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Evidencing the development of distributed leadership capacity in the quality management of online learning environments (OLEs) in Australian higher education

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The poster will present findings from the first year of a two-year nationally funded Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) project, **Building distributed leadership in designing and implementing a quality management framework for Online Learning Environments** undertaken by Deakin University, Macquarie University, University of South Australia, University of Southern Queensland and RMIT University. The project is running over 2011-2012. This project aims to design and implement a framework that uses a distributed leadership approach for the quality management of Online Learning Environments (OLEs) in Australian higher education. The distributed leadership approach enables the development of the framework and in turn contributes to its implementation. The framework is the vehicle for building leadership capacity. The national project team itself represents a broad range of educational, technical and managerial expertise.

Keywords: quality management, online learning environments, distributed leadership

Project aim

The project aims to: Develop and disseminate through a distributed leadership approach an overall framework for the quality management of online learning environments (OLEs) in Australian higher education. The framework will help guide but not prescribe specific leadership actions in various organisational settings relating to new investments in OLEs, and the ongoing maintenance and enhancement of such environments for the benefit of student learning. It will be a transparent, workable and adaptable set of guidelines, which can also aid internal and external benchmarking of OLEs in the sector.

Key elements of the quality management framework

The poster will highlight the key elements involved in the quality management of OLEs, and their multiple alignments. Specific alignments of particular importance will also be highlighted as based on various investigations undertaken to date. This framework has emerged out of literature reviews, partner institutional profiling and an investigation into learning technologies in use across the sector. The elements of the quality management framework range across **planning, organisational structure, governance, technologies, resourcing and evaluation:**

1. **Planning:** external environmental analysis and trend spotting, strategic intelligence gathering, external benchmarking, organisational capacity analysis, institutional purpose, reputation, vision, principles, objectives and strategies, accountabilities, timelines, and resource implications
2. **Organisational structures:** nature, range, coordination and delivery of valued services (underpinned by clarity of understanding of needed expertise/staffing capabilities) for staff and students
3. **Governance:** institutional, faculty and school/department committees and forums (and associated responsibilities and accountabilities), policies and standards
4. **Technologies:** type, range, integration, promotion, and innovation and mainstreaming of emerging technologies
5. **Resourcing:** maintenance and enhancement of technologies, skills recognition and staff development, media production, evaluation activities, governance mechanisms, i.e. all other elements
6. **Evaluation:** stakeholder's 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.

Certain key element alignments are highlighted: Alignments between Planning/Evaluation/Governance; Alignments between Planning/Organisational Structure; and Alignments between Planning/Technologies. The importance of adopting an evidence-based, multi-stakeholder and strategic approach to evaluating the implementation of online learning environments is highlighted as a key element of the quality management framework and its implementation.

Distributed leadership

There has been significant interest in new lines of leadership theorising around distributed and shared leadership. This theorising sees a paradigm shift from a focus on the leader, as individual, and his or her traits, skills, styles and behaviours in relating to parties designated as followers to a focus on the phenomenon of leadership as enacted through various parties in multiple relationships with leadership intent and capability to achieve valued goals. These parties may be those in formal leadership positions at different levels and in different functional areas in the organisation who wish and need to act in concert, or it may involve those with particular interests and capabilities emerging as informal leaders for periods of time and acting in concert with those with formal leadership authority. Leadership of this nature is seen as distributed or shared (possibly even described as dispersed or networked). While scholars in these fields may take issue, for the purposes of this project, we will treat these terms as being interchangeable and draw upon literature in these domains in covering conceptual and practical matters.

Much of the interest on distributed/shared leadership has emanated from the schools sector at national and international levels (Leithwood, Mascall & Strauss (Eds.), 2009; Harris (Ed.), 2009; Spillane, 2006; Spillane, 2007). As applied to the schools sector, 'the core principle is one of extending or sharing leadership practice' in

response to increasingly perceived structural limitations in advancing leadership and organisational performance (Harris, 2009, p.3).

In summing up the extensive literature on distributed leadership emanating from the schools sector, Spillane (2006, p.4) identifies three essential elements in framing a distributed perspective on leadership: Leadership *practice* is the central and anchoring concern; leadership practice is generated in the *interactions* of leaders, followers, and their situation; each element is essential for leadership practice; the *situation* both defines leadership practice and is defined through leadership practice. In relation to this project, distributed leadership is positioned as contributing to clarity of shared understanding of quality management framework elements and constructive alignments amongst them. To achieve this, distributed leadership must be acknowledged in all its forms, developed and be well aligned both vertically and horizontally. The overall responsibility for cultivating distributed leadership resides in senior formal leadership positions within the institution.

References

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