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Holt, Dale, Palmer, Stuart and Challis, Di 2011, Changing perspectives : teaching and learning centres' strategic contributions to academic development in Australian higher education, *International journal for academic development*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 5-17.

This is the postprint version.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in the *International journal for academic development* in March 2011, available at:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/1360144X.2011.546211>

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Changing perspectives: Teaching and Learning Centres' strategic contributions to academic development in Australian higher education

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Keywords: strategic leadership; academic development; learning organisation; points of leverage

This paper reports on a study of Australian teaching and learning Centres to identify factors that contribute to the effective strategic leadership of Centres. Centres remain in a state of flux, with seemingly endless reconfiguration. The drivers for such change appear to lie in decision makers' search for their Centres to add more strategic value to organisational teaching, learning and the student experience. Through a synthesis of findings based on interviews, a survey of Directors of Centres and focus groups the paper identifies paradigmatic shifts in the ways Centres see themselves, relate to their organisations and respond to external environmental forces. From an understanding of paradigm shifts, strategic contributions to academic development in the sector are framed organisationally through key points of leverage. Points of leverage are manageable actions which can be taken which maximise overall institutional impact and effectiveness.

Introduction

This paper synthesises findings across data collection phases of a research project supported by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) as part of a study of Australian teaching and learning Centres (hereafter 'Centres') to identify common factors that contribute to the effective strategic leadership of Centres to enhance long-term teaching and learning performance. The paper presents overarching observations on the changing nature of Centres and their strategic contributions to academic development in Australian higher education. Paradigms, as described by Guba and Lincoln (1989), are basic belief systems that guide actions. They are fundamental and shared constructions of social realities. Observations on paradigmatic shifts in the beliefs and assumptions shaping the activities of Centres draws upon the interview phase of the project, while the framing of the ten points of leverage responded to the key areas of improvement identified in the survey by Australian Centre Directors, and various viewpoints shared amongst Centre stakeholders in the focus groups. The strategic leadership framework and strategies presented form a constructive response to the volatility of Centres' existence, and associated complexity of academic development work, as highlighted by Brew (2007) and Brew and Peseta (2008) in the Australian context, and Gosling (2009) in the UK sphere.

The research approach

The project was undertaken within the framework of mixed methods research (Creswell 2003; Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003). Mixed methods research allows the researcher(s) to draw on data collection methods that are complementary to the purpose of the research and which may arise from qualitative or quantitative epistemologies (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). The purposeful choice of mixed method design allows for

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the collection of ‘multiple data using different strategies, approaches, and methods in such a way that the resulting mixture or combination is likely to result in complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses’ (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004, 16).

The first phase of project data collection involved conducting structured interviews with five groups of key Centre stakeholders providing strategic leadership perspectives in a representative range of Australian tertiary institutions. In determining what makes Centres successful, the issues that are likely to impact on their ability to succeed were examined (see list of interview issues in Appendix A). It emerged that a myriad of factors influence whether or not a Centre was recognised as being an integral and valued part of the university’s teaching and learning community - a hallmark of having reached maturity. However, four factors were identified as being critical to the ability of Centres to succeed: clarity of role and direction; shared understanding of purpose; the capacity and capability to achieve purpose; and ability to demonstrate value (Challis, Palmer & Holt, 2009).

The second phase of project data collection involved the development of an online survey, which the Directors/Heads of Centres at the 38 (of 39) Australian universities with an identifiable Centre of teaching and learning were invited to complete. The survey was focussed on the key issues emerging from the interviews. Specifically, the two areas identified as being in need of greatest improvement were: the provision of academic professional development (APD) for sessional and ongoing faculty teaching staff; and the provision of APD for leaders in teaching and learning. The principal constraint identified by Centres was ‘lack of staff time’, both in the faculties and in the Centre, to engage in teaching and learning improvement activities, followed by an incorrect or outdated general perceptions of the role and function of the Centre, and insufficient resources to have a significant impact (Palmer, Holt & Challis, 2010; article covers structure of survey).

The third phase of the project data collection involved focus groups held at a representative sample of 10 of the 38 Australian universities with an identifiable Centre (see list of focus group activities in Appendix B). The aims of the focus group phase were to: further explore the key issues and critical factors for Centre success identified in the interviews; and identify practical strategies for tackling the key constraints and desired areas of improvement for Centres that were identified in the survey.

Perspectives on strategic leadership: Paradigmatic shifts

Teaching and learning centres in Australian higher education are undergoing profound change. Substantial change will continue as universities search for long-term strategic benefits from their centres. The challenge is one of how centres can position themselves, at the very heart or operating ‘centre’ of their universities’ endeavours in teaching and learning. New ways of seeing the purpose of Centres can be usefully framed around a sense of changing beliefs that should shape the work of centres in contemporary environments. Beliefs might be seen in relation to an older traditional paradigm of conceiving Centre work compared to a newer, emerging paradigm of what Centres might be, and how they might think and act with more pervasive effect.

Thinking strategically in these more fundamental terms can in turn support informed collaborative action suited to particular organisational contexts. Mintzberg (2004) argues that leaders need conceptual frameworks to enable them to understand the descriptive contexts of their organisations and to fashion decision making accordingly. They do not need theories that prescribe leadership decision making in advance of depth in contextual understanding. Gosling (2009) notes the growing strategic role of Centres in their organisational environments and outlines this role in relation to planning and policy development. The starting point in understanding such developments lies more fundamentally with exploring shifting paradigms encompassing all aspects of the purpose, functions and activities of Centres. The characteristics of these paradigms, as drawn from the current study, are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison between traditional and new centre paradigms

Dimensions	Traditional teaching and learning centre paradigm	New, emerging teaching and learning centre paradigm
Relationship with university senior executive	Disconnection	Strong connection – senior executive part of & not remote from Centre
Involvement in university planning & policy making	Marginal	Central
Relationship with faculties/equivalents	Separation & remoteness	Openness & active involvement
Active representation of faculty teaching & learning committees	Marginal	Strong
Professional development approach	Primary reliance on inflexible institutional workshop & seminar program	Multi-faceted, responsive and flexible set of approaches – central & local
Graduate certificates of tertiary teaching or equivalent	Conducted in isolation from faculties	Conducted in partnership with faculties
Work of academic developers	Working in a vacuum	Working in tune with organisational vision & direction
Academic development capacity	Limited to those in designated academic development positions	Expanded through recognition of academic development contribution of outstanding faculty educators
Relationships with faculty-based academic development peers (where relevant)	Disconnection	Strong connections through professional development work & forums
Centre purpose, functions, internal structure/decision making	Confused & unaligned	Clear & well aligned
Organisational arrangements	Closed to internal & external opportunities, and productive partnerships	Openness to opportunities & partnerships
Faculty teaching/learning leadership with which Centres can engage	Lack of well defined faculty leadership	Well established levels and layers of faculty leadership
Access and use of evidence	Difficulty in accessing and using data & scholarship for improvement	Good access, generation & use of data and scholarship for development and improvement
Resources & rewards	Lack of capacity to mobilise resources for innovation & development, and rewards for outstanding performance	Strong capacity to support innovation & development, and to provide significant rewards for outstanding performance
Focus on staff capacity building	Limited in building & using capacities	Strong building & using of capacities

Focus on productive career development	Little of no effort	Major & substantial effort
Synergies between above domains	Not seen & not exploited	Fully recognised & supported

Centres have been evolving for some time (Gosling, 2009). The challenge of moving from an older to a newer paradigm for guiding the work of Centres requires a renewed sense of what leading strategically by and through a teaching and learning centre might mean, and how it might work. In setting this challenge, and a possible way forward, we draw upon the work of Peter Senge (1990) on the leadership of learning organisations. Senge identifies three leadership roles in building learning organisations, namely: leader as designer, leader as teacher and leader as steward. We are interested primarily in the first of these roles. Leader as designer is about building the organisation’s purpose and values, implementing policies, strategies and structures that translate intent into action, underpinned by effective learning processes institution-wide. Collective responsibility for thinking, acting and learning can be enabled through a networked and distributed leadership framework.

Centres, through fostering networking and distributed leadership, can contribute to the growth of staff capabilities for teaching and learning development, innovation and advancement. This can be their truly strategic learning leadership role. What group, situated in a university, is better placed to play this role than teaching and learning centres? Over eras of Centre contributions to teaching and learning emphases have moved across supporting staff through unit, technology and program development. Developing staff capabilities can encompass all three of these emphases, and can be done with major strategic impact throughout the organisation. The goal is that all parties can see themselves as being within the ‘centre’ or conceptual and action-based networking space devoted to designing and implementing valued teaching and learning futures. Through the network, Centres can demonstrate strategic leadership in contributing to the creation of vision and direction, in setting/settling upon the desired vision/direction, in realising the value of plans to achieve the vision in collective, integrated action. Maximising strategic impact would come through all parties working in concert in different areas and at different levels of the organisation, or in different interacting nodes of the one coherently designed institutional network.

Mintzberg (1989), in studying the five key design factors that shape the structure of organisations, classifies universities as professional bureaucracies. Universities, he argues, are hierarchically organised by discipline specialisation. Hence, we see universities organised into faculty-based clusters of similarly related disciplines, with a further more specialised grouping of single disciplines or tightly related disciplines at the departmental level. Professional learning and development in education is, therefore, vertically driven and governed by discipline concerns. Networking, on the other hand, complements vertical learning through the provision of opportunities for educators and leaders to engage horizontally across departments, faculties and disciplines: not only to engage across areas of interest at a particular level but also to relate throughout various organisational levels and domains. This networked, informal and collegial environment, we argue, provides great potential to enhance teaching and learning throughout the organisation and to contribute to external networking opportunities as well.

Centre leadership, including a university senior executive charged with the responsibility of teaching and learning, are well placed to play a strategic leadership role in initiating and developing an organisational teaching and learning network supportive of, and complementary to, the formal structures and governance of the institution. Through a more purposeful and systematic approach to designing and implementing teaching and learning networks, Centres can magnify their impact through the many agents (people and resources) that can be productively drawn into their many and varied relationships. Centres, therefore, can orchestrate resources across, up and down the organisation to best support teaching and learning enhancements through such networking and the distributed leadership entailed in its operation. As organisational entities, a centre’s real

strategic purpose would be to act as a key node or even the ‘central’ hub of the organisation’s teaching and learning network.

Points of leverage in the teaching and learning network

Senge (1990) identifies systems thinking, and the associated notion of leverage, as a key skill for leaders building learning organisations:

Systems thinking also shows that small, well-focused actions can produce significant, enduring improvements, if they are in the right place. Systems thinkers refer to this idea as the principle of ‘leverage’. Tackling a difficult problem is often a matter of seeing where the high leverage lies, where a change– with a minimum of effort– would lead to lasting, significant improvement (Senge, 1990, p. 15).

The following examines ten key points of leverage for the strategic leadership of teaching and learning centres and the organisations in which they exist. These have been drawn from and developed through the consideration of key findings from all three phases of data collection. To maximise strategic impact, Centres can and should be actively contributing in a number of areas of leverage for positive organisational change. They provide a useful summary of advice and guidance gleaned from the project’s evidential base.

Leverage point 1: New visions/new plans

Given the intensely competitive national environment, universities are developing more ambitious visions and plans. Clear and ambitious visions and goals proceed naturally from universities’ historical commitments and strengths. They lead directly into their ambitions for special positioning and recognition in the sector. Visions and plans can provide the key point of differentiation and attraction for universities in the minds of their various stakeholders. They address the questions of who we are, what we stand for and how we go about our business. It seems that many universities continue to develop, review, clarify or change their vision as articulated with the directions they wish to take in teaching and learning. Vision seems essential given the changing nature of teaching and learning environments in higher education. For example, Bates (2000) argues for the centrality of educationally well grounded and articulated visions to shape the best uses of technology in higher education. Choice, possibilities and pitfalls loom large in charting desired future directions. A university’s vision for guiding desired directions in teaching and learning needs to be widely recognised, understood and enacted throughout the organisation. Lack of clear vision can be reflected in misguided, fragmented and localised teaching and learning initiatives. Teaching and learning centres can make significant contributions to developing their organisation’s vision for teaching and learning, and accompanying plans and policies. They can do this by:

- drawing upon national and international research in higher education and trends in good practices;
- undertaking scholarship in teaching and learning focusing on the distinctive approaches to enhancing their institution’s students’ learning experiences;
- assisting their organisations in developing formal connections with other universities with similar aspirations for the purpose of sharing practices, innovations and insights emanating from strategic direction;
- supporting their institution’s efforts in developing visions and plans which gain broad acceptance among academic and administrative staff through wide consultation;
- contributing to the details required to convert statements of principle and aspiration into teaching and learning plans and policies that have appropriate objectives accompanied with achievable targets, timeframes and accountabilities.

Universities are developing visions for learning, teaching and research in times of major change. Visions of desired states of organisational growth and development should be crafted for and by the key stakeholders affected and charged with their implementation.

Leverage point 2: Preparation of new continuing academic staff

The appropriate induction and preparation of academic teaching staff is a national priority area of investigation in Australian higher education. Universities have introduced compulsory GCHE (or equivalent) to develop the teaching knowledge and skills of new continuing teaching staff. Some of these courses have been very rigid in their course structures, although anecdotal evidence suggests that some have been reviewed and restructured to make them more suited (i.e. relevant and flexible) to the changing world of academic work. Rather than having rigid structures that develop the same basic set of teaching knowledge and skills in all new academics, courses are being revamped to allow each new staff member to develop the knowledge and skills most appropriate to their own professional and personal circumstances. This has been a consequence of recognising the enormous diversity of staff teaching capabilities undertaking such courses on entering their university. This diversity is multi-dimensional covering not only existing teaching experience, that can range from first time teaching to twenty years' existing experience, but also dimensions such as the different pedagogies that are the norm across disciplines, the commitment to completing such courses, career stage, and expertise in specific areas of teaching, knowledge of technology, existing teaching qualifications and research skills.

The aims of GCHE or equivalents, as part of the deliberations of the National Foundations Colloquium, are being recast to better recognise more relevant and flexible approaches informed by the scholarship on academic preparation to teach in higher education, and which appropriately consider existing expertise of participants and allows for depth of study as well as breadth of study as valid pathways through the courses. Universities are reshaping their courses in ways consistent with their own teaching and learning strengths, commitments and directions. There appears to be great potential to create articulated pathways between initial induction/orientation events, foundations programs that focus on the development of practical teaching skills, and graduate studies on tertiary teaching from certificate through masters to doctorate levels. Such articulated pathways can and should now embody flexible arrangements and blended learning, staff-centred approaches. They should be responsive to personalised and contextualised career development needs and circumstances. Teaching and learning centres have played a prominent role in leading the development of these institutional approaches to academic teaching capacity building. This represents a significant point of leverage in engaging staff with academic development opportunities consistently across the entire institution.

Leverage point 3: Compulsory casual teaching development program

As with continuing academic teaching staff, the recognition of the special developmental needs of casual staff is also a national area of priority investigation in Australian higher education. Teaching and learning Centres can throw an important spotlight on the developmental needs and circumstances of this substantial body of teaching staff in the system. Institutional programs have been developed with an emphasis on a student-centred/learning-centred approach to teaching – an approach that will lead to deep (rather than surface) learning. They are premised on current educational theory, but designed to be practical in nature. These types of programs have in turn complemented more customised offerings within faculties and disciplines.

Leverage point 4: Just-in-time professional development

Peters (1992, p. 383) observes in relation to developing knowledge management structures in dispersed organisations that 'Wise application of information technology is a necessary, but far from sufficient, condition for knowledge management success'. Professional development (PD) online should be available in geographically dispersed organisations just-in-time/just-sufficient for the individual staff member's immediate needs, and just-for-them. Many universities are spread geographically over different campuses, different cities, and through different regions locally, nationally and internationally. Many academics are highly mobile in their research, teaching, management and consultancy work. It would be fair to say that the contemporary academic enterprise, work and work patterns are now highly dependent on information and communications technologies (ICTs). Flexibility of provision of professional learning opportunities seems imperative in most institutions, irrespective of the degree of their formal commitment to online or flexible education for their students.

Online-supported professional development environments should be viewable by key domains and skill areas related to excellence in tertiary teaching and learning. Moreover, they could be viewable by a staff member's level of tertiary teaching competence and experience. For example, the environment could be viewed by those new to tertiary teaching, new to teaching at the university, and by more experienced, competent teachers for their ongoing professional development. To achieve this, such environments are best driven by searchable databases. Such environments should be problem and issue centred therefore allowing staff to quickly locate resources and use communication channels to improve their teaching in both virtual and physical settings.

They should contain generic advice and support on tertiary teaching and learning principles and practices along with connections into discipline-based educational concerns. The sites should be open to a broad range of parties who can contribute to enhancing the quality of teaching and student learning, including visitors who may wish to understand how quality tertiary teaching is conceived, and how its quality can be enhanced in an e-supported, dynamic action oriented environment. In many institutions, online-supported professional development environments need to promote a sense of community involvement across faculties, departments, programs and disciplines. The resources within these environments should be rich in multimedia and such material should be able to be manipulated by teacher-users for different purposes. Overall, these environments should showcase the integration of the best of a range of e-learning technologies from learning management systems to multimedia content repositories to social software tools like blogs, wikis and podcasting. They are squarely in the domain of Teaching and Learning Centres.

Leverage point 5: Communities of practice

The career advancement view above is designed to develop educators with specialist expertise relevant to teaching in their fields of interest and their possible contribution is discussed above. They can also act within communities of practice (CoPs) to support excellent teaching within the institution through activities such as recognition of new outstanding educators within the institution, and dissemination of outstanding teaching practice.

Communities of teaching/teacher and learning/learners practice can be fundamental in enabling the realisation of an institution's teaching and learning vision. However, as Viskovic (2006) notes, not all teacher's local communities are 'warm, friendly and cooperative', and this may hinder the operation of CoPs. A further factor that may explain the slow emergence of successful CoP activity in Australian higher education is that industry-focused management/corporation CoPs may not translate readily into the academic environment. Given that research into and practical applications of CoP have primarily been industry-focused, a new paradigm for CoP in academe called CoP-iA can be argued (Nagy & Burch, 2009).

While, conventionally CoPs meet face-to-face Spratt, Palmer and Coldwell (2000) showed that virtual CoPs can be effective. Online environments are crucial as a key focus of investigation relating to good practice, policy development, research and scholarship in flexible education and as a key means in a distributed organisation to enable virtual communication and collaboration. Fostering a range of CoPs at different levels, on different topics of interest and in relation to different faculties, schools, disciplines and campuses will require the new forms of social software tools and networking underpinning an online-supported social learning architecture. Teaching and learning Centres, with e-learning mandates, are well placed to lead the design of such architectures.

Leverage point 6: Strategic funding for development

The delicate balancing act in higher education relates to emphasis on the conservation of resources often associated with quality assurance (QA), and risky investments in innovation associated with quality improvement (QI), indeed, major quality break-throughs. Encouraging innovation is an important aspect of demonstrating major strengths in teaching and learning. It has been seen as particularly important in demonstrating leadership in new technologies related to on- and off-campus education. Over time, many universities have attempted to stimulate innovation through substantial strategic institutional funding devoted to projects directed towards advancing teaching and learning within disciplines, within and across faculties, and for the entire organisation. A significant proportion of this funding has been directed to projects related to the use of technology in teaching and learning, an area of continuing ongoing importance. Teaching and Learning centres can orchestrate applications and ensure findings are readily available and fed through the organisation. As well as helping to maximise institutional value and impact, Centres can enable such internal strategic projects to springboard into national grant applications. This helps to crystallise and promote educational leadership strengths within the institution, nationally and internationally with a broadening pool of benefit to higher education scholarship and good practices.

Leverage point 7: Supporting teaching excellence through awards and fellowships

Teaching awards and fellowships are powerful ways of recognising excellent teachers, and providing them and their colleagues with development opportunities. The ALTC has developed a strong framework of criteria and descriptors for assessing teaching excellence and programs that enhance learning. The ALTC has also been concerned with recognising and rewarding a broader range of staff and teams who directly or indirectly contribute to the quality of the student learning experience. Universities have been aligning their own teaching excellence award schemes with the ALTC framework. Various motivations can lead staff to apply for national and institutional awards. Some staff members seek alone, or with colleagues, recognition and reward for their accomplishments that in turn might support their own career development and advancement. They may not wish to feel obliged to share formally their special educational expertise with colleagues in the organisation. Others may be motivated to apply for both individual recognition and reward, and to use it as a vehicle for demonstrating their educational expertise and leadership in the organisation through various formal roles and mechanisms.

Leverage point 8: Disseminating exemplary practices online

In the corporate world, Peters (1992) highlights the importance of computer-based knowledge management structures to enable the acquisition, storage and deployment of organisational learning outcomes for future business value. As related to higher education, the value of cases of good practice as an integral resource in online supported professional development environments has been argued by Segrave, Holt and Farmer (2005).

Jonassen, Peck and Wilson (1999), drawing upon the ecological metaphor of learning environments as spaces, identify cases as a key resource in supporting individual and collaborative exploration and problem solving. Cases in such environments provide ‘on-demand advice. They supplant the experience that the novice teacher has not had’ (Jonassen, Peck & Wilson, 1999, p. 198). Holt, Borland, Farmer, Rice and Mulready (2005) report on an online case resource to support the professional development of staff particularly in the area of digital and online-based teaching and learning. The move to new online learning systems and applications is often accompanied with staff requests for online teaching exemplars to stimulate their thinking about the new possibilities for blended, online and distance education provision. Teaching and learning Centres have a breadth of involvement in teaching developments and can best mobilise and disseminate such exemplars for the benefit of all staff in the institution.

Leverage point 9: Recognition and use of education ‘experts’

By building up a pool of ‘experts’ in different areas of teaching, as universities do with researchers in different areas of research, institutions can create a resource bank of potential mentors who can help others wanting to build up their own specialist teaching expertise. Such a pool of experts could also be called upon to oversee or drive innovative teaching developments across the institution, undertake external benchmarking exercises, pursue higher education research and external grant funding, and provide informal advice in key policy areas to members of the university executive. These groupings of expert educators are emerging across the sector in a number of forms – as colleges, leadership forums or networks. Universities need to increasingly draw upon the knowledge and experience of their best educators, wherever they might be located in the organisation, to enhance significantly the student learning experience through leadership in teaching and learning. In response to the challenge to give greater recognition and developmental opportunities to a much broader range of talented and committed staff, these teaching leaders may occupy formal or informal leadership roles across the institution. In doing this, it is important for universities to recognise publicly the achievements of their most outstanding educators in a way that creates parity of esteem with conventional research activity for the scholarly practice of teaching and learning. Teaching and learning Centres are best placed organisationally to enable and maintain the coming together of such experts to operate collegiately for mutual development. They are also well placed to nurture the development of the next generations of expert educators, and to connect such expertise to the developmental needs of new and mid-career teaching staff requiring different types of local guidance.

Leverage point 10: Renewing leadership

Ramsden (1998, p. 3) observed:

These are sharp and stimulating times. These are times when leadership comes into its own. It is the task of academic leaders to revitalise and energise their colleagues to meet the challenges of tough times with eagerness and with passion. We have seriously underestimated the power of leadership in higher education.

More than a decade on the observation still holds true. Jameson (2006, p. 36) argues for a new ‘connected transformational leadership field’ in post-compulsory education encompassing distributed and shared leadership in educational organisations.

The ALTC has funded a number of leadership capacity building grants projects, inter alia, examining the roles of various academic leaders from deans, heads of departments, associate deans (teaching and learning) and course coordinators. There are universities who have reviewed or are reviewing the roles of associate deans and associate heads of school (teaching and learning), with the view to refocusing their contributions around QI, development and innovation in realising scholarship-driven visions for teaching and learning. Coupled with refocusing the roles of those in formal leadership positions is the expansion of scholarly teaching leaders as described above and their mobilisation within communities of practice. The aim of such initiatives it appears is

to develop a more inclusive distributed leadership capability in teaching and learning across the institution by recognising the important relationships between those: in both formal and informal leadership roles; in different areas; and operating at different levels of responsibility within the organisation. This more inclusive view of leadership is also supported by Marshall, Adams, Cameron and Sullivan (2000).

With the adoption of corporate-wide e-learning technologies by universities aimed at adding value to on-campus and off-campus education, an ongoing challenge appears to be the effective leadership and management of technology-enabled, distributed learning environments (Coates, 2006). This, in turn suggests the need for robust forms of distributed educational leadership to ensure that such distributed learning environments generate maximum teaching and learning value for all parties, with a strong focus on enhancing student engagement and productive learning in a broad range of contexts. Universities are implementing special leadership development programs for associate deans (teaching and learning), associate heads of school (teaching and learning) and course coordinators, and strategic leadership of Centres is well placed to help conceive and deliver these initiatives.

Conclusions

Centres remain in a state of flux, enduring regular change. Flux is symptomatic of the continual search to construct Centres in ways which simultaneously meet the needs of university senior executives for overall institutional improvement (often through generic, centralised, off-the-job professional development approaches), and faculties wishing to improve their own performance in highly decentralised, customised and personalised approaches. These seemingly competing demands and approaches are difficult to reconcile to the satisfaction of various parties. In the hurly-burly of day-to-day work, compromises can be made, expectations not completely met, and overall and local organisational performance not significantly enhanced.

The paper argues for a deeper and more profound reconceptualisation of the purpose and modus operandi of the work of Centres. It draws attention to changing strategic leadership perspectives through juxtaposing a more traditional Centre paradigm with that of an emerging paradigm more suitable to contemporary higher education environments. This need for reconceptualisation was reported through the viewpoints of Centre leaders in the project. Essentially, Centres need to see their strategic leadership contribution as the designers and sustainers of open teaching and learning networks encompassing powerful forms of learning both across, and up and down the organisation.

As a key node or hub of such networking, Centre leadership can create more expansive and sustained value through astutely using the notion of points of leverage. The list of points of leverage canvassed was not meant to be exhaustive. The points of leverage put forward were presented as being indicative of the types of action that can be taken in an organisation, shaped by the value of rich networking, to create and sustain longer-term value in teaching, learning and the student experience. These points of leverage are best mobilised in appropriate combinations – not all will be relevant at particular points in time for every institution. To realise the potential of new paradigmatic thinking and action, a broader range of leadership stakeholders need to be attuned to such alternative viewpoints.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank their own University (Deakin) and the partner institutions (Macquarie University, Monash University, RMIT University, University of New England, University of Newcastle) for their generous contribution to this project as well as all those participants who contributed to the data collection processes. Support for this publication has been provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd, an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The

views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

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Appendix A. List of interview issues

The key issues explored through the interview process were:

1. the leadership role of the individual being interviewed and notions of leadership;
2. key stakeholders and key relationships;
3. organisational redesign/(re)structuring;
4. enhancement of long-term learning and teaching;
5. purposes of a teaching and learning Centre;
6. how the Centre is responding to national and international developments in higher education;
7. how the individual being interviewed will judge the effectiveness of their Centre over time; and
8. constraints (if any) on the achievement of their vision and how they respond.

Appendix B. List of focus group activities

The focus groups were structured around four activities.

1. A method used to stimulate reflection and discussion in the focus groups was to ask participants to firstly describe their Centre as it currently stands using a single word or phrase, and to secondly describe their 'ideal' Centre using a single word or phrase. Each pair of descriptors was recorded, and group discussion was centred on congruence of responses in terms of the Centre now compared to the ideal, paying special attention to what the group perceived as 'outlier' perceptions and seeking explanations where there were apparent strong differences in perception.
2. Focus group participants were provided with a sheet outlining the four previously identified factors critical for Centre success (Challis, Holt, & Palmer, 2009). Participants were given a red pen to draw arrows to show the connections and relationships between the boxes, and otherwise annotate the figure as they wished, based on how things currently operate at their own institution. Participants were then given a blue pen to repeat the exercise, based on what should happen in an 'ideal' world.

3. Participants were asked to discuss and record practical strategies for dealing with the key constraints (lack of time, outdated perceptions of the Centre, and insufficient resources) and key areas of desired improvement (provision of academic professional development for casual and continuing staff, and for teaching and learning leaders), as identified previously (Palmer, Holt, & Challis, 2010).
4. Finally, participants were asked what they would wish for their Centre if they could be guaranteed of that one wish being granted within the next 12 months. The groups then discussed the 'wishes' identified.