

Introduction

CEDAM has successfully managed the two-year Promoting Teaching & Learning Communities: Institutional Leadership Project, funded by the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. The ANU project aimed to:

- use communities of practice; to
- build leadership capacity; within the
- domain of learning and teaching; through
- a context of strategic, organizational support.

This project proved a challenging and transforming initiative for CEDAM, and in line with the Carrick Institute's overarching influence in the sector, is having ripple effects on teaching and learning endeavour in the university.

Our action research has found that communities of practice offer a valuable cross-disciplinary context for building distributed leadership capacity in teaching and learning at the Australian National University. Such capacity development was accelerated in this project through the use of a meta-community of practice (named Super Community of Practice in the project) that comprised a range of people engaged in supporting communities of practice across the campus. The majority of project participants at ANU whose participation straddled their originating communities and the Super CoP, are overtly manifesting shifts in awareness of self as leader or in actions that indicate leadership. Increasingly the communities themselves are exercising distributed leadership and are influencing the discourses and practices surrounding teaching and learning at the university. This report itself is structured to reflect the processes, learning and outcomes arising from our Leadership Project.

Project Implementation

The *Promoting Learning and Teaching Communities: Institutional Leadership* project at the Australian National University began with the following aims:

1. *To determine whether a community of practice approach is effective in developing leadership qualities for learning and teaching excellence in university staff.*
2. *To develop leadership skills and capabilities in individuals within the groups.*
3. *To support the further development of institutional, national and international networks beyond those in the initial groups.*
4. *To develop an approach to educational planning, evaluation and reward customised to research intensive universities.*

CEDAM's initial proposal relied on a self-facilitated learning groups model, dependent on alumni from CEDAM (who were to be appropriately trained and resourced) to underpin area-based communities of practice. Key members of these communities would have access to training and

resources. The membership of area-based groups was to comprise both formal (positional) and informal area-based leaders.

The project plan and its indicative implementation outlined in the initial proposal did not progress or unfold as we had predicted. As indicated to the Carrick Institute in previous reports, there has been substantial shift in the project's intent and manifestation as it has evolved which can largely be ascribed to:

- changes in university context, structures and culture;
- underestimation of the conceptual and organisational challenges in rolling-out the project;
- underestimation of the level of input and resourcing required by the ADU to make it successful; and
- profound shifts in approaches to capacity development.

This final project report outlines our achievements and the shifts and challenges to date during project rollout and at the end reviews our progress against the projected project outcomes and aims.

The shifts in project focus become clear in Year Two of the project's key areas of work which have included:

- a fast track model of capacity development through a Super Community of Practice;
- continued resourcing and evolving of existing and new communities of practice;
- organising and managing the dissemination event—the Practice in Leadership Workshop; and
- considering and exploring the necessary changes in academic development unit culture to continue this work and to advance the work undertaken through this Institutional Leadership Project.

The distinguishing features of the choices and shifts in our project are clearer in retrospect. The project has reorientated itself in progress in response to the organisational context, project manageability and with a view to maximising its organisational benefit over its lifecycle. An account of some of the explicit and implicit decisions taken in implementing the project follows.

Changes in project focus

Staff focus

The initial project focus intended to target both formal and informal leaders in specific disciplines or areas across the Australian National University. However throughout implementation there was shift away from staff in formal leadership roles. Both the seeding of communities of practice locally and the planning of the national dissemination event stimulated careful consideration of the project audience/s. In the project team there was a strong sense of the importance of working with an emergent generation of higher education staff concerned and passionate about its current and future state. As the project unfolded there was a stronger focus on staff with the following general characteristics:

- academic staff and general staff largely at the early to mid-career stage;

- staff without a specific forum, or avenue to pursue, (or the necessary support structures to resource) the issues they are passionate about; and
- people who are taking the lead (mostly informally), or showing some initiative in an area.

The project concept assumed that CEDAM's Academic Leadership and Management Course Alumni would resource communities of practice. This did not occur, although it is apparent that many of the key participants in the project's communities of practice have had some exposure to professional development through CEDAM's Graduate Certificate or Masters in Higher Education courses, or are teaching award applicants and winners.

Operating under the radar

The project has in many ways remained under the 'radar' of senior management at the university. In part this arises from the project's conceptual model of communities of practice fostering distributed leadership. This approach does not map against the university positional leadership structures or its resourcing of managerial based leadership training. The university staff who have participated in the project are, in general, below senior management levels within the university.

The focus on teaching and learning excellence is the secondary key in a research-led university, and the change-making agendas of the project's communities of practice (e.g. tutoring support, general teaching & learning practice and research-led education) are either filling gaps in university service provision or advancing discourses that the university is not adverse to pursuing.

Finally the project inhabits a 'gendered' domain, in that it sits at the 'soft end' of research—'community', 'teaching', 'tacit knowledge', 'reflective practice' and the human need to engage in meaningful conversations, to be heard and to listen.

Approach to capacity development

In the initial project proposal we intended to build leadership capability through extending and building on an Academic Leadership and Management course CEDAM runs. This coursework approach did not prove compatible with the ethos and approach inherent in community of practice approach concerning informal learning. As a network of people engaged in sharing practice and problem solving, the community of practice model favours emergent awareness, meaning making and tacit knowledge surfacing rather than receiving codified knowledge. The expertise for learning and knowledge creation lies within, rather than outside the community of practice.

For CEDAM the cumulative shifts in project orientation imposed a much larger resourcing and facilitation responsibility on the academic development unit than had been originally anticipated.