Strategic leadership of teaching and learning Centres: from reality to ideal

This paper reports on the third phase of a study of Australian teaching and learning Centres to identify factors that contribute to the effective strategic leadership of Centres. Focus groups at 10 Australian universities included 66 respondents, providing a diverse range of perspectives, from students to members of the university executive. Analysis of participant contributions extended findings from prior project phases and the wider literature. They also contributed to the final construction of the strategic leadership teaching and learning Centre maturity framework presented here. Centres remain in a state of flux, enduring regular reconfiguration. For most Centres, their level of interaction with students is low, and increased engagement with students would be of benefit. Perceptions of Centres vary widely, reinforcing the importance of a strategic partnership between the University’s Senior Executive, the Centre and faculties as a prerequisite for implementing identified high impact strategies for improvement in teaching and learning.

Keywords: teaching and learning centres; strategic leadership; focus group

Introduction
This paper is based on a research project supported by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) as part of a study of Australian teaching and learning Centres (hereafter ‘Centres’) to identify common factors that contribute to the effective strategic leadership of Centres to enhance long-term teaching and learning performance. In framing ‘strategic leadership’ we borrow from Viljoen & Dann (2003) and Blackmore & Blackwell (2006), in that we are primarily concerned with parties operating in central groups or interacting with them who have various degrees of formal authority and institutional influence and who are expected to enhance the long-term learning and teaching performance of an organisation. Strategic leadership suggests that strategic leaders have the capacity to set directions, identify, choose and implement activities which create compatibility between internal organisational strengths and the changing external environment within which the university operates. The paper reports on the third stage of data collection involving focus groups with a representative range of universities in Australian higher education. The findings
contributed to the formulation of the strategic leadership teaching and learning Centre framework designed to assist leaders in their longer term development, in identifying a range of strategies that can be implemented to address key areas of improvement and constraints, and in providing some forward-looking insights into desired future states for Centres.

**Research methodology**

The overall project was divided into three principal data collection phases and was undertaken within the framework of mixed methods research (Creswell, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). The purposeful choice of mixed method design allows for the collection of ‘multiple data using different strategies, approaches, and methods such that the resulting mixture or combination is likely to result in complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses’ (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 16). The first phase of project data collection involved structured interviews with five groups of key Centre stakeholders providing strategic leadership perspectives in a range of Australian tertiary institutions. The second phase of project data collection involved an online survey, which the Directors/Heads of Centres at the 38 (out of 39) Australian universities with an identifiable Centre were invited to complete. The third phase of the project data collection, described here, involved focus groups held at 10 of the 38 Australian universities with an identifiable Centre. The aims of the focus group phase were to:

1. further explore the key issues and critical factors for Centre success identified in the interviews conducted in phase one; and
(2) identify practical strategies for tackling the key constraints and desired areas of improvement for Centres that were identified in the survey conducted in phase two.

The third phase of project data collection involved conducting 60-90 minute facilitated and audio-recorded focus groups with a range of key stakeholders in the first quarter of 2009, including:

- university senior executive members with strategic leadership responsibility across the institution (DVC(A)/PVC or equivalent);
- Directors of Centres;
- a representative sample by discipline of faculty Associate Deans (Teaching and Learning) or equivalent – as senior teaching academics representing the views of academic staff in their faculty;
- senior operational leadership/managers in academic or general staff positions in central Centres;
- student representatives – wherever institutions could organise their participation; and
- additional institutional representatives nominated by the university.

In addition to five of the original university sites that participated in the phase one interviews, five additional university sites were included in the focus group phase to expand the representativeness of the data collection sample.

The focus groups were structured around four activities.
(1) A method used to stimulate reflection and discussion in the focus groups was to ask participants to firstly describe their Centre as it currently stands using a single word or phrase, and to secondly describe their ‘ideal’ Centre using a single word or phrase. Each pair of descriptors was recorded, and group discussion was centred on congruence of responses in terms of the Centre now compared to the ideal, paying special attention to what the group perceived as ‘outlier’ perceptions and seeking explanations where there were apparent strong differences in perception.

(2) Focus group participants were provided with a sheet outlining the four previously identified factors critical for Centre success (de-identified for review, 2009), as shown in Figure 1. Participants were given a red pen to draw arrows to show the connections and relationships between the boxes, and otherwise annotate the figure as they wished, based on how things currently operate at their own institution. Participants were then given a blue pen to repeat the exercise, based on what should happen in an ‘ideal’ world.

(3) Participants were asked to discuss and record practical strategies for dealing with the key constraints (lack of time, outdated perceptions of the Centre, and insufficient resources) and key areas of desired improvement (provision of APD for casual and continuing staff, and for teaching and learning leaders), as identified previously (de-identified for review, 2010).

(4) Finally, participants were asked what they would wish for their Centre if they could be guaranteed of that one wish being granted within the next 12 months. The groups then discussed the ‘wishes’ identified.
All data collected from the focus groups were subjected to grounded theory-based thematic analysis (Goulding, 2002). Emergent themes were identified and evidence for their existence between and across respondent groups was collected. The following discussion, structured around the focus group activity sequencing, identifies key emergent themes, provides illustrations of these themes from the focus group data, and links these themes to previous findings from the project and the wider literature relating to teaching and learning Centres.

Participant demographic information
Appendix 1 provides a table of the 38 (out of 39) Australian universities with an identified Centre at the time of the project, classified according to the generally understood institutional groupings identified in Table 1. Table 1 cross-tabulates the number of representatives of each of the institutional groupings that participated in the focus group phase of the project with their stakeholder roles. A total of 66 respondents participated in the focus group phase, providing a diverse range of

Figure 1. Four factors identified as critical for Centre success.
position and institutional perspectives to illuminate and enrich the project data collection. They were reasonably spread by positional category over all of the institutions involved. The careful selection of institutional and positional types aimed at providing useful views of the state of Centres in the sector.

Table 1. Numbers of stakeholders participating in focus groups by institutional group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Centre stakeholder role</th>
<th>Go8</th>
<th>ATN</th>
<th>IRU</th>
<th>NGU</th>
<th>NA</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DVC(A)/PVC or equivalent</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Centres</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Associate Dean (T&amp;L)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Centre staff</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student representative</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra nominated representative</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of staff</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of institutions</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Go8 = Group of Eight
ATN = Australian Technology Network
IRU = Innovative Research Universities
NGU = New Generation Universities
NA = Non-aligned

Findings and discussion

Describe your Centre – now and ideal
When asked to provide one word or phrase to describe their university’s Centre at the time of the focus group discussion, of the 63 individual responses it is noteworthy that
the largest coherent response group (almost one-third; 18 respondents) chose
descriptors such as ‘building’, ‘redefining’, ‘evolving’ and ‘developing’, indicating a
sense of flux and movement, with similar sentiments expressed by ‘under
construction’. Where the past tense was used, indicating a sense of completion, there
was still a sense of recent change, with ‘reshaped’ and where, for instance, a DVC(A)
chose ‘empowered’, that Centre’s Director chose ‘poised on the brink’. Perhaps
because they are viewed by the university executive as an organ for implementing
strategic initiatives relating to teaching and learning quality improvement (Brew,
2007), Centres seem to be prone to restructuring in continuing attempts to ‘get it right’
(Gray & Radloff, 2006). While by no means the only area of universities prone to
cyclical re-configuration, whatever the reason(s), frequent and widespread Centre
restructuring is reported internationally (Gosling, 2009a; Hart et al., 2005; Weimer,
2007). The same is true in Australia – in the national survey of Directors of Centres
that formed phase two of this project, respondents (Directors) were asked to indicate
when their Centre had last been restructured. It was observed that approximately 70
percent of respondent Centres were less than three years old in their current
configuration, with another 13 percent indicating an imminent planned restructure.
The mean Centre ‘age’ was somewhere between twelve months and three years.

When asked to describe their ideal Centre, it is noteworthy that language used
included modifiers such as ‘empowered’, ‘engaged’, ‘established’, ‘respected’,
‘valued’ and ‘integrated’. Such words suggest that participants tend to value what is
achieved and demonstrably in place above what is still emergent and developing.

When the descriptors of the Centre at the time of the discussion were analysed
there was no clearly negative descriptor from the executive and only one from a
Director (‘under a cloud’) with a further one from a member of another Centre
The negatives were more common with the Associate Deans with close to half choosing descriptors such as ‘aloof’, ‘distant’, ‘marginally effective’ and ‘peripheral support’. Despite this caveat, the bulk of descriptors were positive and, while the actual word(s) varied, most were seeing their Centres as ‘engaged’ and ‘supportive’. The descriptors of ‘ideal’ Centres were naturally all positive. When set alongside the descriptor of the reality, only one person (a Director) gave an identical response (‘aligned with university priorities’) with another two closely aligned (one based on enhancement and the other on collegiality and collaboration). The ‘ideal’ being conceptualised as a progression from the present became a discernible trend. Staff who felt their Centre was ‘strategic and policy focused’ looked for this to be ‘transformational’; a Centre that was described as ‘engaged’ would ideally be ‘visionary and truly leading edge’ and a ‘focused’ Centre would be ‘effective’. Those who were negative about their Centres tended to look at the converse when asked to describe their ideal. Hence a ‘distant’ Centre would be ‘active and visible’; a ‘complex’ Centre would be ‘cohesive’; a ‘fragile’ Centre would be ‘leading and purposeful’ and one offering ‘peripheral support’ would be ‘synergistic/integrated and responsive’. Two participants indicated a progression from ‘learning and teaching development/support’ to ‘integrated scholarly development/learning and teaching scholarship’.

The question provided a useful indicator of the extent to which staff within the same institution regarded their Centre similarly and then had similar views of what constituted their ideal. In this regard the Centre with the strongest commonality of response was recently reformed, had just returned from a retreat and the focus group was essentially (and atypically) comprised of Centre staff and hence it could reasonably be expected that participants would note ‘the commonality of where we
are’ and ‘the shared desire for greater recognition/acceptance’. The Centre closest to that in terms of commonality of views was partially reconstituted and so concurred that it ‘lacked role definition’ and was ‘marginally effective’. Participants at other institutions explicitly noted ‘unanimity on both the current state of the Centre and aspirations for a Centre’ and ‘the congruence amongst perceptions of the vision for the Centre shared by all participants’. However, there were instances where staff within a Centre had similar views but these were in marked contrast to those from staff outside the Centre. For instance, where the staff at one university saw their Centre as a ‘community builder’ an Associate Dean saw it as ‘distant’ and another as offering ‘peripheral support’. But, even here, other Associate Deans from the same university used positive descriptors such as ‘contributing’ and ‘supportive’, a strong indication that it is the individual experience of staff that is the telling factor as they draw conclusions about their Centres. The crucial importance, highly variable quality and sometimes ambivalent nature, of relationships between Centres and their stakeholders has been observed elsewhere (Gray & Radloff, 2006). The survey of Directors that preceded the focus group phase also illuminated the importance of relationships between the Centre and individual incumbents in teaching and learning leadership roles – a number of respondents (Directors) noted that relationships between the Centre and particular individual key institutional stakeholder positions vary widely in nature (from the constructive to the virtually non-existent) and depend significantly on the incumbents in those roles.

The group with the strongest shared view of Centres was those who knew least about them. Three of the four students chose words indicating this was their experience (‘unknown’, ‘mysterious’, and ‘confused’) with the fourth describing their Centre as a ‘moving target’. While it might be argued that the fundamental reason
Centres exist is to improve student learning, the link between Centre functions and the student experience is often indirect (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Gray & Radloff, 2006), with the emphasis being on improving teaching on the assumption that this will improve student learning (Prebble et al., 2005). It has been observed that, even though the scholarly rhetoric of learner-centeredness has developed in sophistication, direct consideration of students is often surprisingly absent from such work (Trigwell & Shale, 2004). In the survey of Directors that preceded the focus group phase, less than one third of Australian Centres reported any functions of direct support to students, though Centres may have indirect functions through administering and/or acting on student evaluation of teaching (SET) data or similar roles. Although many Centres do not link directly with students it is telling that for one student the main point from the discussion was the ‘perceived lack of clarity within [the] various sections of purpose/outcomes/resource requirements’. While it was disappointing that student representatives attended only four of the 10 focus groups, they made a marked contribution to the extent that the DVC(A) of one of these institutions saw ‘the utility of having student input’ as the most significant thing to have emerged from the discussion. At the other universities where students had participated in the session, a Centre Director was interested in seeking fuller student involvement in setting directions and a Deputy Director stressed the student’s suggestion of closer links between Centres and students.

Given that the known focus of this study was the strategic leadership of Centres, it is also noteworthy that ‘strategic’ was rarely used. As a descriptor of the current Centre, it was chosen by one DVC(A) but not selected by any Centre Director or Deputy with the only other references coming from two other Centre staff. Nor did this descriptor feature in the perceived ‘ideal’ Centre with again one DVC(A) from a
different university choosing this word, no member of Centres and but one Associate Dean. ‘Strategic’ was used very occasionally during the focus group discussion, although one Centre staff member claimed that the ‘quality of strategic leadership is the key’. Despite rare/occasional direct reference, for one Centre staff member the perceived value of the focus group discussion was ‘understanding better how strategic leadership is understood at my institution’ and, for a staff member outside the Centre and faculty structure, value came from gaining an understanding of the ‘importance of goal/position setting and leadership in setting purpose and strategic direction.

Given that participants chose to respond to the stimuli how they did, with the facilitator deliberately allowing each group and its cohort to interpret the activities and questions as they deemed appropriate, it is noteworthy that one DVC(A) felt the discussion was essentially a ‘recapitulation of a failing discourse’. For that person, attention needs to be given to the ‘failure’ of Centres ‘to change from voluntaristic and supplier driven to strategic remediation and reward’. Another DVC(A) considered that, for Centres to be viable, it was essential they made ‘a measurable difference to the quality and teaching outcomes in their home institution’.

Centre success - moving towards maturation
Through the activity based on annotating Figure 1 and the ensuing group discussion, focus group participants explored the relationships between the previously identified factors critical for Centre success. Analysis of these data sources, in conjunction with data from the interview phase of the project, led us to conclude that Centres can be viewed as existing on a developmental continuum that ranges from embryonic (when newly created or re-structured) to mature (when seen as a valued and integral part of the university’s community and its teaching and learning). While the four critical success factors might form a logical sequence of development, the process is not
necessarily a simple linear one. Rather, we view it as cyclical, with each success factor itself a complex interrelated point. We describe this developmental continuum as the strategic leadership teaching and learning Centre maturity framework, and visualise it in the form given in Figure 2.

![Figure 2. The strategic leadership teaching and learning Centre maturity framework.](image)

The environment can be seen as internal or external. The internal institutional environment is characterised by key factors such as strategic directions, staff capabilities and capacities, organisational climate, and alignments. The external environment is characterised by forces within the higher education sector and beyond it. As leaders change, as agendas are revised and as funding models recast, a Centre that could reasonably see itself as ‘mature’ can find that it is no longer pivotal to a university’s endeavours but increasingly marginalised. Given the volatility of Centres (Gosling, 2009b; de-identified for review, 2010), it is essential that leaders of Centres
are strategically aware and able to (re)position their Centres in terms of often quite rapidly changing situations. To do this, they need to be able to:

- ascertain the key questions that need to be answered by the appropriate people and identify and set in place the most effective and efficient ways of achieving this;
- ascertain who is responsible (and accountable) for each area/deliverable and ensure that this is understood and accepted;
- have systems and methods in place to ensure strong lines of communication across and between all relevant parties; and
- routinely monitor and report on the internal and external environments.

Centres will be, understandably, at different stages on the continuum from embryonic to mature and, while it is instructive to consider the likely characteristics of a mature Centre, the overriding concern is for Centres to maximise their value within their own current context.

It can be observed though that embryonic Centres may have undefined or ill-defined purposes, a lack of shared understanding of and commitment to any discerned purpose, limitations in resources, opportunities and skills required to achieve determined purposes, and be lacking in mechanisms to demonstrate performance. Mature or maturing Centres demonstrate clarify of purpose, a strong sense of shared understanding of purpose and broad commitment to the value of the purpose defined, good resources, opportunities and skills to pursue such purpose, and the capacity to demonstrate positive and valued outcomes. In summary, maturing Centres demonstrate strong understanding of each component in the strategic leadership framework, actively manage the alignments amongst these components, and astutely
capture, communicate and promote their achievements throughout the institution.

Leading change in Centres requires the establishment, maintenance and enhancement of each of these interrelated components through taking actions in various areas of relevance. Most pressingly, the study identified and has elaborated areas perceived as in need of greatest improvement and where the greatest constraints to Centre maturation were found, along with various lines of action or strategies to effect positive change. These are summarised in the following section.

Strategies for dealing with Centre constraints and areas of desired improvement
Focus group participants were asked to discuss and record practical strategies for dealing with the key constraints and key areas of desired improvement that were identified previously. The results presented here in Table 2 and Table 3 distil the deliberations and thinking on these questions from key Centre stakeholders in 10 Australian universities.

Table 2. Strategies for addressing identified key Centre constraints.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overcoming insufficient staff time in faculties to engage with Centre activities/initiatives and insufficient staff time in Centre to be effective in all the required areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Key stakeholders consulted regarding their needs to ensure that the programs and services offered by the Centre are relevant and likely to have an impact on learning and teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The institution’s expectations regarding staff participation in academic development programs and the importance of engaging with the Centre are clearly articulated to staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The design of Centre programs and services takes into account the limited amount of time available to staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The programs and services offered by the Centre have been designed with the end-user in mind</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overcoming incorrect or outdated general perceptions of the roles and functions of the Centre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• The purpose, roles and functions of the Centre have been determined and published</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Centre is consultative and works in harmony with other areas of the institution such as faculties, senior management and the student body.

The Centre has an effective communication strategy in place.

The Centre has a positive image, is viewed as a leader in teaching and learning and is respected by staff, students, senior management, faculties and administrative areas.

The Centre is seen as being accountable for achieving set goals over a period of time.

The Centre seeks to establish and maintain positive relationships with key stakeholders.

Overcoming insufficient resources being available to the Centre to allow it to have a significant impact:

- The Centre and faculties adopt a collaborative approach to the enhancement of teaching and learning, and program and service delivery.
- The Centre initiates communities of teaching and learning.
- The goal-setting process takes into account the capability and capacity of the Centre to deliver its programs and services.
- Staff who deliver programs and services on behalf of the Centre possess the appropriate skills and expertise.
- The Centre seeks out additional funding opportunities both internally and externally.

Table 3. Strategies for addressing desired areas of Centre improvement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Improving the provision of APD for casual/sessional and ongoing faculty teaching staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Improved teaching through engagement with the Centre’s programs and services contributes to career advancement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Staff actively participate in communities of learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Flexible delivery of programs and services results in increased accessibility and engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Incentives for staff to engage with the programs and services offered by the Centre exist within the university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• There are clear benefits to engaging with the operations of the Centre to staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The Centre is integrated in the university and does not operate in isolation. There are strong and clear alignments in place between the Centre, students, faculties and senior management</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Faculties support the work of the Centre and recognise the positive contribution it makes to teaching and learning

An increasing number of staff are engaging with the Centre’s programs and services

Centre programs and services are inclusive of all staff

The programs and services offered by the Centre are considered to be relevant and appropriate to participants’ needs

### Improving the provision of APD for leaders in teaching and learning

- Increased opportunities for leadership in the area of teaching and learning
- A clear link between teaching and learning leadership roles and promotion exists and is visible to staff
- A separate suite of APD programs designed for leaders in teaching and learning
- Professional development for leaders in teaching and learning incorporates a strategic focus
- Faculties have defined informal and formal teaching and learning leadership roles that align with Centre operations
- Leaders in learning and teaching embrace opportunities to familiarise themselves with developments in learning and teaching
- APD for leaders in learning and teaching equips participants with the skills they require to lead
- The Centre seeks out potential leaders/leaders in teaching and learning, and encourages them to attend APD events

### A wish for your Centre

To develop further the sense of what constituted an ideal Centre, and to link this discussion directly with their own Centre in terms of outcomes, participants were asked to record and then discuss one wish for their Centre on the understanding that this would be granted and the outcome achieved within the next 12 months.

Resources clearly headed the ‘wish list’ but the responses indicated awareness that resources, themselves, were not enough. As well as the need to use resources prudently – ‘A money tree and the talent to spend it wisely’ – staff wished their
Centre would ‘use its resources for the high priority things that are its purpose’; have ‘additional funding for staff so we would be better resourced to be efficient and effective in meeting both university and faculty goals’ and have ‘sufficient resources (number and skills/capabilities of staff) to enable Centre staff to work systematically and productively with those staff and courses where there seem to be problems/a need for greater support’. Such comments illustrate the iterative relationship between Centres meeting external goals and the allocation of resources but also suggest that how these goals may be construed is not commonly shared. For the third respondent the implication is that Centres are funded to fulfil a remediation role; for the first, discussion revealed that the ‘high priority things that are its purpose’ were linked with an uncertainty that there was shared understanding of, and commitment to, what these were. This perception was shared by others at different institutions who wished for ‘clarity of philosophy for teaching and learning from [the] university executive’ and a ‘shared understanding of purpose, responsibilities and expectations across all organisational boundaries’. In the survey of Directors that preceded the focus group phase, the top four reported constraints on Centres achieving their objectives were ‘insufficient faculty staff time’, ‘insufficient Centre staff time’, ‘incorrect perception of Centre’ and ‘insufficient Centre resources’. A common theme emerging here is that appropriate resourcing and a shared understanding of purpose are seen as central pre-conditions for Centre success.

A compelling and frequently reiterated theme of the discussions was the link between Centres and faculties. There were instances from every perspective of a wish ‘for greater interaction with the faculties on all levels’. This was especially marked for some individual universities where, for example, the DVC(A) wished for ‘an agreement by faculties to genuinely engage with the Centre’, the Director wished for
‘better (closer and more productive) relationships with faculty staff’, the Deputy Director wished for ‘leadership by way of formal recognition both at management and faculty levels to enable appropriate support within faculties’ and the Associate Deans wished for increased discipline-based support and a ‘greater connection and support between immediate learning and teaching needs/goals of faculties and the Centre’.

Further, there was a perception by the DVC(A) at this university that ‘faculties emphasise the importance of discipline expertise, which is not necessarily aligned with ‘the higher level support [the] Centre sees it can provide’.

Centres and Heads are increasingly likely to find themselves charged with significant responsibility for implementing aspects of the institution’s strategic plan, as they relate to teaching and learning. This creates a political role of translating management imperatives into the context of academic work (Clegg, 2009; Taylor, 2005). There is a danger that aligning strongly with the institutional executive may lead to a loss of educational legitimacy in the eyes of academic staff. But, taking a strategic role means that Centres must necessarily put themselves in the ‘squeeze’ between policy and practice, and manage the tension (Blackmore & Blackwell, 2006; Havnes & Stensaker, 2006). There was quite widespread recognition of this ‘tension between [the] Centralised/strategic role and the ‘coalface’ needs of faculties/schools/individual academics’ and the need to ‘find a creative way to marry the two key dimensions of a Centre’s role: i.e. policy and support’. Where the key message from the discussion is a ‘perceived disconnect between Centre and senior management and faculties re: [the] Centre’s role and purpose’ it is encouraging that both the Director and Deputy stressed that the Centre staff needed to work more closely with faculty staff and make their work/role clearer to them and another Associate Dean conceded that the faculties had a fuller responsibility to bridge the gap
and achieve a stronger alignment. As an Associate Dean from another university averred, ‘we all need to work together to determine goals/ideals across [the] community’.

Resources are clearly tied to capacity (Gosling, 2008) and this featured strongly in the wishes. Again, capacity was usually not seen in isolation but connected to purpose as with ‘That staff will have the confidence and capacity to fully engage in and produce output for teaching and learning research, staff capability development and curriculum development’; ‘To have an outstanding team of staff who are passionate, committed and well equipped to achieve our institutional learning and teaching mission’. Associate Deans at many universities wished for Centre staff to meet their discipline’s needs – ideally without time constraints – and hoped for ‘charismatic, imaginative, creative, technologically switched on people to inspire students, staff and externals to move to a new level of student experience’. There were instances where Directors, too, focused on staffing within their Centre as with ‘getting staff mix right’, ‘having the opportunity to recruit a handful of really capable staff with expertise in the required areas [and] in secure roles’. Given the critical relationships of Directors with DVCs(A) (Gosling, 2008) it is not surprising that staffing at senior level came to the fore. Some wished for ‘no change in senior management’ and for new appointments to be ‘as enlightened about academic development as the current ones’. On the other side, one DVC(A) wished for ‘great, strategically focused leadership at Director level’, another representative from outside a Centre for ‘a professorial appointment to lead the Centre’ and a couple of Centre staff wished for specific staff to be retained.

For members of the executive, some wishes were internally focused as with ‘the university community is beating down the doors to enrol in the GCHE [graduate
certificate of higher education]. For others, external recognition was the hope: ‘that they will bring [university named] to the national leadership of every single LTPF [the former Australian learning and teaching performance fund] indicator’. Most Directors looked internally, hoping for their Centres to be well supported, respected, ‘valued by all’ and understood as well as being a ‘functional, collegial and creative place to work’. The one exception was the Director who wished that ‘the global academic community recognises the equality, reciprocity and justice of teaching and learning and research parity’ and this was the wish also of an Associate Dean from the same university. Other Centre staff and the Associate Deans tended to consider aspects related to engagement with faculties but there were instances where wishes embraced the broader university community but hardly any that situated Centres in the wider higher education environment. Students wished for ‘genuine consultation’ and explicit outcomes to improve their learning but there were also more broadly based wishes that situated the Centre as ‘an open, available and intrinsic part of the community offering quality and continually improving, fully resourced and needed services’.

We have previously proposed that that the hallmark of successful Centres is that they are ‘taken for granted’ as THE source of relevant expertise and knowledge for higher education teaching and learning (de-identified for review, 2009). This was reflected in some of the wishes as with, ‘For strategic teaching and learning leaders in the university to see [Centre named] as the source of advice/innovation/ideas for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in their jurisdiction/unit’ and, from another university, ‘the Centre becomes seen as the place that staff go for expertise on a range of educational development practices’. Such sentiments were quite neatly summarised by one DVC(A) who wished simply for ‘relevance’.
While the bulk of participants focused on tangible outcomes, several others wished for the kind of leadership that would facilitate their desired outcomes. When the responses related to leadership were further scrutinised, it became apparent that structural issues (for example, the level of appointment of a Centre Director) were more prevalent - twice as many - than those categorised as ‘conceptual’ (for example, ‘transformational leadership approaches focused on producing outcomes internally and externally regarded as excellent’; ‘strong, dynamic and sustainable leadership with institutional support’). Significantly, the ‘take-home message’ for most participants (47 of 55 responses) did not concern leadership in any direct fashion. An atypical, but interesting, observation in this regard was made by a DVC(A): ‘leaders in teaching and learning can be found throughout the university and part of the Centre’s role is to identify and nurture them’.

Conclusions
Thematic analysis of the contributions of the focus group participants confirmed and extended a number of findings from prior phases of the research project, and the wider literature more generally, regarding the current realities of Australian teaching and learning Centres. Centres remain in a state of flux, enduring regular reconfiguration and/or redirection, often associated with changes in university executive staffing. While the perceptions of the Centre offered by participants were generally positive, these perceptions were not coherent and varied depending on the individual perspective of the viewer, reinforcing the finding of the importance of the nature of relationships between the Centre and individual incumbents in a range of teaching and learning leadership roles throughout the university. Student participants viewed their Centre as unknown and mysterious, reflecting the reality that a minority of Australian Centres deal directly with students. A number of participants noted the value of the
opportunity provided by the focus groups to interact directly with students, and we conclude that Centres would benefit from more direct engagement with students.

The focus group phase illuminated the complex and interactive relationships between the critical success factors for Centres identified in Figure 1 and aided in the final construction of the strategic leadership teaching and learning Centre maturity framework presented in Figure 2. Many of the descriptors pairs (current and ideal) provided by participants for their Centre embodied a desire for evolution of the Centre, highlighting the continuum nature of the developmental trajectory of Centres. Throughout the project, many examples were provided of the cyclical nature of Centre development – reaching a state of maturity is no guarantee of permanence, nor that restructuring will not return the Centre to a more embryonic stage in the maturation cycle. A key message for Centres is to understand where they are on the continuum and work to maximise their impact and effectiveness within their current context.

The ‘one wishes’ for Centres further highlighted the interrelations between the key factors for Centre success. Many outside of the Centre wished for both the resources (numbers of staff) and capacity (appropriately skilled staff) within the Centre to provide the assistance they desired. A key wish was for better and more productive relations between Centres and faculties. It was widely acknowledged that this is a joint and two-way responsibility. Very few wishes related to the leadership of the Centre, and almost no mention was made of ‘strategic leadership’. This result was surprising to the project team, given that it was the articulated focus of the project and all the component research activities. It suggests that Centres need to be overtly proactive in staking their claim in the strategic planning processes of their university. A strategic partnership between the University’s Senior Executive, the Centre and
faculties was seen as a prerequisite for implementing identified high impact strategies for improvement in teaching and learning.

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De-identified for review (2009).

De-identified for review (2010).

**Appendix 1. Institutional groupings in Australian higher education**

1. The Group of Eight (Go8)  
   - Australian National University  
   - Monash University

4. New Generation Universities (NGU)  
   - Australian Catholic University  
   - CQUniversity
University of Adelaide        Edith Cowan University
University of Melbourne      Southern Cross University
University of New South Wales University of Ballarat
University of Queensland     University of Canberra
University of Sydney         University of the Sunshine Coast
University of Western Australia University of Western Sydney
Victoria University

2. Australian Technology Network
   (ATN)
   Curtin University of Technology
   Queensland University of Technology
   RMIT University
   University of South Australia
   University of Technology, Sydney

5. Non-aligned
   Bond University
   Charles Darwin University
   Charles Sturt University
   Deakin University
   Macquarie University

3. Innovative Research Universities
   (IRU)
   Swinburne University of Technology
   Flinders University
   Griffith University
   James Cook University
   LaTrobe University
   Murdoch University
   University of New England
   University of Southern Queensland
   University of Tasmania
   University of Wollongong
   University of Newcastle
Adapted from (Barrie, Ginns, & Symons, 2008), taking into account subsequent changes in university groupings.

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