Succession planning for academic leaders: Some key findings from ALTC project

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Outline

• Background and context
• Overview of the project
• Results
• Key findings
• Implementation
What is succession planning?

“What succession planning is a strategic, systematic and deliberate activity to ensure an organisation’s future capability to fill vacancies consistent with the merit principle. It specifically focuses on ensuring the availability and sustainability of a supply of capable staff that are ready to assume key or critical organisational roles as they become available.” (QUT 2011)

Challenging

– Academic career is not always seen as an attractive option
– Ageing workforce marked by a gender imbalance
– But…how do you plan for the unknown?
The project: mixed method

• Focus group discussions (FGDs)
  – Participants invited to participate via direct invitation
  – Three FGDs (N=52) were conducted each running for approx. 1 hour
  – Topics included: attitudes, operationalisation, processes, challenges and decision making relating to leadership succession planning in the higher education sector

• Online survey
  – Respondents (N=152) recruited via email using snowballing technique
  – Five modules (26 questions): demography, role, institution, general info. on leadership succession planning, and personal experience with succession planning

*We acknowledge the invaluable contributions of participants*
Age-sex distribution


46% aged 56+
Length of time in current role

# Respondent characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PVC/Executive Dean/Dean</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Dean</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head of School</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creative Arts</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>33.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>48.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Held leadership role outside of higher education sector</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>24.8</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Formal/informal succession plan

- No plan: 74%
- Informal plan: 16%
- Formal plan: 10%

Why no formal succession plan?

• **No time or resources** – difficult to plan when juggling the day-to-day duties of the role or do not have necessary administrative support.

• **Ambivalence to succession planning** – concerns about transparency, uncertainty of staff turnover/exits, and the ‘unknowns’ of career pathways.

• **Informal succession planning** – identification of a suitable successor and prepare them for the position (e.g. mentoring, shadowing, appoint as deputy).

“Succession planning for academic leadership is affected by competing demands of the standard academic career profile (teaching and particularly research), by mobility of academic workforce and by rewards structure more orientated to academic values/goals than to management goals…[T]here are too many leadership roles and too few able people interested in these...”

- Respondent DASSH/ALTC survey
Competing demands

Largely around:

- **Time management** – balancing various roles/tasks and competing demands. No time for research or teaching.

- **Management of staff** – responding to staff needs and acting as “firefighters” managing conflict.

- **Complex institutional structures** – pressure to meet university and government reporting (“paperwork”) and compliance with insufficient administrative support to do so.

- **Budgetary constraints** – working effectively with financial and other resource limitations.

Available time -- Time spent in various activities

- Strategic related activities: 20%
- Day to day operational / admin. matters: 30%
- Supervising HDR students: 10%
- Teaching / managing courses: 10%
- Research: 10%
- Service and outreach activities: 10%
- Mentoring staff: 10%

Mixed attitudes toward formal succession planning

Positivity toward a formal succession plan

Data source: DASSH/ALTC 2011.
### Important factors around succession planning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff profile/infrastructure</th>
<th>%(^a)</th>
<th>Structural framework</th>
<th>%(^a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demographic profile of academics</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>University funding model</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff’s career expectations</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>University senior management strategies</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University staffing policy</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Impact of ERA process</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age profile of staff in area</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Government policy framework</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender profile of staff in area</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Wider economy</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes to discipline areas</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible delivery of courses</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic diversity of staff in area</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous diversity of staff in area</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current technology</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
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Notes:
- a. Proportion of respondents reporting ‘Very’ or ‘Extremely important’.

Hurdles to succession planning

Effective succession planning needs to overcome some hurdles:

**Institutional culture**
- Disinterest in pursuing academic leadership roles
- Barriers to pursuing leadership roles – for example, gender, background, support for promotion

**Capability and capacity**
- Need for relevant and targeted training, guidelines and guidance
- Support or mentoring from senior staff

Key challenges to succession planning

- Staff intentions are not always known, difficult to plan for the future
- Difficult plan for succession when dealing with restructuring/change
- The need for / importance of mentoring is not fully recognised
- Some leadership roles do not have a clear career path, e.g. Associate Deans who do not often gain staff management experience in their role.
- Time is demanded elsewhere, so not much time to focus on succession planning
- Complex institutional structures (particularly relating to human resources) make it hard to manage change and plan for succession
- Performance outcomes are hard to define and measure.
- Need for change in leadership style in some cases to more adaptive leadership.
- Loss of research output and the financial and reputational impact of these on the individual in an academic leadership position.

Data source: DASSH / ALTC Focus group discussions 2011.
“(M)any academics may be willing to undertake academic leadership but not willing to take on management roles… (there’s) a distinction between the two.”

- Respondent DASSH/ALTC survey

“Academic roles incorporate research and many leaders want to retain their research capacity – indeed, within our institution, a lack of ability to combine administrative leadership with research has contributed to staff reluctance to take on leadership roles.”

- Respondent DASSH/ALTC survey
Support strategies for effective succession planning

- Budgetary support
- Clear guidelines
- Investment in staff capabilities
- Recognition of the importance of planning
- Mentoring/preparation for leadership
- Promotion policy/career pathways

Embedding Succession planning

Strategic planning

Business planning

Recruitment & selection

Induction & on-boarding

Business processes & infrastructure

Leadership development & talent management

Structure & job design

Reward recognition

Workforce planning
Next steps…

• Draft report available for comment on the DASSH website by mid-November

• Draft consultation period closes end-November

• Final report by mid-December
Attitude to succession planning differs by role

Positivity toward a formal succession plan

PVC/Dean/Exec Dean: 22% Not at all/Slightly, 34% Moderately, 44% Very/Extremely
Associate Dean: 18% Not at all/Slightly, 47% Moderately, 35% Very/Extremely
Head of School: 23% Not at all/Slightly, 39% Moderately, 38% Very/Extremely
Attitude to succession planning differs by gender

Data source: DASSH/ALTC 2011.