In Search of academic leadership

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Abstract
Motivated by the need to clarify what senior colleagues meant by "academic leadership" when asked to design a program to develop academic leaders in their university, the authors sought guidance from their colleagues and the literature. However, an extensive literature review and semi-structured interviews with a range of academic staff within their institution revealed a lack of consensus as to the meaning of academic leadership. Despite this, some interesting issues emerged from the interviews. These included consistent differences between the views of those in formal positions of management responsibility within the institution and those of the 'rank and file'. Advice from interview participants suggested that any developmental activities that ignored these different perceptions were sure to be unsuccessful. In addition to reporting the results of the literature review and interviews, this paper begins to explore a definition of academic leadership which embraces these multiple perspectives. Further, it discusses the implications of such a definition for academic leadership development.

Introduction
We use it every day. We agree on the need for it in our everyday conversations. We include requirements for it in the position and classification descriptions of senior academic staff. We exhort others (particularly those in senior management positions in our institutions) to demonstrate more of it, and we express dismay at the apparent lack of it in our institutions and departments. But what is 'it'?

- What do we understand academic leadership to be?
- Do we all understand 'it' in the same way?
- Do we all expect the same thing when we call upon our colleagues to be academic leaders?
- How can/should we develop it?

This paper reports on the preliminary findings of a study designed to explore these questions.

Background
Motivated by the need to design a program to develop 'academic leaders', the authors sought guidance from the higher education literature to clarify what was meant by 'academic leadership.'

Much has been written over the years about the centrality and importance of 'academic leadership' to the success of higher education institutions (see for example the work of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990; UCoSDA, 1994; the Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education Management, 1995) and numerous articles and texts have been produced in efforts to investigate and discuss the nature of the concept (see...
for example, Middlehurst, 1993; Leaming, 1998; Ramsden, 1998; Blackmore & Sachs, 2000). However, from even a cursory look at this extensive literature, it soon becomes apparent that the term, while frequently used, is neither consistently used nor defined.

In some texts (e.g., Gmelch & Miskin, 1993; Leaming, 1998; Hecht, et al., 1999) the term 'academic leadership' has been used to describe a collection of tasks or functions performed by individuals appointed to formal positions of responsibility within universities. Most notably, these individuals populate the academic positions of Vice Chancellor, Dean, and/or Head of Discipline/Department.

In other texts, the term is used to describe the qualities or characteristics of particular individuals who are recognised by others as being academic leaders (e.g., Fisher & Koch, 1996; Ramsden, 1998).

In yet others, the term is used to describe anyone who holds an academic appointment. In such texts (e.g., Trowler, 1998; Taylor, 1999), all academics are considered to be academic leaders as they are assumed to be at the forefront of their discipline, and active in the definition of future directions and strategies within their academic programs and research.

While these differences in conceptualisation make the concept of 'academic leadership' elusive, they are not surprising for they reflect some of the many theoretical approaches that have been used to define leadership in the broader social context. As summarised by Middlehurst (1993), these approaches have included:

- **Trait theories** - where leadership has been considered to be linked to the personal qualities of an individual. From this perspective, leadership can be defined in terms of personal qualities and characteristics such as intelligence, charisma, decisiveness, enthusiasm, strength, bravery, integrity, self confidence, and so on. (pp. 13-14)

- **Behavioural theories** - where leadership has been associated with an individual's behaviour and/or style. For example, Bowers & Seashore (1966) have argued that leadership is characterised by four particular types of behaviour:
  - Support or behaviour that enhances the followers' sense of worth
  - Interaction facilitation or behaviour that builds close, mutually satisfying group relationships
  - Goal emphasis or behaviour that stimulates commitment to the achievement of goals, including high levels of performance
  - Work facilitation or behaviour that provides the technical and organisational means for goal accomplishment (i.e., planning, coordination, organisation).

- **Contingency theories** - where the patterns of leadership behaviour and/or qualities necessary for effective performance have been thought to vary between different contexts. For example, as Fiedler (1967) has suggested, the degree of influence that a leader can exercise depends on 'situational favourableness'. That is, on three factors:
  - the quality of relationships between the leader and members of the workgroup
  - the degree of task structure (the extent to which tasks are clear and unambiguous)
  - the position of the leader within the organisation.

- **Power and influence theories** - where leadership has been considered to be a function of an individual's capacity to use power to influence others' thinking and behaviour. The source of the power that a leader may exercise may vary. A leader may have:
- **Legitimate** power - due to the legitimacy they are accorded as a result of the position that they hold within a particular social system
- **Reward** power - due to their ability to provide rewards
- **Coercive** power - due to their ability to threaten punishments
- **Expert** power - due to their knowledge and expertise
- **Referent** power - due to their personalities and the extent to which others like them or identify with them. (pp. 30-31)

- **Cultural and symbolic theories** - where leadership has been considered to be about the management of meaning. Leaders offer ways of finding meaningful patterns in the behaviour of others and help to develop common understandings about the nature of reality both within and outside their organisation. Leadership may be associated with different stages of organisational development:
  - The *establishment of culture* in a new organisational unit
  - The *maintenance and reinforcement of culture* in a thriving operation
  - The *transformation of culture* at times of organisational stagnation or decline or in response to new situations. (pp. 36-37)

As if the level of conceptual confusion between each of the above-mentioned approaches to the definition of academic leadership is not enough, a number of authors (e.g., Seagren, Creswell, & Wheeler, 1993; Gmelch & Miskin, 1993; Hecht, et al., 1999) have followed Kotter's (1990) lead and drawn distinctions between 'academic leadership' and 'academic management'. These distinctions highlight the entrepreneurial and pastoral roles of academic leaders, and the planning, coordination and control responsibilities of academic managers.

But what do our academic co-workers think? How do they conceptualise academic leadership?

Before trying to define a program for the development of academic leaders on the basis of these many different approaches to the definition of the concept, the authors believed that it was important to develop an understanding of how these theoretically derived definitions compared with those of the staff calling for the introduction of such a program, and those for whom the proposed program would be developed.

Consequently, the authors undertook to investigate the ways in which staff of their University understood the concept of academic leadership.

**Research Method**

Since the development of universal, law-like generalisations was not the purpose of this study, but rather the development of an empathetic understanding of the concept of academic leadership based upon the understandings of their University colleagues, the authors decided that a 'naturalistic inquiry' of the type defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), and based on qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis, would be appropriate.

Consequently, the authors conducted two focus groups with academic staff (less than six in each case) at the levels of Professor/ Head of Department/ Head of Division, and senior lecturer. Each group discussion was guided by the single question, 'What does "academic leadership" mean to you?" Focus group interviews were audiotape-recorded with the permission of participants and the data collected thereon analysed by the authors individually and collectively. Having listened to the interviews and developed their own understandings of the participants' comments, the authors discussed these understandings with each other,
returning to the tapes where necessary to ensure that they agreed with the interpretations made.

**Focus group outcomes**

Outcomes from the two focus groups will be described separately: firstly, outcomes from the group consisting of senior lecturers (Focus Group One), and then the group comprising professors who were also Heads of Departments or Divisions (Focus Group Two).

**Focus Group One**

It was clear that members of this group did not come to the focus group with a clear understanding of the meaning of academic leadership. They were, in fact, somewhat puzzled as to the purpose of the discussion, and why they (as members of the University's staff not in management positions) should be expected to have a view. Nevertheless, as the discussion progressed, it became apparent that each individual had an implicit understanding of the concept and that discussion enabled them to explore this concept further.

Initial reactions within the group were almost universal with the view that they had not experienced much in the form of academic leadership from senior academics. Most often leadership from senior academics had been observed or experienced as involving "signing forms" or "advising on ethical or legal issues in assessment".

However, in teasing out the meaning created by placing the word ‘academic’ with ‘leadership’, the group came up with concepts, partly based on examining their own ideas, and partly from looking at the elements they sought when they were seeking leadership from others. They became aware that they and others exercised academic leadership in different ways in different situations.

The group agreed that academic leadership was evident in their own work and that of others in their departments in the following ways. A person could exercise leadership when:

- being a research supervisor, facilitating and encouraging people to achieve their goals;
- introducing students to the scholarship of academic work;
- coordinating a large course unit, building community among lecturers and tutors;
- taking an active interest in people, giving advice and support to help them achieve their academic goals;
- mentoring younger members of staff, being supportive;
- leading by example – being effective in their work;
- being available; and
- being generous with their time and expertise.

When they considered what should characterise persons in formal leadership roles, the group focused on matters to do with human relationships. They wanted an academic leader to be supportive of staff, to build community, to be proactive and to have the courage to ‘call it as they see it’. They were mainly thinking about the roles of Heads of Department when they developed these ideas.

**Being supportive of staff** was exemplified by valuing what people do and having a genuine regard for diversity. They believed that leaders should recognise that there are different ways of being an academic and see difference as positive. This would mean not privileging one aspect of academic work over another, which they believed is so often done. Being supportive would mean positively assisting colleagues to work better in ways which would be visible to them. The group believed this would impact positively on the department.
Building community was regarded as important in fostering an environment where people developed attitudes of responsibility and mentoring for each other; something they believed occurred rarely in university departments. It would be manifest in creating informal and formal forums for discussion and ensuring there is the opportunity for reflection and planning. They believed this could be achieved by means of having regular discussions among staff, staff morning teas and planning retreats. In this way there would be occasions for collaborative discussion of issues to do with teaching, research and service, thus building the culture of the department.

By being proactive the group meant that leaders should be able to convey a sense of progress to their colleagues. This would entail transcending the problems associated with current efforts to restructure the University and its academic departments, and the malaise that has often accompanied it, and looking positively at ways to move forward. To build community and to enable a department to move forward, leaders need to be trusted by colleagues, however. Academic leaders would need to ensure tangible outcomes of planning retreats and forums in order for staff to cooperate and trust the leader’s commitment to them. Leaders thus need to be capable of earning the respect of their colleagues, though not necessarily needing to be liked by them.

Having courage was raised as a necessary attribute of the effective academic leader. This meant that leaders should be purposive and professional about their role in relation to staff, not leaving things to chance. They should take on the responsibility to give both positive and negative feedback when necessary to ensure staff meet professional standards; they need the courage to bring people to task. Being professional about their role means leaders are deliberate in having strategies to find out about staff needs, how much support they need and their professional development needs.

Problems in achieving academic leadership

When asked to think about someone they recognised to be an academic leader, the group had difficulty coming up with examples. They believed that on the whole the university culture does not foster the kind of qualities they described above, although these were the qualities they were looking for in leaders. Because the academic culture is one of individualism, they believed academics are not comfortable with taking responsibility for, or giving feedback to, their colleagues on their work. In their experience people appointed to leadership roles do not have a professional attitude to their role – their professionalism as academics is mainly expressed in their research and scholarship. Because of this they noted that academics usually do not see the need for training in leadership. One member of the group remarked that academic leadership 'is not an issue in our department', meaning that it was not even considered or discussed.

Focus Group Two

This group had no real questions as to why they had been invited to participate in the study - as professors in formal management positions (Head of Department/ Division) they assumed that they held leadership roles. The discussion largely centred on their experiences and concerns relating to their own roles as academic leaders. The initial conversation focussed strongly on what the group considered to be the impossibility of the University's expectations of them. They felt that it might be possible to do either the strategic and administrative work related to their formal roles as heads, or to do the research expected of them as senior academics, but not to fulfil both roles.
It was clear that the group saw a difference between *academic leadership* and *management*, though there was some discussion about the exact nature of the difference, and the group agreed with one member’s suggestion that the terms are often used interchangeably. For this group, the most immediately relevant difference between the two terms was that while *leaders* establish goals, *managers* manage resources. This arose from their experience that the University sees leadership as distinct from management, as it directs resources to those in what it calls *management* positions, and not to the areas where it expects *leadership* to be exercised. The group considered that, in order to exercise leadership, they needed some control of resources. Further, they saw that a leader needs at least a minimal amount of ‘charisma’, while a manager does not.

The group agreed that leadership is not necessarily vested in any formal position – it is ‘a quality, not a function’, as one person said. It should be acknowledged that they did not devote much discussion time to this point, as their main focus was on issues related to their own roles in formal leadership positions.

The group also agreed that leadership exists in a context, and may mean different things in different contexts. For instance, academic leadership as exercised by a Head of Department may be different from academic leadership exercised by a program director. A discussion about whether a person who is an excellent researcher would be an example of an academic leader illustrated this point. Group members said that while a person may qualify as a leader in their own field, because of their research capacity, that did not equate to being an ‘academic leader’ in a broader sense. The person would need to be able to demonstrate some other qualities, for instance at least some ‘charisma’.

Amongst the qualities which an academic leader might be expected to have is a ‘quality of excellence’. An academic leader should be someone who stands out from others, and should be a role model, whom others aspire to emulate. To be effective, academic leaders need to have the trust of other staff; it must be possible to have faith in them. They are people with ideas and more particularly, with the ‘spark of vision’; but it is also the role of a leader to foster and champion the ideas and vision of *others*. That is, leaders should not isolate themselves from their colleagues, or necessarily expect to have all the answers themselves; they need to be open to input. The group felt that it was the role of an academic leader to 'stay ahead of the game', that is, to think and act strategically in terms of ensuring access to information, being aware of the environment, and maintaining a capacity to seize and exploit opportunities.

The discussion touched briefly on this group's expectations of what academic leadership at institutional level could mean. They felt it important that, at the most senior levels of the University, an academic leader should be someone who could generate a sense of commitment to the intellectual life and vitality of the whole institution. (It is interesting to note that they did not discuss this in relation to their own formal leadership roles; although it reflects the comments made by members of Focus Group One when they discussed what they expected from an academic leader.)

**Problems in achieving academic leadership**

Various barriers to the exercise of academic leadership were mentioned during the course of the discussion. For instance, as noted before, the group felt that the University's expectations of those in formal leadership positions were impossible to achieve, because the roles outlined for them were too large. Additionally, those in formal leadership positions may not be given control over resources. Some saw the academic environment itself as encompassing
contradictions and potential barriers to academic leadership. They instanced the lack of hierarchical structures in universities compared with the corporate sector, with the result that academics are reluctant to be subject to authority. This is compounded by the fact that some academic disciplines require academics to act as individuals, leading their own fields in new directions. Balancing this are traditional notions of collegiality, which, presuming a collaborative style of working, do not support the idea of being led or requiring academic leadership.

**Discussion**

Clear similarities and differences in understanding of the nature of academic leadership exist between the two focus groups involved in this study. The similarities include:

- making a distinction between the roles of academic leaders and those of academic managers
- distinguishing between people- and task-focussed activities
- distinguishing between focussing on the future, change and uncertainty, and focussing on the present, predictability, and order.

The differences relate to the way in which each group emphasised different roles, activities and foci as those being most important to the exercise of academic leadership.

From the points of view of those involved in both groups, academic leaders focus on people, tasks and the future. Academic managers, on the other hand focus on managing and coordinating present daily activities.

However, participants in Focus Group One clearly understood both these leadership and management roles to be focussed on people. Participants in Focus Group Two discussed the focus of academic leaders and managers in ways which concentrated on task.

According to Ramsden (1998), there are four principal domains in which academic leaders and managers operate (see Figure 1). These are defined by juxtaposing Kotter's (1990) distinction between leadership and management with Fiedler's (1967) distinction between concern for people and concern for tasks.

The top left hand sector in the resulting four-section grid is, according to Ramsden (1998), the realm of academic entrepreneurialism. It is the realm in which academic leaders proactively seek to build a sense of commitment among their colleagues to a particular vision or view of the future. This is the realm in which participants in Focus Group Two see academic leaders as 'staying ahead of the game' by thinking and acting strategically and ensuring that they and their colleagues are aware of their environment and have a capacity to seize and exploit opportunities.

The top right hand sector is the zone of leadership of academic people, a region of transformational leadership or leadership that provides individualised consideration and intellectual stimulation. It is the zone in which the participants in Focus Group Two see academic leaders as exercising their interpersonal knowledge and skills to build community, support staff, and lead by example. It is the zone in which academic leaders become meaning makers, assisting others to understand and pro-actively respond to the changing nature of the organisational environments in which they operate.
The bottom right-hand quadrant encloses the region of people management. This is the realm of activity identified by participants in both Focus Group One and Focus Group Two in which individuals fulfil their functions as academic managers by focussing their attention on the supervision of staff, the management of staff performance, staff development, and the hundred-and-one other industrial matters associated with the management of staff. It is in this realm of activity that academic managers provide staff with feedback, help them to set goals for the future and to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to realise those goals; it is the realm in which rewards and recognition for and/or of performance are vital management tools.

The bottom left hand corner contains the region of management of academic tasks - a realm of activity identified by participants in Focus Group Two as being fundamental to the academic leadership and management roles. Activities associated with the realm of academic tasks were identified by participants in Focus Group One as being planning new courses and programs, budgeting, staffing, providing suitable resources, monitoring performance, coordinating tutors, and assuring quality.

Clearly, the understandings of academic leadership and management held by participants in this study are generally consistent with Ramsden's (1998) model. However, as suggested above, significant differences in emphasis on the focus, roles and activities of academic leaders exist between the participants in the two focus groups. Participants in Focus Group One clearly understood the focus of academic leaders and managers to be on people, while those in Focus Group Two understood the focus of academic leaders and managers to be on task.
Implications for academic development
The views of the participants in the two focus groups have significant implications for academic developers responsible for developing academic leaders and academic leadership skills. The contrast between the perspectives of the two groups gives room for pause and the issues raised by each group need to be canvassed more widely among the academic community, both by those in leadership roles and staff at all levels of responsibility.

Any attempt to develop ideas of academic leadership will need to encourage people to look outside their own immediate contexts, and more broadly than their own pressing needs, concerns and areas of discontent. The inclusion of multiple perspectives in such a program would enrich both leaders and followers, by exposure to the views and perspectives of the other. It would alert leaders in formal roles to the needs of those for whom they are responsible, and would enable the latter group to understand the difficulties inherent in the formal roles, especially at a time of structural change and external pressures on the University.

During the focus groups it became apparent that people clarified and even shifted their understandings as a result of the process of discussing academic leadership. The process, though entered into as a research exercise that would inform development, in fact became a development exercise in itself.

From this experience the authors conclude that the most effective way forward would be to continue the process of conducting focus groups. This would continue to enrich our attempts to define academic leadership in a grounded way, based on the perceptions of the staff among whom we work, but would also be a developmental activity, leading to raising consciousness among the leaders and the led and a sense of ownership by the University community.

Further dissemination and discussion of the issues arising in these discussions could occur through:
- publishing occasional articles in Staff News, the fortnightly University staff publication;
- introducing the outcomes for discussion in the Special Interest Group established this year as a forum for leaders in the formal role of head of department.

Extending the debate to the executive level would be useful as a means of raising the issues coming from all levels of the University with them. As one of the members of Focus Group Two suggested, leadership behaviour filters down through an organisation, and good ideas are more likely to occur if fostered at every level.

Hopefully an outcome from the continuation of this debate across the University would lead, not only to a more grounded definition of academic leadership, but also to the development of 'criteria by which we judge whether we're doing it well', as suggested by another Focus Group Two member.

Undoubtedly more issues relating to the definition of academic leadership will emerge with the inclusion of a wider sample of academic staff, including the perspective of the University's executive staff. Although these findings are preliminary, and will be followed up with further investigations, it seems clear any professional development program, if it is to be successful, will require the capacity to accommodate the multiple perspectives of different groups of staff.
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References


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