initiatives identify and encourage the participation of experts from among all relevant academic and professional staff.
		Design of participative processes	Communities of practice and other networking opportunities are encouraged and supported.
		Provision of support	Space, time and finance for collaborative initiatives are provided.
		Integration and alignment of systems	Systems are aligned to ensure that decisions arising from initiatives are integrated into formal policy and processes.
ASSESS	Distributed leadership is best evaluated drawing on multiple sources of evidence of increased engagement collaboration and growth in leadership capacity	Increased engagement	Performance review processes acknowledge individual engagement in initiatives.
		Increased collaboration	Data (such as university cultural surveys; collaborative grant applications related to learning and teaching enhancement; and collaborative publications) identify evidence of increased collaborative activity between staff.
		Growth in leadership capacity	Participation in initiatives is recognised and rewarded.
EMERGENT	Distributed leadership is emergent and sustained through cycles of action research built on a Participative Action Research methodology	Participative action research process	An action research process that encourages participation through cycles of activity underpins the initiative.
		Reflective practice	Reflective practice is built into initiatives as a formal practice and stage of the initiative.
		Continuous improvement	Output from each stage of the initiative will be sustained.

Benchmark Instrument

The Benchmarking Distributed Leadership Instrument has been designed to provide users and potential adopters of distributed leadership in learning and teaching with assistance in self-assessing their performance against good practice descriptors for each of the five benchmarks domains and their associated scope and elements.

The Benchmarking Distributed Leadership Instrument provides a template for each domain and element that includes a good practice descriptor of the action required. Users can download the templates to benchmark a description and evidence of their practice and compare this against the good practice descriptor.

Self-assessment of performance is rated as either:

Beginning (action required)

Functional (further action required)

Accomplished (continue current action)

Benchmarks for distributed leadership

Domain: 1. ENGAGE
SCOPE: Distributed leadership engages a broad range of participants from all relevant functions, disciplines, groups and levels. This includes formal leaders, informal leaders and experts
ELEMENT: Formal leaders (academic and professional)
GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTOR: Formal leaders proactively support initiatives through attendance at meetings, publication of activities and other sponsorship activities.

Description of current practice
Evidence of performance in this element

	1	2	3	4	5
	Beginning-Developing		Functional-Proficient		Accomplished-Exemplary
Appraisal of performance in this element					

Actions

Benchmarks for distributed leadership

Domain: 1. ENGAGE
SCOPE: Distributed leadership engages a broad range of participants from all relevant functions, disciplines, groups and levels. This includes formal leaders, informal leaders and experts
ELEMENT: Informal leaders
GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTOR: Staff participate in learning and teaching enhancement and are recognised for their expertise through good practice

Description of current practice
Evidence of performance in this element

	1	2	3	4	5
	Beginning-Developing		Functional-Proficient		Accomplished-Exemplary
Appraisal of performance in this element					

Actions

Benchmarks for distributed leadership

Domain: 1. ENGAGE
SCOPE: Distributed leadership engages a broad range of participants from all relevant functions, disciplines, groups and levels. This includes formal leaders, informal leaders and experts
ELEMENT: Discipline experts
GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTOR: Academics from relevant disciplines contribute their discipline expertise to initiatives either through self-nomination or peer nomination.

Description of current practice
Evidence of performance in this element

	1	2	3	4	5
	Beginning-Developing		Functional-Proficient		Accomplished-Exemplary
Appraisal of performance in this element					

Actions

Benchmarks for distributed leadership

Domain: 1. ENGAGE
SCOPE: Distributed leadership engages a broad range of participants from all relevant functions, disciplines, groups and levels. This includes formal leaders, informal leaders and experts
ELEMENT: Functional experts
GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTOR: Professional staff contribute their relevant functional expertise to initiatives either through self-nomination or peer nomination.

Description of current practice
Evidence of performance in this element

	1	2	3	4	5
	Beginning-Developing		Functional-Proficient		Accomplished-Exemplary
Appraisal of performance in this element					

Actions

Benchmarks for distributed leadership

Domain: 1. ENGAGE
SCOPE: Distributed leadership is enabled through a context of trust and a culture of respect coupled with effecting change through collaborative relationships
ELEMENT: Context of trust.
GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTOR: Decisions made in initiatives are based on respect for and confidence in the knowledge, skills and expertise of academics and professional staff in addition to the relevant rules and regulations.

Description of current practice
Evidence of performance in this element

	1	2	3	4	5
	Beginning-Developing		Functional-Proficient		Accomplished-Exemplary
Appraisal of performance in this element					

Actions

Benchmarks for distributed leadership

Domain: 2. ENABLE
SCOPE: Distributed leadership is enabled through a context of trust and a culture of respect coupled with effecting change through collaborative relationships
ELEMENT: Culture of respect
GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTOR: Decisions made in initiatives are shared between all participants based on their expertise and strengths.

Description of current practice
Evidence of performance in this element

	1	2	3	4	5
	Beginning-Developing		Functional-Proficient		Accomplished-Exemplary
Appraisal of performance in this element					

Actions

Benchmarks for distributed leadership

Domain: 2. ENABLE
SCOPE: Distributed leadership is enabled through a context of trust and a culture of respect coupled with effecting change through collaborative relationships
ELEMENT: Acceptance of need for change
GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTOR: Initiatives combine formal leadership authority, relevant rules and regulations and the expertise of staff in an integrated top-down, bottom- and middle-up approach.

Description of current practice
Evidence of performance in this element

	1	2	3	4	5
	Beginning-Developing		Functional-Proficient		Accomplished-Exemplary
Appraisal of performance in this element					

Actions

Benchmarks for distributed leadership

Domain: 2. ENABLE
SCOPE: Distributed leadership is enabled through a context of trust and a culture of respect coupled with effecting change through collaborative relationships
ELEMENT: Collaborative relationships
GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTOR: Participants in initiatives are provided with professional development opportunities as well as experienced facilitators and mentors to encourage collaborative decision making.

Description of current practice
Evidence of performance in this element

	1	2	3	4	5
	Beginning-Developing		Functional-Proficient		Accomplished-Exemplary
Appraisal of performance in this element					

Actions

Benchmarks for distributed leadership

Domain: 3. ENACT
SCOPE: Distributed leadership is enacted by involvement of people, the design of processes, the provision of support and the implementation of systems
ELEMENT: Involvement of people
GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTOR: Initiatives identify and encourage the participation of experts from among all relevant academic and professional staff.

Description of current practice
Evidence of performance in this element

	1	2	3	4	5
	Beginning-Developing		Functional-Proficient		Accomplished-Exemplary
Appraisal of performance in this element					

Actions

Benchmarks for distributed leadership

Domain: 3. ENACT
SCOPE: Distributed leadership is enacted by involvement of people, the design of processes, the provision of support and the implementation of systems
ELEMENT: Design of participative processes
GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTOR: Communities of practice and other networking opportunities are encouraged and supported.

Description of current practice
Evidence of performance in this element

	1	2	3	4	5
	Beginning-Developing		Functional-Proficient		Accomplished-Exemplary
Appraisal of performance in this element					

Actions

Benchmarks for distributed leadership

Domain: 3. ENACT
SCOPE: Distributed leadership is enacted by involvement of people, the design of processes, the provision of support and the implementation of systems
ELEMENT: Provision of support
GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTOR: Space, time and finance for collaborative initiatives are provided.

Description of current practice
Evidence of performance in this element

	1	2	3	4	5
	Beginning-Developing		Functional-Proficient		Accomplished-Exemplary
Appraisal of performance in this element					

Actions

Benchmarks for distributed leadership

Domain: 3. ENACT
SCOPE: Distributed leadership is enacted by involvement of people, the design of processes, the provision of support and the implementation of systems
ELEMENT: Integration and alignment of systems
GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTOR: Systems are aligned to ensure that decisions arising from initiatives are integrated into formal policy and processes.

Description of current practice
Evidence of performance in this element

	1	2	3	4	5
	Beginning-Developing		Functional-Proficient		Accomplished-Exemplary
Appraisal of performance in this element					

Actions

Benchmarks for distributed leadership

Domain: 4. ASSESS
SCOPE: Distributed leadership is best evaluated drawing on multiple sources of evidence of increased engagement collaboration and growth in leadership capacity
ELEMENT: Increased engagement
GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTOR: Performance review processes acknowledge individual engagement in initiatives.

Description of current practice
Evidence of performance in this element

	1	2	3	4	5
	Beginning-Developing		Functional-Proficient		Accomplished-Exemplary
Appraisal of performance in this element					

Actions

Benchmarks for distributed leadership

Domain: 4. ASSESS
SCOPE: Distributed leadership is best evaluated drawing on multiple sources of evidence of increased engagement collaboration and growth in leadership capacity
ELEMENT: Increased collaboration
GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTOR: Data (such as university cultural surveys; collaborative grant applications related to learning and teaching enhancement; and collaborative publications) identify evidence of increased collaborative activity between staff.

Description of current practice
Evidence of performance in this element

	1	2	3	4	5
	Beginning-Developing		Functional-Proficient		Accomplished-Exemplary
Appraisal of performance in this element					

Actions

Benchmarks for distributed leadership

Domain: 4. ASSESS
SCOPE: Distributed leadership is best evaluated drawing on multiple sources of evidence of increased engagement collaboration and growth in leadership capacity
ELEMENT: Growth in leadership capacity
GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTOR: Participation in initiatives is recognised and rewarded.

Description of current practice
Evidence of performance in this element

	1	2	3	4	5
	Beginning-Developing		Functional-Proficient		Accomplished-Exemplary
Appraisal of performance in this element					

Actions

Benchmarks for distributed leadership

Domain: 5. EMERGENT
SCOPE: Distributed leadership is emergent and sustained through cycles of action research built on a Participative Action Research methodology
ELEMENT: Participative action research process
GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTOR: An action research process that encourages participation through cycles of activity underpins the initiative.

Description of current practice
Evidence of performance in this element

	1	2	3	4	5
	Beginning-Developing		Functional-Proficient		Accomplished-Exemplary
Appraisal of performance in this element					

Actions

Benchmarks for distributed leadership

Domain: 5. EMERGENT
SCOPE: Distributed leadership is emergent and sustained through cycles of action research built on a Participative Action Research methodology
ELEMENT: Reflective practice
GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTOR: Reflective practice is built into initiatives as a formal practice and stage of the initiative.

Description of current practice
Evidence of performance in this element

	1	2	3	4	5
	Beginning-Developing		Functional-Proficient		Accomplished-Exemplary
Appraisal of performance in this element					

Actions

Benchmarks for distributed leadership

Domain: 5. EMERGENT
SCOPE: Distributed leadership is emergent and sustained through cycles of action research built on a Participative Action Research methodology
ELEMENT: Continuous improvement
GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTOR: Output from each stage of the initiative will be sustained.

Description of current practice
Evidence of performance in this element

	1	2	3	4	5
	Beginning-Developing		Functional-Proficient		Accomplished-Exemplary
Appraisal of performance in this element					

Actions

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