



Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc

The Student Experience

Proceedings of the

32nd HERDSA Annual Conference

6-9 July 2009

Darwin, Australia

Jones, S. & Novak, B. (2009) Enhancing the student experience through responding to student feedback: distributed leadership approach, in *The Student Experience, Proceedings of the 32nd HERDSA Annual Conference, Darwin, 6-9 July 2009: pp 241-250.*

Published 2009 by the
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 27, Milperra, NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN: 0155 6223
ISBN: 0 908557 78 7

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Enhancing the student experience through responding to student feedback: distributed leadership approach

Sandra Jones

Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne, Australia
sandra.jones@rmit.edu.au

Brenda Novak

Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne, Australia
brenda.novak@rmit.edu.au

How to improve student satisfaction with their learning experience has become a major concern for universities worldwide as the pressure on Higher Education to move to a more self-funded model has increased. As government financial support is tied to demonstrable measures of excellence in student learning and satisfaction, pressure is applied to universities to improve student feedback, increase student retention and graduation rates and improve graduate employability skills. In most instances the focus for improving student satisfaction is on the individual academic leading the design and delivery of the educational experience for students. This paper presents a different focus in recognising the multi-layered, distributed leadership contribution needed to support the academic in order to enhance the student learning experience as evidenced in their feedback. Arising from the 'lived experience' explained in this paper a framework for a multi-level, distributed leadership approach to improving and responding to student feedback is presented.

Keywords: distributed leadership; student feedback; critical success factors

Introduction

As summarised in the recent Scott, Coates and Anderson report to the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2007) there are a plethora of pressures on universities to accommodate a changing external environment:

"Funding per capita from the public purse is down; competition is up; the pressure to create new sources of income has grown; institutions are more commercial; students are more numerous, diverse and forthright about getting value for money paid; instances of litigation against universities are emerging; government scrutiny is increasing and external quality audits are in place" (Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008. p. v).

This has resulted in a diverse array of research into, and change associated with, the development of means to enhance the student experience. No element of learning and teaching has escaped scrutiny as the pedagogical shift from the traditional didactic teacher-centred approach to a student-centred activity-based learning approach evolves (Biggs reprint, 2007; Biggs & Tann, 2008).

Measuring learning and teaching excellence

In Australia, measures of the quality of student learning experience were first introduced in the 1990s in the form of a national course experience questionnaire (CEQ) administered by the government on all graduates six months after their graduation. This CEQ, based on the performance indicators of teaching quality in higher education originally identified by Ramsden (1991), is now part of the measures used by the Australian Federal Government for university support under the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF) (alongside student retention and graduation rates and levels of graduate employment).

Given its importance, universities across Australia have since developed their own internal measures of formative student satisfaction based on the CEQ as students progress through their studies. This has led to the introduction in many universities of internal measures of staff performance based on student feedback to questions embedded within the CEQ that combine to form a 'good teaching scale' (GTS). This places the individual academic, through their design and delivery of the educational experience, at the centre of responsibility for the quality of the student learning experience

The question of the extent to which one individual academic can, by their efforts alone, improve the quality of the student learning experience and thus be responsible for the level of student satisfaction, is discussed in this paper. The project that underpins the research for this paper was assisted by a related question under exploration by the (then, 2006) national Carrick Institute (now Australian Learning and Teaching Council – ALTC) about what is, and how to build, effective leadership capacity in Australian higher education.

Leadership in higher education

There has been much discussion in recent literature about what constitutes leadership in higher education and how to build a systematic, multi-faceted leadership capacity (Marshall, 2006). While multiple theories abound about leadership outside higher education (trait and behavioural theories that focus on individual leaders (Stogdill, 1948; Du Brin & Daglish, 2003; Stogdill & Coons, 1957), situational and contingent theory that focuses on the environment in which people lead (Fiedler, 1967; Vroom & Yetton, 1973; Hersey and Blanchard, 1988) and social exchanges theories that focus on how leaders wield power and influence by responding to followers expectations (Blau 1964; Burns 1978; Kouzer & Posner 1987)), it is claimed that academic leadership is different. Academic leadership exists in a highly specialised and professional, non-hierarchical environment that 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"

While this conclusion differentiates the academic environment from business, industry and community work environments, it does not provide a clear approach to developing leadership capacity in universities. This has led to emergent literature, with various streams of discourse, on the need for a flexible framework that enables leadership styles to adapt to different disciplinary perspectives (Becher, 1994; Trigwell, Prosser & Waterhouse, 1999; Prosser et al., 2003) and for a more collaborative purposeful leadership to ensure efficient and effective

employment of knowledge (particularly tacit knowledge) required to continuously improve practice (Allee 1997; Leithwood 1992; Martin et al 2003). In seeking to summarise the various discourses on leadership in higher education, Marshall (2006, p.5 of 17) 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.”

To address this he proposed further research into leadership learning and teaching in higher education that adopts a systemic, multi-faceted and coherent approach, utilises policy instruments, and is guided by the principles of critical action learning. This approach was adopted by the ALTC (then Carrick Institute) through a Leadership Grants Scheme Program (Anderson & Johnson, 2006). The first colloquium held by the ALTC to explore the question of what constitutes an effective model of leadership for higher education identified that there is need to find a middle ground between leadership as defined from a structural/positional perspective and the view that everyone is a leader. This middle ground requires leadership in higher education to be considered within the context of the transitory nature of many roles in and the various contributions made by academics and other professional staff to learning and teaching. The conclusion reached was that a *distributed* model of leadership is needed in higher education (ALTC Colloquium, 2006). In doing so it was left open to the projects funded under the ALTC Leadership grant program to identify the details of a distributed leadership model.

It is within this twin context, the pressure on universities to improve the student learning experience and thus improve student feedback, and exploration of what elements constitute a distributed model of leadership for universities, that the question for the ALTC-funded project was formulated. That is: What form of leadership is needed to improve the quality of the student learning experience as demonstrated through student feedback?

Research methodology

The research to explore this question used an action research methodology based on a multilayered approach to engage in, and reflect upon, continuous cycles of planning, action, reflection, replanning over a two-year period.

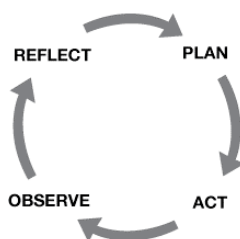


Figure 1: Action research cycle

This enabled changes to be implemented, reflected upon and re-designed as continuous cycles of improvement. The approach involved three School level ‘action research teams’

(ARTs), a ‘project team’ to assist in the planning, scoping and managing of the project, a ‘community of practice’ (in the form of open plenaries) of representatives from a vertical slice across the university, and an ‘expert reference group’. Ethics approval was obtained at the commencement of the project that enabled information to be collected for research purposes from each of the participant groups in the forms of minutes of meetings, notes of plenary sessions, ART group reports and reports of program manager to the project team, the reference group and to ALTC.

The action research methodology in the ARTs was guided by an inquiry-based approach to inform decision and practice and reflective practice aimed at exploring innovations and steady improvement.

Multi-level leadership for learning and teaching excellence: responding to student feedback

Project design

The first step in the project design was to ensure that there was involvement from all levels of the formal decision-making leadership across the university. The project was structured to be participative and collaborative, focusing on the experience of the ARTs to develop a multi-level distributed leadership approach to improving student feedback.

The project sponsorship was shared between the Deputy Vice Chancellor – Academic (DVC–A) and the Pro Vice Chancellor – Student Services (PVC–SS), assisted by a reference group of experts. Project leadership, management and governance was undertaken by the DVC–A, and the Director Learning and Teaching (Chair), assisted by a project team. The project team consisted of representatives of university leaders with responsibility for improvements in learning and teaching (Heads of School, ART leaders and facilitators, Directors of Academic Development Units). Academics responsible for course co-ordination, assisted by project facilitators with expertise in learning and teaching development and participatory and inquiry-based action research and reflexive techniques, formed the School-based ARTs. The focus of the ARTs was the planning, scoping, evaluating and disseminating of learning and teaching innovations aimed at improving student feedback. Plenary sessions were established as a formal mechanism to encourage a ‘community of practice’ in which experiences and ideas from the ARTs would be shared across a vertical slice of the RM IT community.

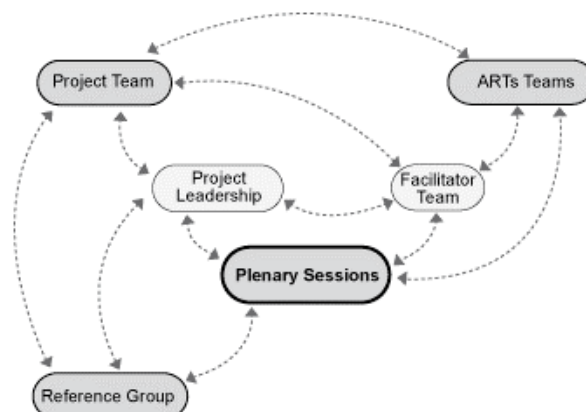


Figure 2: Project action research design

Project implementation

1. **ARTs** were established in each one of the three academic colleges in three broad disciplinary areas with low levels of student satisfaction. One ART included two courses in mathematics taught as a 'service' course across a broad range of programs to large classes of students (each 220 students from mixed disciplines). The second ART included four business courses (macroeconomics, prices and markets, marketing principles and business statistics), each of which constitute a common core course in a number of Business degrees (plus students from non business programs) with a total of 1000–1500 students (onshore) per year in lecture cohorts of 300–500 and demonstration lecture/feedback sessions of 80–120. The third ART included two courses, one a final year course in construction management with 85 students, and the other a first year course in computer-aided drafting with 21 students.

ART members were assisted by funding from the ALTC project that enabled members to either 'buy-out' teaching time to devote to the project or to employ assistance for the project. ART members identified this as a key factor in their active engagement in the project and the successful identification and trial of change innovations.

Action taken by the ARTs occurred as cycles of change rather than a linear progression. While the initial planning stage involved each ART analysing student feedback to identify patterns, action for change to improve student feedback were then trialled, followed by systematic analysis of the statistics relating to student feedback and reflection on the implications of this feedback in terms of the changes introduced and identification of further changes for trial with students.

2. The **project team** developed a more significant role than originally envisaged with the addition of the Manager Corporate Services, the Associate Director Portfolio Relationships (Information Technology Services) and the Manager Survey Centre to the team. This enabled a more holistic systems approach to addressing student feedback. The expanded project team met monthly with the agenda designed to provide opportunities for the ART leaders to identify issues related to support services for students (particularly audio visual (AV), information technology (IT) and teaching room availability – timetabling), that were restricting the ability of academics to present a quality learning environment for students.
3. **Five plenary sessions**, designed to function as a community of practice by bringing together a vertical slice of the university including the DVC (A), Pro Vice Chancellors (PVC Academic and PVC Student Services), Heads of School, program leaders, academics, professional support staff and ART leaders, members and facilitators, were held over the life of the project. While all plenary sessions contributed to the overall project focus, each had a separate theme that arose from action taken during the project. These themes covered a range of leadership issues such as participation, accreditation of staff input, collaborative involvement of multi-levels of leadership, engagement across the university and devolution of power and authority to implement policy.

Critical success factors (CSF)

A number of critical success factors for academics seeking to introduce change to improve student satisfaction were identified in this project.

1. A **supportive university strategic plan and academic plan** that identified the university dual commitment to a more distributed, multi-level collaborative leadership style and the creation of a stimulating and satisfying experience for students. The academic plan specifically emphasised university commitment to a 'top-down policy, bottom-up initiatives' approach to improving learning and teaching. Importantly, these policy statements were supported by implementation initiatives such as financial support for innovations to improve student feedback through the LTIF introduced at the start of the project.
2. The importance of **multi-level formal leadership** support from across the university. The DVC (A), as project sponsor, attended all plenary sessions, project team and reference group meetings. This continually raised the profile of the project across the university. In addition his championing and extending innovations that arose from the ART discussions did much to demonstrate senior leadership support.

Each of the ARTs identified the importance of support from Heads of School which led to greater importance being given to improving learning and teaching quality. One Head of School was the inaugural ART leader until two members developed sufficient skills and confidence to share the leadership. One Head of School, while initially asked not to attend ART meetings due to existing staff reduction strategy, was invited onto the ART once this was concluded. The attendance of another Head of School at ART meeting resulted in his agreement to reduce the maximum class size despite the consequent strain on research income.

3. ART members emphasised the importance of **resource** provision, staff time and finance, to support staff seeking to improve the student experience. The successful funding of ART initiatives through the University Learning and Teaching Innovation Fund also provided valuable resources.
4. The importance of **cross-functional** support that was **timely, appropriate and systematic** from various service providers across the university was identified as vital to initiatives aimed at improving student satisfaction.

The importance of systems support was reinforced by discussion on the limitations of the existing AV and IT facilities in many teaching rooms. The addition of the Manager Corporate Services and the Associate Director Portfolio Relationships Information Technology to the project team, and the resulting improvements in service support and communication, was evidence of the importance of the acceptance by the various services of their role in improving the student experience. These discussions resulted in the addition of the Vice President Resources to the program annual review process.

5. Several actions were taken to support staff by improving the **learning environment** (including teaching spaces). These included the provision of extra funding for refurbishment of teaching rooms by the Vice Chancellor and the establishment of a multi-

functional group to advise on learning and teaching infrastructure requirements. The resulting learning space advisory group includes learning and teaching leaders from the central unit and the three academic colleges of the university, together with the Manager Property Services with terms of reference including both infrastructure and maintenance issues.

6. The importance of a **collaborative** team approach to identifying and sharing ideas for improving learning and teaching practice was identified.

In one ART the effectiveness of the collaboration led the Head of School to establish means to encourage greater collaboration across the school. In another ART the collaborative approach positively influenced the Head of School to set a cap on class sizes. In the third ART, collaboration extended across the dual sector of the university between TAFE and higher education.

The collaborative approach adopted by the project team led to innovative solutions through the unique environment created by the existence of representatives from a cross-section of the university working together to provide effective support for the ART projects.

Collaboration across disciplines was also evidenced. While in each ART initial activity tended to accord with the particular disciplinary focus, over time the initial resistance to explore ideas from outside a disciplinary perspective was reduced. Thus while the ARTs in mathematics and business courses focused their initial activity in gathering and analysing data from the internal course experience questionnaire, the ART in construction management focused immediately on the physical spaces in which learning and teaching occurs. The initial need for examples of excellence in innovative student learning opportunities to be discipline related was also evident in the expert assistance relied upon by the ARTs and their reluctance to accept offers of assistance from experts outside their discipline. However, in the last plenary session, 100% of participants recorded that they “intended to share information from the forum with other colleagues”, and 96% stated they would “recommend actions arising from this forum and/or further discussion of issues identified to appropriate groups/colleagues in my organisation or discipline”.

7. The importance of appropriate **reward** and **recognition** of the individual contribution to improved student feedback was identified. Continual emphasis on research outputs for promotion purposes results in a limit to the time academics are prepared to put into learning and teaching improvements. Recognition of an ART member through university teaching awards and greater emphasis on contribution to learning and teaching for promotion purposes did result from this project.
8. The final CSF identified from this project is the importance of providing support to students making the transition to a higher education student-centred learning environment in which there is an expectation of the active engagement of students in their learning process. One ART discussed their frustration at apparent student disinterest in actively participating in their learning, giving examples of students not taking advantage of opportunities for extra support offered by individual academics, objecting to staff attempts to provide increase feedback through emails prompting student engagement, and only being partially engaged in face-to-face learning situations. While attempts were made to increase student ‘voice’ in the project through focus groups to obtain their

opinions and student presentations during plenary sessions, ARTs identified the need for this issue to be explored further, with the suggestion of the current support for transition that has a cultural and social focus being extended to include an academic focus.

Lesson learnt: a change leadership model

Based on the identification of these CSFs, Figure 3 presents a REALISED change leadership model. This includes the elements of:

- **R**ecognition
Recognition and reward of individual and team contributions requires further change to accord learning and teaching excellence to be considered equal to research.
- **E**ncouragement
Resource support for individuals and teams to design and develop innovative approaches to improving the student learning experience is evidenced. This requires new approaches to resource distribution that taken into account the need to provide time and finance for individual academics to design, develop, trial and evaluate new initiatives.
- **A**cknowledgement
University policy and practice that acknowledges the importance of clearly articulated university commitment to supporting improvements in the student experience through policies and practices designed to assist academics to design, develop and implement learning and teaching innovations.
- **L**eadership
Multi-level leadership support from all levels of leadership, from immediate supervision of the Head of School to the senior executive of the university is acknowledged.
- **I**ntegration
Integrated support through services that more actively engagement students in their own learning, particularly in the transition into higher education.
- **S**ystems
Cross-functional systems support from multi-functional services across the university. This requires both formal and informal opportunities for representatives from all student and resource service providers to work collaboratively
- **E**nvironment
Appropriate learning environments that are supportive of the student learning experiences. This again requires a collaborative approach in which the demands on, and needs of, all participants are recognised and addressed
- **D**issemination
Opportunities to disseminate ideas to underpin collaboration through participative approaches to knowledge sharing as a fundamental value and principal that underpins the university approach to leadership. This includes developing opportunities for all parties to have their 'voice' heard.

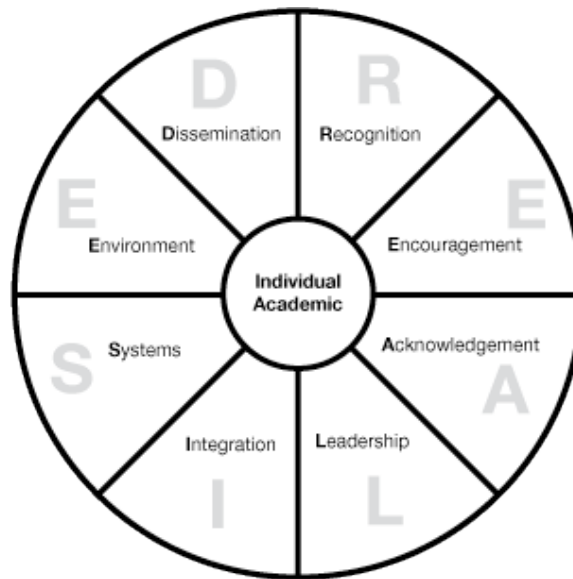


Figure 3: REALISED change leadership model

Conclusion

The experience of the multi-level leadership framework described in this paper, while identifying the central role of the individual academic in improving student feedback, highlights the need for an approach that recognises a number of elements critical to the success of the individual academic. The REALISED change leadership model designed to provide a holistic approach requires an underpinning commitment by the university to a more participate and collaborative approach that recognises both formal and informal (expert) leadership, the acknowledgement that all levels of leadership and service functions contribute to student satisfaction with their learning experience. In so doing, it recognises that learning does not occur in a vacuum but rather that the learning environment is instrumental in influencing student feedback on their experience. Finally, it recognises that both staff and students require development support, recognition and reward to move to a student-centred learning approach in which all parties recognise their leadership role in the learning process.

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