

The Perceived Impact of Leadership Practices of Academic Leaders on Student Success in a Higher Education Institution in South Africa

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Abstract: The research reported on in this paper was motivated by the need to investigate student complaints in the higher education sector in South Africa regarding the poor quality of teaching and learning which has resulted in low student success rates in many institutions in the country. To mitigate poor student success rates, higher educational institutions in South Africa need to consider implementing effective leadership practices of academic leaders to support students in their academic journey. This study identified how academic leaders' leadership practices are perceived by students in a higher education institution in South Africa, and to identify which leadership practices are more impactful in supporting student success. According to Hoadley, Christie and Ward (2009) and Hallinger (2011), leadership practices are indeed aligned to academic performance. Grajfoner (2024) suggests that effective academic leadership is a key contributor to attaining academic excellence. However, Bryman (2007: 14) asserts that "one of the key problems in Higher Education is that not enough is known about exactly what makes an effective leader and what, in turn, may make them ineffective". The theoretical framework upon which the study is based was developed by Mukan, Hawryluk and Stolyarchuk (2015: 42), who suggest that "leadership is a derivative quality of people collaborating, co-operating and supporting each other. It is characterized by openness and is a dynamic, inclusive, collegial process that occurs in a particular context". In this research, a quantitative study was conducted using a purposeful sample selected from the target population of students at a higher education institution in South Africa. The final sample included 78 undergraduate students from the selected institution. The analysis undertaken in the study revealed that perceived leadership practices of academic leaders do have an impact on student success and that student success is not based on any one element of leadership practice alone; instead there are various perceived dimensions of leadership practices that play a role in promoting student performance. The findings of the study highlighted three key leadership practices that impact on student success, namely engagement, support and communication.

Keywords: Leadership, Academic Leaders Leadership Practices, Student Success, Teaching and Learning

1. Introduction

According to scholars such as Maddock and Maroun (2021) and Awung, *et al* (2024), there are numerous challenges faced in the provision of successful support for students in higher education in South Africa. Tewari and Ilesanmi (2020) pose the question as to what the weak link may be in ensuring student success for South African tertiary students. The literature, relating to the effective leadership practices to support students in their academic journey according to Bush (2008), Leithwood and Louis (2011) and Leane (2020) is inconclusive. There is a great deal of ambiguity regarding which particular leadership practices of academic leaders are most likely to improve instruction and student achievement. In the studies conducted by Ruben, DeLisi and Gigliotti (2023) and Tewari and Ilesanmi (2020) it was found that high achieving academic institutions can attribute a part of their success to the high expectations of academic performance that are articulated to both lecturers and students by their academic leaders. Balkrishen and Mestry (2016: 46) affirm that "there is a tangible link between the leadership role of the academic leader and student achievement. Replicating the leadership roles of academic leaders of high performing higher educational institutions has the potential to impact on improving student achievement". Lumby (2012), however, highlighted the fact that research on effective leadership in higher education is not as abundant as that on school leadership. She suggested that "school effectiveness literature has reached a point where it is able to claim an assessment of the percentage of variance in student outcomes related to the principal's leadership and to the concerted leadership of all those contributing to leadership. Research on leadership in higher education has no such equivalent body of work" (Lumby, 2012: 9). This study addressed the abovementioned gaps in the existing literature by identifying how leadership practices are perceived by students in a higher education institution in South Africa and what measures could be taken to improve leadership practices of academic leaders at the institution to promote student success.

2. Literature Review

"Higher education institutions are complex and continuously-evolving organizations that require effective leaders who understand and embrace the preferences of their followers," (Mews, 2019: 63). The perceived responsibility of leadership is to provide students with the necessary resources and continuous academic

support to ensure that they are on track to success. According to Wyatt (2019) stress that there is a strong correlation between academic leaders leadership and student academic success. The institution's academic leaders are responsible for guaranteeing the quality of teaching and learning within an institution, and have a significant responsibility to the overall academic performance and outcomes for students and (Grajfner 2024). The measures that may be implemented are largely dependent on the motivations of the institution's leadership. Thus, effective leadership must be considered to be of paramount importance to guarantee successful academic success within an institution.

Kawar (2012) further states that the key to successful leadership is through the implementation of best leadership practices, as applicable to the particular institution. McGill (2013) argues that leadership practices are activities and approaches leaders will take in order to steadily help their team better understand themselves and attain growth. Kerns, (2016) proposes that leadership practices are implicit and explicit actions and behaviours which those in position of academic authority exhibit while focusing on students towards achieving their academic expectations. Andy-Wali and Wali (2018) go onto suggest that the literature is not clear on the exact nature of the leadership practices that impact on student success in higher education. Therefore, further studies that investigate these specific practices, such as the current study, are necessary to clarify which leadership practices would have the greatest impact on promoting student success in higher education institutions.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study was based on a framework developed by Mukan, *et al* (2015), who contend that leadership is a derivative quality of people collaborating, co-operating and supporting each other. It is characterized by openness and is a dynamic, inclusive, collegial process that occurs in a particular context. In higher education research, student success cannot be attributed to any one element of leadership practice but must be conceptualised as being influenced by various dimensions. Bryman (2007: 14) argues that "one of the key problems in higher education is that not enough is known about exactly what makes an effective leader and what, in turn, may make them ineffective". Mukan, *et al* (2015) suggest that the fundamental leadership practices can be summarised into three simpler themes:

- the practice of collaboration and engagement;
- the practice of support;
- the practice of openness.

2.1 The Practice of Collaboration and Engagement

A study by Andy-wali and Wali (2018) on leadership practices and their impact on student experiences in a higher education institution in the United Kingdom identified four key themes that have a positive impact on student academic excellence, namely: (1) lecturer accessibility; (2) academic versatility; (3) teaching and learning quality; and (4) supportive academic leadership. The accessibility and supportive of academic leaders' practices had a positive impact on students' ability to achieve higher grades in their studies. The study also highlighted the positive impact on student participation and motivation through ongoing feedback and engagement between students and lecturers both in and out of the lecture room. "This implies that when academic leadership activities are supportive, students get positively involved in academic activities, which leads to positive academic performance", (Andy-Wali and Wali, 2018: 45). In a study by Kawar (2012), it was evident that the practices of motivating, collaborating, supporting and stimulating people have a positive effect on performance. This is important in educational institutions as student academic excellence depends highly on the motivations of the academic leaders (Grajfner 2024).

2.2 The Practice of Support

In a study by Moodley and Singh (2015), it became evident that a key reason for poor academic performance in the first year of higher educational studies was poor academic counselling and support offered in higher education institutions. In Moodley and Singh's (2015) research, it was found that students felt lecturers were unapproachable and not willing to assist them to unpack challenging academic content. Furthermore, students felt that they were not guided through assessments sufficiently and therefore did not know what was expected of them when answering assessment questions. Bitzer (2011) advises that successful academic and social incorporation of students in higher education remains important with regard to study commitment, study success and averting early student withdrawal. Academic leaders need therefore, need to oversee first year students with this integration and adaptation into a higher educational environment.

Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008: 664), in advocating for the notion of academic support, suggest that “leadership also includes creating an orderly and supportive environment for both students and staff that makes it possible for important academic and social goals to be achieved”. Furthermore, in the study by Moodley and Singh (2015), students felt that they were not given adequate customer service and academic leader support when issues arose and felt that this lack of support had impacted their academic performance negatively. Wyatt (2019: 3) maintains that “leadership’s level of customer service and support to students from academic leaders sets the tone for other faculties and staff that inevitably trickles down to student success”.

2.3 The Practice of Openness and Communication

Communication in any organization is fundamental to enhancing leadership effectiveness which, in turn, assists in achieving desired organizational results (Kerns, 2016). Kerns (2016) further emphasizes the importance of academic leaders ensuring that they are competent in interpersonal influence skills, as this assists leaders in motivating people and providing them with direction to achieve the institutional goals. “Communication is a fundamental practice area within the interpersonal influence domain that can contribute to effective leadership” (Kerns, 2016: 11). Conrad and Newberry (2011, cited in Kerns 2016: 12) concluded that “communication is connected to all organizational activities and business leaders and teachers/trainers concur on how important it is to organizational effectiveness”. In a study conducted by Spendlove (2007) on effective leadership competencies in higher education, amongst other competencies, the attributes of openness and honesty were highlighted as most important. This attribute of openness was supported in the findings of the study undertaken by Andy-Wali and Wali (2018) where the researchers identified four themes summarising student experiences with regards to lecturers and academic leaders leadership practices. One of the themes that emerged in their study was to do with participants’ experiences in terms of lecturers’ openness and accessibility towards their academic pursuit. Andy-Wali and Wali (2018) found that this practice positively influenced students’ sense of academic commitment, which ultimately contributed to their academic success.

Considering the literature reviewed above and the findings of previous studies, there is a need to investigate in more depth what specific and effective leadership practices can be implemented in higher education institutions in South Africa to support students in their academic journey.

3. Research Methodology

A positivist philosophy underpinned the quantitative research method employed in this study, the aim of which was to measure student perceptions of the impact of key leadership practices of academic leaders in a higher education institution in South Africa (Creswell and Creswell 2018). The positivist approach was of value as it afforded the researcher the opportunity to make a quantitative connection between student perceptions of the impact of academic leaders leadership practices on student success. The University of KwaZulu-Natal’s (UKZN) code of ethics for conducting research was used by the researcher to compile an application for ethical approval before commencement of data collection. The data collection instrument used in this study was a questionnaire which was designed and distributed, to a sample of 78 undergraduate student participants, in a higher education institution. The discussion of the findings aims to highlight the perceptions, from the sample group around the relationship between key leadership practices and student success. A purposeful sampling approach was implemented and all data analysis was carried out using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (Creswell and Creswell 2018).

4. Data Analysis

The data from completed survey questionnaires was coded and captured in SPSS and used for descriptive and inferential analysis. The tests used in the analysis were:

- A repeated measures ANOVA test;
- Descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations, tables and graphs;
- One sample t-test, which tests for significant agreement or disagreement to the Likert scale items;
- Cronbach’s alpha, which tests for reliability of scales.

A one-sample t-test was applied to test whether the average agreement score is significantly different from a central score of 3.5 (halfway between 1 and 6 which is the Likert score range). If the score is significantly different and above the mean score (>3.5), it is interpreted as “significant agreement”, if the score was significantly different and below the mean score (<3.5), it is interpreted as “significant disagreement”. (Creswell and Creswell

2018).

5. Results and Findings

The student responses from the questionnaire on student success in relation to the academic leaders on leadership practices are illustrated in Table 1.1 below.

Table 1: A consolidated summary of results from the student questionnaire on academic leaders impact on student success

Question	Student success will improve if the academic leaders...	Results as Frequency (%)						n	Mean (SD)	t	df	p-value
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree					
1	Is easily accessible and available to listen and advise students who have concerns or questions regarding their higher education experience.	0	0	1 (1.3)	5 (6.4)	38 (48.7)	34 (43.6)	78	5.35 (.661)	24.663	77	<.0005
2	Is known to the student body by name.	1 (1.3)	2 (2.6)	3 (3.8)	17 (21.8)	29 (37.2)	26 (33.3)	78	4.91 (1.071)	11.626	77	<.0005
3	Provides support programmes specifically for first generation students.	0	1 (1.3)	1 (1.3)	17 (21.8)	26 (33.3)	32 (41.0)	77	5.13 (.894)	16.003	76	<.0005
4	Provides adequate suitable residential accommodation for "out-of-town" students.	2 (2.6)	11 (14.1)	7 (9.0)	19 (24.4)	13 (16.7)	25 (32.1)	77	4.36 (1.504)	5.040	76	<.0005
5	Ensures that there is adequate transport between campus and student residences.	4 (5.1)	6 (7.7)	7 (9.0)	21 (26.9)	20 (25.6)	18 (23.1)	76	4.33 (1.418)	5.097	75	<.0005
6	Regularly sits in on lectures to observe instruction.	1 (1.3)	3 (3.8)	5 (6.4)	19 (24.4)	26 (33.3)	23 (29.5)	77	4.75 (1.149)	9.572	76	<.0005
7	Regularly meets with students to discuss progress and get class feedback.	1 (1.3)	1 (1.3)	5 (6.4)	14 (17.9)	22 (28.2)	35 (44.9)	78	5.05 (1.104)	12.413	77	<.0005
8	Offers facilities that will give support and guidance to students who need it.	0	0	12 (15.4)	0	24 (30.8)	42 (53.8)	78	5.38 (.743)	22.414	77	<.0005
9	Communicate	0	1	2 (2.6)	14	22	38	77	5.22 (.927)	16.297	76	<.0005

Question	Student success will improve if the academic leaders...	Results as Frequency (%)						n	Mean (SD)	t	df	p-value
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree					
	s clearly about what the minimum passing requirements are for each module.		(1.3)		(17.9)	(28.2)	(48.7)					
10	Communicate s clearly about what support programmes are available to students on campus.	0	1 (1.3)	2 (2.6)	3 (3.8)	35 (44.9)	37 (47.4)	78	5.35 (.787)	20.726	77	<.0005
11	Provides psychological support for students who are feeling discouraged.	0	3 (3.8)	1 (1.3)	7 (9.0)	30 (38.5)	37 (47.4)	78	5.24 (.956)	16.108	77	<.0005
12	Communicate s clearly the expectation of self-directed learning.	0	1 (1.3)	0	14 (17.9)	30 (38.5)	33 (42.3)	78	5.21 (.827)	18.200	77	<.0005
13	Provides a platform for students to give feedback on their learning experience.	0	0	2 (2.6)	18 (23.1)	29 (37.2)	29 (37.2)	78	5.09 (.840)	16.708	77	<.0005
14	Communicate s clearly to the students the individual roles and responsibilities of the management team.	0	2 (2.6)	5 (6.4)	12 (15.4)	32 (42.0)	27 (34.6)	78	4.99 (1.000)	13.136	77	<.0005
15	Provides learning skills and time management skills to learners to help them to navigate the workload in higher education.	0	0	1 (2.6)	9 (11.5)	28 (35.9)	39 (50.0)	77	5.36 (.742)	22.046	76	<.0005

(Source: Compiled from analysis of data collected in the study)

From the analysis results in Table 1.1 it is evident that there is significant agreement for all the statements. The mean scores ranged from 5.38 to 4.33. The item perceived to have the biggest effect on student success, with a mean score of 5.38, is the offer of facilities and resources that will provide support and guidance to those students who may require it. This was followed by the provision of learning and time management skills with a mean score of 5.36. Next in importance to improve student success, with a mean score of 5.35, is the accessibility and availability of leadership to advise students, as well as the communication of available support programmes. The two questions which are perceived as being of 'lowest importance' regarding the effect they have on student success, with mean scores of 4.36 and 4.33 respectively, were the provision of adequate and suitable residential accommodation to students and having transport arranged between the higher education institution and the student residences.

The 15 items included in the questionnaire were grouped into three basic themes – communication, engagement and support. Items that fall under each theme were combined into a single composite measure by finding the average of the agreement scores across the items. These single measures were tested for reliability using Cronbach’s alpha. A value for alpha that exceeds .7 indicates a reliable single measure. The results pertaining to the composition and reliability of these constructs are summarized in Table 1.2 below.

Table 2: The themes/leadership practices identified as important to student success in a higher education institution.

Theme	Items Included in Each Theme	Cronbach’s Alpha - Reliability
Engagement	1... Is easily accessible and available to listen and advise students who have concerns or questions regarding their higher education experience.	.681
	2... Is known to the student body by name.	
	6... Regularly sits in on lectures to observe instruction.	
	7... Regularly meets with students to discuss progress and get class feedback.	
Support	3... Provides support programmes specifically for first generation students.	.767
	4... Provides adequate suitable residential accommodation for ‘out-of-town’ students	
	5... Ensures there is adequate transport between campus and residence	
	8... Offers facilities that will give support and guidance to students who need it.	
	9... Provides psychological support for students who are feeling discouraged.	
Communication	10... Communicates clearly about what the minimum passing requirements are for each module.	.795
	12... Communicates clearly the expectation of self-directed learning.	
	13... Provides a platform for students to give feedback on their learning experience.	
	14... Communicates clearly to the students the individual roles and responsibilities of the academic leaders	
	15... Communicates clearly about what support programmes are available to students on campus.	

(Source: Compiled from analysis of data collected in the study)

The questionnaire included items relevant to best practice in leadership, with specific focus on measuring the importance of engagement, support and communication from the academic leaders.

The above findings support the researcher’s anticipated outcomes of the research process which, based on the review of relevant literature, was designed to evaluate whether academic leaders’ leadership practices were perceived as impactful on student success, from a student’s perspective:

- The value of the support offered by the academic leaders to the student body;
- The importance of the accessibility of availability to and overall engagement of the academic leaders with students;
- The communication by academic leaders with students regarding issues that concern them.

The overall feedback from the student sample demonstrates that they agree that these academic leadership practices do have a positive impact on student success.

6. Discussion

As a result of grouping the different statements into themes/practices that evolved from the analysis in each of the questionnaires, three key leadership practices emerged namely engagement, support and communication. By applying different tests, it became apparent that these leadership practices were perceived, by the students,

as being impactful on student success. These findings from the current study confirm what was established in an earlier study by Wyatt (2019) where it was found that support from academic leaders does impact student success. Wyatt (2019: 3) noted that “leadership’s level of customer service and support to students sets the tone for other faculties and staff that inevitably trickles down to student success”. The results of this study also confirm the findings from research undertaken by Kawar (2012) in which it was observed that key practices to attain student success include: effective communication; support and development; engagement; and motivation of people.

A study by Shertzer and Schuh (2004) also uncovered similar findings to those generated in the analysis of the data collected in this study, that is, that communication was very important for student success. The overall feedback from students included in this study that was undertaken at a higher education institution in South Africa is that the three key practices, engagement, support and communication, if implemented correctly by academic leaders, would certainly have a positive impact on student success. A recommendation to support the relationship between academic leaders and student success would be for academic leaders have regular engagement with students by developing clear communication channels which encouraged student feedback on the learning experience. This would enable academic leaders to intervene to ensure strategies were implemented to promote student throughput rates and academic excellence.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceived impact of leadership practices of academic leaders on student success at a higher education institution in South Africa. The research aimed to investigate the perceptions of students at the higher education institution with regards to their understanding of the impact that leadership practices of academic leaders have on student success. The quantitative analysis undertaken on the data obtained from the questionnaire administered to students in the study showed that the students were in strong agreement that the three themes that were identified during analysis, namely engagement, support and communication, which were practices which contribute positively to student success. To mitigate low student success rates academic leaders, need to engage and communicate directly with students and provide personal support in terms of mental support, skills development, facilities and resources to support learning. In particular support for first year students who may demonstrate a lack of confidence, a lack of interest in leadership, a self-perceived deficiency in leadership qualities, and encourage opportunities to lead with the university community.

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