

Chapter 16

University Governance and Academic Leadership Capacity Building: Perspectives of European and Chinese University Staff Members

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ABSTRACT

Challenges of modern society require universities to be able to respond to the new challenges and offer innovative teaching and learning for the new generations. The changes and modernization of universities require competences of academic leaders for sound university governance as well as comprehensive leadership skills. The literature and practices show that capacity building for academic leaders is highly needed as academic leaders often operate based on experience or contextual norms while showing a lack of a broad understanding of university governance and the necessary skills for their roles. This chapter investigates the perspectives of both European and Chinese university staff members regarding the areas of capacity building that are needed for middle-level and top-level academic leaders. The results provide us with a deeper understanding regarding the priorities for capacity building in order to enhance academic leadership. The findings also offer an understanding of capacity building of academic leadership in both the European and Chinese higher education contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, higher education institutions (HEIs) have encountered unprecedentedly changing internal and external environments that fuel serious alterations at individual, institutional, and national levels. The commodification of higher education (HE) with the rise of neo-liberalism (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Zomer & Benneworth, 2011), reduced state funding, increased accountability, excessive privatization and marketization, transition to knowledge-society, and the emergence of new competitors (Rich, 2006; Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008) are the major challenges that indicate the complexity and instability in the operational environments of HEIs. These challenges, in turn, tend to define the governance structures of universities with managerial characteristics rather than collegial one (Macfarlane, 2005; Yelder & Codling, 2004). New managerialism perspective, furthermore, has increased the importance placed on entrepreneurial activities (Mercer, 2009) and seeking alternative ways of doing things with a particular emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness and setting up new forms of organizations (Deem, 2001). Additionally, HEIs have turned out to be more complex and professionalized, which, in turn, has caused a shift in the demands for leadership skills from academic to more administrative ones (Waught Jr., 2003).

Although many scholars hold the view that managerialism underpins the current governing practices in the modern universities, the distinctive values and the features of HEIs reduce its viability in this context. Specifically, Middlehurst and Elton (1992) emphasized collegiality, individual autonomy, academic freedom, and trust-based relationships as the distinctive values of HEIs while self-governance, self-regulation, and self-directedness go hand in hand with these values (Thomson, Constantineau, & Fallis, 2005). The mutual influence of these idiosyncratic characteristics and the pressures of the external environment, indeed, cause universities to have plural and fluid identities that call for academic leaders to utilize several perspectives because using only the corporate management skills alone is not considered functional (Winter, 2009). Although the contribution of business leadership practices and management models on the academic operations has already been recognized, it is strictly underlined that the leaders should harmonize the qualifications needed for business organizations and the ones truly unique to academic context and its distinctive ethos (Ramsden, 1998; Reponen, 1999; Davies, Hides, & Casey, 2001).

Higher Education, indeed, is one of the most typical contexts in which the paradox between management and academic leadership is witnessed very often and this makes leadership training a critical issue for academic leaders (ALs) to develop role-relevant skills and demonstrate more effective leadership (Yelder, 2004). However, due to the fact that academics majorly start out on their career paths with faculty positions and head towards administrative roles, they are generally not trained with the intention to promote leaders, which causes role-relevant preparation, particularly for unit-level positions, turns to be an on-the-job training depending on trial and error (Gmelch, 2000; 2002; Strathe & Wilson, 2006).

The issue of university governance and academic leadership also hold merit for Chinese and European universities as an area for cooperation to enhance their competitive capacity and accompanying mutual benefits (Cai, 2013a; Cai & Hölttä, 2014). Chinese HE context constitutes an interesting case across the world given the political and collegial contradictions emanate from its dual system in HE governance and the unprecedented developments in HE in terms of student numbers enrolled and strikingly high performance and quality of the universities, visible in the world rankings (Huang, 2015). Although this duality in the university governance and resulting political intrusion on university operations have been stressed to hamper further developments in some Chinese universities (Cai & Yan, 2017; Salmi, 2011),

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