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System Leaders and System Leadership: Reviewing the Evidence

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1.0 Executive Summary

This executive summary outlines the main findings from an international review of the literature focused on system leaders and system leadership. The main findings are as follows-

- The terms 'system leader' and 'system leadership' are not synonymous, yet they are often used interchangeably within the international literature.
- Definitional overlap means that the available international literature on system leaders and system leadership varies in both content and quality.
- There are different ways of representing, interpreting, and understanding system leaders/ship within the international literature.
- Much of the writing about system leaders/ship can be categorised as expectations, processes, and influences at a macro and micro level.
- Macro level interpretations of system leaders/ship include theories of systems thinking, system change and system learning. A macro focus emphasises the *collective* impact of system leaders/ship to change, transform or improve the system.
- At the macro level, system leaders/ship is presented as broad set of expectations and leadership practices focused on change and improvement at scale.
- Where education systems, and sub-systems (i.e. district, municipality) have embraced (or are embracing) system leaders/ship, it is viewed as a way of leveraging school/system transformation and improvement.
- Evidence about the potential of different approaches to system leaders/ship exist within education systems (See Section 5).
- Micro level interpretations of system leaders/ship focus on the specific roles, responsibilities, and functions of *individual* system leaders within a context or setting.
- Clarity about the purpose, role, expectations and responsibilities of those defined as 'system leaders' is a feature of countries where productive system leadership is in place.
- The key functions of system leaders within the international literature include-
 - a) advocacy
 - b) activism
 - c) facilitation
 - d) change agency
 - e) gatekeeping
 - f) mobilisation
 - g) improvement

These functions are not mutually exclusive and vary from system to system.

The evidence about the effectiveness of a system leaders/ship approach is heavily context specific and dependent.

- Ongoing policy support is key to sustainability and success of a system leaders/ship approach.
- Barriers to system leaders/ship include over ambitious aspirations, variability across system leaders' practices and performance, insufficient time for proper implementation, and a lack of accountability measures to accurately gauge impact.
- Specificity about the meaning, selection, preparation and monitoring of system leaders, along with clear guidance and lines of accountability, directly contributes to the effectiveness of those designated as system leaders.

2.0 Recommendations

This review of the international evidence base has explored the contemporary literature concerning system leaders and system leadership. It has focused on some country examples to highlight different approaches to system leaders/ship.

Based on the international evidence, the following recommendations are made-

- Clarity about the definition, purpose, responsibilities, and functions of system leaders along with clear expectations and lines of accountability are needed.
- Seniority or years of experience, within education, should not be the main criterion for selecting system leaders. Their ability to lead others at different levels in the system is critically important.
- Leaders within a system are not automatically or by default, system leaders. System leaders need to be carefully selected to ensure they have the relevant skill set (e.g. facilitation, advocacy, mobilisation, challenge) and expertise.
- System leaders/ship should complement but also significantly enhance existing professional capacity and professional capital within a system. Added value from the individual and collective work of system leaders therefore should be visible and measurable.
- System leaders need to be thought leaders as well as practical leaders. They need to be able to push the boundaries of professional practice, so they must be knowledgeable of working at more than one level in the system.
- System leaders need to have the status, recognition, and skills to positively influence others, at different levels, in the system.
- System leadership requires a highly skilled and influential set of individual leadership practices that go beyond those developed or experienced in one setting or one layer of the system.
- Effective system leaders need to understand how change is successfully led and managed outside their own context or setting, so they can positively influence others.
- System leaders need a clear theory of action to have a positive influence on others. They must have the ability to refine and extend the practice of others through modelling 'next practice' not simply sharing 'existing or best practice'.

3.0 Scope and Methodology

3.1 Scope

- 3.1.2 This report outlines the findings from a contemporary review of the international evidence on system leaders and system leadership. This report provides analysis, commentary, and recommendations based on the available evidence base.
- 3.1.3 The literature on system leaders/ship is diverse and definitions vary hence this piece of work aims to outline different intentions, processes, and functions associated with system leaders/ship by drawing upon the available evidence. This review does not claim to be a systematic review of the literature, as it only looks at the contemporary literature (2010-2020) not the entire body of scholarly work on the subject. The aim of the work is to provide practical insights and policy guidance to the National academy for Educational Leadership (Leadership Academy) based on a consideration of the international evidence base.
- 3.1.4 The review considered evidence about the roles, responsibilities, actions, functions, and outcomes of system leaders/ship by looking at the international evidence base. It also considered the following specific questions:
- How other jurisdictions internationally have sought to develop system leadership? How successful have these been? (Section 5)
 - How has Wales sought to develop system leadership and to what extent does the Leadership Academy's Associate model represent a novel approach? (Section 6)
 - Why have some prima facie similar initiatives (i.e. SCEL's 'Fellows') been short-lived? (Section 5)
 - What are the main recommendations for the Leadership Academy and the Welsh system arising from this review? (Section 6)

3.2 Methodology

- 3.2.1 This section outlines the methodology used to interrogate the academic literature on system leaders/ship. In this review, a bibliometric and thematic analysis approach was used to gather and select the research literature. Bibliometrics is the quantitative analysis of scholarly publications, intended to provide an indication of their impact on academic and public discourse. Traditionally, bibliometrics takes account of the number of times a research article is cited, to compare it against other articles in the same field. As Gumus et al (2016:33) note:

'the bibliometric approach allows researchers to investigate the abstracts, keywords and references of the studies in a particular field; to reveal and compare authors, countries, journals and institutions in the field'.

- 3.2.2 In this search, bibliometrics was used to cross-check the importance of the academic articles identified, as the search progressed through the different databases. Articles were removed where they failed to meet a range of selection criteria including significance, relevance, and appropriateness.
- 3.2.3 All the selected refereed articles were analysed thematically to obtain an overview of the topics, methods, and foci of the selected studies. The thematic analysis focused upon, issues of definition, scope of the studies, geographical location, empirical evidence, and the interpretations of system leader/ship reflected across the selected articles.
- 3.2.4 The primary aim of this review was to illuminate the contemporary literature on system leaders/ship capturing different perspectives, insights, and evidence. The review considered:
- a) literature published in peer reviewed journals (ISI and SCOPUS) since 2010.
 - b) the grey literature published in this time frame (conference proceedings, reports, blogs, media pieces, commentaries etc.),
 - c) chapters, dissertations, conference papers and books.
- The main intention of the review was explore the ways in which system leader/ship is understood and evidenced in the selected literature.
- 3.2.5 In terms of searching the academic literature, it was decided to use a range of databases to identify relevant articles and to cross-check these databases to ensure that all the retrieved information was accurate, and no publication was missed. The research databases EBSCOHOST, SCOPUS and Web of Science (WoS), were initially searched.

3.2.6 In terms of systematically recording the review process, all working documents, including the full published version of the final selected articles, were uploaded to a shared folder on Microsoft Teams. The data retrieval and analysis process of the academic articles involved the following stages:

- (1) Setting Keywords
- (2) Selecting databases
- (3) Defining search criteria
- (4) Downloading the selected articles
- (5) Analysis framework
- (6) Extracting information from the articles into the analysis framework

3.2.7 The main keywords were ‘system leader and school’ and ‘system leader and education” whilst other stemming keywords included ‘change’ ‘improve’ ‘reform’ or any combination. These keywords were then tested in the selected databases. The reason for testing these keywords was to identify the number of returned articles for each term. Some terms returned no articles in all databases, so some refinement and readjustment were required. To narrow the search criteria and for a more precise and quicker search, a syntax of keywords was created using logical operators such as “And”, “Or”. The final list of keywords was:

- System* Leader*¹ AND school
- System* Leader* AND education
- System* Leader* AND Change AND School
- System* Leader* AND Change AND education
- System* Leader* AND Reform AND School
- System* Leader* AND Reform AND education
- System* Leader* AND Improv* AND School
- System* Leader* AND Improv* And education

3.2.8 It was decided to use the EBSCOHOST research database as an online reference system. This is accessible via the internet and offers a variety of proprietary and professional full text databases from leading information providers. EBSOHOST databases include

1. Academic Search Complete
2. British Education Index
3. Education Abstracts
4. Education Research Complete
5. Education Administration Abstracts
6. Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC)

In addition, the following educational databases were interrogated:

7. Web of Science
8. SCOPUS

3.2.9 The search criteria strategies that apply to the review of the academic literature were divided into four steps. *Firstly*, the initial search criteria looked at articles that were in peer- reviewed journals, that contained one or more keyword descriptors in title and abstract, had a publishing date between January 2010 and March 2020 and were written in the English language. The outcome of this first step across the 8 databases was the identification of 9503 articles.

Secondly, a refined search was undertaken that narrowed the criteria further, so for example, “system leader/ manager” had to be explicitly mentioned in the article title and abstract. Also, only empirical based or informed studies were included at this stage and descriptive pieces or personal narratives were discounted. The outcome of this step across the databases was the identification of 138 articles.

¹ * The asterisk is a wildcard symbol that broadens a search by finding words that start with the same letters

Thirdly, empirical studies were subsequently selected that identified school or school systems only (studies about further education or university were excluded). The outcome of this step across the databases was 56 articles. *Finally*, the last stage of refinement was to exclude any non- SCOPUS articles which narrowed down the group to 37 articles. Full texts of the articles were downloaded and stored in the drive (Section 1 in Reference list).

- 3.2.10 At this stage, and prior to extracting the information from the selected studies, an analytical framework was created to summarise the studies in a series of themed matrices. The analytical framework was designed in an Excel Spreadsheet. There are two main technical reasons for selecting Excel. *Firstly*, Excel allows for data sorting (to organize data based on some criteria) alphabetically (A-Z or Z-A) or numerically (i.e. descending order for date of publishing). *Secondly*, it allows for data filtering (displaying records that meet certain criteria; for example, filtering SCOPUS Journals).
- 3.2.11 The search also extended to books, chapters, dissertations, conference papers and the grey literature on the theme of system leaders/leadership. Books were identified using GoogleScholar, Google Books and SCOPUS. Of the 1030 books identified 10 books in the timeframe specified, were selected (Section 2 in Reference List). Book chapters were identified using the Academic Research Complete Database following the same search criteria as the articles. The search filter specified book chapters that contained one or more keyword descriptors in titles only, publishing between January 2010 to March 2020 and in the English language. This search yielded 92 chapters initially that were refined for appropriateness and relevance down to 2 (Section 3 in Reference List).
- 3.2.12 Dissertations were identified using Electronic Theses Online Service (EthOS) and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) databases. The same search criteria were applied. Of 970 dissertation studies identified, 4 were selected based on appropriateness and relevance (Section 4 in Reference List).
- 3.2.13 Conference papers were identified using SCOPUS and Web of Science databases. The search criteria used the database search syntax² to narrowing the search down to include conference papers only. This search initially identified 629 papers on the topic which were reduced to 1 after sifting for relevance and appropriateness (Section 5 in Reference List).
- 3.2.14 Finally, the grey literature (websites, Blogs, commentaries, etc) was identified. Google Advanced Search was used, and the search criteria were applied. Search terms included “System Leadership” in the title, a customised date range (2010-2020) and the specified language as English. This search resulted initially in 76 hits which were filtered to 18 (Section 6 in Reference List).

Table A summarises the search process. It shows the category of material, the search sites, along with the initial and final number of resources identified. The final numbers represent sources that were intrinsically focused on system leader/ship, were directly relevant and of an appropriate quality standard. A filtering and constant cross-checking process was applied to check and re-check the final sources not only against the selection criteria but also in terms of their relevance, appropriateness, and quality.

TABLE A

Category of material	Search Sites	Initial Search Numbers	Final Numbers
Articles	Ebscohost, SCOPUS, Web of Science	9503 Narrowed down to 138	37
Books	Google.Scholar, Google Books and SCOPUS	1030 Narrowed down to 33	10
Book Chapters	Academic Search Complete	92 Narrowed down to 18	2
Dissertations/Theses	EthOS, ERIC	970 Narrowed down to 32	4
Conference Papers	Web of science, SCOPUS	629 Narrowed down to 27	1
Websites/Blogs/ Commentaries	Google Advanced Search	76	18

Policy literature in selected countries was also highlighted in an analysis of the selected literature. This allowed the signposting of key policy information in the country examples.

²Syntax is set of rules that guide the search. For example: System* leader* AND Improv* AND school) OR TITLE: (System* Leader* AND Improv* AND education)

4.0 Findings

- 4.1. This section outlines the main findings from the review of the international evidence base on system leaders/ship. It considers the origins, interpretations, and expectations of system leaders/ship contained in the evidence base. The origin of the term 'system leader/ship' can be traced back to the early 21st century, within the field of education. System leadership was initially defined as an emerging practice consisting of a broad range of responsibilities developed either locally or within individual programmes or networks. The term 'system leadership' also links to earlier work on systems thinking and has strong connections with systems theory (Senge, 1990).
- 4.1.2 Within the field of education, system leaders have been defined as those willing to improve other schools and systems in addition to their own (Hopkins and Higham, 2007). It has also been suggested that those occupying a system leader role see the multiple system components and the inter-related sets of challenges, they tend not to accept 'business as usual' (Fullan, 2005).
- 4.1.3 In terms of precise definitions, the international evidence indicates that 'system leaders' and 'system leadership' are not synonymous but as they are related. This definitional overlap means that the available international literature on system leaders and system leadership is variable in both in content and quality.
- 4.1.4 The different interpretations and conceptualisations of system leaders/ship within the international evidence base can be separated into *macro* and *micro* level explanations. These interpretations sometimes cross-over, making much of the writing on the subject complex to navigate (Boylan, 2016). To make sense of these different interpretations, and the inter-relationships between them, system leaders/ship is explored through macro and micro level lenses, respectively. The following diagram illustrates the different interpretations and the inter-relationships.



- 4.1.5 At the macro level, the evidence on system leaders/ship diverges into two major areas of study. Firstly, there is a literature on *systems thinking* and *systems theory* which focuses on ways of solving complex problems within and across organisations (e.g. Levin and Schrum, 2013). Secondly, there is a considerable evidence base around system leaders/ship *as a policy driver for system change* and *as the mobilisation of system improvement in different countries and contexts* (e.g. Harris et al, 2014; Cousin, 2016; Nasmyth, 2012, Hamilton et al, 2018).

- 4.1.6 In terms of systems-thinking, this is an approach that is concerned with taking a holistic view of the system. It is a management approach to organisational change that has been applied to schools and connects closely with system science (Shaked and Schechter, 2020). Systems thinking reflects a theoretical orientation on organisational change rather than a practical one. It is viewed as an approach for understanding change within complex systems.
- 4.1.7 Systems thinking places an emphasis upon system thinkers rather than system leaders, reinforcing the capacities of individual leaders within a specific eco-system (Shaked and Schechte, 2014; Toh et al, 2014). Systems thinking is also linked to idea of systemic leadership that appears within the business literature (e.g. Thompson and Zakhirova, 2018) which views organisations as open systems that are visible and inter-connected (Beehner, 2020).
- 4.1.8 In his early work, Peter Senge (1990) viewed *systems thinking* as a framework for understanding the inter-relationships within organisations. His work proposed that systems thinking was a foundation for a system leadership approach premised on understanding and interpreting systems. More contemporary analyses underline that system leadership emanates from, and reflects, several theoretical perspectives, including actor network theory, as well as different fields of study and alternative analytical approaches (Levin and Schrum, 2014).
- 4.1.9 In the second area of study, system leadership is represented and understood *as a policy lever* for school and system improvement. (See section 5). In this respect, system leadership is presented as an adaptive leadership style or disposition that is based on an understanding of the complexity of educational contexts as involving multiple, interrelated systems. System leadership at the macro level focuses on how leadership is exercised for the greater, system good and how *capacity* is built to deliver system wide change and improvement.
- 4.2 The international literature reflects an extensive evidential base around system leadership as a policy driver for system improvement. In Canada, Georgia, England, Hong Kong, New York, Latin America, Singapore, Scotland, Australia and New Zealand there are specific examples of policy interventions, around system leadership, directly aimed at building the capacity for school/system improvement (Michelle and Sackney, 2016; Sentocnick, et al 2018; Elwick, 2017; Weinstein & Hernández, 2015; Hamilton et al, 2018; Robinson, et al 2011; Watterson et al, 201; Dimmock, 2016 Southworth & Quesnay 2005; Szeto, 2019; Ng, 2017).
- 4.2.1 System leadership is essentially defined, at the macro level, as having a systemic orientation where system leaders influence those beyond their immediate context and are deliberately deployed to bring about large-scale change. This interpretation can be seen in policy developments in England (Cousin, 2019; Close, 2016) and in many other countries (Pont et al, 2008).
- 4.2.2 The implementation of a system model, it has been argued, happens when all stakeholders are active co-collaborators in the modelling of solution seeking processes (Wilkinson, 2016). Within the international evidence base, there are frequent references to system leaders as solution seekers and change agents, as levers for system level change and improvement.
- 4.2.3. Most of the grey literature, identified as part of this international review, focuses on the policy dimension concentrating predominantly on the possibility and potential of system leadership to transform the performance and outcomes of education systems. This literature tends towards the descriptive and normative, advocating rather than establishing the positive impact of system leadership. The grey literature encompasses strong support for system leadership as a policy lever for school and system change. (e.g. Carter, 2016; Godin, 2019; Shires Teaching School Alliance, 2015; Senge et al, 2015; Morley and Goodson, 2014).
- 4.2.4 Much the writing about system leadership contained in the grey literature, tends to be inspirational and aspirational in tone. The blogs, media posts and policy commentaries all focus their attention on the importance of building system capacity through deploying system leaders with the experience, expertise, and confidence to lift the performance of other leaders throughout the system. This writing reinforces system leaders as champions, as consultants, as change agents who are charged with driving through system change and improvement. Significantly less is said, however, about how exactly this is achieved, secured, or sustained.
- 4.2.5 The academic literature similarly reinforces the centrality of system leadership as a macro lever for school and system wide change. For example, Cousins (2016) views system leadership as a public service delivery mechanism within a narrative of global governance. Focusing on England, Cousins (2016) outlines findings from a longitudinal study that demonstrates a positive relationship between system leaders (National Leaders of Education) and school/system improvement. Brown and Greaney (2018) also turn their attention to the English education system but offer a more critical view of the evidence about system leadership and its relationship with the self-improving system. Other writers offer examples of system leadership in various settings (e.g. Naicker and Mestry, 2015; Bryant, 2019; Godfrey, 2017) each reinforcing that system leadership is a macro policy lever and a catalyst for system wide change (Hamilton et al 2018).

4.2.6 In his early work, Michael Fullan (2005) referred to leaders who are system thinkers and who act on their thinking as ‘system thinkers’ in action’. The literature constantly reinforces that system leaders need an acute awareness of the bigger picture and that their function is to engage with others, across multiple layers and levels of the system (Harris et al, 2016; Elwick, 2017). As far back as 2008, the OECD noted that:

‘One of school leaders’ new roles is increasingly to work with other schools and other school leaders, collaborating and developing relationships of interdependence and trust. System leaders, as they are being called, care about and work for the success of other schools as well as their own. Crucially they are willing to shoulder system leadership roles because they believe that to change the larger system you have to engage with it in a meaningful way’.

(Pont et al, 2008:9)

In the macro sense, therefore, system leaders are collectively charged with the development of others and the improvement of the system (Sheppard and Dibbon, 2011; Hopkins et al, 2014). Their sphere of influence, however, varies according to role, responsibility, and level.

4.2.7 Moving to the micro-level, shifts the idea of system leaders/ship away from the collective spheres of influence towards individual functions, roles, traits, or characteristics (Accardi 2016, Dimmock, 2016). In his work, Hopkins (2009) suggests that system leaders operate at *three levels* –

1. The level of the school i.e. helping other schools.
2. The local level i.e. working with networks of schools or at the national level.
3. The national/system level i.e. operating as a leader of system change (e.g a National Leader of Education).



Hopkins (2009) further suggests that all these system leader roles are necessary and operate interdependently to secure system level change.

4.2.8. This tripartite distinction suggests that system leaders need to understand the micro and macro influences in the system to be most effective. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) suggest that system leaders must exist on ‘the balcony and the dancefloor’. In summary, system leaders must see the bigger picture but also understand the detail of how to secure change.

- 4.2.9 The international evidence is replete with accounts of the work of different categories of system leaders e.g. headteacher, principal, district leader, network leader, middle leader or teacher leader (Robinson, 2012; Senge et al, 2015; Cousin, 2019;Boylan, 2016). This evidence base proposes that those occupying existing *leadership roles* within the system are, by default, system leaders with the potential to exercise leadership throughout the system. Simkins et al (2019) focus on primary heads and argue that through their leadership within the system it is possible to have a vision of a school led system. Spillane et al (2019) focuses on six school systems in the USA and argues that school leaders are system leaders who affect change and improvement through the processes of sense making.
- 4.3.1 NCTL (2017³) note the work of system leaders in England might include -
- sharing successful practices with colleagues in other schools
 - providing coaching in a specialist area
 - a formal deployment to support a school in challenging circumstances'
- Furthermore, the role of 'system leader' (in England) is conferred on those already working within the system but viewed as being particularly effective. For example,
- 'national leaders of education (NLE) - outstanding *headteachers* who, together with their national support school, work with schools in challenging circumstances
 - national leaders of governance (NLG) - highly effective *chairs of governors* who use their skills and experience to support chairs in other schools and improve the quality of governance
 - specialist leaders of education (SLE) - experienced *middle or senior leaders* with a specialism, who work to develop other leaders so that they have the skills to lead their own teams and improve practice in their own schools.'
- 4.3.2 Within the Welsh context, Hopkins (2016) proposed that there was a need to develop a 'system leadership' approach to drive excellence throughout the education system. This approach comprised a comprehensive system reform strategy for Wales based around four drivers - personalised learning, professionalised teaching, intelligent accountability and networks and collaboration, all of which were moulded to the specific context in Wales through system leaders/ship.
- 4.3.3 System leaders were intended to be senior leaders within the Welsh system, at the school or local authority level, who wished to have an extended role. The idea of system leaders/ship took hold in Wales between 2010 and 2012. Specific training was offered to those interested in undertaking a system leader role and job descriptions were compiled. The idea of system leaders/ship in Wales, however, quickly evaporated when national policy priorities dramatically shifted to reflect a greater emphasis on accountability throughout the system (Andrews, 2014)
- 4.3.4 In their work, Senge et al (2015) talk about core capabilities for system leader/ship that include the ability to see the needs of the larger system, fostering reflection, building collective engagement, and not being reactive but shaping the future. Earley (2016) similarly offers a series of expectations of system leaders but these tend toward the aspirational rather than the practical.
- 4.3.5 To summarise, the international literature views system leaders/ship as a macro level policy driver and a micro level role or responsibility. The literature reflects three distinctive but interrelated interpretations:
- system leaders/ship *as* system change – e.g. in Singapore, leaders within the system (school, district, and Ministry) collectively operate *as* system change agents (Ng, 2016).
 - system leaders/hip *for* system change -e.g. in England, system leaders, (National Leaders of Education) are responsible *for* leading system change (Cousin, 2018)
 - system leaders/ship *through* system change -e.g. in Ontario, system change produced literacy co-ordinators and champions who became system leaders *as a direct result of* system wide change (Gallagher, Malloy, and Ryerson, 2016)
- The next section aims to illuminate these different interpretations further, by offering country specific examples.

³ <https://nctl.blog.gov.uk/2017/07/31/what-are-teaching-schools-and-system-leaders/>

5.0 System Leadership – Country Examples

- 5.1 This section of the review looks briefly at system leadership in selected countries and settings. Over a decade ago, the OECD (Pont, 2008) highlighted several country cases where system leadership was present and prevalent including those summarised here.
- 5.1.2 The short summaries that follow offer more contemporary insights into how system leadership is currently interpreted, understood, and enacted in different contexts. Each of the summaries is based on evidence collected as part of this review of the literature and from communication with country experts.

5.2 Singapore - System Leadership as System Change

- 5.2.1 In Singapore, system leadership is *the* central way that all system change is delivered. School leaders, at all levels, are prepared from day one to take up responsibilities anywhere in the education system, including the Ministry. The National Institute of Education (NIE) trains all teachers and leaders, throughout the country, to a consistently high standard. It prepares them to develop other leaders at all levels in the system.
- 5.2.2 When a teacher is identified as being capable of a leadership responsibility, the final beneficiary is often another school. When the teacher is ready for a leadership position, they may be identified (by the Ministry of Education) to be posted to another school that needs them more or where a better opportunity for further development is available. In Singapore, teachers and principals are allocated to their posts by the Ministry, it is not their personal choice.
- 5.2.3 Many capable heads of department, who have been in one school, become vice-principals in another school. Similarly, many capable vice-principals, who have worked extensively in one school, will eventually leave, and lead another school. Many highly effective principals join the district or the Ministry level.
- 5.2.4 In this way leadership positions and responsibilities are rotated in the system. So, in Singapore, school leaders know that they are developing people for the system, rather than just for one school. ‘This is a system high in trust and collaboration. School leaders also trust the system to provide the human resources the school needs’ Ng,(2017).

‘In Singapore, school leaders do not just lead a school. They are called to lead ‘nationally’. That means that a school leader belongs to a community of leaders. School leaders care for the whole education system, not just the school each of them is currently leading. They must take a broader view and consider how their decisions in school will affect other schools or even the whole nation. Social capital in Singapore is ‘nationalistic’. This is the spirit of competitive collaboration. Centralized decentralisation can work because the spirit of competitive collaboration helps to drive improvement while keeping the system united.’

(Professor Pak Tee Ng, National Institute of Education, Singapore)

5.3 England - System Leadership for System Change

- 5.3.1 In England the 'self-improving school-led system' (SISS) remains the overarching narrative for education policy in England. This agenda has encompassed an ensemble of reforms including academies, the promotion of multi-academy trusts (MATs), the roll back of local authorities (LAs) from school oversight, and the development of new school-to-school support models, such as Teaching School Alliances (TSAs). The government's rationale for this mix of reforms is, ostensibly, to move control to the frontline by giving greater autonomy to schools.
- 5.3.2 To support the SISS, a tranche of National Leaders of Education (NLE's) currently operates to mobilise change across the system and to act as system leaders for school self-improvement. NLE's tend to be high performing leaders and their teams (e.g. as National Leaders of Education or Teaching Schools) who are designated and deployed to support other schools.
- 5.3.3 Prior to 2010, there was a broad interpretation of system leadership in England (Hopkins and Higham, 2017). Any school leader who played a role beyond their context could consider themselves as engaging in 'system leadership'. Latterly, however, system leaders are formally designated as NLE's with clear lines of accountability to government. The primary function of the NLEs⁴ is to deliver school improvement support on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE) in England. The core purpose of the NLE is to deliver support to underperforming schools, helping them to identify and address areas in need of improvement.
- 5.3.4 Within England tensions exist, however, within the NLE system leadership role. On the one hand, system leaders (NLEs) are encouraged and expected by government to drive relentless and rapid improvement across multiple schools. On the other hand, they are expected simultaneously to address other 'school-led' policy priorities, such as to expand the numbers of trainees on school-led Initial Teacher Training routes. NLEs are charged with working on behalf of the self-improving system, engaging their peers in building collaborative alliances while operating in a competitive marketplace for school improvement services (Greany, 2018).
- 5.3.5 A recent NFER report⁵ highlighted that NLEs in England were experiencing conflicting and unreasonable demands from central government while being perceived by their peers to be a 'co-opted elite', working as part of the managerial state and accruing a range of personal and organisational benefits as a result. Concerns about the NLE role have also been raised because of the importance placed on the Ofsted 'Outstanding grade' to designate those selected as system leaders.

'System leaders all identified benefits from their roles, but there are also a series of challenges, including significant pressure to make short-term improvements in other schools and the fear that their own school might drop in performance as a result of their external work'

(Professor Toby Greany, University of Nottingham)

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/system-leaders-who-they-are-and-what-they-do>

⁵ <https://www.ucl-ioe-press.com/ioe-content/uploads/2018/08/Hierarchy-Markets-and-Networks.pdf>

5.4. Ontario, Canada - System leadership *through* system change

- 5.4.1 Since 2007, the Province of Ontario in Canada has successfully embarked on a major reform process, largely but not exclusively focusing on improving literacy and numeracy outcomes for young people, particularly those who are most disadvantaged (Campbell, 2020). Ontario's educational reform agenda has concentrated consistently on raising the bar and narrowing the achievement gap and on increasing the rates of high school completion.
- 5.4.2 An important and prominent part of this reform agenda has been the focus on system leadership across the Province. A by-product of system level reform in Ontario has been the attention paid to building professional capacity and leadership capacity at all levels of the education system (province, district, school, and classroom). A central element of this focus has been developing leaders and leadership practices at all levels of the education system. In this respect, system leadership in Ontario has emerged *through* large-scale system level change.
- 5.4.3 The Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF)⁶ set out five key domains of leadership practices to be developed and demonstrated by principals and vice-principals as leaders in the system:
1. Setting Directions
 2. Building Relationships and Developing People
 3. Developing the Organisation to Support Desired Practices
 4. Improving the Instructional Program
 5. Securing Accountability.

The OLF emphasises instructional leadership and the work of school principals in developing School Improvement Plans, linked to evidence of school effectiveness measures, to establish priorities and actions each year to improve student outcomes. By default, rather than design, therefore, those leading within the system embarked on a range of new leadership practices as outlined by the OLF. Two reports offered the following comments about the role of the system leader in Ontario-

‘One of the strengths of the system is a comprehensive, well-established Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) providing valued support for professional learning into roles as centrally assigned principals and beyond as superintendents. This provides a clear pathway for developing future leaders in the system. Principals and vice-principals are allocated from a central pool to schools by the Toronto Board of Education with the expectation that they remain in one school for approximately five years’⁷

‘Nevertheless, there is a compromise to be made, as the expectation to move schools can affect the well-being of principals. However, principals are well supported in their roles by centrally assigned principals who are all experienced leaders. This leads to a high level of trust and mutual respect, which in turn creates an ethos of support rather than challenge in the system’⁸

⁶ https://www.education-leadership-ontario.ca/application/files/8814/9452/4183/Ontario_Leadership_Framework_OLF.pdf

⁷ <https://secureservercdn.net/160.153.137.40/485.648.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/National-Academy-Commission-Report-Our-Call-to-Action-EN.pdf.pdf>

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5.5 Scotland - System Leadership for System Change

- 5.5.1 In 2010, the Donaldson Report ‘Teaching Scotland’s Future’ recommended the setting up of a virtual college to support the leadership development needs of principals and those occupying other leadership roles within the school sector. This eventually materialised into the Scottish College for Educational Leadership (SCEL⁹) which is now located within the Scottish Government.
- 5.5.2 Until the move to Scottish Government in 2017, SCEL was a powerful influence and a proactive vehicle for system leadership in Scotland. Here system leadership was understood as headteachers enacting macro level responsibilities for system improvement and change. As in England and Wales, the expectation was that system leaders would lead beyond their own school and collectively, would have a positive influence on the entire system.
- 5.5.3 As part of its early work, independent from government, SCEL set up the Fellows programme. The SCEL Fellows were selected based on clear criteria and were interviewed for their position as system leaders. The Fellows were largely experienced and well regarded headteachers who felt that they could contribute to the system in an extended way. At that time, SCEL consisted of the CEO, Gillian Hamilton, and some administrative staff, hence the Fellows were a critical part of the capacity for delivering SCEL’s mission.
- 5.5.4 SCEL’s mission was to support teachers and practitioners to make a difference to the outcomes for children and young people through access to innovative and quality leadership programmes and services. SCEL aspires to-
- develop, articulate, and implement a vision for educational leadership in Scotland that is learner-focused and futures-oriented
 - provide coherence for the range of leadership development opportunities available in Scotland
 - offer/facilitate innovative and cutting-edge leadership development opportunities that are research-led, practice-focused and bench marked internationally
 - embed ‘leadership networks’ across the sectors and systems so that leaders at all levels are connected to and within professional leadership communities in education and the public sector.
- 5.5.5 The aims of the College are as follows-
- Clear articulation with the professional values and personal commitments underpinning the revised suite of GTCS professional standards, including the promotion of social justice, integrity, trust and respect and professional commitment. ‘Learning and leadership for sustainability’ which is embedded across the professional standards should foreground the work of the College.
 - Equality and equity of access and opportunities should shape the College’s work and engagement, and considering the needs of remote communities, and the leadership development needs of teachers in Gaelic medium schools and dual language schools.
 - Inclusivity as a core principle determining the College’s reach, with an emphasis on leadership in and for schools and early years establishments, incorporating teacher leadership, middle leadership, headship, head of centre/establishment and beyond.
- 5.5.6 All teachers and principals in Scotland could register to be members of SCEL and had access to its website and extensive suite of leadership programmes. In 2015, it was announced that there would be a mandatory Masters degree¹⁰ for all headteachers in Scotland that would come into effect in 2018. The Fellows programme was proving to be very successful, and SCEL was gaining both national and international recognition (Chapman, 2019).
- 5.5.7 By October 2017, SCEL had moved into Scottish Government¹¹ and the Fellows programme has ceased.

‘Great leaders help themselves and others do the right things by setting a clear direction, building a vision, protecting what’s good and innovating when something new is needed. They clearly explain what good looks like and inspire others to get there. They are strategic, innovative, problem solving, capable and empathetic. And while planning, processes and technical skills are important, in my experience, the very best leaders know that it’s not just about them and their view of the world’

(Gillian Hamilton, CEO SCEL¹²)

⁹ Confidential- Since the move to Government there is nothing in the public domain about SCEL Fellows or its previous existence as a College at arm’s length from Government.

¹⁰ https://www.holyrood.com/news/view,mandatory-masters-degree-for-head-teachers_11277.htm

¹¹ <https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/glowblogs/eslb/2017/10/30/scel-leadership-programmes/>

¹² https://www.holyrood.com/comment/view,scels-gillian-hamilton-school-leadership-having-a-positive-influence_6598.htm

6.0 Recommendations for the Leadership Academy and the Welsh System

- 6.1.1 System leadership within and across educational organisations is increasingly important to build the necessary professional capital and professional capacity for improvement. As this international review has shown, there is evidence that when properly deployed, system leaders/ship can be a positive force for change.
- 6.1.2 The international evidence about system leaders/ship, however, consistently points to the need for clarity about:
- The definition, role, and functions of system leaders.
 - The criteria for selection and the process of appointment.
 - Core responsibilities and the expectations placed upon system leaders.
 - The accountability structures and evaluative processes that surround their role as a system leader.
 - Gauging the impact of system leaders/ship through agreed monitoring and evaluation processes.
- 6.1.2 The recommendations that follow focus specifically on the Associate role within the Leadership Academy and draw directly upon the findings from the international review-
1. The role of the Leadership Academy Associate needs to be clearly defined and the remit/purpose of the role needs to be scoped in detail.
 2. A set of person specific skills and transparent appointment criteria should be established and published on the Leadership Academy website.
 3. Ways of gauging the impact of the Leadership Academy Associates need to be established and their individual/collective impact needs to be assessed.
 4. The Leadership Academy Associates need to have the appropriate skills and experience to influence others at different levels of the system.
 5. In other countries, principals, headteachers, governors, middle leaders, assistant heads, teachers, district leaders and network leaders are deployed as system leaders.¹³ Widening the constituency of the Leadership Academy Associates, in the future, with different leadership expertise needs some consideration.
 6. The Leadership Academy needs to reflect upon how the work of Associates can be scaled up and sustained.
 7. The ongoing support of Welsh Government for the Leadership Academy as an ‘arm’s length’ organisation is pivotal to its success.
 8. Clarity is needed about whether the Associate role is essentially developmental for the individual concerned or if the role is intended to mobilise change and improvement within the system. If both, the links between the two positions needs greater specificity.
 9. An independent evaluation of the work of the Associates (now in their second cohort) should be commissioned. This evaluation should include questions about *intentions, processes, and outcomes/impact* of the Leadership Academy Associates to inform subsequent phases of their work.
Evaluation questions could include, for example:
 - a) How do the Leadership Academy Associates understand their role, as system leaders, and how they view their system leadership responsibilities? Are these clear and consistent to all Associates?
 - b) What do Associates consider to be the main intentions, purposes and aims of their system leadership role? What do they see as their key accountabilities and responsibilities in this position?
 - c) What key processes are Associates using to support others within the system to improve? How effective have these been and what is the evidence to support this?
 - d) In what ways are Associates assessing their individual and collective impact? Is there concrete evidence of impact at various levels in the Welsh system? How is this collated, shared and communicated? How could evidence of impact be gathered and produced going forward?

¹³ e.g. Bryant, 2018; Sheppard and Dibbon, 2011; Boylan, 2016; Chen and Reigeluth, 2010; Simpkins et al, 2018; Kemp. 2018.

- e) How far are Associates, individually and collectively, contributing to building the professional capacity within the Welsh system? What evidence needs to be systematically collected to demonstrate an impact on capacity building at the system level?
 - f) In the future how will Associates support other leaders in successfully introduce the new curriculum into Welsh education? How will they be developing and supporting curriculum leadership, as system leaders, and how will their effectiveness be gauged?
 - g) What types of specialist support, guidance and training will Associates need to equip them to be effective system leaders and where will this come from within Welsh system?
- 6.1.3 To conclude, the evidence from this international review underlines that under the right conditions, with the right people, system leaders/ship can be a positive force for change and a catalyst for school/system improvement. Consequently, for the Leadership Academy in Wales, this review offers a basis for review, reflection, and a platform for forward planning.

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