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Distributed and collaborative: Experiences of local leadership of a first year experience program

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Abstract*

Local level leadership of the first year experience (FYE) is critical for engaging academic and professional staff in working collaboratively on a whole of institution focus on student transition and success. This paper describes ways in which local informal leadership is experienced at faculty level in an institutional FYE program, based on interviews with faculty coordinators and small grant recipients. Initial analysis using the distributed leadership tenets described by Jones, Hadgraft, Harvey, Lefoe, and Ryland (2014) revealed features that enabled success, such as collaborative communities, as well as faculty differences influenced by the strength of the external mandate for change in the FYE. More fine-grained analysis indicated further themes in engaging others, enabling and enacting the FYE program that fostered internal mandates for change: gaining buy-in; being opportunistic; making use of evidence of success and recognition; along with the need for collegial support for coordinators and self-perceptions of leadership being about making connections, collaboration, trust and expertise.

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Introduction

Successful student first year experience requires a whole-of-institution approach that ensures that students are supported inside and outside the curriculum (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Nelson, 2014; Thomas, 2012; Zepke, 2013). This involves collaboration between academic and professional staff across traditional institutional boundaries. It requires top-down, bottom-up and middle-out leadership that recognises contributions made by people on the basis of their contexts and expertise. Leadership of this kind has come to be known as distributed, collective or shared (Bolden, Jones, Davis, & Gentle, 2015). This paper analyses the ways in which distributed, informal leadership is enacted in an institutional-wide FYE program, focusing on common themes and on different leadership practices in different local contexts.

Distributed and local leadership

Distributed leadership involves individuals with diverse forms of expertise collaborating with others on shared goals and initiatives (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2008; Jones, Harvey & Lefoe, 2014; Jones, Lefoe, Harvey, & Ryland, 2012; Jones, Hadgraft et al., 2014). It works alongside formal leadership, and involves informal leadership that engages people with shared change through collegiality and collaboration (Gosling, Bolden, & Petrov, 2009). This view is aligned with Ramsden's (1998) perspective that leadership is enacted through "how people relate to each other" (p. 4), and contrasts with a focus on the traits of individuals in leadership positions.

Within higher education institutions, distributed leadership can be successful in facilitating alignment between top-down strategic directions and bottom-up emergent approaches, ensuring cross-organisational collaboration (Bolden et al., 2008) and engaging academic and professional staff in collaborative activities (Jones, Harvey, et al., 2014). When used to implement institution-wide learning

and teaching initiatives, distributed leadership approaches have been found to facilitate engagement and change and build leadership capacity (Beckmann, 2016; Carbone et al., 2017; Hamilton, Fox, & McEwan, 2013).

While there is a growing literature on distributed leadership, there is a gap in our understanding of the contextual factors and practices that enable it to be successful at the local level—a gap that Middlehurst (2008) also noted in the general leadership literature. Formal leaders at the local level, such as Heads of Department or Program Directors, have been found to influence and facilitate change in different ways, and be more or less successful, depending on the strength of their external mandate from the institution and the internal mandate gained from their colleagues (Mårtensson & Roxå, 2016). Similar to their work, this paper seeks to explore the gap identified above by investigating the leadership practice of informal leaders who engage in close-up practice in a particular context—a first year experience program.

Local leadership in the UTS First Year Experience Program

The UTS FYE program is an institution-wide approach to supporting transition, retention and success for first year students (see McKenzie & Egea, 2016). While it aims to support students from low socio-economic status (LSES) backgrounds, it does so from within a philosophy of inclusive good practice (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, & McKay, 2012). Since 2011, the FYE program has engaged almost 700 academic and professional staff and influenced significant improvements in student pass rates, particularly for students from LSES backgrounds, using distributed leadership approaches, communities, forums and small grants.

Leadership of the program began centrally, informed by local consultation. In 2011 to 2012, representatives from faculties and professional

areas worked with the central teaching and learning unit in an FYE advisory group. While this engaged the group members, it was recognised that greater local leadership could achieve greater buy-in from faculty colleagues. In 2013, First Year Transition Experience (FYTE) coordinators were appointed at the faculty level. Employed for one day a week or the equivalent, most of the initial coordinators were female and in precarious academic positions but two were male and more senior.

FYTE coordinators report to Associate Deans and align their work to faculty goals within the FYE strategy. They mostly have no line management or course director responsibilities, so exercise local leadership in more informal ways aligned with distributed leadership (McKenzie & Egea, 2015). They also meet regularly as a group with the central FYE coordinator and project owner, with most meetings including staff from professional units.

FYTE coordinators are not the only ones engaged in local, informal leadership of the FYE. First year grant recipients, professional staff and academic development and language specialists also influence and collaborate at the local level. However, the practices and success of local leadership varies across local contexts. This paper will contrast two faculties, as well as describing some common local leadership practices.

Methodology

This paper draws on data collected through interviews with faculty FYTE coordinators, and with a small number of FYE grant recipients. Two different interview structures were used.

Past and present FYTE coordinators were interviewed by the central FYE coordinator, using the Action Self-Enabling Reflective Tool (ASERT) matrix (see Jones et al., 2012) as a trigger to reflect on FY practice within their faculties. ASERT includes criteria, dimensions

and values of distributed leadership, and can be used to identify enabling features and barriers in institutional or local contexts. The coordinators had previously used ASERT to reflect on their experience in the FYE program (McKenzie & Egea, 2015), and were asked to revisit their ratings of the matrix elements as preparation for the interview. Interviews were semi-structured and took around 45 minutes. Each faculty was represented by either a current coordinator (6) or past coordinator (2). The interviews were transcribed in full.

Themes were identified qualitatively, initially through mapping interviewees' responses to the five tenets of distributed leadership described in the benchmarking framework from Jones, Hadgraft, et al. (2014): Engage, Enable, Enact, Assess, Emergent. Each transcript was then analysed in a more fine-grained way to identify ways in which elements of the tenets were manifested. For example, the tenet of Enable includes four elements: context of trust; culture of respect; acceptance of the need for change; collaborative relationships (Jones, Hadgraft, et al., 2014). In one faculty (X), the context of trust and culture of respect were evidenced by casual and junior academics being valued and sought as advisors by colleagues for their expertise in gaining grants and experience in developing practices that improved learning.

The second set of interviews involved 20 FYE grant recipients who had completed two or more grants and focused on three areas: reflection on their grant projects; practice change and influence within the faculty; and their experience of the FYE program. Interviews were conducted by a research assistant, and took 30 minutes to one hour. Interviews were transcribed, and themes coded using Dedoose software, using the tenets of distributed leadership from Jones, Hadgraft, et al. (2014) as an initial frame. A subset of nine interviews was selected for the analysis in this paper, from grantees with early engagement with the FYE program (since 2011) and evidence of informal leadership and influence within their faculties.

Following separate analyses of the coordinator and selected grantee transcripts, the 17 transcripts (eight coordinator and nine grantee) were re-read and the individual analyses pooled to identify common themes in specific local, informal leadership practices. Two faculties were selected for case vignettes, based on having the greatest difference in academic engagement with the FYE program over time. Faculty X was represented by two coordinator and two grantee interviews and Faculty Y by one coordinator and one grantee.

The interviews confirmed differing mandates for engagement in the FYE between Faculty X, where the external mandate was strong and an internal mandate emerged, and Faculty Y, where the external mandate was weak and internal mandate more limited. Differences in local leadership in these faculties and how they manifested the distributed leadership tenets are first illustrated using contrasting vignettes (Findings 1). Following this, further themes in local leadership in the FYE program are described (Findings 2).

Findings 1: Faculty differences in local leadership in the FYE program

Faculty X: Strong external mandate and emergence of internal mandate

Faculty X has been the most successful in engaging staff with the FYE program and bringing about change in learning and teaching practices. From 2010, large increases in first year enrolments (up 81% from 2010 to 2016), increased student diversity, student success and retention issues, and subject quality issues flagged in university performance reports created a strong external mandate for change. In 2011, several academics sought first year grants, making changes that improved pass rates and student feedback. These early adopters began to influence a culture of change in first year.

In 2013, a team of four FYTE coordinators was appointed, including a professor who had been a head of school. Their leadership was enacted through a faculty FY community of practice (Baker & Beames, 2013), workshops for casual academics and support for colleagues in gaining grants. The Associate Dean (Teaching and Learning) was “100% supportive”. The team encouraged engagement and the community of practice, typically attended by 20-30 people, built trust and collaboration and enabled staff to share practice.

While leadership of change was supported top-down, it was largely enacted informally, as noted by a coordinator: “I don’t see myself as leading any of the change, not telling people what to do and follow, I collaborate and I consult with the academics” (coordinator 1); and by a grantee: “I have to interact within the faculty with other academics who are teaching subjects which I share with them, and they just get infected with that [laughs]” (grantee 1).

An academic language specialist also played a key informal leadership role, collaborating on grants and sharing practices developed in one subject with academics in others:

Her expertise was really valuable in that part. You can see that grant had extension for another year, so that’s quite successful in that respect because we really could do a lot, then talk in the community of practice and other areas about it. (grantee 1)

Changed FY practice has been sustained, despite turnover in the first year team and a gap in community of practice events. A new group that includes local formal and informal leaders provides an environment for new ideas and supported a new coordinator to find her feet.

[X] is an informal group that includes the first year transition coordinator, learning designers, the director of undergraduate programs, and associate heads of teaching and learning, and the director of postgraduate programs. So it’s a place

where we can voice our opinions or raise something. So in that way the processes are supportive because there is a venue for that idea to be floated before you could go outside of the group. [we], or [new coordinator] on her own, doesn't have to work on her own and then kind of try and build momentum. (coordinator 1)

Changes to staffing have also meant that new academics are taking over first year subjects. A former coordinator, now learning designer, intentionally engages with these new people to ensure that good transition practices remain embedded:

So just about all of our first year subjects have had a first year experience grant at some point in time. ...[But] I am seeing when new academics are coming in, into teaching first year, they aren't aware of the decisions that were made to say why the structure is the way it is. In which case, there is a need to explain all the transition pedagogies involved. (coordinator 1)

In faculty X, there was a strong external mandate. Early success with change, intentional development of collaboration, and valuing and recognition built a strong internal mandate for successive coordinators. From 2011-2017, Faculty X gained the highest proportion of grants (32%), across 29 subjects with 52 academics involved. Many grantees published their work, and this was seen as valued, encouraging further engagement. Several of those involved, including two of the coordinators, have been promoted and some gained formal leadership positions. Local leadership is sustained but evolving. The new coordinator (coordinator 2) noted that "It's just an evolution anyway. You wouldn't want necessarily a role to be doing exactly the same thing now as what it was two years ago."

There have been significant benefits for students. Pass rates increased from 82% in 2010 to 88% in 2015 for all students, and 82% to 90% for LSES students, despite a 68% increase in overall student numbers. Retention

rates increased significantly from 81% to 86% over the equivalent period (2011-2016) for all students and 82% to 86% for LSES students. As noted above, coordinators and grantees also benefitted in tangible ways.

Faculty Y: Weak external mandate and limited internal mandate

In contrast with Faculty X, Faculty Y had the lowest level of engagement with the FYE program. Since 2011, there has been little external mandate for change in first year learning and teaching and strong pressure towards research. However, an innovative first year teacher was nominated for the FYE advisory group and for her, the discussions led to "a whole paradigm shift in how I thought about what these students are experiencing when they come in" (grantee 3). She was struck by how few students knew others and applied for a grant on implementing networking in her subject:

It kind of connected them into also the support services of the university, the connection with one another, but also the significance from a [] curriculum point of view is professional networking's a really important part of your career. ... And I've actually carried that activity through with my final year (grantee 3)

The grant outcomes were successful, and the academic presented them at a FYE community forum and built on them with two further grants. She also took an informal leadership role with colleagues in a first year coordinators committee to try to engage them with transition:

We all go back into our different disciplines ... so my role ... in the early stages was in influencing that group of core coordinators to get buy-in for this, and I did that through the meetings that we had and ... advertising the grants when they first commenced. ... (grantee 3)

Despite her commitment, she had difficulty in influencing colleagues to take up grants, although some interest was shown by casual academics. Whereas faculty X staff found support within the faculty, this academic found it in the central FYE forums:

My personal experience and my knowledge of talking to other people who work in first year is that it is an increasing, incredibly time-consuming job, ... So to be going to this [central] forum, because we were there to discuss what it was that we were doing in our roles, that was invaluable. And to be able to have a sandwich and talk to somebody was just gold, it really was. (grantee 3)

By 2013, this academic was moving away from teaching first year. Another academic took up the FYTE coordinator role, with more focus on improving orientation and identifying students at risk, and less on engaging colleagues. Orientation improved, and the coordinator contributed ideas within the central FYE group, but few faculty Y academics engaged.

In 2016, a new FYTE coordinator took over the role, bringing a high level of enthusiasm and desire to influence change, but encountering competing pressures:

This whole networked improvement community stuff that [coordinator from faculty X] is doing a lot of work on, just makes sense to me. But when we've put feelers out within [faculty Y], to try something like that, 'oh, no, no time'. (coordinator 3)

Noting that "we just don't seem to be a very collaborative bunch", she set about trying to initiate engagement and collaboration by developing a grant to address a common problem that no individual academic had time to address, students' limited mathematics preparation:

With this maths diagnostic, I got everybody to send me their bits and pieces. And my next task is to try and get them all in a room,

at the same time, and say, "okay, out of all these pieces, here are the sorts of things that we could ask. Let's build a test that's representative of the entire faculty". (coordinator 3)

She is also engaging junior academics, with the specific intention of encouraging them to value and be recognised for teaching, and slowly change the culture:

So my bigger thought is, rather than imposing a strategy on everybody, how do I slowly change culture? To be honest, the way that I've done it is through junior academics. (coordinator 3)

Unlike in Faculty X, the coordinators' internal mandate for change in Faculty Y remained weaker, despite concerted endeavours, although emergent practices are evident. Faculty Y has gained only 9% of grants awarded since 2011, with 9 subjects and 20 academics involved. Benefits for students have also been weaker. Pass rates have increased less, from 84% in 2010 to 86% in 2015 for all students, and 85% to 87% for LSES students, with a 9% increase in overall student numbers. However, retention rates were unchanged, from 92% to 91% over the equivalent period (2011-2016) for all students and 90% to 87% for LSES students.

Findings 2: Further themes in local leadership in the FYE program

While analysis using the distributed leadership tenets described by Jones, Hadgraft, et al. (2014) revealed features—such as collaborative communities—that supported success, and highlighted differences across faculties, the more fine-grained analysis indicated some key themes, particularly focused on in engaging others, enabling and enacting the FYE program. Themes that emerged included: gaining buy-in; being opportunistic; making use evidence of success and recognition; the need for collegial support and self-perceptions of leadership.

Gaining buy-in from academics was a common engagement concern, with coordinators adopting a variety of different approaches, depending on the context. Sometimes, as in faculty X, external drivers and supportive faculty leadership facilitated engagement:

Often I'll get an email saying "Oh [coordinator], this is so and so. He wants a little bit of help with blah, blah, blah". So [the ADean] will often pass people on to me. (coordinator 4)

All coordinators spoke about acknowledging the workloads and priorities of their colleagues, and finding alternative ways to work around resistance and engage colleagues:

I just have to get buy-in, and it's a lot of work because I've got to do that individually ... time is a real issue. The only way I can get buy-in is to show people that what I'm suggesting is going to reduce their problems (coordinator 5)

Some coordinators, like coordinator 3, focused on engaging junior and casual academics, knowing that they are often closest to the students and could do things in their classes which might become examples for others and slowly spread further.

Being opportunistic often went hand-in-hand with gaining buy-in, but also meant seeking out opportunities and being proactive. "I've just got to pick my moment" said one FYTE coordinator (5), echoing the experience of others seeking to engage time-poor academics. Another made use of a range of informal opportunities:

It was very easy to just talk to people, and in a multitude of ways. I did knock on some doors; I did just talk to people, you know, casually in the corridors and in on the stairwells; I did make meetings; I did get referrals from heads of school. (coordinator 6)

Some, but not all, coordinators had gained positions on one or more faculty committees

concerned with teaching and learning, and made the most of their opportunities:

At every meeting I'm going "Oh, but what about the first years? And what about the transition? And how are we going to do this?"... So, you know, things like I get all of the subjects together in a table, I show where the scaffolding is, I show where the assignments are due. (coordinator 7)

Making use of evidence of success, and recognition went together, with evidence of success in small grants enabling academics to be recognised and valued for what they had been doing, encouraging them to continue and potentially encouraging their colleagues:

The things that [grantee] did, they were really valued within the school, and respected, especially because she'd had such poor SFS scores in the past, and they could see that she was using best practice, you know, things she'd changed... (coordinator 6)

The framework of the transition pedagogy principles enabled grantees, particularly many in faculty X, to frame and evaluate their initiatives, present them and write about them for publication. This evidence enabled grantees, and the program as a whole to gain recognition, supporting its sustainability at local and central levels.

Foregrounding this framework [transition pedagogy] has really been successful. I've seen a lot of interventions. I've been here twenty-five years and this is one that I think has really worked and I think it's worked for those reasons that good practice gets noticed, gets evaluated, gets written about and then a set of principles are developed. The principles guide an intervention, the intervention is successful. It's just so sensible. (grantee 2)

Collegial support and informal mentoring were important for coordinators as their roles were new and emergent and most had little or no formal leadership experience. In faculty X, the

professor had formal experience, and the team and community of practice provided support for new coordinators. The other faculty coordinators were working on their own, so the FYTE coordinator group stood out as an essential forum for community support and mentoring:

I found particularly the First Year Transition Experience Coordinator meetings with other colleagues both personally and professionally supportive, for myself but also for what I bring back to the faculty, things that we know that other faculties have done (coordinator 4)

Another coordinator commented on group support making up for lack of faculty mentoring. However, not all coordinators felt comfortable discussing their concerns in the full group meetings, with one junior member (who was widely admired in the group) commenting on the support provided through informal conversations with similar others:

... one of the things we never really wanted to do [in the group] was talk about our weaknesses, or where we felt we weren't doing a very good job, and that was something I appreciated being able to do with [coordinators 4 and 7] We would talk about the things that we felt we were failing badly at, and give each other feedback on how we dealt with those things (coordinator 6)

Coordinators also made use of other forms of informal support, including from the central FYE coordinator, professional staff, occasional meetings with senior faculty staff, and academic development and academic language staff.

The *local leadership* of the coordinators was experienced by them as *informal*, and sometimes not even as leadership, but they described awareness of a range of informal practices:

I really don't see myself as the leader in the faculty in that role; I see myself more as

someone who can help people plug into the systems and the connections in the university, and support them rather than... (coordinator 6)

Leadership was experienced as being about connection, collaboration, trust and expertise:

... so that has built my leadership capacity for sure, just that level of "You can go and do it and we trust you to do it, and we're giving you a seat at the table" and it's not about an official platform of seniority, it's about collaboration. (coordinator 7)

In teaching and learning or in education, it's recognised through any projects that we do ... we would ask somebody who might not have a formal leadership role because of their expertise, their experience. We identify people. (coordinator 8)

Discussion

As the vignettes of faculties X and Y illustrate, there are considerable differences in the ways in which the distributed leadership tenets of engage, enable and enact (Jones, Hadgraft, et al., 2014) have been manifested at the local level in the FYE program. In faculty X, formal leaders and disciplinary academics at different levels were highly *engaged*, an academic literacy expert worked alongside the coordinators and informal leadership was exercised by grantees who shared practice as well as by those in FYTE coordinator and more formal leadership roles. *Enabling factors* included academic ownership of the need to change first year subjects, and encouragement of team approaches, and some local recognition of learning and teaching grants and publications, along with the external mandate provided by improving student retention and success in the face of increasing enrolments. Leadership was *enacted* through the community of practice by grantees and teaching and learning professional staff prior to the appointment of FYTE coordinators, and continued in their presence. By contrast, in faculty Y, formal leaders were less engaged and the *enabling factors* were not present.

Disciplinary academics reported a need to increase their disciplinary research rather than spend time sharing learning and teaching practice, so there was no critical mass to form a community. However, in both faculties and across others, individual grantees and coordinators provided local leadership, working opportunistically to gain buy-in and supporting others to connect and collaborate.

Assessment was similar across all faculties, focusing on engagement and benefits for students and staff, however, as noted above, the indicators used for assessment were associated with stronger mandates for improvement in some faculties, like X. All faculty coordinators took *emergent* approaches, evaluating and reflecting on practices and changing in response to changing local situations. As new coordinators took over, local knowledge was shared but new initiatives also developed.

Similar to the First Year Teaching and Learning Network coordinators described by Clark et al. (2015), the FYTE coordinators worked both individually in their faculties and collectively as a group, providing mutual support for facilitating change in faculty FYE practices. Collaborative communities, in the form of the FYTE coordinator group, the FYE forums and, in faculty X, the local team and community of practice, were critical to these local leaders in learning to be coordinators and continuing to enact their roles. The sense of belonging with other FYTE coordinators and the ability to share weaknesses as well as effective practices and achievements were seen as essential for building their leadership capacity. As Morieson, Carlin, Clarke, Lukas, and Wilson (2013) observed, a sense of belonging is essential for staff who are seeking to encourage belonging in students. In the case of the FYE program, belonging to a community outside their faculty helped coordinators to build and sustain their local leadership in both more and less supportive local contexts.

Like Mårtensson and Roxå's (2016) formal local leaders, the FYTE coordinators worked in different ways that were influenced by the local relevance of the external mandate to maintain or improve student retention and success and the internal mandate of their academic colleagues for engaging with the FYE. They sought to influence opportunistically, supporting others to connect and collaborate where they could, gaining buy-in from the willing and recognising and sharing the evidence of colleagues' successes in order to engage others.

This study provides some evidence that, when informal local leaders engage in the practices of distributed leadership, they may be able to build an internal mandate to engage academics. In the case of Faculty X, this led to increased success for both students and staff. While this study is limited to the particular context of an institutional FYE program, and the vignettes to two contrasting faculties, the findings are consistent with Mårtensson and Roxå's (2016) observations about the importance of building an internal mandate for change. Further in-depth research across different contexts is needed to gain further understanding of the tensions between external and internal mandates experienced by informal local leaders.

Conclusion

As with formal local leadership (Mårtensson and Roxå, 2016), local informal leadership of change may be more likely to be successful if a strong internal mandate can be built and the external mandate is also strong. In the case of the UTS FYE program, informal leaders built internal mandates through being conscious of gaining buy-in, being opportunistic and making use of evidence of success and recognition. These practices, along with collegial support inside or outside the local context and self-awareness of leadership as involving making connections, collaboration, trust and expertise, enabled the development of informal leadership

capacity. While these findings come from one institutional program, it is argued that these practices, aligned with distributed leadership, have relevance to other local level leaders of first year learning and teaching, in both formal and informal roles.

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