
This is the postprint version.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Higher Education Research and Development in 2009, available at: http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/07294360903067021

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Teaching and Learning Centres: Towards Maturation

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Abstract
Approximately 70% of Australian Teaching and Learning Centres have been restructured and/or have undergone leadership changes in the last three years. The volatility of this environment reflects the number of significant challenges faced by Teaching and Learning Centres. In determining what makes Centres successful, the issues that are likely to impact on their ability to succeed were examined. It emerged that a myriad of factors influence whether or not a Centre was recognised as being an integral and valued part of the university’s teaching and learning community - a hallmark of having reached maturity. This paper identifies four factors as being critical to the ability of Centres to succeed, noting that a combination of other factors, appropriate to each unique context, must also be in place in order for Centres to maximise their value.

Introduction
The paper is based on research supported by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council as part of a study of Australian Teaching and Learning Centres to identify common factors that contribute to the effective strategic leadership of Centres to enhance long-term learning and teaching performance. The paper draws on two sources of empirical data: interviews and a survey.

Interviews: In the first quarter of 2008, 37 60-90 minute ‘on the record’ face-to-face interviews were conducted at six Australian universities. The interviews were transcribed and authorised. Those interviewed were directors and senior staff of Centres, faculty staff with responsibility for teaching and learning and members of the university executive with similar responsibilities. Interviewees were given a randomly generated number from 001-100 and for ethical reasons generic terms (e.g. DVC) have been used. For ready identification, interviewees’ comments are italicised.

The survey: An online survey was opened to all directors, or equivalent, of Australian university Centres for Teaching and Learning in the fourth quarter of 2008. 31 responses (81.5%) were received from the 38 surveys sent. This is a highly satisfactory response that compares very favourably with earlier similar surveys (Gosling, 2008a and 2008b) and allows conclusions to be drawn with a reasonable degree of confidence that they are representative of the sector. Moreover, and in contrast to Gosling’s reported experience (Gosling, 2008a, p1), 30 of the 31 completed the entire survey. In this paper, the survey data have primarily been used to set a context and assist in identifying and confirming the existence of common themes which have emerged from the interviews. A future paper will present a full analysis of the survey data.

The concept of maturation: The Australian Oxford Dictionary (2004, p788) defines ‘mature’ as “with fully developed powers ... complete in natural development”. Probably the most important indicator of maturation and, hence, success for any Centre is the extent to which it is seen as the obvious place to go for any matters pertaining to teaching and learning. Likewise, fully evolved Centres will be consulted regarding the development of policies and will be represented on relevant committees. Centres will be “Not just part of the furniture, but an essential part of the furniture - ... the first port of call, the obvious place” [47]. This point was explicitly discussed with several interviewees and, without exception, they concurred that this ‘absolutely’ was a telling indicator of success – where the Centre is “automatically thought of
as the first or next stop when looking at a particular issue” [53]; where there is “automatic inclusion” [62] with a “taken for grantedness” for the Centre, and the Centre and its practices are “integrated into the fabric of the University” [25].

**Perceived critical factors:** To be a valued and integral part of the university’s community and its teaching and learning is highly reliant on a myriad of factors working synergistically and productively (Taylor, 2005). Of these, four have been discerned as being especially important:

- The strategic leadership of the relevant members of the executive and the Centre director in terms of setting an appropriate and realisable role and direction
- A shared understanding and appreciation of the role and purposes of the Centre
- The capacity and capability of the Centre to fulfil its role and achieve its purposes
- The ability of the Centre to demonstrate its value

While discussed separately below, each, in itself, is a complex interrelated point, illustrative of the complexities involved.

**Critical factors**

**(1) The strategic leadership of the executive and the Centre director**

Staff at each of the six institutions selected for interview expressed the view that the Centres did not, themselves, set their mandate. Rather, the Centre’s purpose is to do “what the organisation asks of it” [16]; “[to] facilitate how things are done but not themselves be the drivers of what is done” [80]; “[The DVC] needs to sit down and adequately identify what is the role of the Centre” [04]. Hence it was a common view that their success was judged, ultimately, by those who, as members of a university’s Senior Executive, had authority and oversight and, who, by their expectations, also set the context in which they would be judged:

> I suppose the ultimate judge of our performance is [senior person named] and the Vice Chancellor’s group. So we’re accountable to them, they have expectations of what a Centre like this will do, what it will focus on, what results it will have and it’s up to us, as much as possible, to demonstrate where we think we are achieving those things [84].

Consequently, while individual Centre staff can have exceptionally good relationships and outcomes with individual faculty staff members, it is the perceptions of those “at the top end of strategic leadership” [56] that, in the final analysis, count for most, albeit informed by feedback from and consultation with the broader university community. When Centres report directly to a DVC, as Gosling (2008a, p9) claims, they “are critically dependent on the approval of their line managers”.

The symbiotic nature of the relationship of Centres with senior management (most especially the DVC Academic/Teaching & Learning), was readily apparent to Centre directors and their staff:

> What you can do, the extent to which you’ll be resourced, the extent to which you are able to influence within an institution, the extent to which you are able to build what I would call robust connections to the faculties, to the academic units themselves, very much depends on the conception and understanding and support that you get from that central executive management structure [25].
And, at another University, where there was perceived strong alignment between the Senior Executive and the Centre:

*One of the things I think is very much in our favour at the moment in achieving what we want is the support of the Vice Chancellor and the Deputy Vice Chancellor. I mean that’s palpable and very strong. And I think without that you can’t do anything [35].*

*I feel my vision is very valued so I believe that what I’m doing is endorsed and appreciated and very positively valued. … But who knows. To be very honest, one could have a very different Senior Executive come along who didn’t value teaching and learning at all and I might get nowhere [87].*

As illustrated by such comments, the issue is made more complex by the frequent leadership changes within the sector with the survey revealing that the average Centre would have been restructured in the previous one to three years. 70% are less than three years old and a further 13% face imminent restructure. These data are even more pronounced than Gosling’s (2008a) recent study of Australian Centres, where 10 of the 19 responses indicated the Centre had existed in its present form for five years or less. The reality for the sector is that

*Centres for Teaching and Learning have — seem to have — in the way that universities are being run over the years, an inbuilt instability so that they have been dissolved, reconstituted, set to different purposes, aligned with various other parts of the University or not aligned with other parts of the University and I think that builds into them, that kind of instability [35].*

Hence, the identified purposes and direction of even a year ago may not necessarily be relevant to a Centre’s ‘current iteration’ [25]. Comments such as “Really the sort of direction I want to move in is quite a different direction from how the Centre was initially set up and as I said I want to change that” [30] may be indicative of a willingness to acknowledge a rapidly changing landscape but frequent changes result in confusion and uncertainty within the broader community as faculty staff struggle to adapt and there is a tendency for confidence in the Centre to be lost. Not surprisingly, survey respondents saw incorrect and outdated perceptions of the role and functions of their Centres to be a significant constraint. The confusion and the struggle to achieve an accepted identity are compounded by the fact that changing direction frequently results in change of names for Centres. Further, there is also an acknowledged tendency for newly constituted Centres ‘like new governments’ to deliberately chart different directions from their predecessors, so “overturning … wanting to leave some of the past behind” [35].

Centres within universities where staff can say “I think that we’ve lost our way a little bit, we don’t know who we are, we don’t know who we want to be and that’s probably more important…” [54] are a long way from maturation. In contrast, where the change of personnel at senior level is seen as highly positive and generative, with a strengthened relationship between the Senior Executive and the Centre, the Centre is far more strongly positioned to meet, or even exceed, its goals. For a Centre to be successful, it is important that it has a clear focus, structure and role so that these can be communicated effectively across the university:

*I think with a more central focus on the University, it’s had the opportunity now to communicate what it does a bit more effectively to show some strategic leadership …. Once you have a change at the top [that makes clear decisions] … those changes have actually made a big difference [09].*

However, the ambitions of the person in charge at the executive level will shape those goals and agendas and, where there are frequent personnel changes, this can mean that directions change. Hence it is incumbent on successful Centres to be attuned to these political realities:
A Centre’s success can be just a simple matter if your political master is happy ... If [through ambition] they’re always going somewhere next they’ll always be somebody coming in new ... which means they’re always wanting to do something different because they want to rebuild the organisation in their image and their eyes to do what they feel it should be doing [56].

Centres cannot afford to disregard internal personal politics that are “inevitable anywhere [but] in some places more entrenched than others” [04]. Moreover, with frequent changes of senior personnel and the often perceived need for quick demonstration of impact, time is not something most Centres have on their side:

Changing culture is a very slow process. ... Even if we’re capable of achieving it, the time it will take to achieve it is something that will act as a restriction on the Centre for some time to come [55].

Centre directors and their staff are not the only ones who face problems as they attempt to change cultures and practices. It would be naive to conclude that Senior Executive members, while having considerable authority, will inevitably be able to influence their institution’s teaching and learning in the ways they desire. Problems they faced were quite candidly revealed by such statements as:

They [a senior group of staff] can play games with their DVC and [senior person named] who has made a decision they’re not going to try and take them on, because it’ll create too much political tension within the organisation [68].

Universities are incredibly slow, conservative creatures. ... Academics regard themselves as sort of at the forefront of creativity and social change. They are the most conservative... Trying to get universities to embrace new ideas ... first of all someone's had it already and secondly, it didn't work. That's academics [59].

It is important to note that the survey revealed considerable volatility within the Centres, themselves. The mean duration of the incumbency of the director of a Centre in its current configuration is between one and three years and the total directorship experience of a current Centre director is the same. Moreover, more than a quarter of all Centres have an interim/acting director. It is highly significant also that, within the space of three months from when the interviews were conducted, half of those interviewed (19 of the 37) were in a different role. Only one university reported no changes in this period and the rest had between two and seven. This seems a consistent trend (Gosling, 2008a, p2). If, as an interviewee claimed, success for Teaching and Learning Centres “is as much about the vision and capability of senior staff, as it is about structure” [68], then frequent staff changes at senior level will have considerable impact on those whose roles – and hence their influence and effectiveness – are so tightly aligned to them.

Our research indicates that the volatility of leadership, with the consequent implications outlined above, is a major reason that many Centres struggle to reach maturation.

(2) A shared understanding and appreciation of the role and purposes of the Centre

Centres work within a complex and often contested environment. This is partly due to the evolution of the ‘enterprise university’ with its new forms of organisation, methods and values that align more with the private sector and economic consumption than the traditional public sector culture (Marginson & Considine, 2000). As Blackmore & Blackwell (2006, p376) pointed out, Centres often play a mediating role between the ‘realities of institutional life’ (arising from the policies of the Executive) and the traditional beliefs and values of academic staff. Centres perform multiple, interrelated roles including building capacity in people and
curriculum, integrating IT and developing the careers of academic staff (Taylor, 2005). Such a context militates against a common view of a Centre’s purpose.

Those interviewed were asked to respond to the following articulation of the purposes of Teaching and Learning Centres:

- maintaining a corporate memory of, and sustained engagement in, the issues and innovations in teaching in higher education;
- engaging in comprehensive and systematic implementation of teaching and learning initiatives;
- creating and facilitating communities of learning involved in the iterative and dynamic top-down/bottom-up engagement and management of educational initiatives;
- investigating, articulating and disseminating scholarship in (and on) teaching, learning and education development (Chalmers & O’Brien, 2005, p51).

While there was broad acceptance of the points being made, there were concerns that exposed fundamental differences and tensions even within this select group. The main concerns were that this articulation:

(a) overstates the role of Centres: these purposes have merit but they are not the sole prerogative of Centres
(b) lacks a sense of service and the operational and
(c) omits critical dimensions, especially professional development and students.

A contentious issue is the extent to which Centre staff should be engaged in academic and scholarly activities (Dow, 2007; Havnes & Stensaker, 2006). Concerns were expressed about the relevance and hence perceived usefulness for faculty staff of the research undertaken: “They did scholarship of relevance to themselves rather than something I could rely on them doing the research and coming back to me with some informed ideas” [34]. Even where it was acknowledged that the Centre should take the leading role regarding researching teaching and learning, Associate Deans stressed the need to do this in conjunction with the faculties and it was recognised this was neither easy nor straightforward to achieve:

"I think the Centre has to be the leader, has to be seen to be creating new knowledge about teaching and learning and somehow working with us to produce that. But not just writing papers in isolation and behaving as an enclosed professional group. Very tricky…" [12].

For at least one Director, a perceived emphasis on scholarly activities can be dangerous and deflect staff from their real work:

"Centres that sit around and simply have grand thoughts become quickly irrelevant…. The Centre here is actively involved in the day to day activities of the University. It’s not a group of people who will sit around and prognosticate about things that are irrelevant to the day to day activities" [24].

The interviews revealed, however, a growing awareness of the need for Centres to be actively involved in such activities. Hence this is becoming an increasingly important indicator of their leadership role, and of their maturation (Blackmore & Blackwell, 2006). However, such scholarly activities need to be demonstrably aligned to the university and its Centre’s agendas.

An issue that was widely canvassed during the interviews was the extent to which there was a shared understanding of the purposes of the various Centres. The survey responses ranked
inadequate sense of a shared direction/purpose for the Centre as the eighth most important constraint. It is very telling that not one person interviewed thought with confidence that there was a shared understanding of purpose and the majority quickly rejected the notion, expressing concerns that the differences in perceptions were “quite troubling” [12]. Where the Centre was going through marked and largely unresolved change it is more understandable that “probably at the moment they wouldn’t have a clue, because nobody does” [04]. It is also reasonable that there would be “a mixed reaction depending on who you spoke to, how long they have been here and what their interactions have been with the Centre” [81]. However, for the Centre Director at that University:

   No [there is no shared view]. One of our problems is, actually a University-wide problem that [different] areas of University don’t communicate. We don’t have a way of communicating effectively what we do and I would imagine that perhaps even internally, not everyone’s as aware as they should be ... [50].

Unless staff use the services offered by the Centre, with these services visible and attractive, the Centre will remain peripheral and largely unknown:

   ... there is also a great suspicion amongst the academics. It is sort of ‘them’ and ‘us’ and they’ll say, “We don’t know what the Centre does”. The reason they don’t know is because they’ve [the Centre] never done anything that really has any impact on the particular individuals that you’d ask [19].

For Centres, then, to be widely perceived as successful, it is not enough for them to have definite roles and directions with constructive synergy between the Centre and senior management. These initiatives need to be viewed as appropriate and valued by the faculties (Taylor, 2005). Faculty staff interviewed concurred with Knight (2006) that the route to such acceptance is through strong connectivity: “They [the Centre] can do that [be engaged in issues and innovation in teaching and learning] but unless that’s somehow linked to the faculty it’s not meaningful for me. That’s seen to be distinct from what I do” [72]; “It isn’t going to work in a vacuum. It has to be innovations grounded in the disciplinary knowledge of the faculties or the professional stories of the faculties. So somehow that link has still got to be there” [12]. Centre staff are cognisant of this:

   That [realisation of purposes] can only come with linking up with the faculties. So again it may be to do with our current incarnation but a handful of academic staff locked away in a bunker ... can’t have much systematic impact. That’s got to come through creating that leverage and engagement with people everywhere in the organisation [16].

Furthermore, “it’s hard for faculties alone to build those bridges” [12], so such alignments are of mutual benefit.

With support from the Faculty and executive in place, Centres are still faced with the challenge of achieving their goals if their resources are inadequate.

(3) The capacity and capability of the Centre to fulfil its role and achieve its purposes
Centres require both capacity (in terms of resources and opportunities) and capability (in terms of staffing expertise) to achieve success. The survey responses indicate that, while Centre directors saw a reasonable alignment between capacity and capability, staff expertise was always more highly rated than resources and opportunities. The Associate Deans interviewed
from five of the six institutions, while generally agreeing with the purposes for Centres listed
above, expressed doubts that Centre’s staff can meet such agendas and Centre staff at each
institution shared their reservations. It is noteworthy and significant that some staff
interviewed at senior level expressed reservations and concerns about their uncertainty in
addressing the issue of the capacity and capability of staff in their Centres:

I think there are enough people. Whether they are the right people, and I’m not talking about
their individual skills. I mean whether we’ve got the right mix of people. ... But I really don’t
know and it worries me that I don’t know [30].

Really, truly I can’t answer the question because it’s really not clear what that Centre is meant
to deliver among the needs of the University and I believe there are a variety of perceptions of
what it ought to deliver [to meet] the needs of the University. Sometimes the answer’s “Yes”
and sometimes it’s “No”... I would like it to be clearer. I believe it should be clearer [51].

The one institution where it was felt by the DVC that the capacity was “absolutely” there had
the second most staff (“Between 35 and 40. I’ve lost count” [87]). However, while number is
important it is, again, tied to the purposes and expectations of a Centre. For a second large
Centre (50 plus staff) there was a view that it was too large, too dispersed, and the Director
believed it would be more effective if it were “smaller and more compact” [50].

There also needs to be an acknowledgement that the Centre staff have skills that are needed by
the institution. The Associate Deans, in particular, indicated that named individuals were
highly valued for their contributions. Almost invariably, these were related to discrete specific
projects. For staff to make such contributions it is essential that they are given opportunities
through strong alignments with the Senior Executive and the faculties and that directors are
able to get their staff to work together productively – “getting people to move into a culture of
working as a team is another challenge” [79] – and they support their staff and help them gain
in confidence so they can contribute more. Directors also face challenges in attracting the
‘right’ people to Centres when there is a shared perception of very limited career opportunities
or that the location is a disincentive.

Where Associate Deans look to their Centre “to demonstrate its value to the average academic
at the coal face to a much greater degree than what I think they are currently doing or able to
do” [62], as it is doubtful that any Centre has the capacity to work with many staff individually
it is critical that Centres can convince faculty staff that it is more effective to work with groups:

We have to move to facilitation of groups, working parties, training in groups, developing
resources, guidelines, that sort of thing ... because we don’t have enough staff to actually do the
one-on-one. In the past a lot of money has gone into one-on-one developments and certain
groups have got a lot of money and we’ve helped them develop lots of great things but they
haven’t necessarily been translated across a whole faculty [27].

Faculty staff do not necessarily understand the capacity of their Centres and can be unforgiving
when they feel their needs were not met at the time they needed: “I knocked on that door twice
and they weren’t there. I’m not going back there. I’ll go to another door” [53].

There needs to be a willingness by faculty staff to be open to what Centres can offer. This can
be difficult because “academics being very creative people and people who believe in their
own skills as they should, many believe they don’t need it, OK, and therefore they feel this is
an imposition” [65]. The challenge is possibly insurmountable where the view is that Centres
are involved in “The sort of dispensing of gratuitous advice from people who hadn’t actually
been doing it for a long time and some of whom you thought were there because it’s a way of
getting out of actually doing it” [59], or the Centre is something that the university “has put
together to seem to be doing something in that area” [53]. The challenge may well be met when strategies such as joint projects and joint appointments are put in place in recognition that engaging with faculty teaching staff without authentic classroom and online experience is likely to be difficult.

Where capacity is demonstrably lacking, working closely with the faculties becomes not only desirable but an imperative:

*Because there’s so few people in that Centre we have to also have resources and people in the faculties. ... It can’t just be the Centre that holds that corporate memory and strategic direction but we have to challenge and lead, be the people that are up there with the latest developments in learning and teaching. We also had to be able to use the expertise of the academics in the various faculties in that area as well [27].*

Although, as Gosling’s study also found (2008a), working closely with the faculties allows a Centre to ‘consolidate’ what it does, there is a risk that Centres can then be by-passed: “*The danger is that they spin off and become their own little Centres and you get fragmentation. That's a real threat*” [50]. The answer, for this Centre Director, is keep the connection strong, to be

*... relevant and directly supportive and again, with a centralised teaching system, then those people need to work with us, because we control the environment, the teaching and learning environment, the resources [50].*

Also, there is an iterative relationship between what the Centre is required to do and then its capacity to achieve this [39]. If there is a significant change of direction and/or increased demands without increased capacity, this will seriously impact on its ability to deliver and also the perceptions of staff both within and outside of the Centre:

*As the funding was reduced, staff were put in and expected to do the same and no funding mechanism has yet been put in that recognises the growth that happens every year on the demands on the services [27].*

Resourcing, so closely tied to capacity, is largely influenced by the degree to which the Centre has the support of those who allocate its funding. This is a somewhat circular argument for funding may also be tied to demonstrating achievements – “our budget’s tiny but I think if we could demonstrate really, really, really good outcomes we’d probably attract more money” [79] – and this, in turn, is tied to teaching and learning being highly valued.

*Centres are of intrinsic worth, not because of what they earn. ... So it’s a decision about... strategic priorities. If your priority is to be improving in these areas, there are certain things one must do and one of them is budget [65].*

Where there is uncertainty that teaching and learning are highly valued, the work of Centres “could be significantly undermined because there won’t be the money; therefore there won’t be the staff available to do the work” [81]. Centres who must “bid for strategic funding each year” are more at “the whims of whatever the strategic imperatives are at that time” and so directors must “cut what you can do with the resources that you’ve got” [84]. Uncertain funding impacts on longer term vision:

*You can only really plan for your key ongoing budgeted salaried staff. Everyone else could be gone at the stroke of a budget cutback, type thing. So it really constrains what you can envision for the Centre doing because you’ve only got this ridiculously small core of ongoing resources [16].*
Centres that are “overburdened by procedural work ... pulled in different directions [and] “given unrealistic deadlines” coupled with “unrealistic resources” [52] also struggle to achieve their purposes. If the essence of the work is construed as “very fire fighting” [18] and decisions are not made to work in agreed priority areas it is less likely that strategic purposes will be achieved. But, again, resourcing is not a separate issue and, as staff recognised, achieving these strategic purposes is tied to deploying resources strategically.

The Centre that has the capacity and capability to achieve its agreed goals is approaching maturity. However, there is still one last factor critical to their success and this involves having an ability to demonstrate value and being able to manage perceptions effectively.

(4) The ability of the Centre to demonstrate its value
Teaching and Learning Centres tend to rely on persuasion, rather than direct authority, as they work with staff of their universities to improve teaching and learning. They are rarely directly responsible in isolation for such endeavours and they are often one interested party or, more frequently, several stages removed from the teaching and learning that they may influence but do not deliver.

Although there was some acknowledgement that any Centre was but part of the equation – being “only one component of that experience, [having] only one element of the influence on that experience” [30] – for one Director, at least, there was frustration in the realisation that, if the Centre they led was to be judged on stated key performance indicators, then “I don’t actually control any of them” [50]. Cognisant of this point, another Centre Director argued that, while it was important to judge the success of Centres through their impact, that “level of impact needs to be assessed at various levels of proximity to the Centre” [25]. A similar point was made by a Centre staff member at another University:

... at another level we're not where the action's at. The systematic implementation is at program level and course level. And we're so far removed from it because it's such a large organisation. The Centre can't be out there directly engaging. It can be at a level of framework, policy, some resources that might have wide use, but the use and relevance of those would actually be determined at the local level [68].

A further difficulty for Centres is that quite often the work they do is necessarily behind the scene. Examples were given of Centre staff ‘rescuing’ senior members – ‘sorting it out for them’ – and in instances such as that:

... there’s a lot of that leadership from behind, softly, softly. X [person named] probably doesn’t even know that we did some rescue for him. It’s like we do a lot of that stuff quietly. You don’t expect to be recognised particularly for it [18].

Centre staff may recognise the advantages that accrue from working this way, but also that they, and hence their Centre, are not necessarily acknowledged for this work by the broader university community:

It’s good in the sense that they [DVC] take ownership and they’re seen and it’s their policy, and we’ve just done a huge amount of work to get it to them in a form which they’re comfortable with. If I had got up at Academic Board, and I’d been the one promoting it and pushing it through as much as I possibly could, number one, it wouldn’t have got through necessarily; number two, my profile would have been greater [68].

Taking ownership of policy that is not popular can mean a Centre can demonstrate impact but this can be very damaging to its reputation:
... in the past, the Centre has ended up effectively being a policy maker and a policeman, doing that sort of stuff and interfering and directing where the University goes, because that's where the knowledge was and there wasn't the leadership from above. Now, that left the Centre in a really exposed position. It didn't have the right and it was interfering in things and so there are academics who, to a certain extent, justifiably, felt that Centre was exercising authority and influence that it had no right to do and there were some real problems [50].

Internal politics can also influence how Centres are judged. If, for example, Centres have an important role in the evaluation of key university initiatives, their efficacy can be jeopardised when, irrespective of the quality of the work, this is not valued ‘at the top’: “I think politically at a level it becomes highly selective or almost there is a corporate amnesia. I mean there is no interest, no desire” [56]. As Gosling (2008a, p9) recognises, the close relationships with DVCs discussed above “may also expose [Centres] to more direct manipulation by their senior managers”. There were some compelling instances where senior management, and, consequently, Centre directors, took Centres along pathways that were, ultimately, rejected by the broader university community and, consequently, the Centre’s reputation was seriously eroded. Further, there is dialectic and sometimes a disjuncture between how the Centre is perceived within the institution, how it acts in reality, and how it wishes to be perceived and act (Havnes & Stensaker, 2006).

Demonstrating impact is highly contingent on the perceptions as to what is important of those who judge a Centre’s success. It seems axiomatic that Centres will be best positioned to achieve success when they have a very clear idea of how they will be judged. If, as discussed above, the final arbiter of a Centre’s success is the relevant DVC, as the following comment suggests it is feedback from the broader university community, especially the faculties, that will provide the evidence.

I will judge the Centre as successful if it has continued to provide the kind of quality of service that it has to individual staff members who want to be better connected with issues or as things in higher education than they otherwise would be. I don’t have high numerical requirements on that [51].

The important element, here, is that Centres are fully aware of how they will be judged and, because of their differing environments and circumstances, this will inevitably differ in terms of emphasis, if not in substantive broad elements related to teaching and learning. At another institution, for instance, the Centre Director believes that their success will be demonstrated when

Advice will be sought from us because we’ll be seen as a Centre in this University that is doing a good job and others will want to know about us and how we do it to seek advice from us [87].

For another interviewee [47], that advice is not restricted to the university but the Centre’s leadership and reputation are evidenced when it is acknowledged nationally and internationally by requests for collaboration and informed comment.

Demonstrating value can be problematic when the measures are uncertain or when what is being judged is intangible. Centres do not work in a closed environment and it is useful for Centres to monitor their progress and be aware of any impediments:

It’s pointless just focusing on measuring systems when the key business is learning, teaching and research. It’s actually making clear what you’re wanting to achieve over the next couple of years, making sure that that’s aligned to the planning process for those support groups so it becomes integrated in their program of work, ... We need to monitor and actually see progress. And if, for some reason, there is a genuine blockage or reason then at least we know when it happens [97].

11
Moreover, and central to thesis of inclusivity being a hallmark of maturation, Centres have to be given the opportunity to demonstrate value:

We [previously] weren’t able to participate. We were never invited. In fact we were deliberately excluded from central committees and various committees related to learning and teaching. So while we might be working on something to do with graduate capabilities and policy was being made elsewhere or thought about elsewhere, we were never invited to be part of that [25].

Conclusion
As this discussion has demonstrated, a formulaic approach to identifying the factors likely to cause success for Centres is unrealistic. While some common denominators can be ascertained, it is the combination of factors within a specific environment that is decisive. What this discussion has attempted to achieve is to raise awareness of the sorts of issues that are likely to have decisive impact on how Centres are conceptualised, organised and deliver services designed to enhance teaching and learning. As this discussion has also revealed, how Centres will be judged is highly contingent on the environment in which they are placed and the expectations of senior management and faculty staff. Centres will be, understandably, at different stages on the continuum from embryonic to mature and, while it is instructive to consider the likely elements of a mature Centre, the overriding concern is for Centres to maximise their value within their context.

Effective strategic leadership involves relevant members of the Executive and the Centre director working together to set directions and establish roles which will be valued by the university community. Effective management ensures that the Centre has the capacity and capability to deliver on these agendas. Ideally, Centres are composed of “an amazing group of people … working in a total sort of synergy with the senior management” and the Centre, itself, is “the hub and focus and the home [where] people can feel sustained, supported and allowed to develop to create the change that you’re trying to do” [36]. Doors are open for them to contribute their specialist skills and expertise in ways that readily demonstrate their value for their institutions and the sector.

While there were instances where faculty staff regarded Centres as peripheral, it is significant, and encouraging, that current directors consider their Centres are generally well included in relevant university committees and other activities, the perceived most important indicator of maturation. On a scale of 0 (none) to 20 (always) being consulted, the mean scale rating of the 31 survey respondents was a high 17.6 and seven claimed total involvement, selecting ‘20’. Every Centre director considered their Centre was more likely to be routinely included than not.

Arguably, the role of Centres is integrally related to the perceptions of the Senior Executive staff member most responsible for teaching and learning. As there are frequent changes in key personnel, the agendas for Centres also change. The volatility within the sector has been a consistent trend and our research indicates it is becoming even more pronounced. We concur with Gosling (2008a & b) that a probable principal reason for this is a lack of clarity regarding the core business of such Centres and the contested nature of academic development. Again, this is a somewhat circular argument because it is the lack of a shared understanding and purpose that strongly contributes to disaffection leading, in turn, to restructuring and personnel changes. This may well be the biggest challenge for Centres as they strive to develop a profile
and gain recognition within and beyond their institutions: “Really we have a lot to be proud of and we’re not always getting the message out to the world” [65].

Acknowledgements
The authors wish to thank their own University (Deakin) and the partner institutions (Macquarie University, Monash University, RMIT University, University of New England, University of Newcastle) for their generous contribution to this project as well as all those staff from the 31 Australian universities who completed the survey.

Support for this publication has been provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd, an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd.

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