

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP (DL)  
PROJECT LE9-1222

Lessons Learnt: Identifying Synergies In Distributed Leadership Project

**Scoping Document Validation**  
**Evaluation of Responses ALTC LP Meeting February 2010**

**A. Introduction**

At the February 2010 meeting of the leaders of ALTC leadership projects an interactive session was organised to introduce the Distributed Leadership (DL) Project that is funded under *Leadership Priority Three: Consolidating leadership by building on the outcomes of projects funded in earlier years under the Leadership for Excellence in Learning and Teaching Program.*

- i. The Aim of the ALTC DL LP Project is to:
  - *identify the synergies between the outcomes of four ALTC Projects funded as Institutional Leadership (Distributed) Grants;*
  - *develop an Institutional Leadership - Distributed Leadership Matrix (DLM) - of contextual conditions and leadership skills needed to achieve an effective distributed leadership process and*
  - *develop a flexible self-evaluative tool (SET) to encourage and support a distributed leadership approach to learning and teaching improvements.*
- ii. Universities involved in the DL Project include:
  - Lead university: RMIT
  - Partner Universities: Australian Catholic University, Macquarie University, University of Wollongong

**B. Scoping Document Validation**

**a) Data Collection**

The **aim** of the LP session was to collect feedback from the participants on a Scoping document that had been produced by the LP DL Project Team based on their experience in initial DL Projects funded under the ALTC LP priority between 2006-2009.

The data collection **method** used was to present participants with a Scoping document of common variables that had been identified by the LP Project team from the experience of four previous LP projects funded as DL between 2006-2009. Based on these common variables a small questionnaire had been prepared by the LP Project Team members. The questionnaire included a mix of qualitative and quantitative items. Participants were invited to complete the questionnaire both individually and in groups.

Participants were asked:

- First, to identify any examples of Distributed Leadership that they were aware of occurring within their own University. Participants who could not identify any examples were asked to go to the last question that required a group discussion;
- Second, using the examples they had identified, to rate the importance of five variables (context, culture, change/development, activity and conflict resolution) for the achievement of an effective distributed leadership approach. A 10 point scale, from Not Important to Extremely Important, was provided for participants;
- Third, to identify any additional variables that they thought should be included;
- Fourth, to identify any evidence that distributed leadership is being effective in achieving the aims for which it has been designed, and if so, to identify what their university is using to identify demonstrable or measurable improvements and
- Finally, participants were asked as a Group to discuss the following statement that emerged from an ALTC discussion in 2006:

*A Distributed model of leadership is needed in Higher Education.*

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**b) Evaluation**

**Evaluation** of the data collection from twenty-eight responses was undertaken using a mixed method approach of both quantitative and qualitative analysis with the findings

**i) Quantitative**

An analysis of the data related to the scale measures of the five variables of distributed leadership identified that those who responded to the scales thought that they were at least very important and in some cases extremely important.

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| Context             | 8 of 19 respondents (42%) rated this variable as very important or extremely important.     |
| Culture             | 8 of 19 respondents (42%) rated this variable as very important or extremely important.     |
| Change/development  | 9 out of 15 respondents (60%) rated this variable as very important or extremely important. |
| Activity            | 13 of 19 respondents (68%) rated this variable as very important or extremely important.    |
| Conflict resolution | 4 of 17 respondents (23%) rated this variable as very important or extremely important.     |

The respondents grouped the variables into two categories, context, culture, and conflict resolution, which were all deemed to be important with means of between 7.3 and 7.5. The variables of change/development and activity had higher means of 8.6 and 8.9 respectively.

The difference between the means of these two categories of variable suggests that the participants believed the variables of change/development and activity were more important than context, culture and conflict resolution. However care needs to be taken given the small sample size (n = 15-19). It is also not possible to distinguish the relative importance within the two categories as the intra-category differences are not significant because of the small population size.

**ii) Qualitative**

The following analysis of the written comments is provided in three sections. The first section presents participants responses to the question of examples, and effectiveness, of DL in particular universities. The second section presents the comments made in relation to the five variables of DL. The final section presents the group responses to the question of whether a model of DL is required in higher education.

**1. Examples, and effectiveness, of DL in the particular institutions**

Four distinct, but interrelated themes were identified:

- i. the relationship between the Institutional formal leadership structures and informal processes associated with D;
- ii. relationship of power with leadership and particularly DL;
- iii. how DL occurs at different levels of the universities and
- iv. how DL is related to projects and research activities.

Responses suggest that examples of DL are mainly within (dispersed) faculty structures rather than at the (central) university level. Many participants mentioned formality and power associated with the higher levels of the structure rather than DL.

However, there was also concern at the use of the term 'power' in the working definition used [viz, *a distribution of power through the collegial sharing of knowledge, practice*

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*and reflection within the social context of the university (Wollongong LP)]* as it was felt that the use of the word 'power' could sideline the argument around leadership. A number said that perhaps the notion of responsibility was more appropriate in this context.

The question of the relationship leadership and management was also mentioned.

There were fewer comments on evidence of effectiveness of DL in Institutions, with most claiming that examples of DL were in their early stages and no measures of effectiveness had yet been developed. However, a number of responses identified some changes in their institutions' practices.

Some responses identified problems with the DL that has led to the cessation of some experiments with DL.

## 2. Responses to questions related to the variables of DL

### i) Context

Many of the comments made by the participants on the variable *context* were centred on its internal dimension. The major contextual factor that participants commented upon related to the existing internal dimension of formal leadership, particularly the interplay between leadership and authority.

Some identified a Discipline-based *context* as being important but others were more focused on the inter-disciplinary focus of many of the DL projects.

Some responses linked DL to the level of leadership within the institution.

### ii) Culture

Many responses mentioned *culture* as an important variable in DL, however, there were differences of opinion as to what *culture* constituted. Some mentioned culture as it relates to concepts of collaboration and autonomy, others saw it as relating to the specific nature of the deployment of distributed leadership e.g. online projects, mathematics projects etc.

### iii) Activity

*Activity* was identified as a central factor by many participants, with some said that it was important by definition. A number of comments stated that DL needs to have a shared purpose and outcome. For example one participant said:

*"In our case this shared purpose was the glue that held the network together and that enabled authentic distributed leadership to occur".*

Another linked *activity* to *context* in their comment:

*"Where distributed leadership approach is appropriate or desired, collaboration is fundamental to its success".*

### iv) Change and development

There was some confusion with this particular variable as some felt it should be two variables. Also, there was a comment on how the scale of *change or development* required related to the ability of distributed leadership delivering such a change or development. Indeed, the interplay between *change* and *development* was also something that some participants thought was useful to note.

### v) Conflict resolution

A number of participants made extended comments about *conflict resolution*. This may reflect that for some, issues occurred with their experience of being part of a distributed

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leadership project which required some degree of conflict resolution. There were two groups of responses to this variable, one that felt that it should be intrinsic to the process of distributed leadership and another that processes need to be put in place where distributed leadership was being tried to prevent conflict occurring.

**vi) Other variables suggested**

A number of other variables were suggested by participants; interestingly quite a few were made by participants who made no other comments on the variables suggested by the project team. Examples of other variables suggested included: identity (individuals/group), openness, trust, geography, respect complexity/size of change. The formality of leadership was also commented upon again and how this may be a variable in the use of distributed leadership.

**3. The need for distributed leadership in higher education**

As described in the introduction, unlike the comments above which were taken from individual's responses, the subject of the need for distributed leadership in higher education was discussed in groups around each table at the meeting. The outcome of these group discussions were then presented to the meeting as a whole and notes were taken to record the reactions. The responses received from the groups covered quite different aspects of distributed leadership. For example, some groups could not think of any instances within their own institutions whilst others addressed specific issues of how best a distributed leadership model could work. Again the issue of the relationship with formal leadership and distributed leadership was raised. For example, one group said that for distributed leadership to be successful it needs to be supported at the university level. A corollary of this comment from another group was that distributed leadership needed to be a bottom-up process. Another group felt that distributed leadership was not always the best model and in some cases other leadership models were more effective.

**C. Conclusions**

From this feedback, the project team concludes that the scoping document produced from their experiences of the four initial DL projects does encompass the major variables of DL. Thus progress to the next phase of the project is appropriate. However, several issues were identified as requiring further attention. These included:

1. The relationship between emergent informal leaders and the formal leadership;
2. Potential questions of power and responsibility between leaders and
3. The degree to which DL is occurring in higher education institutions.

Given the emphasis on the variables of change and development and activity in the responses from the meeting, the question of the relative importance of the development of particular leadership skills to increase leadership capacity using a distributed leadership approach requires further reflection.

Project Leaders Assoc. Prof. Sandra Jones  
Project Officer Dr Kevin Ryland  
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