Cultivating a new generation of academic leaders

The University of Wollongong has a vision - to turn the reactive approach to academic leadership development on its head.

Traditionally, leadership training is only available to those already in leadership positions. The UOW Program for Preparing Early Leaders (PROPEL) takes an unashamedly proactive approach, giving potential future academic leaders a taste of the day-to-day complexities of universities well before they commence their first leadership roles. Through this reversal of the accepted order, UOW believes it will be possible for universities to defuse the leadership succession crisis anticipated to hit the sector.

Up until now, there has been a natural flow-on of baby-boomers taking on leadership positions in universities, but many are now retiring out of academic leadership roles, leaving an opening for a new generation of academic leaders. This presents a rare opportunity to create a new leadership culture. But to do this old habits need to be broken.

“People with similar traits to their predecessors have regularly been brought forward in the leadership chain in the past, often resulting in things being done the way they have always been done. We are at a unique point now where we can be pro-active through programs such as PROPEL, and identify people with leadership potential before they are ‘socialised’ by the established system”, says Professor Wilma Vialle, one of the three PROPEL project leaders. “There is great potential for leaders with fresh ideas who can look at things in a different way”.

Wollongong’s vision to nurture future academic leaders is embodied in the intensive 12-month PROPEL program, which kicked off recently at a three-day workshop backed by some of the sector’s most respected leaders.

Fifteen hand-picked young academics from around Australia had the opportunity to interact with prominent guest speakers, including one of Australia’s most senior educators, Emeritus Professor Ken McKinnon, University of Wollongong Chancellor Ms Jillian Broadbent, Professor Margaret Sheil (CEO Australian Research Council) and Professor Gerry Turcotte (Executive Dean, University of Notre Dame Australia).

“The interest and involvement of such prominent educational leaders in the PROPEL program highlights how important it is that we take a proactive approach in preparing our future academic leaders” says project leader Professor Rob Castle. “The increasing complexity of the academic environment makes leadership very challenging. “

Another unique feature of PROPEL is the way it blends a range of leadership development components and targets more than just one type of leadership. This gives participants the opportunity to reflect on the kind of leadership they are interested in and suited to. Participants working through the year-long program will experience a more sustainable impact on their behaviour. Shorter and more narrowly-focused leadership programs often find their impact dissipates relatively quickly as the participants return to their normal ways of working.

“When developing PROPEL we looked at other leadership programs and integrated all the different elements into one, creating a comprehensive program including a range of components. Participants are involved in mentoring, intensive workshops, interdisciplinary fora, strategic committee attendances, leading a full-year project, as well as reflecting and reporting on their experiences throughout the training year” said project leader Professor Sara Dolnicar.
“This leads to a lasting benefit for all participants, as the different components provide the capacity to develop and demonstrate their skills over the course of the year, and then retain those skills long-term”.

Individual outcomes for the 15 participants is expected to be varied, with some likely to go straight into leadership positions. Others might find as they are completing the program that a university leadership role isn’t for them, and decide to pursue a different path. Regardless, it is a positive result for the sector; there will be a growing pool of committed, capable and well-rounded leaders ready to take universities forward.

At the end of UOW’s first trial year of the PROPEL program a dissemination model will be developed to allow broad take-up by other higher education institutions. The PROPEL initiative has already received wide-spread interest from other universities around Australia, with the University of Ballarat, the University of South Australia and the Queensland University of Technology actively involved in the current program.