Turnaround Leadership for Sustainability in Higher Education

About the study

A complex, interlocked set of social, cultural, economic and environmental changes is rapidly unfolding across the world. The role of higher education in helping address the challenges posed by these developments and in producing future leaders equipped to manage them successfully is attracting increased attention.

This report recognises that 'Turnaround Leadership for Sustainability in Higher Education' is required if Universities and Colleges are to respond to these needs. This form of leadership acknowledges the systemic change challenge facing universities and colleges as they wrestle with addressing the four pillars of social, cultural, economic and environmental sustainability not just in their operations but in their research, teaching and engagement activities.

The study, funded by the Australian Government's Office of Learning & Teaching, has identified 10 key recommendations to inform leadership action, support and development. These recommendations have emerged from the experience and insights of the 188 participants in the study and an additional 500 leaders of sustainability in higher education in Australasia, North America, the UK and European mainland who reviewed the findings and identified their key implications for action.

The study has a focus on *Education for Sustainability* (EfS), recognising that sustainability needs to be embedded in learning programmes – the core business of higher education. Universities and colleges frame the thinking and decisions that influence quality of life across the globe and it is through education that it has its greatest impact.

Key recommendations

1. **Acknowledge the distinctive challenges & complexity of EfS leadership**
   This study acknowledges the general complexity of leading change management in higher education but has also identified *distinctive challenges* that make the EfS change leader's role particularly testing. These include addressing system transformation; a focus on futures' thinking not just solving immediate issues; on building connections across traditional academic silos and supporting interdisciplinarity and interportfolio initiatives.

2. **Sharpen the focus & understanding of EfS in higher education**
   The study has captured the widely varied and often confused interpretations of 'education for sustainability' in higher education. It is important to build processes where staff and students can make meaning of sustainability in their own context and enjoy opportunities to share understandings. Successful examples of practice need to be made accessible and available on interactive websites such as www.sustainability.edu.au.

3. **Context counts: ensure organisational integration and system alignment to support EfS & its leaders**
   Turnaround leadership for sustainability in higher education requires an amenable operating context and environment. Effective leaders can reshape this context to be more supportive. Ten key steps identified in the study can be taken to address this issue in order to 'embed' EfS into the core activities of our universities and colleges.

4. **Track & improve EfS program quality more systematically**

A range of key indicators can be used to determine the extent to which an institution is taking a comprehensive approach to embed EfS in its core activities. These key indicators for assuring and improving the quality of inputs and outcomes of EfS initiatives can be used for setting and assessing the KPIs and vision for EfS in our universities.

5. **Put in place the right incentives**

A combination of 19 extrinsic and intrinsic incentives is necessary to encourage and support engagement of university staff and students with EfS initiatives. Examples include having the active support of senior leaders, rewards for transdisciplinary programs, acknowledgement of successful initiatives, having peer support and access to successful solutions in other institutions, knowing one is playing an active role in addressing key world issues, working with inspiring people, positive student feedback and creating a legacy.

6. **Engage the disengaged and the institution's senior leadership**

Successful implementation requires *consistent* delivery of each EfS innovation. 11 proven strategies for engaging 'the disengaged' with EfS initiatives have been identified. These need to be consistently adopted by those leading EfS change in universities and colleges. It is particularly important to ensure active senior leadership support for what is being undertaken.

7. **Apply the key lessons on successful change management in higher education**

Good ideas with no ideas on how to implement them are wasted ideas

Ten key strategies for ensuring successful and sustainable change implementation in EfS have been identified. Professional development of institutional leaders of EfS should give situated focus to how these lessons can be applied in the unique context of each institution and leadership role.

8. **Focus on the change leadership capabilities identified in this study**

Change doesn't just happen but must be led, and deftly

To successfully negotiate, reshape and implement the challenging transformation agenda identified above requires a distinctive set of leadership capabilities. The most effective change leaders of EfS have a particular combination of personal, interpersonal and cognitive capabilities in addition to specific EfS skills and knowledge. The highest ranking capabilities should be given specific focus in leader selection and development processes.

9. **Review EfS leadership position descriptions, selection processes and succession strategies in the light of the study's findings**

Each university and college should review its current suite of leadership position descriptions and selection and succession procedures against the key capabilities, areas of role focus and effectiveness indicators identified in the study.

10. **Apply the most productive approaches to leadership learning identified in the study to the professional development of EfS leaders**

Eight productive approaches to professional development and support of EfS leaders have been identified. These quality checkpoints and strategies should be used to guide the development, delivery and monitoring of EfS leadership development programs. Existing national and international EfS networks need to be linked and leveraged into an integrated learning exchange and support system for EfS leaders.

The full report on the project explores these recommendations in detail and provides a consolidated and practical guide for all who are interested in leading successful change in this key aspect of twenty first century higher education. The report can be downloaded from the Office for Learning and Teaching website at: http://www.olt.gov.au/ .