

LEAP Study Tour to South Australia: Impacts on Participants

*A report by Caitlin Senior, Doctoral Candidate, Southern Cross University and
Pasi Sahlberg, Professor of Education, Southern Cross University*

“The Leap Study Tour provided time and collective wisdom to enable each one of us to renew, recharge and reenergise.” –
LEAP participant

[LEAP](#) (Leading Educators Around the Planet) is an innovative leadership program that connects school leaders around the world through collaborative peer shadowing and study tour experiences. The program was founded in 2009 by former Australian primary school principals Dr Warren Marks and Dr Suzanne Lazenby because they noticed a lack of meaningful professional development opportunities for experienced principals in Australia.

LEAP participants have gone on two-week peer shadowing exchanges and study tours to places like Scotland, Singapore, Finland and Canada. The study tour to South Australia (SA) in 2022 was the first interstate study tour program (inspired by the pandemic restrictions to overseas travel), organised by LEAP in conjunction with the South Australia Primary Principals Association (SAPPA).

During the SA program, 20 principals from New South Wales (NSW) travelled to Adelaide, SA to explore innovations within the South Australian education system. The program delivered informal and formal opportunities for professional learning over six days by providing pre-organised sessions facilitated by education leaders and experts as well as time and space for informal peer learning and networking. Participants received in-depth insights about the South Australian education system from professionals working in the system and visited six innovative SA primary schools of national interest, engaging with SA school leaders and students while at the schools.

Below is an analysis of the impacts of the LEAP study tour to

SA on the participants from NSW. To inform this analysis, we evaluated our first-hand observations of the study tour as well as qualitative data from focus group discussions we facilitated during the study tour in conjunction with post-tour survey question responses received from participants.

In general, we found the program had a rejuvenatingly positive effect on participants, from which they found helpful takeaways that were brought back to NSW. This finding is expanded upon in the following sections.

Overall: Participants were inspired and assured

Overwhelmingly, participants were inspired by the schools, students, educators, leaders and spaces they engaged with in South Australia. The SA schools chosen for the tour were schools that had some innovation that was working well for student well-being, achievement, and engagement. As one participant noted, these innovations were particularly inspiring because they were being done in Australia and therefore in a similar social, cultural, political and economic environment as the participants themselves, relatively speaking.

As expressed in a survey response: “From my SA experience I feel the things that interested me can be easily transferred to my school setting...these opportunities are valuable to leaders who wish to be innovative and open to change.” Another participant shared: “Looking at a different state education system opens your mind to how we can do things differently.”

At the same time, participants also felt more assured as a result of the study tour experience that paths they had already started to go down in their schools were on the right track. For example, one participant felt “affirmed during the tour about some of the programs we have begun to implement at our school.”

Takeaways: Focus on well-being, student voice, and space

The program did not explicitly prescribe takeaways to be actioned upon participants’ return to their home schools. Through being thoroughly immersed in collaborative peer learning informally and formally whilst being presented with new and prevailing ideas around leadership, education systems, schools, student learning and well-being; participants

were able to self-reflect and evaluate what, if anything, they would take back with them from the experience.

In the end, all participants felt the SA Study Tour experience provided them with significant takeaways that they planned to utilise in their home schools. These takeaways centred around conceptions of wellbeing, student voice and space. Wellbeing, student voice and space are interconnected aspects of school and learning as each element can enhance the others.

In regard to wellbeing, participants took with them from SA that wellbeing as a main embedded focus of school for students and staff instead of an add-on was important to work towards in their schools, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Impressive examples of how student voice is exemplified significantly in learning and teaching aspects in the SA schools from students themselves as well as school leaders and staff left a big impression on NSW participants. Many study tour participants saw student voice as a critical way to enhance student learning, engagement and well-being; and now plan to place more emphasis on student voice in their schools. For example, one participant noted that since the study tour they have started “building it (student voice) into decision and planning” at their school as well as “undertaken professional learning with staff in preparation for implementation across the school.”

Many NSW principals commented on the use of space in the schools they visited. Space in terms of how it was used creatively for wellbeing and play both outdoors and indoors. For example, one participant noted that “some of the outdoor learning spaces that we saw during the school visits provided more ideas around the creative use of the space” which prompted a redesign of outdoor classroom space at that principal’s school post-SA study tour.

Some also commented on the open and mixed spaces with, as one participant noted “one thing going on next to another” as something that would be a different style for their students. Participants left the study tour committed to utilizing space better and more creatively, as well as promoting more imaginative play in their available space.

Another overall takeaway that NSW principals audibly commented on throughout the study tour to SA was the sense

of calm they felt being in the SA schools compared to the NSW schools where they were from. Participants asked SA school staff about funding and time allocation. A discovery was made that rather than stark funding differences, SA school teachers have less teaching periods than NSW teachers, freeing up more time for lesson planning etc., as well as providing more room for specialist subjects and teachers.

Furthermore, SA school leaders are not required to have teaching times, like NSW school leaders. This difference, some suspected, related to the calmer feeling overall noticed in SA schools compared to NSW schools.

One participant nicely reflected on this comparative greater sense of calm in conjunction with the theme and takeaways around space in the post-study tour survey:

My main take away from the SA study tour was the importance of creating space - not just physical but also space (time) for teachers to prepare, engage in authentic reflection and evaluation, space in the timetable for students to play or dig in a kitchen garden. My observations (and I could be wrong) is that in NSW schools the past 2 years have been the most challenging ever faced. Teachers, principals and executives are struggling with the current climate - workload, conditions, staff shortages, etc. The schools we visited in Adelaide - while staff were tired (it was the last week of term) there didn't seem to be the elevated stress levels of Sydney schools. There was space - space in the playground, spaces to dig in a garden, space in the timetable for teachers (50 min RFF each day), space for specialist programs - languages, kitchen garden, PE, visual arts. There is so much to consider but moving forward I am keen to further explore two things...implementing a kitchen garden program and looking at how I can fund time to give additional time to staff to plan, reflect evaluate and engage in professional learning opportunities.

As mentioned in the quote above, especially during the past couple of pandemic years, with the teacher crisis in Australia and inequitable school funding, to name only a few things, it can be hard for education leaders to find needed time to reflect, make new connections, continue their learning, and recharge to be able to effectively lead. The LEAP study tour to SA addressed these needs.

Rejuvenated and more confident school leaders

There was overwhelming consensus from participants that the study tour provided much needed rejuvenation. Participants expressed that it was particularly re-energizing to have time and space to focus on teaching and learning again after years of more non-teaching and learning COVID related focused work. One participant reflected that the study tour “revived, restored and refocused me to come back (to NSW) and focus on my core business.” There was a similar feeling by

participants that this kind of rejuvenating experience has a positive impact on the ability to be school leaders.

In addition to feeling rejuvenated, many participants expressed a feeling of improved confidence from the LEAP program. One participant shared that the SA study tour “gave me the confidence to take aspects from those schools that would work in my own context. I had felt quite jaded before the study tour but on my return in Term 2 I felt excited and equipped to move forward...” Another participant described that LEAP enabled her to: “build knowledge, develop capacity and raise my confidence in the directions I take the school.”

The confidence and rejuvenation were in part from the time and space to connect with likeminded professional colleagues facing similar challenges with similar goals. Participants felt kinship with one another, forging new lifelong networks and connections; which was another main positive takeaway from this study tour by participants.

Authentic peer networking and lifelong connections

Participants flourished under the conditions of being able to spend time with likeminded professional peers discussing issues that mattered to them. One participant reflected that a great benefit of the program was the opportunity for ideas to be shared, bounced around and developed.

Participant networking was enhanced by the collaborative comparisons with SA, as one participant described the experience as “a great two-way dialogue about similarities and differences within our schools, education departments’ policies and procedures and initiative priorities.” Other participants similarly appreciated and valued the opportunity for dynamic genuine peer learning and networking.

The connections that were forged during the experience were strong. As one participant said: “I know I can pick up the phone and call LEAP colleagues when I have a question, need professional advice or a sounding board... this is invaluable.” As another participant put it: “I started the trip knowing no one, and left with friends and mentors for life.”

Collaboration is a powerful force for positive school and system improvement. School leaders, especially in Australia

may feel pitted to compete against one another. Programs like the LEAP study tour remind leaders that they can connect, make change and are stronger together. One participant summed up this idea by reflecting that “the generosity of the schools that we visited in sharing resources and their time reinforced for me the necessity for school leaders to work collegially. This can happen across NSW networks or other states across Australia.”

Study tour food for thought

While this article focused on the impact of the LEAP study tour on study tour participants from NSW, it would be interesting to also explore impacts on the hosting study tour participants as well.

While this tour was focused on leadership and principals, it might also be worth considering if a similar type of program would be valuable for other school staff – teaching and administrative.