PROPEL – Program for Preparing Early Leaders

ACTIVE COMPONENT FRAMEWORK

Contents

1 The importance of practice-based learning to academic leadership development .................................. 2
2 Aims of the PROPEL Active Component ................................................................................................. 2
3 Overview of the PROPEL Active Component ........................................................................................ 2
4 Benefits to PROPEL participants from the Active Component ................................................................ 2
5 Criteria for identifying suitable projects .................................................................................................. 3
6 Selection and approval of projects ........................................................................................................... 4
7 Responsibilities related to the Active Component .................................................................................. 4
  7.1 The PROPEL participant .................................................................................................................. 4
  7.2 The participant’s Dean and Faculty ............................................................................................... 4
  7.3 The PROPEL Coordinators ............................................................................................................ 4
8 Support and training for participants ......................................................................................................... 4
  8.1 Support from the PROPEL Mentor ................................................................................................ 4
  8.2 Support from the PROPEL Network .............................................................................................. 5
  8.3 Training for participants .................................................................................................................. 5
9 Timeline for project activities ..................................................................................................................... 5
10 Active Project Component presentation and report .................................................................................. 5
11 Addressing problems ............................................................................................................................... 6
12 References ................................................................................................................................................ 6
1 The importance of practice-based learning to academic leadership development

The teaching profession has long recognised that learners need to actively participate in an activity in order to fully appreciate its implications (Engeström, 1996; Leontiev, 1978). This has not always been reflected in non-Education fields, but is increasingly being applied to academic leadership.

A recent study of 513 university leaders strongly endorsed “role-specific, practice-based, peer-supported and self-managed learning” as the most effective means for learning about leadership (Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008, p. xvii). Similarly, Drew, Ehrich & Hansford (2008) identified learning through action as important for university leaders, while Bailey, Cimini & Coffey (2008) described projects and cross-functional teams as a highly effective tool for the development of leaders. Examples of this approach can be found in both TRN (2008) and UniSA (2008).

2 Aims of the PROPEL Active Component

Through providing pre-leadership academics with the opportunity to lead a self-directed project with strategic significance to their Faculty, the PROPEL Active Component contributes to achieving the following outcomes:

- Providing a pool of candidates for future leadership positions who are equipped with leadership skills which include project leadership and change management.
- Developing and retaining pre-leadership academics with recognised leadership potential.
- Increasing understanding of the range of conflicting interests that universities are facing.
- Increasing understanding of the teaching-research nexus.
- Increasing understanding of the value of collaboration and breaking down borders between Faculties and disciplines.
- Raising awareness among current leaders of the importance of addressing the leadership crisis in the Australian tertiary education sector.

3 Overview of the PROPEL Active Component

Each PROPEL participant chooses one project which they will lead during the 12-month Program. The project is identified and agreed upon through consultation between the participant, their Dean and the PROPEL Coordinators. All selected projects must meet the criteria set out in Part 5 of this Framework.

Participants commence planning for their project at the PROPEL Leadership Skills Workshop at the beginning of the Program. They then lead the project to completion, ideally by the end of their training year. Participants receive support for their project from their PROPEL mentor and the PROPEL Coordinators.

At the end of the Program, participants prepare a presentation and a final report in which the leadership project is explained and the participant reflects on what s/he has done well, what could have been done differently, and what s/he has learned about leadership from undertaking the project.

4 Benefits to PROPEL participants from the Active Component

By undertaking a self-directed project, PROPEL participants are able to put into practice may of the leadership skills they are developing through other components of the Program. The project provides a practical avenue for participants to apply what they have learned, try out new approaches, and reflect on their performance to identify strengths and areas needing further develop. Participants and mentors are able to use the project as a practical focal-point for mentoring discussions.

The project has added benefits of:
- elevating participants’ profiles within their Faculty and the University
- raising participants’ awareness of what is happening around them, what other areas of the University need and how they operate
- giving participants an insight into the strategically important issues in the Faculty/University
- providing a vehicle for collaboration with other PROPEL participants
- expanding participants’ connections with and outside their Faculty/University
- acting as a stepping stone to other leadership roles/responsibilities in the future.
The PROPEL Program is designed to provide lasting benefit to both the participant, in terms of their career development, as well as the University in terms of succession planning and increased collaboration and interdisciplinarity. It is critical that projects undertaken by PROPEL participants meet the following criteria:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Projects need to be . . .</th>
<th>Value to participants</th>
<th>Value to Faculties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aligned with the needs of the Faculty.</td>
<td>Projects of strategic or operational importance to the Faculty will generate greater interest and support, increasing participants’ likelihood of successful completion.</td>
<td>Faculties will gain tangible outcomes from taking part in the PROPEL Program which contribute to their strategic goals.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Valuable to the participant’s career development.</td>
<td>Low-priority or ‘make-work’ projects will not extend participant’s capabilities and will lessen their motivation to complete the project.</td>
<td>Participation in PROPEL should be seen as a one aspect of developing staff into valuable future leaders. Projects should reflect this in their priority to the Faculty and the level of expertise they demand.</td>
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<td>In keeping with the spirit of the PROPEL Program (i.e. focus on interdisciplinarity and/or the teaching-research nexus). <strong>While the primary focus of selected projects will vary widely, projects should be able to incorporate interdisciplinarity and/or teaching-research nexus as a secondary focus.</strong></td>
<td>Learnings from other PROPEL Components (particularly the Interdisciplinary, Big Picture and Mentoring Components) can be applied to leading the project. Participants will also widen and strengthen their cross-Faculty collaboration.</td>
<td>Faculties and the University will benefit from a heightened interest in and understanding of both interdisciplinarity and teaching-research nexus, both of which are key issues for the tertiary sector.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realistically achievable within the 12-month timeframe</td>
<td>Participants will have a limited amount of time to dedicate to project activities. Projects which can be completed within the time available will motivate participants and reward their efforts.</td>
<td>Unrealistic expectations will result in incomplete or inadequately developed projects, which are of little benefit to the participant or the Faculty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable beyond the 12-month PROPEL program.</td>
<td>Participants’ connection with a project which provides long-term benefits to the Faculty will increase their leadership credibility.</td>
<td>Projects which have long-term relevance and can be integrated into Faculty business offer a better return on investment for Faculties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transferable, to a certain degree, within and outside the University.</td>
<td>Exploring transferability in projects will give participants the opportunity to look outside their own Faculty’s/University’s way of operating, and will encourage active collaboration and broaden participants’ connections.</td>
<td>Dissemination of project outcomes across Faculties will provide University-wide benefits. Dissemination to other institutions will provide opportunities to collaborate and form connections, and contribute to the development of the tertiary sector as a whole.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6 Selection and approval of projects

Projects for the PROPEL Active Component are selected through a process of consultation involving participants, Deans and the PROPEL Coordinators. Project selection takes place before participants attend the Leadership Skills Workshop.

- Participants are given the set of project criteria (refer to Section 5) and asked to begin thinking of a suitable projects with strategic significance to their Faculty.
- At the PROPEL Launch, participants are given further information and advice from PROPEL Coordinators on selecting and managing appropriate projects and negotiating project approval.
- Deans are also provided with the set of project criteria.
- After the Launch, participants meet with Deans to discuss the suggested project and gain approval
- Participants provide PROPEL Coordinators with a one-page project plan prior to attending the Leadership Skills Workshop.
- PROPEL Coordinators ensure all projects meet the criteria for the Active Component.

7 Responsibilities related to the Active Component

7.1 The PROPEL participant

Leading the project to a successful completion will depend entirely on the participant’s level of commitment. Participants need to:

- plan their project carefully and consult fully with stakeholders (including Deans)
- identify and keep to project milestones
- make sufficient time available on a regular basis to progress their project
- seek advice and take action to overcome obstacles.

7.2 The participant’s Dean and Faculty

The Dean’s role is key in ensuring the project is successfully completed. Selected projects should provide a genuine benefit to the Faculty. Deans need to show both the participant and other Faculty staff that they value the project and expect a successful outcome. Deans will:

- meet with the participant at the commencement of the PROPEL Program and outline what they expect the project to deliver
- meet with the participant at the half-way point in the project to review progress
- provide the participant with support to overcome obstacles if needed.

7.3 The PROPEL Coordinators

The PROPEL Coordinators (consisting of the three PROPEL Project Leaders and the PROPEL Project Manager) will provide:

- a framework for the identification and selection of projects
- coordination of the project selection process
- information to participants and Faculties on all aspects of the Active Component
- templates for participants to use in managing their projects
- opportunities at the Leadership Skills Workshop for projects to be discussed and planning to commence
- a strategy to monitor and evaluate the process and outcomes of the project
- ongoing assistance to participants and Faculties where needed.

8 Support and training for participants

8.1 Support from the PROPEL Mentor

The PROPEL mentor will actively support the participant throughout the life of the project. Each mentoring session (held monthly) should touch on the progress of the project and review any difficulties the participant has faced. The mentor will provide feedback on project planning and implementation strategies, and will also help the participant explore alternative ways of achieving a successful outcome.
8.2 Support from the PROPEL Network

PROPEL participants can provide each other with feedback and support through the PROPEL Network. Participants will be able to refer to the Network for advice and feedback on their project plans and strategies. A Network email list should be established for this purpose.

The PROPEL Network should also hold regular catch-up events throughout the Program. The topics of these events will be driven by the participants themselves, and may include workshopping common project difficulties or guest speakers who have strong project management skills.

8.3 Training for participants

Participants receive training in leadership skills at the PROPEL Leadership Skills Workshop at the commencement of the Program. This includes training in communications, planning and change management. Participants also receive a number of templates to assist in managing their projects.

The Workshop also gives participants the opportunity to begin planning their project and receive critical feedback from the Coordinators, facilitators and other participants.

9 Timeline for project activities

During the Leadership Skills Workshop participants will:
- Discuss their project with the other participants, coordinators, and presenters
- Learn about project management, change management, overcoming obstacles
- Relate what they are learning about leadership to the reality of running their projects
- Formulate ideas, plans and strategies for their projects
- Develop a first draft project plan
- Present their plans to a round table of other participants and Coordinators and receive feedback

After the Workshop (within 1-2 months) participants will:
- Discuss the project and draft plans with their mentor at the first meeting
- Finalise their project plan and submit to the Dean for endorsement
- Schedule project-work time into their workload

Half-way through the Program participants will:
- Meet with their Deans to discuss progress of the project
- Attend a mid-point event at which all participants give a brief progress report on their project and receive feedback from the group and the Coordinators. Common difficulties which are identified will be workshopped and project evaluation strategies discussed.

Near the end of the Program (prior to the Reflective Event) participants will:
- Attend a Project Presentation Event at which they present outcomes of their projects and reflections on what they have learned about leadership through undertaking the project.

At the end of the Program participants will:
- Attend a Reflective Event at which they will look back on their experiences over the past year (including the leadership project)
- Prepare a final project report and submit to the PROPEL Coordinator and their Deans. (If a project is still ongoing, a progress report can be submitted and arrangements made with the Dean to either continue leading the project or hand it on).

10 Active Project Component presentation and report

The project presentation and final report serve to:
- Set fixed deadlines for participants to work towards in their project timelines
- Ensure participants remain committed to developing their project throughout the year
- Give participants the opportunity to showcase their achievements to the PROPEL Coordinators, other participants and their Deans.
- Give participants a structure in which to consider and present their reflections on the leadership skills they have learned and practiced by undertaking the project.
Presentation format - each participant will prepare a 10 minute presentation which should briefly explain the project, showcase the outcomes achieved, indicate where difficulties arose and how they were overcome, and point to the leadership lessons learned along the way.

The Project Presentation Event is attended by participants, PROPEL Coordinators. Deans and Heads of School can also be invited to attend.

Report format - each participant will prepare a detailed project report which should include:
- Executive summary
- Background to the project
- Project details
- Project outcomes and recommendations
- Project evaluation strategy and findings
- Reflection on the project as a leadership development activity

The final project report is submitted to the PROPEL Coordinators and the participant’s Dean. Copies of all reports are placed on the PROPEL website.

11 Addressing problems

The primary purpose of the Active Component is to give participants a chance to practice their leadership skills. If a project has stalled or is not fulfilling this purpose for any reason, it is important to address this problem as early as possible in the program.

If a participant is experiencing significant problems with the progress or completion of their selected project, s/he should advise the PROPEL Coordinators without delay. It may be necessary to make changes to the original project plans, or even to select a new project, to ensure the participant completes the Active Component successfully within the time remaining.

12 References

