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PIVOTAL – designing innovative leadership courses: a roadmap for anticipating the twists and turns in school leaders’ journeys.

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School leadership preparation must be current, relevant and able to “deal with the complex challenges schools are facing in the 21st century” (OECD, 2008). Dempster, Lovett and Fluckiger (2011) identify gaps in the preparation of school leaders in Australia, arguing that they can be addressed by responding to school leaders’ learning needs, helping them see “the big picture” and building their confidence and capacity as leaders. The PIVOTAL (Partnerships, Innovation and Vitality – Opportunities for Thriving Academic Leadership) research team agrees with this assessment. The PIVOTAL research project analyses how to best develop sustainable leadership practice by investigating practitioner leadership requirements in partnership with local school leaders and students within postgraduate Education and Business courses. Qualitative and quantitative findings successfully informed innovative revisions to these courses, to be implemented in 2015, and included input from a reference group of local school principals, student responses to online surveys and data from past and current student focus group discussions. Informants suggested course design improvements and broadly endorsed the model of Excellence in School Leadership (AITSL, 2011), but said this model did not acknowledge the “personal vitality” that first inspired school leaders to work with young people and lead school communities successfully. Alongside the AITSL model, the dimension of “personal vitality” adds insights relevant to designers of postgraduate leadership courses and supports school leaders’ understanding of their complex roles within the “big picture”. Innovation in nurturing “personal vitality” in leadership course design will influence the future sustainability of professional practice in increasingly complex times.

**Keywords:** Leadership, innovation, sustainability

The Higher Education Context of Leadership Study and Development

University strategic priorities have a long held history in the preparation of future leaders. Indeed, one of the oldest higher education institutions in the world, Cambridge University (founded in 1209), traces its leadership priorities back to the Statues of 1570, where successive monarchs were “concerned with the universities as producers of future leaders of the reformed church” (Cambridge University, 2015). Today, one of the youngest universities in the world, the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) (founded in 1996), directly relates
its strategic priorities to the preparation of future school leadership by striving to “produce graduates with knowledge, skills and attributes to succeed in a world characterised by rapid change” (USC, 2015). This statement is consistent with international trends in leadership preparation and federal governments’ carefully considered strategic priorities. It, too, mirrors the OECD’s assertion that leadership preparation must be current, relevant and designed so that school leaders can “deal with the complex challenges schools are facing in the 21st century” (OECD, 2008).

The PIVOTAL Project (Partnership, Innovation and Vitality – Opportunities for Thriving Academic Leadership) is a cross-disciplinary research project with a focus on the design of innovative leadership courses, within the fields of Education and Business, at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) in conjunction with the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). Researchers have united to investigate approaches to innovative course design that authentically contribute to a “road map” that prepares innovative and successful school leaders for the twists and turns in their leadership journeys. For the purposes of this research project, the term “school leader” is used to describe current school principals as well as those who are currently in senior school leadership roles (for example, deputy principals, heads of departments, deans of curriculum and deans of students) and who aspire to become a school principal in the future.

School Leader Preparation
Within the Australian State School system in Queensland there is an increasing trend towards school principals having the autonomy to make decisions to improve their schools’ effectiveness, whilst independent school principals enjoy high levels of autonomy, their recruitment based on the selection priorities of personal qualities, high levels of skills and ability to manage complex organisations. Both sectors naturally articulate the need for school leadership to be well-versed in the business of Education. However, in Halsey’s 2011 study of 683 Australian school leaders, almost half of respondents, whose first leadership experience was in a rural school, indicated that they “had no preparation for the role” (Halsey, 2011, p. 8) and 29% stated that their preparation consisted of participation in short courses only. Halsey’s description indicates that a “sink or swim” approach to the development of school leaders is occurring in Australian schools and that they ought to be offered “better pathways” into leadership (p. 8). It appears that many school leaders are unprepared for the complex job ahead of them.

The concept of there being a preparation gap in effective school leadership is a widely debated topic, and Androulla Vassiliou, member of the European Commission responsible for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, advocates the identification of potential leaders early in their careers which will “give them the opportunity to develop their leadership skills over time” (Vassiliou, 2013). This statement reinforces Townsend and McBeath’s (2011) study of school leadership in over 60 countries. Their study determined that leadership development should be accessible to young aspiring leaders and relevant to student learning outcomes. We argue that the preparation gap for school leadership can be addressed through responses to school leaders’ individual learning needs, a wide perspective in learning activities and building confidence in leadership capacity. This approach underlines the need for “school leaders to be students of the big educational picture” (Dempster et al., 2011, p. 32).
**School Leader Confidence**

School leaders, therefore, need to be given opportunities throughout their careers to acquire and retain confidence in their management skills and leadership capacity through effective programmes of study. Whilst postgraduate study in Australia is deemed important in order to progress professionally, at the current time this level of study is simply encouraged and not mandated within State, Catholic and Independent sectors of Education. School leaders in Australia undertake postgraduate leadership study programmes voluntarily, although this is, at times, encouraged and funded by employers. Some other countries and states—Texas, for example—require their school leaders to achieve a Master of Education qualification (Lohman, 2000). In Finland, even pre-service teacher education is at the Master’s degree level (University of Helsinki, 2015). There is certainly a move towards this within Australia, with South Australia’s State Government mandating that by 2020 teachers entering the profession within their jurisdiction must be qualified to a Master’s level (Government of South Australia, 2015).

With this in mind, postgraduate studies must be responsive not only to the needs of the profession but also to the needs of individuals (the current and aspiring school leaders) within the profession. Innovative postgraduate leadership courses will ensure effective capacity-building programmes are developed to support future school leaders. Barber, Whelan and Clarke at McKinsey and Company (2010) explore this and assert that leaders “need to be supported by other knowledgeable people if they are to become stronger leaders who make a difference to the lives of colleagues and students” (p. 30). Postgraduate students informally confirm that collegial interaction is a key benefit to their learning, perhaps helping to address what Caldwell (2006) has described as a situation where “all too often leaders feel isolated and alone”. Factors which contribute to effective leadership capacity-building are well-demonstrated generally by McKinsey and Company (2010) on a global scale and can serve to inform how Australian schools plan selection, development and succession of their leaders.

**The PIVOTAL Project – Partnerships, Innovation, Vitality – Opportunities for Academic Leadership**

The PIVOTAL Project aims to be the catalyst for innovation and change within the postgraduate learning experiences of school leaders and to inform the future direction of postgraduate leadership studies within both Business and Education. The processes and outcomes of this project are already enhancing communication with and developing partnerships between higher education institutions and external education colleagues, employers, schools and associations. In addition, the initial findings are having impact on postgraduate leadership course design and have led to increased focus on leader confidence and personal vitality to perform a complex role well. The anticipated final outcomes will also lead to improvements in leadership performance within complex learning communities and a capacity to respond to changing situations through the effective application of leadership theory.

When completed, the project team will present the PIVOTAL Leadership Model and accompanying set of guidelines for effective curriculum design, which can be used at the USC and the USQ in postgraduate leadership courses. The regional similarities as well as the distinct differences of USC and USQ will be revealed through this project in the response to the diverse needs of school leaders, particularly those working in regional, rural and remote
contexts. This project relates directly to the regional contexts in which school leaders participating in the research operate and aims to contribute to both universities’ reputation for excellence in teaching.

Through the inclusion of focus groups comprising current and aspiring school leaders enrolled in postgraduate courses, the project has ensured maximum input from the target group and provided opportunity for collegial interaction. Reference groups of school principals from within the two regions and representing a range of education sectors (State, Catholic and Independent) have maximised input from Queensland schools. Academic staff members from regional universities involved in preparation of leadership courses were also consulted in order to support understanding of leadership needs by the PIVOTAL research team.

Shaw (2011) outlines the AHISA (Association of Heads of Independent School of Australia) review of school leadership in the Australian independent schools sector which underlines “the tripartite relational framework of schools” which includes the relationship “between the school and outside organisations”. Whilst the PIVOTAL Project has initially been developed at USC and USQ, the project aims to establish future partnerships with school sectors and professional bodies on a state-wide, national and international level in order to investigate further directions and innovations to better suit the needs of school leaders. This will go further to support the development of USC’s and USQ’s leadership courses, through benchmarking of these courses against other universities in Australia and internationally. This approach will broaden the study base and give the project more national and international relevance whilst responding to school leaders’ learning needs at a local level.

Data Gathering

The data gathering stage of the project has four distinct phases: contextual understanding, identifying existing factors, advocating innovation and change and finally, leadership course re-design and evaluation.

Phase 1: Contextual Understanding

This phase involved the detailed planning of the research and analysis of data from previous students enrolled on Master of Education and Master of Business Administration courses from the previous years. The Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) and the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) was also utilised. Reference groups provided contextualisation and clarity concerning leadership needs across sectors of schooling.

Phase 2: Identification of Existing Factors

In Phase 2 online surveys of current and previous Master of Education and Master of Business Administration students who are either practising or aspiring school principals were undertaken, and these provided quantitative and comparable data across disciplines and sites. The semi-structured nature of the subsequent focus group sessions provided rich qualitative data. The model of Excellence in School Leadership (AITSL, 2011) was used as the framework for research questions, incorporating AISTL’s designated Leadership Requirements and Professional Practices.

Phase 3: Advocacy for Innovation and Change in Leadership Course Design
This phase focused on designing innovations for leadership courses and implementing changes. Feedback was then sought from students enrolled in the re-designed courses at the end of Semester 1, 2015 from which recommendations will be made for future revisions as necessary. Consequently, the PIVOTAL model for Educational Leadership Learning at USC and USQ is being devised.

**Phase 4: Contributing Evidence of Leadership Preparation Effectiveness**

In the final phase, priority is given to the dissemination of research findings, in order to address what Eacott (2013) describes as the “thin evidence on the impact of school leadership on student outcomes, and even scarcer work on the impact of preparation and development programmes” (p. 2). As such, sharing the findings of this project with potential adopters may help to address this gap. Utilising the Office of Teaching and Learnings (OLT’s) *D-Cubed framework* (Hinton, Gannaway, Berry and Moore, 2011), further presentations at a number of conferences will be undertaken and articles will be published in a range of journals to augment the dissemination to date in journals such as e-JBEST (Simon, Graham, Christie and Call, 2014). The dissemination plan is designed to demonstrate the benefits of the cross-disciplinary nature of the project, and it is at this juncture that national and international collaborative opportunities with other universities, professional associations and school systems will also be explored.

**The Australian Professional Standards for Principals**

The PIVOTAL Project capitalises on developmental work informing the National Professional Standards for School Leaders which resulted in the Excellence in School Leadership Model (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2011) - the model which was used as a framework in this research. AITSL’s model clearly aligns *Leadership Requirements* with *Professional Practice* demands within unique learning environments, leading to what is anticipated will be “high quality learning, teaching and schooling”, which then leads to “successful learners, confident, creative individuals and active, informed citizens”. In the Australian tertiary environment, the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Level 9 criteria apply to Master’s level courses. In this regard, therefore, investigations probed whether curriculum content effectively develops capacity to “apply knowledge and skills to demonstrate autonomy, expert judgement, adaptability and responsibility as a practitioner or learner” (p. 59).

Underpinning the national Excellence in School Leadership model (AITSL, 2011) is an extensive review of the literature conducted by Dempster et al. (2011). This project has been influenced by this work and aims to address what Dempster et al. define as a “gap in research regarding the effects of leadership learning experiences and subsequent development” (p. 35). The long-term aim of the PIVOTAL Project is to have impact on leadership practice sustainability as well as the sustainability of relevant postgraduate learning opportunities – in effect providing a “road map” for future development of universities’ and schools’ partnerships which can effectively inform the development of courses which anticipate the “twists and turns in the school leader’s journey”.
Feedback from the reference groups and focus groups endorsed the important Leadership Requirements and Professional Practices of the AITSL model, and consequently enhancement of existing aspects of the model was incorporated into leadership course design. However, comments also alerted the PIVOTAL research team to consider the topic of “personal vitality” for leaders undertaking roles with high levels of responsibility, challenges and potential stress on the individual. Contributors felt that “personal vitality” was an omission from the model – a criterion deemed to be an important ingredient in the preparation, development and longevity of school leaders. Respondents spoke passionately about the learning environments they worked in, but made reference to the difficulties faced in maintaining their own vitality, which, in part, they believed to be associated with the long working hours entailed in the job, competing and complex responsibilities and tasks, and a lack of peer support, along with a general unawareness in those around them of school leadership demands and the toll this has on them as individuals.

One of the AITSL model’s Professional Practices is “Developing self and others” which is in line with global trends in leadership programmes. In this Professional Practice, the school leader will “model effective leadership and be committed to their own ongoing professional development and personal health and wellbeing in order to manage the complexity of the role and the range of learning capabilities and actions required of the role”. PIVOTAL research highlighted that this reference to being committed to personal health and wellbeing, whilst crucial to performing the role, does not necessarily imply the importance of retaining the original motivation to teach and lead young people nor does it address how to nurture and sustain the essential “personal vitality” for the job throughout a school leader’s career.
Contributors offered information about their own personal approaches to doing this, such as, on particularly challenging days seeking an opportunity to go into classrooms and engage in conversations and learning activities with students - or reading to a group of Prep children under a tree perhaps. In these ways they felt they could re-charge their levels of “personal vitality”. Highlighting this aspect of leadership sustenance was thought to be a welcome addition to the study of leadership in postgraduate courses and would better prepare school leaders for their roles.

After considering this input to the data gathered, a gap was discovered in the literature on the topic. Dempster et al. (2011) found little written on the topic of leadership in schools in the preparatory research undertaken for AITSL, and more recent investigations by Fluckiger, Lovett and Dempster (2014) have confirmed this. Earley, Weindling, Bubba and Glenn’s “Future Leaders” study (2009) focusses on “sustainability, well-being, recruitment and retention” of UK school leaders. However, the more recent National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services 10 Strong claims about successful school leadership (2010) does not allude to any such specific component of personally sustainable leadership development in UK, with the most relevant comment being that “self-efficacy, commitment and a sense of well-being” can “indirectly influence pupil outcomes” (p. 3). Subsequently, the PIVOTAL research team pieced together a broad range of reviewed literature on seven related, interconnecting themes which may assist future research into this seemingly forgotten but crucial concept of “personal vitality” for effective school leadership development:

1. **Motivational roots**
   A few studies have explored what links there may be between innate and conditioned motivational influences in childhood and the subsequent impact on sustainability of school leaders” “personal vitality”. Gottfried’s study (2011) honed in on the links between academic intrinsic motivation, affective identity and non-calculative motivation to lead, and concluded that intrinsic motivation in childhood would probably lead to greater enjoyment in a leadership role in adulthood. Murphy (2011) expounds the need to understand the seeds of leadership development, and hypothesises that certain experiences in childhood will produce more durable roots of leadership and enjoyment of the role.

2. **Emotions**
   Globally, Beatty (2006) conducted a six countries’ study of the impact of emotions on sustainability of the leadership role and principal well-being, both of which can lead to enduring “personal vitality”. However, Morrison (2011) presents a critical analysis of this growing popularity of focussing on the emotional aspects of leadership, asserting that this detracts from the core business of getting important work done which can benefit students’ learning outcomes. Nonetheless, it seems that there is an opportunity to explore further how emotions can impact school leaders’ “personal vitality” – especially within the local context.

3. **Self-efficacy (and wellbeing)**
   The concept of self-efficacy is highlighted in some of the literature and the research team propose that future investigations could investigate the correlation between this
and “personal vitality” in Australian school leaders. On a global level, for example, Devos, Bouckenooghe, Engels, Hutton and Aelterman’s study (2007) of the well-being of Principals in Flemish Primary Schools has shed light on how high levels of self-efficacy can impact on leadership effectiveness and sustainability of “personal vitality”.

4. **View of role / leader efficacy**
   Hannah’s (2008) findings concerning school leadership development research in the United States inform understanding of how school leaders view their roles, how their leadership capacity develops whilst undertaking the role and the implications for effective performance. Fernet’s (2011) French Canadian study incorporates a scale by which to measure motivation for the leadership role – intrinsic and extrinsic – as well as a motivation, all of which will have effects on the professional functioning of principals and the subsequent impact on school success and improvement. Further Australian research into this aspect of leader efficacy may inform future higher education study components which will empower our school leaders to sustain their “personal vitality” in effective ways.

5. **Reaction to stress**
The AITSL Integrated Leadership model used in this research highlights the Professional Practice of “Developing self and others” in which principals “model the importance of health and wellbeing, watch for signs of stress in self and others and take action to address it”. In UK, Robbins’ (2013) study of the evidence of stress-related training for the school leader includes a literature review showing that the “range of materials specifically on stress and the school leader is limited and that there is need for further empirical evidence and research on the topic”. Robbins’ theme of “Who cares about the school leader?” is indicative of the lack of focus apparent in the field of effective stress management for school leadership. There are opportunities, therefore, for both Australian and international researchers to inform postgraduate study accordingly to the benefit of current and aspiring school leaders.

6. **Coaching / mentoring – ways of topping up vitality levels**
   AITSL’s Professional Practice - “Developing self and others” - outlines school leaders’ requirement to “build and sustain a coaching and mentoring culture at all levels in the school and have a system of peer review and feedback in place”. Fluckiger et al.’s (2014) Criterion 7 for effective school leadership is “Peer Supported” which underlines the need for school leaders to “reach out and support colleagues in leadership roles”. Carey (2011) provides a comparison of coaching models and highlights the elements which have been determined to be most effective – models which can be of use to the leaders themselves and to their peers, as well as for their staff. Coaching and mentoring are professional practises which school leaders are therefore encouraged by the national accreditation authority to access – practises also supported by findings from these identified bodies of research. Consequently, these topics can be incorporated into higher education leadership courses, and may contribute to increased “personal vitality” in the school leader.
7. **The Vitality - Fragility Continuum**

If the retention of “personal vitality” is a crucial goal of successful school leaders, then “personal fragility” appears at the other end of the continuum. Moss (2009) presents a framework which shows how leadership constructs – self-sacrifice, moral management and transformational behaviour - can curb the tendency to fragility which then has an impact on leadership performance. Guglielmi’s (2012) research is an international study focussing on “workaholism” and shows how the role of personal resources and personal demands are predictors of work engagement and burnout. Conversely, a strong correlation between emotional intelligence and resilience on leadership success is demonstrated by Maulding (2012) in a US study of 48 school leaders. The PIVOTAL research team proposes that there is more to be discovered regarding this continuum within Australian school leadership development.

The seven dimensions come together in Figure 2 below, and this model can guide further research to inform postgraduate studies concerning the contributing factors to the phenomenon of “personal vitality” for leaders in schools.

![Figure 2: Dimensions of Vitality in School Leadership](image)

**The Road Map**

The various stages of the PIVOTAL research and application of findings, such as the
inclusion of the dimension of “personal vitality” in postgraduate leadership course re-design, are summarised graphically in Figure 3 below:

**Figure 3: The PIVOTAL Road Map**

**Application of PIVOTAL Model in Higher Education**
It is anticipated that the approach taken to date in this research, as shown in Figure 3 above, could be adopted across the other higher education disciplines outside of Education and Business in the future. For example, developments in Clinical Education course design and delivery are based similarly on professional partnerships and input, along with the requirement to address professional standards. Thus, a PIVOTAL model for Clinical Education could include a reference group of medical practitioners and past and current students who all contribute ideas to the re-design of leadership courses in this field of study, based on their professional needs. Likewise, the design and implementation of Engineering courses have similar requirements to include professional engagement and professional accreditation accountabilities, and so there may be an interest from academics in the field of Engineering to adopt an approach to course design based on the PIVOTAL Road Map in Figure 3.

**The Future**
The findings from the PIVOTAL research are already contributing to the design of innovative leadership programmes for school leaders in Education and Business Schools at USC and USQ. Whilst this project currently relates directly to the regional contexts in which school leaders participating in the research operate, the findings will be shared with other universities. Sustainable partnerships with interested institutions will be established to extend this regionally-relevant project in the future. Additionally, at national and international level, the PIVOTAL research work will continue through investigation of the needs of leaders in a range of fields and their ongoing effective professional development delivered through
postgraduate courses across a range of higher education institutions.

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