

Engaging and Developing Academic Leaders 'from base camp to summit'

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Abstract

Leadership is critical to the success of all organisations: academic institutions are no exception. Heads of School perform a pivotal leadership role in today's constantly changing university environment. This role however, is often undervalued in terms of organisational understanding of the key leadership contributions as well as the inherent skills, knowledge and attributes. At the University of Wollongong, Heads of School have often struggled with the conflicting demands of their academic discipline and the role of manager and leader. Identifying the skills and other requirements for these roles and developing academic staff was a central outcome of a review conducted in 2003. The Heads and Associate Deans Leadership Program developed and delivered at the University of Wollongong was designed to support the transition from an academic and administrative role to a leadership role. In the context of an Everest climb we were taking these staff from base camp to the summit.

Introduction

The University of Wollongong is proud of its achievements in teaching and learning and research. We have built a strong national and international reputation in both of these areas. Investing in the ongoing development of our current and future leaders, to continue to grow and strengthen our reputation is a central strategic goal of the University.

Background

The University of Wollongong's academic structure consists of nine faculties and two graduate schools (these are shown in **Appendix 1**). Each of the faculties and graduate schools is headed by a Dean who is supported by Heads of School. The faculties typically have three schools except in the faculties of Law and Education which do not have a school structure, here the Dean is supported by Associate Deans.

Heads and Associate Deans are central to the overall performance of the University through providing leadership in core academic functions, including the development of new programs and initiatives, as well as overseeing the day to day functioning of academic organisational units. In addition, Heads and Associate Deans play a key role in the performance management and career development of our academic staff.

A review of the responsibilities, remuneration, appointment process and contractual arrangements for Heads of School and Associate Deans at the University of Wollongong was undertaken in 2003. The primary catalyst for the review was recognition that the performance and contribution of heads of the academic units had a critical impact on the overall success of the University.

Other factors which influenced the decision to undertake the a review were;

- the significant change in the University's senior academic structure around that time with a number of staff being relatively new to their roles;
- a view that the roles had been undervalued by the University;
- the level of change the University was going through and the need to manage this change effectively at all levels;
- a lack of definition and understanding of the role and expectations for Heads of School;
- recruitment to the roles was not strategic and did not take into account the skills, knowledge and attributes required;
- a need to strengthen medium and long term planning at the academic unit and faculty level;
- the availability and/or willingness of senior academic staff to put themselves forward to undertake these roles;
- a limited number of senior and experienced staff as potential candidates in some academic units;
- a perception in some areas that the roles were seen as limited to administrative functions;
- a perception in some areas that incumbents were not taking ownership of the role and were essentially just 'taking their turn';
- a perception that there is some reluctance among heads of school to take responsibility for more difficult issues. These difficult issues include performance management of staff, and the effective and consistent engagement in career development functions;
- a tendency for problematic, unresolved issues to drift upwards to Deans.

These factors are not unique to the University of Wollongong. Higher education institutions world wide have gone through a period of unprecedented change in the last few decades and face significant challenges into the new millennium. These challenges include reduced government funding, increased competition for funds, students and staff, changing student expectations, greater community accountability

and demands for productivity, rapid adoption of new technologies and globalisation. In this environment of change Ramsden (1998, p.254) observes that it "is hard to overestimate the importance of leadership and management development for (academic) heads in contemporary ... universities". This point is also made by Rowley (1997, p.78) who states that "the future of academic institutions depends on the development of effective leadership skills at all levels".

Outcomes of the review included recommendations on the appointment process and length of appointment; development of core leadership and managerial competencies for the roles; development of bespoke role and responsibility descriptions; implementation of revised contractual arrangements; and, increased remuneration and incentives. Iles (1994, p.8) recognises that it is important "...that our development efforts are integrated at a strategic level into the organisation". This includes aligning any training and development activities with: the corporate strategy; recruitment; rewards and incentives; performance appraisal; performance management; multi-rater feedback and career development, ensuring that they all pull in the same direction.

It was also acknowledged that, whilst we needed to tighten the accountability framework and attempt to enhance incentives so as to gain increased commitment to the roles, it was imperative that we did not ignore the development of the skills, knowledge and personal attributes required by the incumbents. Essential among these is an understanding of contemporary issues in teaching and learning and research, a level of respect among peers, a good working knowledge of the University's student management, finance and employment frameworks as well as a range of leadership skills including good planning and people management skills.

For many of the appointees it is the first time they had taken on a role involving any substantive responsibility for leadership or management and was viewed by some as an interruption to their academic career goals in research and scholarship. As is noted by Rowley and Sherman (Rowley, 2003, p.1058) in the US context "many faculty members end up in both managerial and leadership roles without ever having aspired to them". As well, it is important to keep in mind "that most faculty members are at a college or university because they have been educated for and want to teach and/or do research" (Rowley, 2003, p.1058) not because they have a background in or skills, knowledge or aspirations in relation to leadership roles. Clearly there were gaps in some skills and knowledge areas. Hence one of the key recommendations was the development of a Leadership Program for Heads and Associate Deans.

The Program

In developing the Program we were aware that, while there was widespread recognition of the need for leadership development for academic heads, it was an area where efforts across the sector "have been faltering and largely incoherent" (Ramsden, 1998, p.255). We were also cognisant of the fact that many academic leadership initiatives across the sector had only modest impact and in some instances were not well received by academic staff. This provoked us to think creatively about the scope of the Program as well as a raft of issues relating to style, content and delivery.

Target Group

The Program was designed for academic staff who currently held positions as Heads of School or Associate Dean (44 in all) as well as academic staff from each of the faculties who were identified as having the potential to be candidates for future appointments.(20 staff). The Program will continue to include further potential leaders as this cohort expands.

Design of the Program

The design phase was strongly influenced by the perceived need to gain greater engagement of staff in these roles and to develop a culture of leadership which would endure over time, rather than see the Program as a one-off initiative. Ramsden (1998 p .255) supports this point, "that academic leadership development is too vital to be seen as a distinct activity to be delivered by a central unit to a small proportion of Heads".. To this end equal emphasis was placed on the identification and development of potential leaders for the future as well as catering for the needs of the academic staff already performing the roles.

Given the diversity of the target group in terms of academic disciplines, organisational knowledge, experience in leadership roles and skills we identified a need to significantly tailor aspects of the Program to meet the individual needs of participants. We addressed this on two levels.

First, we planned and delivered the facilitated group sessions to four distinct groups based on the characteristics of participants. These were labeled and became colloquially known as the Blue, Yellow, Green and White groups.

- The Blue group consisted of academic leaders with significant experience in leadership roles and knowledge of the University.
- The Yellow group also consisted of existing Heads and Associate Deans but those who were relatively new to their leadership roles and/or the University.
- The Green group captured some very recent appointees as well as academic staff that had acted in roles or were seen as strong candidates for emerging vacancies.
- The White group was made up of academic staff that had been identified as potential leaders of the future and aspired to move into a leadership role during their career.

Undertaking the core sessions of the Program is a pre-requisite to being considered for appointment as a Head of School or Associate Dean in the future. While the topics covered in the facilitated sessions were common to all four groups the level of content, modes of delivery and the time devoted to and emphasis placed on particular topics varied markedly. The Program has thus far been staged over two years and will continue, particularly in respect of developing academic leaders for the future.

Secondly, we took a decision to augment the learning from the facilitated sessions with the use of external leadership development coaches to work with each program participant on a one to one basis to identify and put into action a personal management development plan. This was a huge 'leap of faith', an initiative that could easily have been unanimously rejected or at best cautiously accepted.

Other approaches we adopted in designing and refining the Program included:

- Identifying a program champion;
 - it was seen as critically important for the University senior executive to demonstrate to the group a real investment on behalf of the University in their development. This occurred at a number of levels but most overtly through the role of the program champion, a member of the Senior Executive staff who was instrumental in the design and delivery of the Program. It would be hard to overestimate the importance of having a senior member of staff demonstrating their commitment and enthusiasm by taking a leadership role in the Program. This level of involvement by the senior executive is reflective of the flat structure and culture of accessibility within our University.
- keeping the Program practical;
 - by focusing on the real issues and challenges facing academic leaders in their day to day roles at our University and how learning from the Program could be readily applied in the workplace. We worked to create a climate where the whole focus was on 'how can we help you do your job better?' rather than 'this is what you should be doing'. We also did not want to have the Program to become weighed down by an over emphasis on abstract content relating to the endless debates on definitions and theories of leadership. We feel there is an unfortunate tendency by staff developers in universities, to feel obligated to fill programs for an academic audience with extensive theoretical underpinnings and empirical justification, to have credibility.
- valuing and building on the experience of participants;
 - both in the refining of Program content and in the facilitation and delivery of sessions. At the commencement of the Program the Blue group in particular was engaged in the planning of these aspects. In this vein we also worked to establish a climate of mutual respect and openness; constantly seeking feedback on what the participants were getting value from and how we might refine aspects of sessions as we moved along. While the core remained constant, aspects of delivery and emphasis in the facilitated sessions evolved both in terms of targeting the different needs of the various groups and incorporating feedback from participants.
- having facilitators with credibility;
 - not only was the Program led by a Deputy Vice Chancellor but other members of senior management contributed to various aspects of the Program. We also identified criteria and undertook extensive research on selection of the external facilitators and coaches we engaged.
- having a bit of fun!
 - Pike (1994 p.4) states that "learning is directly proportional to the amount of fun you have". To maximise learning the facilitated sessions were relaxed and encouraged interaction. As well, opportunities for peer networking and case studies and stories about the trials and tribulations of University life were incorporated. The final session was a 'light hearted' graduation breakfast where each participant was presented with a certificate.

Program Elements Summary

The Program included a number of learning elements to enhance skill acquisition and transfer to the workplace. These elements include:

- facilitated group sessions, taking advantage of the group dynamics and individual expertise;
- one-on-one development support in the form of external coaches; and
- peer networking opportunities.

Element 1 – Facilitated Group Sessions

*This consisted of a series of sessions, including core and supplementary modules (as set out in **Appendix 2**) which aimed to:*

- *explore the role and leadership expectations;*
- *enhance skills in leading and managing staff;*
- *provide essential practical information.*

All existing Heads, Associate Deans and potential leaders attended each of the four core sessions.

Element 2 – One-on-One Development Support

All existing Heads and Associate Deans were required to develop an individual set of leadership/management goals which were shared with Deans and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Operations). This activity was supported by individual external consultants who met with the program participant, three to four times a year. The sessions were designed to enhance sustainable development of participants and give them an opportunity to address individual development needs in a non-threatening and supportive relationship.

Element 3 – Heads Forums

These are convened three to four times a year and provide program participants with an opportunity to discuss current and relevant issues with their peers. These facilitated forums are led by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Operations) and include appropriate guest speakers including the Vice Chancellor to address the group. To ensure these forums meet participants' needs, the selection of topics considers input from the group.

The above elements were augmented by sponsorship of academic leaders on appropriate external leadership and management programs. The Program was also complemented by a wider initiative to undertake a leadership survey of all supervisors, including academic heads across the University. Aspects of the 'Leadership Survey' which was undertaken in 2005 are discussed further in a later section of this paper. Further details of the structure of the Program and UOW's overall approach to Academic Leadership and Management Development is illustrated in **Appendix 3**.

Outcomes

To date 64 academic leaders and potential leaders from across the University have participated in the Program.

Evaluations

The Program was evaluated based on the four-level model developed by Donald Kirkpatrick (1994). Level 1 is the evaluation of **reactions**, level 2 evaluates **learning**, level 3 evaluates **transfer** and level 4 evaluates **results**.

The evaluation consisted of both formal and informal methods and focused on the following:

- session content and delivery;
- coaching sessions;
- participant learning;
- outcomes for the University; and
- input and feedback on future programs.

Evaluation methods included a comprehensive questionnaire, on-going informal feedback such as emails and interviews and anecdotal evidence.

Below are some quantitative ratings from the questionnaire with some of the qualitative statements following.

An average of 92% of participants responded to the questions regarding content and presentation of the facilitated group sessions. Using a four point scale, of the 92% 47% rated the **content** of the sessions as *'really good'* and 41% rated the content as *'good'*. 47% rated the **presentation** as *'really good'* and 41% rated the presentation as *'good'*

An average of 91% of participants responded to the questions regarding the coaching element. Using a four point scale, of the 91%, 35% rated the **coaching** as *'really good'* and 43% rated the **coaching** as *'good'*

Facilitated group sessions:

"I have valued meeting other staff at a similar level. It has given me a reference group."

"I am part of a significant management layer at UOW, the 'senior middle manager.'"

"...it has engendered a greater sense of reflective practice..."

"How to balance the competing demands of making decisions that some staff may not like, while at the same time motivating and leading staff."

"Different attitude to staff member who really dislikes me; led to different approach with that person which has led to some improvement in relationship."

"The broader context of leadership in higher education. The need and benefits of a good leadership. Tips and resources on how to be a better leader."

"I think more carefully about how to approach difficult situations."

“... I really loved talking with people from other faculties about bigger issues - usually when I do this we are trying to solve a particular problem that has a specific solution, whereas this allowed for thinking outside the box.”

Coaching comments:

“Helped me to see what kind of leader I am. It got me to focus on my performance plan.”

“I am enjoying the opportunity to have a significant dedicated period to talk to someone with a good range of experience and skills.....”

“I’m finding that it builds confidence and offers an independent sounding board.”

“Helps put decision making process into a comprehensive framework. Lots of input about how to gain useful self-knowledge and to use it in a complex institutional environment.”

“Extremely useful - a highlight - has really helped to provide personal skills and reinforced self-management attributes necessary for leadership.”

Whilst the Program will continue to develop we recognize that there are many things that we can improve on. Brookfield (1991) suggests successful adult education programs involve continuous collaboration and continual renegotiation of activities and priorities. To facilitate the on-going success of this Program we engaged participants of the initial Program in the design of subsequent programs through the evaluation of content, structure and approach and will continue to do this.

Other Indicators

There have been many requests from members of the senior executive and academic staff to participate in the Program and we currently have a waitlist for the next program.

There has also been a high level of commitment to the Program by participants both in terms of attendance and a high level of involvement and contribution during sessions. Surprisingly, there were several instances where individuals who were unable to attend a scheduled session due to unavoidable travel overseas or interstate sought to join another group to cover the module. Many of the participants also sought additional coaching sessions as they found the process very beneficial. Every participant completed the core modules and coaching elements of the Program. Participants also continue to attend forums and supplementary sessions in large numbers.

Other positive outcomes have been a better understanding of the academic leaders role within the University; evidence that issues and problems are being addressed more effectively at the local level; strengthened succession planning and, increased engagement of academic leaders. As well, we feel the success of the Program has built stronger relationships and connections between HR & academic leaders and will empower HR to deliver new initiatives, enhance credibility and thus positively influence organisational change.

Leadership Survey

The University of Wollongong Leadership Survey was implemented for all staff in supervisory positions. Its chief intention was to provide feedback on leadership capabilities including areas of strengths and development needs. Participating supervisors were encouraged to develop personal action plans to enhance their leadership capacity. The survey has an important link to the Program in that it surveys Heads of School along with other supervisors across the organisation. The survey will be undertaken every two years. It will allow us to measure perceptions of leadership in the University over time and provide another indicator of the effect of the Heads Leadership Program and other leadership initiatives.

The survey consists of 60 questions covering three categories:

- **Relationship Management** - The supervisor's ability to lead a team and their effectiveness in establishing and maintaining communication in the workplace
- **Self Management** – how well does the supervisor manage themselves?
- **Operational Management** – how well does the supervisor manage the day-to-day operational environment?

Within each of the above categories, the individual questions are grouped in **dimensions**. There are 15 dimensions in total.

The research undertaken in developing the survey during 2004 also informed the development of the Heads Leadership Program. We ensured that the Program content covered the major categories and dimensions listed above.

Individual reports were issued to supervisors and they were offered a one-to-one debrief with a staff member from Professional and Organisational Development Services. The debrief was aimed at assisting the supervisor deal with issues and develop action plans. Supervisors were advised to discuss their action plans with their own manager.

In all 137 supervisors were the subject of the survey with 1838 staff invited to respond. A very encouraging response rate of 79% was achieved across campus.

Conclusion

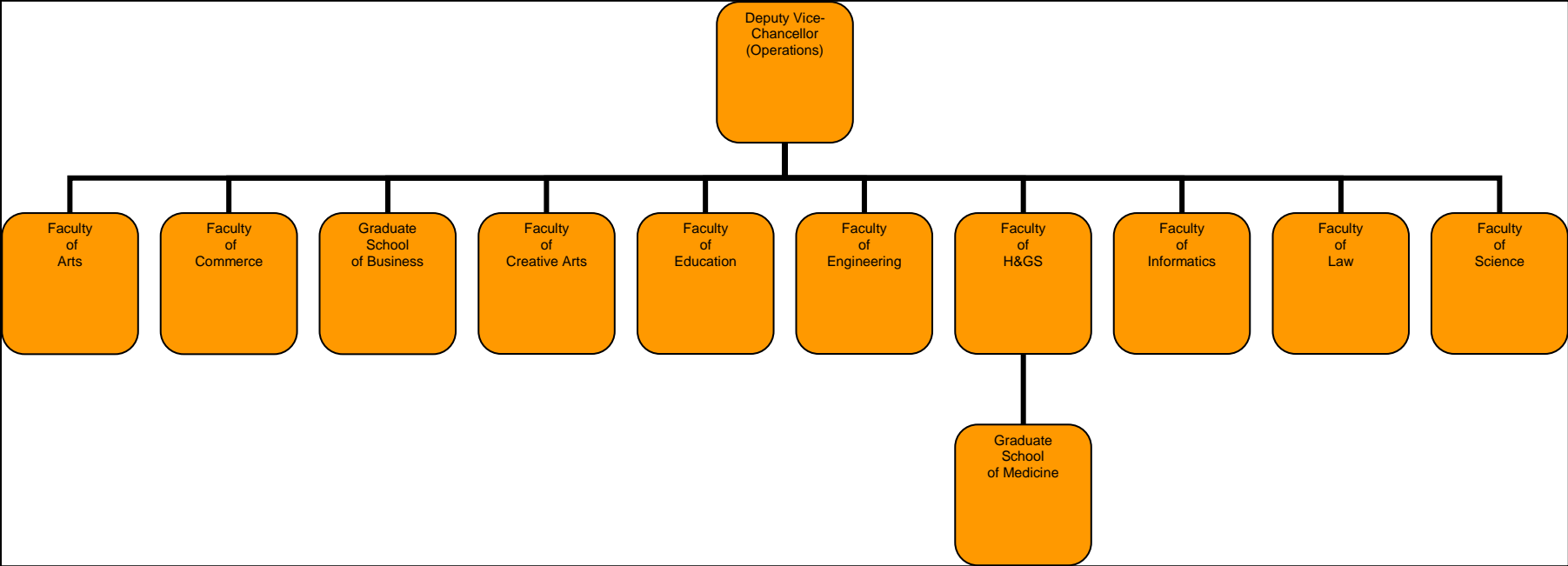
The outcome of the Program has been surprising and one we would like to share with other HR professionals to demonstrate what is possible when you work outside conventional boundaries and take the 'leap of faith'. The journey for us has been satisfying, rewarding and always exciting.

The Program will continue to run both in terms of Heads Forums and for cohorts of potential academic leaders.

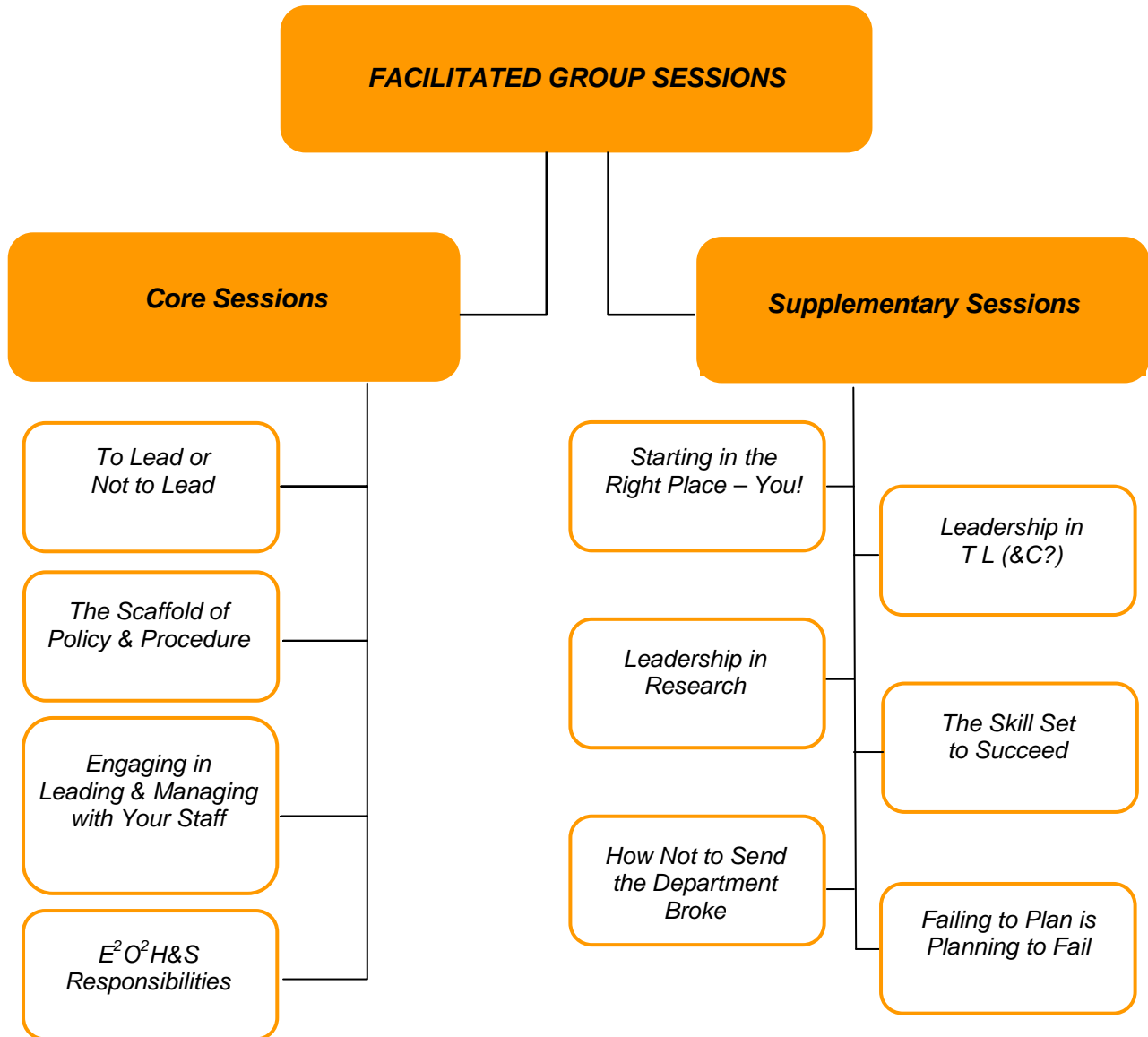
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Appendix 1 – Faculty Structure



Appendix 2 – Facilitated Group Sessions



Appendix 3 – Academic Leadership & Management Development at UOW

