



CAULLT

**COUNCIL OF AUSTRALASIAN UNIVERSITY
LEADERS IN LEARNING AND TEACHING**

CAULLT Grant Final Report

**Developing and Sustaining the Identities of Emerging and Established Educational
Leaders webinar**

Lead institution

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Project summary

This project aimed to understand what educational leadership looks like throughout a career, and how professional practice can better support emerging educational leaders in higher education. In acknowledgement of the increasing casualisation of the sector, this project purposely included the perspectives of sessional/casual academics and professional staff on leadership. This project produced implications for how emerging leaders are conceptualised and supported within their institutions and professional networks.

The project has two key aims:

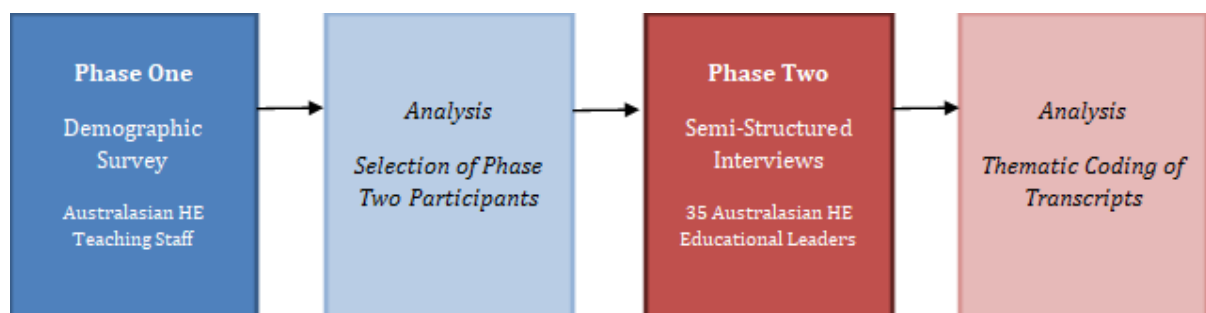
1. To understand educational leadership throughout the academic career.
2. To identify how academic practice can better support emerging educational leaders.

To achieve these aims, four objectives were identified:

1. To identify perceptions of what educational leadership is from varied career stages.
2. To gather the leadership identity narratives of academics from varied career stages.
3. To compare academics' perceptions and narratives surrounding educational leadership across career stages.
4. To devise key approaches, strategies and/or resources to better support educational leadership throughout the academic career.

Methodology

A two-phase mixed methods approach was used to gather rich and diverse narratives of leadership identities from the higher education sector.



Phase One – Survey Method

A short demographic survey was used to identify key contextual factors (e.g., gender, age, experience level) of participants before they were invited to an interview, to ensure that diverse viewpoints were captured. The survey was open to Australasian teaching staff whose work contributed to learning and teaching in their HE institution.

Data from this stage was used to ensure representation of four groups of interest in the target population:

- Secure Emerging L&T Leaders: those employed in ongoing teaching positions, in which they impact the learning and teaching experience of students and colleagues (e.g., head tutors, subject coordinators, program directors).
- Insecure Emerging L&T Leaders: those employed in casual/contract or fixed-term teaching positions, in which they impact the learning and teaching experience of students and colleagues (e.g., head tutors, subject coordinators).

- Current Established L&T Leaders: those currently employed in ongoing leadership roles, in which their main responsibilities are to direct the learning and teaching experience of students and colleagues (e.g., DVCA).
- Retired Established L&T Leaders: those previously employed in ongoing leadership roles, in which their main responsibilities were to direct the learning and teaching experience of students and colleagues (e.g., retired DVCA).

Phase Two – Interview Method

Through semi-structured interviews, the identities of selected L&T leaders at all career stages were explored, allowing the identification of contextual factors (e.g., gender, age, resources) that may contribute to the formation, development, and attrition of educational leaders in Australasian universities.

The interviews took appropriately 60 minutes each. The interviews were conducted and transcribed by the CAULLT project team, before being reviewed via participant checking. Coding was conducted by the CAULLT project team, who then performed a group-based thematic analysis for key themes.

Participants

There were 80 surveys completed in Phase One, representing 11 Australasian HE institutions. Of these, most identified as female (n=39). Of the 80 participants, 47 consented to participate in Phase Two.

Twenty-eight participants across nine Australasian HE institutions were interviewed by the CAULLT project team within Phase Two, representing the four interest groups (see Phase One):

- Secure Emerging L&T Leaders: 6
- Insecure Emerging L&T Leaders: 5
- Secure Established L&T Leaders: 16
- Insecure Established L&T Leaders: 1

No Retired L&T Leaders elected to participate in an interview, and a new categorisation of participants (Academic [23] versus Professional [5]) emerged.

Through these interviews, the identities of leaders at all career stages were explored, allowing the identification of contextual factors (e.g., gender, age, resources) that contributed to the formation, development and attrition of educational leaders in Australasian universities.

| | | PROFESSIONAL | ACADEMIC | |
|-------------|--------------------|--------------|----------------------------|----|
| EMERGING | INSECURE | | D E I R R W | |
| | SECURE EE LL | | L P OO X | |
| ESTABLISHED | QQ U UU | | BB C CC DD F | |
| | | | N HH J KK Y | |
| | | | | FF |

Project findings

The four leading objectives of the project produced findings of leadership perceptions, identity narratives, patterns by career stage and key approaches for better support strategies.

Perceptions of Educational Leadership

This study explored the perspectives of educational leaders in Australasian tertiary settings through the lens of Kouzes and Posner's (2018) *Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership*. While this model is well-established in corporate and K–12 education contexts, it is not commonly used to frame conversations about leadership within Australian higher education (Scott & Okojie 2022). This underutilisation may stem from the complex, decentralised nature of tertiary institutions, where leadership is often distributed and shaped by disciplinary cultures. However, the model offers a valuable framework for understanding leadership practice in these settings, particularly given the challenges of researching educational leadership in environments marked by bureaucratic constraints, academic autonomy, and evolving institutional priorities. Participants provided several insights into what good educational leadership looked like, condensed into five themes:

Modelling the Way

Leaders who “model the way” were described as those who demonstrate integrity, consistency, and alignment between words and actions. Participants emphasised the importance of leaders being visible in academic spaces and actively engaging with teaching, research, and service.

D: I've always looked for ways to be and not to be remembered. It's not to have a statue of you, but just to know that you had some kind of effect on that person's life. You only have this when you are a leader in some way. That comes with a responsibility of being a role model as well, right? It's not good that you preach, but you don't do what you say.

Inspiring a Shared Vision

Effective leaders were seen as those who articulate a compelling and inclusive vision for the future. This vision is not imposed but co-constructed with staff, reflecting shared values and aspirations for the institution.

Y: It's inspiring a vision for the future that's not where we are now... whatever direction that looks like and inspiring people to go on that journey. So, I see leadership and particularly kind of academic leadership, educational leadership as empowering people to move towards a future that is better than where we are.

Challenging the Process

Participants valued leaders who are willing to question established norms and support innovation. These leaders foster a culture of experimentation and are open to feedback, even when it challenges institutional orthodoxy.

SS: But a good leader needs to have some backbone, some empathy but also be willing to go in and fight.

Enabling Others to Act

Empowerment was a recurring theme. Leaders who enable others to act were described as those who trust their teams, delegate authority, and invest in professional development. They create conditions for collaboration and autonomy.

W: That sense of bringing people together around that sense of purpose and then enabling them to really to grow and to learn and to do a good job of delivering education in whatever way.

Encouraging the Heart

Recognition and emotional support were seen as essential components of good leadership. Leaders who “encourage the heart” celebrate achievements, acknowledge effort, and foster a sense of belonging and purpose.

RR: ... a generosity and kindness of spirit and presence, and being present in places, and being open.

In the inversion, participants also discussed what poor educational leadership they had observed throughout their career. They also generated characteristics based on hypotheticals or imagination of what leadership could be like in their contexts. These were also reflective of the inverse five themes identified by Kouzes and Posner (2018).

Modelling Poor Practice

Poor leadership was often associated with a lack of accountability, ethical inconsistency, and disengagement from core academic activities. Leaders who model poor practice were seen as undermining trust and credibility.

I: If I'd encountered educational leadership consistently and at a high level, I think I probably would have been much happier in my job. I would have thought, "Yep, these people know what matters". They've been doing it longer than I have. They're experienced. They're probably going to point me in the right direction or correct me.

Unclear Vision

Participants expressed frustration with leaders who failed to articulate a coherent or meaningful vision. This lack of direction was linked to confusion, resistance to change, and diminished morale.

Y: It becomes more of how we set up systems so that I can feel confident that they are going to be able to deliver what they need to. And I then focus more on making sure that they have the direction they have, the culture, the resources that enables us to deliver that. Without that, it all falls apart.

Protecting Bureaucracy

Some leaders were perceived as prioritising bureaucratic processes over academic innovation. This included rigid adherence to policy, risk aversion, and reluctance to challenge outdated systems.

KK: Things seem very tightly held, quite regulated, very scripted, very programmatic. And I guess that's never... It's never been my experience. I think I've had a fortunate position to bring that scholarly creativity into what I do. And I just I think that's the heart and soul of that sort of leadership in that work. Creating really that distinctive, that unique thing that's about you and your work and bringing that together in context and environment.

Micromanaging

Micromanagement was identified as a significant barrier to effective leadership. Leaders who over-regulate staff activities were seen as stifling creativity, autonomy, and initiative.

N: I think great educational leaders don't necessarily have to occupy a particular role, and I think that's important to recognise.... the word 'leadership' is sometimes a little bit problematic for me, because it sort of conveys that leaders are out in front, leading the charge. I don't know that I ever really felt like I was out in front, I felt like I was behind, or below. Like good leaders I think try and serve staff and try to listen to staff and take their cues from the people who are really experienced and knowledgeable within their roles.

Devaluing Heart

Finally, poor leadership was associated with emotional detachment and a lack of empathy. Leaders who "devalue the heart" were described as indifferent to staff wellbeing, recognition, and the relational dimensions of academic work.

NN: Educational leadership has become a little bit more hands-off. It's not concerned with the people."

These perceptions did not differ significantly between career stages. However, it was observed that those with greater years of experience in the tertiary education sector were more likely to identify narratives of poor educational leadership, indicating that upon entry to tertiary education, most participants held more optimistic assessments of those who were leading them.

Narratives of Educational Leadership

The narratives participants reported about educational leadership were characterised by significant levels of care, altruism and chance. This was exemplified in Interview W:

W: I decided that I would never shut my door, unless I was on Zoom or something. Basically, my door is open. And people start coming and talking to you after a while, because they know your door is open, and you're interested, and you have time. I think, really small, very small things. I just think that hasn't made a difference, and slowly, kind of and reaching out to a couple of people and said, 'hey, let's have a teaching kind of catch up with how things are going in our classes', and that's developed quite a nice friendship. Learning from each other and supporting each other which is good. But certainly, in our environment, it doesn't come to you. You've got to kind of make it.

Connection to Leadership in Teaching

Many participants reflected a sense that being an educational leader in a tertiary setting was still a form of a teaching identity.

W: What motivated me [to go into a leadership position]? I really wanted to explore the whole area of teaching and so that's kind of really where it started, I guess. And then, as you know, as you go along, and then I guess you realise how much how much opportunity there is to lead and influence and shape and bring others in and develop them.

C: I think fundamentally I liked how it felt when I was a teacher. So, standing in front of a room and working with students, seeing them react to me as a teacher, seeing them learn and grow from feedback, seeing them succeed in the classes, make connections and apply what they know to things that they're doing. I think the rewards that I felt from being a teacher is what led me to want it more and led me to want others to do it, to support others in doing it well, too. I think that's what, I think that's what drives me. I just love the feeling of teaching. And I love the change it can make for students.

In these narratives, educational leadership in tertiary settings was conceptualised so similarly to a teaching role that many early career academics and professional staff members with teaching experience felt comfortable stepping into leadership roles. This suggests that embracing this connection in educational leadership discussions may enable more people to see themselves as leaders.

Induction – or the Shoulder Tap

Many narratives spoke of moments where others saw potential in them to be leaders they did not see themselves.

F: Through the mentoring and just talking about my goals, someone said, you need to talk to the Pro Vice-Chancellor and let him know that you think you are ready for some more leadership. And so, in doing that I was kind of then shoulder tapped, but I only was shoulder tapped because I had been encouraged by mentors to make it clear that I wanted that sort of a role.

UU: ...most of the time people see potential in me that I don't see, and I don't know why.

UU: To be honest it came naturally. I wasn't looking for it. And on the contrary, I always thought that I wasn't good enough for this job. And maybe because I'm a bit of a perfectionist, but my manager saw potential in me. So together with my supervisor at that time, they started mentoring me so they, but at the same time I didn't know that they were doing this on purpose.

BB: My experience started on my interview for my course and the panel. They interviewed me before. They told me that I could be a student nurse on this mental health nursing course in England. They said you're going to be an academic, you are going to be an amazing academic. [...] I never forgot those words because true to their word, the lecturing team that we're teaching me were like, wow, you've got it. And I'm like, really? I didn't see it myself.

N: I think it was the kind of treatment that they (past mentors) gave me that I feel that I should always give back to younger people or to people who are just starting out.

Having experienced this themselves, many participants accepted that 'shoulder tapping' others was a part of their role in a tertiary education setting.

U: And get to do what it is that we should be doing as educational leaders, and to me, that's, you know, supporting newer people, showing them the pathway, giving them the tools, having a seat at the table, having a voice, and being respected for that.

Enablers for Self-Identifying as an Educational Leader

Many participants reflected on the factors that enabled them to identify as educational leaders.

Supportive Colleagues

Participants consistently described the importance of collegial relationships in fostering their sense of leadership. Supportive colleagues provided affirmation, shared expertise, and created safe spaces for professional dialogue. These interactions helped participants build confidence and validate their leadership potential.

KK: I would say, get your support network around you. Look at you know, the basics for your own wellbeing. It's really critical to focus on your wellbeing.

Leadership Opportunities

Access to formal and informal leadership roles was a key enabler for participants. Opportunities to lead projects, mentor peers, or contribute to strategic initiatives allowed individuals to enact and refine their leadership identity. These experiences often served as turning points in their professional development.

CC: And so, each opportunity led to another one. So, my advice to my staff was never ever turn down an opportunity to serve because you're turning down lots of opportunities because each one leads to another one. So that's a mixture of me bringing myself forward a bit, but also being given an opportunity in the first place. That's the hard part about service and leadership – it has to be offered to you. You can't just bowl up somewhere and say: "listen I want to be a leader". You've got to prove yourself in the little things and build from there.

Positive Workplaces

Work environments that valued collaboration, innovation, and professional growth were instrumental in supporting leadership identity. Participants highlighted the role of institutional culture in encouraging initiative and recognising contributions. A positive workplace was seen not only as a context for leadership but also as a catalyst for it.

C: So in terms of the educational leadership aspect of those, I think it's a number of environmental factors. I think it's like, you know what is conducive for you to take on leadership? What enables you to take on leadership? And very directly is your, the person who you report to, supporting you to take on leadership? How do they frame leadership?

Barriers for Self-Identifying as an Educational Leader

Many participants reflected on the factors that hindered them from identifying as educational leaders.

Lack of Support and Recognition

Participants frequently reported feeling undervalued or overlooked in their contexts. A lack of formal acknowledgement and limited access to mentoring or feedback mechanisms hindered their confidence in identifying as leaders. This absence of support often led to uncertainty about their leadership contributions and potential.

U: ... just the lack of recognition and respect, even trying to get research supervision access is just becoming an impossible task because you're not recognised. I was even told that my research didn't count towards the ERA ranking stuff. And yeah, not happy!

Narrow Conceptualisation of Leadership

Many participants described encountering rigid or hierarchical definitions of leadership within their institutions. These narrow views excluded collaborative, pedagogical, or informal leadership practices, making it difficult for individuals to see their work as leadership. Such conceptual limitations discouraged broader participation and recognition. A range of these conceptualisations have been selected below:

J: I think is the recognition and the respect. I think when people come and ask for your help, your assistance, your advice, whatever it is. Even if you no longer have the title. And I do that to my colleagues as well, the ones that don't have titles. There are people I'll go to and I'll seek advice. And to me, whether they have the title or not, they still very much to my mind, represent leadership.

N: You can be an educational leader no matter what your role is, whether that's a professional staff member or an academic staff member; that educational leadership is not related to position or role. *LL: For academic leaders.... and you do get it with professional leaders as well but as we sort of alluded to earlier, [but] the academic leaders of the organisation set the culture. They hold the most senior positions. They're the ones at the end of the day who make those big decisions.*

Workload & Stress

Heavy workloads and high levels of stress were cited as significant barriers to engaging with leadership roles. Participants felt that the demands of teaching, administration, and research left little time or energy for leadership development. This strain often led to disengagement or reluctance to pursue leadership opportunities.

J: We have workload allocations, but they do not match the actual work we do in those spaces.

Leadership Narratives by Participant Group

Some patterns in how similarly and differently certain groups of participants conceptualised certain aspects of educational leadership in HE.

Experiences of Poor Leadership

Across all participant groups, there was a shared narrative of having worked under poor educational leaders. Although these conditions were constraining for participants, these experiences were also often described as formative, shaping their values and approaches to leadership. Many expressed a desire to lead differently, informed by what they had witnessed as ineffective or damaging practices.

F: I saw a leader in a meeting cut down one of my colleagues. She asked a couple of questions and was told how badly her college had performed ... she was just shut down with this. And then, in the very next meeting with the same leader, no one wanted to speak. So, you've just eroded trust, and you've created a fearful environment. And then how can we grow and have honest discussions if everyone's afraid of being cut down?

Need for Greater Support

Participants widely agreed that educational leaders in higher education require more systemic support. This included access to mentoring, leadership development programmes, and clearer institutional pathways. The perceived lack of support was seen as a barrier to both effective leadership and the sustainability of leadership roles.

U: And get to do what it is that we should be doing as educational leaders, and to me, that's, you know, supporting newer people, showing them the pathway, giving them the tools, having a seat at the table, having a voice, and being respected for that.

Openness to Informal Leadership

Emerging educational leaders were more likely than their established counterparts to recognise leadership as something that could be demonstrated without formal titles or roles. They valued influence, collaboration, and initiative as markers of leadership, regardless of position. This contrasted with more traditional views held by some established leaders, who tended to associate leadership with certain formal position titles (e.g., Head of School).

N: You can be an educational leader no matter what your role is, whether that's a professional staff member or an academic staff member; that educational leadership is not related to position or role. It's related to disposition and willingness to engage with yourself and managing yourself, and assisting and building a culture with your colleagues.

Recognition Gaps Between Professional and Academic Roles

Educational leaders employed in professional (i.e., non-academic) roles were more attuned to the lack of recognition for their leadership contributions. They often felt their work was overlooked or undervalued compared to academic leaders, despite playing key roles in institutional change and student support. This disparity was seen as a structural issue within higher education.

N: I think that a lot of opportunity is not necessarily provided to people who are classified as professional staff but who are also educational leaders. Professional staff who were also educational leaders were often not eligible for awards, which drove me insane.

Key Strategies to Support Educational Leaders

Professional Development

Participants emphasised the value of both formal and informal professional development in strengthening educational leadership. Structured programmes, workshops, and leadership courses were seen as essential for building confidence and capability. Informal learning, such as reflective practice and peer learning, was also highlighted as a meaningful way to grow leadership identity.

X: And nobody had this conversation with me but to actually sit down and have a conversation with somebody you know about educational leadership and what the path can look like? What you're aspiring to? And then helping them work out what the key thing steps that they have to take to get there. I mean, I've had very little professional development. And that's not how we should be doing it.

Community

Thematic analysis revealed that peer-to-peer resource and idea sharing played a vital role in supporting educational leaders. Participants described communities of practice and informal networks as spaces for encouragement, problem-solving, and innovation. These collegial relationships helped reduce isolation and fostered a sense of shared purpose.

T: [Educational leadership] is a collaborative activity that everyone is engaging in and hopefully, people are engaging in slightly different ways. So, it's much more of a community effort, and I would just encourage people to be part of that community. Don't sit in your office by yourself and just do your own thing. Become part of the educational community that is sharing ideas and always trying to learn more from other people.

Career Pathways

Clearer career pathways, including access to leadership opportunities and mentorship, were identified as critical enablers. Participants expressed a need for transparent progression routes and support in navigating leadership roles. Mentorship was particularly valued for offering guidance, affirmation, and strategic insight into leadership development.

C: I think we need to do a lot more work in professional development around discovering ourselves, discovering our strengths, getting feedback on our work, getting feedback from students and peers on our work, and then having meaningful career-based conversations that can help guide or illuminate possible pathways.

Project deliverables

- Dissemination of good practice for the support of emerging leaders via CAULLT workshop, with implications for CAULLT and academic development programs throughout Australasian higher education institutions.
- Advance a holistic conceptualisation of emerging leaders for the higher education sector via conferences and publications.
- Produce scholarship that contributes to existing conversations on identity, motivation and leadership in Australasian higher education.

- Present implications for how leadership can be conceptualised and scaffolded in professional standards.
- Create a record of practice sharing via rich narratives from institutional members to build shared understanding of leadership within our sector.

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