

## Images of academic leadership in large New Zealand polytechnics

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As accountability stakes continue to be raised in all education sectors, leadership as a factor that can have an impact on improved student outcomes is being studied with heightened interest. This study was conducted from 2011 to 2012 in New Zealand's large urban polytechnics with the aim of investigating the nature and expectations of academic leadership. The conceptualisation of academic leadership in the theory base is fraught with both complexity and paradox and is often presented in contradictory terms. The study identifies images of academic leadership practised by directors of an academic front line, by actors in the front line and supporters on the side line. In relation to polytechnic settings it is concluded that new and varied forms of academic leadership are provided by spreading the role that encompasses both leadership and management.

**Keywords:** academic leadership; New Zealand; polytechnics

### Introduction

The setting for this research is the Institute of Technology/Polytechnic (ITP) education sector in New Zealand which comprises 20 institutions and is a distinctive higher education context in terms of its focus on technical, vocational and professional education, and applied research. This segment of the tertiary sector is virgin territory for researching leadership in general and academic leadership in particular. Interest in the nature of academic leadership and its impact has recently increased. Because higher education operates in a context of high accountability and public performance expectations for student learning outcomes leadership is under scrutiny as a factor that needs to be examined in terms of effect on the achievement of organisational goals.

Whilst universities (there are eight in New Zealand) have a long history of academic teaching, research, development and leadership, the ITP sector has a short history of 20 years of engagement in degree level teaching which has created a technology and training *plus* culture in many of these institutions. This culture change has been brought about because many ITPs now offer not only undergraduate degrees, but also postgraduate programmes. Consequently their staff profiles now include highly qualified academics who engage in research so that several ITP disciplines and departments offering professional postgraduate qualifications resemble their counterparts in universities.

This study was conducted in six large, urban Institutes of Technology (the nation's metro-polytechnics) with the aim of exploring the way in which academic leadership was conceptualised, its scope and expectations held of academic leaders. There is currently a heightened level of interest in the effectiveness of academic leadership in higher education

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because accountability stakes have been raised in terms of a demand for greater transparency of measurable outcomes especially those related to student achievement. In New Zealand this accountability takes the form of reporting student outcomes and engaging in institution-based self-assessment to isolate factors that could improve teaching and learning. Whilst this may not be an entirely new trend internationally (see for example Marshall, Orrell, Cameron, Bosanquet, & Thomas, 2011; Rosser, Johnsrud, & Heck, 2003), new accountability practices include the public posting of evaluations of the educational organisations supported by the state (Tertiary Education Commission [TEC], 2010). In this country at least, the direct linking of funding to student success in terms of learning outcomes that relate to course and qualification completion and the progression and retention of students has also directed a spotlight on leadership that can impact on improving student learning outcomes.

### Paradoxical conceptions of academic leadership

There appears to be considerable interest in studying leadership in higher education settings, however, the literature reveals that several recent studies which use the term *academic leadership* do so in a loose sense to describe leadership in an academic setting that mirrors a general or generic view of leadership (see for example Bryman, 2007; Drew, 2010; Vilkinas & West, 2011). The small existing literature that defines academic leadership more specifically reflects complexity and confusion in suggesting firstly, that academic leadership can be located at all levels of the organisation and secondly, that, paradoxically, it must be located close to academic practice. In some cases it is related to all leadership position holders in the organisation by virtue of them being leaders in an academic organisation (Diamond, 2002; Jones, Lefoe, Harvey, & Ryland, 2012). In other cases it is more particularly assigned to academics leading departments and programmes, who as leaders of other academics are engaged in influencing teaching and learning as practising academics themselves (Marshall et al., 2011; Ramsden, 1998).

A distinction between executive (institutional) level leadership and middle (discipline) level leadership is drawn by several authors such as Bryman (2007), Cardno (2012) and Eddy and VanDerLinden (2006). Bryman (2007) contributes a useful distinction between 'leadership of universities' and 'departmental leadership' (p. 694) creating in the latter context a clear locus for academic leadership. This location at middle-level rather than executive-level leadership is mirrored in many studies of academic leadership in the university sector (Briggs, 2005; Floyd, 2012; Smith, 2002) where they are also referred to as academic middle managers (Kallenberg, 2007). Cranston, Ehrich, Kimber, and Starr (2012) identify academic leaders as those holding middle-level Course Coordinator roles placing them in the midst of the organisation between senior staff and other academics and students. At this middle level an array of titles such as Head of School, Head of Department, Programme Leader/Manager are referred to in the literature. This level reflects Bryman's (2007) view of leadership *in* institutions but academic leadership in the literature is also confusingly associated with senior level titles – which Bryman calls leadership *of* the institution.

The many ways in which academic leadership is defined in the literature contributes to confusion about the nature of this construct. Academic leadership is sometimes defined as having a broad focus. This is evidenced in a significant study of academic leadership roles (ranging from Deputy Vice Chancellor to Head of Programme) in 20 Australian universities which provides a summary of the focus of academic leadership. Scott, Coates, and Anderson (2008) in stating this focus below capture the paradoxical essence of the role

which is that here leadership encompasses foci that have both leadership and management implications.

The study has identified a number of areas of focus in academic leadership that cut across the majority of leadership positions studied. These include policy formation, managing relationships, working with challenging staff, involvement in various aspects of planning and attending meetings. (p. xvi)

Also, confusingly, within this study there is an identification of academic leaders with a narrow focus as 'learning and teaching leaders' (p. xvi) who view the ability to demonstrably improve student outcomes as a hallmark of effectiveness.

The uniqueness of *academic* leadership is clearly captured by Ramsden (1998) who states that an effective academic leader is 'academically-inclined' (p. 120). He asserts that this type of leadership is characterised by values held in common by academics and related 'to the nature of "academic business"' (p. 123) which is about effective teaching. Thus the academic leader is concerned first and foremost with understanding what constitutes effective teaching. Effective academic leaders solve problems of teaching which Ramsden asserts are directly connected to the responsibilities of academic leaders. In rare instances a wider literature suggests that leading and managing academic work contributes to the enhancement of student learning (Gardiner, 2002; Knight & Trowler, 2001) emphasising that the focus of academic leadership should be on improving teaching and learning.

#### **Role dualities in academic leadership**

Inherent in the notion of academic leadership is the dual emphasis on both leadership and management. The interchangeable way in which the terms are used is viewed as problematic by some. For example, Marshall et al. (2011) say the notions of leadership and management are 'confounded by conceptual ambiguity. In practice, as in the literature on higher education, these terms are often used interchangeably, as if "leader" is synonymous with "manager"' (p. 88). This is indeed the case in the literature although some researchers have taken pains to indicate they are studying a fundamental conceptualisation of leadership that associates it with influence, inspiration and motivation (Bryman, 2007) as opposed to a wider understanding of the concept that meshes it with management tasks and action in an inseparable way. However, within Bryman's study of the literature on leadership, it could be argued that he has isolated several functions that can be identified as management tasks, such as providing resources, providing performance feedback and appointing academic staff. In short, academic leadership is conceptualised in multiple ways: as only leadership, as only management, and as a combination of both whatever it may be called. According to Smith (2002) department heads provide academic leadership and management to academic staff. Ramsden (1998) assumes that academic leaders are also managers. He presents leadership and management as complementary and equally necessary functions required to both create order and produce change, and states that he has 'used "leadership" as shorthand for "leadership and management"' (p. 107). This is consistent with the elision of terminology that has occurred widely in the field of educational administration, management and leadership (Bush, 2011; Cardno, 2012). The universal popularisation of the term 'leadership' over 'management' had often resulted in titles using the former term leading to a misunderstanding about the importance of both dimensions in work that is intended to

both shape change and take action that makes it possible to achieve the organisation's goals (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Another aspect of role complexity that challenges academic leadership effectiveness is the tension between being an academic oneself and being a manager of academics. Traditionally an academic leader in university settings has been expected to be a leading academic who is capable of managing other academics and the fundamental expectation is that they participate in teaching, research and advancing practice in their discipline (Harman, 2002). In the only located item of literature that captures expectations held of academic leaders in New Zealand polytechnics, Yelder and Codling (2004) draw a distinction between what they call academic leadership of a department and managerial leadership of a department. In the former case leadership is vested in the person who is a capable academic but may lack management skills. In the latter case leadership (capability for management) is vested in the position but the person may not have the academic credentials to exercise credible leadership. These authors argue for polytechnics to 'develop a leadership model which values both management and academic leadership equally' (p. 323).

In both Australia and Britain, former polytechnics have been granted the status of universities or universities of technology across the board. The corporatisation of university management in several Australian settings has favoured new forms of management over traditional versions of academic leadership, resulting in concerns about academic-related decisions being made by managers who do not have the expertise to make judgements and set direction for other academics (Harman, 2002). A similar trend is also evident in a study undertaken by Smith (2005) of British universities, including the 'new' or 'statutory universities' that were once polytechnics. The new status brought greater emphasis on research for these statutory universities. This became part of the Head of Department job description enhancing the academic nature of the role. This pressure in the new universities to make the role more academic was accompanied by pressures to make role more managerial in both the traditional and new universities. As a consequence 'the dual roles of academic leader on the one hand and line manager on the other were recognised' (Smith, 2005, p. 296). Similar concerns are evident in research conducted by Sarros, Gmelch, and Tanewski (1997) who reported dramatic change in relation to the role of department heads 'increasingly [. . .] being held accountable for the financial operation of the department, the calibre of students admitted, the quality of academic staff in terms of research output, administration responsibilities and community and professional duties, as well as countless other tasks' (p. 9).

Whilst it is self-evident that academic staff engage in teaching, a further aspect of the duality of expectations is contained in the expectation that an academic leader must be a leader-manager and as an academic must also continue to engage in research to maintain credibility with the colleagues they lead. In essence the academic leader role presented in the literature highlights the paradoxical nature of academic leadership as a concept. The term is used eclectically to describe leadership and management on many hierarchical or functional levels where the work may have little or no direct connection with teaching and learning (Drew, 2010; Yelder & Codling, 2004). Yet it is also assigned specifically to middle-level leadership where direct action impacts on learning and teaching (Cardno, 2012; Marshall et al., 2011). Academic leaders are conceptualised as teachers, leader-managers and researchers (Ramsden, 1998; Ramsden, Prosser, Trigwell, & Martin, 2007). Leading academics (identified by their research capability) are expected to be capable leader-managers of other academics, who also experience the challenges of the dual expectation of teaching and researching.

### Methodology

This study focused on investigating the views of middle and senior level academics in relation to the concept of academic leadership and the expectations held of academic leaders. Participants were drawn from New Zealand's six large urban polytechnics. Between three to five academic leaders in four of these institutions responded to an invitation to participate, with the researcher using a liaison person in each setting to establish contact. In all, 15 face-to-face, hour-long, semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded. Transcripts of the interview were sent to each participant for verification before the data were analysed. Four of the interviewees held executive-level academic leader positions and are referred to as (AD) to distinguish their Academic Director role. Four Heads of Department (HD) participated and seven of the participants were Programme Leaders (PL). These abbreviations are used in the reporting of verbatim data.

Five of the six polytechnic's approached also provided documents that referred to the expectations held of academic leaders. A conventional approach to qualitative content analysis was adopted for both interview data and documents (Bergman, 2010; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data gathering and analysis were simultaneous activities that spanned 11 months. Thematic analysis involved both top-down coding imposed by pre-identification of broad categories from the literature that framed the interview questions, and bottom-up coding which allowed for the inductive identification of relevant themes.

### Findings and discussion

The data from this small sample have revealed a multiplicity of understandings of the meaning, nature and expectations of academic leadership in New Zealand Institutes of Technology/Polytechnics. This finding is congruent with the literature that presents the concept of academic leadership in a variety of ways that confirm its complexity and scope (see for example Marshall et al., 2011; Ramsden, 1998; Smith, 2005). It is also significant because the participants in this study (at both executive-level and middle-level) have commented on the lack of clarity regarding the communication of expectations held of academic leaders. This is in spite of the existence of a plethora of documents describing positions, jobs and roles.

Across documentation that describes the expectations of the academic leadership role at the middle level of polytechnics are references to the scope of the job which encompasses leadership, management, administration (clerical), teaching, and learning facets. The terms academic leadership and or academic management are stated as a general key expectation in relation to the leadership-management of departments and programmes. None of these documents provide a definition of the terms. Professorial and Principal Lecturer position documents define research expectations explicitly and refer to academic leadership expectations in terms of a range of tasks including both leadership (strategic) and management (operational) dimensions in relation to teaching, curriculum development, quality management, and staff development.

Many tiers of academic leadership are acknowledged throughout the data, with comments such as, 'So, I think it's kind of multi-layered' (PL4), and 'I see it in layers, from the CEO to the teaching staff' (AD1). One participant stated:

I think that academic leadership happens theoretically from the CEO down through the leadership team [ . . . ] runs through the faculty deans and then down through heads of department through programme leaders, curriculum leaders, down to all teachers potentially having an academic leadership role. (AD1)

Three distinct images of academic leadership have emerged from the perspectives of the participants in this study and are described as:

- Academic leadership from the top – directors of the front line
- Academic leadership at the front line – actors in the front line
- Academic leadership from the side line – supporters of the front line.

#### **Academic leadership from the top – directors of the front line**

Executive academic leadership at the institution-wide level in these polytechnics is reflected in titles such as Academic Director, Director of Learning and Teaching, Vice President (Academic), Vice President (Teaching and Learning) and Dean of Teaching and Learning. These are academic positions, held by staff with the highest level of academic qualifications but they neither teach or manage directly and are seldom actively researching. They are all members of senior or executive leadership teams in the organisation and have significant influence on decision-making and setting direction for the organisation. Bryman (2007) has described this as leadership *of* the educational organisation. A key function of academic leadership at this level is vision and mission clarification and communication. One participant who was a Head of Department commented on the need for academic leadership to emanate from the senior-most level of the hierarchy. She said,

Academic leadership I see in this institution as being at the very top. She [Academic Director] has a vision and we do the work. (HD2)

And the perspective of an Academic Director was that at the executive level academic leaders had,

... the potential to facilitate and encourage greater movement in learning and teaching capability across the institution. (AD2)

Several participants expressed commonly held views regarding what academic leadership involved:

Covers quite high level things such as the academic direction of the institution strategically and all sorts of things about our values, around our academic portfolio and academic behaviours. (AD1)

We have academic leadership right at the very top level, the faculty dean who looks to see that the structure of the organisation best supports learning and teaching. (PL6)

These academic leaders direct the front line. The front line in where the teaching and learning occurs and guiding the work of front liners is a common teaching and learning vision for the organisation. One Head of Department stated that institutional leadership was a kind of indirect influence on the quality of the work of the 'real academic leaders who take the action' and these leaders:

need to be excellent teachers themselves. Number one. They need to have an active professional development plan themselves, they need to be up-to-date, they need a passion for actual teaching and learning. (HD1)

### **Academic leadership at the front line – actors in the front line**

The majority of interview respondents confirmed that the locus of real academic leadership is the middle-level of the organisation. Actors in the front line were entitled Head of School, Head of Department, Programme Leader, Curriculum Director, Academic Manager and Principal Lecturer, for example. They defined academic leadership at organisational mid-level as follows:

It's about teaching and learning and it's about student achievement. And I suppose my role is to think about that in a holistic sort of way. (PL5)

Then we have another layer of academic leadership, which is kind of where I fit in, where we look at how our department functions in a way that best supports learning and teaching. (PL6)

The data reveal two distinct views of what it means to be an academic leader. Firstly, they were practising academics who could model excellence in teaching and research. Secondly, they engaged in both leadership and management.

In almost all cases the seven programme leaders in this study held in common the view that as an actor in the front line modelling was central to the role. One programme leader put it this way:

My drive is for excellence in teaching and learning and to do this you have to be practising it. (PL2)

These middle-level leaders saw themselves as directly engaged with academic work and research. They believe that being able to model excellent teaching and/or excellent research is central to the role; and they see themselves as being capable of managing co-academics because they have the credibility to do this. This is a view of academic leadership captured in Bryman's (2007) review of the literature that provides 'evidence that effective departmental leaders form role models for members of their staff' (p. 701). The ability to be a role model is linked to the notion of leader credibility. In this study recognition of one's own lack of credibility was referred to as a personal challenge.

I am uncomfortable about leading academics when I do not see myself as a senior academic. (HD3)

This sort of concern is related to polytechnic settings in particular where promotion to leadership positions may be based on managerial qualities rather than academic prowess (Yielder & Codling, 2004).

Not all participants felt that they had to perform every facet of the role themselves as role models. For example, in one institution a deliberate decision had been made to assign research leadership expectations to the appointed Principal Lecturers in each discipline or programme area, thus freeing the academic leader from having to undertake research personally. One Head of Department expressed the view that:

My focus is on managing and teaching – research is not a personal priority and others can compensate. (HD1)

The majority (three out of the four department heads and five of the seven programme leaders interviewed) clearly positioned themselves as mid-level academic leaders with their role involving a combination of both leadership and management functions. Several

commented on following leadership direction that was set for the institution by academic leaders (at a higher level of the hierarchy) although they mentioned planning, working with industry and managing change as middle-level leadership activities. One participant felt that it was important to have people, other than the designated leader, who could show leadership by influencing new directions in programmes or for instance in research. She stated:

Whereas the Head of School is an operational management leader type of person the Principal Lecturer is an academic leader. (AD2)

Another participant stated, 'I see we're all academic leaders within our relative context' (PL5).

In relation to management aspects of the role, many of these participants were adamant about the fact that management was an overwhelming aspect of a multifaceted role. As one participant stated 'My key thing is it's really hard to teach, lead and research. (PL1)'

Academic leaders in the middle of the organisation's hierarchy found their role was dominated by a need to manage quality and to manage staff performance appraisal and development. For some, management tasks dominated the role.

Most of my job is still management. Most of my time is taken up with making decisions but of course I am also looking for ways to improve the programme. (PL6)

Quality management and assurance featured repeatedly as a key element of the role.

Formal expectations would be around quality, processes, moderation, evaluations of the programmes and lecturing staff, and ensuring that professional development meets the requirements that would support the lecturer to achieve the academic quality. (PL2)

Managing staff appraisal and development was viewed by the majority of participants as an essential function of academic leadership and management. In one institution a new level of academic leadership had been introduced to allow the department head to delegate staff appointment, appraisal and development to Programme Managers. This freed them up to attend to other department-wide tasks such as planning, budgeting and building external stakeholder relationships.

I think it's important that academic leaders do have control over the lecturers and that evaluations are going on to make sure that the outcomes, the moderation of unit standards in our case, are carried out. (PL7)

If you've got what I'd call quality teachers, people who do have an understanding of the curriculum and in my context it's both theoretical knowledge and clinical knowledge, then in terms of academic leadership I think the best impact they can have is to actually support those people. (PL4)

Several Programme Leaders and Heads of School/Departments identified 'driving' and 'managing' the professional development of academic staff a key facet of the role.

My principal role is to drive staff development – or I call it teacher development in the department. My role is managing the professional development budget, making certain priorities and running the teacher development programme which is pretty substantial in this department. My drive is for excellence in teaching and learning and to make sure people are working to their potential and have the resources and capacity to do that. (HD3)



I think we have to be rigorous and determined in performance management and professional development and not tolerate poor practice. I think good academic leaders shouldn't be satisfied with continuously poor teaching. Shouldn't tolerate it. (AD4)

In order to function effectively across a myriad of expectations related to both leadership and management, academic leaders need to draw on colleagues within and beyond their departments and programmes for specific kinds of leadership and management contributions.

### **Academic leadership from the side line – supporters of the front line**

Respondents referred to ways in which academic leadership (seen as influence on academic work) was not necessarily the preserve of the designated role holder. It was provided by other people in the department and the system in relation to teaching and research.

The strongest, most consistent reference was made to how academic developers influenced change in relation to teaching and learning. Participants alluded to institutions creating support units within the structure with names such as Academic Development Centre, Centre for Education Development and Academic Support Centre. These units provided a form of 'bolt-on' leadership because the work of specialist advisors, for example in eLearning, could influence change and improvement from a position outside the department.

Other key people that support that leadership would include members of the Academic Development Centre and in varying faculties and departments there are experienced academic people. (PL2)

The Academic Development staff come to us. I asked X to observe a teacher with me and we both gave him feedback. (HD3)

In structural terms academic developers could be seen as inhabiting what Mintzberg terms the technostructure in a professional bureaucracy (cited in Bolman & Deal, 2008). Here the specialists are located, outside of the management lines that run from a strategic apex to an operating core and are drawn on for expert advice that cannot be provided by line managers.

Participants also mentioned the use of key people within departments and programme teams who could supplement the role-holders' work as a learning-focused leader by providing direction, mentoring and modelling in a direct form.

We have appointed people in our department (0.4) to support other staff to improve teaching. (HD3)

Polytechnic teachers know their discipline stuff but the teaching environment is new and they must be developed. (PL7)

Research was also influenced by other key people with expertise and designated research responsibility to mentor colleagues. Research administration support, another aspect of technostructure, was centralised in two of the polytechnics, providing consistent internal procedures and sustaining external credibility around postgraduate research quality assurance standards.

These people and services on the side lines of department and programme based academic leadership provided an invaluable form of leadership for academic work in a way that spreads both the load and the accountability to improve teaching and research that is inherent in the role of an academic leader.

### **Conclusions**

The nature of academic leadership in the setting of large New Zealand polytechnics is revealed in this study as a poorly understood concept in spite of the term being used in an array of documents that describe the position and the job. It is a term used loosely, understood variously and assigned to multiple levels, individuals and groups in the organisations studied.

While it is evident that academic leadership is a complex, multi-level concept it is clear that this is recognised by those who practise it. The confusion that abounds in relation to the terminology in the literature that sometimes separates and sometimes integrates leadership and management (Marshall et al., 2011) is confirmed in these findings but is not necessarily problematic. If a notion of leadership in its pure sense is employed to examine the implications of these findings, then it could be assumed that for 'directors of the front line' leadership in terms of direction setting and inspiring change (Bryman, 2007) is indeed the main role. They exert a form of academic leadership that is indirect because they have the ability to establish institution-wide conditions conducive to the improvement of teaching and learning. As Cardno (2012, p. 20) states, 'In indirect forms of leadership, distance is imposed between the decision-making at a higher level and implementation at the core level because of multi-level leadership structures, or a strategic orientation to the leadership'.

Overall, the nature of academic leadership revealed in this small set of findings shows that the primary actors are academics managing academics in a close-to-the-job and direct manner because it is about leading teaching and learning. Hence, the concept embraces leadership that is focused on the work of departments and programmes in the form of guiding and directing change that meshes with the organisation's vision. And, academic leadership also comprises management. It is associated with middle-level leader-managers who hold the middle space in terms of a structural image that represents a professional bureaucracy.

In the polytechnics featured in this study it was rare to find an academic leader who substantially engaged in the tripartite traditional features of teaching, research and management that appear on paper (in job descriptions) to be the common expectation. Instead, it is concluded that academic leadership as direction setting and influencing the core work of teaching and research has to be understood as a widely distributed structural phenomenon (Gronn, 2003) in the case of the polytechnics that participated in this research project because it purportedly occurs at many levels. At the middle-level of these institutions it is vested in formal role holders whose work is predominantly management with the expectation that they also lead the academics and the teams who perform the core work of the organisation. Hence academic leaders behind the front line, in the front line, and supporting the front line can be seen in the picture which portrays the complexity of a role with a vast scope. It is a role that may well be misnamed, continues to be misunderstood in many cases, and is performed in both direct (hands-on) and indirect (from a distance) forms.

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