

The Changing Academic Profession: towards Empowering Leadership in Teaching

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Overview of Findings

Being part of a 22-country study on the changing academic profession (CAP project) which began in 2006, the research instrument (a questionnaire on the changing academic profession) was designed by the Method Group based at Kessel University, Germany which laid out sampling and data collection procedures. The Malaysia study used mailed or/and online questionnaires which were sent out to academics in both public and private higher education institutions. Data collection was completed in June 2007. A total of 1,176 completed questionnaires were analysed. In an effort to cross check the information provided in the questionnaire, the researchers interviewed 10 lecturers in Universiti Sains Malaysia for their views on teaching which encompassed current challenges in their profession, teaching workloads, work situation and leadership activities. This article discusses the findings from the qualitative data.

The individual semi-structured interviews with the lecturers broadly reflected the analysis of the quantitative data collected from the questionnaire (especially with regard to instruction time spent and number of students taught, involvement in teaching activities, quantitative load targets or regulatory expectations, views on various aspects of teaching and teaching abroad and official language of instruction).

Other findings relating to the emergent theme of leadership in teaching include:

- the pressing need “to introduce and apply innovative teaching methods” (Respondent 3=R3), “to engage in collaborative research as opposed to individual research” (R2), “to constantly enhance the learning experience of students” (R1), “to keep up with technology, especially in teaching” (R8), and “to meet increasing demands in terms of assessment” (R5).
- the need to ensure that students acquire the necessary soft skills such as “good communication skills, thinking skills, analytical skills, the ability to work independently and the ability to take initiative” (R2, 3, 5, 7, 9)
- the increasing importance attached to research activities

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- administrative work is seen as a necessary extension of teaching activities besides supervision of postgraduate students
- the need to assume the position of leader to their own students (including the ability to initiate and foster relationship with others, first with those in the same department/section and to build a strong team, and later with other colleagues within the same school and to work closely with them in teaching and non-teaching activities)
- leadership is also viewed as the ability to support one’s colleagues and to provide encouragement to them. One respondent (R2) also mentioned that being a leader means “taking responsibility and initiative even when you are not in a position of authority”. Additionally, another respondent (R3) views leadership in the academic profession as an avenue that “involves giving intellectual input in a variety of channels – through one’s community activities, research responsibilities, administrative tasks and requires one to share material among colleague to generate collegiality to enhance capacity building”

- the importance of group work where everyone is given the chance to be leaders, for instance to set a goal as a team, to work together as a team by drawing on their individual strengths, to delegate tasks to members of the group, to voice out their own opinion, to encourage others to work/join in group discussions, and to manage conflicts within their own group
- leadership is also cultivated by giving students the freedom to complete a certain task (R5, R7, R9). According to one respondent (R8), rather than telling students how something should be done, students are free to make their own choices. Besides cultivating leadership, these activities also go some way in developing their soft skills. To another respondent (R6), academic leadership can take on various forms but this respondent stresses the fact that “the first step is always for lecturers to instil discipline in structuring course content that will meet the students’ needs and abilities”
- the importance of being good role models to their own students
- leadership also involves giving intellectual input in a variety of channels including through community activities, research responsibilities and administrative tasks. Another respondent (R2) mentioned the importance of collaborative research in which each member of the team is expected to work with others, negotiate differences among themselves, manage conflict among themselves, complete the tasks given to them, and support other team members. Another respondent (R8) mentioned that although the increasing importance attached to collaborative research at the university means that faculty members have no choice but to engage in research instead of focusing merely on teaching, it forces them “to learn how to work with people that they otherwise do not normally work with”.

Conclusion

While academics might lament that their profession is often compounded by pressing challenges, they must acknowledge that the efficacy of leadership qualities in their profession does to a large extent rest on their ability to cope with existing reforms and challenges in their organisational structures. While a supportive work environment can help empower university teachers to adopt leadership qualities, academics who accept the constraints of limited time and heavy responsibilities can achieve more success if they focus their energy on improving their teaching and learning activities.

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