

Ensuring Sustainable Leadership for Quality Learning and Teaching

Agnes Bosanquet, Alison Cameron, Stephen Marshall, and Janice Orrell

Learning and Teaching Centre, Macquarie University

Abstract

Increasingly, universities are addressing environmental sustainability issues by modelling ecologically sound practices and supporting the integration of sustainability into the curriculum. It is not yet common, however, to examine human resource practices from a sustainable perspective. With greater than ever scrutiny of learning and teaching activities by internal and external stakeholders, ensuring the quality of learning and teaching means addressing issues of sustainable leadership. This paper, based on a study of academic leadership in relation to learning and teaching, argues that the current development and preparation of academic leaders of learning and teaching do not represent sustainable, or even good, practice. This paper examines the importance of sustainable leadership practices within universities and, in particular, proposes that there are potential benefits if institutions are more actively engaged in sustainable leadership practices around learning and teaching.

Sustainable leadership practice includes recognising the need to plan for succession, and providing adequate developmental opportunities for those who are likely to become leaders of learning and teaching. This approach requires explicit articulation of the expectations held of leaders of learning and teaching, and making adequate provision for recognition and rewarding of those who take on such positions and meet the expectations. Without these steps it is difficult for institutions to assure the quality of learning and teaching into the future.

Ensuring Sustainable Leadership for Quality Learning and Teaching

Increasingly, higher education institutions and their stakeholders are focussing on approaches to learning and teaching that promote economic, social and environmental sustainability. A brief review of the literature demonstrates that one major focus of sustainability in a higher education context has been environmental sustainability and ensuring that universities model ecologically sound practices (Clark, 2000; Wright, 2002; Bacow & Moomaw, 2007). A second major concern has been the development of graduate capabilities around environmental sustainability, with calls for 'education for sustainability' to ensure that future leaders, policy-makers, and professionals are 'earth-literate' (Martin and Jucker, 2005) and can demonstrate 'sustainable mindsets' (Cohen, 2007). Attention has also been given to the integration of environmental sustainability into the curriculum (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006; Cortese, 2003; Sammalisto & Lindhqvist, 2008), principally in the area of teacher education and training (Ferreira et al, 2007; Martin et al, 2007) but also in science, philosophy, theology, business, finance and economics.

While universities are addressing sustainability in an environmental sense and as a teaching content issue, there has been little discussion of sustainability as it relates to their own human resource management. Issues of sustainable leadership have been explored in the context of school education. This has included consideration of succession planning, the impact of proportionately higher numbers of retirements from an ageing workforce, the professional development of school leaders, organisational change and the value of sustainability for school leaders (Davies, 2007). There has been very limited application of this work to higher education. (Goncz, 2006).

There is substantial evidence that academic leadership has an impact on student learning (Gibbs, 2006; Martin et al., 2003; Prosser and Trigwell, 1997). In an environment in which there is increasing scrutiny of learning and teaching activities by internal and external stakeholders, issues of sustainable leadership require attention in order to ensure the quality of learning and teaching. In this context we consider that sustainable practice includes recognising the need to plan for succession, and providing adequate developmental opportunities for those who are likely to become leaders of learning and teaching. It also includes being more explicit about the expectations we have of leaders of learning and teaching, and making adequate provision for recognition and rewarding of those who take on such positions. This raises the question of how sustainability is modelled in the development of leaders of learning and teaching within the higher education sector. How can leaders of learning and teaching demonstrate 'sustainable mindsets' in their practices of leadership?

The Study

This paper emerges from a research project that explored academics' conceptions of the leadership of learning and teaching. The aim of the study was to develop a conceptual foundation for describing, evaluating, developing, and planning for the succession of academic leaders with responsibilities for learning and teaching. The question asked in interviews with thirty-six leaders and managers of learning and teaching at multiple levels across eight Australian universities was:

How can universities develop the capacity of individuals to envision the future of learning and teaching programs in their institution, faculty, department, or discipline, and their capacity to develop and realise these?

In other words, how do we ensure sustainable leadership practices in regard to learning and teaching in a higher education environment?

Data were collected via thirty-six interviews with academic staff from eight universities across Australia. The institutions were chosen to represent the Group of Eight, the Innovative Research Universities Australia group, the New Generation Universities group, the Australian Technology Network, and unaligned universities. Participants were representative of academic staff from across the university and at different levels of appointment (i.e. executive level, professorial level, heads of faculties and departments, and other academics involved in the leadership of learning and teaching).

The analysis of the interview data involved a comparison of (a) the practices of job design, preparation, succession planning, and career development identified by interviewees; (b) publicly-available documents (from institutional websites) relating to current policies and practices at the eight institutions included in the research; and (c) the advice found in the research literature on best practice in these areas. On the basis of this analysis, the research aimed to develop guidelines for sustainable practice in the recruitment, selection, induction and orientation and performance management of staff with responsibilities for leading learning and teaching.

Findings

Interviews with stakeholders from diverse levels of appointment in a wide range of institutions reveal that the notion of leadership in relation to learning and teaching is problematic. No single, common definition of leadership in the context of learning and teaching prevails. An individual who is a 'leader' with regard to one aspect of learning and teaching may not be so in regard to other aspects. A commonly held belief is that activities and responsibilities for leadership and management are evident at all levels of employment in higher education and are not necessarily linked to a formal position of authority.

Preparing Leaders of Learning and Teaching

Our research indicates that current practices in the development and preparation of leaders of learning and teaching are a long way from modelling sustainable practice. They are at best *ad hoc* or absent altogether in any systematic sense. Responsibility for developing the knowledge, skills and capabilities necessary to effectively lead learning and teaching is generally left to the individual, and largely gained 'on the job' and developed through experience. Formal professional development programs, where they are provided, often focus on either learning and teaching practice, or leadership and management development more generally, with the latter targeting staff already in formal positions of management responsibility. Participants in this research generally believed that more could and should be done to integrate leadership and management development with the development of learning and teaching practice.

Participants in this study were explicit about the lack of systematic preparation for those moving into leadership roles in learning and teaching.

I'd have to say I don't think there's any conscious development of leadership and management of teaching. (HEIP01)

[Leaders of learning and teaching are] thrown in the deep end and there's a bit of a sink-or-swim sort of ethic in some cases. (HEIP10)

I don't think they are truly developed in any way or [they] haven't been to date. (HEIP11)

When asked how leaders and managers of teaching and learning are prepared for their roles, one participant replied,

Not at all . . . I've just fallen into it. I'm making it up as I go along. I would say our Associate Deans (Teaching and Learning) fall into it. (HEIP08)

Several participants singled out the relatively new role of Associate Dean (Teaching and Learning) as one for which preparation is lacking:

I don't think [we] very capably and suitably prepare that person for the role [of Associate Dean (Teaching and Learning)]. They have probably done stuff of their own volition . . . It is probably individually driven, rather than institutionally assisted . . . we could do more at that level. (HEIP07)

The same participant noted the lack of consideration given to succession planning for such key leadership roles.

For the Associate Dean's role . . . the focus ought to be more on the succession planning side of all of that. What do you do if so and so falls off the perch or moves on or doesn't want to do it any more? What is the next generation of person that is going to come in here? And I don't think we do that particularly well. (HEIP07)

Frequently, preparation for leadership roles and professional development were perceived by participants in this research to be the responsibility of the individual, with most skills and knowledge acquired on the job. It is clear from interviews with participants that current practices in the development and selection of academic leaders of learning and teaching do not represent sustainable practice as described earlier – in many instances, they do not even represent good practice.

Professional Development Available

The extent of professional development offerings, whether they were compulsory for new staff, and whether they aligned with promotions criteria or other institutional reward systems, varied from institution to institution. While all of the institutions involved in this research offered some form of professional development relating to learning and teaching, this rarely focused on the leadership of learning and teaching. Furthermore, there was little evidence of active identification and development of those who might be future leaders of learning.

The specific development of unit or course leaders was supported at some institutions.

[T]hey needed to have a much clearer vision of what all the policies were, what were the demands on them . . . the major issues about effective teaching in a university that they need to pay attention to . . . [W]e've talked about how do you manage staff who are difficult, conflict resolution, those sorts of things. So they need to be experienced teachers themselves, but they need another set of skills when they come to course coordination and course leadership. (HEIP06)

Some considered the development of Heads of Department as critical, as people in this position were understood to be the group most likely to succeed those in more senior positions.

For me, Heads of Department are . . . that's your succession plan, is making sure you train your Heads of Department so that they can do the role well. (HEIP29)

One interviewee observed that while early-career academics are well catered for,
we don't do enough professional development activities specifically designed for Heads of School and Associate Deans . . . and we don't do anything, of course, for the top level at all. (HEIP07)

Interviewees also noted that professional development opportunities available to them often focus on the practice of teaching rather than its leadership and management.

Teaching is very consciously developed, but I don't think people see it as developing leadership in teaching, I think they see it as developing teachers. (HEIP01)

I think [professional development opportunities are] just for developing teachers, although potential leaders of teaching may emerge through that process of reflection and communication and presentation. (HEIP16)

Several institutions had award courses available to staff, such as graduate certificates and diplomas in learning and teaching. While some of these courses included elective units in leadership and governance, the focus of such units was commonly on generic higher education leadership, and the overall program focus was the practice of learning and teaching, not the leadership of teaching.

Commenting on professional development programs, an Executive member of staff said:
[the staff development office] suggested it would run programs on leading and teaching, and I put a stop to it because I couldn't see what they actually meant. You know, until we clear up what on earth we mean, I'm not sure that's the way [to go] . . . [My view is that] yes, we do need to construct staff development opportunities for people who are going to move into leadership . . . it's actually growing their capacities to have an organisational impact of some kind through tailoring things around them . . . (HEIP08)

A number of reasons were given for lack of development of leaders of learning and teaching, and the lack of attention given to succession planning for these critical positions. Reasons included a lack of leadership at an institutional level, an institutional environment that does not recognise or is not supportive of developing leadership of learning and teaching, and the lack of an institutional language and culture that links leadership and teaching. One interviewee said:

At this university . . . institutional-level leadership of teaching is not part of the culture. It's not the language . . . It's not just that there's no preparation for leadership at that level, there doesn't seem to be any conceptualisation of what leadership is at the institutional level. So there's no driver for preparing people. (HEIP01)

Interviewees cited the perceived lack of prestige or value for learning and teaching compared with research as having a negative effect on the preparation and development of leaders and managers of learning and teaching.

If you get a name . . . [as] . . . a leader of teaching now, you're basically kissing goodbye to . . . a career path . . . It will always - unless something changes at a very fundamental level - be seen as second-rate. Going into higher education teaching as a

career - people look down their nose at it. You're a second-class citizen in academia. (HEIP01)

A Head of Department explained that people are often reluctant to take on leadership roles in learning and teaching:

[B]ecause it's not really well-rewarded, that's a bit of a deterrent . . . You would have to ask why people would want to be leaders . . . I actually had my arm twisted to do it, but when I thought about it and made a decision, I decided to do it as a personal challenge. (HEIP10)

One of the Deans recently . . . [said that] even if we were to reward [leadership of learning and teaching] in this institution it wouldn't help staff get a job anywhere else. You know, it would be taking them outside sort of standard career paths . . . There's still a lot of issues around this notion of leadership in this area and where it fits in the career development of academics. (HEIP17)

Need for Sustainable Practice

Participants expressed a need for more systematic preparation for leaders and managers of learning and teaching, as the importance of demonstrating quality processes increases.

[A]s the pressures on compliance get bigger and bigger . . . I'm not sure how sustainable the kind of amateur model is. (HEIP08)

They had a number of suggestions about the nature of development which should be available. Participants commented on the need for formal development for leaders and also the need to demonstrate an ongoing commitment to leading learning and teaching.

I think they should have formal training. I think . . . people should be able to identify themselves as being interested in this area, and put their hand up for leadership and management positions. I think before they get it they should be able demonstrate they have had training . . . and they have to exhibit sustained interest and commitment to it over time, and that can be either through their contribution to the development of others, what they've done to develop themselves or what they've exhibited in terms of their teaching outputs . . . I think it does teaching damage if people take up leadership positions because 'I feel like getting something on my CV, and I might be applying for a promotion in a year's time and I need to tick off that box.' (HEIP05)

According to participants in the study, institutional practices and supports to ensure effective preparation for roles in the leadership and management of learning and teaching - rarely in evidence at present - are important. A Dean said:

There are the things the institution can do to facilitate it [such as] bringing people together who share an interest . . . They can facilitate building support networks for people who want to, for example, apply for teaching awards, properly resourcing things like learning and teaching committees, recognition of teaching as part of things like promotion and probation processes. (HEIP16)

Critical to effective succession planning is the need to ensure that leadership positions, such as Associate Deans (Teaching and Learning), are formalised and rewarded as part of an academic career:

I think we should make it more explicit by indicating that taking on these roles constitutes strong performance from the university's point of view. It's not just a little

backwater. So it's converting it into being seen as . . . a career development thing to do. (HEIP08)

. . . many academics see the pathway as taking them away from academia, and not into a bigger responsibility, or an opportunity to influence things in a sustaining way. (HEIP24)

Other institutional responsibilities named by interviewees included appropriate induction for new staff and career planning for roles in the leadership of teaching and learning. Informal means of preparation and development should be encouraged and supported but need to be related to institutional goals and values, for example through the development of an institutional policy on mentoring which reinforces these.

Each of our faculties has got a responsibility to mentor people into our business. The concept of succession leadership is an important concept and I don't think we've engaged in it enough. (HEIP 22)

A number of participants felt that much successful preparation for leaders of learning and teaching occurred through mentoring.

I think that one of the most effective means of support . . . is mentoring . . . It is a wonderful opportunity to teach in a team-taught unit for that reason, and I think that more should be done like that . . . where [you] would have a coordinator who may act in that role, and have younger staff members involved. (HEIP04)

Discussion / Implications

There was limited evidence in interviews of organisational structures or enablers to support or encourage the development of skills in leading learning and teaching, or to support the notion of leading teaching as a career aspiration. The move towards recognising and rewarding learning and teaching achievements represents a change for many higher education institutions. However, the lack of clear conceptualisation of what is required to lead learning and teaching impedes appropriate professional development, recognition and rewards for those with responsibilities in this area.

This investigation found that current staffing practices, as articulated in position advertisements, academic classification standards, and institutional policies relating to selection, appointment, promotion and performance, rarely include adequate descriptions of leadership responsibilities in relation to teaching or recognition of leadership capacity and responsibilities in relation to learning and teaching.

A conclusion drawn from this investigation was that more explicit descriptions of expectations in regard to learning and teaching leadership are needed in recruitment and selection processes and performance management. It is also important that more explicit understandings of the activities and responsibilities of academic leaders of learning and teaching be used in designing and targeting programmes of induction, continuing professional development and succession planning processes.

Guidelines for Developing Professional Development for Leaders

It is clear from these data that, on the whole, universities put insufficient time and effort into planning for the sustainability of leaders of learning and teaching. Sustainable practice includes recognising the need to plan for succession, and providing adequate developmental

opportunities for those who are likely to become leaders of learning and teaching. It also includes being more explicit about the expectations we have of leaders of learning and teaching, and making adequate provision for recognition and rewarding of those who take on such positions. Current preparation and development practices are largely *ad hoc*, informal and managed by individuals, with a tendency for formal professional development to concentrate on developing teaching practice rather than leadership practices in relation to learning and teaching. While academic leaders have survived and succeeded in this system, many of them believe that they would have benefited from a less *ad hoc*, more systematic approach to preparing them to take up their roles. Evidence from participants in this research indicates what is required of any effective program of development.

The literature on development for leaders in higher education focuses more on the forms which development should take than the actual content required. According to Ramsden (2003), effective preparation for roles and professional development for leaders requires a cycle of learning through experience, engaging in evaluative activities and applying these findings to the role to improve performance and leadership capabilities. McDaniel (2002) argues leadership development needs to be conceptualised as a long-term practice that focuses on 'career-long progress' (p.83), and there is broad consensus that professional development programs need to be conceptualised and structured to facilitate continuous learning (Ramsden, 2003; Wolverson *et al.*, 2005; McDaniel, 2002). Scott's (2007) study found that academic leaders expressed a preference for self-managed and practice-based professional learning, and mentoring by an experienced senior colleague was considered to be an important leadership development strategy. Scott notes, however, that it is not clear how such methods are translating into more effective leadership for learning.

The role of head of department has been a particular focus in the research literature, with recommendations that members of this group are in particular need of improved preparation and development for their critical responsibilities in leading teaching and learning (Knight & Trowler, 2000; Wolverson *et al.*, 2005; Pearson & Trevitt, 2004; Ramsden, 2003). This might include department-situated action learning, experimental projects and debate. The capability of department leaders to enact change is developed by engaging in collaborative and innovative projects within and across departments (Pearson & Trevitt, 2004). According to Ramsden (2003), at this level, learning for leadership must involve actively learning within the department about how to apply principles and interpret needs.

Participants in this research have provided us with a great deal of information which can be used to structure an effective program of development for leaders of learning and teaching. This included information about both the format and focus of content was considered to be important. They have reminded us that leaders of learning and teaching appear at all levels of the institution, at a range of academic levels and levels of career experience, in formal and informal positions of responsibility, and with a consequent range of foci for their work. In terms of professional development then, the conclusion is that *all* staff should have access to development opportunities relevant to their individual career stages, levels of experience and the nature of their leadership and/ or management responsibilities.

Participants believe that in order to be effective, leaders and managers of teaching need an acquaintance with the scholarship of learning and teaching, and some understanding of leadership theory and practice. Most participants believed that, in order to be respected, leaders and managers should be at least adequate teachers themselves. Efforts to develop leaders and managers of learning and teaching must therefore begin with ensuring that

such staff have access to opportunities to develop their understanding of the basic principles which underpin effective professional practice in learning and teaching. As they progress in their careers such staff need to develop an understanding of the importance for professional practice of an evidence-based, scholarly, approach to learning and teaching.

Familiarity with the practice of leadership can be developed through a variety of practical means - mentoring, as already mentioned; committee membership; leading and/ or managing teaching projects; participating in or leading program or curriculum review processes, and so on. Understandings of leadership can also be developed through more overt processes, such as programs which challenge participants to reflect on their own conceptions of leadership and how these affect their behaviour and that of others around them, in the light of relevant literature in the area. Such programs would provide participants with a scholarship in leading learning and teaching necessary to guide, review and evaluate their practice.

Future Directions and Recommendations for Sustainable Leadership Practice

A flexible, multi-faceted suite of developmental opportunities such as that recommended by the research literature and practitioners in higher education institutions needs to be integral to the professional life of all staff involved in learning and teaching. The expectations of *all* staff with leadership responsibilities - whether in formal positions of responsibility or not - need to be clearly and consistently enunciated in position descriptions, performance criteria and probation and promotions criteria. These expectations should include some requirement for participation in professional learning, as appropriate to an individual's career stage, position and aspirations, and such participation in learning or professional development activities should be properly recognised and rewarded

Conclusion

Universities both teach and preach sustainability but have yet to turn the lens of sustainability on their own human resources practices. This research has demonstrated that academic staff seek more active engagement in succession planning, and better development of, or support for staff taking on roles as leaders or managers of learning and teaching. Its absence compromises institutions' capacity to assure the quality of learning and teaching into the future.

References

- Bacow, L.; Moomaw, W. (2007). The university case for sustainability. *New Directions for Institutional Research* 134, 37-40.
- Clark, C. S. (2000). Campuses move toward sustainability. *Priorities* 14 .
- Cohen, B. (2007). Developing educational indicators that will guide students and institutions toward a sustainable future. *New Directions for Institutional Research* 134, 83-94.
- Cortese, A. D. (2003). The critical role of higher education in creating a sustainable future. *Planning for Higher Education* 31, 3, 15-22.
- Davies, B. (Ed.) (2007). *Developing Sustainable Leadership*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Ferreira, J.; Ryan, L.; Tilbury, D. (2007). Mainstreaming education for sustainable development in initial teacher education in Australia: A review of existing professional development models. *Journal of Education for Teaching: International Research and Pedagogy* 33, 2, 225-239.
- Gibbs, G. (2006). Departmental leadership for quality teaching - an international comparative study. <http://www.learning.ox.ac.uk/oli.php?page=72> (downloaded May 2008)
- Gonczi, A. (2006). *A Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Leadership*. Paper presented at the Sustainable Leadership in Education Symposium and Conference, Sydney, NSW. http://www.proflern.edsw.usyd.edu.au/proceedings_resources/papers/GoncziA_06_SustainableLeadership.pdf (downloaded May 2008)
- Hargreaves, A. & Fink, D. (2006). The ripple effect. *Educational Leadership* 63, 8, 16-20.
- Knight, P.T. & Trowler P.R. (2000). Department-level cultures and the improvement of learning and teaching. *Studies in Higher Education* 25, 1, 69-83.
- Ladyshevsky, R. K. & Jones, S. (2007). Academic leadership and the course coordinator: 'King Pin' in the quality process. In *Proceedings of AUQF 2007 Evolution and Renewal in Quality Assurance, Hobart, Australia 11-13 July 2007*,. 83-90. *AUQA Occasional Publications Number 11*. AUQA: Melbourne.
- Martin, S. & Jucker, R (2005). Educating earth-literate leaders. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 29, 1, 19-29.
- Martin, E., Trigwell, K., Prosser, M. & Ramsden, P. (2003). Variation in the experience of leadership of teaching in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education* 23, 3, 247-259.
- McDaniel, A. (2002). Senior leadership in higher education: An outcomes approach. *Journal of Leadership and Organization Studies* 9, 2, 80-88.
- Pearson, M. & Trevitt, C. (2004). Alignment and synergy: Leadership and education development. In K. Fraser (ed.), *Education Development and Leadership in Higher*

Education: Developing an Effective Institutional Strategy, 88-107. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

Prosser, M. & Trigwell, K. (1997). Perceptions of the teaching environment and its relationship to approaches to teaching. *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 51, 25-35.

Ramsden, P. (2003). *Learning to Lead in Higher Education*. London and New York: Routledge.

Sammalisto, K. & Lindhqvist, T. (2008). Integration of sustainability in higher education: A study with international perspectives. *Innovative Higher Education* 32, 4, 221-233.

Scott, G., Coates, H., Anderson, M. & Johnston, K. (2007). *Learning Leaders in Times of Change: Draft Key Findings*. Briefing notes prepared for national workshops on Carrick National Leadership Project, June-July 2007.

Tilbury, D. and Cooke, K. (2005). *A National Review of Environmental Education and its Contribution to Sustainability in Australia: Frameworks for Sustainability*. Canberra: Australian Government Department of the Environment and Water Resources and Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability.

Wals, A. E. J. & Jickling, B. (2002). 'Sustainability' in higher education: From doublethink and newspeak to critical thinking and meaningful learning. *Higher Education Policy* 15, 2, 121-131.

Wright, T. S. A (2002). Definitions and frameworks for environmental sustainability in higher education. *Higher Education Policy* 15, 2, 105-120.

Wolverton, M., Ackerman, R., & Holt, S. (2005). Preparing for leadership: What academic department chairs need to know. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 27, 2, 227-238.