Tertiary student leadership training: A case study

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Abstract

The University of New England, Australia, offers an institutional award for student achievement through extra-curricular activity which aims to provide an incentive to students to get involved in university and community life whilst at university. An underpinning principle of the award is that extra-curricular activity offers rich avenues for the development of valuable graduate attributes.

One of the student training and development programs offered under the umbrella of the award is a Student Leadership Program. The program's objectives are to develop and enhance the practical skills of leadership including appreciation of different leadership styles; the principles of strategic thinking and planning; good citizenship and the importance of taking a life-long learning approach to leadership.

This case study set out to explore why students participate in the Leadership Program, what they gained from their participation and the impact of the institutional award.

The students reportedly participated in the Student Leadership Program to develop themselves personally and professionally. While the availability of the institutional award was a factor, it appeared that the majority of the respondents also possessed the desire to extend and challenge themselves. The students stated that they gained professional skills such as communication, conflict resolution, time management, interpersonal skills and lifelong learning skills. They believed that certain personal qualities such as confidence, assertiveness, empathy, optimism, social responsibility, self knowledge, and improved understanding of human nature were also enhanced.

Additionally, it was found that active and involved students did respond to institutional recognition of their efforts and achievements and saw the institutional award as further incentive to get involved and become active citizens in their communities.

Introduction

Non-accredited learning and training is difficult to 'sell' to university students who are becoming increasingly pragmatic about how they spend their time (Pantelides, 1998; Schirato & Wallace, 1998). Student patterns of engagement in university life in general have changed (White, 2006). Many tertiary students now need to engage in paid work to support their time at university (Clegg, Bradley, & Smith, 2006; McInnes, James, & Hartley, 2000;

Parry & Debowski, 2004) and are preoccupied with their employability (Lichtenberg & Howell, 2005; Watts, 2006) and the related need to achieve high grade point averages. They have little free time to engage in extra-curricular programs. The providers of non-accredited learning and training programs, including tertiary learning support, careers development units and university libraries, are continually seeking new methods of encouraging students to participate in their programs (Clegg et al., 2006, 104; Schirato & Wallace, 1998, 189).

The University of New England, Australia, offers an institutional award for student achievement through extra-curricular activity. The New England Award (NEA) aims to provide an incentive to students to get involved in university and community life whilst at university. An underpinning principle of the award is that extra-curricular activity offers rich avenues for the development of for students' personal and professional development including citizenship (Muldoon, 2007a, 2007b, 2009a).

One of extra-curricular student development programs which is offered under the umbrella of the NEA is a Student Leadership Program which runs every semester for one morning per week. It is presented jointly by academic and general staff with expertise in the various components of the course. The program's objectives are to develop and enhance the practical skills of leadership; understanding of the distinction between leadership and management; appreciation of different leadership styles; knowledge of employer expectations of leadership; the principles of strategic thinking and planning; a life-long learning approach to leadership; conflict resolution strategies; emotional intelligence; personality types and effective communication skills. The course is designed to enhance the leadership skills of students already in leadership positions and those aspiring to leadership in their chosen professions. Students can apply for New England Award points for successful completion of the Program.

The participants (n=20) in the Leadership Program in Semester 1, 2009 were surveyed about why they participated in the Leadership Program and what they gained from their participation. The impact of the NEA was also explored. There were twelve responses to the survey, a response rate of 60%.

Why do students participate in extra-curricular training such as this?

When asked why they applied to do the Leadership Program all respondents (n=12) said they hoped to increase confidence and to improve practical skills such as communication skills. Six spoke about wanting to develop leadership skills and there were six mentions of other personal and professional development. They were also asked specifically about the impact of the NEA on their decision.

All respondents said they had expected to gain, in addition to greater knowledge about leadership, increased confidence and practical skills. For example:

- *I expected to be able to identify what skills good leaders possess, which of these skills I currently had, and how I could further develop these as well as how to pick up the skills I didn't have;* and
- *A range of skills that would be beneficial to applying for and working in positions requiring leadership and responsibility.*

Also, improved communications skills was a common expectation. For example:

- *I expected the Leadership Program to provide me with skills that would allow me to confidently lead and assist others. Communication skills are essential in all areas, and I was hoping to build on mine. I hoped to come out with a greater confidence in knowing how to successfully lead and encourage people by example;* and
- *I particularly wanted to do the course to work on my communication skills, leadership skills in general and conflict resolution skills.*

Six students said the primary reason for applying for the course was to gain leadership skills to prepare for leadership positions they were considering or as personal development. A typical response from those wanting to hone their leadership skills for a specific reason was:

- *After learning about the course...I found that the idea really appealed to me and I was interested in completing it. I had the intention of applying for a* (leadership) *position at College in the following year... and felt that this would be very beneficial for me not only to give me an advantage over other applicants but to build on my abilities as a leader.*

Two of those seeking general personal development said:

- *I thought it seemed like a fantastic opportunity to expand areas about myself that I knew needed improving. The course was very broad in the fact that it really went through all what a leader should be and should do. It was a fantastic opportunity/experience to grow my knowledge of what a leader should be and do it in a fun way;* and
- *I thought I could gain something from it and further develop as a leader and an individual.*

Additionally there were four responses about doing the course for professional development, including:

- *I felt that as I was intending going into the army once finished it would be good to gain leadership skills;* and
- *Leadership is crucial to my career in teaching and* (I) *believed it to be an excellent professional development opportunity.*

One student very pragmatically stated that his participation in the program was to bolster his curriculum vitae:

- *It would look good on a resume.*

Another said he/she participated to be involved*:*

- *I wanted to be involved in as much as possible in my final year at UNE.*

Yet another baldly announced: *Initially for NEA points and to meet the Vice-Chancellor.*
The participants were asked if the NEA had any bearing on their decision to do the Leadership Program and the result was an even division between the respondents with six saying that the NEA did not influence their decision and six saying that it did. A typical response from the latter was:

- *I was trying to think of ways to get points for the NEA because I wanted to complete the award, and the VSCL was worth a good percentage towards the NEA.*

However, three of the six who said they were doing the Program for the NEA points in this study said they were doing it not *only* for the points:

- *It posed an opportunity to gain from the Leadership Program but also gain points for the NEA. Killing two birds with one stone* (but also*) it seemed like a challenge;*
- *Points, expansion of awareness* (and) *development of skills,* and
- *Points for NEA, graduate attributes and trying to gain more skills.*

In summary, the reasons for participation in the leadership course ranged from the desire for personal and professional development through to the more pragmatic goal of gaining NEA points. However, half of the respondents who said that they sought NEA points also said that there were other reasons for the participation as well, such as for the challenge, and skills development. This desire for personal and professional development was borne out by an examination of other extra-curricular involvement of the respondents. The majority of respondents (10/12) had engaged in other extra-curricular learning and training opportunities while at university, including 5/6 of those that said they had applied for the leadership course for the NEA points. Many of these activities had been completed before the advent of the NEA. These results indicate that the majority of the respondents possessed the desire to extend themselves.

At the same time, it appeared that the NEA points did encourage participation in extra-curricular activity but that it was already active students who were encouraged. These students did respond to institutional recognition of their efforts and achievements and feel encouraged to do more. This may suggest that this type of encouragement promotes student engagement in the full university experience which is known to have a positive impact on retention (Nagda, Gregerman, Jonides, von Hippel, & Lerner, 1998; National Resource Centre for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2001; Tinto, 1993).

What do students gain from participation in the Leadership Program?

The students were asked what they thought were the most important things they had learned in the Program. All the respondents (n=12) gave positive answers with more about various skills and attributes that they felt had been enhanced than actual leadership ability per se. There were ten mentions of development of skills and attributes; nine mentions of personal

qualities; and seven mentions of leadership skills. In separate questions the students were asked if their leadership skills had been enhanced and if they thought they had developed personally and professionally through the course.

Out of ten comments about skills developed as a result of participation in the program, eight were about communication and interpersonal skills, such as:

- *Effective communication is essential to leadership;* and
- *Leadership skills such as conflict resolution and communication skills.*

The other two were:

- *Time management skills;* and
- *Building on my multi-skilling and prioritising abilities.*

There were nine responses to the question about what was learned through the program about personal qualities, three of which specified increased confidence, such as:

- *Further confidence in my abilities to lead and make decisions that will affect others.*

The remainder were about having gained a heightened understanding of human nature and social responsibility. For example:

- *Everyone has different personality traits and leadership styles, not necessarily bad. However, people with the same traits, etc, may work better together. This was particularly important for me as I have decided I may want to work in the human resources side of management;* and
- *The importance of relationship building in leadership. The importance of people's value systems. How I can change myself to be a better leader.*

There were seven responses to the question about what was learned that specified leadership skills without any further information and one response from a future teacher that reflected her thinking about leadership in the classroom:

- *I need to model leadership to develop leadership in my students. Leadership is about working with people.*

The students were asked if the course had enhanced their leadership skills. Again they gave the most answers about increased skills, particularly communication and interpersonal skills, followed by feelings of increased confidence, assertiveness and also empathy. Typical responses about skills development were:

- *I now work harder at communication with others;*
- *I know positive ways in which to interact within a team in order to complete a set task;*
- *I am more equipped to manage time, resources and the delegation of duties;* and
- *It made me realise how you present the information can impact (*on*) the way the message is received. It greatly improved my public speaking ability.*

About increased confidence typical responses were*:*

- *Confidence is an undeniable asset when speaking to others and trying to gain their respect and confidence in your ability to lead and make decisions;* and
- *Building more confidence in me to step up to leadership more often.*

Students also said:

- *I now try to be more assertive;* and
- *I am more empathetic,* in answer to this question.

When asked how they developed personally and professionally through the Leadership Program students gave more responses about personal development, particularly in relation to increased confidence about their communication and interpersonal skills. Of the eighteen examples given by students, the following are a sample*:*

- *I became more confident when working in a group situation;*
- *I realised I need to continually communicate with people as a leader and understand their view;*
- *More aware of the consequences of my actions;* and
- *Deeper understanding of my own strengths/weaknesses. Deeper appreciation for my intimate relationships. New found outlook on life and optimism for the future.*

There were seven responses to this question about professional development as a result of the Leadership Program, such as:

- *I have a better understanding of how to work with others on a more professional level;* and
- *I don't hesitate to mention it when applying for jobs.*

The Leadership Program participants were required to write an assignment in which they reflected on the success of their past and current leadership activities and also to present a twelve month plan for their own personal leadership development. They were also required to present an audiovisual presentation summarising what they gained from the course, their own ideas about the attributes of good leader and an overview of their own leadership development plan. The participants were asked what value they had derived from these activities. Most of the answers were about the value of thinking about the future and setting goals. For example:

- *It made me actually plan and develop a strategy to further develop personal skills;*
- *This required me to set goals for the future, having something to strive for;*
- *More clarity about my future. An understanding about my present life situation. Personal satisfaction from having shared my ideas with other potential leaders;* and
- *Speaking about my leadership plans I gained reassurance from my audience. I was required to think and organise goals. I was required to formalise and set these plans for the future.*

The second most frequent response was about the opportunity to practise their communication skills, such as:

- *It provided another opportunity to develop public speaking skills;* and
- *Testing my communication skills at the end in front of people that had become my friends was great because I felt if I couldn't do it in front of them I wouldn't be able to do it all.*

Others said that they felt more positive and confident about their leadership ability as a result of the Leadership Program assignment. For example:

- *Telling other people my plans made them seem more real, and also made me realise that it was possible to achieve them*;
- *I realised that I am committed to achieving a leadership role;* and
- *Being asked what I intended to do after completing the course and after completing uni, made me think what I actually wanted to do with my life.*

Conclusion

The Leadership Program participants gained skills such as communication, conflict resolution, time management, the ability to prioritise and interpersonal skills; and enhanced personal qualities such as confidence, assertiveness, empathy, optimism, social responsibility, self knowledge, personal goalsetting and improved understanding of human nature. These are typical of the types of personal attributes, attitudes and human qualities being increasingly expounded in the graduate attribute literature (Barnett, 2004; Barrie, 2005; Rooke, 2003).

The students reportedly participated in the Leadership Program to develop themselves personally and professionally. While half of them cited the availability of NEA points it appeared that the majority of the respondents also possessed the desire to extend and challenge themselves and possessed a degree of altruism. The influence of the availability of NEA points was more that it encouraged participation amongst already active students. However, it was found that active and involved students did respond to institutional recognition of their efforts and achievements and saw the NEA as further incentive to get involved and become active citizens in their communities.

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