

Enabling Distributed Leadership for Learning and Teaching: The Self Enabling Reflective Tool (ASERT)

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Conference research domain(s) addressed

Leadership, management, governance and policy in higher education

Background literature

The challenges facing Higher Education (HE) require a distinct leadership approach that recognises both change required to meet the demands of complex, ambiguous environments and the diversity of disciplinary approaches that contribute to a university (Becher 1987, 1989). The sector needs to take a leading edge role in order to graduate students with skills for industry (Employability skills for the future, 2002), at the same time accommodating reduced government financial support for HE. While multiple theories abound about leadership outside HE, it is claimed that academic leadership is different as it exists in a highly specialised and professional, non hierarchical environment. This has led to much discussion about what constitutes leadership in Higher Education and how to build systematic, multi-faceted collaborative leadership capacity (Marshal 2006).

Two principle concepts are being explored on Institutional leadership – a structural model that focuses on how to develop the skills, traits and behaviours of individual leaders, and a distributed model that focuses on how activity theory (Engestrom, 1999) can be used to explain the interplay between subjects, objects and instruments, rules, community and division of labour (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2008; Bryman, 2009; Harris, 2009). The distributed model is the focus of this research.

The initiative/practice

Based on several initial ALTC funded projects that used a Distributed Leadership (DL) approach to build leadership capacity for learning and teaching, a Distributed Leadership Matrix (DLM) and associated Action Self Enabling Reflective Tool (ASERT) have been developed using a further ALTC funded grant aimed at consolidating the outcomes of the initial projects (Harvey, 2008; Jones, & Novak, 2009; Lefoe & Parrish, 2009; Schneider, Applebee, & Perry, 2008). The resultant tools will assist universities to self-evaluate their capacity to engage with a DL approach. The DLM provides the framework for HE Institutions to identify the requirements to move towards DL and the ASERT presents the means to identify action required to support a DL approach. The DLM and associated ASERT has been developed from the experience of four participating institutions and has been initially 'road-tested' with a cross section of leaders of learning and teaching across Australian HE institutions.

Method(s) of evaluative data collection and analysis

The project used a participant reflection method. First, by the Project Team members each of whom had been leaders in the original four DL funded projects. These reflections were compared against the literature on DL in HE in the UK and USA, with the resulting scoping document presented for feedback from participants at an ALTC Leadership Project meeting. Following additions suggested by these leaders a series of questions were developed for further reflection and analysis by participants from the four initiating projects in each institution acting as a focus groups conducted. These reflections were then subject to further refinement through feedback from the expert Project Reference Group.

Evidence of effectiveness

The effectiveness of the ASERT as a workable tool for diverse institutional environments was tested (and validated) at a meeting of leaders of ALTC funded Leadership projects in early 2011 using a Reflective Prompt process

Discussion

The outcomes from the project which will be showcased consist of the DLM and the ASERT. Particular focus will be given to the ASERT which places emphasis on the importance of action by many people working collectively across the institution for a DL approach. 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. It provides an overview of the principles of DL and offers opportunity to engage with the concept of distributed leadership.

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