The PROPEL Project

Succession Planning at Universities: Program for Preparing Early Leaders

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Funding for the production of this report has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.
Executive summary

The Australian higher education sector needs a new generation of effective and capable leaders if it is to ensure a prosperous future. It is no longer good enough to wait for new leaders to surface. They must be nurtured and developed if universities are to avoid facing a leadership succession crisis.

"While there are strong societal pressures that maintain leadership as a mysterious brotherhood into which only the cognoscenti are admitted, an international leadership crisis in education and other fields demands that we nurture and develop leaders and not wait, hoping that tradition and primogeniture will suffice to fill the next generation of leadership roles" (Reeves, 2008).

The PROPEL project is a practical response to this anticipated leadership crisis in universities. Through the development, trialling and dissemination of a new leadership program targeting pre-leadership academics, the project aims to provide institutions across the sector with a proven and cost-effective framework from which to customise their own academic leadership development programs.

The PROPEL Program (Program for Preparing Early Leaders) is the major deliverable of this project, and is provided online for use by Australian higher education institutions in the form of the PROPEL Resource at <research.uow.edu.au/propel>.

The project took a two-stage approach to creating the PROPEL Program:

- **Stage one** consisted of undertaking broad qualitative and quantitative research into academic leadership. The aim of this research was to identify the skills and personal characteristics found in excellent university leaders, and particularly to highlight those which may be specific to the academic leadership environment. The research also aimed to identify which of those skills and characteristics can realistically be taught, thus driving the focus of the PROPEL Program.
- **Stage two** saw the creation and trialling of the 12-month PROPEL Program with a group of 15 carefully selected pre-leadership academics from University of Wollongong, University of Ballarat, University of South Australia and Queensland University of Technology. The pilot Program was based at the University of Wollongong.

Findings of the project’s leadership research brought out two distinct sets of attributes which are considered important in an effective academic leader — those that can be taught and those that can’t (or would be very difficult). The profile of those ‘important but unteachable’ characteristics has been incorporated into the PROPEL Program participant selection guidelines. The teachable characteristics have been summarised into a set of leadership attribute domains upon which the components of the PROPEL Program were built.
By selecting participants for leadership development who already demonstrate the ‘unteachable’ qualities of a good leader, and focusing development activity on those areas where a training program has some chance of long-term impact, the PROPEL Program provides a strong opportunity for universities to positively influence the quality of their future leaders.

The 12-month PROPEL Program pilot was a revealing journey for both the participants and the project team. All 15 participants successfully completed the Program, and it was through their enthusiasm, insights and experiences that the Program grew richer and more practical.

The final structure of the PROPEL Program model is a single, homogeneous program which brings together multiple facets of leadership development. It consists of six interrelated components — Mentoring, Networking, Big Picture, Leadership Skills, Active and Reflective — each focusing on the development and practice of broad leadership skills and the growth of confidence as a leader.

A unique feature of PROPEL is that it targets more than just one type of leadership, giving participants the opportunity to reflect on the kind of leadership they are interested in and suited to at a formative point in their academic careers. The PROPEL Program is designed to target academic staff who are at a ‘pre-leadership’ stage, but have shown leadership ability and potential. Traditionally, leadership training is only available to those already in leadership positions and is usually focused on performing a particular role, such as Dean or Head of School. The PROPEL Program takes an unashamedly proactive approach by giving potential future academic leaders a taste of the day-to-day complexities of university leadership well before they commence their first leadership roles, thereby laying the foundations for their entire leadership careers.

The PROPEL project will be of benefit to institutions across the higher education sector, whether or not they currently have an academic leadership development strategy. The PROPEL Program is compartmentalised and easily adaptable, and can be used in its entirety or by taking up selected components to supplement existing programs. Institutions which implement PROPEL will be taking proactive steps to develop a pool of candidates for future leadership roles, and will be supporting and nurturing their most promising academics who, as skilful leaders, will inspire the people around them and take their institutions forward, even before they reach a formal leadership position.

Summary of major recommendations

1. Leadership development should be provided to suitable ‘pre-leadership’ academics in order to support the succession planning process.
2. A multi-component development program such as the PROPEL Program should be adopted to expose ‘pre-leadership’ academics to the wide range of issues, both self-focussed and organisational-focussed, which they face as potential leaders.
3. The PROPEL Resource should be utilised by institutions to build a multi-component leadership development program for ‘pre-leadership’ academics which can be customised to fit with existing academic development strategies.
Overview of the PROPEL project

1 Context and need for the project

The anticipated leadership crisis in the Australian higher education sector demands that universities take active steps to nurture and develop new leaders to ensure they will have the skills and attributes to carry the sector forward. To do this successfully, the PROPEL project leaders believe a new approach to leadership development is needed.

It is acknowledged that “effective and capable” (Scott, Coates and Anderson, 2008, p. vii) academic leaders are essential in higher education. However, concern about replenishment suggests we are facing a “succession crisis” (Scott et al., 2008, p. xv). “While there are strong societal pressures that maintain leadership as a mysterious brotherhood into which only the cognoscenti are admitted, an international leadership crisis in education and other fields demands that we nurture and develop leaders and not wait, hoping that tradition and primogeniture will suffice to fill the next generation of leadership roles” (Reeves, 2008, p. 1).

Leadership is “...a practical and everyday process of supporting, managing, developing and inspiring academic colleagues” (Ramsden, 1998, p. 4).

While this sounds simple at first, the increasing complexity of the academic environment makes leadership quite challenging, in our view requiring future academic leaders who react quickly to internal and external challenges, think beyond disciplinary boundaries, live collaboration, inspire people, and genuinely care about the development of their staff. Such leaders are rare and often the result of fortuitous circumstances rather than pro-active development.

We argue, then, that Australia needs a new generation of effective and capable leaders to ensure a prosperous future for its tertiary education sector and that pro-active development of such leaders needs to start at the early career stage of academics, rather than waiting until they undertake leadership roles. The PROPEL project proposes a one year intensive leadership program for early career academics (Program for Preparing Early Leaders — PROPEL) which will immediately start to train future academic leaders, locally and nationally, as well as resulting in a model that is transferable to other institutions.

In the past there has been a “deeply entrenched association of leadership with hierarchy and authority” (Parker, 2008, p. 3). The majority of leadership programs are therefore targeted at academics who are already on the leadership ladder (e.g. courses and seminars offered by the LH Martin Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Management). New appointees to leadership roles can become overwhelmed, so early planning and development is crucial.
2 Focus of the project

The PROPEL project’s focus is squarely on developing a practical response to the anticipated leadership crisis in universities through the development, trialling and dissemination of the PROPEL Leadership Development Program. Our aim is to provide institutions across the sector with a framework, from which to customise their own development programs, which meets the needs of ‘pre-leadership’ academics.

Through this project we hope to contribute to raising the awareness of a potential leadership crisis in the sector by:

1. Provision of a model as a potential solution for the academic leadership crisis.
2. Provision of a pool of candidates for future leadership positions who are equipped with leadership skills for the future.
3. Fostering of collaboration between faculties and Australian universities.

3 Methodology — Developing and trialling a new leadership program for the sector

3.1 Leadership research

The PROPEL project needed to establish a clear understanding of what good academic leadership looks like before it could start the work of building a development program aimed at producing good academic leaders.

The project undertook a three-phase research study aimed at producing a catalogue of leadership attributes that were considered essential to good academic leadership, and which were believed to be teachable.

The three phases of this research study were:

1. Literature review of existing work on academic leadership attributes.
2. Qualitative study consisting of interviews with a sample of academic staff in non-leadership roles.
3. Qualitative study consisting of an online survey of all academic staff at one Australian university.

*The research study is described in detail in Part 1 of this report.*

3.2 Pilot leadership development program

With the knowledge gained from the research study into academic leadership, the project designed, trialled and evaluated the 12-month ‘Program for Preparing Early Leaders (PROPEL)’.
**Development phase**

The aims of the development phase were to:

1. Establish relationships with project stakeholders within and outside of UOW.
2. Promote interest in, understanding of and support for the PROPEL project among key executive staff at UOW.
3. Develop all six components of the PROPEL Program.
4. Synthesise outcomes of the leadership research study into the PROPEL Program framework.
5. Develop processes required to support the PROPEL Program, such as participant selection guidelines, self-assessment and 360 degree feedback instruments.

At the outset of the development phase, the project conducted stakeholder identification and expectation assessment exercises. The Project Team and Advisory Board were established and consultation commenced. This consultation was ongoing for the life of the project, with the Project Team being an especially valuable source of critical feedback and new ideas. In addition, a number of Australian universities were approached and invited to put forward applicants to be involved as participants in the pilot PROPEL Program.

A promotion strategy was developed to ensure key executive staff at UOW were fully aware of the aims of the PROPEL project and were publicly supportive of the project’s activities. This strategy consisted of individual meetings and group presentations, followed up by regular project bulletins.

The six PROPEL Program Components which had been envisaged at the commencement of the project — Mentoring, Active, Big Picture, Reflective, Interdisciplinary and Leadership Skills — were fully developed, including documentation of guidelines and development of training and supporting materials. A number of components, such as the Active and Big Picture Components, required the cooperation of key university staff including Deans and Chairs of university-level committees. Liaison and negotiation with these key staff was undertaken and their support established.

The outcomes of the leadership research study were considered in the context of the six Program Components. A skills matrix was developed to ensure all leadership attributes identified by the research study were incorporated in the Program. The list of identified attributes heavily influenced the content and structure of the three-day Leadership Skills Workshop.

Processes surrounding the implementation of the pilot PROPEL Program were developed. These included the negotiation and articulation of the participant selection process, and the development of two new leadership assessment tools: The PROPEL Leadership Self-Assessment instrument and the PROPEL 360 Degree Feedback Leadership Assessment instrument.
**Trial phase**

The trial phase commenced in June 2010 with the Information Session for prospective applicants. Overall, the trial phase lasted for 15 months, including the 12-month PROPEL Program itself.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15 June 2010</td>
<td>Information Session for prospective applicants.</td>
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<tr>
<td>30 July 2010</td>
<td>Participant applications close.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 August 2010</td>
<td>Participant Selection Committee meeting.</td>
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<tr>
<td>27 August 2010</td>
<td>Program Launch for participants and mentors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 September 2010</td>
<td>Participants complete the PROPEL leadership self-assessment questionnaire.</td>
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<tr>
<td>17 September 2010</td>
<td>Supervisors, colleagues and reports of participants complete the PROPEL 360 degree leadership feedback questionnaire.</td>
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<tr>
<td>20 September 2010</td>
<td>Participants submit Active Leadership Project proposals for approval.</td>
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<tr>
<td>27, 28 and 29 September 2010</td>
<td>Three-day Leadership Skills Workshop attended by participants and project leaders.</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 2010</td>
<td>Mentoring meetings commence (held monthly).</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 2010</td>
<td>PROPEL participant network meetings commence (held monthly).</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 2010</td>
<td>First committee attendance by participants.</td>
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<tr>
<td>14 February 2011</td>
<td>Program Mid-Point Workshop (including Interdisciplinary Forum).</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 2011</td>
<td>Second committee attendance by participants.</td>
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<tr>
<td>26 August 2011</td>
<td>Active Project outcomes presentation event.</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 2011</td>
<td>Participants repeat the PROPEL leadership self-assessment questionnaire.</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 2011</td>
<td>Supervisors, colleagues and reports of participants repeat the PROPEL 360 degree leadership feedback questionnaire.</td>
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<tr>
<td>27 September 2011</td>
<td>Reflective Event and participant graduation.</td>
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Fifteen participants were selected to take part in the trial PROPEL Program. Twelve participants were selected from UOW applicants, spread across 10 faculties. Three participants external to UOW were also selected, one each from University of South Australia, Queensland University of Technology, and University of Ballarat.

**Evaluation phase**

At the completion of the trial Program, the structure and content of the Program were evaluated. Evaluation included indicators of changes in leadership ability as measured through the PROPEL Leadership Assessment instruments (both self-assessment and 360 degree), through feedback from participants gained throughout the Program, and through feedback from other key players in the Program such as the leadership mentors.

*The pilot PROPEL Program is described in detail in Part 2 of this report.*
4 Outcomes of the project and *The PROPEL Resource*

The 12-month PROPEL Program pilot was delivered as planned, with all 15 participants successfully completing the Program. Much was learned from the experiences of the participants, who provided clear and honest feedback on all aspects of the Program, as well as on their thoughts and plans about following a leadership career in academia.

The original design of the PROPEL Program was adjusted and enhanced based on the outcomes of the pilot Program. The final structure of the PROPEL model is a single, homogeneous program which brings together multiple facets of leadership development. It consists of six interrelated components — Mentoring, Networking, Big Picture, Leadership Skills, Active and Reflective — each focusing on the development and practice of broad leadership skills and the growth of confidence as a leader.

The major deliverable of this project is *The PROPEL Resource* — a comprehensive user guide and materials kit available for use by universities and other institutions as a starting point for building in-house leadership development programs for pre-leadership academics.

*The PROPEL Resource is available online at [research.uow.edu.au/propel]. Copies of a selection of elements from the PROPEL Resource are included in Part 3 of this report.*