LEO: an emerging initiative in student leadership.

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Abstract

This Emerging Initiative paper will report on a new offering underway at the University of Sydney that is part of a major curriculum transformation project. The team presenting this paper secured a Strategic Education Grant to work on this initiative with students and they are in the process of devising an Open Learning Environment (hereafter OLE) on student leadership. The OLEs will offer foundational knowledge, concepts, skills and experiences and will be available in multiple modules from zero to six credit points and in a flexible mode combining online and face-to-face environments. The student leadership OLE will bring together existing transition, retention and leadership programs (for example those available in student mentoring and representative positions) and offer students the opportunity to substantiate their volunteering experience and have it recognised on their transcripts.

The initiative

The Student Leadership OLE is based on a new zero credit point learning module called LEO - Leadership in Education and Organisations. Building on from LEO are customised modules, each of 2 credits points to scaffold student achievement from 0 to 2 and 6 credit points awards. Lead by the Faculty of Health Sciences in partnership with the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, the OLE will be accessible to all students enrolled in undergraduate programs. The OLE will be a cross-faculty, multi-disciplinary project developed by Leaders, a Reference Group and Student Advisory Group. A strong feature of the OLE will be student co-design and a team that embraces the strengths of academic-professional unit partnerships including the University of Sydney Union, Library, Student Services and the National Centre for Cultural Competence. The OLE will be designed to capture the interest of not only senior students but also junior students, in order to create a culture of self-reflection and leadership potential from the early years of higher education. Modules and tools for student engagement (discussion, interaction and engagement) will be available through the Learning Management System (hereafter LMS). Resources will be developed on their basis for being sustainable, use blended delivery and focus on 'edutainment'.

Rationale

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Many universities offer leadership development programs for students. Indeed, the University of Sydney (hereafter USYD) is globally renowned for producing leaders and the USYD has branded leadership to attract high achieving students through the "leadership for good starts here" campaign (http://sydney.edu.au/leadership/). Currently, leadership as a topic is gathering momentum as a key curriculum area however effective leaders and managers of the future need to be nurtured and supported by the organisations in which they study (McKimm & Swanwick, 2011).

Many USYD faculties offer successful individual or faculty-based programs related to discipline areas that aim to increase student confidence in the workplace. For example, the four leadership programs currently offered by the Faculty of Health Sciences (hereafter FHS) were recently announced as finalists in the *Australian Financial Review* Higher Education Awards "Employability" category, noting such leadership programs offered students a competitive edge when entering the employment market. The Faculty of Engineering & IT Leadership Scholarship Program at the University of Sydney also offers leadership education, industry mentoring, and placement components with an industry sponsor, providing the scholars to both develop and practice leadership by the time they graduate from their degree. However, many of these programs are not currently accessible to large student numbers in a self-paced environment and often rely on the goodwill of alumni to provide facilitation. The OLE in Student Leadership will offer a module in professional, industry and community leadership to prepare students for external, on-going opportunities that will ensure development of USYD graduate qualities.

Student Mentoring

Peer mentoring, peer tutoring and other voluntary leadership roles for students facilitate development of personal leadership skills alongside USYD graduate qualities, such as communication skills, influence, cultural competence and an integrated professional, ethical and personal identity. While these leadership roles provide many benefits for the students involved, and the students they work with, there are associated learning curves and risks potentially due to the failure to fully understand and appreciate their roles and the processes involved (Long, 1997). For example, some challenges as evidenced through student feedback in USYD peer mentoring programs include:

- Mentees become too attached to / too dependent on their mentor
- Mentors may not understand the appropriateness of referral and delegation
- Mentors may struggle not to take on others' problems and become emotionally fatigued
- Often there is confusion about leadership roles and responsibilities (Colvin, 2015; Dearlove et al., 2007; Nguyen et al., 2015)
- Understanding personal motivation to join, participate and complete leadership/peer programs

This OLE aims to give students theoretical and practical underpinning for their leadership aspirations and to mitigate risks by providing students with the opportunity to develop and practice relevant skills before they take up these positions.

Student Representatives

Student representatives on university committees are keen to contribute to decision-making processes, but often need some preparation so that they are effective in their roles. For example, students in leadership positions in Australian universities (446 were surveyed) do not "identif[y] their role as directly influencing teaching and learning or having an impact on curriculum" (Deane & Stanley, 2015, p. 133). Carey (2013) found that students involved on university committees sometimes encountered hostility or apathy from academics. In particular, female students and students from minority backgrounds might need advice on how to be more assertive in meetings. Clearly there is a need to support students in these roles, with particular emphasis on building social capital, cultural competence and confidence to be able to adequately represent collective student views.

Work and Community Engagement

The majority of the students that complete a university degree end up working in the industry, start their own business, or take part in some form of community engagement (very few end up as academics). It is hence important that students engage with the wider community and industry partners to better understand the world and the professional and social context where their education, skills and knowledge will be applied upon their graduation. Furthermore this engagement opens up opportunities for gaining valuable experiences positively looked upon by any potential employer. The networks and relationships formed also act as gateways to seamless recruitment for the students should there be a good synergy and skill-match between potential employers and students. Placements are an integral part of several USYD degrees, and in an engineering degree, for example, the students are required to undertake 600 hours of professional engagement equivalent to 12 weeks during the course of their degree as a requirement for the completion of their engineering degree.

Innovation

Currently, no units of study of this kind exist at USYD and it is a particularly challenging and innovative to design a unit of study and associated learning materials and assessment tasks that caters for students wanting to undertake a zero credit point 'taster' unit and those that want to undertake a for credit unit of study. It is also the first time that colleagues at USYD from such a broad range of disciplinary backgrounds and professional services will be working together on such a project.

Approach or method

This OLE aims to give students theoretical and practical underpinning for their leadership aspirations and provide students with the opportunity to develop and practice relevant skills before they take up these positions.

The Student Leadership OLE is closely aligned to the stated purposes of OLE learning in a liberal studies program including the provision of foundational areas to support and inform further study, acquiring broadly applied leadership skills and a strong focus on personal development. This OLE in Student Leadership is based on two USYD Educational Strategies [Initiative 1, Strategy 4: Embedding new graduate qualities through a transformed curriculum] and [Initiative 5,6, Strategy 5: Providing interactive and flexible learning designs that enhance the learning experience].

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The OLE leaders include previous Vice Chancellor Award winners in Support of the Student Experience. Within the Reference Group, there will be 3 teams that will be responsible for the scoping, provision of materials and facilitation that equal 2 CP each (see below). The broader team of Leaders, Reference Group members and Student Advisory Group will be responsible for development of the zero credit point value resources and activities.

Student co-design and broad consultation are key features of this project. Involving students as co-designers will have several benefits. Students are well placed to know which learning activities and resources will best support their learning. Student co-designers gain graduate qualities that maximise their employability, including confidence, leadership, and decision-making skills, deeper self-awareness and greater meta-cognitive awareness (Bell, 2016). As well as providing authentic access to student voices, the Student Advisory Group will provide links to student networks and groups such as the Student Leadership Academy, founded by the FE&IT. We also aim to fill pivotal team roles such as the project manager and video production/resources with current students or recent alumni.

Broad consultation with both Faculties and professional units will ensure the design of high quality OLE that draw on existing resources, innovative new resources, and resources that scaffold learning outcomes and are sustainable.

Evaluation plan

The OLE will be pilot tested by students from both within the Student Advisory Group (hereafter SAG) and external to the project, such as those in the SLA. The project will have key performance indicators (for both development and later delivery) of the OLE based on a 4 term (3 month) working timescale.

Evaluation activities will include:

1. OLE online resources pilot tested by students
2. OLE workshops – feedback from students and staff. Actions will be devised to meet KPIs and built into next term work plan
3. Feedback from project team members, reference group and student advisory group: discussion board as a LMS eCommunity to present ideas and evaluate the effectiveness of current strategies
4. OLE Live: collection of student feedback data via USS and qualitative means plus feedback from colleagues (facilitators, wider faculty perspective) on sustainability and workload.

This data will both inform the design of the OLE and our approach, and measure the project's impact.

Impact and broader context

Given that this OLE will be one of the first ones launched in 2018, and the only unit that we are aware of that involves such a broad and inclusive number of colleagues, every stage of

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this process is a pedagogical, intellectual, and technical challenge and one that is already challenging our unit approval system and timetabling. We have been described as 'trail blazers' and 'ground breakers' on campus. Our OLE will have impact across the university as it will change not only the way we offer student leadership training but also this type of cross-disciplinary modularised content. This may, of course, be of interest outside of the university sector for businesses offering staff leadership training. As we intend to present papers at education conferences and publish our findings in education journals, the lessons learned from our curriculum transformation process will be valuable ones for colleagues at other institutions and in the broader community. Moreover, our lasting legacy will be future cohorts of student leaders who go out into the community and make their mark. Considering that student leaders (and leaders in general) have an impact on their peers, this OLE aims to equip our student leaders to be more effective in their interaction with their peers, aiming to produce and leave a more positive and magnified impact in their leadership. This ripples throughout campus and is hoped to create a more positive, collaborative and caring culture throughout the student cohort.

Discussion points

Are other universities offering this type of content for credit (either online or in workshops)?

What kind of content and training is provided by other available programs? (leadership topics, activities etc).

What challenges do other delegates face when implementing leadership education and leadership programs?

How are students incentivised?

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