

**DO ACADEMIC LEADERS REQUIRE SPECIFIC
COMPETENCIES?
TRAINING NEEDS ANALYSIS OF UTM ACADEMIC
LEADERS**

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ABSTRACT - Much has been learnt from studies on academics, their personal qualities, values and their attitudes towards students, education and different aspects of academic work. However, existing literature has poorly documented about the training and development of academic leaders in higher education. The purpose of this paper is to report findings of an investigation pertaining to professional development and training needs of academic leaders in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. In particular, the study focuses on identifying general profile of an academic leader in UTM, competencies of the leader, as well as skills and knowledge required for them to carry out their duties. A quantitative approach was undertaken, whereby Saad Abdulrahman Alghmdi et al (2016)'s research instrument was adapted for the short-term study. Respondents provide their rating on a five-point Likert scale in five domains: personal capabilities, interpersonal capabilities, cognitive capabilities, perceived skills and knowledge possessed, and support required to function well. In general, respondents were confident with their capabilities as academic leaders. There are gaps in terms of training and development that can be provided in-house, or outsourced to training providers, who are able to collaborate with experts and industrial leaders to develop appropriate training modules for the academic leaders.

Keywords: Higher education, leadership, academic leader, competency.

1. INTRODUCTION

Much has been learnt from studies on academics, their personal qualities, values and their attitudes towards students, education and different aspects of academic work. These studies, which concentrated in the US, UK and Australia, have extensively documented the academic profession, providing a firm information base for future research and planning. Among the major issues examined include

the historical development of the academic profession, demographic trends, the academic work environment and productivity factors, work orientation, workloads and recruitment patterns. This intensive exploration of academic life highlights the complexities, interconnections and differences between various aspects of academia, and how the academic community navigates their career and professional development [1].

However, existing literature has poorly documented about the training and development of academic leaders in higher education [2]. Universities are renowned for promoting people who demonstrate excellence in one domain, such as teaching or research, into jobs which require experience and skills in quite a different domain, such as people or financial management [2]. As they fill positions of power, authority and patronage, they are required to converse in management-speak, engage in objective performance evaluation, and rally their colleagues in collegiate decision making [3]. Many stumbled their way through various processes, activities, meetings, and unwelcomed situations [4]. While promotion on a basis of potential may well be valid, it is bad practice if no support or training is provided to develop the needed skills, and in their absence, it has the potential to generate poor leadership and dysfunction.

In the case of Malaysia, empirical studies on the academic profession focused mainly on collecting demographical information, and quantitative responses gained from self-reported surveys with academics [5]. For example, a cross-national study called Changing Academic Profession was conducted in 2007, giving quantitative insights on academic work, conditions of work, beliefs about decision making, and the sense of affiliation and satisfaction based on a sample of 1,130 academics from public and private universities [6]. A follow up study called the Malaysian Academic Profession Survey was conducted in 2012 [7], giving further insights into the roles and responsibilities of academics, academic freedom, training and continuous professional development, resources, curriculum implementation and review, and mentoring. Among the Malaysian-based studies cited, only [5] shed some light on the experience of academic leaders in higher education. Although administrative duties may be accompanied by a small reduction in the teaching load of the academic, the additional administrative responsibilities are extremely time-consuming and energy sapping. While the flexible nature of academic work may be a source of satisfaction to some academics, being required to work long and rigid hours is required of those with administrative duties and hence became a source of frustration. Many academics have been frustrated when they are being assigned with administrative duties which they do not feel free to decline to take on. The additional responsibilities only make a minor contribution to decisions in the promotion and yearly appraisal

exercises. They are also not satisfied with having to deal with fellow colleagues, including becoming the buffer between the leadership and management of the universities and academics and students. These challenges suggest the need of some management skills. The lack of such skills, especially in dealing with people, and the lack of preparation and training for academics for administrative duties have therefore also contributed to the sense of frustration.

The purpose of this paper is to report findings of an investigation pertaining to professional development and training needs of academic leaders in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. In particular, the study focuses on identifying general profile of an academic leader in UTM, competencies of the leader, as well as skills and knowledge required for them to carry out their duties. A study found that academic staff spent majority of their time involved with administration work that requires specialised skills, such as human resource management, management of information technology, marketing, strategic planning, and financial and investment planning, which are areas undertaken in the outside world by highly paid and skilled professionals [8]. The academic staff also need to concentrate on skills related to the ‘teaching’ function of universities, which include specialised language preparation and curriculum design, development and delivery, particularly delivery associated with distance learning or electronic delivery. This illustrate the need to be more thoughtful and deliberate in supporting academic leaders in their professional development, as well as to cope with a dynamic higher education landscape.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Reserch instrument

A quantitative approach was undertaken for the short-term study. Research instrument from [9] was adopted, which assessed competencies of the academic leaders based on five domains personal capabilities (15 items), interpersonal capabilities (11 items), cognitive capabilities (14 items), perceived skills and knowledge possessed (16 items), and support required to function well (20 items). In each domain, respondents were required to rate the importance of items using a five-point Likert scale (1 - low to 5 - high).

2.2 Collaborator

The research instrument was translated and distributed by UTM Academic Leadership (UTMLead), a centre tasked to profile and identify, train, and manage succession plan of academic leaders in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), a science, technology, and engineering-focused public research university in Malaysia. UTMLead also managed the data entry of responses collected from the data collection exercise, which was conducted from June to September 2019.

2.3 Participants

UTM academic leaders, defined as academic staff holding administrative positions in UTM at faculties, schools, and centres were invited to be part of the study. The total population of UTM academic leaders tracked by UTMLead as at September 2019 was 398. A total of 144 responses were collected by UTMLead, or 36.18 percent of the overall population.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Personal capabilities

Out of the 15 items highlighted under this section, respondents reported six competencies that require additional attention: confidence in taking calculated risks, the ability to remain calm under pressure, or when things take an unexpected turn, willingness to make hard decisions, willingness to pitch in and undertake menial work when needed, the ability to defer judgment and not jumping in too quickly to solve a problem, and the ability to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty.

3.2 Interpersonal capabilities

Out of the 14 items highlighted under this section, respondents reported three competencies that require additional attention: the ability to collaborate with senior officials within and beyond the university without being intimidated, the ability to understand how different groups in the university influences different situations, as well as the ability to influence people's behaviours and decisions in different ways.

3.3 Cognitive capabilities

Out of the 11 items highlighted under this section, respondents reported five competencies that require additional attention: the ability to recognise how seemingly unconnected activities are linked, the ability to trace out and assess the likely consequences of alternative courses of action, the ability to see the best way to respond to a perplexing situation, the ability to think creatively and laterally, as well as the ability to recognise patterns in complex situations.

4. CONCLUSION

In general, respondents were confident with their capabilities as academic leaders. That said, there are gaps in terms of training and development that can be provided by UTMLead to the academic leaders. Such professional development opportunities could also be outsourced to training providers, who are able to collaborate with experts and industrial leaders to develop appropriate training modules for the academic leaders.

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