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# Developing and Sustaining Shared Leadership in Higher Education

## Stimulus paper

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# Stimulus Paper Series

The Leadership Foundation is pleased to present this latest series of 'Stimulus Papers' which are intended to inform thinking, choices and decisions at institutional and system levels in UK higher education. The themes addressed fall into different clusters including higher education leadership, business models for higher education, leading the student experience and leadership and equality of opportunity in higher education. We hope these papers will stimulate discussion and debate, as well as giving an insight into some of the new and emerging issues relevant to higher education today.

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## Foreword

I am delighted to be invited to write the foreword to this stimulus paper, which is the result of collaboration between the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, and LH Martin Institute at the University of Melbourne. For a decade or more, theories of distributed and shared leadership have emerged as alternatives to those of the industrial model where leadership is centralised in the few. The difference is seeing leadership as a process (or more explicitly as a set of functions or activities) that are carried out by the group rather than defining leadership as a set of individual qualities or traits. This paper explores what individuals and institutions can do to help develop and sustain more inclusive and shared leadership cultures and practices in their institutions. It is structured around three themes – context, practice and engagement – and begins by uncovering the confusion between academic leadership and the management of academic practice. It highlights how increasing competition, marketisation and the global financial crisis have served to run the potential risk of driving academic leadership underground.

On my first read of the paper, I thought hard about what differentiates it from my 25 years' experience of working in leadership development in higher education and the issues and challenges faced during that time. The notion of shared leadership per se is not new in higher education. It has always been there, not necessarily in any systematic way, and certainly was less explicitly articulated in the past. Paradoxically, it would seem that the very acceleration of competition, marketisation and financial pressures identified in the text as potentially driving academic leadership 'underground' are also giving the premise of shared leadership more prominence and relevance.

Certainly, when I have shared the 'sailing ship' and 'sinking ship' models of academic leadership (p7 and p8) with academic leaders, they have resonated strongly, and are helping rethink leadership development approaches in institutions. What distinguishes this work on shared leadership is, of course, the practical approach that underpins it. It shifts the focus from inputs to leadership 'outcomes', and rather than assuming that shared or distributed leadership is the solution to the academic leadership challenge, it quite rightly encourages the reader to question this:

*The issue is not vertical leadership or shared leadership. Rather the issues are: (1) when is leadership most appropriately shared? (2) How does one develop shared leadership? and (3) how does one utilize both vertical and shared leadership to leverage the capabilities of knowledge workers?<sup>1</sup>*

Finally, the paper very importantly moves beyond abstract concepts to present a number of resources in the form of analytical frameworks, reflective questions and case studies to assist leaders in higher education institutions who wish to develop shared leadership more systematically throughout their institutions. It is practical, and translates shared leadership theory into a set of common dimensions and associated value descriptors:

1. **“Context** – where leadership is regarded as relying less on positional power and more on placing trust in expertise
2. **Culture** – in which leadership relies less on control and more on respect for experience and expertise
3. **Change** – where leadership is recognised as emanating from multiple levels and functions as a mix of top-down, bottom-up and middle-out contributions
4. **Relationship** – based on collaborations between individuals that together contribute to a collective identity.

And four associated criteria for a collective approach to shared leadership:

1. **People** – the involvement of a broad range of experts contributing their knowledge
2. **Processes** – that support individuals in sharing their expertise across traditional functions and structures
3. **Professional development** – provided to develop individual and collective skills, traits and behaviours
4. **Resources** – provided to encourage collaboration, networks and partnerships.”

This paper makes it explicit that to achieve shared leadership ‘requires a conspicuous, planned and systematic investment in relational skills’. It argues for greater engagement of staff in layers of leadership activity as we transition our focus from ‘leaders’ to ‘leadership’. There are no easy answers as to how to do this, and as the paper points out, the first step is:

*“...to simply begin, to be intentional about doing this work and to take explicit responsibility for the strategy; to try out a potentially viable response under controlled conditions, and aim to articulate what works best and scale this up once it has been tested and refined<sup>2</sup>.”*

At a time when the government’s efficiency work moves towards looking more at academic processes, I hope this paper will indeed stimulate thinking and actions as senior leaders review and develop leadership and management capabilities in their institutions. While many of the examples in this paper relate to the leadership of teaching and learning, it would seem that many of the practical tools offered here can equally apply to other areas of the academic enterprise such as research, knowledge transfer and professional services. In the spirit of shared leadership I encourage you to experiment and adapt the ideas to the context in which you find yourself.

**Alison Johns**  
**Chief Executive**  
**Leadership Foundation for Higher Education**

3  
Gibb (1954) cited in Gronn (2000)  
p324

## Executive summary

In recent years, concepts of shared and distributed leadership that view leadership 'as a group quality, as a set of functions which must be carried out by the group'<sup>3</sup> have emerged as popular alternatives to heroic and individual approaches. A shared leadership perspective shifts the focus on leadership from person and position to process and is now widely advocated across public, private and not-for-profit settings where there is a need to influence and collaborate across organisational and professional boundaries.

Within higher education, shared leadership offers a compelling alternative to the discourse of managerialism (based on principles of new public management), which has become increasingly prevalent within the sector. In a context where many are sceptical of traditional influence and authority, it has been suggested that shared leadership may offer a means of reconnecting academics with a sense of collegiality, citizenship and community.

Drawing on the authors' extensive experience of researching and developing shared leadership in British and Australian universities, this stimulus paper explores what individuals and institutions can do to help develop and sustain more inclusive and shared leadership cultures and practices. It is targeted mainly at middle- to senior-level academic and professional service managers, and leadership and organisational development specialists, and seeks to provide practical as well as conceptual guidance for day-to-day leadership practice and development.

A wide range of sources has been used in compiling this paper, going beyond abstract concepts to present resources and examples of using a shared leadership approach to achieve change at many levels and across many institutions that make up the higher education sector in the UK and Australia. A key aim of this paper is to bridge the gap between shared leadership theory, practice and development.

The paper is structured into three main parts – context, practice and engagement – that consider, in turn, the conceptual framing, institutional practice and individual and cultural change aspects of shared leadership. Alongside a review of relevant theory and research, these sections present a series of resources, cases and examples to help assess current leadership practice and identify future action for shared leadership.

The tools, practices and insights in this report will help debunk common myths and misconceptions about shared leadership and offer a systemic framework for developing and sustaining a shared leadership approach in higher education. Practical examples from Australia and the UK are included throughout, and each section contains reflective questions to assist in learning and application.

Overall this paper suggests that shared leadership offers a viable and effective approach for developing and enhancing leadership in higher education and for engaging a wide range of interests and expertise in the leadership process. It is not, however, a panacea and we encourage the reader to take an open yet critical approach in which consideration is given to the wider social, political and cultural context in which leadership takes place.

# Introduction

Over recent years, concepts of shared, distributed and collective leadership<sup>4</sup> have become increasingly popular and are now widely advocated across public, private and not-for-profit sectors in the UK, US, Australia and elsewhere. Within higher education, it has been suggested that such perspectives might offer an alternative to the discourse of 'managerialism' that has become increasingly prevalent within the sector and as a means of reconnecting academics with a sense of collegiality, citizenship and community<sup>5</sup>.

Since the industrial revolution, most developments in leadership and management practice have focused upon the centralisation of power and control into the hands of the few. Whilst this may have been successful in driving economic performance and growth in manufacturing and production, it is arguably less appropriate in today's highly networked, knowledge-intensive environments.

The idea that effective leadership requires the involvement of a far wider set of actors than senior organisational leaders alone is leading to broader conceptualisations of the 'work of leadership' in higher education<sup>6</sup> and draws attention to the underlying motivations, values, beliefs and influences that may help to harness the creative energies of all who work in this sector. The distribution of leadership beyond the senior leadership team requires, amongst other things, a shift in thinking about the allocation of responsibility, resources, power and influence that brings into question common assumptions about how groups and organisations function.

Given that much of the theory and practice of shared leadership come from the education sector, it is perhaps unsurprising that higher education has been at the forefront of recent developments in the field. In the last decade, work sponsored by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education in the UK and the Office for Learning and Teaching in Australia, amongst others, has made a significant contribution to our understanding of shared leadership. But higher education, like other sectors, is beset by change and uncertainty – reeling from the effects of the global financial crisis; social, environmental and demographic change; rapid developments in technology; and increasing national and international competition for students, staff and funding.

Drawing on recent developments in theory and practice, this stimulus paper explores the question of what universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) can do to develop and sustain cultures of shared leadership that prepare them for current and future challenges. It is informed by the collective insights of the authors who bring together a diversity of expertise and experiences of leadership research, development and practice in the UK, Australia and elsewhere.

## 4

Whilst there are some minor variations in meaning and origin, 'shared', 'distributed' and 'collective' leadership are all part of a family of concepts that regard leadership as a group process rather than as a set of individual traits, competencies or behaviours. For the purpose of simplicity 'shared leadership' will be used throughout this report as an umbrella term that encompasses all three concepts. For a detailed review see Bolden (2011).

## 5

Gosling et al (2009); Macfarlane (2012)

## 6

Davis and Jones (2014)

The decision to write this paper emerged over a number of years, during which the contributors shared ideas and insights from their respective research and development work in order to gain a richer understanding of the value of distributed and shared leadership in higher education. It represents a cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural enquiry, given the authors' different academic and professional backgrounds, in each case, comprising a combination of experiences of leadership and management research, development and practice.

Whilst we do not purport to offer a comprehensive or definitive overview of shared leadership, we do seek to debunk common myths and misconceptions of both heroic and shared leadership and to encourage the reader to reflect on (potentially inconvenient) questions about power, purpose and politics in higher education in order to gain genuine insight into the work of leadership and followership in this sector.

A wide range of sources have been used in compiling this paper in order to illuminate what universities can and are doing to draw on the collective strengths of their workforce. The paper goes beyond abstract concepts to present a number of resources and examples of using a shared/distributed approach to achieve change at many levels and across many institutions that make up the higher education sector in the UK and Australia. A key aim of this paper is to bridge the gap between shared leadership theory, practice and development.

This stimulus paper is targeted primarily at middle- to senior-level academic and professional service managers and leadership and organisational development specialists within higher education, and seeks to provide practical as well as conceptual guidance to those involved in the day-to-day work of leadership and leadership development. We also expect this paper to be of wider interest to emerging leaders, leadership researchers, developers and practitioners within and beyond the sector.

Alongside the introduction and conclusion, this paper is structured into three parts – context, practice and engagement – that consider, in turn, the conceptual framing, institutional practice and individual and cultural change aspects of shared leadership. When reading this report, we encourage you to reflect critically on the concepts, practices and examples provided and the extent to which they relate to your own experiences of leadership and followership in higher education. Reflective questions have been included to assist in this process.

This paper is not intended as a prescriptive, 'how-to' guide, but rather as a prompt to stimulate individual and collective reflection, debate and action. Shared leadership is not a panacea – it is a perspective that may facilitate a shift in the way(s) that you and your organisation think and talk about leadership. Like all practice-based endeavours, however, 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating' – it is ultimately up to you and colleagues to make these more inclusive forms of leadership a reality.



## Part 1: Context

Throughout this paper we highlight the importance of context in framing leadership and determining what does and does not work. In this section we begin by exploring the contested nature of leadership and management in academic settings, the potential for ambiguity and conflict between professional and managerial roles, and the consequences for engagement with leadership and followership in higher education. We then explore the potential for shared leadership to offer an alternative perspective on leading and following that may be more appropriate in today's academic and educational contexts than the simplistic 'leader/follower' dichotomy that typifies traditional accounts of leadership. This section concludes with an introduction to the notion of complexity in organisations and the implications for how we approach leadership and leadership development in higher education.

### Academic leadership and management

A recent study, commissioned by the Leadership Foundation, identified a tension between conceptions of leadership and management amongst academics in UK universities<sup>7</sup>. This study, which was conducted at a time of significant change in the sector, indicated that academics tend to be sceptical of explicit organisational leadership by those in formal positions of authority (such as vice-chancellor, dean and head of department) and frequently look elsewhere for the leadership of academic work; often to people with whom they have informal relationships within and beyond their own institution. The findings suggested that much of what is described in both scholarship and practice as 'academic leadership' is in fact regarded as 'academic management', i.e. associated with the practicalities of running a large, complex organisation such as a university.

Strong competition for market position, brand, reputation and associated funding, it was suggested, are driving a top-down, managerial approach that limits opportunities for more emergent, opportunistic and entrepreneurial forms of leadership. Academics in this study placed high value on their own sense of autonomy, mastery and purpose and reported feeling disengaged and demotivated by changes in the sector<sup>8</sup>.

In order to synthesise findings from a range of sources (survey, interviews and listening posts), the authors produced two diagrams. The first, described as the 'sailing ship' model, illustrated how research participants tended to distinguish between academic leadership, academic management and self-leadership (see Figure 1). This model suggests that all three aspects are essential components of a balanced higher education system that together contribute to the effective development and delivery of academic work.

7

Bolden et al (2012)

8

Disengagement is not just an issue in higher education. O'Boyle and Harter (2013:111–13) report that engagement levels across different industries around the world are as low as 17% in the UK, 24% in Australia and 30% in the USA. In a review of the evidence, Dan Pink (2009) suggests that autonomy, mastery and purpose are fundamental to motivation and wellbeing across many occupations (for a video summarising this argument visit: [www.thersa.org/events/rसानimate/animate/rसानimate-drive](http://www.thersa.org/events/rसानimate/animate/rसानimate-drive)).

9  
Bolden et al (2012) p35)

10  
Whitchurch (2008)

Figure 1: The 'sailing ship' model of academic leadership<sup>9</sup>

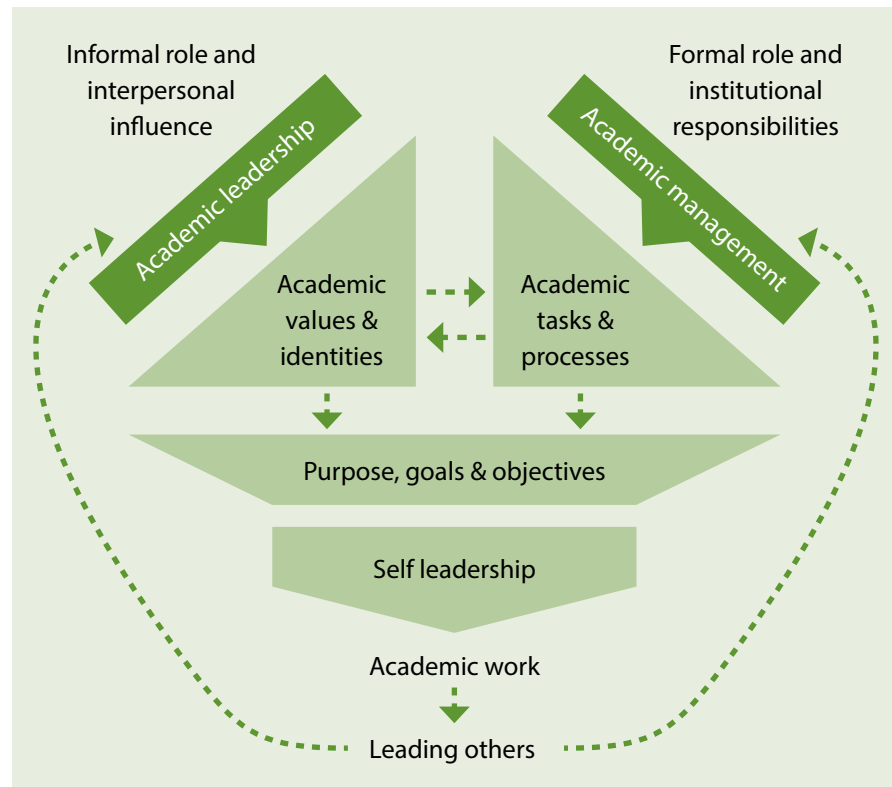
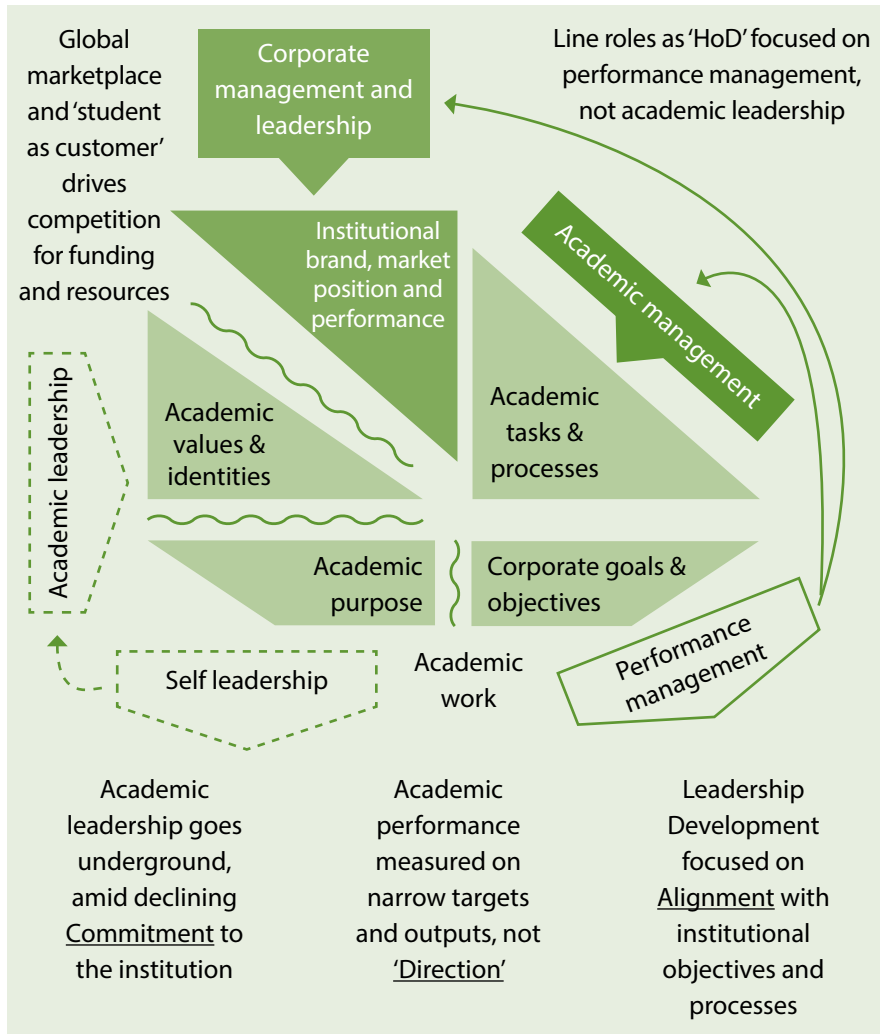


Figure 1 indicates that, for academics, the choice to lead may be conscious and intentional or an emergent outcome of one's scholarly influence and esteem and may be enacted through formal or informal channels. Rather than being directed what to do, academics may well 'self-lead' (although may not describe it in these terms) according to their perceived sense of purpose, goals and objectives, which emerge through a combination of their academic values and identities and academic tasks and processes. For professional staff the choice to lead is constrained by more rigid structures that rely on formal positional roles. Yet there is also evidence of an emerging 'third space' in which professional staff engage in leadership activity based on their expertise, particularly in learning and teaching support areas<sup>10</sup>.

A second diagram, referred to as the 'sinking ship', was presented alongside the idealised representation of Figure 1 in order to convey the sense of dissonance that emerged in participants' accounts of their lived experience as members of the UK's higher education sector at the time of the research (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: The 'sinking ship' model of academic leadership<sup>11</sup>

11

Bolden et al (2012) p37

Figure 2 suggests that traditional accounts of academic leadership, academic management and self-leadership (as illustrated in Figure 1) are becoming disrupted by an increasingly prevalent discourse of corporate leadership and management that emphasises the need for market competition, institutional brand and financial performance. From the accounts of participants in this study, the move towards a more corporate approach is associated with an intensification of formal management processes (as indicated on the right of Figure 2) and the potential fragmentation and erosion of informal academic and self-leadership (as indicated on the left of Figure 2). The 'sinking ship' represents a possible reality that is likely to become increasingly pervasive if efforts are not made to actively engage current and emerging academics in processes that give rise to a coherent sense of academic values, identity and purpose that, in turn, are key to the production of high-quality academic work. Whilst the sense of disengagement expressed in the findings is likely to be associated with the changes to higher education funding that were occurring at the time (including a near-trebling of fees for domestic undergraduate students in England), the outcomes have resonated widely with academics and other professionals in knowledge-intensive industries well beyond the UK. It seems to capture some of the sense of conflict and ambiguity experienced by people whose sense of professional identity and purpose does not

**12**  
Parker (2004) p56

**13**  
Grint (2005a); Macfarlane (2005);  
Bolden, Gosling and O'Brien  
(2014)

**14**  
Oakley and Selwood (2010) p6

**15**  
The Fair Campus Report,  
published in October 2013,  
identified an average pay  
differential of 18.6:1 between  
the highest and lowest paid  
workers in UK universities, with  
a differential of more than 60:1  
in some institutions (see [www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/pay-ratios-point-to-massive-inequality/2008207](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/pay-ratios-point-to-massive-inequality/2008207)  
**article**).

**16**  
See Bolden and Gosling (2006)  
and Bolden et al (2011).

map neatly onto organisational boundaries. As the critical management academic Martin Parker observes when reflecting on his experience as head of department:

*I think that the most important distinction to be made is that I am a manager with an alternate 'professional' identity. Like other professionals in large organizations (doctors, engineers, lawyers) I have a somewhat divided series of identifications, some of which have little to do with my employer as such.<sup>12</sup>*

Leadership is an inherently contested concept, no more so than in a sector in which academic development and reputation tend to be associated with principles such as critical thinking, intellectual freedom and collegiality<sup>13</sup>. In such a context the very notion of 'leadership', and its common associations with power and inequality, may be perceived as problematic and unappealing. As Oakley and Selwood noted in their study for the Leadership Foundation:

*The culture of academics is, if anything, distrustful of overt organisational leadership. This appears to be partly about not wanting to swap their professional expertise for what is perceived as the more banal role of management, but also about a more deep-seated resistance to the language of leadership.<sup>14</sup>*

This, of course, is not to suggest that there is an absence of leadership in higher education but rather to draw attention to the importance of language and identity in terms of framing what are recognised and rewarded as effective and/or legitimate forms of social influence. It is here that the notion of 'shared leadership' offers a means for looking beyond role and personal characteristics to better understand the processes that give rise to effective leadership and engagement.

## From leaders to leadership

There is an obsession, it would appear, in both the popular and business press, with the celebrity of leadership – an assumption that it is the qualities, characteristics and capabilities of individual leaders (usually in senior management roles) that determine the ultimate effectiveness of organisations. Whilst these are undoubtedly important, an almost exclusive focus on 'leaders' rather than 'leadership' has created an environment where senior executives are paid many times higher than others who may play an equally (if not more) important part in the life of the organisation<sup>15</sup>.

Leader-centric perspectives that focus on the qualities, characteristics and behaviours of people in positions of power and authority continue to dominate leadership theory and practice around the world. The prevalence and popularity of such ideas, however, belie the multitude of other factors that contribute towards success and failure and the potentially disastrous effects of placing too much emphasis on the few<sup>16</sup>.

Since the early 2000s, distributed and shared leadership theories have emerged as alternatives that begin with the premise that 'leadership is probably best conceived as a group quality, as a set of functions which must be carried out by the group'<sup>17</sup>. Such a perspective shifts the focus on leadership from person, position or results to leadership as a process<sup>18</sup>.

Spillane and Diamond<sup>19</sup> identify two key elements of a shared leadership approach: 'leader-plus' (recognising the collective contribution of all actors rather than just those in formally designated positions of authority) and 'practice' (a focus on the interactions between *leaders*, *followers* and situation). A review of the literature, commissioned by the National College for School Leadership, highlighted three main assumptions that are associated with a distributed perspective on leadership<sup>20</sup>:

1. Leadership is an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals.
2. There is openness to the boundaries of leadership/
3. Varieties of expertise are distributed across the many, not the few.

Such principles make good sense in an educational setting where multiple stakeholders have a direct interest in, and impact on, student outcomes and have been supported by compelling evidence that 'school leadership has a greater influence on schools and pupils when it is widely distributed'<sup>21</sup>.

Within higher education, whilst it may be harder to gain agreement on key performance criteria, it is nonetheless relatively straightforward to see how a distributed or shared leadership perspective can reveal important dimensions of leadership practice that may otherwise be overlooked. For example, in relation to the development of a successful research grant, whilst a traditional leader-centric approach may focus almost solely on the skills, knowledge and competencies of the principal investigator, a shared leadership approach would also recognise the vital role played by colleagues and collaborators (within and outside the institution), administrators (in supporting the bidding process), institutional processes and reputation (that may influence how the bid is coordinated and received), and the network of internal and external reviewers (who assess the bid before and after submission). The design and delivery of learning environments that engage students in truly authentic learning activities (assisted by rapid advances in digital technology) is a further example of the need for a distributed or shared approach, including academics and professional experts, as well as students and other stakeholders.

**17**  
Gibb (1954) cited in Gronn (2000) p324

**18**  
Grint (2005a)

**19**  
Spillane and Diamond (2007)

**20**  
Bennett, Wise, Woods and Harvey (2003)

**21**  
Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris and Hopkins (2006) p12

**22**  
Gronn (2002)

**23**  
ibid p657

**24**  
eg, Pearce and Conger (2003);  
Bolden et al (2009); Collinson and  
Collinson (2009)

**25**  
Gronn (2009; 2011)

**26**  
Pearce (2004) p55

**27**  
Day et al (2009) p14

**28**  
Bolden, Petrov and Gosling (2008)

Peter Gronn<sup>22</sup>, one of the founders of distributed leadership theory, identified three discrete ways in which leadership might be distributed across two or more people:

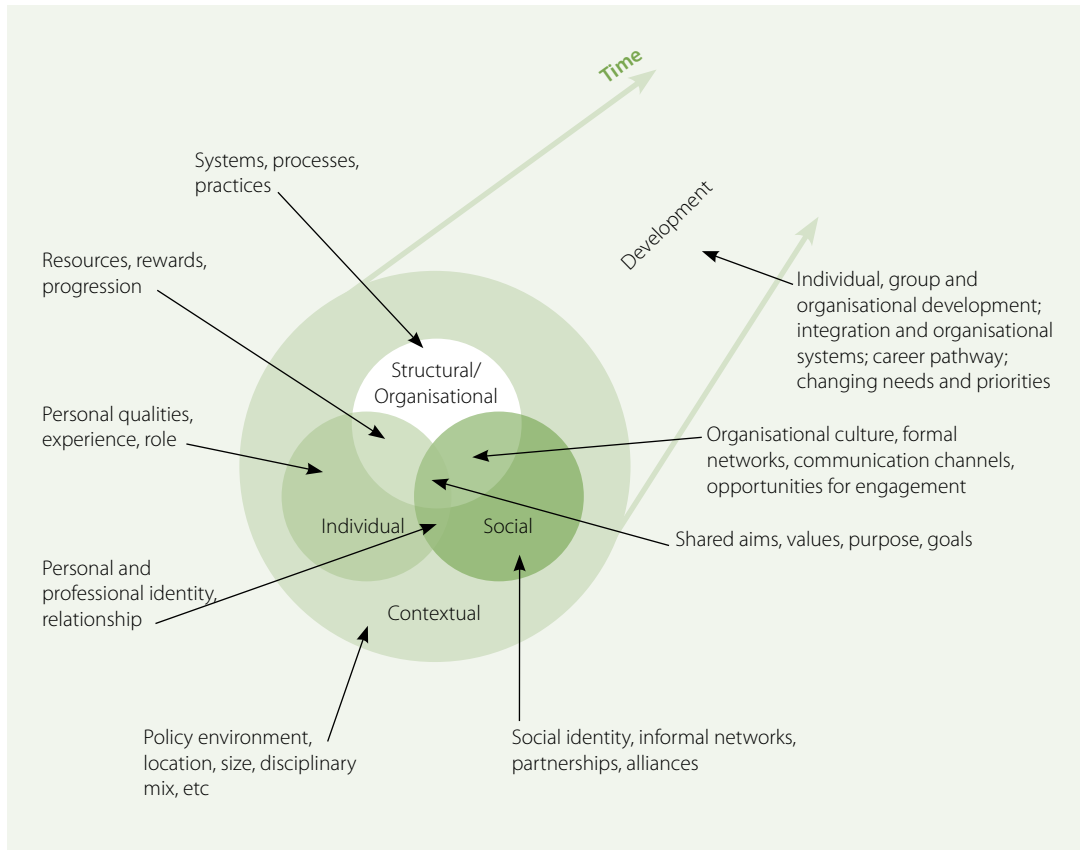
- *Spontaneous collaboration*: where groups of individuals with different skills, knowledge and/or capabilities come together to complete a particular task/project and then disband.
- *Intuitive working relations*: where two or more individuals develop close working relations over time until 'leadership is manifest in the shared role space encompassed by their relationship'<sup>23</sup>.
- *Institutionalised practice*: where enduring organisational structures (e.g. committees and teams) are put in place to facilitate collaboration between individuals.

Other authors have made similar distinctions and highlighted the ways in which shared leadership forms co-exist alongside hierarchical and individual leadership<sup>24</sup>. In response to calls for a wider distribution of leadership within schools, universities and other organisations, Gronn<sup>25</sup> has encouraged a contextual approach that considers the 'hybrid configurations' of leadership practice that co-exist within a given environment. As Pearce suggests:

*The issue is not vertical leadership or shared leadership. Rather the issues are: (1) when is leadership most appropriately shared? (2) How does one develop shared leadership? And (3) how does one utilize both vertical and shared leadership to leverage the capabilities of knowledge workers?*<sup>26</sup>

Organisational context, therefore, is an essential consideration when determining which configuration of leadership forms is likely to be most effective and/or desirable. Research in the school sector, for example, suggests that intentional efforts to distribute leadership often arises from pressure to address challenges such as poor performance and changes in policy and practice and that 'greater "distribution of leadership" outside of those in formally established roles usually depends on quite intentional intervention on the part of those in formal leadership roles'<sup>27</sup>.

Whilst there are clearly some significant differences between the higher education and school sectors, a shared leadership perspective has proven helpful in illuminating key features of the leadership landscape that may otherwise be neglected. In a study incorporating the views of academic and professional service leaders in 12 UK universities, Bolden, Petrov and Gosling<sup>28</sup>, for example, identified the significance of a range of factors that include, but go far beyond, the individual characteristics of people in formal leadership roles (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Dimensions of leadership in higher education<sup>29</sup>**

Whilst most attempts to enhance leadership in higher education, as elsewhere, tend to be targeted at individuals (through recruitment or development) or by reconfiguring organisational structures, systems or practices, Figure 3 highlights the importance of social, contextual and temporal factors in shaping and determining shared aims, values, purpose and goals and their accomplishment within higher education. Such a perspective helps identify factors that both enable and constrain effective engagement with leadership and management and highlights the need for a more systemic perspective that acknowledges the complexities and interdependencies of organisational life if we are to appreciate how leadership is accomplished in practice.

**29**  
Bolden et al (2008) p 60

**30**  
Flinn and Mowles (2014) p4

**31**  
ibid (2014) p2

**30**  
Stacey (2001)

**31**  
ibid (2014) p2

**32**  
Stacey (2001)

**33**  
For an entertaining illustration of this in action, watch Derek Sivers' famous TED talk 'Leadership Lessons from Dancing Guy' (<http://sivers.org/dancingguy>).

**34**  
A common metaphor for this is the so-called 'Butterfly Effect', developed from Edward Lorenz's work on chaos theory and his famous address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1972, entitled 'Does the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?'

**35**  
Wheatley (1994); Snowden and Stanbridge (2004); Western (2008)

**36**  
Flinn and Mowles (2014) p5

**37**  
ibid (2014) p19

## Leadership and complexity

A recent Leadership Foundation stimulus paper by Flinn and Mowles offers an alternative to the 'dominant discourse on leadership and organisation... which views management as science, organisation as system, and leadership as a set of identifiable skills and competencies which can be developed and applied instrumentally irrespective of context'<sup>30</sup>. Drawing on the work of Ralph Stacey and colleagues at the University of Hertfordshire, Flinn and Mowles argue that a 'complexity approach' has much to offer our understanding of leadership and leadership development in higher education. Rather than viewing organisations as rational, bounded systems that can be managed in predictable and controlled ways, they 'offer a view of organisations as patterns of human interaction constantly emerging in both predictable and unpredictable ways in the living present, mostly through conversational activity'<sup>31</sup>. Stacey's<sup>32</sup> notion of 'complex responsive processes of relating' offers a fluid and dynamic perspective on leadership that extends beyond traditional roles and boundaries and challenges the simple dichotomy between 'leaders' and 'followers'<sup>33</sup>.

A 'complex adaptive system' cannot be understood through examination of its constituent elements in isolation. Changes in any one part of the system will have knock-on effects elsewhere, and patterns of activity combine to produce system-level effects that could not be anticipated in advance, and which could not be dictated through command and control<sup>34</sup>. From this perspective, organisations may be best understood as complex social ecosystems<sup>35</sup>.

An important insight from a complexity perspective is that 'there is nowhere outside of the complex (responsive) processes of organisational life for a leader or manager to stand; they too are caught up in the flux of stability and change as much as everyone else'<sup>36</sup>. The developmental implications of such a position are outlined below.

*From the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, leading leadership development involves encouraging radical doubt, enquiry and reflexivity as a way of developing the capacity of leaders to manage in circumstances of high uncertainty and ideological and political contestation. However, radical doubt does not mean throwing everything up in the air at once. It means learning how to navigate between the poles of absolute certainty and absolute doubt, while persisting in seeing the world as more complex than it is portrayed in the dominant discourse.<sup>37</sup>*



Such an approach, whilst challenging and potentially threatening to those in positions of authority, is well suited to contexts of uncertainty and ambiguity that increasingly typify the higher education sector, where individuals and organisations face 'wicked', intractable problems that cannot be resolved through the application of proven management practices<sup>38</sup>. Furthermore, it offers a means of addressing some of the concerns around language and identity outlined earlier in this section and for articulating a more inclusive and less hierarchical view of how people can engage in processes of leadership (be that of the institution, group, project, initiative, subject discipline, sector, etc.).

In today's higher education environment, where working in partnership and collaboration is the norm rather than the exception, the ability to lead and influence across boundaries (between institutions, disciplines, professional areas, etc.) is essential<sup>39</sup>. In such contexts, rather than retaining our focus on leadership 'inputs' (traditionally conceived of as leaders, followers and tasks), we would be advised to turn our attention to leadership 'outcomes' (such as a shared sense of direction, alignment and commitment), irrespective of how they are accomplished<sup>40</sup>.

### Reflective questions on context

1. What do you notice about the ways in which people talk about management and leadership in the various contexts in which you operate? What might this suggest in relation to their assumptions about the nature and purpose(s) of leadership?
2. In your organisation, do staff self-identify as leaders and in which contexts? Are there any situations where there is a clash between this and other identities?
3. What opportunities exist in your workplace for people, other than those in formal leadership and/or management positions, to demonstrate leadership? How is this recognised and rewarded?
4. Are there any groups or individuals who are excluded and/or have withdrawn from the leadership process? How might things be different if they were more actively involved?
5. Are there any limits on the extent to which leadership is distributed, and why might this be? Do you see any risks or challenges associated with a shared leadership approach?
6. To what extent does the account in this section resonate with your own experience at work? What are the two or three key learning points you would like to explore further?

**38**

Grint (2005b)

**39**

Ernst and Chrobot Mason (2010)

**40**

Drath, McCauley, Palus, Van Velsor, O'Connor and McGuire (2008)

41

Hartley (2007); Hargreaves and Fink (2008)

42

A heterarchy is an organisational form where units are related in non-linear and non-hierarchical ways and/or the relationships could be interpreted in multiple ways.

43

Woods and Gronn (2009)

44

Jones, Harvey, Lefoe and Ryland (2011)

## Part 2: Practice

Part 1 of this paper highlights that, for well over a decade, interest in leadership studies has turned to post-heroic approaches, where shared and distributed leadership theories (amongst others) have emerged as alternatives to leader-centric leadership. It also suggested that the principles that underpin shared leadership make good sense in a higher education setting, given the multiple stakeholders involved. Why then has shared leadership been so slow to be universally adopted in higher education? The answer to this question lies in a combination of resistance to change and the need to design new approaches to underpin shared leadership development and practice. In this part we explore these issues and present a range of tools, frameworks and examples to facilitate the development of shared leadership practices.

### Beginning the journey to shared leadership

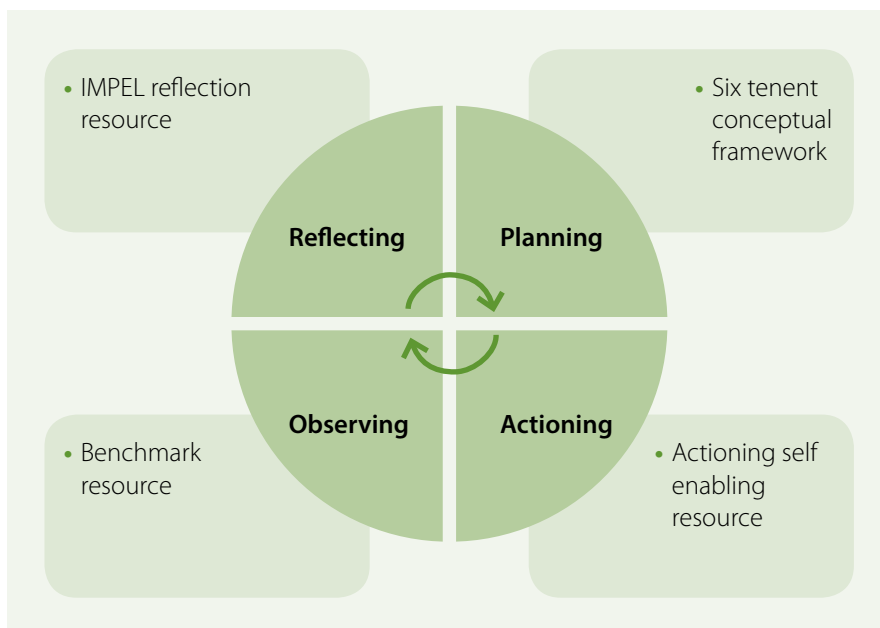
Resistance to the adoption of shared leadership approaches often arises from misunderstandings of both its purpose and outcomes. On the one hand, formal leaders may fear it will undermine decision-making and result in a reduction of their power and authority. On the other hand, employees may fear it is the latest in a long history of management tools that has the appearance of democratisation but in reality provides them with little voice<sup>41</sup>. The middle ground, occupied by claims that shared leadership can change the nature of the relationship between employees and organisations and has the potential to democratise the workplace, has had less impact despite being in keeping with the concept of academic independence and the heterarchical<sup>42</sup> division of labour, rights and authority that characterises higher education<sup>43</sup>.

This ambivalence is evidenced in recent Australian research into the experience of academic volunteers in projects designed to use a distributed leadership approach to improve learning and teaching<sup>44</sup>. While participants were confident they had the expertise needed, they did not regard themselves as leaders. However, following their experience in the project, they began to self-identify as leaders and, in some cases, went on to be appointed to formal leadership roles. Resistance is a natural response to change and requires genuine commitment and understanding if organisational leaders wish to build the necessary levels of trust, engagement and responsibility for effective shared leadership. The need to design new approaches stems from the fact that whilst shared leadership is not in itself more complicated than traditional leader theory, it does require more creative thought, planning, design and assessment. There is greater need to focus on how to support and develop collaboration, relationships and networks rather than simply develop the skills, traits and behaviours of individuals in formal leadership roles and structures.

This section of the stimulus paper explores what shared leadership looks like in practice. It presents a systematic design process for planning, actioning, observing and reflecting on shared leadership practice. This aim is to stimulate thinking and inform choices for action. Further, it is underpinned by a participative action research (PAR) approach that enables practitioners to introduce a change and at the same time be 'inside researchers', assessing the impact of the change through continuous loops of plan–act–observe–reflect<sup>45</sup>. The PAR approach was chosen as it parallels the conceptual basis of shared leadership in that it engages relevant parties, provides the flexibility to accommodate the dynamic nature of shared leadership, and enables adaptation over time.

Figure 4 illustrates the four components of the systematic design process, together with the resources to support action for each component<sup>46</sup>. Examples that illustrate the use of these resources are then provided. While the components are best approached in the order presented, they are flexible enough to underpin variations.

**Figure 4: Systematic design process for shared leadership practice**



**45**

Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon (2014)

**46**

This approach is based on empirical research into distributed leadership in the Australian higher education sector that has been funded by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. Resources to assist are available from [www.distributedleadership.com.au/](http://www.distributedleadership.com.au/)

**47**

This framework is based on the 6E Conceptual Model for Distributed Leadership developed from research into the use of a distributed leadership approach to build leadership capacity for learning and teaching in Australia (Jones et al 2014).

**48**

Foreman (2014a)

**49**

Jones et al (2014)

## Planning for shared leadership practice

In this section we consider the first component of this systematic approach. Six key principles for planning a shared leadership intervention<sup>47</sup> are presented alongside illustrative examples of practice from the UK and Australia.

1. **Engage with people** – a broad range of leaders in positions of institutional authority (termed formal leaders), employees respected for their leadership but not in positions of institutional authority (termed informal leaders), experts in learning and teaching and formal and informal leaders and experts from various functions, disciplines, groups and levels across the institution, who contribute to learning and teaching

### Examples

In the UK, De Montfort University made systematic use of a world-café approach to engage the broadest possible range of institutional staff in proposed strategic changes, thus ensuring broad understanding and opportunities to shape the future direction of the institution<sup>48</sup>.

In Australia, a university-wide project-planning group to introduce e-portfolios was established, consisting of academic staff and general staff from different departments within the university. The task had the support of senior management but was led and undertaken by staff who did not have formal responsibilities in the university, but had knowledge and experience of e-portfolios<sup>49</sup>.

2. **Enable through relationships** – development of a context and culture of respect for and trust in individual contributions to effect change through the nurturing of collaborative relationships.

## Examples

It is arguably difficult to identify entire institutional cultures that are defined by trust in individual collaborations. Nevertheless, where wide-scale institutional change is sought, there is some evidence that attending to aspects of organisational cultures by building effective collaborative relationships can produce results. One documented example of this is the case of institution-wide change in technology-enhanced learning at the University of Exeter<sup>50</sup>.

In Australia, participants in a project established to enhance the learning experience of students demonstrated how trust can be developed gradually from a 'local' environment to a whole-of-university domain. At RMIT University, an action learning teams (ART) approach was established at the local (departmental) level to make changes to teaching that would enhance student learning. The initial decision of ART members to share student feedback on their individual teaching was initially resisted because of fear that they would be 'blamed' for adverse feedback. This was overcome as mutual trust, respect and confidence developed and it became clear that the head of school would not use the information against individuals. The outcome was not only new approaches to teaching by ART participants but also the sharing of ideas across the university at institute-wide forums that led to more broad-scale change<sup>51</sup>.

3. **Enact via intentional practice** – design of a holistic process in which processes, support and systems encourage the involvement of people.

## Examples

At Birkbeck University of London, assistant deans (learning and teaching) have a key role as discipline-based agents of change in their respective academic schools, and are a good example of planned distributed leadership that operates through influence rather than formal, line-management authority.

An Australian national survey of distributed leadership identified an uneven spread of action taken to support distributed leadership. While there was evidence that many people were engaged and some support was given, there was less widespread evidence that professional development and other resources were available<sup>52</sup>.

**50**

Cullen, 2014

**51**

Barber, Jones and Novak, 2009a, 2009b

**52**

Jones et al., 2014

53  
Foreman, 2014b

54  
Jones et al (2011)

55  
Jones et al (2014)

4. **Encourage with activities and acknowledgement** – a plethora of activities to raise awareness and scaffold learning through professional development, mentoring, facilitation of networks, communities of practice, time, space and finance for collaboration, and recognition of, and reward for, contribution.

## Examples

Practices to encourage institution-wide use of coaching at the University of Hertfordshire are part of a deliberate attempt to build communities of practice amongst leaders and managers in both academic and professional services areas of the institution<sup>53</sup>.

The Australian experience of distributed leadership presents a variety of examples of activities to support a distributed leadership approach including workshops to build relationships and develop understanding of appreciative inquiry techniques, facilitation for action teams and finance to support workload reduction<sup>54</sup>. One example was that leaders of action-learning projects have been provided with a half-day workshop on leading change (specifically on how to engage others in a change initiative) and another half of a two-hour workshop, plus support to reflect on and document the leadership challenges in their projects<sup>55</sup>.

5. **Evaluate for learning and development** – benchmarks against good practice examples that evidence increased engagement in learning and teaching, collaboration, and growth in leadership capacity.

## Examples

In the UK, where universities conceive of strategic change initiatives in learning and teaching as opportunities to build shared approaches to practice through engagement in dialogue, there is evidence that this leads to sharing of good practice and implementation of innovations. At Northumbria University, use of so-called 'strategic conversations' brought together large numbers of managers, academic practitioners and student leaders in groups that had not met hitherto, and achieved significant changes in understanding and practice as a result<sup>56</sup>.

An analysis of responses in the Australian national survey of distributed leadership found a strong cross-correlation between 'building leadership capacity for learning and teaching' and 'increased engagement in learning and teaching', and 'building collaboration' and 'sustaining collaboration'. A medium correlation was identified between 'building leadership capacity and the provision of resources in the form of time identified in work plans, recognition for career development purposes and finance' and between 'sharing of decisions regarding the initiative between participants and formal leaders'. Weaker correlations were found between 'building leadership capacity and self-selection of participants, and sharing of responsibility for the successful outcomes of the initiative'<sup>57</sup>.

6. **Emergent through participative action research (PAR)** – a sustainable, ongoing process of cycles of action through PAR.

## Examples

The UK's Leadership Foundation for Higher Education ran a PAR project among its own staff in which 60% of the organisation participated<sup>58</sup>. This led to increases in engagement among the workforce, and changes both in collaborative working practices and in wider ownership of the organisation's strategic direction.

In the Australian higher education sector, a PAR process has been used to underpin many projects funded by the Office for Learning and Teaching to simultaneously research and practise a distributed leadership approach to building leadership capacity for learning and teaching. Projects include i) developing leaders in effective assessment practice<sup>59</sup>; ii) using student feedback to enhance learning and teaching practice<sup>60</sup>; iii) improving online learning facilitation<sup>61</sup>; and iv) building a faculty scholar model<sup>62</sup>.

**56**

Cullen (2014)

**57**

Jones et al (2014)

**58**

Clifton and Gentle (forthcoming)

**59**

Fraser and Harvey (2008)

**60**

Barber, Jones and Novak (2009a)

**61**

Chesterton, Duignan, Felton, Flowers, Gibbons, Horne, Thomas and Koop (2009)

**62**

Lefoe and Parrish (2008)

## Actioning shared leadership practice

The second component of the systematic framework for shared leadership (Figure 4, p15) is aimed at building leadership capability in all its complexity rather than suggesting it is simply a linear cause–effect process. Practising shared leadership requires both an understanding of the conceptual model that underpins it and detailed identification of the actions required to encourage and support its implementation.

A considerable amount of research has been conducted to explore a range of factors that impact upon leadership perceptions and practice, as argued in part 1 of this paper. This has led to the identification of a particular set of dimensions and values synthesised from a literature research into distributed leadership in the UK and supported by empirical research of the practice of distributed leadership in Australia<sup>63</sup>. These were identified through research into the synergies in the empirical experience of projects designed to use a distributed leadership approach to enhance learning and teaching in Australian higher education. This work has led to the identification of four common dimensions and value descriptors for shared leadership:

1. **Context** – where leadership is regarded as relying less on positional power and more on placing trust in expertise
2. **Culture** – in which leadership relies less on control and more on respect for experience and expertise
3. **Change** – where leadership is recognised as emanating from multiple levels and functions as a mix of top-down, bottom-up and middle-out contributions
4. **Relationship** – based on collaboration between individuals that together contribute to a collective identity.

The four associated criteria for a collective approach to shared leadership are:

1. **People** – the involvement of a broad range of experts contributing their knowledge
2. **Processes** – that are supportive of enabling individuals to share their expertise across traditional functions and structures
3. **Professional development** – provided to develop individual and collective skills, traits and behaviours
4. **Resources** – provided to encourage collaboration, networks and partnerships.

The intersection of these dimensions, values and criteria is shown in Figure 5 as an action self enabling resource (ASER) for shared leadership, which identifies 16 actions required to support a shared leadership approach. These are presented as a grid to assist the process of building shared leadership rather than a prescriptive step-by-step approach. This enables the mapping of what currently exists against what needs to exist and thus provides the flexibility to map mutually reinforcing actions and conditions.



These 16 action items in Figure 5 (below) add detail to the environment (contextual dimension) shown in Figure 3, p11, with the four criteria adding detail to the three intersecting dimensions of structural/organisational, individual and social. The ASER in Figure 5 provides a systematic perspective on the range of factors that impact upon leadership perceptions and practice as identified in the first part of this paper. The ASER is designed at the intersection of four dimensions of shared leadership, each with an associated value descriptor and four criteria for shared leadership.

**64**

Sharma, Rifkin, Johnson, Tzioumis and Hill (2014)

**65**

Adapted from © Jones, Harvey, Lefoe and Ryland (2011)

## Examples

In Australia the ASER has been used to analyse, synthesise and interpret the experience of a project designed to develop 100 leaders of change in university teaching of science and mathematics across Australia and establish a self-sustaining national network of science and mathematics university educators supported through distributed leadership<sup>64</sup>.

**Figure 5: Action self enabling resource (ASER) for shared leadership<sup>65</sup>**

Criterion for shared leadership	Dimensions and values of shared leadership			
	CONTEXT Trust	CULTURE Respect	CHANGE Recognition	RELATIONSHIPS Collaboration
<b>People are involved.</b>	Expertise of individuals is used to inform decisions.	Individuals participate in decision-making.	All levels and functions have input into policy development.	Expertise of individuals contributes to collective decision-making.
<b>Processes are supportive.</b>	Shared leadership is demonstrated.	Decentralised groups engage in decision-making.	All levels and functions have input into policy implementation.	Communities of practice are modelled.
<b>Professional development is provided.</b>	Shared leadership is a component of leadership training.	Mentoring for shared leadership is available.	Leaders at all levels proactively encourage shared leadership.	Collaboration is facilitated.
<b>Resources are available.</b>	Space, time and finance for collaboration are available.	Leadership contribution is recognised and rewarded.	Flexibility is built into infrastructure and systems.	Opportunities for regular networking are supported.

**66**  
Woodhouse (2000) cited in Stella and Woodhouse (2007)

**67**  
Jones, Hadgraft, Harvey, Lefoe and Ryland (2014)

**68**  
For details see [www.distributedleadership.com.au](http://www.distributedleadership.com.au)

**69**  
Adapted from © Jones, Harvey, Lefoe and Ryland (2014)

## Observing shared leadership practice

The third component of the systematic approach to shared leadership (Figure 4, p15) provides the opportunity to self-assess action taken to encourage shared leadership through benchmarking against good practice reference points. This is based on the concept of best practice benchmarking, which is recognised as appropriate for shared leadership given the iterative, formative process that is encouraged<sup>66</sup>.

These good practice examples have been adapted from those developed from a national survey that engaged 47 Australian HEIs that aimed to identify distributed leadership related systems and frameworks currently employed to build leadership capacity in learning and teaching across Australia's higher education sector (N=110)<sup>67</sup>. This national survey resulted in the development of a benchmarking framework, consisting of five domains – *engage, enable, enact, assess and emergent*, each with an identified scope, elements and good practice descriptors.

A summary table of the benchmarks is presented in Figure 6 (overleaf), with the detailed benchmark resource available from [www.distributedleadership.com.au](http://www.distributedleadership.com.au)

### Examples

In Australia, the benchmarks for distributed leadership were used to develop 11 case studies of distributed leadership implementation in curriculum design; student–staff learning; student engagement in first year in higher education; professional development; peer-assisted teaching teams; cross-discipline networks; sessional staff; and whole-of-institute leadership – in universities from five states and Papua New Guinea, plus a new approach to university–industry partnership (health sector in South Australia). The case studies were presented at a national summit on distributed leadership in Melbourne in 2014<sup>68</sup>.

Figure 6: Benchmarks for shared leadership<sup>69</sup>

DOMAIN	SCOPE	ELEMENTS	GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTOR
<b>ENGAGE</b>	... a broad range of participants from all relevant functions, disciplines, groups and levels.	Formal leaders	Formal leaders proactively support initiatives through attendance at meetings, publication of activities and other sponsorship activities.
		Informal leaders	All employees participate and are recognised for their expertise.
		Discipline experts	Academics contribute discipline expertise either through self- or peer nomination.
		Functional experts	Professional staff contribute functional expertise either through self- or peer nomination.
<b>ENABLE</b>	... through a context of trust and a culture of respect coupled with acceptance of change through collaborative relationships.	Context of trust	Decisions are based on a combination of expertise of participants plus relevant rules and regulations.
		Culture of respect	Decisions made are shared between all participants based on their expertise and strengths.
		Acceptance of change	An integrated (top-down, bottom- and middle-up approach) is encouraged.
		Collaborative relationships	Professional development, facilitation and mentoring support is provided in collaborative decision-making.
<b>ENACT</b>	... by involvement of people, the design of processes, the provision of support and the implementation of systems.	Involvement of people	Relevant experts are identified and encouraged to participate.
		Design of participative processes	Communities of practice and networking opportunities are encouraged and supported.
		Provision of support	Space, time and finance for collaborative initiatives are provided.
		Integration and alignment of systems	Systems are aligned to ensure that decisions are integrated into formal policy and processes.
<b>ASSESS</b>	... drawing on multiple sources of evidence of increased engagement, collaboration and growth in leadership capacity.	Increased engagement	Performance review processes acknowledge individual engagement.
		Increased collaboration	Data identifies evidence of increased collaborative activity.
		Growth in leadership capacity	Participation is recognised and rewarded.
<b>EMERGENT</b>	... sustained through cycles of action research built on a PAR methodology.	PAR process	Action research through cycles of activity is encouraged.
		Reflective practice	Reflective practice is built in as a formal practice and stage.
		Continuous improvement	Output from each stage is sustained.

## Reflecting on shared leadership practice

The fourth component of the systematic approach to shared leadership (Figure 4, p15) acknowledges that shared leadership involves a continuous flow of activity rather than residing in a static position or structure. It enables reflection on the lessons learnt from the practice of shared leadership in terms of impact at five levels – immediate (team), unit (department/school), part-of-institution, whole-of-institution and beyond institution.

A reflection resource, shown in Figure 7 (overleaf), was adapted from the Impact Planning Management and Evaluation Ladder (IMPEL) model used by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching<sup>70</sup>, with a series of reflective prompts provided to match each of these levels.

### Examples

In Australia, the IMPEL reflection resource was used by participants in a national summit on distributed leadership to reflect on the potential of the benchmarks for distributed leadership to contribute to the identification of impact of projects. The reflection activity identified where further assistance was needed, with an overwhelming identification of the need for more active endorsement of a distributed leadership approach by senior leaders.

Figure 7: IMPEL reflection resource for shared leadership<sup>71</sup>

IMPACT LEVEL	REFLECTIVE PROMPTS
<b>IMMEDIATE TEAM</b>	What impact has this had on developing a shared leadership approach amongst the participants directly engaged in the activities, for example building leadership capacity, increasing collaboration, advancing careers?
<b>INSTITUTIONAL UNIT</b>	What impact has this had on developing a shared leadership approach in the institutional unit to which the participants belong, for example in spreading beyond the initial scope?
<b>PART OF INSTITUTION (NARROW) OPPORTUNISTIC</b>	What impact has this had on developing a shared leadership approach in a separate institutional unit based on a similar opportunity (or challenge) to that identified in the initial scope, for example in spreading to another department or function?
<b>PART OF INSTITUTION (NARROW) SYSTEMIC</b>	What impact has this had on developing a systematic approach to designing a shared leadership approach across distributed units of the institution, for example the design of a policy change to support the spread of shared leadership across departments or functions?
<b>CROSS-INSTITUTIONAL BROAD OPPORTUNISTIC</b>	What impact has this had on developing a shared leadership approach as a whole-of-institution model based on a similar opportunity (or challenge) to that identified in the initial scope, for example in being supported by incentives?
<b>CROSS-INSTITUTIONAL BROAD SYSTEMIC</b>	What impact has this had on developing a systemic approach to design a shared leadership approach as a whole of institution policy change? For example the design of a policy change to support the spread of shared leadership across the university?

71

Adapted from Hinton (2014)

## A systemic approach to shared leadership

In summary, shared leadership requires a systematic design process to support the work of shared leadership as it is practised, especially to recognise formally the commitment necessary at all levels to develop networks and relationships between people. This requires recognition of and commitment to leadership practice as a flexible and changing concept in which people dynamically engage in processes of leadership. To illustrate what these systematic design processes might look like, this section of the paper shared one such design which has four components:

1. A planning component – with a resource in the form of a conceptual framework
2. An action component – with a self-enabling action resource to assist the identification of action needed to support shared leadership
3. An observing component – with a resource to assist self-assessment through good practice benchmarks to evaluate shared leadership
4. A reflecting component – with a resource to enable lessons learnt from past practice to identify change to increase future impact.

The next section turns to enabling fuller engagement in shared leadership practice through leadership development for leaders and all who work in higher education.

### Reflective questions on practice

1. What, if anything, are the main barriers to implementing a shared leadership approach in your context? How could these be addressed or reduced?
2. To what extent is a PAR process (planning, acting, observing and reflecting) embedded within your ways of working? Are any stages absent or under-represented, and what could be done raise their significance?
3. What examples can you identify in your workplace for each of the six components of the conceptual framework for shared leadership (engage, enable, enact, encourage, assess and emergent)? What mechanisms do you have in place for sharing good practice across your institution?
4. Use the ASER framework in Figure 5, p22 to map the extent to which a shared leadership approach is present in your organisation. Where are the key priorities for action and what can you do promote them? (Use the reflective prompts in Figure 7, p26 to help identify actions.)
5. Compare and contrast the benchmarks for shared leadership in Figure 6, p24 with performance and appraisal criteria and working practices within your own organisation. Do you notice any areas of conflict or inconsistency? What could be done to address this?
6. How could the tools and frameworks presented in this section be used to facilitate a process of reflection, debate and action around shared leadership in your organisation?

## Part 3: Engagement

An outline of the contexts for developing and sustaining shared leadership approaches and a glimpse of the practices already evident in higher education have been given in parts 1 and 2 of this paper. This section turns attention to promoting engagement with shared leadership through leadership development, individual and cultural change, and community building.

Encouraging people to develop a shared leadership repertoire, for themselves and others, is supported by emerging theory and practice on 'post-heroic' leadership. Here, the notion of shared leadership is underpinned by concepts such as relational leadership<sup>72</sup>, complexity leadership<sup>73</sup> and distributed leadership (as outlined in part 1), and acknowledges that the work of leadership in knowledge-intensive enterprises requires the deployment of the energies of all. In essence, these understandings share a view that 'leaders are in the business of energy management'<sup>74</sup> and that we are all responsible for the work of leadership, whether it is leading the self, coaching and mentoring others and/or through taking on a formal leadership position<sup>75</sup>.

For all the discussion so far to stimulate thinking about sharing, distributing and collectively taking responsibility for leadership, embedding this practice nevertheless relies on the motivation and commitment of individuals and teams. Willing investments of time and energy to intentionally develop broader and more critical perspectives of the self, as well as deeper understandings about roles and responsibilities for shared leadership in higher education, are crucial if engagement is to be anything more than rhetoric.

In order to promote and facilitate engagement with shared leadership, this section begins by considering the developmental focus at the level of 'mindsets' and what this means for individuals in order to engage in, build and sustain resilient leadership communities. It is argued that 'leadership and management development (LMD) activities are often commissioned with little consideration of the underlying theories and assumptions upon which they are based'<sup>76</sup>. Knowing more about these underlying influences promotes critical thinking capabilities that in turn tap into the necessary creativity and innovation required for knowledge work.

### 72

Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011); Uhl-Bien (2006)

### 73

Burnes (2005); Hazy, Goldstein and Lichtenstein (2007); Obolensky (2010) Stacey (2001); Uhl-Bien, Marion and McKelvey (2007)

### 74

Kets de Vries (2003) p111

### 75

For an interesting illustration of leadership mindsets and the roles that different people can play, watch former US president Bill Clinton reflecting on what he has learnt from working on HIV/AIDS initiatives in Africa, suggesting that 'leadership is more a state of mind than a place in a hierarchy' (<http://bit.ly/16zgQOc>).

### 76

Bolden (2010) p117

## 77

Krugman (1995) pp71–72

## 78

Johansen (2009); Stiehm (2010)

## 79

Jordan (1994); Nanschild and Davis (2007)

## Developing shared leadership mindsets

An understanding of individual, organisational and professional mindsets relating to leadership, culture, power and work are worthy sites of inquiry for shared leadership development in higher education. A mindset provides a particular lens through which to understand the world – something that we do all the time (both consciously and unconsciously) and that has a significant impact on knowledge and behaviour, as Krugman argues:

*... it is essentially impossible to avoid seeing the world in terms of that model – which means focussing on the forces and effects your model can represent and ignoring or giving short shrift to those it cannot. The result is that the very act of modelling has the effect of destroying knowledge as well as creating it. A successful model enhances our vision, but it also creates blind spots, at least at first.<sup>77</sup>*

The aim of this section is to stimulate discussion about what kinds of leadership mindsets are needed for leadership in 21<sup>st</sup>-century higher education, where resources are scant and knowledge work is challenging. One way of describing these contexts is as VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous), an acronym first coined by the US military in the 1990s and now applied to leadership and management more generally<sup>78</sup>.

For leadership development, this suggests that building and supporting a capacity for shared leadership requires a conspicuous, planned and systematic investment in relational skills, given the need to engage more people in layers of leadership activity as we transition our focus from 'leaders' to 'leadership'. These capacities will likely touch on matters of identity and surface assumptions about leaders and leadership in terms of, as noted earlier, the allocation of responsibilities, resources, power and influence.

Mindsets are sets of values, attitudes and beliefs about the world that are held by people, as individuals and in groups. They emerge from the conditions of their times and are generally underpinned by three key assumptions: (1) a view on what human beings are like; (2) a view about how society works; and (3) a model of the ideal world. Dominant mindsets are very difficult to dislodge due largely to investments in identity and comfort in certainty that individuals and groups take collectively from these standpoints. Mindsets are part of any socialisation or enculturation process and are at the heart of most contestations in the workplace<sup>79</sup>.



Mindsets that privilege creativity have been chosen for this part of the discussion, given that creativity and innovation are necessary elements for knowledge-intensive work. Defined as the production of new and useful ideas concerning products, services, processes and procedures<sup>80</sup>, creativity has become something of a catchword for thinking differently about leadership and work where knowledge is the means of production and the tools of the trade are inside our heads. It is as good a concept as any to turn leadership attention to 'soft' and relational skills that support creativity, such as the harnessing of ideas, innovation, critical thinking and cognitive flexibility. Yet, depending on our underlying values and mindsets, soft skills that support creativity may be viewed as either crucial (in mindsets amenable to knowledge work) or frivolous (in mindsets more amenable to order, control, efficiency and certainty, that underpinned the industrial era).

In terms of shared leadership development, the quality of thinking and action is not only the domain of the leader: engagement is to be encouraged at all levels. Max DePree captures this shift when advocating that leadership performance should be measured not only by 'the quality of the head, but the tone of the body. The signs of outstanding leadership appear primarily among the followers'<sup>81</sup>.

## Engaging in knowledge-era leadership mindsets for leadership development

Attention now turns to leadership development that focuses on the individual's interest and responsibility for leading the self and a commitment to developing a 'shared and mutual sense of leadership identity'<sup>82</sup>. There are no easy answers as to how to do this; however, the first step is to simply begin, and to be intentional about doing this work and taking explicit responsibility for this strategy. Fullan and Scott suggest a move from the seeming propensity for indecision to a strategy of 'ready, fire, aim – a process in which ready is a need to act, fire is to try out a potentially viable response under controlled conditions, and aim is to articulate what works best and scale this up once it has been tested and refined'<sup>83</sup>.

The considerations for these developmental options are framed by the work of Jones and colleagues on their distributed leadership matrix of values and practices<sup>84</sup>. Drawing upon Fletcher and Kaeufer's<sup>85</sup> conceptions of the relational nature of shared leadership, these considerations illuminate the practices of shared leadership as underpinned by notions of self-in-relation; dialogue through learning conversations; social interactions; and growth-in-connection with others. These themes provide a lens to locate and measure soft and relational work and provide the opportunity to highlight examples of where this is already occurring within current leadership development activities in higher education.

### 80

See for example Amabile (1996); Zhou and Shalley (2003)

### 81

DePree (1990) pp11–12

### 82

Gentle (2014) p25

### 83

Fullan and Scott (2009) p85

### 84

Jones et al (2011) p14

### 85

Fletcher and Kaeufer (2003)

86

ibid p32

87

Davis (2010) p49

88

For more on eLAMP which began in 2012, see <http://bit.ly/16zsDMY>

89

Davis and Moon (2013)

## Self-in-relation

It may be argued that knowing and learning about what makes us tick is more about personal development than leadership development. The challenge then for leadership development is to move the development focus from the 'self', to taking responsibility for 'self-in-relation' to others. Such a shift to 'privileging interdependence over independence is neither trivial nor benign... it is linked in powerful ways to deeply rooted beliefs about individual achievement and meritocracy that underlie many organisational practices and norms'<sup>86</sup>. This can be difficult and challenging developmental work as it is very much bound to identity, ego and power relations.

*Paradoxically, the seemingly selfish act of spending time and energy reflexively seeking to know who we are often leads to growth, not contraction, of our sense of responsibility to others and the environment... before we can truly understand our interdependence with others we must first know ourselves in a way that transcends our own ego and in a way that is not fearful of difference and diversity of viewpoints.<sup>87</sup>*

## Examples

In the first of four modules in the Emerging Leadership and Management Program (eLAMP)<sup>88</sup> offered widely to tertiary education managers by the LH Martin Institute in Australia, the emphasis is very much on developing and managing the self and is taken before modules in developing and managing others and the business of tertiary education management. The emphasis in this first module is on developing intra-personal intelligences; leading the self; and critical reflective tertiary education management practice<sup>89</sup>. These all encourage not only a deeper understanding of self, but importantly, self-in-relation to others, as expressed well by a participant upon completion of the program in 2014:

*I enrolled in eLAMP after having had the opportunity to lead an academic discipline for two years, which led me to ask significant questions about the current and emerging nature of leadership in the higher education industry. Through eLAMP I have come to better understand that leadership involves everyone, not just those in management positions. Moreover, leadership is a journey that begins with an understanding of self and an appreciation for the different perspectives of those around us. Completion of eLAMP won't automatically make us better leaders, but it will provide us with valuable resources to initiate and guide our development.*

## Dialogue through learning conversations

Patricia Shaw presciently devoted a whole chapter of her book on conversations in organisations to the matter of the 'transformative activity of conversing'<sup>90</sup>. As we move increasingly into engaging and leading knowledge-intensive work, in higher education and elsewhere, dialogue and conversations are being repositioned as central. In other words, conversations don't precede knowledge work, they ARE the work.

### Examples

At the end of 2013, the University of Portsmouth expanded the size, scope and capacity of its executive team to work collaboratively to achieve institutional goals using a set of learning conversations at a residential retreat event. This involved working with a facilitator through a set of authentic decision-making activities which were paused at critical moments in order to examine the social interactions taking place, and thus to provide opportunities for feedback.

The aims of the event included the following commitments.

- Agree how members of the executive team would work together in terms of the role and remit of the team, and its working processes and expected behaviours.
- Explore in detail one strategic area (Knowledge Services) and the actions needed to further develop it.
- Agree how the executive team would develop its shared mission and values, with a clear view of success and the underpinning leadership attributes.
- Review strategic priorities, including key issues and concerns, for the next 12 months.

In order to achieve these aims, some two hours were spent on a specific activity that exemplified Shaw's 'transformative activity of conversing'<sup>91</sup>. Members of the executive team divided into three groups of four people in order to hold exploratory conversations, in rotation, with different internal and external stakeholders of the work of the university's innovation and knowledge-transfer division. These stakeholders were a key external client from private industry, the vice-chancellor, and the director of Knowledge Services (who was not a member of the executive team). The conversations constituted a form of collaborative inquiry, which led to transformed understanding amongst the executive team, and subsequently fed into a real discussion on the team's agenda.

**90**

Shaw (2002) pp.45–71

**91**

Shaw, 2002

92  
McLagan and Nel, 1995, p.48

93  
Sinclair, 2007

94  
Uhl-Bien, 2006, 2011

95  
Fletcher (2004) p.649

96  
Schein (2013) p.9

## Social interactions

Following on from the last point, that conversations are very much entwined with knowledge work, the quality of that work is largely dependent on participation, social interactions and relationships. McLagan and Nel, for example, argue that:

*Relationships are both the building blocks and probably the most telling indicators of the new (participative) governance. In fact, the genetic code of the organization is embedded in thousands of interactions that occur every day between people everywhere in the organisation.<sup>92</sup>*

The challenge is, as always, how to invest in the development of soft skills, which are the foundation for good-quality conversations and relationships when budgets in higher education are largely determined by a focus on efficiency rather than effectiveness, engagement or emancipation<sup>93</sup>.

Nevertheless, there are signs that these sites for leadership development are occurring in the sector and elsewhere. Specific concepts that support this work include 'relational leadership'<sup>94</sup> and Fletcher's leadership typology organised around the principles of leadership as practice (shared and distributed); leadership as social process (interactions); and leadership as learning (outcomes):

*Another important aspect of postheroic leadership is its emphasis on leadership as a social process. Postheroic leadership is portrayed as a dynamic, multidirectional, collective activity – an emergent process more than an achieved state. Human interactions are key in this concept as leadership is seen as something that occurs in and through relationships and networks of influence.<sup>95</sup>*

Schein's more recent work, concerned with 'building positive relationships and better organisations' through an emphasis on asking rather than telling, is also a useful reference for this work. He argues that in order to build trusting relationships, conversations are 'an interactive process in which each party invests and gets something of value in return'<sup>96</sup>.

## Examples

On the Leadership Foundation's Top Management Programme in the UK<sup>97</sup>, almost 20% of programme time is spent working in peer groups, based on the principles of action learning, which demand and develop reflexive practice by participants. Known as impact groups, these peer groups are professionally facilitated, and call on individuals to examine their own practices and underlying assumptions, and to support and challenge one another as peers. They frequently bring about profound insights into self-identity, and thus demonstrate how learning from the programme impacts on participants as individuals, and on their ability to effect change in their institutions through developing a more mature sense of their leadership.

## Growth-in-connection with others

It is clear that leadership development concepts such as self-in-relation, dialogue through learning conversations and social interactions are interconnected and value-laden concepts, as are notions of soft skills more generally. Whilst of conceptual value in isolation for the purposes of this discussion, when brought together they become more than the sum of their parts. They all inform the last of the themes as they coalesce to draw attention to what soft skills and relationships bring to the leadership development arena, which is the strengthening of bonds of trust and interdependence underpinning the notion of growth-in-connection with others.

Fletcher and Kaeufer's<sup>98</sup> work is seminal to this concept and its connection with shared leadership more generally, and also for raising the profile of relational perspectives emanating from the work of the Stone Center<sup>99</sup>:

*Growth fostering interactions require that participants approach the interaction expecting to grow, learn, and be changed by it and feel a responsibility – and a desire – to contribute to the growth of the other. Putting these beliefs into practice, however, requires relational skills such as empathy, listening, and emotional competencies as well as skills in relational inquiry and the ability to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty. In other words, relational theory asserts that growth-fostering social interactions do not occur 'naturally' but depend on the exercise of certain strengths, abilities and relational skills<sup>100</sup>.*

It is clear that there is strong theoretical support for the theme of growth-in-connection with others within the context of complexity for leadership studies, as discussed in part 1 of this paper. In particular, Stacey's notion of 'complex responsive processes of relating'<sup>101</sup> encourages attention to leadership development in this area.

97

[www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/programmes-events/you/top-management-programme/](http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/programmes-events/you/top-management-programme/)

98

Fletcher and Kaeufer (2003)

99

Jordan (1991; 1997)

100

Fletcher and Kaeufer (2003)  
pp28–29

101

Stacey (2001)

102

[www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/programmes-events/alumni/lf-fellowship/](http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/programmes-events/alumni/lf-fellowship/)

103

Jones and Harvey (2016 forthcoming)

104

Day (2000)

105

Kim and Mauborgne (2014) p2

106

Indeed, they were key aspects of the Human Relations Movement in the early 20th century (see for example, Barnard, 1938; Follett, 1924; Mayo, 1919).

## Examples

Participants in the Leadership Foundation's key senior programmes are able to apply for Fellowship of the Leadership Foundation<sup>102</sup>, which has been awarded to participants from some 50 universities in the UK. Applicants need to demonstrate that they have met criteria which include demonstrating impact of their own leadership development on their institution and, critically, providing evidence that they have taken responsibility for and contributed to the development of others. Fellowships are valued by senior leaders, including the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Essex, who supported the creation of an in-house Fellowship at the university, and provided evidence of his own leadership, which led to his being awarded Fellowship in 2014.

In Australia, a project funded by the national government agency to improve the quality of learning and teaching across the Australian higher education sector found that communities of practice (CoPs) were overtly acknowledged as an important means by which collaboration is achieved. The CoPs established as part of four projects funded between 2006 and 2009 were characterised as bringing together a community of people to share their practice in a specific aspect of learning and teaching (assessment practice, online teaching, improving the student experience and developing scholarly leadership). Reflection by the participants identified a range of behaviours needed for people to engage in shared approaches to leadership, including being adaptable and resilient, sharing goals, being willing to listen and having the ability to work outside comfort zones. The development of these behaviours was assisted by facilitators and mentors who supported the development of appreciative inquiry, reflective practice and reflective journaling<sup>103</sup>.

## Building sustainable and resilient leadership communities

In this part of the paper, we have demonstrated how leader development that focuses on developing individual 'human capital' can complement and facilitate broader leadership development, with its focus on the development of shared 'social capital'<sup>104</sup>. We have indicated some of the ways in which universities and other HEIs are promoting 'ingenuity, creativity and energy [which] are among the most essential ingredients to organisations' health, wellbeing and high performance today and in the future'<sup>105</sup>. These ideas are not new<sup>106</sup> but do not always receive the recognition and reward they deserve within traditional leadership mindsets.

The concept of shared leadership and the approaches described throughout this report can go a long way in promoting more flexible and inclusive leadership practices but ultimately, for durable and sustained engagement, these practices need to become embedded within the cultural fabric of the organisation. There can be huge differences in culture and practices within the same organisation and much that can be learnt from investigating how and why collective engagement is greater amongst some groups than others.

Barker describes leadership as 'a process of change where the ethics of individuals are integrated into the mores of a community'<sup>107</sup>. From this perspective, leadership development is an important forum for negotiating shared values and purpose and ultimately a process of community development. If, as indicated in part 1 of this paper, academics often struggle to engage with the concept of leadership and find themselves conflicted in their roles as leaders and managers, then there is a serious limit on how sustainable or resilient our academic communities can be.

Sharing frustrations and concerns about academic work and the changing nature of the sector can be cathartic, giving people the opportunity to realise that they are not alone in their dilemmas and helping them come to terms with the tensions they face<sup>108</sup>. It may not be something that can be easily addressed within institutional and professional development programmes though, and highlights the value of broader forums for networking and engagement with peers<sup>109</sup>.

The tendency for most leadership development interventions to focus on individual skills and behaviours neglects perhaps the most important question of all – *Why should anyone be led by you?*<sup>110</sup> Leading and following are choices and without a clear sense of connection to others and a shared endeavour, we are unlikely to do either. Within the sector, some of the greatest impacts of leadership development arise through 'identity work' where participants are given the opportunity to explore questions such as 'who am I?' and 'where am I going?'<sup>111</sup> and to work through tensions between multiple social and professional identities.

**107**

Barker (1997) p352

**108**

Bolden, Gosling and O'Brien (2014)

**109**

Such as the Leadership Foundation for higher Education, LH Martin Institute, Higher Education Academy and professional associations

**110**

Goffee and Jones (2006)

**111**

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003); Sinclair (2007)

### Reflective questions on engagement

1. What are the dominant mindsets within your organisation, and how do these impact upon day-to-day leadership practice?
2. What are the main ways in which you have learnt and developed your own practices of self-in-relation, social interactions, dialogue through learning conversations and growth-in-connection with others?
3. To what extent do you actively facilitate the development of these 'knowledge-era' mindsets and capabilities amongst others?
4. Do you and those with whom you work see yourselves as part of a 'community', and to what extent do members of that community actively engage in governance and leadership?
5. What have been the most significant factors that have influenced your own approach to leadership? To what extent do these constrain and/or facilitate your engagement with shared leadership?
6. Drawing on the insights raised by this stimulus paper, what are the main development priorities for you, your organisation and the other communities to which you belong?



## Conclusion

In this stimulus paper, we have explored context, practice and engagement with shared leadership in higher education and presented a range of frameworks, examples and questions to consider. Together, we hope these provide a good sense of how and why a shared leadership perspective has much to offer those seeking to improve the quality and effectiveness of their higher education projects and organisations.

This is still an emerging field however, and as Harris suggests:

*The empirical evidence about distributed leadership and organisational development is encouraging but far from conclusive. We need to know much more about the barriers, unintended consequences and limitations of distributed leadership before offering any advice or prescription. We also need to know the limitations and pitfalls as well as the opportunities and potential of this model of leadership practice.<sup>112</sup>*

Within higher education there is still much to do, and evidence to suggest that academics and other members of the community rarely find genuine opportunities for debate and enquiry about the nature and purpose of academic work<sup>113</sup>. Universities, as institutions with both normative and utilitarian objectives, must help people find ways in which to navigate and address these tensions. As Albert and Whetten argue:

*Effective leaders of dual identity organizations should personify and support both identities. University presidents who were never professors (ordained members of the priesthood) will always be considered managers, not leaders. This deficiency should impair their effectiveness during retrenchment when they must be perceived as the champion of the normative as well as the utilitarian values of the organisation.<sup>114</sup>*

In moving forward, we urge you to take an open yet critical approach to shared leadership in which you become alert to the wider dynamics of leadership and the social, political and cultural context in which it takes place. We encourage you to ask the inconvenient questions about power, purpose and privilege in order to gain genuine insight into what enables and constrains active leadership and followership from all quarters. This is the kind of 'radical doubt, enquiry and reflexivity' encouraged by Flinn and Mowles<sup>115</sup> that emerges when acknowledging the true complexities of organisational life. Thompson, Constantineau and Fallis, for example, suggest that academic rights of self-governance and self-regulation, academic freedom and tenure, and self-directedness all carry certain key responsibilities, including playing an active role in leadership:

**112**

Harris (2009) p18

**113**

Bolden et al (2012)

**114**

Albert and Whetten (2004) p112

**115**

Flinn and Mowles (2014) p19

**116**

Thompson, Constantineau and Fallis (2005) p134

**117**

Kelly and Hess (2013) p9

**118**

Cited in Haslam, Reicher and Platow (2011)

**119**

Cited in Manz and Sims (1991) p35

*[Leadership] is an ongoing responsibility of citizenship and it occurs in all aspects of one's university life since some changes are as local as introducing or promoting pedagogical opportunities and others as large as changing social priorities and conditions. Some can only be responded to by instructors in the context of individual classes, others require the involvement of large numbers of faculty (curricular revision, for example), and yet others require extra-university activities such as negotiating government–university frameworks.<sup>116</sup>*

We encourage a critical review of a dominant mindset (variously described as 'economic rationalism', 'neo liberalism' or 'new public management') that still underpins policy and management in tertiary education in most Western countries. This mindset, which has dominated the higher education policy landscape since the 1980s, is based on principles of 'efficiency' that have led to a culture of 'established routines, structures and hierarchies [that] make it inordinately difficult for organisations to rethink their cost structures and business models'<sup>117</sup> when conditions change. Indeed conditions have changed and the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) context of contemporary higher education means that command and control are no longer a viable option, if indeed they ever were.

From these perspectives, shared leadership is not simply a desirable approach to leadership within higher education but a necessity. If however, as the evidence suggests, academics are either disengaging from leadership and management within their institutions, or find themselves excluded for a variety of reasons (including age, gender and ethnicity), it makes sense to ask why and what can be done to re-engage them. Only then can shared leadership become a reality.

Shared leadership requires a systemic approach that focuses on the relationship between individuals, groups and organisations rather than any one of these in isolation. Ultimately, as the leadership scholar John Adair<sup>118</sup> says, 'the most important word in the leader's vocabulary is "we" and the least important word is "I"'. Leadership is, and always has been, a shared activity.

*A leader is best  
When people barely know he exists  
Not so good when people obey and acclaim him  
Worse when they despise him  
But of a good leader, who talks little,  
When his work is done, his aim fulfilled,  
They will say:  
We did it ourselves.*

**(Lao Tzu, 5th century BC)<sup>119</sup>**

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