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## Exploring young level academic leadership

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### Abstract

Higher education institutions around the world have been experiencing pressures resulting in substantial changes. In this transformative era, successful functioning of the universities and maintaining their competitive advantage highly relies on the institutional level governance and the capacities of academic leaders at all levels. Despite some studies in senior and middle-level academic leadership, there is still scarcity of research on the young level academic leaders. Young level academic leaders are those who play a decisive role in both practices of department and research group running and teaching and research to promote the development of a new turn of higher education. They also constitute an important part of academic leaders as they have excelled competencies in welcoming change, inspiring, being receptive to feedback and setting stretch goals. However, they struggle to lead teaching programmes, course coordination and research projects in an era of ever-increasing impact of neo-liberalism in a more competitive environment. Therefore, this paper is intended to fill the gap to study the concepts, competencies and challenges of young academic leadership. As a concept paper, this study can offer us insights into understanding the concept of young academic leaders who possess a range of competencies and specific challenges. Moreover, it can serve as a stepping-stone for designing the leadership framework used in academic leadership development programs.

**Key words:** Young level academic leaders, concepts, competencies, challenges, strategies, leadership development

## Introduction

Leadership traits required to effectively lead organizations are the subject of considerable research and discussion (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans & May, 2004; Boyatzis, Passarelli, Koenig et al., 2012; Cuddy, Kohut & Neffinger, 2013; Dasborough, 2006; Einarsen, Aasland & Skogstad, 2007; Johnson, 2002; McKee & Massimilian, 2006). Similarly in higher education, studies of effective formal leadership and management traits confirm that leadership is crucial to improving the governance, learning, teaching, relevance and success of higher education institutions (Bolden, Petrov, Gosling & Bryman, 2009; Bryman, 2007, Middlehurst, 2008; Parrish, 2013; Ramsden, 1998; Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008). At the same time, academic leaders face greater pressure from students, parents, employers and taxpayers to produce a skilled workforce to meet the challenges of the 21st century (Hénard & Roseveare, 2012).

Despite the extensive literature on senior (rector, vice rector) or middle level academic leadership positions (dean, vice dean, head of department) in higher education, little is known about what young academic leadership means and what competences they need to develop and enact leadership (Juntrasook, Nairn, Bond & Spronken- Smith, 2013; Middlehurst, 2008). As the future of higher education institutions, young academic leaders are expected to flourish their ability to motivate others, establish high standards of expectations and performance, set clear goals, appreciate the team for the work they put in, and encourage people to challenge themselves to be able to perform the best of their potential (Bass, 1985). They are precious talents with a high knowledge level who provide creative labour and generally refer to those distinguished academics who make tremendous achievements. They are not only remarkable strategists and organizers but also talents who are able to develop a team (Morvenna Griffiths et al., 2000). Despite being leaders at a starting level with or without a mandate in the organizational structure, they are an important part of the core competitive strength and thus, universities can benefit from the advantage of their decisive role in both practices of the idea of department and research group running and the improvement of the quality of education and teaching (Zhang, 2013). Linked to those, it is more realized by the scholars that high quality education is only possible when young academic leaders cultivate their talents with solid foundation, brilliance, dedication and creativity (Fullan, 2002; Zhang, 2013). As they go through their leadership journey, they will come across many challenges such as financial, organizational, managerial and educational. They struggle to lead teaching programmes, course

coordination and research projects in an era of ever-increasing impact of neo-liberalism in a more competitive environment (Mercer, 2009). It is therefore timely to explore young academic leadership and its competences as well as consider their challenges they may face.

Thus, as a concept paper, this study aims to shed light on understanding the definitions of young level academic leadership, the capacities to operate successfully with others to achieve continuous improvement, the areas they struggle. The research objectives that guided this study are:

1. What does young academic leadership mean?
2. What competences do they have?
3. What challenges do they face?

### **The concept of young academic leadership**

Higher education institutions incorporate a variety of leadership roles, and they made a differentiation between those with formal line-management and budgetary control (vertical function) and those with more cross-cutting roles dependent on interpersonal and social influence (Bolden, Petrov & Gosling, 2008; Roberts et al., 2010). In general, literature focuses on the formal roles of senior level leaders (rector, vice rector) or middle level leaders (dean, vice dean, head of school, head of programme and director of teaching and learning) (Scott et al., 2008; Roberts et al., 2010). At the institutional level (Bolden et al., 2012), those leaders in senior or middle level positions mainly focus on administrative rules, tasks and functions to ensure the managerial goals of the organisation are met effectively (Ramsden, 1998). Their formal leadership responsibilities have significant influence on work culture, productivity and the power (Bryman, 2007). Similarly, they were considered to be inward focused to ensure the rules and policies were followed by staff, and to manage grievances. Leaders needed to be outward looking and have institutional credibility in order to create positive work environments for staff (Parrish, 2013; Bryman, 2007; Ramsden, 1998). The style of some senior and middle level leaders has been described as dictatorial, which directly influenced relationships with staff and the workplace culture (Hofmeyer, Sheingold, Klopper & Warland, 2015).

The literature excludes the individuals who may not occupy formal leadership positions but who enact it in their day-to-day work (Roberts et al., 2010) although there is an emergent view that leadership is everyone's responsibility (Bolden, Petrov & Gosling, 2008). As Bryman (2007) laments, very little is known about the variety of leadership roles that exist in universities at the departmental level. This shows that recent interest is in response to calls for more relevant democratic cultures and less hierarchical models of leadership (Lefoe, Harvey & Ryland, 2012). To that end, young level academic leadership is a term used to describe leadership that occurs purely through recognising and acting on opportunities without being in a formal managerial position or role (Roberts et al., 2010). This definition is close to that of Taylor (2008) who emphasizes on influence within the context of relationships between leaders and their collaborators. He also added that young level academic leadership involves establishing direction, aligning resources, generating motivation and providing inspiration to achieve mutual interests. Accordingly, young level academic leaders, those not in the formal leadership positions but recognized as leaders nevertheless, must rely on; less hierarchical models of leadership in higher education, such as distributed, collaborative, authentic models (Jones et al., 2012) rather than dominating or ordering; tactics available to formal leaders (Pielstick, 2000). Accordingly, they do not have such authority and power as senior or middle level leaders have.

As they are not selected and thereby very often do not have any positional authority, they take initiative to address a problem or institute a new programme and influence people around them through their personal expertise and practice (Wells, 2002; Maxwell, 2002). Similarly, for van Linden and Fertman (1998), young level academic leaders are those who think for themselves, communicate their thoughts, act on their own beliefs. At the same time, they are willing to help others influence them in an ethical and socially responsible way. Roach et al. (1999) supported this idea in their earlier study. They state that young level academic leaders are more interested in developing leadership in groups, rather than as an individual and that leadership is more about group participation and distribution of knowledge and skills in a collaborative way.

A further definition of young level academic leadership is given by Armstrong and Gough (2019). For them, young level academic leadership is the ability to work either individually or within a group to create ideas, take initiatives, influence, educate and motivate others and to undertake actions that will bring about change for a more sustainable future.

Zhang (2015) uses this term to refer to age. According to him, young level academic leaders are those at an age below 40 who are a particular high-end talented group and are the creators of high-quality education at universities (Zhang, 2015). The following definition by Dopson et al. (2018) is intended to emphasize the importance of leadership in complex organizational context of universities. Young level academic leaders, for them, is closer to the transformational model which involves projecting a vision and enrolling others into it; being sensitive to other people's needs; risk taking; unconventionality; and ethical behaviour. This definition accords with that of Bryman (2007, p.706) who suggests a participative leadership can be effective in HE as it "fosters a collegial atmosphere and advances a department's cause" (Bryman, 2007, p.706).

With the blossoming of studies on leadership in academic settings recently, a variety of definitions of the term young level academic leadership have been suggested from different aspects. Based on these conceptual studies, this paper will use a multi-dimensional definition instead of one single dimension. The authors have defined young level academic leaders as academic talents who perform or take up leadership roles spontaneously and organically with or without a mandate, who have distributed leadership properties evolving from within a networking group in the changing organizational context of universities. They are *emerging* leaders among professors, lecturers, researchers, PhD candidates, master students, etc. who perform and lead academic groups, in order to work within a group or academic organization, motivate others, facilitate the development of a new turn of higher education.

### **The capabilities of young academic leaders**

'Capability' describes the level of talent, gift or capacity required to differentiate high performers from those who are average and deliver innovations under testing, uncertain and constantly shifting human and technical situations (Boyatzis, 2008; Scott et al., 2008). It also goes beyond the minimum set of expectations for all employees, or those described as the "price for entry" (Marcus & Pringle, 1995; Aziz, 2018). In this sense, 'capability' is more linked to younger academic leadership with having the talent and capacity necessary to operate successfully with others to achieve continuous improvement and innovation with a focus of consensus (Scott et al., 2008). This view has links to that of Ramsden's (1998) observation that young leaders are more responsive, creative, contingent thinker in relatively uncertain cases with the idea of helping people through change and providing a vision for the future. In this

perspective, as the future of the higher education, young level academic leaders should have time, coaching, information, sharp observational and self-evaluation skills, emotional maturity, discipline, respect for others, a sense of timing, and perseverance to be able to lead and to be effective (Wells, 2002). Academic leaders have the cognitive ability to diagnose accurately what is happening when the unexpected occurs, to identify what the human as well as technical or administrative dimensions are, to determine if the problem is worth addressing in detail, and then having the ability to match an appropriate course of action to this diagnosis (Scott et al, 2008; Schön, 1983). Zenger and Folkman (2015) explore how those capabilities operate in young leaders. According to them, young level academic leaders excelled in challenging the status quo and looking for innovative ways to accomplish work more efficiently and productively. They also added that younger level academic leaders are good at setting stretch goals with a high need for achievement and putting all their energy into achieving their goals. Moreover, as they are more open, they ask for feedback about their performance more often and seek ways to create development opportunities and identify development resources (Wells, 2002).

It is important to bring together all of the capabilities above into a single, integrated picture of academic leadership capability. Thus, as Scot et al. (2008) and Dinh, Caliskan and Zhu (2019) reflected for academic leaders, young level academic leaders also have some of those capabilities which are personal/interpersonal capability, academic capability and leadership capability.

Linked to personal and interpersonal capability, it is important for young level academic leaders both to manage their own emotional reactions and to understand better what is happening around them. This is referred by Goleman (2008) as emotional intelligence to recognize their own feelings and motivate emotions in their relationships. In uncertain conditions, they are able to first to control their emotions by being creative, enthusiastic, honest, kind, calculative, open-minded, original because of their multiple roles as a researcher & teacher, consultant, entrepreneur, corporate trainer, independent director and case writer (Zafar et al., 2019). At such times it is important for young leaders to be selfless, responsible, problem solver, enabler. They create environments for both action and personal learning (Corriero, 2006). These traits showed a consistency with Rogers (2009)' s research identified several innate characteristics such as intelligence, wisdom and creativity. More specifically, young level academic leaders' interpersonal capabilities are based on shared needs, values and

beliefs than the vision of senior and middle level leaders. They also appear more to listen and understand others' needs. Thanks to the sense of inclusiveness, they tend to engage in interactive dialogue in which they seem more open to sharing, giving and receiving, accepting criticism and showing appreciation. As with communication, young level academic leaders appear more likely to be inclusive by fully engaging others, collaborating with them, and recognizing their needs. They seem more empathetic and respectful towards others (Pielstick, 2009). These interpersonal capabilities are similar to the ones in Scott et al. (2008)'s study that seemed to have been learnt empathising, listening to others, motivating, influencing others around you.

Moving now on to leadership capability, the research endorses the view that authentic or distributed leadership competencies have proven to be the most important leadership capacities (Zhu & Zayim-Kurtay, 2018; Bryman, 2007). Challenging the view of formal appointed leaders (Pearce & Conger 2003), young level academic leaders focus on the mechanisms through which diverse individuals contribute to the process of leadership in shaping collective action. Additionally, to deal with the growing complexities of higher education and to sustain their competitiveness, they increasingly depend on their cross-functional, self-managing work-teams (Cummings & Worley 2004). Instead of traditional leader-centric approaches, young academic leaders lead team in a distributed way to involve matters ranging from new product development to implementing organizational change (Thamhain 2004). They behave not as a dominant character but the one who may have more experience, as a result, knowledge work becomes more team based and requires the coordination and integration of the expertise of different people (Pearce 2004). Young level academic leaders, without any given power and authority, always trust and respect contributions, collaborate together to achieve identified goals. Through shared and active engagement, young academic leadership can result in the development of leadership capacity to sustain improvements of higher education (Jones et al., 2011).

Regarding academic capacity, young level academic leaders are grounded both in demonstrating teaching excellence and recognizing the learning programs, as well as in applying, engaging in, and disseminating research and scholarship related to teaching and learning. With learning-centred approaches to teaching, these leaders facilitate learning processes and break down barriers to learning in order to improve students for a better future (Weimer, 2013). They are also expected to be skilled at the delivery of social services, which

encompass essential functions such as bringing resources, increasing access to research collaborators, being productive, and popularity in the market (Dinh et al., 2019).

## **Challenges**

Many universities are challenged by the increasing diversity of students that has resulted from the increasing share of young people enrolling in higher education along with more mature students as well. At the same time, institutions are coming under greater public pressure to demonstrate that they are preparing their graduates for the labour market and to show what value students will get in return for the cost of their education – whether paid for by the student or the taxpayer (Hénard & Roseveare, 2012). Young academic leaders working below the level of middle level academic leaders (Mercer, 2009) come across many different bridges and as they cross those bridges. The challenges covered in this study are financial (resources), organizational (being flexible, adapting to changes), managerial (the demands of leadership itself) and educational (the balance between teaching and research).

Due to the reduced government funding and increased accountability, young level academic leaders have to compete for financial matters. They meet with difficulties in gaining resources and funds, deal with paperwork and retain quality staff (Cohen, 2004; Ramsden, 1998; Drew, 2010). Indeed, their leadership competencies and experience would not be adequate to deal with the magnitude or complexity of these problems, (Gardner & Howard, 1998). Additionally, some of them may become overwhelmed with lack of funding, political, social, economic forces and changes within the context of universities (Dopson et al., 2018).

They also have to deal with the challenges in organizational issues. Their inability to be flexible and adaptable to the changes can be barrier to meet the demands of an increasingly complex, dynamic and changing university context because of Neo-liberalist ideologies and New Managerialism notion (Hanna, 2003; Huisman, 2016). In this regard, they have difficulty in engaging their teammates in change and innovation, thus they have to build robust capacity in others to accept and adapt to change (Zenger & Folkman, 2016). They may face new issues and challenges where their leadership competencies and experience would not be adequate to deal with the magnitude or complexity of the problems, and their inability to handle or manage an increase in workload and responsibilities (Gardner & Howard, 1998). Concurred with Drew



(2010), young level academic leaders should have the courage in leadership to think and act creatively, to take considered risks and to help staff deal with the impact of change.

In terms of educational challenges in the balance between teaching and research, they have to respond to tensions (Drew, 2010). Over the past thirty to forty years, as universities grew in size and complexity, young leaders have over-work loaded in the balance between research and teaching as well as the intensification of academic work (Mercer, 2009). Linked to that, they face challenges in helping students develop both knowledge and values as well as equipping them for the changing context of universities (Drew, 2010). Because they can be looked on as spiritual guides, as mentors, as teachers, as inspirers, as models (Wells, 2002). Regarding research, the barrier is to have research capacity through rigorous inquiry that yields peer-reviewed, published works at national and international levels in a limited time (Fields et al., 2019). Research expertise can act as a barrier for young level academic leaders due to the current forces of change present in most academic organizations (Evans, 2015; Scott et al., 2008).

## **Conclusion**

Due to the presence of vast amounts of scholarly work on senior level and middle level academic leaders, exploring young level academic leadership in a holistic presentation utilized in this study provided a deeper understanding about the concept of young level academic leaderships, competencies to be an effective leader and the current challenges they encounter.

In this study, we first suggest that young level academic leadership is an emerging position which affect and enhance the colleagues' teaching and learning experiences. This study also reveals young level academic leaders ensure that task gets done without problems, help transforming attitude and behaviour and motivate the people. In addition, they improve the opportunities, satisfaction and outcomes for potential academic leaders (Samman, 2018). This conceptual paper has put forth a definition of young level academic leadership based on the literature from multi-dimensional aspects. Young level academic leaders are those who are under middle level academic leaders who emerge spontaneously and organically from professors, lecturers, researchers, PhD candidates, master's students. They are emerging leaders in the hierarchical structure, leaders at a starting level with or without a mandate

representing distributed or authentic leadership qualifications in order to work within a group or individually, motivate others and facilitate the development of higher education. This definition, on the one hand, complements some of the studies in literature. On the other hand, it lays emphasis on young academic leadership concept in multi-dimensional elements which may be related to age or not, the level with or without a mandate in the changing organizational context of universities. In other words, this conceptualization provides researchers with a comprehensive notion of academic leadership that moves beyond individual leaders and involves leadership processes in the changing HE settings in more relational and contextual terms. Additionally, when this term is put together with senior level and middle level academic leaders, there are both overlapping and diversifying elements. In terms of overlapping elements, all the academic leaders in a university context need to stay close to teaching, learning, research and scholarship to bring out the best without considering the formal or emerging leadership position (Sathye, 2004). However, on the one front, as formal leaders in vertical university structure, senior and middle level academic leaders have to deal with a diversified cohorts of people constituting academic, administrative, technical and other supporting staff and students as well, on the other hand they have to deal with complexities of administration, finance, and academic and a plethora of other issues in managing the university (Pani, 2017). In the future, this study may provide a starting step for empirical researches in conceptualizing academic leadership in general and academic leadership in different levels.

Secondly, our study reveals that an effective young level academic leader has the ability to support his/her vision, develop effective relation and consensus among team members and convince others by discussing the plan which is proposed to bring improvement and changes in academic system. They have capabilities in diagnosing what is happening around them and they do not allow setbacks to inhibit their initiatives (Zafar et al., 2019). These capabilities to streamline processes, adapt and innovate are critical for all leadership levels in the current complex university leadership environment (Cohen, 2004; Hanna, 2003). To expand their roles, all the academic leaders have to possess some capabilities such as creativity, enthusiasm, honesty, humour, kindness, listening, calculative, open-mindedness, originality, perseverance, problem solving, reading, writing, social studies, sportive, positive work ethics and teamwork (Zafar, Hmedat, Chaubey & Rehman, 2019).

In contrast to the researches mentioned above, this study moreover allows for the fact that young level academic leaders should possess personal capability to control their own

emotions by being creative and open-minded (Scott et al., 2008); interpersonal capability to empathise, listen to and motivate others when compared with senior or middle level academic leaders (Zafar et al., 2019). They are more open to sharing, engaging, collaborating and communicating with others than senior and middle level academic leaders (Pielstick, 2000). Specifically, senior level and middle level academic leaders have significant influence over the culture and the power to determine how teaching workloads were distributed, adjusted and rewarded (Hofmeyer et al., 2015; Bryman, 2007). They have more management capabilities to entwine and ensure the governance and administrative functions with an inward focus. This calls in the literature for less hierarchical models of leadership in higher education, such as distributed, collaborative models (Jones et al., 2012) with a capacity to bring people together and influence their movement towards change, integrity and collective goal achievement (Boyatzis et al., 2012; Avolio et al., 2004). Apart from these capabilities, young level academic leaders' interpersonal capabilities are based on shared needs, values and beliefs. They are more open to sharing, engaging, collaborating and communicating with others than senior and middle level academic leaders (Pielstick, 2000). Thus, this study offers a framework for future research on developing a research tool and investigating academic leadership competencies in different levels in empirical studies.

As a last point, we identified a group of matters that challenge the young level academic leaders face in financial, organizational, managerial and educational aspects (Zenger & Folkman, 2015; Hannum et al., 2011). The challenges are an indication to rise to another level, to test themselves and improve in the process, and to show that they can accomplish some strategies to overcome those challenges (Shree & Srivastava, 2019). Relevant studies show that senior level or middle level academic leaders may be trapped by similar challenges (Min, 2015; Scott et al., 2008; Gmelch & Burns, 1993; Creswell et al., 1990).

More specifically, high importance given to more managerial and entrepreneurial departmental objectives may reflect the emergence of 'managerialism' in the governance and direction of universities (Sotirakou, 2004; Huisman, 2016). It is the point at which the roles of senior level academic leaders change from tasks, such as research and teaching, in which scholars have had years of training and practice, to those in which they may have precious little prior experience and expertise. This position requires new skills in media and crisis management, fundraising, industrial relations, financial management and the principles of governance (Bebbington, 2018). Additionally, reduced state funding and accompanied efforts

to raise alternative funding options, rising importance of accountability, changing demography, growing demands for higher education, and excessive privatization and marketization of higher education are among the most mentioned challenges by the scholars (Scott et al., 2008; Keller 2007).

Under the recent pressures on HEIs for stronger institutional management and the resulting loss of departmental power in favour of the institution, middle level academic leadership position may be characterized by high levels of role conflict. It is argued that they must serve as buffers between the various conflicting forces stemming from the different internal operation modes and managing the academic, the state and the market forces effectively (Gmelch & Burns, 1993).

In coming to an understanding of the challenges, there are some good reasons to suspect that academic leaders in all levels are somewhat more stressful today than they have been in the past (Pulkkinen et al., 2019; Blackburn et al., 1986). In this regard, developing young level academic leaders both in professional and personal aspects is as important as making profits to organizations because young leaders brings in new ideas, use their energies and youthfulness to aggressively pursue organizational goals and ensure credible succession thereby guaranteeing not growth but survival (Musa & Ali, 2018). Higher education should strive to develop academic leadership practice to engage institutions and their faculties in coping with changes in order to respond effectively to complex educational, social, political, economic and globalisation concerns (Wisniewski, 2006). Considerably more work will need to be done to determine different needs of academic leaders in all levels and to enable stronger linkages to the real work context.