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Mentor or manager: perspectives of distributed leadership in a UK

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**Leadership
Foundation**

for Higher Education

Context

- HEIs reflecting on the need for flexible leadership models to help adapt and react to the quickly changing academic environment (Flumerfelt & Banachowski, 2011; Osseo-Asare, Longbottom, & Chourides, 2007; Randall & Coakley, 2007).
- Rapid shifts in the higher education sector are contributing to a kaleidoscopic ‘supercomplexity’ (Barnett, 2000) of challenges, structures, processes and value frameworks for academics who lead and for those who are led.

Key Questions

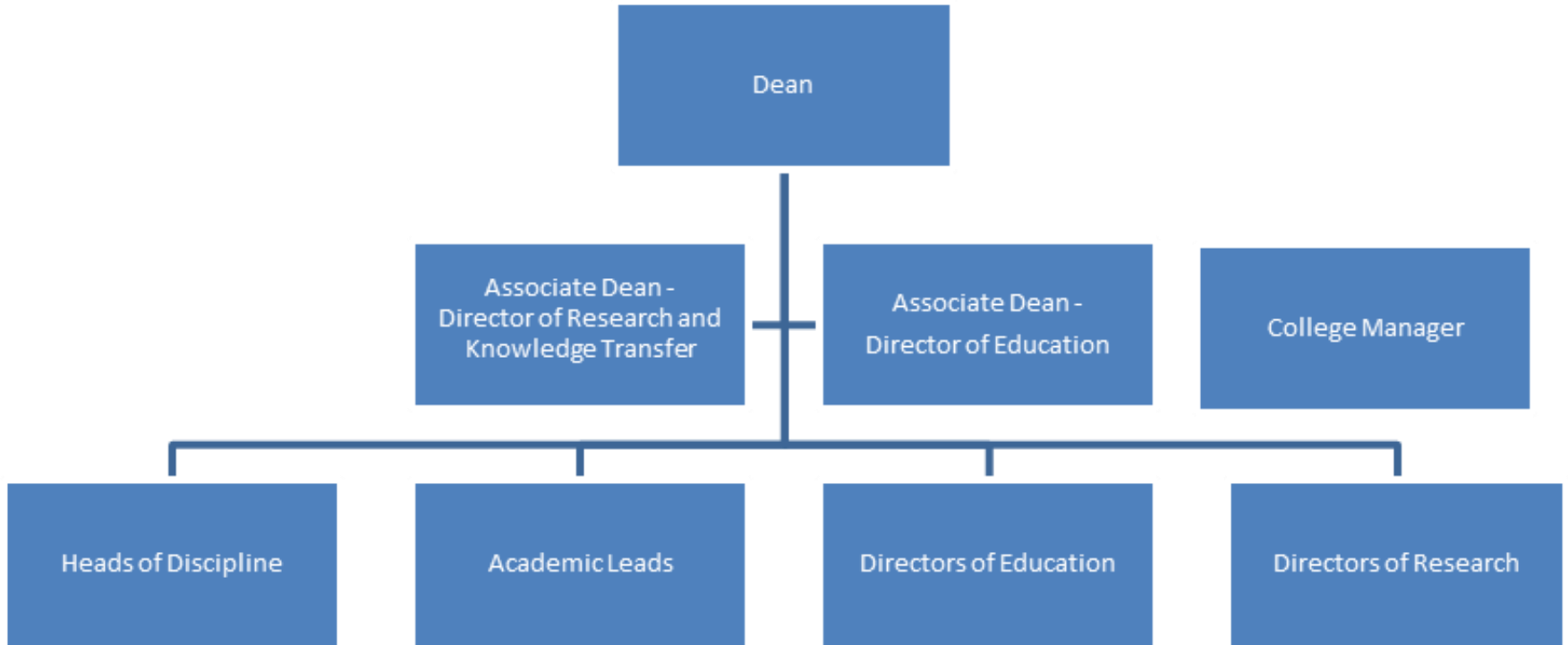
- How are such institutions' leadership structures and roles developing in response to these changes?
- How do these responses affect academic staff in relation to their identity, status and career?



Study Background

- The new Academic Lead (AL) role was introduced to the case study University in 2010 as part of its re-structuring from subject-based Schools into larger Colleges.
- Role was designed to be two-fold.
 - Representation on the College Management Group, ALs to engage with College wide decision-making.
 - Each AL to provide leadership, guidance, support and advice to a group of individual academic colleagues in their discipline or subject grouping (PDRs).

College Management Structure



Project Aims

- To explore the perceptions and experiences of academics who have taken on the role of ‘Academic Lead’ (AL) within the case study University.
 - Why they have taken on the role?
 - What are their experiences of being in the role?
 - What are their perceptions and experiences of the PDR process?
- To explore how academics assigned to an Academic Lead perceive and experience this relationship.
 - What are their perceptions and experiences of the PDR process?

Theoretical Framework

- At the institutional level, we draw on ideas of distributed leadership (see Gronn, 2008) to explore the model that has been introduced.
- While the concept of distributed leadership has been widely used in school leadership research, it has been less widely applied to research exploring the higher education sector (Bryman, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

- At the level of the individual academic, we draw on a conceptual framework based on the interplay between concepts of socialisation, identity and career trajectory.
- This framework has been used in previous research investigating the academic HoD (Floyd, 2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2013).

Methods

- Embedded mixed methods design, where the whole study was framed within a Humanistic philosophical framework (Newby, 2010).
- Specifically, we used an exploratory, sequential mixed methods design (Cresswell, 2014) where qualitative data are gathered and analysed first, before quantitative data are collected from a larger sample size.

Methods – Stage 1

- Stage 1 - interviews with 15 ALs and 15 assigned academics, from across the Colleges.
- The sample contained male (ALs = 9; AAs = 8) and female (ALs = 6; AAs = 7) staff with a range of ages and levels of experience.
- Each participant interviewed for approx 1 hour and interviews recorded and transcribed.
- Interview data supplemented with the analysis of key strategic documents linked to governance arrangements and working practices.

Academic Leads			Assigned Academics		
Name	Age	Domain	Name	Age	Domain
Arthur	33	Natural Sciences	Amy	32	Social Sciences
Brandon	60	Natural Sciences	Bert	35	Natural Sciences
Chris	55	Social Sciences	Clare	57	Humanities
Diane	49	Social Sciences	Harold	39	Natural Sciences
Evelyn	53	Social Sciences	James	35	Social Sciences
Francis	60	Humanities	Jane	45	Social sciences
George	35	Social Sciences	John	37	Social Sciences
Howard	44	Humanities	Katherine	52	Natural Sciences
Ian	49	Natural Sciences	Matthew	31	Humanities
Jack	39	Humanities	Nick	41	Social sciences
Kendra	50	Humanities	Ruth	28	Natural Sciences
Lisa	54	Social Sciences	Sophie	39	Natural Sciences
Martin	65	Social Sciences	Sylvia	44	Social Sciences
Nel	47	Humanities	Tobias	35	Humanities
Oliver	64	Social Sciences	Terry	54	Social Sciences

Methods - Stage 2

- Survey of all academics using an online questionnaire which was based on themes and issues emanating from the first stage of the project
- Expected number of respondents: 1034
- Number of respondents: 177
- Response rate: 17.1%



Figure 2 - Survey Breakdown by Role and Gender

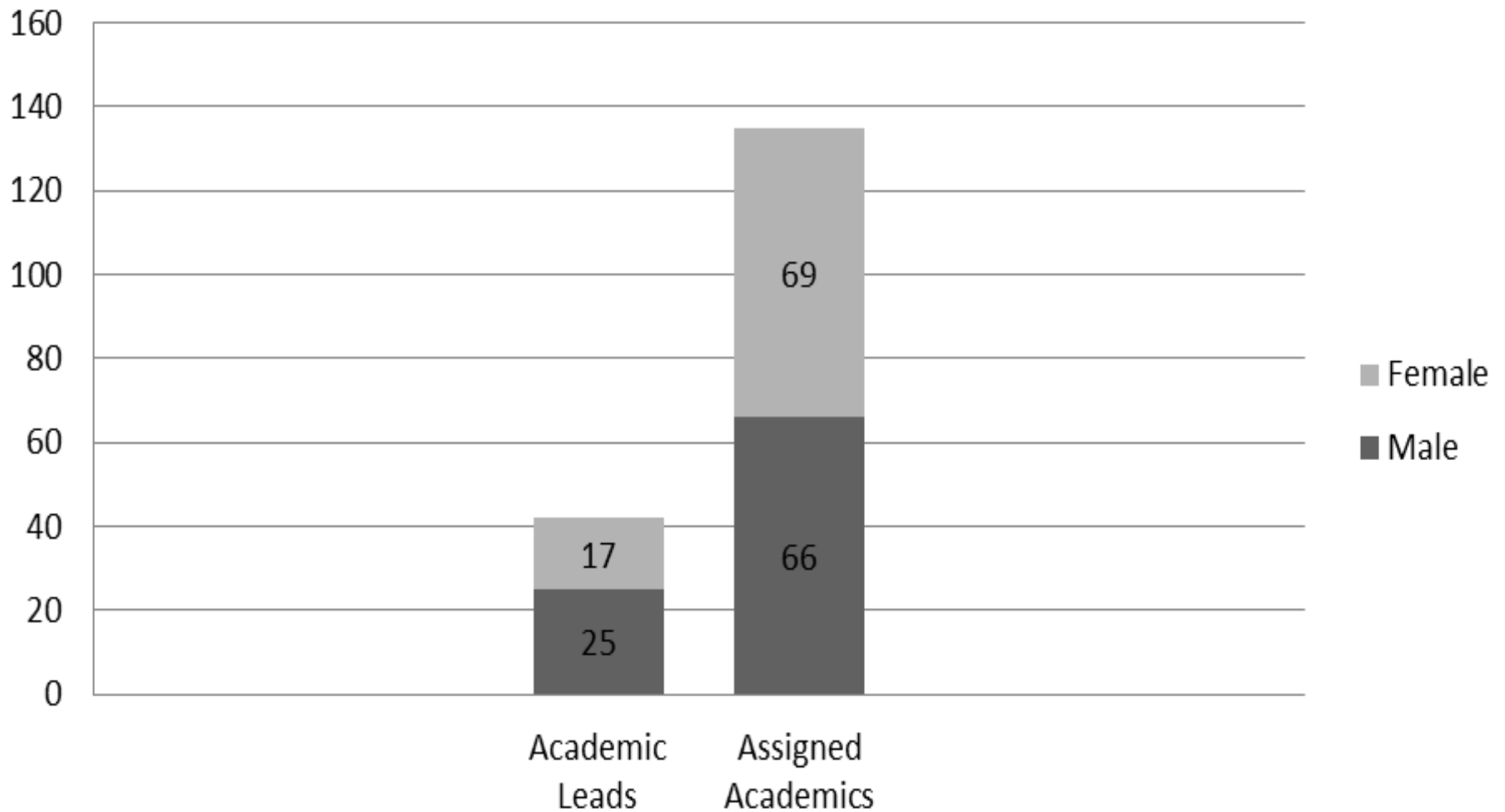
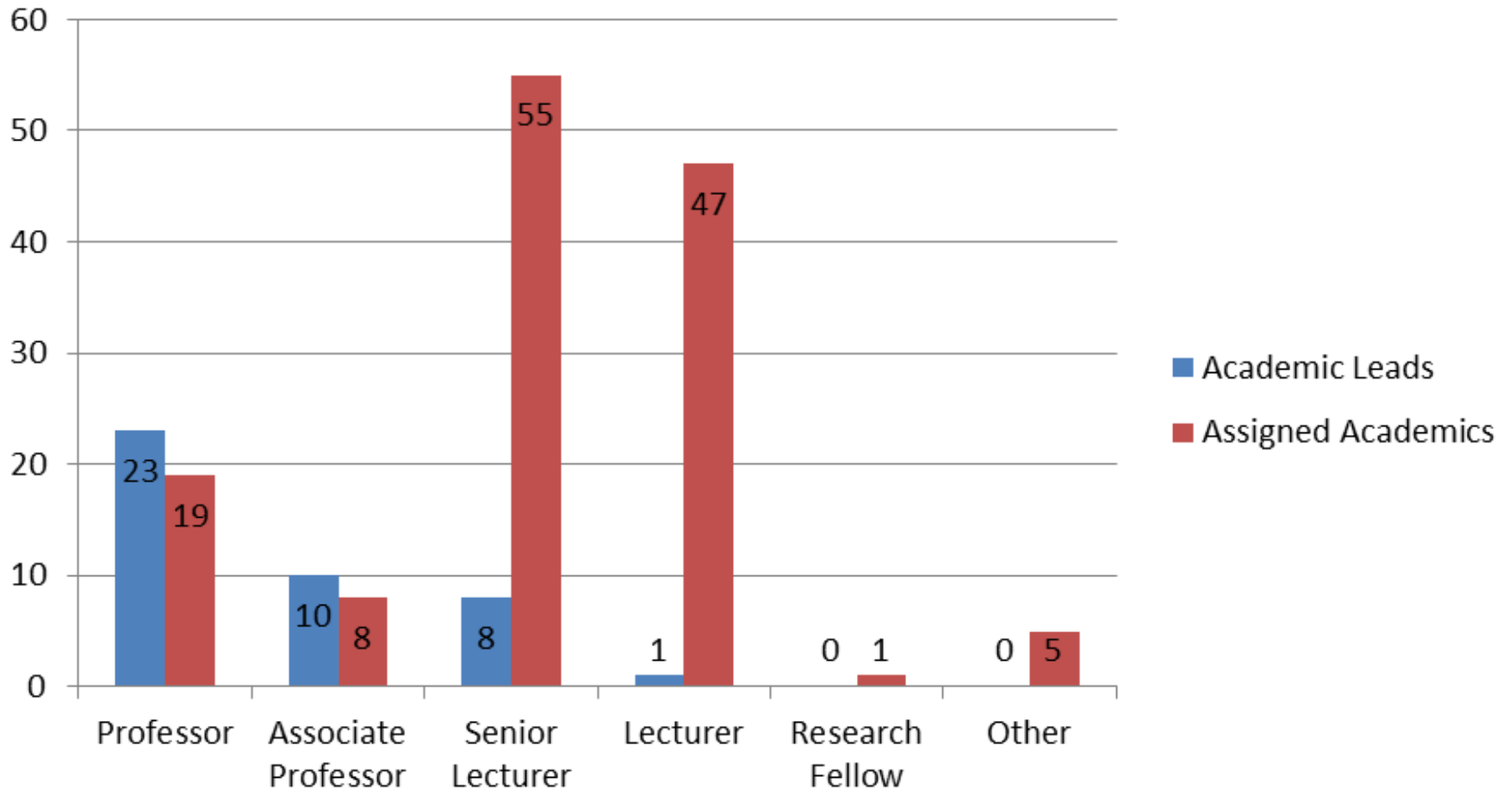


Figure 4 - Survey Breakdown by Job Title



How do ALs describe their experiences?

- All interviewees expressed concerns about two conflicting aspects of the role – mentoring and management.
- Most ALs were happy with the mentoring aspect of role and felt that this should continue.



How do Academic Leads describe their experiences?

- ALs struggled with the concept of being given responsibility without the role having any real power.
- In terms of college and department structures, respondents felt that there was a lack of clarity about how the AL role sits with the role of HoD.

They want us to be poacher and gamekeeper at the same time.
(Evelyn, Social Sciences)

The theory, I think, is perfectly sensible... Who looks after a member of academic staff, whether they are teaching only or teaching and research, in the round? Who actually cares about the overall career development and performance of this individual in the round?

(Brandon, Natural Sciences)

You can't expect people to be completely candid about the mentoring side of stuff, if they know that this is being fed up to senior management in an environment that is at least perceived to be increasingly top down
(Jack, Humanities)

In almost every situation, the individual would be referred to the Head of School, Director of Research or Director of Education.

They *really* fulfil the line management functions within the units..

Having the academic leads trying to fulfil any of those functions clouds the issue, muddles it.

(George, Social Sciences)

How do Academic Leads describe their experiences?

- Difficult aspects of the role include
 - the mixed/competing agendas of research and teaching
 - managing the diverse needs of colleagues in different job families and at different stages of their careers
 - dealing with difficult staff
 - issues relating to succession planning



How do ALs describe their experiences?

- ALs raised the need for more on-going training and development, especially for staff who have taken on the role since the initial training days were held.
- It was suggested by several ALs that a forum in which they meet and discuss the issues about being in the role would be helpful (distinct from College Management Group).



How do 'assigned academics' describe their experiences of being 'led'?

- Almost all of the interviewees expressed positive responses to the introduction of the AL role, and to working with their own academic lead.
- Many cited very specific and even inspirational ways in which ALs had supported, guided and advised them, in relation to research, teaching and/or moving forward with career goals.



I'm much clearer what my goals are for the rest of the academic year and the next two years, I'm also much clearer on the perceptions of my strengths and weaknesses... I'm also encouraged for the first time in quite a long time.

(Katherine, Natural Sciences)

I have a very high respect for [my AL]... She is really a very encouraging person and really pointed out cases where you can improve... I feel somehow as if I've been recognized. She really makes you feel as if you have done something and can be proud of yourself ... so you feel as if you have been recharged.

(Sylvia, Social Sciences)

I would like to consider [my
Academic Lead] more as
somebody I can rely on, instead of
somebody who was here to
control what I'm doing.

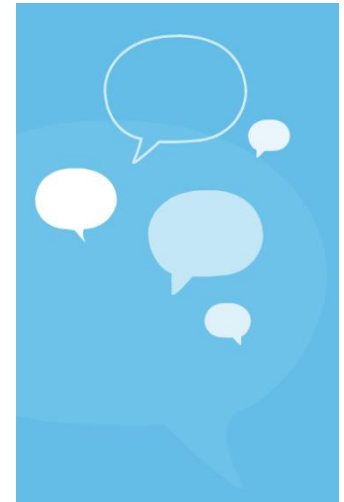
(James, Social Sciences)

How do assigned academics describe their experiences of being 'led'?

Small minority had experienced 'poor' relationships with their academic 'leaders'. Main issues:

- poor communication
- lack of explanation regarding what was expected
- failure to listen to or show respect for the academic's identity, perspectives or concerns
- insufficient time allocated to open dialogue and the building a productive relationship.

The **cultural context of the subject group** is seen to play a vital part in fostering good relationships.



I thought it should have been a kind of exchange of ideas, constructing exchanges. It turned out to be, in my experience, a very strong, pushy way to implement the policy from above.

(Nick, Social Sciences)

How do assigned academics describe their experiences of being 'led'?

Overall, however, the mentoring dimension of the AA/AL relationship is very highly regarded.

Some speak of their perception that their AL is 'protecting' them from the management pressures 'from above' and supporting them in their own academic goals and challenges.



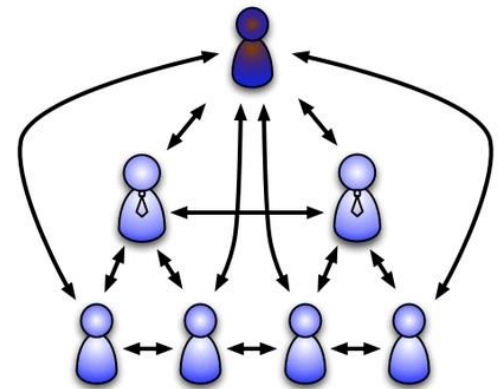
How do assigned academics describe their experiences of being 'led'?

Some expressed an awareness of the difficulties that Academic Leads themselves may have in working out that role, especially in relation to the balance between mentoring and line management.



How do assigned academics describe their experiences of being 'led'?

- A number felt that they had had no explanation of the criteria whereby ALs had been chosen by the University and/or allocated to staff.
- Those who were Directors of Education or Directors of Research expressed difficulty in relation to the tension between those two roles, particularly in terms of lines of accountability and power dynamics.





John (Social Sciences)



I suppose it's unfair to say that [academic leaders] are not putting forward their own idea of what the university does or should be for, but they're putting forward the idea in a very constrained space, which is set for them by external forces. They don't have the freedom of manoeuvre...

[But] I'm very glad I've got an Academic Lead. ... it's like having a supervisor again, and ... to have someone help me through ... has been really important..



1. The high value placed on **opportunities to develop a mutually respectful relationship** and share in productive dialogue between academics and their leaders throughout the year.
2. The perceived need for a **form of dialogue whose tone enables the academic to be heard** and to take the initiative in conversations with their Academic Lead, and which includes meaningful dialogue with others in leadership roles, including HoDs.
3. The value placed upon **dialogue in which the individual's own perspectives and experiences can be shared safely**, and an ethos which acknowledges and even explicitly **explores possible tensions and incongruities** between the goals and values of the academic, those of his or her academic leaders *and* those espoused (declared and/or enacted) by the institution itself.