



# Academic Programme Leadership in African Higher Education: A Phenomenological Reflection

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## Abstract

Given a dearth of literature on the role of middle-level academics in African higher education, this article contributes to the understanding of the roles played by this cadre. In this article, I draw on my lived experiences of leadership as an academic programme coordinator in higher education studies located at a higher education unit at a South African university. I pose two phenomenological questions: 1) how is it to be an academic programme leader, from my lived experiences of leadership at a South African university? and 2) what do my lived experiences of academic programme leadership reveal about programme leadership at a South African university? To answer these questions, I utilised a personal phenomenological reflection by drawing on concepts of *lifeworld* and *being*. The results showed that academic programme leadership was demanding and required paying attention to systemic contexts of universities as well as developing skills such as decision-making, curriculum development and pedagogical leading, and communication. These findings imply a need for careful planning of university structures, such as the locus of higher education units and their operations, a clearer definition of the role of academic programme leaders/coordinators and capacity building for academic programme leaders in South African universities.

**Keywords:** middle-level academics, higher education, South African university, academic programme leadership, phenomenological reflection

## Résumé

Compte tenu du manque de littérature sur le rôle des universitaires de niveau intermédiaire dans l'enseignement supérieur africain, cet article contribue à la compréhension des rôles joués par ce personnel. Dans cet article, je m'appuie sur mes propres expériences de leadership en tant que coordinateur de

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programme académique dans l'unité d'enseignement supérieur d'une université sud-africaine. Je pose deux questions phénoménologiques, 1) comment est-ce d'être chef de programme académique à partir de mes expériences vécues de leadership dans une université sud-africaine ? Et, 2) que révèlent mes propres expériences de leadership de programme académique sur le leadership de programme dans une université sud-africaine? Pour répondre à ces questions, j'ai utilisé une réflexion phénoménologique personnelle en m'appuyant sur les concepts de monde vécu et de d'être. Les résultats ont montré que la direction de programme académique est exigeante et nécessite une attention aux contextes systémiques des universités, ainsi qu'au développement des compétences telles que la prise de décision, le développement de curriculum et la direction pédagogique, et la communication. Ces résultats appellent une planification minutieuse des structures universitaires telles que l'emplacement des unités d'enseignement supérieur et de leurs opérations, une définition plus claire du rôle des responsables/coordonateurs de programmes universitaires, et le renforcement des capacités des responsables de programmes universitaires dans les universités sud-africaines.

**Mots-clés :** universitaires de niveau intermédiaire, enseignement supérieur, université sud-africaine, leadership de programme académique, réflexion phénoménologique

## Introduction

Literature on the role of middle-level academics in Africa is generally scant. Given the intricate issues that characterise university leadership, it is important to engage with the roles middle-level academics, such as academic programme leaders, perform in academic leadership. This is pertinent in order to understand emerging leadership cultures in African higher education. More so, such an understanding would shed more light, not only on leadership challenges, but also on good leadership practices that could improve aspects of university leadership more generally in African higher education.

Having been involved in coordinating postgraduate academic programmes in the field of higher education studies at a South African university, I reflect on my lived experiences of this middle-level academic leadership. The reflection, termed 'a phenomenological reflection of academic programme leadership', draws on phenomenological concepts of *lifeworld* and *being* – I return to these concepts in the theoretical framing and methodology. While a number of studies in higher education leadership or governance have employed phenomenology in understanding lived experiences, most have tended to understand lived experiences of others (see

Van der Mescht 2004: 1-16; Jenkins 2015; Yankech 2015). This personal reflection provides first-hand information on personal lived experiences that is crucial in understanding middle-level academic programme leadership. This phenomenological reflection answers two questions: 1) how is it to be an academic programme leader, from my lived experiences of leadership at a South African university? and 2) what do my lived experiences of academic programme leadership reveal about programme leadership at a South African university?

Results from reflections on my experiences of academic leadership showed that academic programme leadership was demanding and required paying attention to systemic contexts of the universities – for example, inflexible university leadership structures impeded the smooth working of academic programme leadership. More so, because of operating somewhat differently from the mainstream education offerings, the locus of the higher education unit, as well as the academic programme leadership within it, were susceptible to ‘otherness’. Second, that there is a need for developing skills, such as curriculum development and pedagogical leading, communication, decision-making and people skills. These findings imply a need for careful planning of university structures, such as the locus of higher education units and their operations, clearer definition of the role of academic programme leaders/coordinators and capacity building for academic programme leaders in South African universities.

I present this article in seven sections. In the first section, I conceptualise the notion of middle-level academic leadership while, in the second, I briefly explain the context of academic programme leadership at the concerned university. In the third section, I provide theoretical underpinnings of my phenomenological reflection and in the fourth, I present the methodology and data used. In the fifth section, I present results and discussion by first narrating my own lived experiences of leadership as an academic programme leader before discussing what these experiences reveal about academic programme leadership. In the sixth, I engage with policy implications of the findings, followed by conclusions in the seventh section.

## **Conceptualising Middle-level Academic Leadership**

Middle-level academic leadership designates a cadre of academics who are not directly involved in senior management and leadership but play different roles that affect and shape university cultures (Thomas-Gregory 2014; Nguyen 2013). Middle-level academic leadership is conceived as a process through which academic values and identities are constructed, communicated and enacted by middle-level academics (Bolden *et al.* 2012). Examples of the

middle-level cadre include faculty deans, heads of department, officials of the academic union, course coordinators and doctoral holders involved in mentorship. Thomas-Gregory (2014) contends that the work of middle-level academics makes them responsible for the operational engagement of others, such as lecturers, senior lecturers and administrators.

While there is a dearth of literature on the role of middle-level academics in African higher education, abundant literature exists from the United States, Europe, Australia and China, among others. For example, drawing on a study that examined duties of heads of department in the United States and Australia, Wolverton, Gmelch, Wolverton and Sarros (1999) found the following major roles of heads of department: administrative tasks, resource management, scholarship, leadership, faculty development and resource development. In their study at Edith Cowan university in Australia, Pepper and Giles (2015) found that while middle-level academics enjoyed using their roles in making a difference in other people's lives within the university, they perceived their roles as overwhelming and with a sense of huge responsibility, albeit with little power. They argue that this cadre of academics perceived their roles as reactive and that the roles made this cadre feel isolated in university leadership. Similarly, Briggs (2001) contends that middle-level leaders tend to lack clear role definition, which eventually undermines their autonomy and authority. De Boer, Goedegebuure, and Meek (2009) argue that middle-level academic leadership is stressful, given the fact that there are multiple expectations and demands that generally lead this level to conflict.

### **Academic Programme Leadership/Coordination**

Generally, academic programme leaders or coordinators are part of the middle-level academic leadership. In Australia, for example, this cadre is referred to as "course coordinator, programme director or department chair and refers to academics responsible for a degree course or programme" (Ladyshevsky & Flavell 2011:128). Zutshi, Creed, Ringer, and Osborne (2013) contend that the role of academic subject coordination demands establishing connection with students and other academics, and that it requires empowerment and support. They argue that the coordination role is layered with administrative complexity. The challenge is that "the role of coordinator takes many guises, including leader, educator and manager, all of which are bundled with administrative expectation by the university" (Zutshi *et al.* 2013:58). The other challenge faced by academic programme leaders or coordinators is that they hold an ambiguous institutional position, in that while they manage courses and programmes, they do not

line manage staff, yet there is an expectation to draw on staff/faculty support to develop modules that constitute programmes (Middlehurst, Goreham & Woodfield 2009; Murphy & Curtis 2013).

Ladyshefsky and Jones (2007) contend that while course coordinators tend to be experts in their academic fields, they are usually ill prepared for the kind of leadership required by course coordination. They argue that this needs to be addressed, as course coordinators are crucial in the quality of programmes universities offer. In Australia for example, programme coordinators tend to be left out of formal leadership trainings, as their roles are not pronounced – usually embedded between a general academic staff and a head of department in the organisational charts (Ladyshefsky & Flavell 2011) – revealing a lack of serious recognition and an identity challenge to this cadre.

### **Factors for Successful Academic Leadership**

Any form of academic leadership requires thoughtful enactment. Detsky (2010) argues that a good academic leader requires to display fundamental characteristics of leadership to succeed. For example, an academic leader requires a vision of how to take the department or unit to the future; he/she needs to be an excellent communicator; he/she needs to clearly understand the core activities of the department or unit; and he/she must have people skills or emotional intelligence. Many scholars (see Black 2015; Black, Groombridge & Jones 2011) also advance these traits.

Another useful understanding is presented by Bryman (2007:2) who provides a list of important facets of leadership both at departmental and institutional levels:

- Providing direction,
- Creating a structure to support the direction,
- Fostering a supportive and collaborative environment,
- Establishing trustworthiness as a leader,
- Having personal integrity,
- Having credibility to act as a role model,
- Facilitating participation in decision-making (consultation),
- Providing communication about developments,
- Representing the department/institution to advance its cause(s) and networking on its behalf,
- Respecting existing culture while seeking to instil values through a vision for the department/institution, and protecting staff autonomy.

These facets chiefly suggest that at whatever level, leadership in higher education demands thoughtful facets on how leaders act and engage with others.

### **Academic Programme Leadership and Context at the University**

I coordinated postgraduate programmes in the field of higher education based at a higher education unit at a South African university. These programmes were hosted at the School of Education but offered by the unit, which served multiple roles of promoting the field of higher education as an area of scholarship, implementing university-wide staff development programmes and conducting institutional research. The higher education unit was essentially concerned with postgraduate studies, mostly attended by academics from South African universities who performed full time roles in their respective universities. The unit gave 40 per cent of its effort to the School of Education and 60 per cent to the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor – Teaching and Learning. At a practical level however, this arrangement presented some challenges inviting a need to engage with the locus of the unit. Further, the fact that most course participants performed full time jobs impacted on the unit's planning in terms of teaching time, programme delivery mode as well as teaching venues. Following this, the unit's operations then could not neatly meet with the expectations of administrators at the School of Education in terms of teaching times and examination results provision among others. These systemic challenges complicated academic programme leadership at the unit.

### **Theoretical Underpinning: Phenomenological Reflection**

Phenomenological reflection provides an understanding of our lived experiences. I draw on two phenomenological concepts in reflecting on my lived experiences of academic programme leadership: *lifeworld* and *being* (to be). The notion of lifeworld or *Lebenswelts* suggests that “we exist in a day-to-day world that is filled with complex meanings which form the backdrop of our everyday actions and interactions” (Finlay 1999:301), or simply, it is the world as men and women experience it (How 2003). Finlay (1999:301) argues that in existential terms, the lifeworld of an individual can be understood as comprising three universal horizons of experience: *Being a body in space* (Umwelt), *being a self in time* (Eigenwelt) and living with others (Mitwelt). Applied to academic leadership, these three horizons mean that leaders are bound to *what they are in space* meaning they exist, are bound to what they are in time, meaning that their lived experiences of leadership reflect the time in which they live, and finally that they are bound to *living with others*, meaning that they interact with colleagues, students,

administrators and others in doing their work. As such, the notion of lifeworld is pertinent to this article as, having been an academic programme leader means that I have lived experiences of leadership in a university, which I can narrate and share to help shape university leadership practice.

The notion of being is equally important in this article. In his book *Being and Time* (1962), Heidegger develops the idea of *being* (to be). He argues that in understanding being, there is a need to engage with the self-evident nature of being or the meaning of being as it is, in its essence (Spier 2018). What this means is that *to be* always means to exist in a highly context-specific way (Spier 2018). The idea of being is important in two ways. First, it foregrounds the ontological nature of existence that makes it possible for us to talk about a phenomenon – what Heidegger refers to as the *already there* (Spier 2018). Applied to the article, it means that the phenomenon *experience of academic programme leadership* is already there, and that people can relate to it, but what is different is the way different people experience the phenomenon. Therefore, it is important to share the different lived experiences to learn from each other. Second, it means there is a need to study the phenomenon within a context, which in this article is a South African university.

## Methodology and Data Production

Drawing on a phenomenological understanding, I sought to understand my lived experiences of being an academic programme leader at a South African university by posing two research questions:

1. how is it *to be* an academic programme leader, from my lived experiences of leadership at a South African university?
2. what do my lived experiences of academic programme leadership reveal about programme leadership at a South African university?

These questions follow directly from the theoretical notions of *lifeworld* and being as conceived in the article.

## Data Production

Data reported here were generated from own narratives of lived experiences of academic programme leadership. I then reflected on these narratives to unpack what the narratives implied to academic programme leadership at a South African university. Writing down the narratives allowed me to tell my stories – my lived experiences – while reflecting on them enabled me to tease out what these experiences meant in relation to academic programme leadership in my context. I call this process a phenomenological reflection.

## Analysis of Data

I grouped my narratives into themes. The following themes were developed: narratives regarding systemic challenges, narratives regarding induction aspects and narratives regarding required skills for academic programme leadership. In analysing the data, I drew on the theoretical frames by engaging with the phenomenological notions of *lifeworld* and *being* as espoused in the article.

## Results and Discussion: Narrating my Lived Experiences

In this section, I start by presenting the results or the narratives that formed my own lived experiences of academic programme leadership before reflecting on them and providing a discussion. I group the narratives under two major themes: first, systemic challenges; and second, required skills for academic leadership.

### Systemic Challenges

The following were my narratives that touched on systemic challenges: *mediating systemic challenges of governance structures, deciding on programme delivery mode; deciding on where to run programmes, and a perception of otherness*. I present them in turn.

### *Mediating Systemic Challenges of Governance Structures*

Two major aspects reflected or contributed to systemic challenges: the locus of the higher education unit with 40 per cent and 60 per cent reporting lines to the School of Education and the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor – Teaching and Learning – respectively and the offering of postgraduate programmes to students who worked full time in their respective universities or higher education institutions. For example, arriving at appropriate dates to offer courses was a challenge, as the unit needed to take into consideration when the course participants would be free. This not only made it difficult for the unit to strictly follow stipulated teaching time of the School of Education per semester, but also for the programme to adhere to dates set by the School of Education for examination reporting. This meant that grades for some courses could sometimes not be captured within the designated semester. In such cases, failure to meet the School of Education administrators' expectations caused uneasiness to academic programme leadership. While administrators were responsible for steering the general expectation as stipulated by the school within its governance

structures, there was a need to understand the unique situation of the unit – dealing with postgraduate students only, dealing with postgraduate students who worked full time in their respective institutions and running offerings that had to be negotiated in terms of teaching dates.

### ***Deciding on Programme Delivery Mode***

While the preferred programme delivery mode was face-to-face using selected days per week within semesters, this did not work smoothly for the programmes at the unit. The challenge arose because, as noted, the course participants were mostly full-time academics in their respective universities or higher education institutions, which made it difficult for them to attend classes on selected days per week, given transport, accommodation and related costs. As such, the programmes were delivered in week-long (five-day) block. The difficulty with such a delivery mode was that little time was available for in-depth engagement with the content of courses.

### ***Deciding on Where to Run Programmes***

As is expected, face-to-face courses offered by a university ought to be situated within its campuses. However, given the situation at the unit, there were complications. Standard practice was that universities sent their academics to our unit for lessons and provided transport, accommodation, and related services to their academics. However, there were instances when some universities negotiated with our unit to have our academics travel and facilitate courses at their universities. This was not always a straightforward issue to deal with, especially as that policy generally required that courses be taught within universities that offer the programme to ensure quality by making sure that teaching and learning facilities are available for the programmes.

### ***A Perception of Otherness***

As already noted, given the fact that the unit could not always neatly fit within the expectations of the school in areas like teaching within the stipulated semester and providing examination results within stipulated dates, a perception of “otherness” was implicitly felt. Administrators adhering to strict deadlines did not usually show an understanding of our unit’s unique situation. We became the “odd ones out” and, as an academic programme leader, I had to deal with the situation while maintaining the quality of the programmes I coordinated.

## **Required Skills for Academic Programme Leadership**

The following were my narratives that touched on required skills for academic programme leadership: *curriculum planning and pedagogical dimensions, communicating with colleagues, communicating with students, communicating with administrators and capacity development for academic programme leaders*. I present them in turn.

### ***Curriculum Planning and Pedagogical Dimensions***

As an academic programme leader, I took the lead in curriculum planning and pedagogical aspects of the programmes I coordinated. This entailed making sure that all courses had curriculum templates that were approved by the university senate. This was to ensure that courses were relevant and responded to the university's vision and mission. Further, that fellow academics had produced course outlines in line with the goals stipulated in the approved curriculum templates. Together with colleagues, we would ensure that courses in the programme draw on participatory pedagogies.

### ***Communicating with Colleagues – Fellow Academics***

Communicating with colleagues involved in the academic programme was an important leadership role that I played. My role demanded that I communicate aspects of the programme carefully to my colleagues. I needed to remind my colleagues about the courses they were to teach, teaching venues, the processes and engagement with external examiners, including dates for submission of students' grades.

I also dealt with queries that came from both students and academics. Depending on the nature of the problems at hand, I would then take appropriate courses of action. In general, queries concerned teaching materials, teaching and learning venues as well as lecturers' teaching methods and assessment procedures.

### ***Communicating with Students***

While individual lecturers communicated with students directly on the requirements of their courses, I played an oversight role for the programmes I coordinated. My role was to make sure that students had received all the necessary information for their studies. For example, whether they had received learning materials, course outlines, dates for courses as well as venues for programme delivery.

### ***Communicating with Administrators***

As an academic programme leader, I liaised with administrators on a number of issues, such as examination processing, examination results and students' admission. There was always tension because our unit did not fit smoothly within the operations that the administrators adhered to, given what I have already alluded to.

### ***Capacity Development on the Role of Academic Leadership***

Although I had considerable experience of academic leadership as a former deputy dean, a position I served outside South Africa, the role of programme coordination was in many ways different. First, as deputy dean I would line-manage staff, while in this role I did not. Second, I needed to understand the context in which my new university operated. There was a need to be inducted into the operations of this role within the context of this university in South Africa. I took it upon myself then to learn on the job and mediate several intricate issues that arose.

## **Discussion: Implications of my Lived Experiences Regarding Academic Programme Leadership**

### ***Systemic Challenges***

The systemic challenges experienced reveal that inflexible university governance structures and expectations impeded the smooth working of academic programme leadership. For example, the locus of the higher education unit needed to be understood and engaged holistically. There needed to be an understanding of the nature of the programmes in terms of the nature of students that were admitted as well as the programme delivery modes and times. Adherence to a "one-size fits all" perspective affected academic programme leadership. As noted, a lack of a neat fit within the school operations generally produced feelings of otherness. An understanding of the uniqueness of the operations of the unit was needed to mitigate the challenges, including feelings of otherness.

I realised that, to work within such an environment, I needed to develop excellent decision-making skills to respond to the situation at hand, while avoiding halting the programmes. For example, decisions of delivery modes different from general expectations or whether to run some courses at other universities required quick thinking and liaising with colleagues.

These findings on systemic challenges, relate to many findings in higher education environments generally. As noted earlier, Briggs (2001) contends that middle-level leaders tend to lack clear role definition, which eventually

undermines their autonomy and authority while De Boer, Goedegebuure and Meek (2009) argue that middle-level academic leadership is stressful, given the fact that there are multiple expectations and demands that generally lead this level to conflict. This talks to how universities generally tend to perceive the role of academic programme leaders or coordinators within the organisational structure. As noted by Ladyshevsky and Flavell (2011), this position suffers from a lack of identity within the academy.

### **Required Skills for Academic Leadership**

Drawing on my lived experiences, I realised that academic programme leadership in universities demands serious skills, such as decision-making, curriculum and pedagogical leading, communication, and people skills. The development and nurturing of these skills demand elaborate capacity development.

As noted, decision-making skills were vital in mediating systemic challenges. Having developed decision-making skills while serving as deputy dean in another country was useful in mediating systemic challenges. However, since this was a different context, an in-depth understanding of the environment was required.

In attending to curriculum planning and pedagogical issues, as an academic programme leader, I was required to engage and understand processes of curriculum development and innovation at my university. While I had considerable knowledge and experience in curriculum development and leadership, I needed to understand the policy environment that shaped curriculum processes and development at this South African university. This demanded understanding national higher education policy, processes such as developing curriculum templates, liaising with quality assurance colleagues on course development as well as connecting teaching content to the university's mission and visions, among other activities. In terms of academic programme leadership, this talks to openness and willingness of a leader to learn new things and enhance practice.

Drawing on my narratives of communication with colleagues and students, as an academic programme leader, I learnt the importance of mastering communication skills. Given the fact that I did not line-manage fellow academics, proper communication that got things done was extremely important. For example, dealing with academics required that I understood their *modus operandi* and found ways of harnessing interpersonal communication to get things done. More so, I depended on their academic citizenship – faculty's commitment to their duties without coercion (Macfarlane 2007) – to respond to their work.

Communicating with students demanded patience and constant engagement. For example, I learnt not to assume that since information was available on websites or other forms of communion, then participants would access it. In general, in dealing with both academics and students I learnt the importance of listening, articulating direction, bringing to the fore and sustaining arguments, as well as changing my views based on reason where necessary. The success of this academic leadership could be measured by the increased numbers of universities sending their academics to participate in the programmes I coordinated at the unit.

These findings tally with many authors who argue that the role of academic programme leadership requires one to develop appropriate skills. For example, as Zutshi, Creed, Ringer and Osborne (2013:58) noted, the role of academic subject coordination demands an establishment of connection with students and other academics, as well as empowerment and support.

### **Policy Implications of the Study Findings**

These findings provide three policy implications. First, a need for careful planning of university structures and a holistic understanding of its operations. This is important in allowing flexibility within the operations of the academy. For example, a need to rethink the locus of higher education units and their operations could avoid these units feeling susceptible to “otherness” as they usually operate differently from mainstream education faculties. Second, a clearer definition of the role of academic programme leadership in South African universities would allow for better attention to the roles these leaders play. This is important, given the fact that the roles played by this leadership directly talk to the issues of quality education in universities. Third, there is a need for capacity building initiatives for middle-level academic programme leaders. This is important to assist these leaders to develop the required skills for their roles. What is crucial in capacity building is the understanding of the environment and context in which middle-level academic leadership is to be enacted.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, I have drawn on phenomenological reflection to discuss my lived experiences of academic programme leadership at a South African university. This was important because studies on experiences of academic programme leadership are scant in African higher education generally. I have conceptualised the notion of middle-level academic leadership, discussed the academic programme leadership context of the concerned

university, engaged with the theoretical underpinnings of the article, discussed the methodology and data production used, presented results by first narrating the lived experiences of academic leadership before explaining their implications to academic programme leadership, and then drawn the policy implications of the findings.

I have contended that through my lived experiences, academic programme leadership was demanding and required paying attention to systemic contexts of the university, as well as developing skills such as decision-making, curriculum development and pedagogical leading, and communication. From these findings, three policy implications follow: a need for careful planning of university structures, such as the locus of higher education units and their operations, a clearer definition of the role of middle-level academic programme leaders/coordinators and capacity building for academic programme leaders in South African universities.

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