

Leadership for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

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Four topics for discussion in small groups

1. Issues around structures for teaching and learning in Universities.

Background

We can generally define five levels of leadership in teaching and learning:

- within the Senior Executive, styled perhaps DVC or PVC with appellation of 'academic' or 'teaching and learning' or 'quality'
- a faculty or a group of schools or faculties, headed by a Dean or a Pro Vice-Chancellor (for example Dean of Science, Engineering and Health, or Deans for each of these separately), often has an Associate Dean (Teaching) or similar position
- heads of schools or heads of departments, (representing a discipline or defined profession) may themselves be responsible for, or appoint a person to be responsible for delivery of one or more than one academic program - to provide academic leadership, manage resources, support program delivery
- program directors, or course coordinators, administer teaching and learning programs for which they are responsible
- 'lecturer-in-charge' of particular subjects, can have large student numbers, manage tutors and tutorials, sessional staff, organize laboratories or clinical or practical or field or industry experience, arrange for other staff (including part-timers and sessionals and post-graduate students) to teach and assess under supervision

Discussion

In this layered or tiered structure, how clear are lines of accountability and who ensures clarity in these cascading relationships for those who need to know?

How should communication be managed between the levels so that those 'at the top' know what is really happening 'at the coal face'?

Where does the Academic Board fit into this? Is it a forum for academic leaders, or a forum for managers? How does/should it help support teaching and learning?

Where do institutional centres or units for promoting teaching and learning fit in? How should the role for the 'director' or 'head' of such a centre and the staff of the centre relate to the actual teaching activities of the institution? How effective can such entities be if they appear to be set apart from the mainstream action?

What are optimal relationships between academic leaders of teaching and learning and managers and administrative and support staff?

What are optimal relationships between academic teachers and staff in student support services? (for example, those providing assistance with English language and essay writing).

2. The nature, context and scope of 'Leadership'

Background

In her book, Doing Leadership Differently (second edition 2005) Amanda Sinclair (Professor of Management at Melbourne Business School) writes:

Among scholars and students of leadership, I still see too much of what I call the 'track down the truth about leadership, trap it and train in it' approach. In a discipline with a million books and articles paying homage to leadership, the task of today's scholarship is surely to ask deeper questions about why one would want to foster it. By advocating leadership, we can often find ourselves lined up with the status quo, helping to shore up the voices of the powerful and increase their capacity to control the lives of the powerless.

I view leadership as the most important part of the work that we all do and the influence that we have in our lives. There is leadership – potentially – in most actions and sometimes it is the most common of actions in which we can exercise extraordinary leadership. Leadership is work that serves valuable purposes, be those purposes to help people around us grow, to adapt, to support, to learn, to do new things, to take responsibility, to take risks which unveil formerly unseen possibilities. My own capacity to recognize leadership in new places – in others as well as myself – has increased, along with my willingness to go out on a limb to advocate it.

There can be parallels drawn between 'teachers' and 'leaders' prompted by the old question – are teachers (or leaders) born, not made? Those who see the capacity to teach, or the capacity to lead as inherent will search for people they deem to be a born teacher or a born leader, and give encouragement and opportunity for such an individual to demonstrate their capacities. In today's world where many leaders and many teachers of different kinds with different mixes of knowledge and skills are needed, there is an overwhelming case for careful and systematic induction and teaching of leadership knowledge and skills, as there is, or should be, for teachers of many kinds.

The question then becomes, how best to do this?

Discussion

Different leadership contexts lead to differing emphases. Contrast for example the private business sector (an emphasis on entrepreneurship?), the public government sector (an emphasis on bureaucracy?), the layered structure of

the traditional armed services, increasing complexity in the health and education sectors.

Thinking then of universities, we might ask:

Which aspects of leadership are common to these different fields, and which aspects of university leadership are unique? What specific leadership elements ought be identified, developed and taught (including through mentoring) for leadership for excellence in teaching and learning in Higher Education? Who should to do this?

How should this relate to other academic staff development activities? For example, have links been established between those developing programs to further leadership for excellence in teaching and learning and Human Resource departments in the same universities running leadership programs for, say, heads of departments and for Women in Leadership?

Three things to note:

1. Be aware that it is easy to stereotype and to oversimplify when considering leadership in different fields and areas.
- 2 .The sheer size of enrolments in many large subjects, especially in first year, can provide significant impediments to learning, which is done by individuals. Indeed, institutions with up to 50,000 students are hardly natural environments for learning! Use of technologies can be very helpful here, if well managed and integrated.
3. Take account of the frequency with which university arrangements, structures, financing and scope change over time. Think of the changes of the last ten or twenty years, and even more of likely change in the next ten or twenty years.

3. Quality Issues in leadership in university teaching and learning

Background

Over the past twenty years, and perhaps especially over the last ten years, there has developed a strong discourse of commitment to teaching and learning in Australian universities. Nationally, this has been led by the Carrick Institute and its predecessors (AUTC, CUTSD, and CAUT), more recently by instigation of the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund, and by the completion of the first cycle reviews by AUQA. There are clear parallels in the individual universities: styling of appointments with specific commitment to teaching, the role of teaching in academic promotion processes, student evaluations of subjects (units) and courses, awards which celebrate excellent teachers, and so on.

A topic worthy of discussion is how far all this activity has impacted on a large proportion of the nation's 37,000 full-time and fractional full-time academic staff. Some staff still object to being described as teachers, believing that is an activity confined to schools with younger students. They see themselves as 'lecturers', as indeed their appointments say. While willing to provide some assistance within a limited time frame, responsibility for learning rests essentially with the students, who either 'make it' or don't. They argue that their appointments require time allocations for research, and that the demonstrable worsening of student- staff ratios show the declining resource base available for quality teaching, and in consequence students cannot expect to receive the level of attention provided in earlier times.

Discussion

These are realities that need to be confronted directly. How should leaders of teaching and learning respond?

At a more detailed level, some of the regular assertions about improvement and good practice warrant a closer look. Take the contention that teaching is 'taken into account in promotion'. Yes it is, as the policy statements require, but how clear is the evidence base. And when the evidence has been assessed, are cases found where individuals with a poor or mediocre teaching record or reputation are still promoted? This may not occur often nowadays, and may happen against the better judgement of those who are leaders in teaching and learning. But our arrangements for 'who determines' might warrant some review.

A second area for a closer look is the use of student evaluation of teaching. While such consultation with students is now widespread, I note as an

example of practice not yet ideal, the comments from a recent AUQA institutional report, which says of the particular university being audited:

'The University has for some time run Student Evaluation of Unit (SEU), and Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) surveys. All subjects must be evaluated once every two years but SET is an optional survey, with results reported only to individual teachers, although they are also used as supporting material for internal teaching awards and promotions. Because the application of SEU/SET has been inconsistent across the University, a new process commenced in 2006. However, the Audit Panel was told during the Audit Visit that the improved system had been placed on hold, pending further improvement to the survey instruments. There appears to be considerable uncertainty over responsibilities for moving forward with the new processes— SET results are reported to Council in the form of a composite Quality of Teaching indicator but reporting of results is unlikely to provide the Council with an accurate picture while participation in SET remains voluntary. The lack of comprehensive systematic information on higher education teaching makes it difficult for the University to identify areas of excellence in teaching as well as areas requiring attention.'

How can leaders in teaching and learning exert greater influence in the formulation, use and consistent interpretation of indicators of effective teaching and learning, at internal levels within faculties, across their own universities, and in making comparisons (such as in the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund) between universities?

4. In line with increasing diversity, should the notion of 'Teaching Only' staff be revisited? (albeit with a better descriptive terminology)

Background

There appears a case for developing at all levels, within institutions, a cadre of committed and capable people whose focus is unambiguously on effective learning and teaching. This is needed especially in undergraduate programs, and perhaps particularly at first year level.

A recent advertisement for 'scholar practitioners' (at Assoc Prof, Senior Lecturer and Lecturer levels) called for 'expertise and experience in at least one of the following domains: curriculum design and development, learning and teaching processes, use of technologies in learning and teaching, student assessment, program, course and teaching evaluation, leadership for learning and teaching in a research university'.

This spells out well the range of specialist needs, to which one might add others, such as building partnerships for industry based or clinical or other professional experience.

Discussion

Question: What are the risks and problems in proceeding in this way, and how might they be overcome?

The DEST Annual Report for 2004/05 gives the number of full-time and fractional full-time staff employed in a 'teaching only' capacity as 1401 in 2004, up from 901 in 1999, but down from 1587 in 1996. Parallel figures for 'research only' staff are 11,339 in 2004 and 8601 in 1996. 'Teaching and research' staff numbers have increased steadily year on year from 1999 and are around 24,660 in 2004.

Two related issues might also prompt discussion. One relates to students being admitted to courses with poor background attainments in mathematics. How effectively do we manage the upgrading of students' knowledge and skills in this area? This widespread problem occurs not only in science and engineering courses, but in the various health fields, in psychology, in accounting and in preparing primary teachers. Would there be a case for more systematic handling of this issue, perhaps at an institutional level, or at least going beyond separate handling in individual courses and subjects? Could we with advantage employ expert school teachers of Year 11 and 12 mathematics, who might do this work more efficiently than do present arrangements?

In this connection, note the emergence of the alternative pattern of foundation studies programs, which use such teachers, and which increasingly include two year diploma offerings which admit students to second year of degree courses. Should this route be seen as a preferred pathway for a proportion of potential entrants? What role should leaders of teaching and learning play in securing such arrangements? How well established are already existing partnerships between those teaching in such programs and those who subsequently teach the students in their parent universities?

A second issue relates to the role of casual and sessional teachers and the role which leaders in learning and teaching could play in putting this work on a more secure basis. Consider the following extracts drawn from an article titled 'The academic underclass' by Inez Baranay in the Griffith Review, No.11, Autumn 2006 (pp.41-49).

'When I started, I was just dropped into a classroom with no experience or training as a teacher. It's on the web now, but it wasn't when I began, and even now you may never be told where the information is to be found'.

'The support we give to casual teachers is very poor' says a senior staff member.

'But because of the increase of casual teachers to full- time staff it's very difficult to give casual teachers appropriate support, particularly at assessment time. Full-time staff ideally would provide important professional development for the casual teachers.'

'Apart from preparation and marking, casuals also do a lot of extra unpaid work talking to students.' As tutors in our subject we, the sessionals, are the interface between the students and the university. We're the ones who teach the courses, mark the assignments, and talk to them about their problems. They come to us.' Students generally have no idea that their teachers are not paid full-time salaries and don't understand why they can't find us, why we don't have offices. Students need advice, they need to talk about their ideas and they seek out the people who teach them. Email has changed the horizon for casuals. You're never out of contact with your students. Again, the university gets away cheaply.'

Question: how accurate is this characterization? Are current arrangements sustainable? If change is needed, what is the role of leaders in teaching and learning about pointing a way forward?