Academic Leadership Development for Course Coordinators and the Influences of Higher Educational Change

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Abstract

This paper argues that leadership development programs in higher education face challenges that are unique to the context of academia. In designing, delivering and planning academic leadership programs universities must consider the influence of academic culture on the desired outcomes. Ironically, although higher education is undergoing a change to a business model more conversant with notions of management and leadership, these changing work conditions can feed tensions that present stumbling blocks to the up-take of leadership due to the enduring character of many academic traditions of working and interacting with colleagues. Many academics are experiencing what might be perceived as "management fatigue," having been on the receiving end of continuous change, as higher educational institutions work to meet the increasing conditions required to access federal funding. Evidence gathered from a recent Australian Learning and Teaching Council (formerly the Carrick Institute) Leadership Project targeted at enhancing academic leadership in course coordinators at Curtin University of Technology illustrates the kinds of issues that arise to prevent the provision of effective leadership development in a higher educational context. This paper explores these issues and provides some strategies and direction for staff developers running a program designed to build academic leadership capacity in middle level academic staff.

Introduction

Much has been written about the on-going reforms to higher education in which competition, privatisation, and market focus have become driving forces within the sector. Aligned with these changes, higher education has witnessed a shift in the perception of the "student" to client and an increasing emphasis on quality. In this changed environment accountability has heightened as universities work to develop their competitive edge. One of the initiatives at Curtin University of Technology (Curtin), in response to the increasing pressure of accountability, has been to introduce a leadership development program for course coordinators (sometimes called program directors, that is, those responsible for a course or program of study leading to a degree). Challenging the conventional belief about who can function as a "leader" in academia, the Academic Leadership for Course Coordinators Program recognises the key role of these often undervalued academics.

Traditionally, leadership in the tertiary sector has been viewed as an occupation befitting more senior academic staff (D'Agostino, 2006) despite the key contribution of course coordinators (CCs) who have to perform well across a range of competing competencies to produce the outcomes now demanded from the tertiary sector (Ramsden, 1998, p.3). Not only are CCs a key point of contact for students they are responsible for delivering high quality, industry relevant courses. Significantly, they have this crucial level of responsibility, now heightened by the introduction of the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (Department of Education Science and Training, 2004), often without any line management authority. The qualities of academic leadership—in particular networking skills and relationship building—are even more crucial in this context. This paper discusses the pilot of Curtin's leadership program and explores some of the stumbling blocks to the uptake of leadership

development within universities, providing strategies for minimising their impact. The paper will thus act as a guide for academic staff developers in the successful delivery of such programs.

Methodology

Funded by an Australian Learning and Teaching Council leadership grant (2006), the aim of the program is to enhance the leadership capacity of CCs by focussing on inter-personal, change management and communication skills, conflict resolution, cultural management, emotional intelligence and coaching. A literature review was carried out on academic leadership and a survey emailed to 179 CCs at Curtin to specify their development needs (Ladyshewsky & Jones, 2007). The pilot program content was designed based on the literature review, survey results and in consultation with an Internal Reference Group. In semester two, 2007, 29 CCs completed the pilot. Notably, the literature suggests that more effective student performance can be achieved when teaching staff are encouraged to discuss curriculum and teaching approaches, and where management is open and collaborative (Prosser & Trigwell, 1997). Gibbs (2006), for example, argues that department leaders who foster a good teaching environment are more likely to have better teachers who encourage deep learning and deliver better outcomes for students. Furthermore, more recently, Ramsden et al. (2007) attempt to provide empirical evidence that links teaching and learning outcomes with leadership approaches.

Based on research in the secondary schooling system that indicates student learning is informed by its context (which includes attitudes to learning) a survey was developed to establish whether or not university lecturers are also affected by the context in which they work, in particular the leadership they experience. Research in the secondary system has shown that a supportive collaborative environment that encourages open discussion of teaching approaches and techniques fosters improved teaching, and presumably (although it is not overtly stated) learning outcomes (Ramsden et al., 2007, p.142). In this study, using various models for statistical analysis 439 responses from tertiary teachers were examined to identify linkages between themes and issues related to teaching. According to Ramsden et al., if a student centred, deep learning model is promoted through academic leadership then the lecturer's approach to teaching will improve thus improving teaching (and learning) outcomes.

This recent paper further substantiates Ramsden's (1998) earlier work in which he suggests that student centred teaching is best enabled by academic leaders who have clear goals and assist staff to embrace change. Curtin's program, therefore, through enhancing the leadership capacity of CCs, strengthening peer relationships, and providing practical skills around course review and curriculum development, endeavours to ultimately improve students' learning experiences. What is unique about this program's approach to improving the student learning environment is that it does not attempt to ameliorate student evaluations in the short term. Rather, it demonstrates a longer term commitment underpinned by a quality framework, which is embedded at several levels throughout the associated project. For example, a key aspect of the program is experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) employing peer coaching (Ladyshewsky, 2006) and reflective journaling (Kerka, 1996).

The format of the program is also important to this quality cycle. Scheduled as nine fortnightly seminars of two hours CCs have time to reflect on their learning throughout, making changes and trying different strategies which are then critically reviewed and modified. The seminars are supported by supplementary materials available on-line through Blackboard, to which participants have on-going access (Ladyshewsky et al., in press). At the start of the program participants are also asked to draw up a development plan for themselves as part of this continuous improvement process (Boyatzis & Dram, 1999). Similarly, the program embeds on a practical level the processes relating to course review and curriculum design, and the project team responsible for the pilot of the program have dedicated considerable time to formative evaluation, reviewing and modifying content and focus dependant on feedback. One of the changes made to the program following feedback from the pilot, for example, was the inclusion of a tenth seminar, which addresses working effectively with students and staff to build performance.

Case Study

Responses to the pilot program have been excellent with over 90 per cent of respondents (25 out of 29 participants) registering on the final evaluation survey that the program met their professional development needs in this area, met the learning outcomes, and was pitched at the right level. At the same time, 87.5 per cent of respondents remarked on the positive aspects of the program in their final comments. Based on this feedback and Curtin's quality model of "fitness for purpose" one could have some confidence that the pilot therefore achieved a quality outcome. Similarly, given the methodological approach and the literature in the field it is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the pilot—and the more broadly the program—should have a direct and positive impact on the quality of teaching.

However, challenges emerged in the delivery of the pilot to dispute the argument that appropriate academic leadership development will equal better outcomes for students. In fact, a closer examination of the Ramsden et al. (2007) paper, in which the authors attempt to provide the first empirical link between leadership approaches and teaching, warns that there are a more complex range of factors influencing academic leadership and teaching and learning outcomes.

The paper's argument is, for example, not wholly convincing primarily due to the frequent slippage between "leadership" and "teaching leadership," which goes unexplained and unacknowledged. Bryman (2007) has shown that leadership in academia is used in different contexts to mean different things, and is often not defined at all. The attempt by Ramsden et al. to establish empirical evidence that links leadership styles and teaching is also inconclusive as the models employed for statistical analysis do not provide decisive results and need to be supported by earlier qualitative studies (see, for example, Martin et al., 2003). The authors acknowledge this shortcoming themselves (Ramsden et al., 2007, p.154). The problematic aspects of the paper weakens the argument and points to the difficulty of reductive hypotheses in the context of the current tertiary environment. Where the paper is more useful, however, is when it alludes to an underlying issue that emerged in the pilot. That is, in asking whether university lecturers are affected by the context in which they work—in particular the leadership they experience—the paper encourages one to think about leadership *perception* as a variable in improving teaching and learning. As student attitudes to learning will affect their learning so too will academic staff attitudes to leadership affect the success of leadership development.

In fact, as the challenges that emerged in the pilot indicate, aspects of academic culture influence the perception of "leadership" undermining the delivery of leadership development. In other words, the perception of "academic leadership" is a key indicator of how academics are dealing with the rapid and continual change now a part of university life. Traditional academic culture, the recent history of change and increased accountability under higher educational reform—and the tensions between the two—inform the issues that arose in the pilot. In the words of Yielder and Codling (2004, p. 315): "The collegial approach of the traditional post-war university has given way to the corporate management influences of the last twenty years. Advocates of the former decry the influence of the latter, and vice versa." Interestingly, Ramsden (1998) also spends considerable time discussing traditional academic culture and the challenges it presents to leadership. He argues that there is a persuasive myth present in academic life that "management is an intrusive and unnecessary activity which confines academic freedom and wastes the talents of a leader such as the head of department in trivial administrative tasks" (Ramsden, 1998, p. 4). If a recent article in the Higher Educational Supplement titled "Three jeers for managerial jargon" is any indication, management practices and the associated changes have not increased in popularity (Moore, 2008). Moore (2008, p.30) decries what he believes is an invasion of the academy by an "alien code," where "the never-ending processes of quality assurance, performance management, continuous improvement and so on will succeed eventually in snuffing out all civility and creativity in the [universities]." Academics are used to a culture of collegiality, autonomy and freedom based on individual achievement. Careful negotiation of the tensions between these traditions and emerging management practices must be attended to avoid disaffecting the participants of leadership development. In the pilot, the issues that stemmed from this these tensions included: the lack of a clear role description for CCs, the inevitable diversity of the group taking part (given university organisational structures and discipline focus), the need for

extensive time for critique, debate and discussion given learning style preferences of the academic group, the need for a collegial approach, their non-identification as leaders, and segments of resistance depending on one's discipline and personal framework in relation to the language of "management."

Lessons Learnt

The concerns and issues raised by participants (their expectations, dynamics and responses) during the pilot indicate that considerable attention must be paid to the tensions that exist in the higher educational context, between traditional academic culture and recent reforms, if any leadership program is to be successful. For a program such as this to bridge the gap between the "old" and the "new" university it must first engage with these concerns and the discourses that underpin them. Merely introducing a leadership program without this focussed consideration could, in fact, undermine the desired outcomes and exacerbate some existing tensions.

If one designs the leadership program with this in mind it is possible to anticipate some of the issues that surface. For example, problems such as their blurry role description, the diversity of the group, the need for dedicated time for critique and debate, and the desire for a collegial approach from participants, can all been seen to stem from the "old" ways of academia (Table 1). The lack of a clear role description is a trace from an earlier time when academics were less accountable to external bodies and their roles were less complicated and demanding. Significantly, it is difficult to expect staff to function as leaders without understanding their role and responsibilities (Parker and Wilson, 2002).

Establishing clear role descriptions prior to commencing leadership training, or, at the very least, taking time to address the lack of a clear role and how this might be negotiated will be appreciated and help alleviate frustration. Interestingly, another Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Project has noted the challenge to academic leadership posed by poorly defined roles and the lack of profession-wide understandings of the same roles (Scott et al., 2007). "Learning Leaders in Times of Change" (Scott et al., 2007, p. 6), whilst looking at higher level academic leadership positions, observes that: "Role confusion and… role clarity are both contributing factors in what we see as another finding about the world of academic leaders—many perceive they do not have room to lead."

Related to the lack of a clear role description, and the diversity of role definitions, is the inevitable diversity of academics that might put their hand up for a leadership program. Due to traditional university structures—based on discipline focus—the group of academics who present for leadership training will probably have different job descriptions for the same or similar role as well as diverse perspectives that will have to be considered. The design of the program is essential, therefore, in addressing participant needs as is the responsiveness of the team delivering the content. Group dynamics and needs will vary dependant on each cohort, so flexibility is crucial. Unsurprisingly, given the context, a collegial approach that showed a respect for discipline expertise—consistent with traditional academic culture—was well received in the pilot (see, for example, Bryman's (2007) report for the Leadership Foundation where he cites collegiality and the maintenance of autonomy as particularly desirable leadership qualities in the academic context).

In Curtin's recent pilot staff came from across five faculties. This had positive benefits as it enabled staff to share issues, solutions and best practice with each other from across the University. The most-often commented on positive aspect of the program was the benefit of meeting staff whom they normally would not come into contact with, and the networks that developed. One of the off-shoots from this was their need and desire for extended time to interact, discuss and debate. This need can clearly be seen as stemming from underlying traditional university structures but also traditional academic culture, which promotes and values a collegial approach and an academic tradition of critical engagement. A successful leadership program must allow time for this interaction. It must also acknowledge and respect the knowledge and skills of the people participating, approaching the facilitation with care and consideration.

Table 1: Key Considerations Relating to Traditional Academic Culture

	Challenges Stemming from Traditional Academic Culture	Strategies to Reduce Their Impact
1.	Poor or no clear role description.	▪ Address the issue of clear role statements for staff prior to leadership development if possible. ▪ If the staff participating don't have clear role statements address this lack and its impact on leadership.
2.	The diversity of the group including: discipline approach and practices, and varying roles dependant on local work practices within their area.	▪ Be prepared to meet the needs of a diverse group. ▪ Incorporate formative evaluative strategies, be flexible and responsive to group dynamics and needs. ▪ Respect the discipline knowledge of the group.
3.	Need for discussion and critical engagement with theories and literature informing program approach and content.	▪ Allow time for discussion, critique and debate. ▪ Critically engage with concepts and theories delivered in the program. ▪ Provide the theoretical grounding and academic relevance of concepts, theories and approaches taken in the program.
4.	Strong emphasis on collegiality and autonomy.	▪ Apply a collegial approach to communications and interactions generally. ▪ Allow plenty of time for networking, socialising and sharing best practice. ▪ Employ small group work where possible. ▪ Take time to form the group.

As has been established, the successful introduction of leadership development for academics is a complicated initiative if meaningful quality outcomes are to be achieved. Unlike other sectors, the cultural characteristics and structures can undermine conventional "leadership" development practices. The remaining challenges that emerged in the pilot demonstrate this by highlighting the tensions between the "business model" of education and traditional academic culture (Table 2). The segmented resistance to "management speak" and non-identification as leaders found in this pilot, illustrates the underlying misfit between recent changes and traditional academic culture and values, informed by the belief in academic freedom and autonomy. "Management" in the context of the current environment has come to mean a restriction to academic freedom and autonomy.

For example, the pilot at Curtin experienced a positive response when it was first advertised, with 50 full-time staff registering, however 29 completed the full program. The attrition was largely due to competing work commitments, however, based on comments from participants (both informal and formal feedback) it appears that a perception of some who withdrew was that the leadership program was aligned with management processes. Leadership development, therefore, may become associated with the changes taking place, which are perceived as making academic life more difficult.

According to Gordon "some of the tension, even conflict and opposition" that arises in response to professional development is often the result of the perception that any training and development is driven by recent reforms resulting in more appraisal, quality assurance and evaluation of staff performance (Gordon, 1995, p. 163). If "management" and, by association, leadership programs are seen to pose a threat to academic freedom and autonomy since they represent the "new" university

approach they may also go some way to explaining why CCs involved in the pilot did not tend to identify as leaders. Clearly many CCs saw leadership capacity as limited to possessing line management authority. In other words, leadership was narrowly defined to correspond to a management role with direct power over staff. This narrow perception of leadership is best addressed early in any academic leadership program if the venture is to enhance the leadership capacities of participants and have the desired outcomes. It is possible this perception of leadership may also be informed by the tradition of collegiality which embraces committee structures and shared decision making.

Table 2: Key Considerations Relating to the Tensions Between Traditional Academic Culture and Recent Reforms

	Challenges Stemming from Traditional Academic Culture and Recent Reforms	Strategies to Reduce Their Impact
1.	Resistance to "management" speak.	▪ Facilitate and encourage discussion on the tensions between more traditional academic culture and emerging "corporate management" practices early in the program. ▪ This requires skill-full facilitation by staff familiar with the higher educational context, and familiar with working with academic staff in particular. ▪ Contextualise materials and examples to make them relevant to the experience of the staff participating. ▪ Make the program relevant to them and their career progression rather than yet another hurdle to be overcome.
2.	Non-identification as leaders.	▪ Early critical engagement, with scholarly evidence, on the concept of academic leadership to broaden the perception of leadership. ▪ Careful unpacking of the issues relating to academic culture and emergent management practices relating to a business model of education. ▪ Empower staff to realise their leadership capacity. ▪ Survey participants prior to the program to establish their knowledge, interests, issues and previous study in the area of leadership.
3.	Perceived declining social status of academic work.	▪ Value staff by providing a prestige venue and excellent catering. ▪ Acknowledge their commitment through participation in the program.

By addressing these issues through establishing a formal critical discussion on academic leadership in the changing higher educational environment staff developers can engage academics and give them a space to voice their concerns. Skill-full facilitation is required to avoid the discussion falling into a wholly negative space. Speaking about academic resistance to professional development based on the perception that it is yet another agent of change, Gordon (1995, p. 163) observes:

This poses substantial professional and practical challenges to staff developers who must handle such situations with integrity, dignity and sensitivity. In doing so they often need to possess high levels of personal resilience in addition to good facilitative and reflective skills.

Mindful consideration of the context in which the professional development will take place is, therefore, crucial. Attention to localised issues relating to academic culture and change is also recommended. To achieve buy-in from busy academic staff working as CCs it is recommended that the content and design of the leadership program is made relevant to their role, position and particular context. Materials and examples used in addressing the theories must be work-based and meaningful to them. In the pilot, for example, the focus shifted early in response to feedback towards providing a set of "tools" to aid them in their demanding role. There is little benefit from giving readings and examples that come directly from business contexts without making them meaningful through direct relevance.

In the pilot, some participants were resistant to the leadership and management measurement tool used for determining leadership capacities, again largely due to the "management speak" and its perceived irrelevance to higher education. Other dimensions influencing this resistance were related to the potentially confronting information one might receive from supervisors, peers and professional staff. A revised model will be trialled in 2008, the Integrated Competing Values Framework (iCVF) (Vilkinas et al., 2007) that uses familiar higher educational "friendly" terminology (currently under development as part of another ALTC funded project). The iCVF is based on the original work by Quinn et al. and the Competing Values Framework (Quinn et al., 2003).

Taking time to form the group at the beginning, given the emphasis on individuality in academic culture, is also very important. In the next iteration of the leadership program at Curtin participants will be surveyed in advance to develop a group profile, in an attempt to anticipate their needs and help better establish relationships to build networks, peer coaching triads and engagement with the leadership and management assessment tools. Most importantly, however, staff developers facilitating such groups need to be reflective and responsive to the individual cohort dynamic. Finally, within the changing broader society where academics are perhaps not as highly valued as they were in the past, and given that at work they often feel under threat, the importance of providing the right kind of social supports such as a premier venue and catering to show that they are valued and appreciated cannot be underestimated. During the pilot, participants rated the food very highly, along with the quality of the venue (which was the Council Chamber), even going so far as to comment specifically on their contribution in supporting learning.

Conclusion

Whilst it would be reasonable to assume that the introduction of a leadership program such as Curtin's would help create the right environment to enable a student centred teaching approach the equation is much more complex due to the broader cultural drivers at work. As Bryman (2007, p. 706) has suggested, leadership definitely "*does* make a difference so far as academic effectiveness is concerned." However, as Bryman (2007) goes on to warn the conditions and practices of academic work—including, autonomy, freedom and the strong professional orientation—means that leadership in the wrong form could do more harm than good. As the experience of the pilot suggests, the same may be said of academic leadership programs: the wrong kind of program may potentially worsen the situation. Failing to consider the tensions between old and new practices within the academia in designing and delivering academic leadership programs will have a negative impact on leadership development in higher education.

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