

Activity 3 Authentic Action Learning Faculty-Based Projects

3



Scholars engaged in leadership capacity development that was enabled through the provision of opportunities and experiences to practice leadership. These opportunities and experiences transpired throughout engagement in authentic and situational learning that occurred in the implementation of faculty-based projects. Implementing the faculty-based project compelled scholars to engage in leadership activities that they might otherwise not have embraced.

The leadership practice that scholars engaged in transpired in the context in which it would most likely be applied. Implementation of the faculty-based projects enabled scholars to engage in real-world, complex tasks that facilitated diverse leadership opportunities and the impetus for collaboration and ongoing reflection.

Through the facilitation of the authentic tasks (faculty-based projects) scholars were provided an opportunity to:

1. Develop 'real-world' leadership skills relevant for the context in which they would be employed; and
2. Construct a legitimate awareness and understanding of the relevance, complexity and perspectives of leadership in the higher education context.

“Doing the project is definitely useful leadership wise because it takes you out of your comfort zone.” (2008 Scholar)

Context

Scholars nominated to be involved in the Distributive Leadership Project (DLP) by submitting an expression of interest (EOI). In submitting the EOI scholars identified the details of their faculty-based project including the intended goals, outcomes and deliverables of implementation. The EOI submissions were assessed against established criteria by institutional steering committees and suitable applicants for involvement in the project were identified.

A decisive factor in the assessment of the EOI nominations was that the proposed faculty-based project: was aligned to institutional and faculty strategic goals; related to improving assessment; and had the approval of the Faculty Dean (See part 3 of this report for an overview of the scholar's faculty-based projects).

A meeting between the scholar and project leader and project manager was organised to discuss the details for involvement in the DLP. At this meeting scholars were given various participant information sheets and signed a project consent form and letter of agreement that outlined the activities and expectations for their involvement in DLP.

Scholars articulated the details of their faculty-based project and strategies for its implementation and considerations for the development of an action plan were discussed.

In the context of the DLP, facilitation of the faculty-based projects commenced after the leadership retreat and concluded at the roundtable. However, the majority of the projects were implemented for a longer duration.

A collection of resources and materials developed in relation to this activity including the call-out notice, letter of agreement and participant information forms, the ethics application, and reporting template are available on the GREEN website at: www.uow.edu.au/cedir/DistributiveLeadership

Program of Activities

Scholars were required to construct a draft action plan for their faculty-based project that was reviewed and further developed at the leadership retreat. These action plans detailed the goals, outcomes and deliverables as well as the proposed strategies for the implementation of the faculty-based project.

An opportunity was provided at the leadership retreat for scholars to discuss, review and get feedback on their action plans, which were further developed in light of these activities. The refined action plans were presented, in a plenary session, to senior institutional leaders (from the participating universities) on the final day of the leadership retreat.

Scholars implemented their strategic action plans over the course of approximately 6 months. Mentoring and coaching, and institutional and cross-institutional meetings provided opportunities for scholars to discuss the status of their faculty-based projects and get feedback from peers, and senior institutional leaders.

Activity 3 Authentic Action Learning Faculty-Based Projects

“I spent a lot of time working on my action plan and I really thought a lot about the action plan and the different phases when I developed it. Then I’ve absolutely stuck to this plan and ensured I had everything done by the specified date. Definitely for me the planning has been most important.” (2008 Scholar)

Monitoring and evaluation of the faculty-based project and the implementation of the action plan was predominantly informal. However, feedback from stage 1 scholars indicated that an impetus to formally evaluate their faculty-based project, mid-way through the implementation phase, would be beneficial. Subsequently in the second stage of the project, scholars were required to produce an interim progress report.

The scholars’ action plans and progress reports for their faculty-based projects are available on the GREEN website at: www.uow.edu.au/cedir/DistributiveLeadership

Success Factors of this Activity as Reported by Scholars

Key factors in the success of the faculty-based projects included:

- strong support from formal leaders in the faculty and/or institution;
- engagement, ‘buy in’ and support of faculty staff and other faculty-based project participants;
- having champion/s to assist in the promotion and progression of the faculty-based project (e.g. senior institutional leaders); and
- implementing a faculty driven project.

Developing a detailed action plan for the implementation of the faculty-based project and then adhering to this plan ensured that key outcomes, timelines and deadlines were achieved.

Opportunity to witness different models and perspectives of leadership contributed to scholars’ construction and awareness of leadership for the higher education context and in the management of their faculty-based project.

“Taking part in this project I have seen the inside workings of other departments and I think that is very important to developing leadership capacity. Getting to see other aspects of the department you learn more.” (2008 Scholar)

The opportunity for scholars to exercise and practice leadership skills and identify and progress leadership qualities they already possessed.

Implementation of the faculty-based projects provided opportunities for the scholars to develop versatile leadership skills that would have applicability across a diverse range of ‘real world’ contexts.

“Some [faculty members] just pay you lip service and give you reasons why it can’t work but these too are good comments that you get back. Many of the problems that these people give you are actually good because they are issues that you have to work through.” (2007 Scholar)

Transparent and regular communication of the status of the faculty-based project to faculty members and those directly involved in the project’s implementation.

Activity 3 Authentic Action Learning Faculty-Based Projects

3

Key Challenges Experienced by Scholars

Getting 'buy in' and engagement from faculty members for the implementation of the faculty-based project.

"Employees directly associated with the project can see the value but they don't always want the extra workload that comes with it." (2007 Scholar)

Conflicting faculty agendas, projects and commitments and staff changes.

"Some employees or colleagues also have a wait and see attitude ... so basically if it works I'll get on board." (2007 Scholar)

Resistance from faculty members to the faculty-based project and addressing this resistance.

"Some people have expressed support and an enthusiasm in the project but for the most part people are busy and it is due to this that they have not engaged with the project. It was interesting to compare my project to one that was being pushed from the top down, mine was from the bottom up. There was a noticeable difference, mine lacked that faculty driven impetus, there wasn't a purpose from the faculty for mine whereas there was in the other project." (2008 Scholar).

Not taking setbacks, challenges and resistance personally, managing these strategically and thoughtfully not emotionally.

Sufficiently progressing the faculty-based project to be able to report on and discuss key findings at the roundtable.

"It was hard in the given timeline to experiment with assessment and trial something." (2008 scholar)

Maintaining the original parameters of the faculty-based project. Many of the scholars found it difficult to keep their projects contained often adding extra tasks, outcomes, activities and deliverables to their action plan.

Lack of interest and enthusiasm in the faculty-based project from other members of staff.

Keeping participants engaged and sustaining their enthusiasm and interest in the faculty-based project.

Dispelling the notion that the faculty-based project belonged to the scholar, maintaining an ongoing appreciation that the project was a faculty initiative.

Obtaining specific and constructive feedback on the implementation of the faculty-based project. Scholars indicated that much of the feedback they received was generally not as detailed as they would have liked.

Monitoring and evaluating the progress of the faculty-based project.

Activity 3 Authentic Action Learning Faculty-Based Projects

Review and Improvement

It was suggested that assembling scholars into groups, at the leadership retreat, according to the focus of their faculty-based project would have established a community of practice and founded a group that could work collaboratively and provide specific feedback on the implementation of the faculty-based projects.

*“It may have been beneficial if we had worked on the faculty projects in conjunction with someone else from one of the other universities talking about virtual teams in this sense.”
(2008 Scholar)*

Another suggestion was to have a Senior institutional leader (e.g. DVC) present the faculty-based project and scholar to a university wide forum. It was perceived that this would promote the project and communicate its credibility and worth to faculty members; thereby enhancing the possibility of ‘buy in’ and engagement from faculty staff.

More opportunities for specific feedback on the faculty-based projects from DLP participants and leaders was suggested. Enabling this to occur in a face to face manner was also perceived by scholars as highly beneficial.

The issue of obtaining specific feedback on the faculty-based projects was mentioned often. One suggestion for addressing this was to instigate formal feedback mechanisms, (e.g. a survey). It was further suggested that it would be worthwhile communicating the results from such a process back to the faculty.

Links and Resources

Resources developed throughout the Project to support this activity are available on the GREEN website:
www.uow.edu.au/cedir/DistributiveLeadership