

**Using a network of Program Heads to enact successful change
in a higher education institution**

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Abstract

Effective change management in higher education is essentially about the staff who are to put each development into practice wanting to engage with the initiative and then learning how to do something new. A key player in this process is the Head of Program – the person who is responsible for ensuring that a desired educational change is actually put successfully and sustainably into practice. This is because the Head of Program is the final arbiter of whether any learning and teaching change is actually consistently and effectively put into practice by program staff. If a Head of Program does not see a change or quality improvement initiative as being relevant, clear and feasible (implementable), then they will not engage their staff in learning how to make it happen.

This paper examines the background, operation and outcomes of a Heads of Program Network set up at the University of Western Sydney in order to reinforce staff engagement in university wide efforts to improve learning, teaching and student retention.

This network received a commendation in the University's quality audit because it had proven to be a convenient and well regarded way for Heads of Programs to assess the feasibility and relevance of changes proposed by "the centre"; to adjust these to ensure their feasibility; and to identify the best way to ensure they were taken up locally. It has proven to be an efficient mechanism for identifying locally successful ways of addressing key changes that could be adapted for application in other locations across the university. And it has proven to be an ideal forum for informal learning and support around a common role and set of change challenges.

Keywords: Heads of Program Network, staff engagement, change implementation

Introduction

Articles on professional networking in higher education are rare in the literature and non-existent for the networks of people who are in the same leadership role, for example, Head of School or Head of Program. The internet portals and e-publications on professional networking at universities are mostly focused on either research and disciplinary networks (e.g., Australia's Academic and Research Network [AARNet], 2009; Dynamics of Institutions and Markets in Europe [DIME], 2009; Haynes, Adams, & Boss, 2008; Mireles-Cabodevila & Stoller, 2009; Murdoch University, 2009) or university-industry networks with an entrepreneurial orientation (e.g., Clarysse, Wright, Lockett, Van de Velde, & Vohora, 2005; Ozgen & Baron, 2007; Walter, Auer & Ritter, 2006).

However, as it is stated in the recent book by Fullan and Scott (2009) "Turnaround Leadership for Higher Education", currently, at a time when the pressure for change from sources outside the university is mounting, the importance of staff peer networks in higher education is also increasing. A key function of these networks is to enable leaders to talk through the most perplexing challenges with someone who understands the day to day realities of their work – not necessarily to get an answer, but to figure out what is going on and to identify some potentially relevant ways to respond.

Earlier research by Scott (2003, 2004) and by Scott, Shah, Grebennikov and Singh (2008) has revealed that change in higher education is fundamentally about the staff who are to put each development into practice wanting to engage with it and then learning the new skills and knowledge necessary to make it work. Everyone who is to deliver the new practice will have to learn a "gap" in their expertise (and often unlearn old ways of doing things). Therefore, understanding what will motivate staff to engage in the learning that underpins each change effort is critical to achieving the above outcomes. Staff will not engage unless they can personally see that doing so is relevant, desirable, clear, distinctive and achievable. Being involved in shaping an agreed change project, providing advice on what might happen within their area of expertise, and being clear on what is envisaged are also powerful motivators. At the same time we know that a key resource for effective adult learning is having access to a "fellow traveller" further down the same career path one is on (Tough, 1979).

Thus, participating in a well organised peer network within a university helps achieve "buy in" and provides peer-support for those front-line staff who will, ultimately, be the ones who actually put each improvement project into daily practice. Yet, evidence that professional

networks of this type are typically ad hoc rather than purposefully organised and promoted by universities goes back to the work of Hitchcock, Bland, Hekelman, and Blumenthal (1995). In particular, the authors report that “the most important source for developing colleague relationships is professional associations, while the least important source is one's own institution” (p.1108).

The Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) report “Learning Leaders in Times of Change” (Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008) provides empirical evidence on the importance of staff peer networks within universities. The report is based on one of the largest empirical studies of learning and teaching leaders in higher education in the world. The study analysed survey data from 513 academic leaders (Pro and Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Deans, School, Department and Program heads, and Directors of learning and teaching units) from 20 Australian universities. One of the survey’s questions asked the respondents to rank 20 different forms of learning in terms of their effectiveness in helping them develop their capabilities as an academic leader.

Table 1 summarises the responses to this question. It lists the items in the order of importance to the 91 Heads of Program (highest first) as ranked mean values obtained using a 5-point Likert-style scale. This is noted in the second column. In the third column the importance ranks for the same items given by the 130 Heads of School and in the fourth column the importance ranks given by the combined pool of respondents are shown.

Table 1: Activities perceived as most effective in helping academic leaders develop their leadership capabilities. In rank order for HoP, highest first (total number of items = 20)

| Item | HoP ranking (n = 91) | HoS ranking (n = 130) | Combined pool ranking (N = 513) |
|--|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------|
| • Learning “on-the-job” | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| • Ad hoc conversations about work with people in similar roles | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| • Being involved in informal mentoring/coaching | 3 | 5 | 4 |
| • Participating in peer networks within the university | 4 | 3 | 3 |
| • Completing a tertiary qualification relevant to leadership | 5 | 13 | 10 |
| • Study of “real- life” workplace problems | 6 | 4 | 5 |
| • Attending learning and teaching conferences | 7 | 18 | 9 |
| • Participating in peer networks beyond the University | 8 | 7 | 6 |
| • Undertaking self-guided reading on leadership | 9 | 8 | 7 |
| • Participating in higher education leadership seminars | 10 | 9 | 8 |

For example, the table shows that “completing a tertiary qualification relevant to leadership” was ranked 5th on importance by Heads of Program (HoP) but only 13th highest by Heads of School (HoS) and 10th highest on importance for the combined pool of 513 respondents (i.e. the combined set of respondents from Pro or Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Deans, Associate Deans, Heads of School, Directors, to Heads of Program, Team Leaders, etc.).

The table suggests that of the 10 activities perceived by Heads of Program as most important for developing their leadership capabilities six are about communicating with people who are in the similar role (ranks 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, and 10). The same result is evident for the combined pool of 513 respondents, while for Heads of School it is five of the 10 most important activities.

Many of the 1,200 higher education leaders in the national and international workshops which reviewed the “Learning Leaders” (Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008) results also emphasised the importance of developing targeted support networks for people in the same role. Recurring themes in these review workshops include:

- Recognise the difference between people with line responsibility and those who operate only by “influence”. Set up support groups for the “influencers”.
- Establish a network of “fellow travellers” in the same role – both formally (e.g., via discussions with trained Heads and monthly chats) and informally (e.g., via email lists, discussion boards, web-based learning resources, readings and links).
- Develop a support group for beginning leaders.
- Offer a mentoring program, especially for the recently promoted, using the data from this study on the capabilities that count most in the role.

Scott, Coates and Anderson (2008) argue that one role underestimated for its key influence on whether a desired change is taken up and actioned locally is that of the Head of Program. As noted earlier, if these people do not engage with such change then they will not focus and assist their staff to learn how to make the desired change work in practice. The development of Heads of Programs Networks led by a Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) and their early involvement in the learning and teaching change process to test the relevance, feasibility and clarity of what is being proposed was widely recommended in the study’s review workshops. It was also recommended that they should be more systematically and directly involved in leading local implementation.

With this context in mind, the objective of this paper is to share the experience of setting up a Heads of Program Network (HoPNet) at the University of Western Sydney (UWS). This

paper gives a detailed and evidence-based description of the initiative's background, operation, and outcomes to date, and thus it might be valuable to those seeking to set up similar networks at other institutions.

A network of Heads of Programs: The UWS model

The UWS network of Heads of Programs was set up in 2005 and it is led by the University's Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching). It enables Heads of Programs to work directly and reciprocally with senior management on key focus areas for learning and teaching improvement. As an informal network with no reporting accountabilities, its continuity and success depend on its relevance to the Heads, and their involvement in its operation. It is an innovation which allows the University to achieve a focused, efficient two-way flow of information between local change managers and University's executive management, Academic Senate and other sources of academic development and governance. It also encourages discussion of changes in learning and teaching and its effective support from a crossdisciplinary perspective. Some of the challenges in setting up such a network have included:

- Clarifying the role of Head of Program as the term was used to describe activities of differing scope, size and levels of responsibility;
- Identifying all UWS Heads of Programs and keeping an up-to-date database on who is currently in the role;
- Achieving convenient and productive communication between some 60 Heads of Programs spread over six campuses. The solution was found in setting up a user-developed WebCT site for the network upon which meeting notes and resources are also lodged.

The HoPNet meets three or four times each year. If a UWS staff member is a HoP or becomes one in the future, they will be contacted automatically about forthcoming HoPNet forums. HoPNet forums usually include an information session, some group work on a strategic issue and a professional development component. They may be a half or full-day long. The information sessions typically involve staff from the academic administration delivering short items on innovations or revisions to practice involving students, e.g. online enrolment, and then seeking feedback from Heads. Strategic issues sessions are often configured as opportunities for the Heads to give feedback to senior management on draft policies or strategies. The staff development component is user-determined. These sessions usually involve a facilitator working with the group on a specific issue which HoPs have identified for development attention. For example, there was a requested session on anti-

corruption, which involved colleagues from the Office of Legal Counsel and a Deputy Vice-Chancellor with extensive expertise in the area.

The HoPNet looks at the best ways to implement the University's agreed change priorities in the unique context of their local course and share effective solutions. As noted earlier, it addresses a key gap in most university implementation strategies – the failure to systematically engage key local players in the process of shaping uniquely suitable ways of handling each strategy and then providing targeted, peer-supported assistance to help them learn how to make their selected change solution work in practice. Some of the key change areas addressed by HoPNet over the past four years are summarised below:

The UWS retention campaign

Optimising student retention has been a key University priority since 2004. The retention campaign, which commenced in that year, was one of the standing agenda items at the HoPNet Forums during 2005 and early 2006. The strategies shaped at the Forums and implemented by the University included: communicating to all UWS staff the fact that there is a retention campaign running at the University, the reasons why retention is vital, and the key tasks and who is accountable for them; administering a regular UWS First Year Student Exit Survey and First Year Retention Survey and jointly addressing the key areas for improvement action that emerged; and undertaking a university wide Students at Risk project with a set of key strategies identified for action at the HoPNet forums. These included ensuring a more consistent and relevant approach to the:

- quality of student orientation;
- accuracy and speed of enrolments and fees invoicing;
- provision of contact for students to promptly resolve their administrative problems;
- more effective transition of first year students into university study (by ensuring easy access to IT resources, their effective use of WebCT, group projects, and peer mentors);
- management of student expectations and clarity about what is expected of them, especially regarding assessment;
- active and targeted promotion of support services and facilities.

Each of the above components of the Retention Campaign was led by the senior staff member accountable for its delivery. For example, the Director of Student Support Services was responsible for orientation, student support and provision of convenient contact for students with queries. Each HoPNet action team worked with the relevant key players across the University and was linked with what the other teams were doing. The specific initiatives

included tailored customer service training provided for UWS Student Centre staff and other administrative staff; development of customer inquiry and service protocols; a refurbishment of campus libraries; an upgrade of IT equipment and computer labs; introduction of online enrolment of students; additional online learning material and student services made available through UWS online learning. Other actions shaped by HoPs at the Forums and then led by them included the active promotion of peer-mentoring, advising, counselling, early intervention of at-risk students and other initiatives focused on student socialization and adjustment. One year later, five of the six areas subjected to improvement action showed a noticeable increase in student satisfaction with their quality. The retention of first year undergraduate students has gone up by 4% from 2004/2005 to 2008/2009.

The Australian Universities Quality Agency audit of UWS

In preparation for its 2006 cycle one audit by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) the “listen, link and lead” approach to collaborative change management in higher education (Fullan & Scott, 2009) was effectively used. One key group involved in this collaborative approach to self-assessment was the HoPNet. In the approach:

- “listen“ involved asking HoPs to identify against a set of self-assessment checkpoints areas they saw as needing improvement and relevant and feasible ways to address them;
- “link” involved bringing those strategies together into a plan of action which was, therefore, “owned“ by those who were to implement it; and
- “lead” meant giving targeted support to these people to learn the “gaps” in their expertise which were necessary to make their agreed change work; it also involved working with them to monitor and refine the pilot versions of different solutions before scaling them up more widely.

One example how this played out in the case of the HoPs was the development of a new university assessment policy. In the early stages, Heads of Program were asked to debate the principles behind the new policy, and their opinions were injected directly into the policy development group's deliberations. Later, they were asked to advise on the methods of implementing the new policy; again their advice was taken up directly by the senior managers with overall responsibility for implementing the policy.

The University's development of the Heads of Program Network was highly commended by the AUQA panel and a more detailed outline of it can be found on the AUQA Good Practice Database (AUQA, 2009).

Other high-level UWS change areas shaped by HoPNet

HoPNet has assisted the University to most relevantly, sharply and feasibly implement a wide range of high level UWS strategic developments. Examples include its work in figuring out how best to implement the UWS:

- Learning and Teaching Action Plans 2005-2008 and 2009-2013;
- Learning Guides and Assessment Project;
- Review of its approach to recognising and rewarding good teaching;
- E-learning strategy; and
- University Engagement Plan.

Evidence of success

Key performance indicators

A range of University performance data from 2004-2009 indicates that UWS has made positive progress in such areas as retention, stakeholder satisfaction with learning and teaching, research, the international student experience, Indigenous student satisfaction, and community engagement. For example, retention has gone up by 4% from 2004/2005 to 2008/2009 for commencing undergraduate students. The UWS graduates' "explicit overall satisfaction" (% scoring 4 or 5 i.e. max) measured by the national Course Experience Questionnaire has risen by 13% during the same period of time. Comparable data from a range of UWS internal surveys support the hypothesis that if University improvement initiatives are "owned" by those who are to implement them, like HoPNet members, this can help enhance the core business of the University.

It should be noted that the relationship between the development of the HoPNet and improved University performance is not uniquely causal. A range of factors including the network have been associated with this improvement. However, recent studies on effective change leadership in higher education (Fullan & Scott, 2009; Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008) indicate that the Head of Program is the key arbiter of whether any desired change is taken up by local staff and supported into effective and consistent implementation.

HoPNet Benefits and Achievements Survey

This survey, conducted in 2007, aimed to determine how beneficial the HoPNet was proving to be for its participants and to identify key areas for improvement. Respondents were invited to rate the various activities provided for the network and its overall benefit – first on the relative importance of each component to them and then on its current performance. A five point Likert-style rating scale was used (1 – low to 5 – high). Respondents were also invited

to provide open-ended comments on the best aspect of different elements and what most needed improvement. A range of demographic and other data were also gathered. The survey was completed by 21 Heads of Program with about 30% response rate. Key findings were as follows:

- All survey respondents undertook from one to three additional roles, including Associate Head of School, Course Advisor, Lecturer, Unit Coordinator and Head of Research Group.
- Of the three main HoPNet activities, the Heads of Program Forum was rated highest in terms of both importance and performance.
- In terms of seven benefits from participating in the network the following three were rated highest on both importance and performance:
 - a) It is a valuable discussion forum for discussing Teaching and Learning issues across disciplines (importance rank = 1, performance rank = 1);
 - b) It supports HoP leadership development (2, 3); and
 - c) It is a platform for peer support and sharing experience with people in the same role and context (3, 2).
- Of the nine HoPNet Forum features surveyed the following three were rated highest on both importance and performance:
 - a) Feedback and discussion time – information sharing (1, 2);
 - b) Face-to-face delivery (2, 3); and
 - c) Networking with other HoPs (3, 1).
- Of the five features of the Network's professional development workshops the following three were rated highest on both importance and performance:
 - a) Face-to-face delivery (1, 1);
 - b) Topics – the training sessions meet HoP needs (2, 2); and
 - c) Training is content rich (3, 3).
- Of five HoPNet WebCT site features the following three were rated highest on importance and performance:
 - a) Being kept in the loop on the events and topics discussed at HoP Forums which I may have been unable to attend (1, 1);
 - b) One-stop-shop-information for HoPs (2, 3); and
 - c) Content (3, 2).

The written comments from respondents appear consistent with the above quantitative results and highlight that the HoPNet was:

- Having a positive impact by enabling HoPs to communicate with people in the same role and to share experiences on how best to build staff morale and performance, e.g.,
 - An opportunity to see that my issues and problems are shared with others.*
 - Getting tips from others helped me prioritise.*
 - Decreased sense of isolation.*
 - Reduced stress – it's not just me struggling with administration.*
- Of particular help to Heads of Program who were new to the role, e.g.,
 - I highly valued these events, especially when I was new to the role.*
 - As a new member of staff – developing an understanding of UWS methods, processes and policies .*
- Helping HoPs develop a better understanding of what is happening university wide, e.g.,
 - HoPNet helped me link UWS strategies with program delivery and direction.*
 - Get information that does not filter to HoP level in the school.*
- Facilitating bottom up communication, connections with senior management, e.g.,
 - Communicating with middle and upper managers.*
 - Recognition of my role.*
 - We need to see more on how the UWS management has responded to the issues raised in the HoP Forum.*

The participants' comments support the research cited earlier in the paper – that, if Heads of Program see a change or quality improvement initiative as being relevant, clear and feasible, then they will engage their staff in learning how to make it happen. For example, when answering the question “What are key initiatives you have undertaken as a result of being involved in the HoPNet” the survey respondents identified a wide range of implementation support activities, including:

- *Meeting with unit coordinators after each forum to advise them of changes or proposed changes;*
- *Compiling a program administration folder to make managing the program better;*
- *A review of assessment practices in my program;*
- *A more active role in course review;*
- *Assessment updating and development;*
- *Streamlining academic advising protocols and processes; instituting workable Callista rules and publicity for same, education and re-education of BA cohorts about their course rules through institution of planned course sites;*

- *My day-to-day management of HoP tasks was improved as was my understanding of my obligations. Review of standards across course.*

Discussion

It is important to recognise that change implementation does not just happen. It must be skilfully led. Fullan and Scott (2009) and Scott, Shah, Grebennikov and Singh (2008), in summarising many years of research, conclude that the leadership approach which works best is akin to the one adopted by the effective teacher of adults – a process in which the learners are assisted to learn the key “gaps” in their expertise which need to be addressed to make the change work. And the same active, flexible, “just-in-time“, “just-for-me” learning methods that work for our students also work for staff as they learn how to put their development or improvement projects into practice.

The UWS HoPNet has been praised because it has proven to be a convenient and productive way for middle level leaders to assess the feasibility and relevance of changes proposed by “the centre”, to adjust these to ensure their feasibility and to identify the best way to ensure they are taken up locally. It has proven to be an efficient mechanism for identifying locally successful ways of addressing key changes that can be adapted for application in other locations across the university. And it has proven to be an ideal forum for informal learning and support around a common role and a similar set of challenges and changes.

The UWS HoPNet has created a useful “third space” between the domains of the management and governance. The internal functioning of universities in Australia is generally characterised by a distinction between academic governance and executive management. The extent to which this “separation of powers” varies from institution to institution. However, the distinction is fundamentally between the functions of policy setting on the one hand and policy implementation on the other. Policy setting is, for example, typically in the hands of academic boards, academic senates and suchlike, while policy implementation is typically carried out through a line of management positions and financial delegations. The two functions are often linked through those senior staff who operate in both domains.

The Heads of Program Network sits between these domains. The relatively free and flexible discussion and communication format ignores internal boundaries (e.g. between Schools) and minimises status differences (e.g. Lecturers and Professors can both be a Head of Program and, in the context of this role, find themselves to be on a more equal footing). It

also allows discussion of topics from the policy setting and policy implementation domains. For example, the UWS HoP Forum is routinely used to get grass roots feedback on policies that are being developed by the Senate Education Committee; this feedback is routed back into the formal governance mechanism by the HoP Forum convenor – the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) who is also Chair of the Education Committee. On the other hand, the HoP Forum generates discussion of issues like staff development, which impinge more on the area of implementation than policy. When this is the case, the feedback is routed to the relevant executives in the university.

The key factor in developing this responsive “third space” is the active leadership of the HoP Network by a Pro Vice-Chancellor who is linked directly into the policy setting and policy implementation domains. Without this key ingredient, it is very likely that the UWS HoP Network would have become a short-lived talking shop. It is notable that the same Pro Vice-Chancellor has personally convened every UWS HoP Forum since its inception.

Conclusion

The research reported in this paper gives a positive indication that the establishment of a Heads of Program network has the potential to increase staff engagement with, and consistent implementation of, quality improvements in higher education learning and teaching. For such a network to be successful it is critically important that it is led by the senior executive responsible for this area; that the members of the network are included in an annual quality forum; that their role is directly acknowledged by the university executive; and that they are used as a sounding board early on in the process of shaping learning and teaching initiatives to determine what would be the most relevant and feasible way to action them. Finally, it is recommended that the network not be configured as a formal university committee but, rather, that it remain a community of practice with the major task of sharing effective ways to tackle common implementation challenges.

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