

**Framing and enhancing distributed leadership in the quality management Online Learning Environments in higher education**

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**Abstract**

This paper reports on the findings of senior leadership interviews in a nationally funded project on distributed leadership in the quality management of online learning environments (OLEs) in higher education. Questions were framed around the development of an OLE quality management framework and the situation of the characteristics of distributed leadership at the core of the framework. The project's premise is that distributed leadership is a descriptive reality of managing OLEs given the various leadership parties involved and the complexities of the contemporary technological landscape. It was believed that enhancing distributed leadership would become more pressing given the ever-changing nature of e-learning, and the associated competitive dynamics at work. Leaders' understandings of distributed leadership were examined – its nature, value and potential for advancing the quality management of OLEs. There was confirmatory evidence of its reality, but its meaning and value were not uncritically accepted. Discerning its practice was not unproblematic,

along with institutional strategies that have and could be implemented to build such organizational leadership capacity. It can be concluded that building distributed leadership must start through deliberative formal leadership commitment and action starting at the highest levels of the institution.

**Keywords:** online learning environments; quality management, distributed leadership; semi-structured interviews

## **Introduction**

This paper is based on an Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) nationally funded project titled, 'Building distributed leadership in designing and implementing a quality management framework for Online Learning Environments'. (The ALTC is now the Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT).) The project involved five partner universities representing the diversity of developments in the Australian higher education sector. The project's rationale was that distributed leadership seemed centrally important to this sphere of higher education activity given the complexities of the challenge. The paper focuses on the final phase of data collection involving one-on-one interviews with senior leadership from the project partners. These interviews represented the culmination of the project's efforts to develop insights into the nature, value and, indeed, limits of distributed leadership in the OLE domain. The interviews also illuminated the ways in which distributed leadership might be developed to enhance the quality management of OLEs. The relevance and usefulness of distributed leadership to the quality management agenda is not straightforward. Distributed leadership may be seen as capturing something of the reality of the way leadership works, but it does not go unchallenged as the most desirable way of leading key institutional developments. Having said this, valuable insights have been gained in cultivating distributed leadership, with the greater active involvement of those in the organization with leadership capacities and contributions to be made. This expansive view of leadership can benefit the quality management of online learning environments in open, distance and flexible education. It is of prime relevance and importance to those in such organizations that occupy various formal senior and functional level leadership roles.

## **Nature and relevance of distributed leadership to the quality management of OLEs**

Northouse (2013) summarises a broad range of theoretical perspectives on the nature of leadership and distils its essence from this theorizing as: “Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2013, p.5). It can be concluded, however, that no grand synthesis has emerged in formulating an overarching view of what leadership is or should be; how it should be researched and how it should be practised effectively. One emerging line of theorizing and practice sees leadership as potentially being more shared and dispersed through an organization. This acknowledges that more parties may have more shared influence on their colleagues, above and beyond traditional formally and vertically designated leader-follower influence relationships. As expounded by milestone educational collections and perspectives on distributed leadership, the focus shifts from leader and leader development, assuming subordinate-follower behaviour, to shared or distributed leadership practices, as at least a descriptive reality of how leadership emerges in practice (Leithwood, Mascall & Strauss (Eds.), 2009; Harris (Ed.), 2009; Spillane, 2006; Spillane, 2007).

Distributed Leadership refers to situations when leadership is said to be distributed among multiple actors who support others in achieving organizational goals. It has emerged as a significant field of leadership conceptualization, theorizing and practice improvement in the last decade or more (Bolden, 2011). In some ways similar to shared or dispersed leadership, distributed leadership exists in relationships, and it recognises informal, emergent and collective acts of influence as well as those instigated by people in formal positions of authority (Harris, 2009). Based on the scope of distributed leadership identified by Harris (2009, p.5), a number of key alignments become prominent in higher education institutions, namely: *vertically* amongst faculty *formal* leaders in hierarchy, and amongst senior executive leaders and faculty formal leaders; *horizontally* amongst senior executive leaders, faculty

*formal leaders* across hierarchies, and senior executive leaders and across faculty leadership; *informal* academic and professional support leadership *horizontally* amongst staff at discipline, school, faculty and inter-faculty levels/domains; and *informal* leadership at particular locations in multi-campus environments.

Distributed leadership approaches seem highly relevant to the quality management of OLEs in higher education. The leadership of quality OLEs is becoming more complex and demanding as seen through the:

- growing size and reach of universities (some with offshore campus operations, and others now involved in national and international strategic partnerships)
- growing number of information and communications technologies (ICTs) which constitute such environments
- loosening of institutional control over certain technologies which can be used for effective learning and teaching
- greater size and more diverse composition of universities' workforces and student populations
- ever-present multiplicity of curricular and pedagogical models which underlie an ever-expanding range of occupations and professions requiring higher-level education
- intensifying of national and global competition in the e-learning marketplace.

No one formal leader at the top, no matter how ambitious and knowledgeable, could possibly contend with the complexity of issues related to the quality management of online learning environments. Leaders must be mobilized down, across and throughout the organization to realize the full benefits of massive institutional investments in online learning systems. This is well expressed by O'Toole, Galbraith and Lawler (2003, p.260): 'The lesson is this: The more

interdependent the work of co-leaders, the more input they should solicit from affected others and the more they need to coordinate between themselves’, and reinforced by Conger and Pearce (2003, p.285): ‘Shared leadership is therefore an effective solution to a fundamental dilemma: No single individual possesses the capacity to effectively play all possible leadership roles within a group or organizational setting’. The potential value of distributed leadership has been highlighted more generally in higher education by van Amejide, Nelson, Billsberry and van Meurs (2009), Bolden, Petrov and Gosling (2009), and Keppell, O’Dwyer, Lyon and Childs (2010) specifically in distance education. These studies, however, do not focus on the demonstration of distributed leadership around institutional OLE spaces. Any purported value should not be accepted uncritically and empirical investigations are required to test value propositions.

### **Investigating distributed leadership in the quality management of OLEs**

The nature and relevance of distributed leadership to the leadership of OLEs in Australian higher education was investigated through a national Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) grant conducted over 2011-2012 involving five Australian universities. The aim of the project was to develop and disseminate through a distributed leadership approach an overall framework for the quality management of OLEs. The purpose of the framework was to help guide, but not prescribe, specific leadership actions in various organizational settings relating to new investments in OLEs, and the ongoing maintenance and enhancement of such environments for the benefit of student learning. The framework was intended as a transparent and adaptable set of guidelines, which could also aid internal and external benchmarking of OLEs in the sector. The framework was not intended to compete with the many existing governance and quality management models in e-learning (Australasian Council on Open Distance and E-learning, 2010; Charles Sturt University, 2010; IT

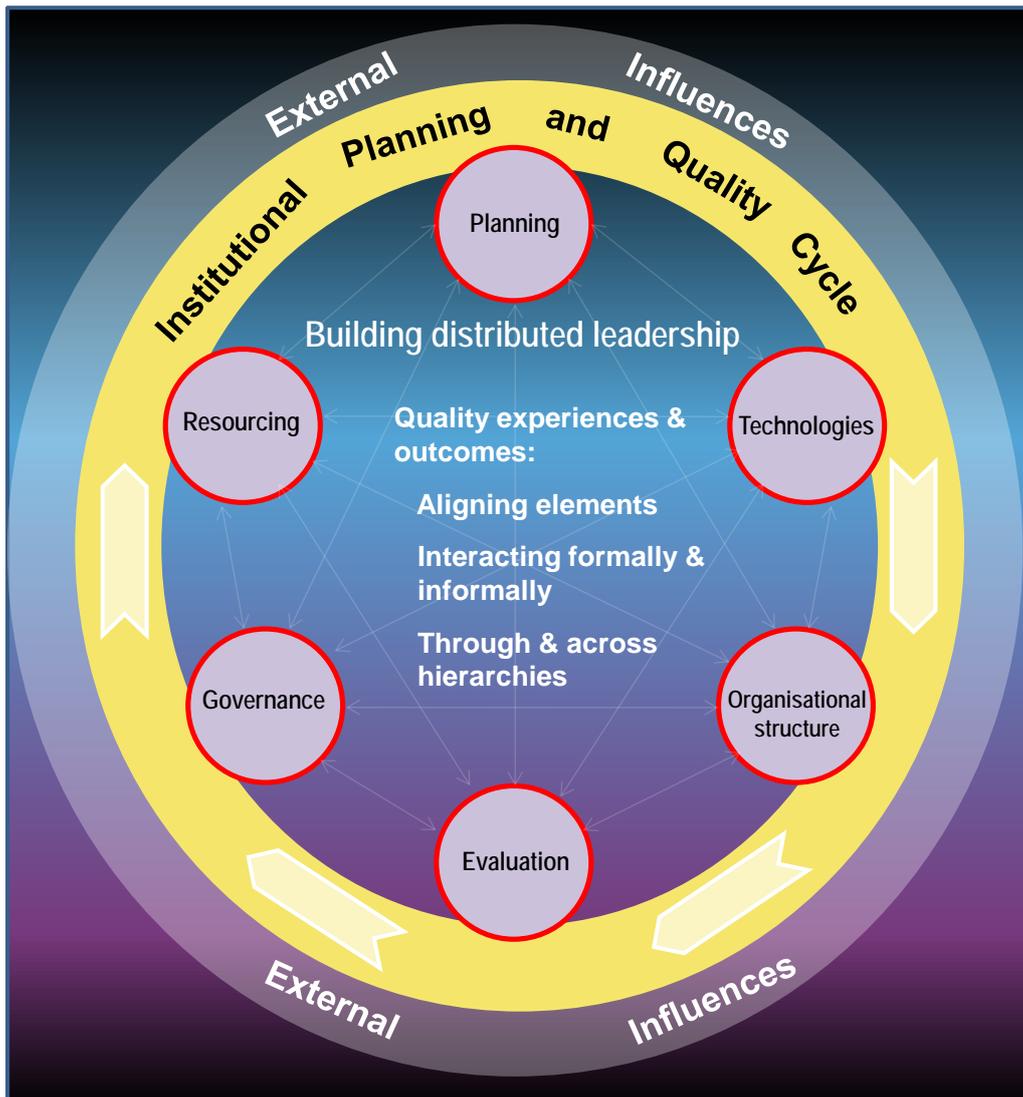
Governance Institute, 2012; Marshall, 2004, 2007; Oliver, 2003; Scott, 2008; The State of Queensland (Department of Public Works), 2011; White & Larusson, 2010). It was designed to assist endeavours in these areas. The five university project partners encompassed a diversity of OLE systems (including proprietary and open source learning management systems (LMS)). Moreover, the partners, at the beginning of the project, were at different stages of deploying their next generation OLEs, and represented the institutional diversity of the Australian university sector.

The project methodology used the following data collection methods:

1. three rounds of focus groups at the five partner institutions where different groups of representatives of the institutional distributed leadership involved in OLEs interactively explored emerging themes from project research;
2. a survey of institutional representatives from Australasian (Australian and New Zealand) universities with OLE leadership responsibility (reported in Palmer, Holt, Gosper, Sankey & Allan, 2013);
3. a final round of one-on-one interviews with senior leaders at each partner institution to elicit strategies for the development of distributed leadership for the enhancement of OLEs.

This paper focuses on the findings of the final phase of data collection around senior leader interviews, i.e. the fourth round of qualitative data collection post-completion of the three rounds of focus groups. Drawing on the literature investigations, the initial project partner workshop and the first round of institutional focus groups, and with input from the project reference group, an OLE quality management framework ('the framework') was developed. The initial iteration of the framework was then refined (see Figure 1). The core of the framework is the building of distributed leadership capacity with the aim of enhancing the

quality of learning and teaching outcomes and experiences through the alignment of the six identified and interrelated elements. A set of desired characteristics of distributed leadership to support the quality management of OLEs was also developed, and definitions refined over time. These characteristics are summarized in Table 1.



### **Element Descriptors**

**Planning:** external environmental analysis and trend spotting, strategic intelligence gathering, external benchmarking, organizational capacity analysis, institutional purpose, reputation, vision, principles, objectives and strategies, accountabilities, timelines and resource implications

**Technologies:** type, range, integration, promotion, and innovation and mainstreaming of emerging technologies

**Organizational structure:** nature, range, coordination and delivery of valued services (underpinned by clarity of understanding of needed expertise/staffing capabilities) for staff and students

**Evaluation:** stakeholder needs, methods, reporting, decision making through governance structures, evaluation relating to the initial selection of new technology, and evidence gathering relating to the on-going assessment of its performance, value and impact

**Governance:** institutional, faculty and school/department committees and forums (and associated responsibilities and accountabilities), policies and standards

**Resourcing:** maintenance and enhancement of technologies, skills recognition and staff development, media production, evaluation activities, governance mechanisms, i.e. all other elements

**FIG. 1. Framework for the quality management of online learning environments.**

**TABLE 1**

**Desired characteristics of distributed leadership**

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• Enabled individual and collective agency	• Co-created & shared vision
• Inclusive of all those who lead	• Broadest recognition of leadership
• Communicative and engaging	• Appropriate responsibilities
• Meaningful rewards	• Trusting and respectful
• Nurturing of valued professional expertise	• Collaborative in development
• Valuing professional forums & communities	• Continuity and sustainability

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The framework elements and their relationships are examined in depth in Holt et al. (2013).

## **Methodology**

The phase four data collection involving a round of interviews sought perceptions of nominated leaders of the five partner universities in two areas:

- Developing distributed leadership (DL) within the OLE space
- Using this (and other strategies) to manage change within the OLE space.

Twelve interviews of 30-45 minutes duration were undertaken with leaders nominated by representatives of each of the partner institutions between September and October, 2012.

These occurred in the final quarter of the project, and were undertaken by an independent consultant, who also analysed them and wrote up a final report. Half of these were face-to-face and half by telephone. Seven participants were male, and five were female. The group included three Deputy Vice-Chancellors (DVCs)/Pro Vice-Chancellors (PVCs), three teaching/learning Directors plus one Assistant Director, a Principal Advisor, two Managers and two Deans/Associate-Deans Teaching & Learning. Ten interviewees came from Central groups and the inclusion of two Faculty staff provided valuable insights of how this matter was perceived by those directly involved in teaching online for two of the five institutions. A briefing document was provided prior to the interview (see Appendix A) and the interviews, while following the direction taken by those interviewed, covered a series of questions that resulted from a list of issues provided by the project team (see Appendix B for list of questions).

The interviews were recorded and pertinent material was provided in written format to the project leaders and manager. Over 36,000 words of text were generated (including input from the consultant), endorsing the impression that participants were engaged with the issues and often gave expansive comments. While the analysis is a summation of the views expressed on the canvassed issues, it draws heavily on what was said by those interviewed as

the way they chose to express their views, as well as the views, themselves, is often compelling. The quoted comments below, while an accurate portrayal of what was said in terms of the ideas expressed and the language used, are not necessarily verbatim as non-fluencies have been removed. As the cohort is quite small (12), for ethical reasons comments are not attributed. Occasionally, where it is deemed particularly instructive, reference has been made to whether the person concerned is in a senior leadership role and/or affiliated with a central of faculty area.

## **Findings and discussion**

Findings are presented and discussed under key perspectives: defining distributed leadership (DL); level of support for the concept of DL; perceived limitations of DL; the future of DL in the OLE space; personal characterizations of leadership within the OLE space; handling different views; initiatives carried out in the last three years; contemplated initiatives; and building leadership capacity within the OLE space.

### **Defining distributed leadership**

All those interviewed accepted the definition of distributed leadership provided (see Appendix A). In the two cases where there were reservations, ‘collaborative’ and ‘devolving’ were preferred terms but all those interviewed were comfortable with the sentiments expressed. It is noteworthy that, while accepting the definition, several expressed a lack of conviction about the value of the term, with it being labelled – albeit by a minority – as ‘contrived’, ‘irritating’ and ‘a nonsense’, creating artificial boundaries with the issue being leadership. A few indicated the term was new to them and a strong impression was gained that many chose to go along with the term as the basis for the interview, being convinced more by their understanding of what a distributed leadership model entailed, rather than the word itself as illustrated by comments such as “*I feel I understand it but I feel it’s more about*

*devolving leadership and 'distributed' is more about putting leadership into roles which are closer to the coalface for teaching”.*

#### **Level of support for the concept of DL**

All those interviewed supported the concept of DL. Five of the twelve rated their level of support at '5', so to a 'very good' extent, and the same number gave a '4' ('good') rating with the remaining 2 rating it at '3', so to a 'reasonable' extent. Those who indicated strong support often did so on the basis that, with something as complex and multi-faced as an OLE within a university context, leadership is required at many levels: *“Around simple issues, requiring domain expertise, I think you want strong – almost individual – leadership. ... But around complex issues where no one individual is controlling all the resources required to make that initiative happen, I can't think of an alternative”.* Further, with the reality for all institutions of frequent leadership changes *“distributed leadership may actually be a buffer against that because it's spread across many people and so the knowledge and sense of where you're going is spread across a range of leaders and levels and so is not as exposed as having it in only 2 or 3”.*

It is telling that some senior leaders recognised that, for their OLE vision to be realized, a network of leaders was necessary and, while central areas have a vital role, online teaching and learning occurs in the faculties and leadership there is essential. In this regard the Associate-Deans (Teaching & Learning) [ADTLs] or their equivalent were deemed as the 'key people' because of their leadership role within their faculty and remit to forward the online learning environment. While valuing DL – especially as it was seen as engendering buy-in through a culture of collaboration – people pointed to the need for oversight and formal direction by someone with the vision of where the organization wants to see its online teaching and learning go and to the critical role of absolute directional leadership being set in

place within the management regime. There was recognition also that success depended not only on the person in a DL role but also on the support by upper levels of leadership/management – including respect and recognition – and the general conditions of the online working environment. The 2 who gave a '3' ('reasonable' extent) rating pointed to the influence of senior leaders to drive the adoption of, and support for, key technologies.

DL relies on forging productive individual and team relationships and there was appreciation – at least for some – that in the OLE space there is a higher level of dependence on mutual support than an academic may normally experience:

I think distributed leadership is really very dependent on the individual relationships and they have to be at the right level of maturity – people have to be prepared to put themselves out there a bit in a distributed leadership model, to work in an area that, by default, you're not leading because you've got others involved in the leadership. ...In a distributed leadership model you're reliant on all parties to do their thing and to bring their level of expertise to bear at the most appropriate point in time. So you're very dependent on having very trusting, open and mutually supported relationships. And then it works.

#### **Perceived limitations of DL**

While supportive of DL, the majority of those interviewed shared some concerns in this area beyond the necessity for ultimate leadership and agreed and understood parameters. If, as was argued, DL is not a construct of sufficiently understood value to many people in the organization, it follows that the time to develop leadership capacity and the rewards for those who strive to work in this area will not accrue. Moreover, while:

... some universities will recognise more the importance of responding to distributed leadership it remains under the whim of politics of leadership within the university.

So you might have a leader come in who understands the concept and invests in it strategically but that person is on a limited timeframe contract and moves, and the whole thing is swept away and they're acting as if it's of no value. So the pattern of the sector is that of almost a whim-based leadership at the top of the hierarchy depending on skill set and political agenda.

As well as the necessity to have strong and supportive leadership at the top, several people commented on the importance of having the right people to distribute leadership to: *“You’ve really got to treat them like diamonds as they’re not plentiful. So finding them, identifying them and supporting them is really important and if you don’t have those people you’re really behind the eight ball”*.

#### **The future of DL in the OLE space**

Those interviewed were asked if they thought DL would become more or less important, or stay the same, in any future change management efforts in the OLE space. Many expressed uncertainty but there were some instances where those interviewed provided insightful comments such as:

You would hope eventually it becomes something that people don't talk about or have to define. ... And the companies that seem to be succeeding and the universities that seem to be moving into new spaces quickly are the ones that understand that the leadership has to come from multiple levels and you have to recognize the informal as well as the formal relationships. Even how we think about knowledge, itself, and theories of learning like connectivism and community of practice – that understanding of distributed learning or cognition – really fits in with distributed leadership. So I

think it's here to stay for the medium- to long-term and eventually will become part of business as usual.

### **Personal characterizations of leadership within the OLE space**

Significantly, despite their stated support for distributed leadership, it was rare for any person interviewed to characterize their leadership – and also those who reported to them or they reported to – in DL terms. Connections between a personal statement of leadership style and building distributed leadership capacity as a valued part of this tended to be tenuous. As leaders within the OLE space, those in senior positions spoke of monitoring the global online environment to keep their university apprised of the latest developments and then lead the decision-making to ensure these work in a practical way with cognizance of business, as well as pedagogical, imperatives. While drawing on the wisdom and expertise of others, there was acknowledgement that leaders have to lead and that means having the vision and being the driver. Those in less senior roles were more likely to speak of influencing people as:

I am required to go about things by building consensus and persuading people – making the case. So if you compare top-down and bottom-up approaches I have to be more of a bottom-up type person where I'm getting line level people at the lecturer/senior lecturer level interested in things and hoping it works its way up. And I do work with the centre managers and department heads but again its more persuasion and convincing to get them to provide the top-down leadership.

### **Handling different views**

Because the earlier three focus groups conducted for the project highlighted the number of instances where diametrically opposed and sometimes mutually exclusive viewpoints were held regarding online teaching and learning, those interviewed were specifically asked how, as leaders, they dealt with this significant challenge. Universities are institutions where

questioning and debate are embedded into the culture. Moreover, in the context of the OLE, these leaders recognized they were working in a dynamic space and opinions could change literally overnight as technology changed. While there was general agreement that the goal was to gain consensus and a mutually satisfactory and satisfying outcome through meaningful discussion, there was also recognition that a leader also has to be able to make a judgement call about the importance of the issue and the significance of an entrenched view and hence when it is appropriate to capitulate, walk away or indicate that viewpoint cannot be accommodated. While all wished for 'win-win' situations, with enthusiastic buy-in by all those involved, some leaders indicated that, if a viewpoint is contrary to the stated direction of the institution, or if the person advocating the position is inexperienced or in a role of minimal influence or impact, it is relatively easy to reject their views rather than taking the normative approach of persuasion through well-argued and evidenced discussion. Where the person concerned was a leader in a particular area but was not in a position of authority, there was acceptance that, once viewpoints had been expressed, then it was necessary to defer to a person/group with more responsibility and accountability and move on with the agreed view.

Successful leadership appears to demand the preparedness to listen to different viewpoints, appreciating that people come with different experiences, understandings and approaches and that these can result in a richer outcome. Beyond this, where that leader has the authority, responsibility and accountability to make the decision, once the consultative stage is completed and the decision is made, it is productive to explain why contrary viewpoints cannot be accommodated so those people are not simply ignored. Doing everything possible to engender buy-in by all those involved (and even the most senior leaders interviewed stressed the importance of buy-in from those above them in the hierarchy as well as those

below) means that having strategies such as this to bring those who are apparently disaffected into the fold makes such an effort well worthwhile.

### **Initiatives carried out in the last 3 years**

All those interviewed were asked to describe distributed leadership capacity initiatives/actions/strategies that had been implemented to contribute to the effective change management of their online environment. Although this issue had been clearly flagged as a focus of the discussion, it is telling that some initially thought they could offer no illustrations and several struggled to make the connections between the different elements. Many of the instances that were given explained how change management within the OLE had occurred but, in most cases, any connection with DL was left as implied or assumed. The initiatives referred to were:

- Making structural changes so related sections are brought together
- Developing a planning framework
- Undertaking a comprehensive skills analysis to reveal skills and understanding in the online space
- Having broad e-learning advancement programs
- Having programs around specific technologies or suites of technologies
- Establishing and developing Faculty-based teams linking pedagogical, educational design and technological expertise
- Identifying and supporting champions and developing exemplar units
- Increasing the investment in developing resources to support online learning: for example, employing online designers, retraining educational developers, offering high quality professional development including paid PD for sessional staff

- Developing standards for good practice to provide staff with a guide to what is acceptable or not acceptable
- Resolving workload issues
- Adopting strategies to increase communication between parties and campuses.

Those interviewed were asked if there had been any **impediments to the implementation of the initiatives they had described**. For three people, there were none, or, at least, none they were aware of. Only one person explicitly referred to the challenge and cost of enabling leaders to lead in this space. As well as technical failures and problems, the impediments described included:

- The absence of local leadership to support a central initiative
- The lack of a culture where there is an expectation that all staff will be highly fluent with the University's OLE and staff are actively encouraged to embrace its opportunities
- Entrenched views
- Time and the many competing priorities for all staff involved
- Lack of workload recognition.

#### **Contemplated initiatives**

Those interviewed were asked to describe any change management initiatives they were contemplating within the OLE space in the next few years and they were encouraged to link this with distributed leadership. As part of this discussion, they were asked to nominate what they considered would be the biggest challenge their university would face in this regard and to indicate how this would be addressed. Resourcing was seen as the key issue but not, as some could expect, fiscal investment in the OLE with several staff from different institutions referring to significant investment of many millions of dollars. Rather, the emphasis was on

staff as a resource and building that capacity. There was widespread recognition that technology changes are very rapid and skills requirements in this area have fundamentally changed and will continue to change. Whereas 5-10 years ago the emphasis was on content preparation with significant investments in products that need quite long lifespans to justify their cost, this has changed to developing pedagogical analysis to discern the best tools to match the learning activities that most suit the learning outcomes desired at a given time for a given group.

### **Building leadership capacity within the OLE space**

This is arguably one of the most significant aspects of building a culture of DL, yet the dominant impression was that this was something that was rarely explicitly attended to or considered. Some of those interviewed were able to cite how they built capacity in particular areas relating to the OLE by, for instance, providing mentoring and professional development activities. Such decisions appeared to be deliberate but, when those interviewed were specifically asked if there had been similar deliberate decisions to build leadership capacity, the answer was “No”. Further, while distributed leadership could readily be expressed through committees and working parties and other networks, and it can reasonably be concluded that these opportunities and the experiences resulted in increased understanding of what effective leadership in this space entailed, there was little in the way of explicit statements regarding what this meant and how this could be developed. Similarly, while there was ready acknowledgement that DL was reliant on having the ‘right’ people in leadership roles, the attributes these people required and how they were recognised as having them – or would have the potential to have them with experience – were far less certain. van Amejide et al. (2009, p. 777) in investigating the improvement of leadership in higher education institutions using a distributed approach highlighted the importance of having a

much broader base of leadership development and organizational conditions more conducive to fostering distributed leadership through networks of expertise. Thus, both skill development and favourable conditions go hand in hand in enhancing engagement and effectiveness. These observations accord with the project findings.

### **Distributed leadership capabilities**

Distributed leadership arises through the interactions of many different people with a common interest in advancing the quality of OLEs. From above, high level positional leadership must accept the overall responsibility for framing a change ready and capable organizational environment. To build and maximize the conditions for effective distributed leadership they must have certain types of leadership capabilities (i.e. knowledge, attitudes and skills). Moreover, those in other leadership roles, or wishing to take advantage of leadership opportunities, must also cultivate capabilities which allow them to perform effectively in such environments. Effective distributed leadership cannot emerge if those participating lack the individual leadership know-how to contribute in highly collaborative ways across a diverse range of parties and contexts. In referring to Table 1, the characteristics of effective DL capacity building can be restated in terms of the know-how required to contribute actively to building and gaining value from distributed leadership structures:

- **Enabled individual and collective agency:** the capacity to exercise individual judgement in informing action, both individually and when working in groups.
- **Co-created and shared vision:** ability to appreciate the institution's strategic intent and directions, contribute to its formation, and contribute actively to its realization in concrete ways.
- **Inclusive of all those who lead:** capacity to rise to the challenge of demonstrating leadership when opportunities are forthcoming, and the confidence to do so wherever

located within the organization hierarchy.

- **Broadest recognition of leadership:** an appreciation of the many ways in which leadership can be demonstrated and the capacity to reach out and use the value of these leadership contributions.
- **Communicative and engaging:** skills to be an open and active communicator, and to engage with a broad range of people's interests and concerns.
- **Appropriate responsibilities:** capacity to clarify leadership responsibilities, and provide maximum room for people to demonstrate initiative and work effectively with others in the sphere of influence.
- **Meaningful rewards:** ability to construct a broad range of rewards for staff to exhibit effective leadership.
- **Trusting and respectful:** capacity to trust those who lead in various roles and ways, and to deal constructively with those who may have alternative viewpoints.
- **Collaborative in development:** skills in contributing to collaborative endeavours and in seeing the added value through the pooling of diverse expertise.
- **Nurturing of valued professional expertise:** capacity to create, support and match staff to professional learning and development opportunities consistent with their career stage and leadership aspirations.
- **Valuing professional forums and communities:** commitment to establishing various forums and communities to enhance OLE practice throughout the organization in ways which maximize opportunities for leadership contributions and which are consistent with strategic directions.
- **Continuity and sustainability:** capacity to foster ongoing commitment to enhancing

the quality of OLEs through mobilizing the broadest range of leaders in ways which create enduring learning and teaching gains.

### **Institutional strategies**

Strategies for capacity building for distributed leadership are centre-stage in managing the quality of OLEs, and should be directed at increasing organizational effectiveness across the system in the service of advancing teaching and learning experiences and outcomes (Fullan, Hill & Crevola, 2006, p. 88). In identifying specific strategies which can be implemented to foster distributed leadership it is important to select and use them in the context of the types of major OLE change management initiatives identified above, and bearing in mind the types of impediments which can be experienced. Often strategies are and need to be used in combination. Institutional and individual needs and benefits must be balanced and tied in with short- and medium-term career goals. With this in mind, the following 12 strategies can provide staff with opportunities to develop, demonstrate and sustain leadership both individually and in association with other leaders:

1. **Local and institutional forums:** opportunities for informal leadership to emerge at various levels and domains and to interact with those in formal leadership positions. Can provide deep level collective understandings around the commonality and diversity of concerns and practices. This can be useful in informing ongoing developments of an institution's OLE.
2. **Inter-institutional forums:** these more formalized opportunities, as facilitated by national, state and regional bodies, provide opportunities for developing a breath of understanding of national and international developments with OLEs, in collaboration with significant other leaders in these domains.
3. **Internal conferences:** on learning technologies often allow staff to informally

showcase their online teaching, and make connections across faculties, campuses and disciplines helping to build with others the capabilities required to more formally lead within and beyond their institution. These events can give senior leaders a breadth of insight into the various and diverse uses of their OLE.

4. **External conferences:** which might be educational or commercial in nature, provide extended opportunities to connect with knowledgeable others nationally and internationally. They provide opportunities for developing or expanding OLE research and development agendas and programs.
5. **Internal research and development projects:** OLE research and development projects can be funded at faculty and/or institutional levels. Bidding can be framed around organizational strategic commitments. They can involve multidisciplinary and cross-functional teams providing new forms of project-based, shared leadership opportunity and responsibility. Projects can help create or at least realize strategic intent in a deep fashion. Their outcomes can be institutionalized and scaled when of broad relevance, generating further distributed leadership engagement.
6. **External research and development projects:** internal projects can be a springboard to externally funded projects of national significance. These focus on questions and topics of national significance, and a number in Australia have been funded in the OLE space. Such projects open up distributed leadership through inter-institutional partnerships with a strong focus on research informed development and dissemination. Leaders can both foster DL through the project and connect findings to a range of relevant leaders within the host institution.
7. **Internal learning technology fellowships:** fellowships can provide faculty staff

with opportunities to interact with their peers in other faculties and with central staff. They can provide the time and support for leadership know-how to be developed within a supportive peer group. Fellowships can provide the basis for further development of leadership through projects, and Fellows might continue their work through institutional and faculty forums.

8. **External learning technology fellowships:** these may be supported by the national teaching/learning body and professional associations. They provide opportunities for high level mentoring and ‘critical friend’ support from acknowledged leaders in higher education nationally and internationally. These can lead to new collaborative opportunities of significance to the staff member’s institution and the sector.
9. **Centrally and locally provided workshops, seminars, training and other information sharing channels and sessions:** staff can develop leadership through running such activities or develop important contacts through active participation. Opportunities for individual and collaborative forms of professional learning away from the immediate pressing demands of specific work activities to be undertaken can stimulate staff to appreciate other contexts and develop richer perspectives. Such staff in interaction with each other can demonstrate important forms of collaborative leadership, and bring shared commitments back to enhancing local OLE practices. Increasingly, institutional information sharing is occurring via social media environments which are open to anybody with relevant expertise to lead discussions or share intelligence on OLE developments.
10. **National and international partners, including benchmarking exercises:** usually these are strategic initiatives pooling expertise amongst those in formal leadership positions across various institutions. They may involve major OLE

benchmarking activities or consortia offering a range of online courses. Having the capabilities in working effectively with the distribution of high level leadership in such arrangements becomes a critical success factor.

11. **Course/program (re)accreditations and course advisory groups:** In Program Director-type roles, shared leadership capabilities are required in undertaking major course/program (re) accreditations in dealing productively with more senior internal leaders and colleagues, and external leaders on course advisory groups. Increasingly, major program (re)developments need to be cognizant of the developing affordances of the institution's OLE in order to achieve fully intended program learning outcomes, and aligned statements of institutional graduate attributes. Effective leadership at the program level can be lead on to further higher level leadership positions with their own accompanying distributed leadership challenges.
  
12. **Development of staff as unit/course chairs, course/program directors/coordinators, Associate Heads of Schools and faculties, Heads of School and Deans, Senior Executive through formal leadership development programs:** off-the-job leadership development opportunities are still important for leaders at different levels of the academic management hierarchy. Such leadership development opportunities can be more valuable when they require a mix of leaders at different levels, in different roles and in different groups to work together on some relevant and important project addressing a real institutional need. Such projects demand effective distributed leadership with participants needing to develop and demonstrate DL know-how to achieve desired solutions.

Responsibility for cultivating distributed leadership could be seen to fall within the province of strategic human resource management (HRM), with its focus on both vertical and

horizontal integration of HR understandings of the organisation and its context, and HR systems across the organisation, in order to improve business performance in partnership with various internal parties (Schuler & Jackson, 2005). A key point of difference, however, between commercial organisations and universities is that organisational responsibility for strategic HRM is not concentrated solely in one HR department. It may itself be distributed, particularly around training and professional development, across HR divisions, central teaching/learning units, and faculty academic development groups. Orchestrating distributed leadership strategies for teaching and learning improvement resides at various levels and in various domains in educational institutions like universities. In relation to satisfying organisational stakeholders, Schuler and Jackson (2005, p.17) argue that innovative industries demand high employee engagement and knowledge development. OLEs in higher education embody innovation, and afford innovative educational practices, and cultivating distributed leadership is a prime way of advancing staff engagement and know-how in systems use – integral to the strategic HRM view. They also highlight strategic contingency theory in the HR realm (Schuler & Jackson, 2005, pp.21-2), and this can be applied to the selection and implementation of distributed leadership strategies suited to the particular context of the institution and its OLE goals. These strategies may vary contingent on whether a new OLE is being selected, initially being trialled, being implemented mainstream, in a mature steady stage of usage, or nearing the end of its current deployment period.

## **Conclusion**

Despite some reservations regarding the term itself, all those interviewed supported the concept of distributed leadership as explained in the statement provided. As the discussions progressed, it became apparent that distributed leadership was not generally regarded as a

conscious and hence explicit enactment of an espoused commitment to this ethos. Rather, actions that are congruent with this ethos have been taken that, on reflection, and with this as the stated philosophical construct, can reasonably be construed as aligned with a distributed leadership mode. People from each of the institutions could point to initiatives they had taken, and/or intended to take, regarding change management of their OLE that involved a network of leaders. Few, however, took a further step to ask if such an approach really impacted on student learning.

The interviews suggested that, for change management within the OLE space to be effective, even within the DL construct there remains a hierarchy of leadership and leaders need to act in ways that accord with their position. While making their own contribution to the university's mission and vision in this regard, it is the responsibility of senior leaders to set an appropriate organizational framework to help shape the effective change management of the OLE. They need to create and/or allow opportunities for various approaches and strategies to be pursued to allow distributed leadership to flourish within such a framework and within well understood and accepted boundaries. Leaders at all levels need to be encouraged and supported to see how their own leadership skills can be enhanced and how they can build leadership capacity in others. As major decisions are implemented, well led interconnected networks, or teams, allow better outcomes for all concerned as all stakeholders work in an environment of mutual respect and support towards common goals and as broader, as well as deeper, engagement with the OLE agenda results.

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## **Appendix A: OLT Online Learning Environments Project interview briefing**

This two year project is concerned with building distributed leadership in designing and implementing a quality management framework for online teaching and learning environments [OLEs]. Following three rounds of focus group discussions at each of the partner institutions (Deakin University, RMIT, University of South Australia, Macquarie University and University of Southern Queensland), Dr Di Challis, the independent consultant who has undertaken this work for the project, will conduct up to three targeted interviews of recognised leaders at each university.

You are invited to set aside 45 minutes for this on-the-record interview. Its focus will be to seek your perceptions in two areas:

- Developing distributed leadership capacity within the OLE space
- Using this (and other strategies) to manage change within the OLE space

For the purpose of this exercise, the project team defines ‘distributed leadership’ as follows.

*Distributed Leadership refers to situations when leadership is said to be distributed among multiple actors who support others in achieving organisational goals. In some ways similar to shared or dispersed leadership, Distributed Leadership exists in relationships, and it recognises informal, emergent and collective acts of influence as well as those instigated by people in formal positions of authority.*

*Leadership can be distinguished from management. Managers are generally thought to focus mostly on monitoring, directing and refining current performance. So management is usually concerned with hierarchy, equilibrium and control. The term leadership, on the other hand, is used to describe what certain individuals do to assist others in achieving organisational goals, and in creating the future and adapting to*

*new demands, often under conditions of change. Leadership has been associated with dynamism, vibrancy and to some extent charisma. Leaders are not always managers.*

At times you may be asked to provide a rating. If so, the following scale has been used throughout the project:

0 = to no extent

1 = to a minimal extent

2 = to a moderate extent

3 = to a reasonable extent

4 = to a good extent

5 = to a very good extent

If your interview is by telephone, it would be helpful if you can refer to this scale.

## Appendix B: Leadership interview questions

	Current position? Since when? Prior leadership positions?
1.1	Do you accept the definition of DL provided by the team and the differentiation between leadership and management?
1.2	If not, why not? How would you change it?
2.1	On a scale of 0-5 how supportive are you of the concept of DL? Why?
2.2	What characterises your leadership?
2.3	How important is it for you as a leader to deal with/accommodate different viewpoints? How do you know what these are? How do you achieve this?
3.1	What <b>distributed leadership</b> capacity initiatives/actions/strategies have been implemented over the past 3 years to contribute to the effective change management of your online environment?
3.2	What has been your role? [Check length of time]
3.3	How effective have these initiatives been in your opinion? [0-5]
3.4	On what do you base this judgement (ie the criteria)?
3.5	Have there been any impediments to their implementation? If so, what are they?
3.6	Would you now revise the rating? [0-5]
4.1	What <b>distributed leadership</b> initiatives would you contemplate implementing as you move into the future management of your OLE?
4.2	How would you go about implementing them for maximum beneficial effect based on past experiences?
4.3	What do you see as the biggest challenge that your University is facing regarding the OLE? How can you/DL contribute to meeting that challenge?
5.1	Do you see limitations to the current and future possibilities of distributed leadership to contribute to the quality management of your online environment?
5.2	Why might this be the case and how do you think you might address any perceived limitations?
5.3	Do you think that distributed leadership might become more or less important in any future change management efforts?
5.4	Why might this be the case?
6	Additional comments