Scoping a Distributed Leadership Matrix for Higher Education

Professor Sandra Jones, RMIT
Dr Marina Harvey, Macquarie University
Associate Professor Geraldine Lefoe, University of Wollongong
Ann Appleby, Australian Catholic University

While there has been significant research into the theory and practice of the concept of Distributed Leadership in the School system, particularly in the United States, there has been less research into its applicability into Higher Education, apart from some theoretical research in the United Kingdom. This is somewhat surprising given the pressure on universities to reshape their governance models to accommodate a more competitive business environment as education becomes an important contributor to national economies. It is also interesting that, despite resistance from academics to the more 'enterprise-based' approach to shaping university leadership, there has not been a focus on a Distributed Leadership model that appears to accommodate the need for autonomy that underpins academic culture. It is within this context that this paper intends to use the findings of four recently completed empirical projects funded under the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Leadership Project (LP) grant scheme to identify synergies in approach as a scoping exercise of the issues that need to be considered in exploring the applicability of distributed leadership in higher education.

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Distributed Leadership – Conceptual Discourse

Discussion on whether a Distributed Leadership model may be an appropriate alternate frame of leadership for the education industry has existed for some years. As one of the current authors has argued elsewhere (Jones & Novak 2009), while multiple theories abound about leadership outside Higher Education [trait and behavioural theories that focus on individual leaders (Stogdill 1948; Du Brin & Dagliesh 2003; Stogdill & Coons 1957), situational and contingent theory that focuses on the environment in which people lead (Fieder 1967; Vroom & Yetton 1973; Hersey and Blanchard 1968) and social exchanges theories that focus on how leaders wield power and influence by responding to followers expectations (Blau 1964; Burns 1978; Kouzer & Pousner 1987)] academic leadership is different. Indeed Ramsden (1998, p.4) has claimed that academic leadership exists in a highly specialised and professional, non hierarchical environment that requires:

> 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

Distributed leadership is being researched for its potential to assist universities to address the challenges of operating in the globally competitive market in which education is recognised more for its economic value. The changes facing higher education have resulted in many challenges throughout the sector, not least of which is the need to reshape governance structures. In the early 1990s Bell (1991, p.136) summarised the challenges as "we are still guilty of borrowing perspectives, models, concepts and theories from the world of industry and commerce……this is a weakness". Several years later Lumby (2003) described the

change in leadership in higher education as one of degree rather than substance or waves of managerialism from 'overt oppression' to 'more subtle manipulation'.

Discourse upon distributed leadership is the one exception to this trend. Gronn (2000) described distributed leadership as a 'new architecture for leadership', different from both traits/behaviours (agency) theories that focus on the individual leaders and structural theories that focus on systemic properties and role structures. In contrast to these theories, Gronn described distributed leadership as the complex interplay that bridges agency and structure:

> The structural patterns taken by various social and organizational formations are activity-dependent, and an analysis of the activities engaged in by particular sets of time-, place-, space –and culture-bound sets of agents permits an understanding of agential-structural relations through the process of structuring (Gronn, 2000, p.318).

He termed this 'concertive action' and proposed that, when combined with activity theory (Engestrom 1999), a distributed leadership framework offered a new conception of workplace ecology in which contextual factors are incorporated to identify both a more holistic perspective of organisational work and a focus on emergent approaches. Thus not only would the complex interaction between subjects, objects and instruments be included but also the rules, community and division of labour that impact on activity.

In their review of the literature on distributed leadership Woods, Bennet, Harvey and Wise (2004) state that distributed leadership is an extension of collegiality often associated with academia that is characterised by three elements, concertive action, movable boundaries and a broader spread of expertise. Concertive action, they argue, is achieved by a process in which a group or networks of individuals interact in conjoint activity through the pooling and aggregation of individual initiative and expertise rather than by the linear addition of individual activity (Woods et al 2004, p.441). Movable boundaries are achieved by the encompassing of a wider net of leaders than traditional approaches. The broader spread of expertise results from the inclusion of a variety of organisational expertise.

Distributed leadership, they conclude, is made up of five main variables: context (internal and external), culture (of academic autonomy), change and development from many sources (top-down and bottom-up), activity that is collaborative, multiple and complementary by teams of people sharing responsibility for a successful outcome, and conflict resolution processes that are effective (to assist the multiple people contributing across a broad arena of activity). Building on this they characterise distributed leadership as 'analytical dualism' in which "both structure and agency have distinct effects" (Woods et al 2004, p.448). Structure they described as encompassing institutional, cultural and social elements (including the duties and role of, and the distribution of power between, the participants), systems and patterns of knowledge ideas and values in the institution and patterns of relationships and interactions between the parties. While agency places emphasis upon the action of people (including self-consciousness that enables people to evaluate their social context, envisage alternatives creatively and collaborate with others to bring about change). In summary they described the kernel of distributed leadership as "the idea that leadership is a property of groups of people, not of an individual" (Woods et al 2004, p.449).

Similarly, Spillane (2006) identifies two aspects of distributed leadership. First, a 'leadership-plus' aspect that recognises that leading and managing (in Schools) can involve

multiple individuals (in both formal leadership positions and non-formally designated persons). Second, a practice-based aspect (Eccles & Nohria, 1992) that regards leadership as action. Once again this aspect recognises the potential contribution of both formal and informal leadership.

The theoretical discourse outlines above, although not inclusive of all discussion, provides an overview of the conclusion reached by Woods et al (2004, p.451; 453) that it is difficult to construct a single model of distributed leadership given that different contexts will affect choices to be made. Similarly Bennett et al (2003, p.2) state "there is little agreement as to the meaning of the term……distributed leadership is a way to think about leadership. Given this, it is necessary to go beyond conceptual discourse about what distributed leadership is to explore the empirical evidence of distributed leadership in practice.

Distributed Leadership –Empirical Studies

Research into the practice of distributed leadership in education has been principally focused in three countries. In the United States the focus has been on distributed leadership in secondary schools, commencing with conceptual discussions of what is distributed leadership to empirical descriptive studies of how leadership is distributed (for example Lieberman, 1988; Hart, 1995). More recently it is turning to evaluation of the contribution of distributed leadership (Camburn, E; Rowan, B. &Taylor, 2003; Leithwood, Mascall & Strauus, 2008; Spillane 2006; Spillane et al 2009).

In the UK research in the Schools has been occurring for many years (Harris 2004 and 2008 provides comprehensive overviews of the literature) there has been more of a focus on distributed leadership in higher education through funded research projects into leadership in higher education by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE). One project aimed to identify styles of, or approaches to, effective leadership in higher education (Bryman 2009). Another project aimed to develop recommendations on how leadership and leadership development can be enhanced, particularly through encouraging collective engagement with the leadership process (Bolden, Petrov & Gosling 2008).

While the findings of these Reports are too detailed for any one paper, the importance of the conclusions reached is twofold. First, the importance of context in which effective leaders operate for distributed leadership. Bryman (2009, p.66) concludes that academic leaders need to "create an environment or context for academics and others to fulfil their potential and interest in their work". Bolden, Petrov & Gosling (2008, p.1) place emphasis on the significance of the "wider context in which leadership and leadership development takes place, as opposed to focusing solely on the traits and capabilities of individual leaders". Second, the variety of ways that distributed leadership is conceived was recognised. Bolden, Petrov & Gosling (2008, p.4) state that "successful university leadership requires the dynamic interplay between a range of factors and priorities at a number of levels: individual, social, structural/organisational, contextual and developmental". A similar finding led Bryman's call for:

> Systematic research that directly examines the connection between leader behaviour and effectiveness…as a springboard for developing principles of leadership effectiveness that could be employed in training leaders Bryman's (2009, p.68).

In Australia research into the practice of distributed leadership also commenced in the secondary schools system (including Brennan, Collier, Reece & Mulford, 2000; Gronn 2002; Duignan 2006;. Duignan & Gurr [eds.] 2007; Dinham, Dinham 2007; Dinham 2008). Discourse extended to the higher education sector with the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) introduction of a Leadership Grants Scheme Program in 2005 based on the assumption that academic leadership is highly specialized and thus needs a different model from pre-existing private and public sector models of leadership. Accordingly it was claimed that there is need to support systematic, structured and sustainable models of academic leadership (Anderson & Johnson 2006) through providing funding to explore a middle ground between leadership as defined from a structural/positional perspective and the view that everyone is a leader. It was considered that a distributed model of leadership provides such a middle ground opportunity in which leadership in higher education occurs within the context of the transitory nature of many roles in learning and teaching and the various contributions of roles between academics and professional staff. What such a distributed leadership model would incorporate was left for research associated with the projects (ALTC Colloquium 2006). The outcomes of these projects are the subject of this paper.

Distributed Leadership –Empirical cases in Higher Education

In 2006 the ALTC funded five issue-based projects under the banner of distributed leadership: Using student feedback (RMIT University); Faculty scholar model (University of Wollongong); Leadership and Assessment (Macquarie University); Leadership in on-line learning (Australian Catholic University) and Leadership in Communities of Practice (Australian National University). In her review of the ALTC Programs, Parker (2008) provided the following summaries of these projects:

> *1. Developing Multi-level Leadership in the Use of Student Feedback to Enhance Student Learning and Teaching Practice (RMIT University)*

> The purpose of this Project was to foster, develop and implement an academic leadership model with a focus on the effective use of student feedback to improve the quality of learning and teaching and to enhance students' educational experiences. More specifically, the Project aimed to significantly empower academic teams to take initiatives in the use of student feedback.

> The approach taken in the Project was collaborative, broadly based and participatory. It involved three action learning research teams (in Business; Science, Engineering and Technology; and, Design and Social Context), whose work was supported by small incentive grants and facilitators with experience in leadership in learning and teaching. A Project team of middle and senior managers from across the university met monthly to assist the action research teams and five plenary sessions operating as Institute-wide Communities of Practice were held over the three years The model of leadership underpinning activities was one premised on "collaboration, dialogue, inquiry, facilitation and conflict resolution skills" (RMIT proposal, p.8).

> The project attracted university-wide interest, although it was recognised that there were significant costs in terms of staff time in embedding the process across the university and that an appropriate compromise between group independence and institutional authority needed to be found. This was recognised as a difficult challenge in a large, diverse institution, with many different disciplinary traditions

2. Development of Distributed Institutional Leadership Capacity in Online Learning and Teaching (Australian Catholic University)

The purpose of this Project was to develop distributed institutional leadership capacity in the pedagogical and evaluative dimensions of online learning and teaching across the University. The immediate problem addressed by the Project concerned how best to implement the University's decision to no longer outsource its online teaching provision. At a broader, more philosophical level, the problem addressed concerned how to operationalise the University's commitment to ensure equitable and optimum learning opportunities for all students, across all of its six campuses, distributed amongst three States and the Australian Capital Territory.

The approach taken was to develop leadership capacity among six academic staff (Online Advisers) for application at a University-wide level, taking into account the specific needs and circumstances of a variety of campus, faculty and disciplinary contexts. The Project was grounded in a model of distributed leadership, operationalised in terms of networks across campuses, Faculties and Schools. It defined leadership as linked to two major dimensions: providing direction and exercising influence. The Online Advisers gradually came to accept themselves as "leaders" in this activity and they slowly gained confidence in their own credibility and overtime cascaded their learnings to other academic staff until the project became embedding across the university with funding dedicated by the Faculties.

3. Leadership and Assessment: Strengthening the Nexus (Macquarie University)

The purpose of this Project was to develop, through a distributed leadership model, multi-level leadership across the University, to promote and support the strategic coherent policy frameworks at all levels. The problem addressed in this Project concerned the need to incorporate, into a coherent institution-wide framework, the existing, valuable assessment-related work of individual lecturers.

The Project was underpinned by a Participatory Action Research approach, targeted at empowering practitioners to be leaders in assessment practice. The Project rejected the notion of hierarchical, authoritarian leadership in favour of a distributed model, driving what the Project Team described as "a trusting, collaborative approach".

The project was conceptualised in three Phases of cascading development from the initial three departments that had identified a wish to review their assessment procedures supported by a multi- level "Leaders in Effective Assessment Practice" (LEAP) group, which included an "action research enabler" and an "influencer" from each Department. The LEAP group was a forum for providing the Departmental representatives with support and knowledge relevant to leadership in assessment reform.

4. Distributive Leadership for Learning and Teaching: Developing the Faculty Scholar Model (University of Wollongong)

The purpose of this Project was to develop a distributive leadership framework for teaching and learning through a faculty-based scholars' network. The Project defined distributive leadership as a distribution of power through the collegial sharing of knowledge, practice and reflection within the social context of the university.

The Project was grounded in the practical experience of the Project Team and built on experience of an existing Faculty Learning and Teaching Scholars program in which a small network of faculty-based academics were partnered with a mentor in a central

academic development unit. The Faculty Scholars established action learning projects related to assessment and aligned with institutional strategic goals.

By 2009 each of these projects had reported their findings, with each identifying a model or framework for distributed leadership. These included a P.A.C.E.D (Participative, Accredited, Collaborative, Engaged, Devolved) Distributed Leadership Model (XX 2009); a LEAP (Leaders in Effective Assessment Practice) model (XX, 2008); a Faculty Scholar Model (XX, 2008) and an On-Line Advisors Framework (XX 2008).

While the diversity of these models and frameworks is illustrative of the theoretical finding identified earlier that it is difficult to construct a single model (Woods et al 2004), it was argued that there is need to undertake wider application, testing and evaluation of the frameworks and tools for building leadership capacity from the outcomes of these projects (Parker 2008). The first step in this is to identify any synergies between the project findings in order to provide a basis for exploring the broader implications for distributed leadership in Australian universities. Accordingly, the ALTC funded a further project aimed at consolidating the findings of these four projects in order to provide greater clarification on the elements of, and processes to develop capability in, distributed leadership.

Scoping Distributed Leadership

The project *'Lessons learnt: identifying synergies in distributed leadership projects'* proposed to:

> *identify the synergies and differences between the outcomes of four ALTC Projects funded as Institutional Leadership (Distributed) Grants (*The fifth University had undergone a restructure that resulted in the original project team being unavailable for further research)*, and from this to develop an Institutional Leadership - Distributed Leadership Matrix (DLM) of contextual conditions and leadership skills needed to achieve an effective distributed leadership process. The DLM was to be accompanied by a flexible self-evaluative tool (SET) by universities that seek to encourage and support a distributed leadership approach to learning and teaching improvements* (XX, 2009).

From an initial scoping exercise undertaken by the project team to determine synergies between the projects, a scoping framework that builds upon the variables identified by Woods et al (2004), (context, culture, change, activities and conflict resolution processes) was adopted. The findings of this scoping exercise are presented below

Context

While the particular issue in each project differed a common element was that the need for change was driven by contextual factors related to both external and internal pressures. In all cases the projects were designed to respond to external (government) emphasis on the need for the higher education sector to improve the quality of learning and teaching. This was combined with internal (university) concerns related to the need to build existing leadership capacity in learning and teaching at the same time to encourage research output. These dual demands led universities to review existing hierarchical leadership approaches through the establishment of more inclusive (distributed leadership) approaches designed to produce more standard policy to issues. In one instance the focus was on enhancing the student learning experience through responding to student feedback, in another the design of more robust, pedagogically sound approaches to using the on-line learning environment and in two cases to the design of new assessment policies capable of being implemented.

Culture

The importance of adopting a new leadership approach that supports the existing and deeply embedded culture of academic autonomy was evident across projects. In each project academics were invited, based on their interest in leading improvements to the issue under discussion, to self select. While in some cases individuals were 'shoulder tapped' and encouraged to apply, they were not formally delegated or appointed to the roles. Participants became, respectively, known as Action Research Team members (RMIT), Online Advisors (ACU), Action Research Enablers who together formed the Leaders in Effective Assessment Practice (Macquarie) and Faculty Scholars (Wollongong). This resulted in the participation of academics at various stages in their careers in the informal leadership roles they adopted as well as academics who held formal leadership roles. In each case it was acknowledged that support from colleagues in formal management and leadership positions was essential for the success of the project.

The provision of funds to enable participants time to engage in activities and to design opportunities for professional development to build their leadership skills was acknowledged as critical to the credibility of the participants in these leadership roles.

Change and Development

In each project the need for change that incorporated a new, more integrated approach between the formal senior leaders making policy at the top of the organisation and the informal leaders implementing policy (academics-as-teachers) was recognised. The change under discussion had Institute-wide impact designed to produce a mix of new top-down policy with bottom-up implementation strategies.

In each case, the important role played by the Deputy (Pro) Vice Chancellor in positively and overtly encouraging, endorsing, supporting and recognising the contribution being made by the informal leaders and in providing mentoring and coaching support was identified. In addition, each project was assisted a Project Team of Steering Committee of formal decision-makers from across the University (Heads of School, Pro Vice Chancellors) plus formally designated Learning and Teaching leaders, and, in some instances, by formal leaders from support and services departments, students and internal and external experts. This ensured that changes being implemented was informed and supported by the various interests across the universities (that is middle-out support was included) as well as the process itself becoming a form of staff development. In one case the existence of two other universities as partners contributed to a changed understanding of leadership.

Activity

In each project teams of people, academics and professional staff with expertise in a broad range of relevant knowledge, ideas and value were involved in a collaborative process of change. In three cases the process involved cycles of change using an Action Research approach that relied upon reflection on and in action by the participants. This enabled the participants to consider the praxis of theory and action and to journal the process of their leadership capacity building. In the fourth case monthly report on progress was made to Faculty Committees, regular videoconferencing was enabled and participants were encouraged to use reflection as a key activity documented in journals.

In each case the participants were assisted by professionals in the Learning and Teaching Units who adopted a facilitative role using regular sharing of individual reflections on

activities and change such as through the embedding of Appreciative Inquiry in team activities.

The flexibility of this process was identified as crucial in developing complementary activity by the various participants and assisting in the cascading of the development of leadership capacity beyond the individual leaders initially involved. The need for ongoing opportunities for leaders to communicate and network together to be developed was also identified as an important activity.

The importance of the Institutions adopting an approach to resources provision that recognised the importance of providing time for networking and communicating opportunities was identified. The projects provided this opportunity in various ways, through Community of Practice of interested persons across the university, regular videoconferences and encouragement to dedicate time to critically reflect upon, and refocus where necessary, the process. In addition the importance of providing training in leadership associated with the issues involved was identified.

Interestingly, a common finding was also that on-line communications were not regarded as effective as face-to-face. While each project established a Web-based interface as a form of communication for their project, this did not become the principal discussion forum. In one project in which there were three partner institutions this led to a major challenge given the number of participants in each institution. Face-to-face meetings, such as a National Roundtable and a three day leadership development retreat early in the year provided the best opportunities for collaboration. This led in the second year of the project to an additional face to face meeting which included dinner before a one day meeting that improved communication and collaboration considerably using electronic means thereafter.

Conflict Resolution
In none of the projects was conflict resolution identified as an important part of the process. There were, however, several issues mentioned that may be considered as important factors required to assist any conflicts that may arise. First, the Action Research process (in the fourth project regular reports) enabled any conflicts to be identified in a timely manner and adjustments to be made to the process. Second, each project had a two-year timeline that enabled sufficient time to be devoted to the change process without undue pressure for speedy outcomes. Third, each project had a Reference Group of external and internal experts who were available to discussion and advice. Several challenges were identified that had the potential to lead to conflict. First each project suffered from turnover of participants to varying degrees. This made communication of achievements more difficult. Second, as informal leaders gained expertise and began to exercise leadership skills, this created some tension for the formal leaders used to be the sole expert and/or decision-maker. Third, the cycles of change that characterise Action Research, caused some concerns for formal leaders used to focusing on short-term, explicit outcomes.

Scoping Distributed Leadership: Lessons Learnt
The findings from the distributed leadership projects outlined in the previous section provide empirical support for the conclusion reached by previous researchers that there is no single model of distributed leadership. However there is evidence that the process of distributed leadership does include four main variables - context, culture, change and development and activity. A fifth variable, conflict resolution, while not being explicitly evidenced in these

cases, was at least implicitly evident with the action research approach enabling adaptation to address conflicts as they arose.

The existence of analytical dualism was also instanced by the importance given to the need to establish structures and systems to support relationships and interactions between participants. This was particularly evident in the need for the informal leaders to be recognised and supported by formal leaders. It is clear that the action of participants was assisted by the Action Research approach that encouraged experimentation with different approaches over time.

Further research into the lessons learnt from these projects is needed to identify a distributed leadership matrix that universities can use to self-evaluate their capacity for distributed leadership.

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