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21. November 2011

Online at <http://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/35019/>
MPRA Paper No. 35019, posted 25. November 2011 / 20:39

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES IN TODAY'S ACADEMIA

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Abstract: Starting from the anecdotic hypothesis that “leading academics is like trying to herd cats”, the paper reviews the main challenges and barriers to present academic leadership. The context is that of the on-going Bologna transformation of the university, and of the renewed quest for competitiveness. The method employed is that of the individual case-study, with a single-embedded design. The case study is exploratory, as we don't know from sure which the effects of leadership in the university are, and to what degree are they alike, across sub-units of study. The case study is also intrinsic, as its main outcome is not theory-building, but understanding the particularities of a phenomenon strongly tied to its context. Our unit of study is the largest business university in the country, with its faculties and departments. The main data sources are short structured interviews with members of the academic staff. The analysis implies both explanation-building and cross-case synthesis. The results of the study give insights on the context of leadership, enablers and barriers, as well as on the content of leadership, in the particular setting of the academia. Conclusions connect our research with similar endeavours, outlining the particularities and patterns of educational transition in a transition country.

Key words: academic leadership, structural equation model of academic leadership, Romanian academia

Leadership- a fast growing concept: literature review

The field of leadership — in theory and in practice — has been a fast-growing part of management knowledge since the beginning of the 20th century. In most conceptions of management and organization, leadership has a given and central place in enforcing principles, motivating employees and communicating future goals and visions to strive for. Leadership is assumed to make a special, significant and positive contribution to action processes in most organizations, and leadership studies as an academic field has thus been preoccupied with the never-ending task of identifying identities or practices related to successful leadership.

The field of leadership studies has traditionally been leader-centered, focused on the individual leaders and their traits, abilities and actions (Wood, 2005), placing the abstract phenomenon of ‘leadership’ into distinct individuals that are detached from their cultural context (Barker, 2001). This was a part of the developments in the management sciences during the early 20th century, in which the best leaders were to be identified and chosen out from their suitability and formal merits rather than from pre-modern bases such as kinship or charisma.

The problem was still to determine what constituted a suitable leader, and this question gave rise to a series of different theoretical schools (Parry and Bryman, 2006; Yukl, 2008). One stream of thought tried to identify personality traits that distinguished successful leaders from other people. Against this, others claimed that leadership was about interaction between leaders and followers, and that different interaction styles (e.g. characterized by concern for

people) implied different consequences (Katz et al., 1950; Stogdill and Coons, 1957). Yet another stream of research advocated instead a situational perspective, according to which leaders are only effective if they adapt their style to the situation at hand; for example, very simple or very complicated situations are best handled through task-oriented leadership, while most other situations are better handled through socio-emotional leadership styles (Fiedler, 1967). The situational perspective became very influential, reflecting the increasing popularity of the contingency approach in organization theory, but it has also been subjected to recent criticism for focusing too much on the leader and not enough on the group interaction (Parry and Bryman, 2006).

In contemporary writings, the leader is described as a member of a group, albeit with specific possibilities to influence the group, and leadership is, consequently, a series of interaction processes where leaders inspire followers by creating common meaningful images of the future (Parry and Bryman, 2006; Smircich and Morgan, 1982). Thus, in some situations, leadership is seen as a collaborative and collective responsibility where the responsibilities, competencies and decision-making need to be distributed onto several individuals rather than one (Huxham and Vangen, 2000). The resulting literatures contain several conceptualizations of such observations and arrangements, such as shared leadership, (Bradford and Cohen, 1998; Lambert, 2002; Pearce and Conger, 2003; Wilhelmsson, 2006), collaborative leadership (Collinson, 2007) and dispersed/distributed leadership (Crevani et al., 2007; Gronn, 2002, 2009; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009; Parry and Bryman, 2006).

Academic vs business leadership

Although leadership in higher education has been borrowing both theory and practice since its inception from its father, business leadership, recently, it has been argued that the two of them are not as alike as we might have thought. For example, Choudaha (2011) states that there are at least three main differentiators between the two: the role of the institutional mission which impacts the style of leadership, the means of measuring success (quantitative vs. qualitative) and the role of governance, which is a shared responsibility and entails domain expertise for leading an educational institution. However, practice has taught us that there is at least one more thing which separates academic from business leadership. This is one issue with respect to academic leaders that has recently come to our attention, the fact that it is usually not an anticipated career path for many academics. As McClurken (2010) states: Rarely do people go into graduate school thinking ‘Gee, I can’t wait until I’m department chair.’

Due to the lack of provisions for the role of academic leader, many of those facing this challenge end up complaining that they have a poor understanding of their role, that this role is too demanding, complex and very stressful, have high administrative workloads, find little support, feel undervalued, are uncertain about the scope of their role and that they are ill-prepared for their new responsibilities (Ladyshewsky and Jones, 2007). From this we can derive another discrepancy between academic and business leadership: for most people, becoming a business leader is a life goal, an accomplishment, whereas for academia the role of academic leader has come to be regarded as a “career killer”, as the administrative demands that are associated with it hamper with the main activities of academia, teaching and research (Vikinas, 2009).

While much research has been undertaken on leadership in the management literature little work has been undertaken on Academic Leadership. Given the broad range of roles

undertaken by academic leaders in universities today and the relatively small number of studies in the area, it is perhaps not surprising that Academic Leadership is poorly understood, under-theorised, and characterised by sometimes contradictory and often underdeveloped definitions.

However, the work of Ramsden et al. (2007), Bryman (2007), Scott et al. (2008) and most recently Vikinas (2009) provides a useful overview of Academic Leadership at all levels. Ramsden et al. (2007) identified four types of leadership in their study of teachers' perceptions of Departmental/School leadership (Transformational as defined by inspirational behavior and trust, Transactional as defined by setting clear goals and contingent rewards, Teacher/lecturer involvement, Collaborative management). Bryman's (2007) review identified 13 forms of leadership behaviour at the departmental level and described some additional behaviors such as being a role model, advancing the department's cause, providing resources, and participating in academic appointments.

Scott et al. (2008) reported that for most leadership levels the focus was on policy formation, managing relationships, working with challenging staff, involvement in various aspects of planning, and attending meetings. The study of Vikinas (2009) was to enhance the quality and effectiveness of programs by developing the leadership capacity of Academic Coordinators as being the front-line managers in universities, the linking pin (Likert, 1961) between the School/Department and the students. In order to achieve this goal, the study identified the key leadership skills and abilities required for effective coordination of programs and developed frameworks and resources for professional development of Academic Coordinators. Main conclusions of studies reflect that effective leadership in complex environments (such as institutions of higher education) requires complex behaviour including competence in a number of roles and the capacity to move effectively between them. They must be able to perform a broad range of competing roles and functions – developing, innovating, brokering, delivering, and monitoring. Added to these five operational roles, there is a sixth role that will facilitate their effectiveness at the academic level called integrator (a fit between context and behaviour) meaning the capacity of Academic Coordinators and Leaders to be both critical observers and reflective learners (Vilkinas and Cartan, 2001, 2006).

Undoubtedly, the role of Leaders and Academic Coordinators is complex and they need to employ a range of strategies: caring for the teaching staff and dealing with their personal development (Developer role) whilst at the same time demanding that the student completes their assignments (Deliverer role); finding the balance between liberty and regulation, and autonomy and restraint and observing performance (Monitoring role); between creativity and criticism (Innovator role) as well as finding resources and developing networks inside and outside university (Broker role).

Research methodology

Fundamental to the strategy of science is the formulation and testing of hypotheses about populations or the effects of experimental conditions on criterion variables (Ho, 2006). For that reason the first step undertaken within this study was the identification of the research hypotheses. The research hypotheses were deduced from the theory. Thus:

H₁: Research competence exerts the strongest influence on the perceived capabilities in the field of academic leadership.

H₂: The endowment of a strong vision is positively correlated with the perceived capabilities in the field of academic leadership.

H₃: All the four leadership scales are positively correlated with the perceived capabilities in the field of academic leadership.

In order to test the aforementioned hypotheses during the academic year 2010/2011 there have been conducted structured interviews within a master programme offered by the Academy of Economic Studies of Bucharest, the largest and most prestigious economic and business school from Romania. There were interviewed the Master Director and 15 professors (teaching staff within the Master programme). The majority of the respondents were represented by females and their average age is 56 years.

The qualitative results obtained from the structured interviews were translated into quantitative data, using the Likert scale. For the left-hand side of the model, namely the self-evaluation, a seven-point Likert scale (from 1 – totally disagree to 7 – totally agree) was used in order to give the respondents a larger leeway, given the very subjective nature of the self assessment process. For the right-hand side of the model, namely the evaluation by the subordinates, the more common five-point Likert scale (from 1 – never to 5 – always) was used (the five-level Likert scale is convenient because it encourages respondents to use all of the five levels) (Field, 2005).

The main limits of research consist in the fact that the research population represents a convenient sample, which do not offer representativeness to the research results. In a next stage, the structured interviews could be administrated to a larger number of leaders and their subordinates and a transversal approach, instead of a longitudinal one, should be deployed.

Structural equation model of academic leadership

The paper adapts and tests in the academia a structural equation model of leadership used by Spreitzer et al. (1999), employed on *Fortune 500* organizations. The hypothesized model takes into account, on the one hand, the self-assessment done by the leader (the left-hand side of the model), and, on the other, the assessment done by the subordinates (the right-hand side of the model).

Considering the academic context, and relevant literature, we have proposed, for the left-hand side, four components of academic leadership: *research competence*, *education competence*, *administrative competence*, and *vision*. Competence is a component of leadership in general (House, 1977), and should be recognized as such in academic practice. We have split competence according to the three traditional components of the academic environment, keeping in mind that they are not independent. According to Starkey and Tiratsoo (2007) “forty years ago running a business school was something a senior Professor might well take as a matter of duty before retirement. Nowadays, Deans almost constitute a profession in their own-right, a cohort with unique and specialist skills [...]. Deans may be likened to sports coaches: hired to improve performance, fired at will, but with one eye always on building their own careers.” Vision was included also as a traditional component of leadership (Hanna, 2003).

The four items corresponding to the four components – a) do you characterize yourself as performing outstanding research?/ b) are your teaching skills adequate?/ c) do you perform an effective administrative job?/ d) do you consider that you have a strong vision? – were evaluated on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 – totally disagree to 7 – totally agree. The Cronbach Alpha for these items was 0.72, a value which we considered acceptable for the analysis.

We preserved the right-hand side of the model as close as possible to the four leadership scales used in business, namely *influence*, *innovation*, *inspiration*, and *monitoring*. The measures for *influence* were *ingratiation*, *reasoning*, and *assertiveness* (Thacker and Wayne, 1995; for an analysis focused on academic career advancement, see Zin et al., 2011). *Ingratiation* refers mainly to relationship with the leader's superiors. The issue assigned to *ingratiation* was: "does the manager show a strong and fair relationship with superiors?" The issue assigned to *reasoning* was: "does the manager support his/ her choices by data gathering, analysing, discussing?" The issue assigned to *assertiveness* was: "does the manager show directness in his/ her actions?" All the items were evaluated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 – never, to 5 – always.

The measures for *innovation* were set by adapting the scale proposed by Choi and Price (2005): *stimulation*, *assessment*, and *implementation*. The issue assigned to *stimulation* was: "does the manager stimulate the employees' creativity?" The issue assigned to *assessment* was "does the manager identify innovative ideas?" The issue assigned to *implementation* was "does the manager actively support the implementation of innovations?" All the items were evaluated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 – never, to 5 – always.

The measures for *inspiration* were adapted from Gardner and Avolio's (1998) theatrical perspective on charismatic leadership. The two researchers speak about *framing*, *scripting*, *staging* and *performing*. The issue assigned to *framing* in the semi-structured interviews was: "does the manager set the desired meaning in organizational communication?" The issue assigned to *scripting* was: "does the manager develop a set of directions, as well as sketch the expected behaviors?" The issue assigned to *staging* was: "does the manager have an energetic and inspirational presence?" The issue assigned to *performing* was: "does the manager appear competent and determined?" All the items were evaluated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 – never, to 5 – always.

The measures for *monitoring* were set by adapting Dennison et al. (1995) scale, as follows: *structure control*, *process control*, *detection*, *feedback*. The issue assigned to *structure control* was: "does the manager check compliance with rules and procedures?" The issue assigned to *process control* was: "does the manager exert logistic control?" The issue assigned to *detection* was: "does the manager record errors and discrepancies?" The issue assigned to *feedback* was: "does the manager share findings with employees?" All the items were evaluated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 – never, to 5 – always. The Cronbach Alpha for these items of the right-hand side of the model was 0.69, a value which we considered suitable for the analysis, as the responses may be treated as consistent.

The descriptive statistics and correlations for the considered items are presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations of constructs

Construct	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
1. Research competence	6.00	0.5																		
2. Educational competence	5.00	0.5	0.53																	
3. Administrative competence	5.00	0.5	-0.64	0.12																
4. Vision	6.20	0.40	0.13	0.25	0.12															
5. Ingratiation	4.60	0.20	0.20	-0.12	0.20	0.08														
6. Reasoning	4.20	0.20	0.21	0.33	-0.17	-0.13	0.14													
7. Assertiveness	3.80	0.60	0.34	-0.14	0.24	0.29	0.35	-0.18												
8. Stimulation	3.60	0.40	0.15	0.02	0.19	0.08	-0.07	0.03	0.56											
9. Assessment	4.20	0.20	0.29	0.09	0.22	0.17	0.22	-0.20	-0.13	0.02										
10. Implementation	3.80	0.40	-0.14	0.26	-0.30	0.33	0.12	-0.14	0.63	0.09	0.21									
11. Framing	3.80	0.40	0.02	0.38	0.21	0.41	0.22	-0.27	0.08	0.21	0.32	0.21								
12. Scripting	3.40	0.60	0.31	0.41	-0.13	-0.23	0.19	0.13	-0.14	0.13	0.13	0.16	0.22							
13. Staging	3.20	0.10	0.45	-0.19	0.40	0.30	0.31	0.42	0.09	-0.41	0.14	0.28	0.57	0.26						
14. Performing	3.40	0.40	0.32	0.32	0.02	0.06	0.40	0.08	0.11	0.18	0.01	0.15	0.12	0.19	0.43					
15. Structure control	4.20	0.40	0.05	0.07	0.11	0.62	0.12	0.17	0.23	0.22	0.28	-0.32	0.07	0.21	0.22	0.09				
16. Process control	4.00	0.30	0.61	0.22	0.28	0.34	0.30	0.34	0.15	0.14	0.51	0.15	0.41	0.30	0.12	0.11	0.34			
17. Detection	4.60	0.20	0.15	-0.10	0.17	-0.15	-0.27	-0.05	0.52	0.08	-0.13	0.08	0.20	0.04	-0.10	0.22	0.42	0.27		
18. Feedback	4.00	0.10	0.18	0.28	-0.03	0.04	0.16	0.19	0.18	0.27	0.18	0.19	0.12	0.09	0.21	0.30	0.26	0.32	0.25	

* p<0.05

For these correlations, AGFI = 0.79, which is below 0.9, CFI = 0.87, which is also below 0.9, RMR = 0.052, slightly above the 0.05 threshold, which is due to the smallness of the sample. The strongest correlation between two perceived leadership items is between *influence* and *inspiration* ($r = 0.69$). Otherwise, the correlations are rather moderate. Due to the complex and fuzzy nature of the concept of academic leadership, the multicollinearity between the two variables, influence and inspiration, is considered not to affect the research outcome.

The model was further tested using LISREL. The input was represented by a covariance matrix. The result of the structural equation modeling is presented in Figure 1 below:

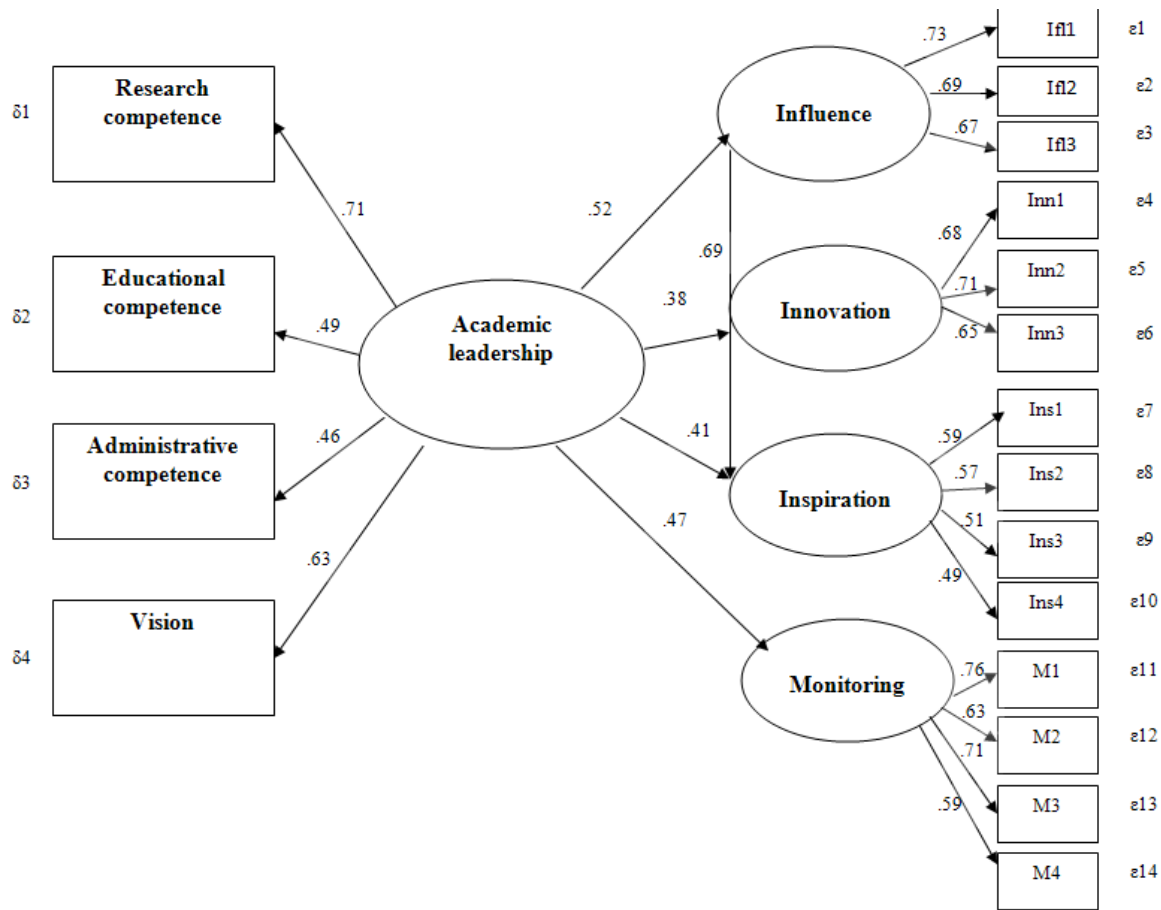


Figure 1. SEM of Academic Leadership

The component (measured within the self assessment process) which exerts the most important influence on the perceived skills of academic leaders is the research competence (0.71), followed by vision (0.63) and educational competence (0.49) and administrative competence (0.46) which exhibit similar values. These results are consistent with the conclusions drawn from the literature review, where it is stated that becoming an academic leader does not represent in most of the cases an objective by itself, but a consequence of outstanding research results and skills, which are endorsed by a strong vision and further educational and administrative skills. The large weight of the research competence may be also a consequence of the fact that the analysis was conducted within the framework of Master programme, where the research dimension might have an above-average importance.

The subordinates' perceptions of leadership were positively correlated with all the four components (influence: $\beta_{11} = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$; innovation: $\beta_{21} = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$; inspiration: $\beta_{31} = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$; monitoring: $\beta_{41} = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$). While, for the business environment, monitoring is not as significant, for the academic leadership it seems to be of importance. Therefore, we can conclude that all the three research hypotheses were confirmed.

Conclusions

The perception of leadership in universities has changed, over the last decades, as universities evolved from communities of equals, to entities having stakeholders, and from peer evaluation to external accountability. The traditional view of universities, associated with their prominent social role (Readings, 1996; Kumar, 1997) declined, and left in place the rules of the audit society (Power, 1997). New pressures – new technologies, competition for students, corporate universities, a need for a better fit with labor market demands – reposition continuously the university. We are witnessing the age of the “academic capitalism” (Kirp, 2003). The existing model of university is not only challenged in time – present vs. past, but also in space, as developing countries are creating their own competitive higher education systems, as a response to the Western supremacy (Marginson, 2007). A need for business-like rigor, in a field of consensual freedom, is deemed necessary. The immaterial values universities produce need to be measured, and the role ambiguity of the university, considering emerging concepts as the third mission, managerialism, marketization, has to be solved by effective leadership.

The present paper puts forth a Structural Equation Model for Academic Leadership which was deducted from the theory and tested within one Masters Programme in the most prominent School for Economics and Business from Romania. Considering the models’ parameters, it can be stated that all three research hypotheses were confirmed.

Considering the self-perceived traits of leaders, academic credibility, as a result of research competence, is highly valued, followed by the endowment of a strong vision. Educational and administrative abilities have closer, significantly lower, scores. The experience of previous leadership positions, as part of administrative competence, is also valued. With respect to the right-hand side of the model, one can note that within the academic leadership process, the dimensions “influence” and “monitoring” play the most important role, followed by “inspiration” and innovation” which feature lower similar scores.

The proposed model can be improved and expanded by including new dimensions both on its left- and right-hand side and by testing it in a larger sample, which would also confer more relevance and representativeness to the research outcomes.

Acknowledgements: This work was supported by CNCSIS-UEFISCSU, project PN II-RU-TE_351/2010.

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