A Virtual Academic Leadership Program Using a
Blend of Technologies

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Abstract: Leadership development (LD) is usually delivered in a face to face format, over a period of time, to engage learners in an experiential manner. These LD programs usually include: self and team assessment; theory; developmental experiences; and coaching. University based LD programs, however, can be difficult to deliver because of the nature of the academics' work. Academics have teaching, research, consultancy and conference commitments which makes regular attendance at a LD program difficult. Using advances in elearning technology, however, it becomes possible to deliver a more self-directed and flexible LD program for this cohort of people. This can be achieved by starting out with a learning management system (LMS), such as Blackboard, as the platform and then blending in a range of technologies to enhance learning outcomes. For example, academic and web based information can be integrated into the system, along with i-lectures, to deliver theoretical content. Links to in house digital libraries, scholarly databases, and the WWW provide further access to learning resources. For learner engagement and coaching, asynchronous discussion boards can be used to discuss leadership theory and experiences. Blogging can be used for reflective journalling. Communication technology such as Skype can be used for 'face to face' real time coaching. This presentation illustrates how these combined technologies, integrated through a LMS, can be used to create a comprehensive and flexible LD experience where the technology supports the educational innovation.

Keywords: Academic Leadership, Blended Technologies, Experiential Learning

INCREASING ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES being applied to Universities are making quality teaching and learning an institutional priority. Quality is often measured at the unit level (e.g. psychology 100) by examining student feedback and performance. However, quality at the course level (eg. Bachelor of Science – Psychology) is equally, if not more important as this is where ranking decisions are often made about a program. The course coordinator (CC) carries much of the leadership responsibility for ensuring that a course is of high quality and relevant to industry and accreditation bodies.

Ramsden (1998) summarises many of the leadership issues facing higher education which are still current today. As noted in his work, the sector is facing swings in student enrolments, greater scrutiny from the community and government, fiscal challenges, rising consumer demands, advancements in technology, increasing workloads and industrial reform. The need for leadership, as a result, has never been more important.

The higher education system has tended to rely upon the 'wisdom of experience' in selecting its teaching and learning leaders (Southwell, Gannaway, Orrell, Chalmers, & Abraham, 2005). Course coordinators are one group of academic leaders who tend to be highly competent and qualified and by virtue of their academic accomplishments, advance to the role of managing and leading a university course (Yielder & Codling, 2004). One reason that these individuals may move into these roles is their commitment to the organization and the potential intrinsic and extrinsic rewards associated with this role such as personal satisfaction, potential for higher status, salaries and career advancement.

Frequently, however, the CC is ill-prepared for this leadership role, given that they have focused much of their academic pursuits on developing their discipline expertise. The CC role is often ill-defined, leaving individuals uncertain about their responsibilities. Bennett (1983) has noted the difficulty of moving into an academic leadership role. Individuals must shift from being a specialist to a generalist and an individualist to a collectivist. The academic leaders must also shift their loyalty to their discipline to the loyalty of the institution or course. The CC is vested with considerable academic, managerial and administrative responsibility for course management. This responsibility, however, is often accompanied with limited line management authority which makes implementation of ideas and actions difficult.

The CC position is also viewed as an all-consuming, complex and demanding role. It is often seen to have an adverse impact on personal teaching, research and scholarly activities (Carroll & Wolverton, 2004). Currently there is little support within universities to prepare, support and recognise academics in these crucial academic leadership roles (Parker & Wilson, 2002), particularly with respect to promotion where research and teaching have a much greater emphasis.

An ill-prepared CC can jeopardise the quality of a course and have a detrimental effect on institutional teaching and learning effectiveness (Wolverton, Ackerman, & Holt, 2005), resulting in lowered university reputation. Through no fault of their own, the CC may focus on the managerial or transactional aspects of their role (Antonakis & Hourse, 2002) such as planning and budgeting, organising and staffing, course control and monitoring and solving problems. Unfortunately, the academic leadership or transformational aspect of the role (Antonakis & Hourse, 2002) is often subsumed by this managerial role (Woods, 2007).

The literature suggests that sound academic leadership ultimately improves student learning. Gibbs (2006) found that if academic leaders facilitate a good teaching environment, then educators are more likely to use a student-focused approach to learning, which in turn results in far superior learning outcomes due to a deep approach to study (Martin, Trigwell, Prosser, & Ramsden, 2003; Prosser & Trigwell, 1997). Martin et al. (2003) also found that teachers are more likely to adopt a student focused approach to teaching when they experience: transformational and transactional leadership; clear goals and contingent rewards; and teacher involvement in decisions about curriculum and collaborative management.

Academic Leadership

Academic leadership has been analysed alongside conventional leadership theory to ascertain how leadership manifests within the higher education sector. One of the problems with gaining consensus on a singular definition of leadership has been aptly described by Grint (2004). There is lack of agreement on the process of leadership and whether leadership stems from the personal qualities of the leader or from their ability to induce followers through their actions. A second challenge is the position problem, namely, do they have formal authority or must they lead through influence. The third challenge is a philosophical one. Does the leader exert an intentional causal influence on followers or are the leaders' actions determined by the context and the situation. This creates a fourth question, is leadership embodied in individuals or is it a group based phenomenon

(Grint, 2004),Marshall, Adams, & Cameron (2000) interviewed senior academics to ascertain conceptions of 'academic leadership'. Interestingly there were different conceptions when leaders in formal positions were asked for their ideas in comparison to those in the 'rank and file'. In their review of the literature, Marshall and colleagues found that academic leadership could be viewed as a collection of tasks or functions which are performed by individuals in formal positions within the university. Alternatively, academic leadership could also be described as qualities or characteristics of individuals. Yet in other literature, academic leadership was seen as vested in the position of the academic because of the leadership role played within that discipline. What Marshall et al. (2000) describe is not unusual when reading the leadership literature. As they note, the concept of 'academic leadership' is elusive.

Specific dimensions of leadership within the academic environment are described in the research by Marshall et al. (2000) Those which are particularly relevant to Course Coordinators are described below:

- Introducing students to scholarly work.
- Coordinating large course units
- Building community among lecturers, through team building, coaching and mentoring, and involving others in discussions and planning.
- Mentoring younger members of staff.
- Leading by example and being effective in one's work
- Keeping people informed of progress.
- Being available and being generous with time and expertise and building trust.
- Being supportive of staff by valuing what they do and seeing differences as positive, and coaching them to work better, but also having the courage to give positive and critical feedback.

Gaither (2004) also summarises some major findings on leadership within the academic context. During times of turmoil and change, leadership is essential to calm staff. However faculty participation in institutional decision making and change processes is often resisted for a range of reasons (Bruns & Bruns, 2007). This resistance stems from differing views between faculty and administrators. Faculty prefer peer review, expertise, autonomy and shared governance whereas administration structures its foundations on a hierarchical structure using power and influence.

Leadership also is not connected to title and position, but is invested in behaviour. Academic leadership is much more interdependent than individualistic because of the people-centred nature of the organisation. Building and maintaining relationships across the system is critical to leadership success. Gaither (2004) notes that academic leadership is about shar-

ing power and authority, which is very much in line with transformational leadership theory. This is echoed by Bolden, Gosling, & Petrov (2006) in their description of distributed leadership which is defined as a practice which takes shape in the interactions of people and their situation, rather than from the actions of an individual leader. Distributed leadership suggests that it is an emergent property of a group of interacting individuals all of whom contribute to the leadership experience based on their expertise (Bolden et al., 2006).

Taylor (2005 :31) also shares these views on academic leadership noting that leadership is not defined as a prescribed set of characteristics. Rather, it is a synergy among variable characteristics of the person, the academic development role, development strategies, and the institutional context. Taylor emphasises the importance of personal qualities such as communication, empathy, listening, and negotiation along with personal competencies in teaching, learning and academic culture.

Challenges are also inherent within the academic leadership role, and some of these are particularly noteworthy for course coordinators. Marshall et al. (2000) note several issues that complicate academic leadership. One particular challenge is lack of control over resources and the ability to make decisions. A second challenge is inherent in the blurring of hierarchical relationships, which are usually clear in corporate sectors, but fuzzy in academic settings. Colleagues typically want collaborative working relationships but do not comply readily with being led or supervised. Lastly, Marshall and colleagues note that expectations can also be unrealistic, particularly when demands for research, scholarship, and teaching are added to leadership and management responsibilities. Sathye (2004) adds that academic leadership is distinctive from leadership in business or government agencies because individuals, like course coordinators, still must stay close to teaching, learning, research and scholarship to bring out the best in those academics they lead.

Given all the demands described above on this academic leadership role and the necessity for providing leadership development, one must consider the best means to deliver such a program. Long-term and sustainable improvements in leadership ability can not be achieved in a short program. In order to get transfer of training (Baldwin & Ford, 1998) a range of factors need to be considered (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2004). These factors include: ensuring individuals actually have leadership responsibilities; that they can incorporate their own work and life experience into the process of learning about leadership; that there is thoughtful reflection and interaction with others during learning, and learning is facilitated through coaching. Leadership development is an experiential and interpersonal process. Individuals need information on their strengths and development needs so they can identify priorities for learning. They need to set robust development plans that address these learning needs. These plans should be experientially focused with opportunities for practice, reflection, conclusion-making and re-application (Kolb, 1984). The development experience should also provide opportunities for coaching and mentoring, 360 degree feedback, and opportunities for discussion and support (Bolden et al., 2006).

The importance of sharing and discussing academic leadership issues is a central part of leadership development and peer coaching can be a powerful way of creating this engagement. Peer coaching has a long history in teacher education development (Joyce & Showers, 1995) and is appropriate for use in higher education as well as leadership development. Peers are a compelling, yet safe source for discussions involving professional practice because they use language and information which can be easily understood by one another. Further, the communications between peers about performance are less threatening than those that involve supervisors or authorities. Hence, enhanced disclosure, discussion and deeper learning outcomes are possible.

The discussion of questions and dilemmas is supported by a range of key philosophers and their social constructivist views (Mead, 1934; Wittgenstein, 1953). These authors see the conceptualization of knowledge as a social artifact that is maintained through a community of peers. For example, Vygotsky determined that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition (Vygotsky, 1986). The support of learning from peers provides opportunities for the CC to reflect upon propositional knowledge (facts and concepts), professional craft knowledge (learning from experience, skills) and personal knowledge (unique frames of reference and self) (Donaghy, Carey, & Beeman, 1998). Green (2005) expands upon the work of Vygotsky (1978) using the term 'spaces of influence' where an individual learner can gain learning through the support of others. None of the participants necessarily has the answers but all are willing to explore spaces that may be unknown to all. Reflexivity is central to the space of influence as individuals have time to discover and reflect on information from their own and others' perspectives.

The nature of academic work, however, makes attendance at traditional leadership development initiatives (e.g weekly or intensive program) difficult because of teaching and research activities, ongoing student demands, committee work, consultancy and conference travel. The following is a typical comment one receives in trying to deliver an academic leadership program.

"Please accept my very late apologies for not attending today's session. I got caught up in a staff meeting and subsequent teaching and learning matters which did not finish until well after 4 pm…"

Course Co-ordinator Response to Course Leader about their Participation

Advents in technology, however, potentially provide a solution to the problem of weekly face to face attendance and the need to engage with peers in the learning process because of the possibility of creating more flexible learning initiatives using advances in e-learning technology.

Technology as a Lever for Academic Leadership Development

Allen (1999) asserted several years ago that the use of the internet in education was not an inert tool and was reshaping the world of knowledge through its socio-technological practices. A recent survey emphasises that blended learning strategies, that make use of information and communications technology, are on the rise and Universities must be responsive to these advances (Kim & Bonk, 2006). More and more, individuals are becoming digitally literate with expectations that universities and resources will be accessible and available online and that learners can stay connected through technology such as email, SMS (short message service), MP3 (MPE Gaudio Level 3) and other hand held devices such as PDAs (personal digital assistants) (Sach, 2006). As Hilton (2006) notes, learners want to be able to use information from others and to use it in novel ways by re-modelling, producing and publishing it in different forms. Information and communications technology (ICT) can be used strategically, therefore, to enhance the learners' participation in the intellectual and cultural life of their study (Sach, 2006).

There is a growing body of literature on web based learning as a lever for building learner-centered socially constructed learning environments (Andrewartha & Wilmot, 2001; Beerman, 1996; Brennan, McFadden, & Law, 2001; Dewar, 1999; Dunlop & Scott, 2001; Ellison, 2006; Halsne & Gatta, 2002; Jacobs, 2003; Kim & Bonk, 2006; McLoughlin, 2000; Mioduser, Nachmias, Lahav, & Oren, 2000; O'Grady, 2001; Ramsay, 2005; Watrall & Ellison, 2006). Computer based communication is an effective way to increase social connectivity between learners and to increase collaborative exploration of ideas (Graham & Scarborough, 1999). Through formulating ideas in their words, and receiving feedback and evaluation from peers, members' knowledge, thinking skills and meanings are increased as a result of the socially constructed meaning that ensues (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1995).

A recent review of the literature on online teaching and learning reveals that asynchronous communication appears to facilitate in depth communication, suits learners' preferences to move at their own pace, and that learning outcomes appear to be the same as traditional courses (Sitzmann, Kraiger, Stewart, & Wisher, 2006). Particularly interesting from this research was the fact that web based instruction was 19 per cent more effective than class instruction for the learning of declarative knowledge when learners could control their learning over an extended period of time, and when this was combined with actual practice of material with feedback.

Blogs, a more recent innovation, are also becoming more commonplace in learning. A blog is short for web log (Jacobs, 2003) and is written by individuals or groups of people on the world wide web. It is analogous to an online diary or journal that has open access. Blogs are one of the next directions in e-learning and e-education (Ellison, 2006; Mouhtouris, 2006) as they provide creative spaces for learners to co-produce ideas and knowledge (Allen, 1999; Hiler, 2002). A common educational use of a blog is for learners to reflect in writing on their experiences, akin to a learning journal. Ferdig & Trammell (2004) build on the work of Vygotsky (1978) and argue that the discursive nature of knowledge construction is best addressed by the immediacy and contemporary system of blogging. It encourages a natural tendency for reflection and analysis on the part of the learner because the feedback system is integral to the blogging interface. It is more successful in creating interactivity that is conversational, active and higher order. Williams & Jacobs (2004) investigated the use of voluntary blogging in a graduate business program. Forty nine percent of respondents to their survey felt that blogging assisted with their learning, whereas another 23 per cent neither agreed/disagreed.

Learning management systems (eg. Blackboard, WebCT, LearningSpace, Moodle) provide an easy to use software solution for integrating a range of e-learning technologies. Learning management systems enable course developers to upload course content, digital lectures (streaming video and/or audio only) and accompanying powerpoint slides, online quizzes, discussion forums (synchronous or asynchronous), links to scholarly material on the WWW or within institutional databases. The systems also enable internal communication and assessment management of learner work portfolios.

Other ICT technologies such as blogs and podcasting, as well as virtual communication software such as Skype or MSN messenger can also be integrated into the curriculum design of an educational program. Weindling (2003) has noted that key trends in the United Kingdom and United States of America with respect to leadership development programs are

focusing more and more on the adoption of online learning communities to support the program.

What follows is a description of an institutional response to the need to develop an academic leadership development program at the course level and the virtual leadership program, and technologies, that were employed to address this need.

The Virtual Academic Leadership Program

To identify academic leadership development needs at the CC level, a survey was distributed to Course Coordinators at the University (Ladyshewsky & Jones, 2007). Distribution of the survey was through email as well as a hard copy follow-up. A total of 179 course coordinators were identified in the University. A total of 48 replied (26.8 percent). There were a total of 12 questions. Respondents were required to answer each question using a 5 point Likert Scale with 5 being a high priority, and 1 being a low priority.

Table 1 provides a summary of the results rank ordered by level of priority indicated by the cohort. The top three priorities were: providing a positive and supportive environment for the teaching team (78%); establishing and maintaining quality assessment practices in the course (76%); and ensuring that the assessment practices align with the unit and course learning outcomes (68%). The next three priorities were all ranked equally (64%), namely: having a clear and consistent understanding of the role and responsibilities of the Course Coordinator; developing a high performance culture within the course team; and student management issues. Course review processes, outcome focussed education frameworks and understanding online learning technologies were ranked seventh to ninth respectively. Understanding course administration and management and career path issues were the lowest priorities for the course coordinators.

Table 1: Course Coordinator Survey Results

Questions	High Priority Percent
	4+5
Q10: Providing a positive and supportive environment for the teaching team engaged in this course	78
Q2: Establishing & maintaining – the quality of assessment practices within the course	76
Q3: Ensuring that the assessment practices align with the unit and course learning outcomes	68
Q7: Having a clear and consistent understanding of the role and responsibilities of the Course Coordinator	64
Q4: Developing a high performance culture within the course team	64
Q6: Student management issues	64
Q5: Undertaking course reviews to enhance the quality of the course outcomes	57
Q1: Ensuring appropriate and consistent application of the outcome focused education (OFE) framework	53
Q12: Understanding of online teaching and learning technologies	52
Q8: Understand the course management and committee processes	50
Q9: Understanding the course administrative processes. e.g. enrolment, StudentOne etc.	40
Q11: Understanding career paths available to you	30

Based on the information from the survey, literature on academic leadership, and the experience of a team of experts in leadership development and curriculum design, an academic leadership program was developed. The program was delivered initially as a face to face pilot project, supplemented by a complete virtual program which would ultimately enable the leadership development program to be delivered wholly on line, or in combination with face to face instruction, in other words, a blended strategy.

The software platform for this program was Blackboard. Blackboard is a learning management system that enables curriculum developers to create an interactive and interconnected learning community. It is able to host a range of educational materials which support learning.

Each module within the virtual academic leadership program was driven by a set of learning outcomes. Within each module, a set of standard categories exist which structure the learning experience for

that particular topic. This creates a standardised 'look and feel' for the program. These categories are described in table 2.

Table 2: VAL Modular Structure

Category	Content
Overview	Course notes on the specific topic. Provides an overview to the topic, with built in images and illustrations.
i-Lecture	A virtual video-streaming i-lecture that can be watched on line using media player (for example). It is accompanied by a set of power point slides which the observer can open alongside the lecture. The i-lecture can also be podcast, or downloaded for later viewing as an MPEG file. The i-lecture, depending on the institution's resources, can be recorded in a studio, in class with a camera set up, or with a digital web camera. They are then stored on an institutional server and linked to the online course through its server networks.
Readings and Internet Links	Scholarly materials such as journal articles are scanned and available on an institutional e-reserve server, or directly available via a hot link to the University scholarly databases. Viewed through an Adobe PDF format. An institutional e-reserve server allows the institution to manage copyright restrictions by ensuring all scanned copyrighted materials are stored in a central database. If these resources are available through a commercial database, which the institution has access to, then a direct link to that resource can be structed within the program, with authentication processes put into place to restrict access. Resources on the WWW can be directly hotlinked.
Practical Activities	A range of practical activities are built into this module. They include surveys and self assessment tools which individuals open and complete either on their computer or in hard copy. These can be surveys which are scanned and stored as PDF files, or set up as self scoring quizzes using the LMS software directly.
Discussion	Set topics, which build upon the content of the particular module, are structured and moderated by an e-tutor. Participants can discuss more deeply the theory and practice of leadership, based on the particular topic under question. and bring in their own experiences for discussion, exploration and reframing. Discussions can be set up as asynchronous discussions using the LMS software features. Alternatively, live chat can be carried out using the LMS software or external software such as MSN.
Peer Coaching	This is carried out across the duration of the program. This is achieved by users using MSN Messenger or Skype. When these programs are used, with accompanying webcam and microphone support, virtual, real time, 'face to face' communication is possible and participants can undertake more personal coaching arrangements with a colleague in the program if face to face access is difficult.

The implementation of a virtual academic leadership program such as the one described does require a very significant commitment on the part of the organisation. Investing in a LMS such as Blackboard is not without its costs. For most higher education institutions, these investments have already been made as part of providing general courses through its institutional learning management system.

Specific costs associated with such an initiative include a server infrastructure with dedicated e-learning specialists to manage the technology. Help desk functions are required to support participants in the program. Other infrastructure costs include licensing for use of the LMS, servers for e-reserve and i-lectures, and associated staff, and scholarly database fees.

Course developers must be abreast of the range of teaching and learning e-technologies and be confident in their use. Otherwise, a LMS specialist, as was the case in this project, is needed to manage the programming and technical issues associated with building a course within Blackboard.

Users of the virtual academic leadership program must also have a high level of technological literacy as well as personal resources to set up a virtual learning space (computer, webcam, microphone, iPod, high speed internet access, software licensing (Office, Adobe, Media Player). Again, most participants, because of their employment in the higher education sector, would have access to this technology.

Participants must also be highly self-directed and manage their own participation in the virtual academ-

ic leadership program according to timelines built into the course structure. The technology only serves as a medium for providing information and learning resources for participants. An academic participant's commitment to the program will vary given demands on their time and personal perceptions of their learning needs. Again, in the pilot academic leadership program, individuals came to the program with a range of needs and views of their own leadership. For some, they did not conceptualise themselves as leaders, in the formal sense, because of a lack of line authority. For others, they could see the leadership role they played, by virtue of their knowledge and expertise, and engaged more readily with the concep-

tual framework of the program. With these participant perceptions, varying levels of engagement with the technology and its content then follow.

Figure 1 illustrates how the participants in the blended learning model, accessed the virtual content for the academic leadership program. This data can be obtained by generating usage statistics from the learning management system. The largest point of access was the program material, which made sense, as the other aspects of the program were delivered in the face to face component of the program. Access to this material also supported those course coordinators, who may have missed a session because of conflicting work demands.
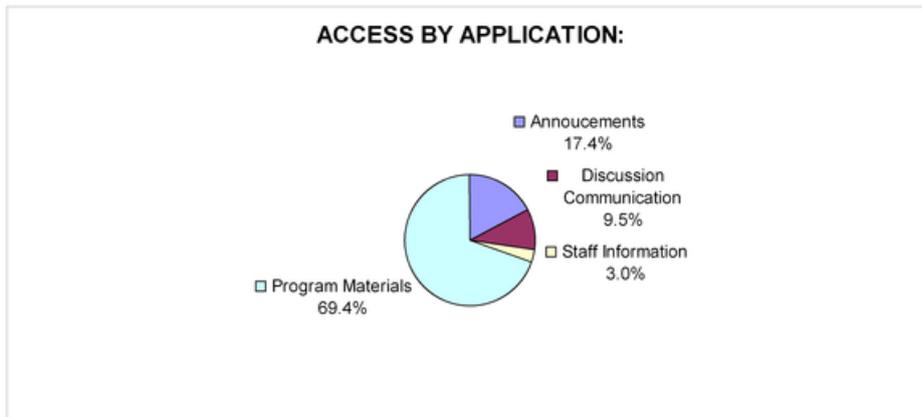
Figure 1: Participant Usage of the Applications within the VAL Program

Figure 2 provides information on when participants mostly accessed the program. Given the workload demands of this cohort, it is not surprising that the

highest peak usage was on the day of the program (Wednesday) with relatively equal usage patterns across the other working days of the week.
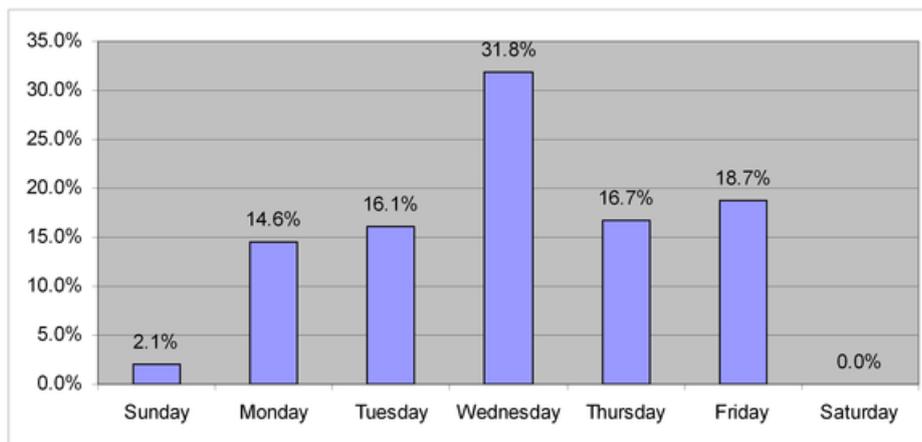
Figure 2: Participant Usage of the VAL Program by Day of Week

The importance of self-directedness is an important one. In a recent review of the literature, Burgoyne, Hirsh, & Williams (2004) found that there were two key factors that seem to increase the impact of leadership development initiatives. The first is the inclusion of opportunities for receiving and discussing individual feedback. This can be achieved using the range of technologies noted above. One of the most

valued aspects of the pilot program was the opportunity for participants to engage in discussions about their learning and its application to their role. Whilst this occurred mostly in the face to face session, a wholly virtual program would need a robust discussion facility, with moderation from the course leaders. This can occur within the learning management

systems discussion room or via a link to a course blog.

The second factor identified by Burgoyne et al. (2004) is the quality of management processes preceding, supporting and reinforcing development activities. The environment of support that management creates for academic leadership development is critical to its success. Given the time pressures noted by those who responded to the survey, it suggests that support for development and learning in academic leadership initiatives could be improved, along with greater role clarity of the CC role. Without clear role descriptions, time for learning, development and integration with practice, and coaching opportunities, transfer of training will be lessened and the value of the training investment, whether virtual, blended or wholly face to face, will be lost (Baldwin & Ford, 1998; McCracken, 2005).

Conclusion

Universities are increasingly becoming more complex. The push for measurable indices of course quality with links to government funding is elevating the importance of the CC role. Declining student enrolments as a result of population demographics, budget pressures, and higher consumer demands are also placing pressure on course coordinators to manage their programs efficiently and effectively. Management needs to consider the developmental needs of this critical operational cohort in the higher education setting and begin to place greater value on this role from a rewards and promotion perspective, developmental needs perspective, and also budget and plan accordingly for these demanding and time intensive positions. The virtual academic leadership program described in this paper provides one solution given the time demands, mobility and work structure of this group of individuals. The flexible and self-paced structure of this virtual academic leadership program may be well suited to the working dynamics of the CC in this complex environment.

Ackowledgements

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