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## Making Headway: Developing Principals' Leadership Skills through Innovative Postgraduate Programs

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## **Making Headway: Developing Principals' Leadership Skills through Innovative Postgraduate Programs**

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*Abstract: Effective school leadership preparation has been regarded as desirable if not mandatory in Australia and globally for decades. Schools and school systems, higher education institutions and education jurisdictions have attempted with varying degrees of success to encourage teachers aspiring to become principals to prepare well for the complex role ahead. Research involving postgraduate education students identified that peer support, collaboration and collegial professional learning contributed towards self-development, strengthening the required Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills of contemporary school leaders.*

### **Introduction**

Findings from research conducted with postgraduate students at a regional university in Australia in two research projects conducted over a two-year period, indicate whether opportunities for self-reflection, peer support and increased collegial interaction can contribute to increased confidence and capacity to undertake demanding leadership responsibilities. The context for the research projects was the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC), and participants were Master of Education and EMBA (Executive Master of Business Administration) students, all of whom studied in face-to-face mode. USC consistently scores highly on teaching ratings, and postgraduate courses can be accessed from across the span of the University's catchment so that students are able to attend classes in the evenings and enjoy collegial interaction with lecturers and peers. Given that a significant proportion of the Master of Education and the EMBA students at USC are either current or aspiring school principals, the research undertaken in the two projects authentically interrogates whether identified professional practices incorporated into courses influenced leaders' confidence and school leadership capacity.

The specific leadership qualities and practices incorporated into postgraduate programs through the two projects, are in alignment with the current mandated professional standard – the Australian Professional Standard for Principals (AITSL, 2014) – to which Australian principals across all systems aspire and against which their performance is judged. The findings from the two projects have already influenced postgraduate course design at USC and will potentially influence other postgraduate programs designed to be practical as well as theoretical in nature with regards to leadership skills development.

### **Tension or Alignment between Practice and Theory?**

In Australia, many school leaders are recruited after highly successful years as classroom teachers, Heads of Department and Deputy Heads (Gurr and Drysdale, 2015), unlike in the United States where the pathway into the principalship is commonly the acquisition of a Master's degree in Educational Administration or Leadership (Schleicher, 2012). Experience in the school context, coupled with evidence of successful development of the requisite skills and aptitudes, continues to be regarded highly within the profession in Australia (Evans, 2016), and discussion abounds concerning how important additional academic study of leadership-related topics is, compared to the opportunity to gain practical leadership experience at the coalface (Simon, 2015). The findings from the two research projects highlighted here are discussed against this backdrop of sometimes competing tensions and help to determine whether opportunities to develop leadership skills within a postgraduate program make authentic and valuable contributions to leadership confidence and capacity.

### **The Need to Develop and Practice Leadership Skills**

It is posited that it is important for current principals and those teachers who aspire to become principals, to have genuine opportunities to develop necessary leadership capabilities, to road-test them and then to practice using them in context. In fact, the professional practices of collegial interaction, self-reflection and reflexivity are emphasised in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST), which all teachers in Australia are required to incorporate into their professional repertoire. In particular, the descriptor for APST 6.3 *Engage with colleagues and improve practice* for Highly Accomplished Teachers is: *Initiate and engage in professional discussions with colleagues in a range of forums to evaluate practice directed at improving professional knowledge and practice, and the educational outcomes of students* (AITSL, 2011a). Furthermore, many Australian schools proactively engage in 360-degree performance appraisal processes for their teachers in leadership roles and this provides invaluable opportunities for self-reflection alongside a trained facilitator. One such process is the Centre for Creative Leadership's *Benchmarks Appraisal Program* (Centre for Creative Leadership, 2016) and others are cited by Dinham, Anderson, Caldwell and Weldon (2011) in their comprehensive review of leadership development. The question of whether postgraduate learning activities can also effectively develop necessary leadership skills and aptitudes with the support of peers, as performance appraisal does, is important to consider.

### **Appropriate Leadership Skills for Complex Times**

To ensure optimum effectiveness in leadership practice in complex times, Townsend (2011) highlighted the increasing trend to gain insights from international educational leadership studies and experiences. Townsend suggested that it is preferable to approach leadership in a way that is contextually relevant – to think globally but to act locally - and that leadership capacity is strengthened through responsibility that is distributed in order to empower all members of the senior executive of the school (Townsend, 2011). Gurr and Drysdale (2012) addressed the need for a changed leadership approach for contemporary Australian schools – one that focusses on leadership preparation for the future. Rhodes (2012) focused on ways that the individual can become better prepared for future leadership and claimed the management of self-belief as being ‘an important component of talent

management' (Rhodes, 2012, 439). According to Rhodes, this was especially important in complex times where the principal's responsibilities and range of pressures mount steadily on a day-to-day basis and increase significantly when a crisis or a change of role is presented. The importance for contemporary school leaders to have professional support through a community of practice was demonstrated through McCauley-Smith, Williams, Clare Gillon and Braganza's empirical research in UK (McCauley-Smith et al., 2013). Their study established their preferred combined approach of distributed, shared and collaborative leadership where participants reflect on and are able to embrace a new and overarching, innovative leadership structure to facilitate integrated leadership. Collegiality, collaboration, personal skills development (in particular, empathy, patience, tenacity, holding difficult conversations, and coalition-building) and community capacity-building were identified as the essential skills by Archer and Cameron (2008) whilst the essential skill of collaborating effectively with colleagues and other professionals in contemporary schools was endorsed further by Campbell (2015). Most recently, Sahlberg endorsed the enduring assertions of Showers and Joyce (1996) who 'insisted that the transfer of new skills from staff development to classrooms must also include opportunities to practice new skills in safe environments, receive feedback from experts and colleagues' (Sahlberg, 2017, p. 11).

Thus, a range of authors have established the fundamental aspects of good leadership capacity building: thinking globally and acting locally; being focused on the future; having a high level of self-belief; having access to a community of practice; and the capacity to work collaboratively. The clear intention of the authors of this paper is to relate the findings of two research projects running concurrently with postgraduate education students to these criteria for leadership capacity-building and within the context of the theory/praxis debate for school leadership skills development. The research question at the core is: How can higher education leadership courses support current and aspirational leaders to develop skills and abilities for future educational leadership roles? Is it feasible, authentic and relevant for them to 'road-test' these skills and build capacity in the postgraduate classroom in order for them to make headway at the coalface?

## **Literature Review**

### **Studies of Effective Leadership Development**

Current and aspiring principals' learning needs, appropriate in-context preparation, effective professional development, impactful postgraduate study, authentic self-reflection and collegial interaction and support must be informed and supported by relevant research studies and their findings, as well as unique personal and contextual need. One such study conducted by Gardner, Coglisier, Davis and Dickens (2011) included a review of 91 publications on the topic of authentic leadership across all fields and disciplines and highlights broad findings during the previous decade and suggests ways to continue relevant research in the future for the benefit of practitioners and researchers alike. In the same year, Dinham, Anderson, Caldwell and Weldon's historical overview of school leadership quality in Australia and its impact on school effectiveness and student learning, also presented leadership development emphasis and areas of policy and program development for further consideration (Dinham et al., 2011). Concurrently, Eacott investigated the preparation of aspiring principals in 'managerialist times' in Australia, providing further insights which echoed some of the 'new set of demands on schools and those who lead' in the 'new economy' – community capacity-building in particular (Eacott, 2011, p. 43). Subsequently, Eacott honed this interest in effective preparation of school leaders and directed it specifically

into researching the effectiveness of university-based leadership programs (Eacott, 2013).

### **Emerging Professionalism**

Dempster, Lovett and Fluckiger's investigations in 2011 provided a foundation for the design of the Australian Professional Standard for Principals (APSP) to be launched by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2011b). Dinham, Collarbone, Evans and Mackay (2013) subsequently traced the collaborative process through which the Standard had been developed after the initial research had been conducted. Dinham et al. (2013) maintained that AITSL's mandate for establishing the APSP was based on the need for transformational change in school leadership and in 'creating new levels of teacher professionalism' (Dinham et al., 2013, p. 467). Thus, the APSP was the result of consultation with researchers and practitioners in the field, and the culminating *Leadership Requirements* and *Professional Practices* of the Standard were the essential dimensions which assist in achieving the aims of AITSL in respect of increased school leader confidence, professionalism and effectiveness.

### **International Alignment**

Global influences on the emergence of increased mandated leader professionalism in Australia include the *Preparing Teachers and Developing School Leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* report which was published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2012, and which highlighted international variations on leadership preparation (Schleicher, 2012). Based on lessons learned from around the world and on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores as a means of determining school effectiveness, a correlation was then made between school effectiveness and the performance of the leader. These OECD findings indicated that well-distributed leadership approaches, new types of training and development, and appropriate support and incentives are required in order for the beginning principal to be successful in the role (Schleicher, 2012). Findings from research with high-performing schools in UK (Bush and Glover, 2012) also emphasised the importance of the leader's role in establishing, and being committed to, a distributed structure of leadership and effective two-way communication internally and externally.

### **Significance of the Background Literature**

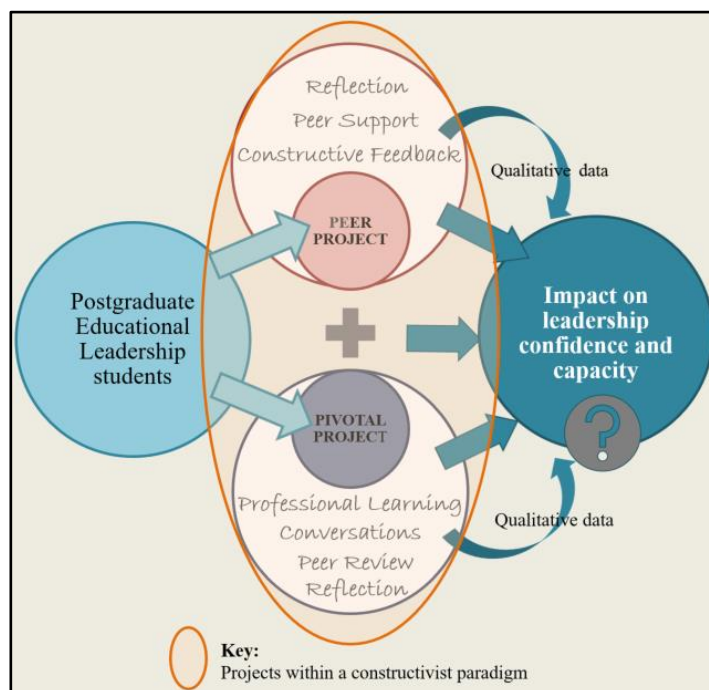
Based on significant research studies and reports such as the ones highlighted above, it would seem that university-based programs for leadership development would do well to not only provide current and aspiring principals enrolled in postgraduate programs with opportunities to gain knowledge and understanding of distributed leadership theories, but also with practical opportunities for peer interaction, collaboration, support and collegiality. Some research studies also highlight the highly-contextual nature of leadership skills and capacity requirements, for example Blackmore's investigation into school leaders' need to work with emotions in culturally-diverse educational communities (Blackmore, 2010). The relational and situated nature of leadership demands are highlighted in Blackmore's findings concerning appropriate leadership development and leadership diversity in the Australian school context.

In summary, these selected research studies and investigations guided research into the effectiveness of learning experiences of current and aspiring school principals in order to build confidence and leadership capacity – and to consequently influence the designers of university-based leadership courses in order to better meet the leadership skills development needs of current and aspiring school principals. The breadth of investigation into effective school principal preparation in the literature demonstrates the wide interest and concern in the community about leader efficacy which has been shown to have significant impact on school effectiveness and student learning (as shown, for example, in the study conducted by Leithwood and Jantzi in 2008). This concern is also evident across the globe, as seen in the OECD study (Schleicher, 2012) and it is crucial that a consistent focus is maintained on proactive preparation and intervention strategies based on evidence from current as well as past practice. Students in postgraduate leadership programs consistently indicate that they need increased opportunity to self-reflect and also to reflect professionally with peers in order to become confident as leaders (Simon, Christie, Graham and Call, 2015). Indeed, the interventions incorporated into the two aligned research projects featured here were, in part, in direct response to these postgraduate students' articulated requirements.

## **Method**

It was, in fact, a coincidence that the two projects in question – the PIVOTAL (Partnerships, Innovation and Vitality – Opportunities for Thriving Academic Leadership) Project and the PEER (the Postgraduate Evaluation of Educational Research Project) Project - were being conducted at the same time within the same postgraduate context. However, despite there being no intention of alignment of aims and outcomes at the commencement of the projects, as they proceeded, their relevance to the research question became apparent: How can higher education leadership courses support current and aspirational leaders to develop skills and abilities for future educational leadership roles? The projects included the introduction of similar learning activities such as peer review and self-reflection whilst utilising distinctively different methods of capturing outcomes, data and student perceptions. These specific learning activities were guided by the constructivist paradigm of the Master of Education and the EMBA, and were therefore anticipated to be able to contribute to the development of leadership skills and confidence. Thus, the evaluation of their impact on the current and aspiring principals in the postgraduate classes who participated in the two projects contributes to answering the research question.

## Conceptual Framework

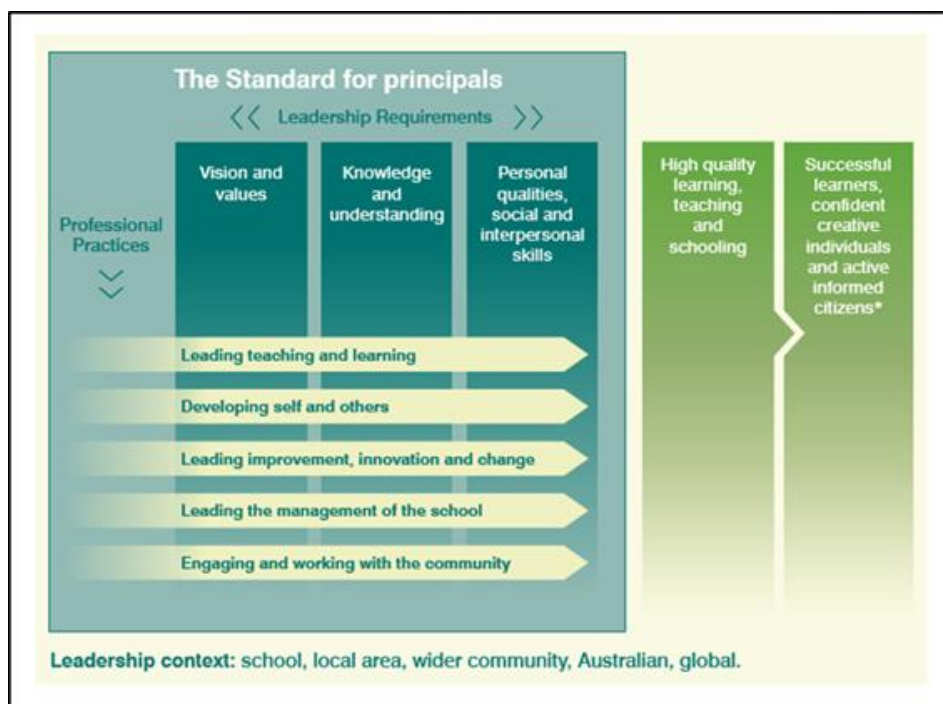


**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: USC's PEER and PIVOTAL Projects' influence on leadership confidence and capacity**

Figure 1 diagrammatically represents the alignment of leadership development activities within two separate projects at USC during a two-year period and participating students may have engaged in one or both projects. Learning activities are based within a constructivist paradigm and reflected the criteria of the Professional Practices of the APSP (AITSL, 2014), in particular, that of *Developing self and others*. At the culmination of the projects, the qualitative data collected was utilised in evaluating the impact of the new learning activities on leaders' confidence and leadership capacity, and in answering the research question: How can higher education leadership courses support current and aspirational leaders to develop skills and abilities for future educational leadership roles?

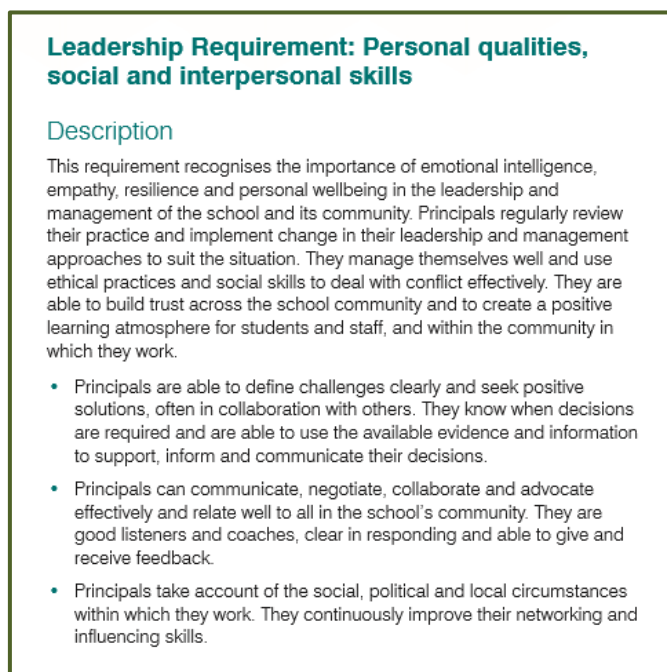
### The PIVOTAL and PEER Projects; and their Alignment with the APSP

The PIVOTAL Project was a research project funded by a seed grant from the Australian Government's Office of Learning and Teaching and it had the over-arching aim of evaluating the effectiveness of selected postgraduate learning activities for current and aspiring principals' leadership development: professional learning conversations; peer review; and critical reflection. Being conducted during the same time-frame, the PEER Project aimed to give participants the opportunity to support other students, peer-review others' work and to provide constructive feedback. Due to the fact that all Australian school principals are guided in their roles by the Australian Professional Standard for Principals (APSP) (AITSL, 2011b), the model as shown in Figure 2 below served as a stimulus for discussion, peer feedback and reflection in the PIVOTAL Project. Likewise, the underpinning aims of the PEER Project were aligned to aspects of the APSP, namely the *Leadership Requirement of Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills* and the *Professional Practice of Developing self and others*.



**Figure 2: Australian Professional Standard for Principals (AITSL, 2011b).**  
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Specifically, the *Leadership Requirement - Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills* - includes key qualities such as: empathy, regular review, ethical behaviour, social interaction, trust, sensitivity, community focus and the capacity to create a positive learning culture as shown in AITSL's Leadership profile in Figure 3.



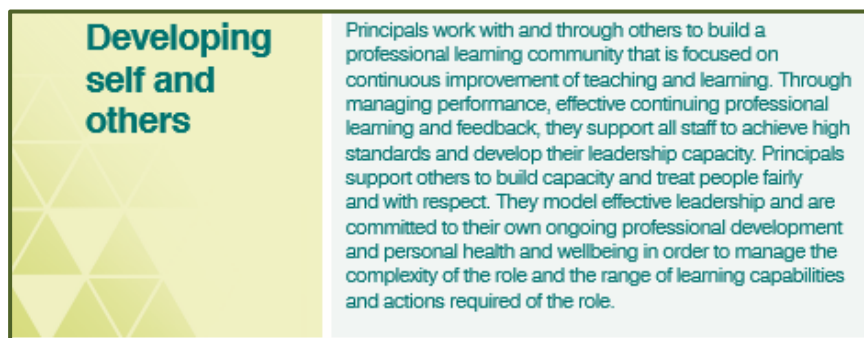
**Figure 3: From AITSL (2014): Australian Professional Standard for Principals and the Leadership Profiles**

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Regarding the *Professional Practice of Developing self and others*, desirable practices are expanded by AITSL and include: working with and through others, managing



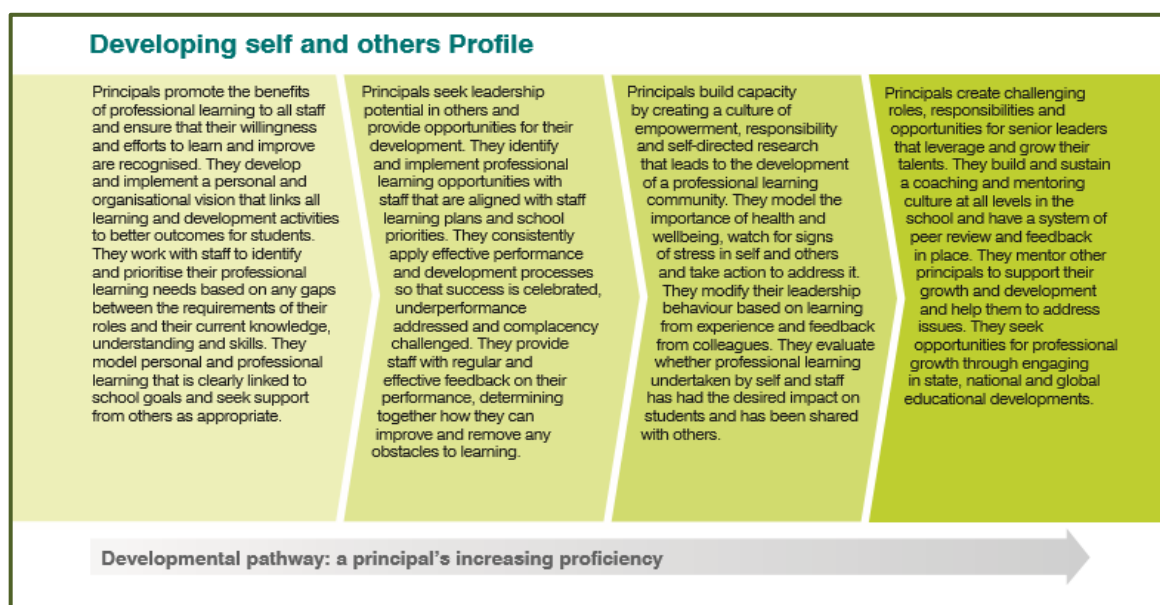
performance, life-long learning, giving and receiving feedback, building fair and respectful relationships whilst maintaining health and wellbeing (Figure 4).



**Figure 4: From AITSL (2014): Australian Professional Standard for Principals and the Leadership Profiles, p 29.**

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Furthermore, to demonstrate how this professional practice may develop over time, the anticipated professional progression of principals within the *Professional Practice of Developing self and others* is illuminated in AITSL's Profile in Figure 5. Principals will, in the early stages of their careers, 'provide staff with regular and effective feedback on their performance, determining together how they can improve and remove any obstacles to learning'. As they develop expertise and confidence in their roles, they will 'mentor other principals to support their growth and development and help them to address issues'. Thus, there is a continuum of effective collegial support across a career. It was anticipated that being able to practise these essential skills before assuming complex leadership responsibilities would be a good start on the continuum presented through the model in Figure 5.



**Figure 5: From AITSL (2014): Australian Professional Standard for Principals and the Leadership Profiles**

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Alignment with the relevant concepts encapsulated in the APSP can be identified in both projects and their findings were considered to be well-positioned to contribute to answering the research question: How can higher education leadership courses support

current and aspiring school leaders to develop skills and abilities for future educational leadership roles?

### **Contextual Features, Data Collection and Analysis**

The context of the PIVOTAL Project was one course in the Master of Education Program and one course in the EMBA program at USC. However, this project involved not only enrolled postgraduate students, but also a Reference Group comprising 20 local school principals (6 State Primary, 4 State Secondary and 10 Independent Prep – Year 12). The advocacy of this group informed the formulation of questions concerning appropriate leadership development activities within postgraduate study and these were included in the PIVOTAL online survey. 55 Master of Education students participated in the PIVOTAL Project and 52% of them completed online surveys: the rest were involved in focus groups. Surveys and focus groups were held twice each semester – at the beginning and ends of two consecutive semesters. The PIVOTAL participants who contributed to focus group discussions expanded on the feedback in the online surveys. Findings from the PIVOTAL Project reflected students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the innovations which had been incorporated into course learning activities and how helpful these had been in developing leadership skills.

By contrast, the context of the PEER Project involved 75 Master of Education students across four courses within the Master of Education Program at USC. The project gave students the opportunity to view other students' videos and presentations in a range of courses to develop their skills in peer-reviewing. The feedback was delivered in both written and verbal modes. Online surveys were administered and completed by students at the beginnings and ends of two semesters (four surveys in total). The students were surveyed as to the effectiveness of incorporating peer review into courses and they subsequently reflected on how beneficial this activity was to their development of leadership confidence and capacity.

Specifically, the findings of the PIVOTAL and PEER projects were analysed utilising a process involving: collation by project group; coding; analysis; data reduction; data complication; potential theme identification; review; and the subsequent confirmation of themes (Saldaña, 2009). Appendices 1 and 2 detail the emergent themes from both projects through this process, as well as examples of commentary to support thematic analysis. It was anticipated that the emergent themes from the PEER and PIVOTAL Projects, would make important contributions to answering the research question: How can higher education leadership courses support current and aspirational leaders to develop skills and abilities for future educational leadership roles?

### **Findings**

Within a constructivist paradigm, the content analysis described above has provided opportunities for the researchers to interpret commentary and conclude dominant themes, relating these to the research question. Significant identified themes from the two projects are presented here and they highlight students' perceptions of leadership skills developed through the learning activities incorporated in the research projects. Appendices 1 and 2 contain verbatim commentary categorised for each project and cohort group.

### The PIVOTAL Project Findings<sup>1</sup>

The *Leadership Requirements* and *Professional Practices* of the APSP Model (AITSL, 2015) (see Figure 3) were used as stimulus frameworks for interrogating PIVOTAL participants' perceptions of the most important school leadership skills and requirements. Despite there being a general consensus that each of the three *Leadership Requirements* of the Australian Professional Standard for Principals (APSP) are crucial to being a successful school leader, *Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills* was rated by all groups of participants in the PIVOTAL as the most important *Leadership Requirement* with such comments as:

*[The Leadership Requirements] all seem related to each other, but without ability in one area such as interpersonal skills you may have a vision and values, but your staff team may not feel the drive to support you in achieving these (PRG1).*

The three *Leadership Requirements* are as depicted in Figure 6 below, with the highest rated *Leadership Requirement* being *Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills* :

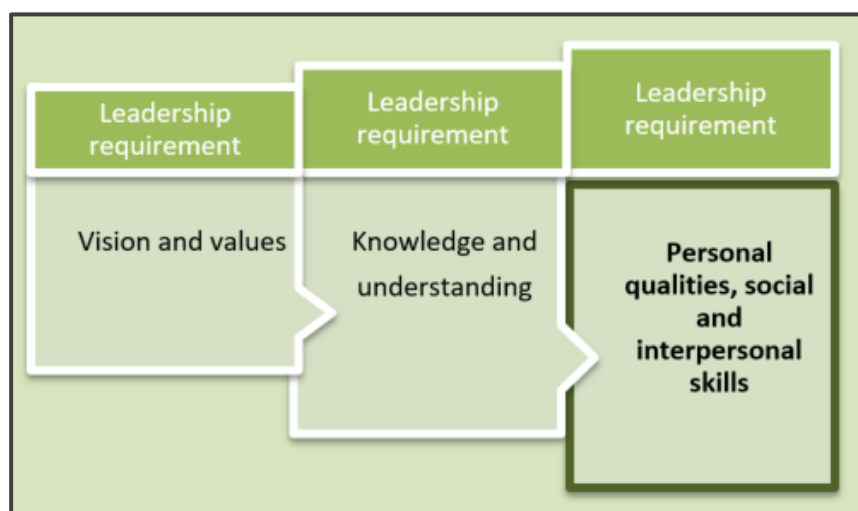


Figure 6: The PIVOTAL Project: Relative importance of the APSP's Leadership Requirements (AITSL, 2011b)

This most highly-rated *Leadership Requirement* - *Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills* - includes key qualities such as: empathy, regular review, ethical behaviour, social interaction, trust, sensitivity, community focus and the capacity to create a positive learning culture (Figure 3) and these were all commented on by respondents in the PIVOTAL Project as being critical to effective school leadership (see Appendix 1). In particular, participants referred to qualities which would constitute evidence of this *Leadership Requirement* as; emotional intelligence; managing up and down; interpersonal skills; relationship-building; instructional leadership; classroom observations; and feedback to staff. PIVOTAL participants commented:

*Leaders need to be skilled in working with others to ensure the established vision is futures-focused and responsive to the needs of the clients now and in the future. (PRG2)*

<sup>1</sup> PRG - PIVOTAL Reference Group Participants (Total N=20)

PSG – PIVOTAL Student Group Participants (Total N =55)

*Unless school leaders have the required interpersonal skills, they will always struggle to move a school forward. Valuing and harnessing the skill set of staff to support you to move a school forward are critical. (PSG1)*

*The biggest issue is interpersonal skills and those inspiring others being brave enough to tell those aspiring they will have no success without those skills, (PSG2)*

*How do you get people to pick up the strain? How do you get people to do this thing that doesn't come naturally to them? You need to engage all of them. (PSG3)*

Concerning the five *Professional Practices* of the APSP, there was consensus by PIVOTAL participants that all five practices are crucial to becoming a successful school leader. However, *Developing self and others* was rated as the most important *Professional Practice* by PIVOTAL participants, as depicted in Figure 7 below.



**Figure 7: The PIVOTAL Project: Relative importance of the APSP's Professional Practices (AITSL, 2011b)**

PIVOTAL participants identified key responsibilities of the leader as: working with and through others, managing performance, life-long learning, giving and receiving feedback, building fair and respectful relationships whilst maintaining health and wellbeing. These qualities relate directly to the *Professional Practice* of *Developing self and others* as shown in Figures 4 and 5. Participants clearly identified the importance of this practice in preparing them for eventual success as a leader in their schools, and they believed that being able to practise these essential skills in a supportive environment with peers would be a good start on the continuum presented through the model in Figure 5.

PIVOTAL participants suggested learning activities which would build capacity in this *Professional Practice* as follows; participating in professional learning conversations; practising mentoring skills; studying and analysing case studies; creating leadership project simulations; and responding to scenarios (see Appendix 1). Some reasons respondents gave for the incorporation of these activities include:

*What is important is the development of a culture within leadership that values staff and recognises and utilises the strengths of individuals. (PRG3)*

*The analogy is; if you're on a plane and the oxygen bags all drop down and there's a bit of a crisis, you've got to put it on your own face first because you've*

*got to be going OK for everyone else in your organization to be going OK, and then you've got to develop the others. (PSG4)*

Having ascertained that *Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills* and *Developing self and others* were areas for potential development of crucial leadership skills in postgraduate study programs, innovations were then included the program. Mentoring and collegial support across contexts, was to be facilitated by the creation of weekly opportunities for leadership project 'trouble shooting' and formative round table discussions. Face-to-face and online collaborations formed communities of practice, whilst written peer feedback and professional learning conversations provided opportunities for developing individual's Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills as well as developing others' capacity as a leader (see Table 1).

<i>Leadership skill or approach</i>	<i>Relevant Leadership Requirements (LRs) or Professional Practices (PPs) of the APSP</i>	<i>Design innovations made to postgraduate leadership courses</i>	<i>Delivery innovations made to postgraduate leadership courses</i>
<i>Mentoring and collegial support across contexts</i>	Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills (LR) Developing self and others (PP)	Creation of weekly opportunities for leadership project 'trouble shooting'	Formative round table discussions
<i>Communities of practice and partnerships</i>	Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills (LR) Developing self and others (PP)	Face-to-face and online collaborations to form communities of practice	Class and online learning activities designed to encourage establishment and maintenance of communities of practice
<i>Collaborative leadership</i>	Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills (LR) Developing self and others (PP)	Professional Learning Conversations	Verbal feedback and interaction replaces teacher-led summation in the culminating phase of the course
<i>Peer review skills</i>	Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills (LR) Developing self and others (PP)	Peer review included in assessment task Professional Learning Conversations	Written feedback included as essential part of early tasks Verbal feedback and interaction replaces teacher-led summation in the culminating phase of the course

**Table 1: The PIVOTAL Project: Innovations to Leadership Courses 2015 (Simon, Christie, Graham and Call, 2016)**

Once the subsequent semester of study was completed, researchers investigated the effectiveness of the innovations which had been introduced and which were anticipated to contribute to leadership development, especially in the area of *Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills* and *Developing self and others* (see Appendix 1). Evaluation of the innovations at this stage of the research reflected the degree to which respondents had perceived that the learning activities introduced in the PIVOTAL project had contributed to

the development of their leadership confidence and capacity. The peer review concept was conducive to giving respondents 'insight into giving and receiving constructive and positive feedback through a professional process' (PSG5). Another respondent recalled the powerful emotional reaction experienced after giving peer feedback:

*It was the first time I've ever done a peer review, so I found it extremely challenging. I cried the first time when I got home, because I felt that I'd given not the best feedback, so I felt like it was really detrimental. I actually rang [lecturer's name]. .... Yeah, because I said a few things, like someone spoke a bit fast and then afterwards, I really struggled with that for a day. (PSG6)*

Finally, participants emphasized the benefit of being able to apply newly learned skills and effectively provide peer feedback in their own school contexts (Appendix 1). Collegial interaction was gauged to be a great motivator and source of wisdom and advice. Providing this kind of peer support that is very much part of a school leader's role, was perceived to be surprisingly difficult for some students, but, having done it, it was deemed to be an invaluable experience as an aspiring leader. Suggestions for future development of the postgraduate leadership courses were offered and featured additional interactive activities which would provide opportunity to practice difficult interactions and develop confidence in leadership skills: scenario planning, simulation creation, case study analysis and role-playing difficult conversations with staff, students and parents.

## PEER Project<sup>2</sup>

Whilst the PIVOTAL Project was directly based on the APSP (AITSL, 2015) the PEER Project could also be seen to also have a contribution to make to current and aspiring school leaders' leadership confidence and capacity in the domains of the *Leadership Requirement of Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills* and the *Professional Practice of Developing self and others*. Comments concerning the personal benefits of peer review, collegiality and collaboration as experienced by the respondents, many of whom are current or aspiring educational leaders, have been selected from the online survey data gathered during the PEER Project. In the pre-test activity, it was revealed that 35% of respondents had never engaged in peer review activities before. However, all reflected on what they anticipated would be professional benefits of doing peer review (see Appendix 2). Emergent themes were: the development of a team atmosphere, building networks, professional relationships and strengthening friendships; the development of critical thinking, analysis skills and supportive feedback skills; improvement of teaching skills; and the provision of evidence for their professional portfolio for promotion. Respondents also expected that they would be exposed to a diversity of views and be able to adopt a more global world-view.

When surveyed after engaging in a peer review, over 80% of respondents reported they had benefitted from the learning activity. The themes identified in the pre-review survey were endorsed repeatedly, with additional emphasis on: the importance of giving non-judgmental feedback; observation and articulation skills; dealing with contradictions; the importance of learning from each other; formative benefits of critical self-reflection; capacity to influence; and the pride in being able to support and encourage others (see Appendix 2). Respondents were also interrogated about the specific leadership skills the peer review activity had given them an opportunity to practice. Consequently, additional themes emerged: the need to relate to others' different leadership styles; the imperative for empathy for those

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<sup>2</sup> PER – PEER respondents (N=75)

to whom you are giving feedback; the important balance between politeness and constructive and honest feedback; and the confirmation of one's own beliefs. There was unanimous endorsement of the activity for future use with examples of how it could be productive in specific school contexts as well as ways in which it would continue to build leadership capacity for themselves (Appendix 2). Comments from respondents confirmed the validity of the researchers' analysis of the relevance and timeliness of specific leadership skills' development:

*As this was my initial introduction to the peer reviewing process, I found this concept challenging but extremely valuable. The peer review process has enabled me to reflect on my own areas of leadership development. In a time of increasing accountability, reflecting and reviewing one's practice has never been more critical. (PER1)*

The learning activity of peer review included in the PEER Project also enabled respondents to feel that they could embrace change and be adaptable:

*On reflection of my presentation and peer review, the areas of leading self, skill development and goal-setting have been extended to accommodate growth in the area of practicing skills outside my comfort zone. 'Leading self' has been upgraded to include adaptability and embracing change. Also, it is a goal to invest time in careful and critical reflection of my professional practice. (PER2)*

When asked what peer review had taught them about staff motivation and empowering others, respondents referred to the need to 'hold the vision in tough times' and the challenge of 'learning to facilitate without dominating discussion and perhaps, even without intent, predetermining the outcome of the process' (Appendix 2). In terms of constructive criticism, insightful reflections revealed deepening awareness of important leadership skills, such as:

*Providing constructive feedback has always been a challenging, uncomfortable process for me. Within my working environment, it is often a process that most people try to avoid or skirt around with pleasantries. On reflection on my growth as a leader, I have come to recognise how influential my fellow peers have been, in my gaining self-awareness. My peers have been my most valued supporters, inspiration and critics. They have provided me with invaluable insight into various ways of promoting, reflecting and making positive changes into my leadership direction. (PER3)*

Recognising success as well as areas for development was referred to by several respondents with one commenting that

*there seemingly was a theme that I could not help but notice: in order to accept the leader within each of us, we had to acknowledge both the strength and weaknesses within our own characters and realise that there is a strong connection between our self-concept and being a leader. (PER4)*

Some found that it was 'very confronting and harder to be on the giving side than the receiving side of [peer feedback]' (PER5), but that it was certainly contributing to their professional growth. The specific benefits of engagement in the process of peer review were revealed as: benefits to one's own thinking as well as to the group as a whole – and to the profession ultimately. Learning from others was seen to be complementary to individualised learning and deemed most appropriate for today's workplaces where there are increasing emphases on team work and collaboration. Being able to offer non-judgemental feedback and to articulate this well and sensitively, is balanced with the observation that it is not helpful to be too polite whilst reviewing peers' work. Indeed, the practice of giving and receiving feedback provides opportunity to focus on constructive criticism and consequently equips the participant with future strategies to cope with differing perspectives and various learning and



leadership styles. The sense of satisfaction in being able to offer support, to empathise, to motivate, to encourage, to influence others in some way and to focus one's thinking was evident. Most importantly, the benefit for others was balanced with tangible personal benefits: an increased ability to affirm successes as well as areas for development; to self-reflect, develop self-awareness and be more adaptable; have one's confidence boosted; and one's own thinking confirmed by colleagues. Participants thought there were certainly challenges in doing this well, but there was also evidence that professional growth was experienced through actively participating in the process.

## **Discussion**

### **Endorsement of Learning Activities to Enhance Leadership Skills**

The research question of how postgraduate leadership courses can support aspiring leaders to develop skills and abilities for future educational leadership roles has been shown to be addressed through key findings of the PIVOTAL and PEER Projects. The indications are that educational leadership students believe that postgraduate courses which include learning activities and assessment involving peer review, collaboration and collegial interaction help build leadership capacity. This belief had been anticipated by current practicing principals during the PIVOTAL Reference Group discussions and they had advocated that peer review, collaboration and collegial interaction are essential to develop if one is to be an effective school leader: principals need to have knowledge and understanding of how leadership style and behaviour contribute to their capacity to effectively interact with, and support, peers and others in the school community. These core criteria were also originally identified as being essential from the relevant literature (Dempster, et al. (2011): criteria which have now been endorsed further by the findings of these two research projects.

### **Individual Challenges and Solutions**

Despite participants in both research projects agreeing convincingly that postgraduate learning activities designed to develop leadership confidence and capacity were effective, it must be remembered that individual personality, ways of learning and differing contextual and personal circumstances at the time of the activities being undertaken may cause varying levels of effectiveness of the practice. For instance, a respondent in the PEER Project commented that some people were being 'possibly a little polite rather than truthful' which may indicate a high level of discomfort in giving hard-hitting feedback. This may cause a recipient to feel that the feedback given is less than insightful and helpful. It is possible also that the dynamics in a particular cohort of students engaging in interpersonal activities such as peer review may have been influenced by previous interactions within the group – either positive or negative – and this may affect confidence levels to be fully involved in the task. Significantly, cohorts of students in postgraduate educational leadership programs at USC, whilst they may have similar educational contextual experience, may have a wide variety of length of experience, range of experience and level of seniority within the field. This disparity could either be advantageous with some people sharing deeper insights based on experience which can benefit less-experienced peers, or it could additionally be a source of diminished confidence to engage effectively with the activities should someone feel overwhelmed by others' experience and expertise.

These potential challenges may be ameliorated to a certain degree by ensuring that: the facilitator of the activity knows the students well and is mindful of any individual's current circumstances which could have an impact on their participation; a positive classroom



climate of mutual respect has been established prior to the commencement of activities; that discussions concerning the variety and depth of experience has been discussed and the benefits of learning from others has been highlighted; that guidance on how to give constructive feedback has been given to students prior to the activity (Vardi, 2012); and that the long-term benefits of practicing leadership skills are discussed and can be seen to outweigh the short-term perceived challenges or discomforts.

### **Authenticity of ‘Road-Testing’ Leadership Skills**

It is important to consider whether classroom-based peer review, collaborative activities and critical reflection as learning activities can really provide comparable opportunities for growth to dealing with real life scenarios in the school context. Of relevance is the proposition expounded by Bush (2016) that socialisation into the role of principal is an essential aspect of the emergence of confident future leaders in their preparation for the role. Indeed, socialisation of current and aspiring leaders can be seen to occur in postgraduate classrooms through the activities included in the PIVOTAL and PEER Projects. Current and aspiring school leaders reflected on their involvement with these activities and to some extent regarded them as pre-cursors to what they can do in their own school environments. The professional learning conversations of the PIVOTAL Project provided participants with the chance to collegially interact in what effectively are communities of practice. One participant commented that ‘the greatest value for [her was] the interaction with the others... ..and bouncing off each other and finding out what you do and how you do it’ (PSG7). Specific skills and reflections were also seen to be directly applicable to responsibilities they have in their work context and the understandings they have about themselves as a leader. One respondent in the PEER Project commented:

*The feedback that was provided to me gave me insight into not only my leadership project but also my presentation style and the knowledge of my own leadership journey. It has also made me to look at how I give feedback to colleagues. (PER7)*

The opportunity to debate important aspects of leadership practice and discuss responses to hypothetical scenarios which could be faced by any school leader in a non-threatening and professionally supportive atmosphere, are also actually seen by participants as being as complementary to coalface learning.

### **Contemporary Higher Education Trends**

The current trend of increased online and blended learning in Australian higher education institutions (Gardner, 2016) suggests that potentially fewer postgraduate students will enrol in classes which are delivered solely in face-to-face mode in the future. The contexts of the PIVOTAL and PEER Projects were within the Master of Education and the EMBA programs at USC and these programs at the time were offered in face-to-face mode. It is apparent that students are increasingly seeking flexible and more relevant delivery of study programs which fit in with other commitments they have. Given that the learning activities examined in this paper rely on direct personal interaction, some solutions will need to be found to ensure that comparable outcomes can be achieved and that the programs do continue to support current and aspiring principals in developing their confidence and capacity for effective school leadership.

One solution to this phenomenon is that providers of postgraduate programs focus on increased flexibility of delivery of content in programs in which current and aspiring

principals are likely to enrol. For example, this could include weekend intensives with interactive opportunities for students in combination with online theory for the remainder of the semester. This mode of delivery serves the needs of time-poor current or aspiring principals who cannot devote time to attend regular sessions every week of the semester but can concentrate their efforts into a couple of weekend intensives which would include the chance to participate in the learning activities with peers – activities which have been shown to develop leadership skills - plus undertake the online study of theory when it suits them.

#### **Future Design of Educational Leadership Programs**

The research featured herein suggests that specific collaborative, peer-supported and reflective activities can enhance current and aspiring principals' confidence and capacity to undertake complex school leadership roles. Consequently, in the future, the design of educational leadership programs may well reflect these activities, albeit in differing modes of offering and in consideration of specific cohort demographics and individual student circumstances. The design of future postgraduate programs for a cohort of current and aspiring principals must accommodate changing perceptions of the theory/praxis relationship, evolving modes of program delivery being experienced in higher education presently, and any opportunities to capitalise on the best resource available – local schools and practitioners in the field. One suggestion is that universities offering postgraduate programs to current and aspiring principals could develop further existing partnerships with schools in their catchment area who may be able to provide appropriate opportunities for postgraduate students to practice and implement newly-acquired leadership skills in projects or problem-solving scenarios – the end results of which would also be of benefit and relevance to the school. Relevant postgraduate course designers, therefore, need to be engaged professionally with practitioners in the field and establish and build an effective network of school partners to facilitate this kind of leadership development activity – to the benefit of all.

#### **Summary**

The evidence from two research projects undertaken at USC have strongly emphasised previous studies' findings that school leaders must have confidence in their capacity to support and develop others, and to be able to reflect and learn from opportunities to do so. Global, as well as local, concern about the effectiveness of school leadership preparation is a hot topic, as this is seen to have significant impact on school effectiveness and consequently on student learning in every classroom around the world. Furthermore, the current alarming high turnover of school principals in many countries and contexts, and the difficulties with attracting and retaining good leadership in our schools, is demanding that those responsible for leadership development urgently evaluate what constitutes effective preparation. When doing so, full consideration and priority should be given to those development programs which include opportunities for practicing peer support, collaboration, collegial interaction and self-reflection, as these have been demonstrated to impact favourably on leadership capacity and confidence. Indeed, evidence presented here shows that these learning activities are most beneficial for teachers aspiring to become school principals, as well as for current principals. These practices, designed within a constructivist paradigm, and delivered in engaging postgraduate leadership learning programs which effectively integrate theory and practice, enhance key leadership skills which will sustain throughout a career.

The research question of how higher education leadership courses can support current and aspiring leaders to develop skills and abilities for future educational leadership roles has been interrogated through the analysis of the findings from the PIVOTAL and PEER Projects. Whether current and aspiring principals can effectively ‘road-test’ these skills in the safety of their postgraduate studies classroom, has been answered, in part, by the findings of these two research projects. Authentic opportunities to practice skills which prepare them for future leadership roles and responsibilities, such as the peer review, collaboration and collegial learning activities included in postgraduate courses at USC, can prepare principals, both aspiring and current, for the demands of the profession in the future. Nevertheless, in addition to postgraduate programs’ ‘road-testing’ activities, leadership skills must be practised in their current educational context. That will be the time to take off the L plates and make real headway in their individual leadership journeys, moving into top gear as they make their advances.

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## Appendix 1: PIVOTAL Project data

### 1.1 The PIVOTAL Project: endorsement of *Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills*:

PIVOTAL cohort	Themes identified	Verbatim commentary from respondents:
<b>Reference Group comments (current principals):</b>	Effective interpersonal skills Empowering others crucial; Clear direction to other aspiring leaders	Leaders need to be skilled in working with others to ensure the established vision is futures-focused and responsive to the needs of the clients now and in the future. Unless school leaders have the required interpersonal skills, they will always struggle to move a school forward. Valuing and harnessing the skill set of staff to support you to move a school forward are critical. The biggest issue is interpersonal skills and those inspiring others being brave enough to tell those aspiring they will have no success without those skills.
<b>Focus Group 1 comments (past and current students also in leadership positions in schools):</b>	Confidence Problem-solving and team work require good interpersonal skills Inspiration and engagement essential	More confidence is needed and interpersonal skills. Leaders need to increase capacity to develop relationships, problem-solve and improve interpersonal skills. The people that don't have interpersonal skills...you don't want to do what they've asked you to do, because they're not framing it in a certain way, they're not considerate of your feelings, or what's going on in your classroom. Whereas if someone is considerate of all of those things you're more willing to want to follow and get on board with what they're proposing. It's not to say that they don't have Personal qualities. They just don't get some of the stuff that sits on the line. How do you get people pick up the strain? How do you get people to do this thing that don't come naturally to them? You need to engage all of them.
<b>Focus Group 2 comments (current students also in leadership positions in schools):</b>	Need for staff support to get job done Common challenge	[The Leadership Requirements] all seem related to each other, but without ability in one area such as interpersonal skills you may have a vision and values, but your staff team may not feel the drive to support you in achieving these. Too many more [of my colleagues] than not, it seems to me, are struggling around that third one [Personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills ].

### 1.2 The PIVOTAL Project: endorsement of *developing self and others*:

PIVOTAL cohort	Themes identified	Verbatim commentary from respondents:
<i>Reference Group comments (current principals):</i>	Professional conversations and real-world challenges are needed	The way to develop self and others is to incorporate conversation scenarios: mentoring: challenges in leadership: case studies.
<i>Focus Group 1 comments (past and current students also in leadership positions in schools):</i>	Valuing, empowering and including members of team Influence and encourage collective action	What is important is the development of a culture within leadership that values staff and recognises and utilises the strengths of individuals. I just think that what I've been working on is around <i>Developing self and others</i> . How can I, as a principal of a large organization, ensure that all those other things are happening? The only way to do that is to exert influence across all those other things, through other people.
<i>Focus Group 2 comments (current students also in leadership positions in schools):</i>	Self-reflection and development is the precursor to developing others	Yeah. I'd probably be leaning towards <i>Developing self and others</i> . Again, they're integrated, but the analogy is; if you're on a plane and the oxygen bags all drop down and there's a bit of a crisis, you've got to put it on your own face first because you've got to be going OK for everyone else in your organization to be going OK, and then you've got to develop the others and that's the analogy of it.

### 1.3 The PIVOTAL Project: student evaluations of innovations to leadership courses

Themes identified	Verbatim commentary from respondents:
<i>Value of peer-review in leadership professional development</i>	The peer review concept was conducive to giving me insight into giving and receiving constructive and positive feedback through a professional process.
<i>Collegial interaction and communities of practice</i>	I think that's what has been the greatest value for me is the interaction with the others... ..and bouncing off each other and finding out what you do and how you do it.
<i>Challenges of providing effective peer support</i>	This is the first time I've ever done a peer review, so I found it extremely challenging. I cried the first time when I got home, because I felt that I'd given not the best feedback, so I felt like it was really detrimental. I actually rang [lecturer's name]. .... Yeah, because I said a few things, like someone spoke a bit fast and then afterwards, I really struggled with that for a day.
<i>Proposals for further innovations to leadership courses</i>	I would like to perhaps run through some scenarios / role plays of difficult conversations that leaders may be confronted with. This would assist the aspiring leaders, and also reinforce good practice for current leaders.

## Appendix 2: PEER Project Data

### 2.1 The PEER Project: Pre-peer review survey

Question 1: What do you think the benefits of peer review will be?	
Themes identified:	Categories coded from data gathered from respondents:
<i>Benefits to my thinking</i>	Challenged, develop feedback skills, view alternative perspectives and approaches.
<i>Benefits to the group</i>	Collegiality, support, sharing, understand others' thinking.
<i>Professional benefits</i>	Development of: team atmosphere, networks, relationships and friendship; critical thinking and analysis skills; supportive feedback skills. Improved teaching. Evidence for professional portfolio - for promotion.
Question 2: Why would peer review be beneficial?	
Themes identified:	Categories coded from data gathered from respondents:
<i>Offers diversity</i>	Demonstrates similarities and differences between experiences, approaches, styles, perceptions and perspectives, valuable perspectives, experiences, interests, expectations, contexts, ideas & ideals, resources, insight, understanding, bigger picture, varied audience, broader viewpoints, ingredients for wider learning, stakeholder interests, academic culture, economic perspective, range of eyes.
<i>Global community</i>	Global world, global standards, global perspectives, global viewpoints, universal processes, across nations, international issues, cultural differences.
<i>Collaboration</i>	Collaboration.
<i>Critical feedback</i>	Critical commentary, feedback, confidence.

### 2.2 The PEER Project: Post-peer review survey

Question 1: What did you learn from your involvement in Peer Review?	
Themes identified:	Categories coded from data gathered from respondents:
<i>New learning</i>	Valuing feedback, different perspectives, variety of approaches, collaboration.
<i>Skills</i>	Giving non-judgmental feedback, articulating, observation skills, leadership skills.
<i>Navigating feedback</i>	Different perspectives, cultural differences, different interpretations and contradictions, reflection, clarifying and modifying ideas, difficulty in feedback for unclear/unknown topics.
<i>Relationships/interactions</i>	Learn from each other, importance of peer relationships.
Question 2: How did you feel you benefitted?	
<i>Experiences</i>	Connectivity with the group, students saw colleagues as feedback providers – not just the lecturers.
<i>Knowledge</i>	Enhanced understanding, clarified ideas, feedback supported learning and skill development, gained alternative perspectives.
<i>Education outcomes</i>	Constructive criticism, range of feedback beyond the criteria, development of students.
<i>Formative benefits</i>	Reflected on progress, learnt from others and adapted work, influenced direction, focused thinking, proud of being a support and encourager.
Question 3: In what ways did peer review help you in your leadership development?	
Themes identified:	Verbatim commentary from respondents:
<i>Identification of different leadership styles</i>	It is always beneficial to receive feedback from leaders and peers who may have a different leadership style to you.
<i>Self-reflection</i>	Forced me to stop, take stock and reflect on where I am at as a leader.
<i>How to relate to other leadership styles</i>	It highlighted the different leadership styles I could connect with.



<b>Question 4: To what extent is it helpful to receive feedback from your peers?</b>	
<i>Relevant knowledge is crucial</i>	I think it's very helpful for the most part but difficult at times when they are not familiar with your particular subject.
<i>Confirmation of own beliefs</i>	Very helpful - it confirmed some of my own thoughts about my journey.
<i>The important balance between politeness and constructive and honest feedback</i>	Interesting, but possibly a little polite rather than truthful as the group has not yet bonded.
<i>Empathy</i>	Extremely helpful. They understand the position you are in.
<b>Question 5: Is this a strategy you currently use in your professional practice??</b>	
<i>Future use</i>	It is actually a strategy I will be employing in my leadership project.
<i>Current application in school</i>	Yes, in the classroom and we are starting to use it through the Arts and Science of Teaching (ASoT) framework to do peer classroom observations.
<i>Peer review with colleagues</i>	Yes – we reflect on other staff members in classroom activities.
<b>Question 6: Will you consider using it in the future?</b>	
<i>Mandated by school policy</i>	Yes, the College is committed to [a pedagogical framework which utilises peer feedback].
<i>Individual choice of use of peer review</i>	Yes, I am hoping to do a similar activity for lesson observation.
<i>Professional conversations</i>	Yes, it can be a good starting point for discussion.
<i>Critical self-reflection</i>	Definitely as it is also a great opportunity for self-reflection.
<i>Application to student learning</i>	I would, but probably only with older students.

### 2.3 PEER Project Data - from Educational Leadership students only (enrolled in EDU705 Leadership for Learning Communities)

<b>From Reflections 1 and 2: Providing and receiving written feedback</b>	
<b>Themes identified:</b>	<b>Verbatim commentary from respondents:</b>
<i>Self-reflection is enhanced</i>	Having a better a working knowledge and relationship with class members now – am more equipped to provide useful and valuable feedback in a way most effective for each individual. The value of feedback which encourages further self-reflection cannot be overstated.
<i>Community of Practice</i>	The feedback I received has confirmed my thinking about the project, particularly in my areas of development. It has also confirmed that my approach to my project, developing a community of practice, is the best step forward for my Constructivist Leadership style.
<i>Challenges of peer review</i>	As this was my initial introduction to the peer reviewing process, I found this concept challenging but extremely valuable., making me reflect on my own leadership development. In a time of increasing accountability, reflecting and reviewing one's practice has never been more critical.
<i>Embracing change and adaptability</i>	I have been encouraged to practice skills outside my comfort zone. 'Leading self' has been upgraded to include adaptability and embracing change. Also, it is a goal to invest time in careful and critical reflection of my professional practice.
<i>Staff motivation</i>	I must remember these comments and use them to guide the project forward, particularly when motivating staff and holding the vision in tough times.
<i>Self-awareness</i>	In only 5 weeks I am much more aware of my position and my ability to lead a project than I was before. What has changed the most for me is my awareness of the strengths and weaknesses I possess and even though I haven't fully developed as a leader and still have a long way to go, I stop and reflect more often now and think about ways to tackle a situation that might be a hurdle in my development.



<b><i>Confidence and goal-setting</i></b>	Learning from others and sharing ideas has given me confidence in my own abilities, given me some insights into how I can build my leadership skills and also made me realise that I actually want to improve my leadership skills and that this is a pathway that I really would like to pursue.
<b><i>Empowering others</i></b>	Empowering the teachers within the school setting is a major focus for the Principal. Empowering people is the way to go. The challenge lies with my learning to facilitate without dominating discussion and perhaps, even without intent, predetermining the outcome of the process.
<b><i>Constructive criticism</i></b>	Providing constructive feedback has always been a challenging, uncomfortable process for me. In my working environment, it is often a process that most people try to avoid or skirt around with pleasantries. On reflection on my growth as a leader, I have come to recognise how influential my fellow peers have been, in my gaining self-awareness. My peers have been my most valued supporters, inspiration and critics. They have provided me with invaluable insight into various ways of promoting, reflecting and making positive changes to my leadership direction.
<b><i>Recognizing success as well as areas for development</i></b>	It was challenging to accept positive feedback from peers - I think it is often the hardest thing to acknowledge and be in the moment of your success. The learning through this reflective realisation was fantastic, and as a result I was able to plan for future challenges and obstacles in my project, and work on being kind to myself. What stood out for me the most is how much growth other members of the class had done through this process. There seemingly was a theme that I could not help but notice: in order to accept the leader within each of us, we had to acknowledge our own strengths and weaknesses and realise that there is a strong connection between our self-concept and being a leader. I have come to a conclusion that leadership doesn't mean having all of the answers. Listening to other principals and people in leadership, I realised it was quite the opposite, and that it is OK to not always have the answers to every problem or solution.
<b><i>Giving feedback often harder than receiving it</i></b>	I find peer review to be very confronting and harder to be on the giving side than the receiving side of it. It was very impressive to see how far people had come in the course and see obvious changes in their projects. I look forward to seeing that in my own practice when my project becomes more than just an idea and will value the experience which has made me better prepared to take it on.
<b><i>Affirmation of worth</i></b>	It was reaffirming to see other people being supportive of my leadership project as well as having questions that made me explain some of the decisions I have made and the reasons behind them.
<b><i>Professional growth</i></b>	The feedback gave me insight into not only my leadership project but also my presentation style and the knowledge of my own leadership journey. It has also made me to look at how I give feedback to colleagues.