A TIGHT BALANCING ACT:
LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES FOR UNIVERSITY HEADS
(Heads of School and Heads of Department)

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on the responses of 134 Heads of School and Heads of Department who were part of a larger study of 513 Australian higher education leaders. Heads of School / Department are at the centre of complex relational interfaces comprising faculty, students, central administration, and external entities and support agencies. While such experiences are not necessarily unique to Heads, the analysis suggests that they do perhaps experience these challenges in more intense and explicit ways than many other managers, as they have to 'manage' both up and down. Many of the Heads perceived taking on this position was a backward rather than forward career step in the development of an academic career. However, the analysis also suggested that this group of leaders are critical to change efforts in higher education but are often the forgotten middle leaders. Their learning for leadership is done on-the-job and mostly adhoc. Feedback on the results from the large-scale survey was sought through workshops with over 500 higher education leaders across Australia and internationally. According to this feedback, studies like this one that set out to identify the experiences of 'fellow travellers' are helpful to leaders in a range of ways. It helped them, (a) realise that their experiences of leadership are not necessarily idiosyncratic; (b) identify the perceived connections, overlaps and differences between different formal leadership positions; (c) identify and understand conditions that may aid and thwart effective practices. These issues have important implications for succession thinking and practice in higher education. The research team are currently producing a prototype online leadership development tool for trial by university leaders early in 2009.

INTRODUCTION

In 2004, Geoff Scott (2004) noted in his keynote address to the Australian Universities Quality Forum on effective change management that the motto for higher education leadership now must be: "Good ideas with no ideas on how to implement them are wasted ideas". Failed change in higher education has costs—not just economically but strategically, socially and psychologically. When enthusiastic university staff commit to a change project and that project fails, they take the scars of that experience with them. Students and the country receive no benefit from failed change. Institutions that take on an essential reform project that founders suffer a loss of reputation and, in the current climate, this can lead to a loss of income and, as a further consequence, closure of courses, schools or faculties with an associated risk of redundancies. Sitting in the midst of this challenging and rapidly shifting environment are university leaders.

The key focus of this paper is on the responses of 134 Heads of School / Department who were part of a larger study of 513 Australian higher education leaders. The study, 'Learning Leaders in Times of Change', was funded by Australia's Carrick Institute for Learning & Teaching in Higher Education and identified the capabilities that characterise effective academic leaders in a range of roles.

This paper begins with an overview of the study and the characteristics of Heads. It then identifies and critiques what Heads from the study said about their daily realities, influences challenges and the most/least satisfying aspects of this role; what Heads identified as the capabilities they see as being most important for effective performance; and what supports they perceive as providing the most/least assistance in developing these capabilities. Collectively, these analyses highlighted some key implications for the preparation and ongoing development of this group of leaders in higher education.

OVERVIEW OF 'LEARNING LEADERS IN TIMES OF CHANGE'

Focus of the study

The study explored and identified productive ways to address the issues and challenges for various leaders in higher education. The approach has been to build upon a decade of studying professional capability, development and change leadership in a range of contexts—most recently in a study of more than 300 effective leaders in Australian school education (Scott, 2003).

The aims of the study were to:

- profile academic leaders and their roles;
- clarify what 'leadership' means in an academic context;
- illuminate the daily realities, influences, challenges and most/least satisfying aspects of the wide range of learning and teaching roles in our universities;
- identify the perceived markers of effective performance in each role;
- identify the capabilities that leaders see as being most important for effective performance;
- identify the forms of support that may be of most/least assistance in developing these capabilities;
- determine key similarities and differences between roles; and
- compare the study's findings with the existing literature on higher education leadership and the outcomes of similar studies in other educational contexts.

The focus was primarily on formal leadership roles in learning and teaching in our universities. The specific roles studiedwere: Deputy Vice-Chancellor; Pro Vice-Chancellor(PVC) (Learning and Teaching); Dean; Associate Dean (Learning and Teaching); Head of School/Department; Head of Program; and Director (Learning and Teaching).

Some of these roles focus almost exclusively on learning and teaching (e.g. the relatively recent roles of PVC [Learning and Teaching] and A/Dean [Learning and Teaching]). Other, more long standing roles like Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), Dean, Head of School or Head of Department focus not only on learning and teaching but often on research, engagement and a range of budget and staff performance matters. Some leadership roles (e.g. PVC or Director of Learning and Teaching) have a pan-university scope; others (e.g. Dean or Head of School) are more focused on particular portfolio responsibilities of the institution.

In Australia, while the title of 'Head of School/Department' is common across institutions, in practice the role and associated levels of authority and responsibility has been found to vary considerably between institutions (e.g. Smith, 2005). The variations of such roles present particular challenges for identifying the characteristics of leaders, their work and learning needs. Any analysis, therefore, must be mindful of the potential differences as well as commonalities that may exist within the one leadership position.

A partnership

The project has been delivered through a two-year partnership between the University of Western Sydney, UWS (Professor Geoff Scott and Kim Johnson), Australian Council for Educational Research, ACER (Dr Hamish Coates and Michelle Anderson) and senior colleagues from 20 Australian universities under the guidance of a National Steering Committee chaired by Professor Peter Booth, Senior DVC at The University of Technology, Sydney, and Chair of the Universities Australia DVC (A)'s group.

Methodology

The study undertook an extensive international literature review, an online survey, and a series of national and international sector feedback workshops that tested the veracity of the results and identified their key implications. An overview of the report's content can be found in Appendix One. A copy of the report, including details of the methodology, can be found at:

Australian Learning and Teacher Council (ALTC) formerly CARRICK Institute
http://www.altc.edu.au/carrick/webdav/site/carricksite/users/siteadmin/public/grants_leadership_uws_acer_summary_june08.pdf
http://www.altc.edu.au/carrick/webdav/site/carricksite/users/siteadmin/public/grants_leadership_uws_acer_finalreport_june08.pdf

Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)
http://www.acer.edu.au/documents/UWSACER_CarrickLeadershipReport.pdf

The systematic use of sector-wide feedback on the results is comparatively distinctive and is an approach that is recommended for use in subsequent studies. It has ensured that the results are both valid and owned by those well positioned to action them, and that the key recommendations made in the report are authentic.

CHARACTERISTICS OF HEADS OF SCHOOLS/DEPARTMENTS

Leader demographics

Table 1 presents demographic characteristics of those leaders who identified as being a Head of School or Head of Department. Most of this group is male, between 46 and 55 years of age, has a background in the humanities or in health. Most of the responding Heads worked at sandstone universities, and the fewest at technology institutions.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the Head of School / Department sample

Characteristic		n	%
Your sex	Female	40	29.9
	Male	94	70.1
Your age	Under 36	1	0.7
	36 - 45	16	11.9
	46 - 55	70	52.2
	56 - 65	45	33.6
	Over 65	2	1.5
Main disciplinary background	Agriculture and Environmental Studies	7	5.2
	Education	12	9.0
	Engineering and Technology	8	6.0
	Health	32	23.9
	Information Technology	7	5.2
	Law	4	3.0
	Management and Commerce	12	9.0
	Natural and Physical Sciences	17	12.7
	Society and Culture	35	26.1
University type	Sandstone	44	32.8
	Regional	32	23.9
	Technology	9	6.7
	Innovative	27	20.1
	New Generation	22	16.4

The location and configuration of higher education institutions were highlighted as particular challenges for some Heads. Numerically, the responses highlighting these challenges were not significant. However, these Heads articulated that working in a remote higher education location and/or the complexity of communication and coordination across multi-campus sites was not conducive to trying to establish productive working relationships with colleagues. For Heads in these contexts leadership capabilities, such as interpersonal and diagnostic, are not just useful to have but critical to effective practice.

Current position

Table 2 indicates that most of the 134 Heads were new to this position or in the first few years of service. Overall, the high numbers of direct reports suggest that Heads carry a wide portfolio of responsibilities. A number of the Heads appear to aspire to the position of Dean. But most Heads from the study had no intention of applying for another position. What cannot be assumed from this analysis is that Heads intend to stay in their current position. As the years in current role suggests, very few remain in their current role beyond seven years. In turn, this has implications for the provision of meaningful induction and ongoing professional learning opportunities for these groups of leaders in higher education (see section on learning for leadership later). Researchers for some studies question the quality and timing of professional learning for Heads, suggesting that the only preparation available to prospective leaders is after their appointment (e.g. Montez, 2003). This issue is not unique to higher education, but evident from recent international reviews of improving school leadership (Anderson et al, 2008).

Table 2: Characteristics of Heads' current position

Characteristic		n	%
Years in current role	Under one year	20	15.2
	1 - 3 years	60	45.5
	4 - 6 years	33	25.0
	7 - 10 years	10	7.6
	More than 10 years	9	6.8
Staff who report directly to you	1 - 5	3	2.3
	6 - 10	6	4.5
	11 - 20	30	22.6
	21 - 50	69	51.9
	More than 50	25	18.8
Intend to apply for another position	No current intention	88	57.5
	VC	1	0.7
	DVC	2	1.3
	PVC	12	7.8
	Dean	24	15.7
	Associate Dean	8	5.2
	Assistant Dean	2	1.3
	Head of School -- Head of Department	14	9.2
	Program Head -- Program Co-ordinator	2	1.3

The number of years Heads have held their positions does appear to influence how they perceive the focus of their work. Our analysis suggests that leaders who have held the role for between one to six years tend to place a fairly even emphasis on different aspects of their work. However, leaders who report holding their roles for seven to ten years place a notably greater emphasis on networking. From the study, Heads who have held positions for more than ten years report lower levels of involvement than their colleagues in all aspects of their work besides networking.

The longer Heads were in the position, the fewer social pressures they perceived themselves as feeling. In the survey, social pressures were deemed to reflect issues associated with balancing work and family, declining status of academic work, managing difficult staff. Those in the position for between one to three years tended to reported feeling more pressures than others.

THE CONTEXTS THAT SHAPE HEADS' WORK

The focus of Heads' roles

Leaders participating in the study were asked to identify the key domains for their work: planning and policy development; managing staff; academic activities; management and administration; networking.

As already indicated from the literature review and the analysis of the number of staff direct reports; the Heads perceived managing staff and developing policy and planning as a major focus of their work. This was the most common activity for Heads at all institutional types (e.g. sandstone, regional etc). Less emphasis was perceived by Heads to be placed on networking and academic activities. Together with Deans and DVCs they provided the highest ratings in terms of staff management. Again, this was not a surprise in light of the number of staff Heads identified reported directly to them (see Table 2).

Our analysis identified that both male and female Heads' tend to see their work as composed of the same activities, although female Heads gave higher level responses in all five measured aspects, and in particular to aspects of management, networking and academic activities. Female Heads, for instance, placed around the same emphasis on networking as did males on planning and policy development activities. There were no apparent patterns in work focus by age in the data.

For each of the key domains of activity (i.e. managing staff) a number of specific items were developed (see full report). These identify the nature of leaders' activity within each domain. The number of respondents per role is fairly low (e.g. PVCs N10) and so care should be taken in interpreting the figures because they are only single indicators with differences between the scores tending to be small. This said; looking at the highest and lowest rank scores for each role highlights a relational portrait of what people in formal positions of leadership report as their key work activities.

Table 3: Areas of work focus ranked by importance

	Head of School / Dept	DVC	PVC	Dean	Assoc Dean	Program Head / Co-ord	Director	Asst/ Assoc Head
Managing other staff	**1**	7	4	4	12	5	7	1
Managing relationships with senior staff	**2**	1	1	1	7	7	1	12
Identifying new opportunities	**3**	4	3	3	9	4	3	5
Strategic planning	**4**	3	2	2	1	10	4	9
Budget management	**5**	23	8	12	25	25	23	23
Marketing activities	23	24	18	25	24	22	24	24
Preparing reports	24	14	12	21	14	20	9	21
Institutional research	25	16	17	21	23	23	25	25

This data, along with other items of work focus, attracted particular interest at the national and international workshops. Participants at these workshops suggested the results provide a very useful way to get a quick overview of the nature and relative focus of the many central, university-wide and local leadership roles concerned with learning and teaching. It would also help universities to get a sharper picture of how to make the various roles more directly complement each other.

Most roles, for example, allocate relatively high importance to identifying new opportunities and, with the exception of Assistant Heads, managing staff. Similarly, strategic planning is important in the majority of roles with the exception of Program Head/Coordinator. Staff development and reviewing people's performance appear to be of greatest importance for the Heads of School. Heads of Program, however, give much higher priority to developing learning programs than all other roles and, predictably, give top importance to working on student matters and reviewing teaching activities. This links to the key motivators for leaders in other roles and raises interesting implications for the performance indicators currently given emphasis in such roles.

Of note, although not reflected in the results above, were the relatively low importance ratings across the majority of roles on one's own professional development. The exception to this pattern was Assistant Heads.

Most satisfying and most challenging aspects of being a leader in the current context

Consistent with other research on Heads, our study identified that this group of leaders occupy the interface of complex and different roles and responsibilities (e.g. Bryman, 2007). Ramsden's earlier research (1998: 238–40) had captured this complexity through some 50 paradoxical aspects of how the university Head of Department job has to be managed. They involve managing a range of paradoxes and dilemmas concerning:

- Vision, strategic action, planning, resources management
  (for example, how best to balance 'following the university line' with working to the department's advantage);
- enabling, inspiring, motivating staff
  (for example, how best to balance telling and directing staff with listening to and consulting with them, or encouraging disagreement with avoiding conflict);
- recognition, reward, performance assessment
  (for example, how best to balance delegating tasks with controlling the outcomes, or making staff accountable with letting them set their own professional standards, and rewarding effort with rewarding achievement);
- personal learning and development
  (for example, how best to balance seeing academic leadership as a career with seeing it as a temporary job)

This notion of leadership as requiring one to balance what, at first glance, appear to be contradictory ways of approaching a perplexing situation is a key finding in both the present study and earlier ones (e.g. Binney & Williams, 1995; Scott, 1999).

As part of the online survey, leaders were invited to write down what were the most satisfying and challenging / unsatisfactory aspects of their particular role as a higher education leader. Comparisons of these results from the different groups of leaders are presented in Tables 3 and 4. It is perhaps interesting to note that there is some congruence between what Heads perceive they do most of in their day-to-day work and what they suggest are the most satisfying aspects of their role (i.e. change leadership). That said; it will be shown later that actually being able to make things happen can be problematic for Heads who must manage both up and down (see challenges and metaphors for leadership).

Both Table 3 and Table 4 have direct implications for reviewing and giving greater focus to the position descriptions for different roles and making sure that they both complement each other and focus on what is most productive. This process can be further developed by ensuring that the performance criteria take into account the effectiveness indicators identified for each role (see full report) and that person descriptions focus on the capabilities that count, which are identified later in this paper.

Table 3: Most satisfying aspects of current role

DVC/PVC • Setting strategy & direction • Making team-based change happen • Interacting with clever, motivated staff Dean • Developing a productive group of leaders • Helping staff achieve goals • Strategy formation & implementing efficient systems A/Dean • Working across uni to make key L&T improvements happen • Policy & strategy development • Identifying problems & opportunities and addressing them	Head of School/Department • Setting direction for the school • Being able to make things happen • Assisting staff and managing resources Head of Program • Assisting students and teaching • Implementing a new curriculum • Building staff morale & skills Director of Learning & Teaching • Achieving teaching improvements • Developing new approaches to learning and teaching • Having an influence on L&T policy and strategy

While managing staff appears to form a central focus of Heads' work, this appeared to be in both a positive and negative sense. Heads reported that they receive the greatest satisfaction from creating the conditions that allow staff and students to succeed. This involved, identifying new opportunities; improving internal processes, developing new programs; networking to develop a sense of community within and beyond the department or school; and working with others to solve problems.

Table 4: Most challenging/least satisfying aspects of current role

DVC/PVC • Archaic processes & endless travel/ meetings that have no outcome • Organisational indecisiveness • Performance management of staff & change averse cultures Dean • Educating bureaucrats/handling administrivia • Excessive number of ritualised meetings • Managing resource cuts & staff performance • Having to lead through influence A/Dean • Dealing with difficult staff & inertia • Fuzziness of the role: influence compared with line supervision • Finding room to 'lead' – meetings, administration, reporting, changing directions • Managing restructures	Head of School/Department • Processes, ad hoc requests & meetings that don't demonstrably improve core outcomes • Lack of rewards/praise for success • Managing complaints, staff performance and budget constraints Head of Program • Dysfunctional systems & administration that don't add value to student learning • Dealing with difficult staff & inertia • Managing complaints Director of Learning & Teaching • Endless paperwork & proposal writing • Unproductive meetings with no agenda or outcome • Engaging uninterested staff • Promoting the equal status of L&T vs. research

In light of a broader analysis of change forces in higher education (e.g. economic, technological, demographic changes) and influences (e.g. social,), the analysis suggests that learning and teaching leaders find they have 'little room to lead'. Time consuming and unproductive meetings, dysfunctional systems, unnecessary bureaucracy, excessive reporting with no outcome, a culture and focus on talk, planning and review more than action, are getting in the way of what leaders' expressed as the key focus areas of their work and key satisfactions. The Heads' comments indicated they are feeling a tension in their work between the emphasis on administration, management and leadership:

> Each day I have to deal with a constant stream of trivial distractions that others seem to think (are) important. (Head of School, male, 46–55)
>
> 'tedious administrivia' (Head of Department, female, 56-65)
>
> 'dealing with the ever changing nature of national, local and university micromanagement, which essentially leads to nothing other than a paper trail. This takes the form of endless requests for information, data and reporting on issues that we have very little control over' (Head of Department, male, 36-45)
>
> 'I find some aspects of the university processes intensely irritating, in that they are bureaucratic and under-supported. This particularly applies to financial matters' (Head of Department, female, 46-55)

From the thematic analysis of open-ended responses, it can confidently be said that Heads feel the weight of and are weighed under with management and administration activities. Administration and its various derivatives as administrivia; meetings, management, paperwork, bureaucracy, routine and emails were some of the most frequently cited examples by Heads. As illustrated in the comments above, these examples are perhaps perhaps predictable as features of Heads' work in light of what the research literature says about the changing context and expectations of higher education leaders.

Within this rather gloomy picture of influences on and challenges in Heads' work were a number of people who noted that being a Head was indeed a pleasant surprise. Along with the previously mentioned perceived areas of most satisfaction, a small number of, generally older male and female, Heads wrote of their surprise at actually enjoying their role or perceived that the role enabled them to make some difference in the university. As one female head wrote, she was surprised at her, 'level of excitement and personal satisfaction' (HOD, female, 46-55).

Heads found their role satisfying when they could successfully buffer staff from distractions from the core business of teaching and research and when they could take advantage of seeking new opportunities. Of note in their responses was an enjoyment of developing staff, with mentoring particularly new staff. This was mentioned a number of times in their open-ended responses. This development dimension to Heads' work was reflected on numerous occasions through such comments as:

> 'helping staff to succeed in their work. Developing new initiatives' (HOD, female, 36-45)
> 'working in a mentoring role with staff and students, opportunities to advise on new program design' (HOD, female, 46-55)

> ‘learning how people tick, influencing quality of teaching, learning and research’ (HOD, male, 36-45)
>
> ‘having the opportunity to provide a supportive academic environment for junior academics and professional staff enabling their endeavours’ (HOD, male, 36-45)
>
> ‘I like it when people who thought they could not work together form successful teams, with my guidance. I also like the excellent results from such highly capable teams’ (HOD, male, 46-55)

While staff development was a key satisfaction for Heads, a number also wrote of their surprise at the number of staffing problems that come up. It seems that for some Heads, the challenges of managing staff might be more than they had anticipated. It was then no surprise to see that interpersonal issues, peppered most of the open ended responses from Heads. With regard to interpersonal issues, conditions within the higher education setting were perceived to help or hinder Heads in their day-to-day work. Whether Heads’ perceived they were being supported was frequently mentioned. A number of Heads suggested they experienced an overall lack of support to enact their role successfully or a lack of power to execute what they saw as key decisions. Our analysis suggests that the Head of School role is insufficiently supported, acknowledged and developed.

Overall, a story of trying to strike the right balance emerges from the open-ended responses about key challenges in the role of Head. These included, balancing teaching and research; managing above and below and finding the time to think about change strategies and actually implement these.

METAPHORS FOR LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The analyses identify some important areas of misalignment between titles, roles, performance management and position descriptions on the one hand and the daily realities of each university leadership role on the other.

The insider’s perspective on the daily realities of higher education leadership

In the online survey respondents were invited to develop and explain an analogy that best described what it was like to be in their current academic leadership role. These provide important insights into what it is like to be a leader in the continuously shifting context of higher education and having to deal with the key influences and change forces. The most common analogies are listed in Table 6.

Table 6: Academic leaders' analogies

• Herding cats • Getting butterflies to fly in formation • Juggling • Being a gardener • Conducting of an orchestra/directing a play • Keeping flotilla heading in the same direction • Being the captain of a sailing ship • Coaching a successful sporting team • Climbing a mountain together • Plumbing a building – essential but no one sees it • Being a diplomat • Wearing multiple hats at the same time • Being the older sibling in a large family • Working with a dysfunctional family • Being the minister of a church where only the converted come • Voting Labor in a safe Liberal seat • Matchmaking • Bartending	• Being a small fish in a large cloudy pond • Being a salmon trying to swim upstream • Rowing without an oar • Sailing a leaky ship – faulty bilge pump • Being the meat in the sandwich • Wading through a quagmire of bureaucracy • Pushing a pea uphill with my nose • Riding a bicycle on a tightrope • Having a Ferrari with no money for fuel • Being a one-armed paper hanger working in a gale • Trying to nail jelly to the ceiling whilst trying to put out spot fires with my feet • Trying to drive a nail into a wall of blanc-manage – little resistance but no result • Being in groundhog day • Living in a medieval castle • Being a Rubik's cube • Being in an Escher painting

These analogies all indicate that the role of academic leader requires one to be able to negotiate not only the external forces but also the local ones; that leading is a complex, constantly changing, relatively uncertain and highly human endeavour; that not everything can be pre-planned or can be expected to turn out in the way intended; that leadership is a team not a solo effort; that culture ('the way we do things around here') counts—that, for example, leadership can be frustrated by overly bureaucratic and unresponsive systems or by being confronted with passive resistance; that, as the orchestra conductor analogy suggests, successful learning and teaching programs require both a sound plan (score) and the people with the skills and ability to work productively together to deliver it (a talented orchestra able to work together in a harmonious and complementary way).

The most popular analogies were 'herding cats' and 'juggling'. These highlight the challenges of working with diversity and with the different 'tribes' that make up the modern university.

When the analogies are analysed by role it becomes clear that one's sense of 'efficacy' (control) shapes the type of analogy selected. Analogies that indicate more control (e.g. being an orchestra conductor, gardener) tend to be identified by the more senior leaders (DVCs, Executive Deans, PVCs).

Leaders whose role is to manage both up and down (e.g. Heads of School) tended to opt for analogies like 'being the meat in the sandwich'; 'running a balancing act – having to keep budget, staff, students, industry requirements, research and senior management in some sort of balance'; 'being a mother – always at someone's beck and call'; 'being the captain of a small ship in stormy weather' or 'being a spider building a web'. Some, like the Ferrari analogy, pick up on the challenges associated with the funding issues.

Such states of being reflect the demanding scope and complexity of a Head's role. It is a role from which people seem to expect a lot but that often appears to be enacted without much authority. This perception was evident from all Heads, but most often from female Heads under 55. These Heads wrote analogies, which reflect responsibility versus authority tensions:

> 'being a curtain fig tree, which is struggling to grow healthy fruit…in nutrient poor soil, at the same time being strangled by parasitic growths… (Head, female, 46-55).'

The analogies from Heads describe the struggles they experienced in their day-to-day work. As expected, Heads appear to experience pressure on many fronts, although they place a slightly lower emphasis on student pressures and external accountabilities. Institutional change matters and general social forces reportedly play an important part in shaping their performance.

Collectively, identifying the challenges, satisfactions and metaphors for Head leadership also provides important implications for what capabilities should be given focus when leaders are selected and for ensuring that succession plans to replace the current leadership as they retire are well formulated. They also point to important implications for what should be given priority in academic leadership development programs.

LEADERSHIP CAPABILITIES

In terms of addressing perceived challenges for Heads, the qualitative analysis demonstrated that although the required combination of personal, interpersonal and cognitive capabilities is common across roles, the level, sophistication and consistency of their delivery becomes more demanding in roles like DVC and Executive Dean. The most demanding roles are indicated not only in the sorts of challenges identified, and the scope and level of accountability for the activities to be undertaken, but also in what leaders noted were analogies for their role and their self-identified effectiveness criteria (see full report).

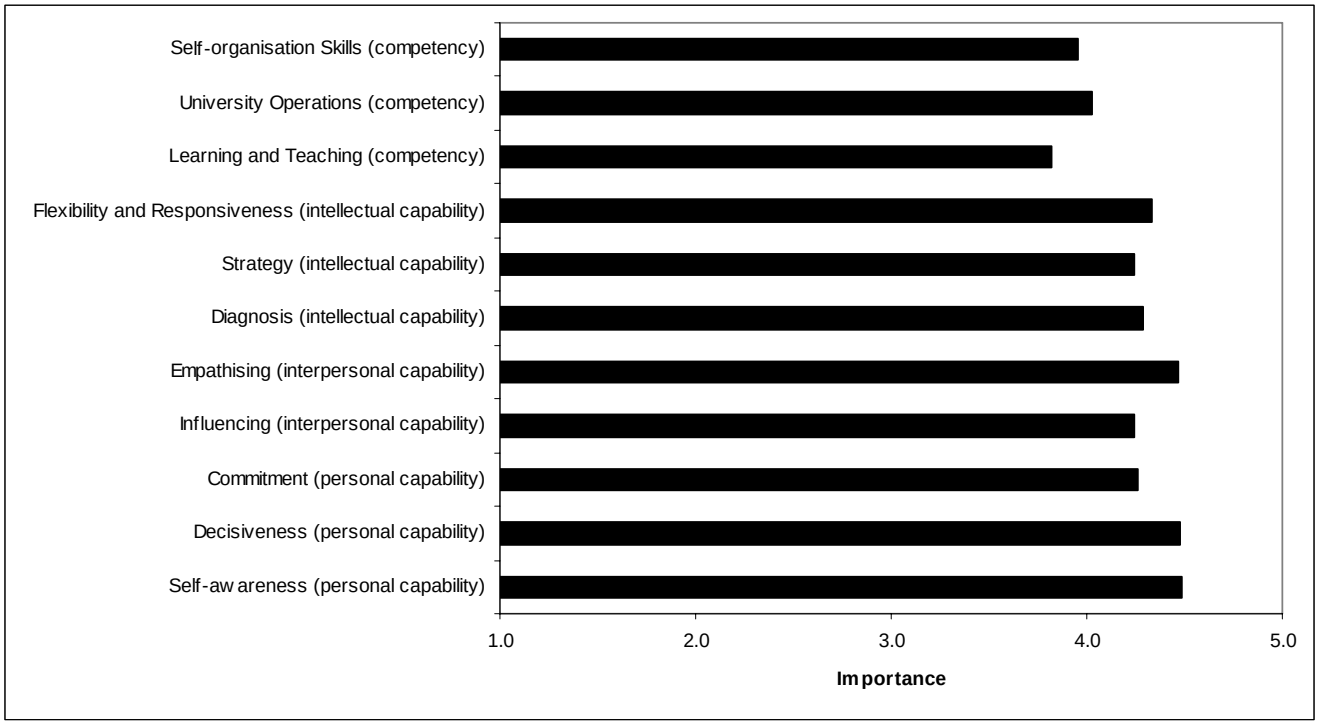
Table 5 below presents the top ranking capability items on importance across all roles in the study. Although the interval between the rankings is not always statistically significant, taken as a whole the results in this table give a powerful message—they indicate that key aspects of emotional intelligence (both personal and interpersonal) are perceived by these respondents to be critical to effective performance across all roles.

Table 5: Top twelve ranking leadership capabilities
(the rank of each item is given in brackets, 1 – highest)

Personal capabilities • Being true to one's personal values & ethics (2) • Remaining calm under pressure or when things take an unexpected turn (3) • Understanding my personal strengths & limitations (5) • Energy & passion for L&T (7) • Admitting to & learning from my errors (10) **Interpersonal capabilities** • Being transparent & honest in dealings with others (1) • Empathising and working productively with staff and other key players from a wide range of backgrounds (4)	**Cognitive capabilities** • Identifying from a mass of information the core issue or opportunity in any situation (8) • Making sense of and learning from experience (9) • Thinking creatively & laterally (11) • Diagnosing the underlying causes of a problem & taking appropriate action to address it (12) **Skills & knowledge** • Being able to organise my work & manage time effectively (6)

As noted earlier, the Head's role emerges as being particularly tricky because it requires incumbents to manage both up and down. They have to negotiate across multiple interfaces and balance various demands. It was perhaps of no surprise then to see Heads rate the importance of all the personal, interpersonal and cognitive capabilities, and role-specific competencies highly (see Figure 1). It can be suggested that these responses are an endorsement of their importance and relevance to the context of Head of School / Department leadership.

Figure 1: Heads' perceptions of leadership capabilities



Overall, the analysis of challenges also confirms that the academic leader's capabilities (across all roles surveyed) are most tested when what was planned is not working out, when the unexpected takes place or when one is confronted with complacency, cynicism, stonewalling, white-anting, needless bureaucracy or disengaged staff. Every challenging situation identified had a complex human dimension and was peppered with dilemmas.

DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP CAPABILITIES

Regardless of the leadership position, leaders reported improvement in their capacity to bring change successfully into practice to be their highest priority for professional development and personal improvement. To achieve this, Heads wrote that they learn for leadership most effectively from other people and their own experiences of leading.

Mentoring was the most frequently mentioned best method for developing Heads' leadership capability. Both males and females valued this approach to learning, along with learning from on-the-job experiences. It appears to be an important leadership development method prior to and early in a Head's appointment. This perception appears to be regardless of age and gender.

Overall, Heads noted certain institutional conditions help with developing their capabilities as leaders. These conditions include:

- providing feedback on performance;
- participation in discussion and input at various institutional levels;
- access to up-to-date information on strategic directions;
- ongoing exchanges with people in similar roles;
- participation in lengthier programs, for example, one year with one day per month commitment;
- talking about issues with like-colleagues.

One female Head noted she would value participating in programs that specifically catered to the needs of women in leadership roles.

Early identification and nurturing of potential leaders are key steps that Heads believe they and their university could take to improve selection and development of leaders. According to these Heads, selection criteria need to overcome the teaching and learning and research hierarchal divide, and negative perceptions of leadership being too hard for little reward. Once again, mentoring programs, individualised coaching and opportunities to experience a different role through, for example, secondments were perceived by Heads as effective methods of development.

Heads appeared frustrated at leadership methods that focus on the theoretical at the expense of any practical application. One such comment was:

> 'Reading without the opportunity to discuss with anyone the pros and cons of different methods of leadership' (Head of School, female, 46-55).

Similarly, Heads perceive that certain conditions and practices work against developing leadership capabilities. High on the list were perceptions from Heads of lack of support from senior colleagues – perceptions of responsibility without authority to act. - being 'thrown in the deep end'; 'adhoc learning on the run or being told what to do without explanation' and 'suck it and see' approaches to learning and development.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The important role of leaders in creating conditions conducive to learning is neither new nor surprising. However, as our study suggests, the changing context and expectations of leaders are fraught with complexities and tensions. Leaders are expected not only to manage their area of responsibility well but to know how to develop their department and university's capacity to constantly review and improve performance. Heads of School / Department were one group of leaders in our study, among several others (e.g. Dean), who were involved in a tight balancing act of often competing and complex challenges (e.g. managing both up and down).

Analyses of the Heads' and other formal leadership positions in higher education, lead us to suggest that Heads of School / Department:

- are critical to change efforts, but are often the forgotten middle leaders;
- perceive that taking on this position is a backward or at the very least a holding-bay, rather than a forward academic career step;
- learn on-the-job and what they value, regardless of age or gender, are flexible authentic learning opportunities, such as mentoring prior to appointment or early in their role.

In light of the critical change focus for a Head of School / Department, these analyses have important implications for how to best prepare people and retain them in this role. What is clear from our broader review of the literature is that those institutions that manage the growing change pressures best have clear, complementary, well spread and valid leadership roles; selection processes for new academic leaders that focus on clear role descriptions; and are places that specifically seek to create the conditions that give these people room to lead and use valid performance indicators to judge effectiveness.

Feedback from the workshops with over 500 education leaders suggest that studies, like this one, that set out to identify the experiences and realities of 'fellow travellers' help leaders (a) realise that they are not alone; (b) compare and contrast the connections, overlaps and differences between various formal leadership positions; (c) identify the conditions that may aid and thwart effective practices. In turn, this knowledge can be used to start or continue the conversation on leading learning in the context of an individual's own higher education setting and circumstances. Our study is a contribution to these issues of leading learning.

The findings from the 'Learning Leaders in Times of Change' study can be used to enable academics interested in becoming a learning and teaching leader to self-assess their potential by completing the online survey for themselves and comparing their results with those already in the position they are considering. To that end, the research team are developing an online Leadership Evaluation and Development Resource (LEADR) that will be trialled with a number of universities in early 2009.

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APPENDIX ONE

Learning Leaders in Times of Change
Geoff Scott, Hamish Coates and Michelle Anderson

OVERVIEW OF REPORT

Structure of the Report

The report commences with an Executive Summary. This section of the report gives a succinct, integrated picture of what the study has discovered. It highlights the key findings, products and insights that have emerged, and lists a series of core recommendations for acting upon these findings in ways that will both help to address the leadership succession and capability crisis faced and to secure Australian Higher Education during the challenging times that lie ahead. The recommendations made have been identified not only by the 513 leaders involved in the empirical phase of the study but also validated by the additional 600 higher education leaders from Australia and across the world who have evaluated the results.

The Executive Summary is followed by a series of chapters, which justify and explain the key findings and recommendations given in the Executive Summary. Each chapter gives patterns of similarity and difference in the responses to the online survey by the leaders in the range of learning and teaching leadership roles studied. Each chapter also brings together what the available empirical literature says on the issue being addressed, what the online survey revealed, and what the participants at the national and international workshops said. Links to parallel findings from other Carrick leadership projects are also noted where appropriate.

Chapter One focuses on understanding the nature of academic leadership in our universities, the people who undertake it, and the key concepts that underpin the study. In this Chapter the often misunderstood concepts of 'leadership' and 'management' along with 'capability' and 'competence' are clarified. This is followed by an exploration of the extent to which leadership in learning and teaching differs from leadership in research, business or the public sector. A profile of academic leaders in Australia is then presented and a range of emerging implications are identified. At the same time, the literature on each of these areas is reviewed. Finally, the conceptual framework for leadership capability in higher education that has guided and been tested in the study is presented.

Chapter Two looks at the current context and key challenges faced by our academic leaders. This aspect of the study has identified how broader social, political, economic, technological and demographic changes nationally and internationally over the past quarter of a century have triggered a set of higher education specific change forces These forces have, in turn, have interacted with a set of local institutional and cultural factors.

The key point is that the factors outlined are intertwined and feed into and off each other. The key implication is that they make the effective management of change and implementation a key imperative for universities and their leaders if these institutions are to not only survive but thrive in a new, more volatile operating context. This chapter sets the scene for Chapter Three.

Chapter Three shifts focus onto how our higher education leaders experience and respond to the change pressures, context, influences and challenges identified in Chapter Two. First, the insider's experience of leading in such a context is identified using the analogies that the 513 leaders involved in the study developed to describe what their daily world is now like. The major areas of daily focus in each role are identified, along with their major satisfactions and challenges. Finally, the indicators our leaders use to judge that they are delivering their role

effectively in such a context are discussed. This chapter identifies some important areas of misalignment between titles, roles, performance management and position descriptions on the one hand and the daily realities of each university leadership role on the other.

Chapter Four identifies the capabilities and strategies that count most in addressing the key challenges and areas of focus identified in earlier chapters for each of the higher education leadership roles studied.

The findings align with studies of successful leaders in other sectors of education and of successful graduates in nine professions. In particular, a specific set of capabilities around personal and interpersonal emotional intelligence, along with a contingent and diagnostic way of thinking, emerge as being critical to effective role delivery across all of the leadership positions studied.

A key implication of this finding is that the capability profiles and methods used to identify, select and evaluate leaders may need to be significantly revised. There are also important implications for what should be given focus in academic leadership development programs.

In Chapter Five the question of how our higher education leaders prefer to learn and develop their capabilities is explored. The key findings here confirm that the same flexible, responsive, role-specific, practice-oriented and just-in-time, just-for-me learning methods that are being advocated for use to engage higher education students in productive learning and retain them apply just as well to assisting the learning and development of academic leaders. This has important implications for a radical revision of current, workshop-based approaches to leadership training in higher education. It also indicates that, if we want our learning and teaching leaders to be strong advocates for the new approaches to higher education learning now being advocated, they need to have experienced the benefits of what is intended for themselves.

Chapter Six brings together the key findings from each of the above chapters into an integrated picture. It also identifies what participants at the sector workshops said they intend to do to act on the study's findings and summarises the key recommendations that have emerged from the extensive feedback given on them. The key products generated by the study are also identified.

The Appendices provide the more technical and detailed data and analyses that underpin the conclusions drawn. Appendix Two includes a copy of the online survey.

It is anticipated that the report will be of relevance to everyone in a university who is confronted by a call or an opportunity for change and who wants their efforts to make a difference—from members of governing boards, Vice-chancellors, Provosts, Presidents and other university executives to Deans, Heads of School or Department, Program Coordinators and university administrative and service directors. It also carries important, practical policy messages for public interest groups, government departments and higher education agencies.