



The Level of Academic and Professional Competencies Required by Middle-level Academics to Serve in African Universities

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Abstract

Using the lens of situational leadership theory, this article interrogates if early career academics serving in leadership positions, particularly those who have worked in a university for less than seven years, possess the task-relevant competencies that are required for university leadership. The study assessed academics' competency levels by examining their pedagogical capabilities, their research and publication output, and their proficiency in integrating ICT tools into teaching and learning. The research adopted a qualitative design, using narrative interviews and focus group discussion (FGD) to sample ten early-career academics in a private university in Nigeria. The findings indicated that participants had weak research and publication records and relied predominantly on traditional lecture-based pedagogy, which limited opportunities for innovative and participatory teaching and learning. However, the participants' engagement of ICT was apt and promising. Based on their narratives it is recommended that some restrictions be applied to the appointment of early-career scholars as middle-level academic leaders, on the grounds that they need adequate time to develop their academic and professional competencies before taking up leadership demands.

Keywords: Middle-level academic leaders, early-career academics, academic and professional competencies, university leadership and governance, university-set goals/mandate

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Résumé

Par le prisme de la théorie du leadership situationnel, cette recherche demande si les leaders universitaires en début de carrière occupant des postes de responsabilité, en particulier ceux qui ont travaillé moins de sept ans dans une université, possèdent les compétences requises pour le leadership universitaire. L'étude a évalué les niveaux de compétence des universitaires en examinant leurs capacités pédagogiques, leurs travaux de recherche et leurs publications, ainsi que leur aptitude à intégrer les outils TIC dans l'enseignement et l'apprentissage. La recherche a adopté une conception qualitative, utilisant des entretiens narratifs et des discussions de groupe pour échantillonner dix leaders universitaires en début de carrière dans une université privée du Nigeria. Les résultats ont montré que les participants avaient peu d'expérience en matière de recherche et de publication et s'appuyaient principalement sur une pédagogie traditionnelle basée sur les cours magistraux, ce qui limitait les possibilités d'enseignement et d'apprentissage innovants et participatifs. Cependant, l'engagement des participants en TIC était pertinent et prometteur. Sur la base de leurs récits, il est recommandé que certaines restrictions soient appliquées à la nomination d'universitaires en début de carrière en tant que leaders universitaires de niveau intermédiaire, au motif qu'il doit leur être accordé suffisamment de temps pour développer leurs compétences académiques et professionnelles avant d'accepter des exigences de leadership.

Mots-clés : leaders académiques de niveau intermédiaire, universitaires en début de carrière, compétences académiques et professionnelles, leadership et gouvernance universitaires, objectifs/mandat fixés par l'université.

Introduction

What academic and professional competencies do academic leaders need to discharge their daily duties in African universities? This research question was examined in the context of the deployment of early-career academics to serve as middle-level academic leaders in various university academic and institutional administrations, particularly as co-ordinators of academic programmes, unit heads, Heads of departments (HoDs) and deans. An African university, like any other university in the world, has clear mandates and roles which are reflected in their research, publication, teaching and community service (Etim 2009; Muriisa 2010; Mwiandi 2010). Achieving these mandates means that faculty staff have to be proactive in ensuring that their pedagogy is properly planned and delivered. The staff must also be prepared to guarantee a good track record of research and publication, and the utilisation of ICT in the teaching and learning process. In this context,

universities need competent academic and professional personnel to manage their academic and administrative activities, which do not necessarily need to be carried out by top leadership personnel, such as the governing council, vice-chancellors (VCs) and deputy vice-chancellors (DVCs) (NUC 2018). Consequently, quality leadership skills of middle-level academics are needed to augment top leadership efforts towards achieving university-set goals.

This research explored the level of academic and professional competencies required by middle-level academic leaders who serve in African universities. Specifically, the academic leaders referred to in the research were early-career academic scholars who had less than seven years of service in the university. The rationale is that such early-career academics are still considered novices (Omotosho 2019) who, not only dutifully but assiduously, need to develop competent professional skills required for leadership in terms of research and publication, pedagogy and the engagement of ICT in teaching and learning, among others. The prevailing narrative is that there is a proliferation of universities in Africa (Ojudu 2012; Okebukola and Fonteyne 2015; Omotosho 2019), and therefore the demand for academic leadership is higher than the supply, which has escalated the practice of enlisting early-career academics in these mid-level positions.

For example, Nigeria and Ghana opened their first universities in 1948. Today, the former has over 150 public and private universities with a capacity to carry 600,000 students (NUC 2017). Recently, Nigeria's Federal Executive Council (FEC) approved the inauguration of twenty new private universities in Nigeria, bringing the total of private universities in the country to ninety-nine (Aytogo 2021). Ghana is no exception, with seventy universities (Education in Ghana 2019). Definitely, such progression stretches the already high demand and supply interplay for quality university leadership.

The implication is that the continued rapid growth of African universities requires a concomitant growth in the number of competent academic and professional leaders. This is a challenge. In the past, when universities were few and systems for producing academics were functioning, only the best-experienced academics, with a track record of research and publications as well as pedagogy, would be appointed to a position of university leadership (Omotosho 2019). However, rapid institutional growth has outpaced the supply of such academic leaders. Another factor limiting the size of this pool is the constant brain drain of many qualified African academics migrating to foreign nations, which leads to early-career academics being deployed as leaders (Ayee 2014; Omotosho 2019; Isibor et al. 2020).

Not much research has been conducted in Africa regarding academic and professional competencies required by early-career academic leaders, apart from conceptual analyses of why such a situation should exist. It is against this background that this research was conducted, to fill the gap by exploring what competencies early-career scholars need to provide quality leadership as middle-level academics in African universities.

The argument is that university academics are expected to research and publish as a way of improving their professional competencies but also as a means of sustaining national development. This is based on the premise that research is key to innovation and development. In addition, research and publication expertise directly promote innovative pedagogy, including the integration of ICT into teaching and learning. The perspective of CODESRIA's (2019) HEPI training programme is that knowledge of ICT, from which middle-level academic leaders are not exempted, will augment quality leadership for African universities.

Data for this research was collected from ten early-career middle-level academic leaders working at a private university in Nigeria, using individual interviews and a focus group discussion (FGD). The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim in order to capture exactly what the participants said. Thematic analysis was employed to present the participants' narratives, paying attention to their experiences and competencies with regard to pedagogy, research and publication and application of ICT software in teaching and learning.

The findings revealed that early-career academics employed as middle-level leaders had minimal skills for research and publication and that they mostly used traditional lecture methods for teaching and learning, which fall short of engaging students in critical analysis of the lessons taught. However, their narratives regarding the incorporation of ICT in teaching and learning was assuring; most of them indicated that their affiliated university had afforded them with opportunities to learn how to integrate ICT into teaching and learning. Hence, they were able to embrace the best ongoing practice of online teaching and learning, particularly in the era of virtual interaction.

Early Academic Career Scholars: Perspective Clarification

Typically, an 'early-career scholar' is defined in relation to research output within the five years following PhD completion and career progression from the time of the postdoctoral appointment and beyond (Bosanquet et al. 2017). However, there are other parameters for measuring early-career scholars. The parameters include an appropriate pedagogical approach and

the incorporation of ICT in teaching and learning. The interest of this article focuses on early career scholars who are appointed as middle-level academic leaders in African universities and institutions of higher education.

Based on de facto observation, in only their second and/or third year after completing their PhD, some early-career scholars have been appointed as unit heads, programme co-ordinators, HoDs, assistant deans and deans of faculties (Omotosho 2019). Technically, such scholars do not have yet the academic or professional qualities to serve in such administrative positions (Elham et al. 2011). Even so, these appointments are fast-tracked in the face of massive growth in numbers of universities in Africa (Etim 2009; Omotosho 2019) and the world at large.

The importance of this research is based on the fact that there is a paucity of literature regarding the competencies required of such early-career academic leaders (Blair 2000; Isibor et al. 2020; Mapp 2008; Muriisa 2013b; Omotosho 2019; Townsend and Bassoppo-Moyo 1997).

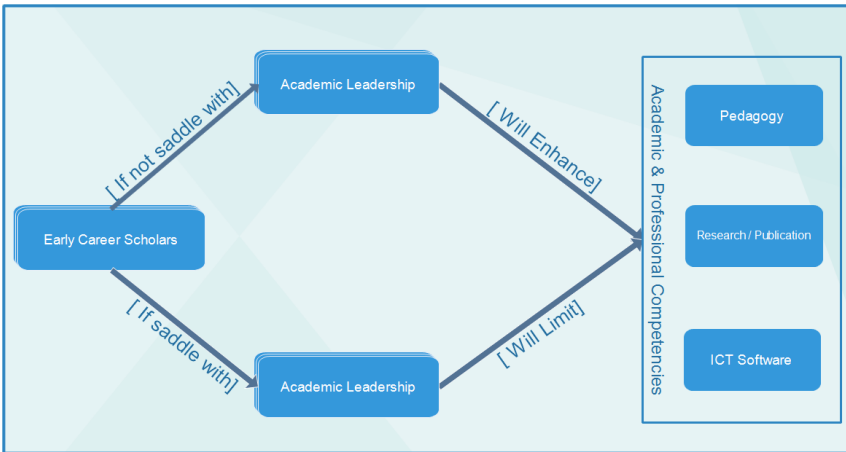


Figure 1: The conceptual framework expressing the relationship between early-career scholars and academic and professional competencies

Source: Author

Conceptual Framework

The relationship between being appointed as a middle-level academic leader while still being an early career academic scholar, and the level of academic and professional competencies to effectively provide quality leadership in an African university, is portrayed in Figure 1. The variables of academic and professional competencies are espoused in pedagogy skills, research and publication, and the use of ICT in teaching and learning (Elham et al.

2011; Nwoye 2013; Omotosho 2019). Respectively, these variables could be tracked through expertise in planning and delivering lectures, robust record of research and publication, and ease of engagement with ICT in teaching and learning. Hence, the competencies are considered to be antecedents that serve as motivational strategies to enhance leadership performance geared towards the sustainable development and achievement of university-set goals.

Level of Academic and Professional Competencies Required by Middle-Level Academics to Serve in African Universities

A body of literature affirms that university governance and leadership require competent leaders (Aniagolu 2019; Assie-Lumumba 2006; Archibong and Effiom 2009; Fredua-Kwarteng and Ofosu 2018; Gmelch and Buller 2015; Garwe 2014; Ojudu 2012; Seale 2019). What these authors argue is that every university academic leader ought to possess competencies in pedagogy, research and publication, and ICT applied to teaching and learning, among other things. Accordingly, early-career academic scholars who serve as middle-level academic leaders should possess the aforementioned competent skills in order to promote not only university academic leadership and governance but also to ensure that set mandates are achieved.

From inception, universities have been described as citadels of learning, where teaching and learning are of optimal importance. Correspondingly, universities map out appropriate processes of teaching and learning that cater for individual differences in students, which Nsamenang (1992) describes as the art of pedagogy. In this view, pedagogy refers to the interactions between teachers and the students' learning environment and the learning tasks. By extension this includes the choice of instructional approaches. However, there is no one-size-fits-all method for lecturers, but the onus falls on them to adhere to best practices of making teaching and learning as accessible as possible to ensure that students learn at their maximum ability. In this regard, Fredua-Kwarteng and Ofosu (2018), in their findings of a research study designed to explore the quality of university education in Africa, reported that there is a seeming lack of appropriate pedagogy method. Their observation in two universities in the west of Africa indicated that abstract facts, figures, theories and concepts were literally thrown at the students, in what might be described as 'straight lectures'. They interpreted straight lectures to mean the process of feeding students with information without stimulating them to think critically and/or engage in creative analysis of the information.

The challenge is that university lecturers (including academic leaders) need to lean more towards transformative pedagogy and provide opportunities for students to interrogate their own attitudes, beliefs and mentalities as part of their preparation for wider social transformation (Fredua-Kwarteng and Ofosu 2018). Hence, appropriate pedagogy needs to be learner-centred across three domains of learning: cognitive, psychomotor and affective (Nsamenang 1992; Nsamenang and Tchomber 2011). In this way, learning would be productive, reflecting proactive engagement with the context, enabling the students to acquire suitable skills for onward progression in the world of work and life ahead. Therefore, co-ordinators of academic programmes, unit heads, HoDs and deans who serve as middle-level academic leaders ought to be adequately skilled in pedagogy in order to monitor and inspire their colleagues to adapt the best practices. In this way, the university would achieve one of its mandates, of producing viable human resources for the local community and the globe (Association of African Universities 2009).

Furthermore, pedagogical competence is linked to the potential for groundbreaking research, particularly within African nations where such research is urgently needed in fostering national development (Aniagolu 2019; Ichoku 2019; Salmi 2009). Research and publication have been described as one of the optimal responsibilities of the university, as a means of knowledge creation, dissemination of information and its utilisation (Association of African Universities 2009; Ichoku 2019; Etim 2009), which Salmi (2009) argues provides the basis for competitiveness, unrestrained scientific inquiry, critical thinking, innovation and creativity. Research and publication have also been used as metrics for university rankings worldwide, including the provision of national data for the planning and execution of developmental projects. Therefore, it is essential that middle-level academic leaders drive research, and in order to do so they must possess the necessary competencies. Thus, African university leadership needs to accelerate its research engagement otherwise it will continue to lag behind (Etim 2009).

It is in this context that middle-level academics must be research experts, exploring research orientation that integrates the best practice and knowledge in the African and Western canon to generate evidence-based value for Africa's development (Nwoye 2013). It means that early-career academic scholars, particularly middle-level leaders, need to inspire and collaborate with others in conducting African-oriented research. Achieving this requires a genuine engagement with African Indigenous Knowledge Systems, challenging the widespread assumption that highly educated Africans are detached from

their own cultural practices and contexts.” (Fredua-Kwarteng and Ofofu 2018; Nsameng 1992). Therefore, to ensure that the future of university leadership in Africa is successful, expertise, scholarship, knowledge and overall engagement with research are required.

In the same way, the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) has become imperative in the presence of ever-evolving changes and the emergence of distant/online learning (Bisbee and Miller 2006; Nwaobi 2000). Digital technology is a prominent feature of education across the globe; therefore, middle-level academic leaders in African universities need to be proactive in the use of ICT devices. They need to be familiar with desktop, laptop and smartboard operations, and all forms of online teaching and learning, such as Google Classroom, Zoom, video-conferencing, as well as the application of software in data analysis, and so on.

From this perspective, Agu (2015) argues that contemporary students inhabit an increasingly technological world, forcing lecturers to learn and master digital literacy skills, – an imperative that the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified. However, he acknowledges that there are some constraints, such as the lack of facilities, particularly where institutions do not have adequate resources to sustain the use of ICT devices. This is corroborated in a research report by Nigeria’s National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA 2007), which emphasised that a wide geographical disparity exists in the level of e-readiness across Nigeria, with most technological infrastructure and services being concentrated in urban areas. This disparity could be interpreted to reflect the reality that universities in urban centres have greater access to e-learning resources than universities in rural areas. On the other hand, challenges to successful ICT usage could emerge from lecturers’ resistance, emanating from a lack of confidence and competence (Archibong and Effiom 2009). In this context, in-service training needs to be implemented to alleviate the distress of lack of ICT knowledge among middle-level academics, particularly for early-career academic scholars.

Theory of Leadership and Governance

Hersey and Blanchard’s (1977) situational leadership theory underpinned this research. The theory states that no single leadership style is better than another, but, rather, leaders ought to adjust their style to align with their followers’ ability. This theory was first introduced in 1969 as the ‘life cycle theory of leadership’ and has been updated recently, emphasising that effective leaders are those who are task-relevant (Kenton 2019). In this context, the core argument of this article – the level of academic

and professional competencies of early-career scholars elevated to middle-level academic leaders – must include task-relevance and the reflection of capacity to deliver expected results.

An early-career academic scholar who serves as a middle-level academic leader (be it unit head, programme co-ordinator, HoD or dean) in an African university should possess a certain level of academic and professional competencies to be able to influence colleagues/students in achieving university-set goals, especially in the area of research and publication, pedagogy and use of ICT in teaching and learning. In the words of Hersey and Blanchard (2006), an effective academic leader is one who uses four styles – telling, selling, participating and delegating – to achieve institutional goals. To be able to tell, sell, participate and delegate you must have the competencies to motivate and direct others, reflecting some of the core values of governance (Landell 1991).

Research Method

This was a qualitative interpretive research study that was aimed at capturing the participants' in-depth wealth of experience (Daher, Carré, Jaramillo, Olivares and Tomicic 2017). The choice of an interpretive approach was governed by the assumption that the participants' act of meaning-making regarding their experiences of academic leadership and level of competencies is a subjective experience. Hence, the participants were considered to be in the best position to voice their narrative experience of academic leadership and competence (Mohajan 2018).

As an interpretive research study, it employed narrative interviews with ten early-career middle-level academic leaders from a private university in Nigeria, who were invited to narrate their experiences in the context of pedagogy, research and publication, and engagement of ICT. Theoretically, post-modern psychologists argue, in order to understand the individual's act of sense-making, researchers should use a narrative approach to elicit from the participants the in-depth meaning they make from the world they live in (Brockmeier and Carbaugh 2001; Crossley 2000; Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010; McAdams 2001; Riessman 2008). The participants were drawn from a private university within the Federal Territory of Abuja, Nigeria, but for ethical reasons the name of the university is withheld, based on the participants' preference.

Data was drawn from ten middle-level academic leaders whose term of service at the university ranged from two to seven years across five faculties: Education, Humanities, Management Studies, Pure and Applied Science, and Social Sciences. The data was collected through individual

face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions (FGD). The individual interviews were held with five of the participants and another five took part in the focus group discussion. Although, this number might seem small, qualitative research strength lies in in-depth exploration rather than largeness of number; hence, a single case could be richly informative and meaningful (Boddy 2016). The interview data was recorded and transcribed verbatim in order to capture exactly what the participants said.

Thematic narrative analysis was employed to analyse the data with the aim of highlighting common themes that the participants raised regarding their experiences of academic leadership in relation to pedagogy, research/publication and use of ICT in teaching and learning (Clarke and Braun 2017). The rationale was to examine how the participants' narratives reflected their academic and professional competencies, as a prerequisite for quality academic leadership.

Reflexivity

The researcher in this study occupied both an insider and outsider position. At the time of the study, the researcher was an early-career academic leader in a private university. This dual positionality presented both advantages and limitations for the study. Its merit arose from the fact that the researcher could easily identify with the narratives that the participants presented, yet its demerit emerged from the fact that the researcher's identification with the participants' narrative could be disadvantageous based on the possibility of introducing bias (Heron 2005). Therefore, the researcher balanced the merit and demerit effect by keeping a research journal for personal reflection, which was used to monitor personal prejudices.

Furthermore, the potential of these prejudices to affect the trustworthiness of the data was mitigated by having the data validated by the participants after it had been transcribed (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The transcribed data was taken back to the participants for confirmation and they signed it to indicate that it represented what they had said and experienced. In addition, the participants' request for anonymity, including that of the name of their institution, was respected. Thus, they felt valued, and were able to offer their candid opinion in rich information narratives without coercion

Presentation of Findings and Discussion

The participants' narratives are discussed under three broad themes in line with the three main competencies. The main focus is to explore what level of competencies the participants possessed, including any challenges.

Participants' narrative in relation to pedagogy

A majority of the participants described their pedagogy as taking the form of lectures, term paper projects and class presentation. The participants expressed that they frequently used PowerPoint slides in their lectures, thereby providing the students with the summary points of the content. Hence, one participant narrated:

Frequently, I teach my courses via PowerPoint slides, which provides the students the opportunities to see the summary of the topic under discussion. Besides, we try to engage in class discussion and I hope that helps them to understand the course content under discussion.

Another participant said:

My students seem to appreciate it very much when I am able to provide them with the summary of the course content under discussion for each lecture and the PowerPoint slide does this very well for them. Hopefully, they ought to explore further what is in the PowerPoint slides ... including the project work they undertake.

Clearly, these participants exhibited some competency in creating a lecture platform wherein they were able to engage the students in class discussion. But their method reflected to some extent what Fredua-Kwarteng and Ofosu (2018) refer to as straight lectures, which give students little space for critical thinking and analysis. When asked what they did to elicit active participation from their students within a lecture space that ought to include having them critique concepts, the participants responded that the students were often not interested in becoming critically involved; they would rather copy notes and reproduce them when examined. The discourse on why students reproduce copied notes could relate to how the assessment exercises are structured, which goes beyond the scope of this research. It could be explored in further studies. That notwithstanding, narrative from the focus group discussion (FGD), which captured the participants' frustration in engaging apt pedagogy, went as follows:

See, the students we have are not interested in critiquing whatever you are telling them. What they want is the fact as you have stated it in the notes and/or PowerPoint. They want to chew it and pour it back when asked in the continuous assessment/exams, so we just do what they want. Besides, there is so much work demand that you don't even want to stress yourself any further. Prepare your lecture and let them see the point you are conveying and let them go and explore.

Another participant, who echoed a similar view, emphasised that:

The truth is that most of these students come from the background where critical analysis is not part of their knowledge base. In fact, there is one colleague, who insist that the students cram the notes and give it back the same way during exams and continuous assessment ... the students like it, for them it is made easy; they only have to 'chew and pour'... After all that is the type of knowledge base system that most of us were brought up with. So why stress yourself when you have so much other work to do. Hum ... there is even not enough time for research ... so why bother students who only need the fact as it is.

Yet, another participant said:

I just dictate notes for them and I think that makes all of us happy. However, I try to go slow in this process ... in order to give room for individual differences; let the slow writers catch up! Sometimes, too, they have class presentations to make and that's it!

Based on the above narratives, it is obvious that the participants saw the students coming across as passive learners, which, on one hand, is how they too were treated during their days of learning as students. So, they were giving back to society what they had received. But on the other hand, there is the underlying notion that they didn't have enough time to explore any other new method and/or something different, which could be a position they shared with other academics, such as senior scholars. However, the latter does not eliminate the fact that, as academic leaders, early-career scholars ought to exhibit better pedagogical skills, which would enable them to influence others they lead. Consequently, possessing the appropriate pedagogical skill is an aspect of academic and professional competence, which, within the premise of situational leadership theory, is a requirement that cannot be compromised.

In this context, academic leaders should go beyond what they themselves experienced during their university days and teach lectures that embrace the three domains of learning – cognitive, affective and psychomotor – as described by Nsamenang and Tchomber (2011). In this way, they would stimulate students to be proactive learners. Certainly, students' active participation has implications for the achievement of university-set goals and mandates, which absolutely is a by-product of quality academic and professional leadership.

Participants' narratives in relation to research and publication

The participants' narratives with reference to research and publication highlighted that they struggled to find adequate time to engage in research and publication. Most stated that research was a time-consuming activity that they did not have enough space to engage with. They argued that the stress of leadership had led them to compromise on research and publication, as is evident in some of the interview extracts below:

I feel bad that I have not published much in the last two years ... the demand of teaching and learning is cumbersome, not to think of combining it with being a unit head/Head of Department (HOD) ... I feel very exhausted by the end of each day ...

Another participant reiterated this, as follows:

What can I say regarding research and publication, when I have so much to do in a day and I keep wondering when/where do I figure out what to do with research and publication? Sometimes I ponder on what is going on; four years as an academia and I don't have much publication to show for it. My fear is: What will the future be like if I am not able to publish now? ... It is worrisome.

These two narratives illustrate the frustration and anxiety experienced by early-career academics as they navigated academic leadership roles within a private university dominant discourse is that there is not enough time for fruitful engagement with research and publication, which has a far-reaching impact on academic and professional competencies for any academic, not least for the one who is expected to lead and inspire others to research and publish (Hersey and Blanchard 2006).

The demonstration of apt skill for research and publication is of utmost importance as such skill directly impacts on the quality and methodology of teaching and learning. However, the participants seemingly did not link their research ability to teaching but rather to career growth. They presented research and publication as a mere path for career growth, and in that regard their lack of scholarship was a source of apprehension.

The fact that the participants expressed fear of a lack of research is another needed area of study, to explore the factors responsible for this, but it is beyond the scope of the present study. Be that as it may, lack of research and publication hinders quality teaching and learning, which is why academic leaders should lead by example and inspire others to become active researchers. Low output of research and publication indicates that they lack the task-relevant academic and professional competencies. Their

struggles in the academic and professional competencies of research and publication are amplified in the following voices captured during the focus group discussions:

Although the university lays much emphasis on research and publication, but there are numerous obstacles arising from the position of leadership that suffocates the leaders' ability to publish. The number of meetings in a day, ranging from different management to senate meetings, which sometimes impact on even teaching and learning not to think of research and publication. After such long meetings I am exhausted and they are a number of them in a week ...

Similarly, another participant echoed:

I constantly wonder how I am coping without research and publication. I feel my ability to research is ebbing away ... one full year with no publication is bad ... I am completely overwhelmed with work. So, what can I do?

These two quotes echo what the early-career middle-level academic leaders in the individual interviews were experiencing, with the additional constraint of the impact on teaching, as indicated in one of the extracts. The reason in their view for this inability to research and publish emerges from being overwhelmed with leadership responsibilities besides the normal demands of teaching and learning. These experiences are risk factors that impact on the level of competencies required by middle-level academic leaders in the university. As situational leadership theory puts it, such a show of reality reflects little task-relevant ability on the part of the academic leaders (Kenton 2019), and holds paltry evidence of the leaders' professional competence to tell, inspire and/or delegate others to be oriented towards research and publication (Landell 1991).

The participants' narratives in relation to engaging with ICT in teaching and learning

Unanimously, the participants confirmed that the use of ICT in teaching and learning is the new norm, particularly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the safety protocol of national lockdown, which had compelled them to teach a full semester online. In this regard, they affirmed that their institution was doing everything possible to ensure that they gained more insights into ICT as a tool in teaching and learning. The participants expressed that they had had numerous training workshops on ICT best practices in teaching and learning, which they claimed boosted their competencies, as exemplified in the following disclosures:

I would say, I was a complete novice when I first started teaching with regards to engaging ICT to teaching and learning. The much I could do, was just use computer to type, but today in view of the different workshop training, I could now use Google Classroom, Zoom among many others. Initially it was challenging but everyday practice is getting me and my colleagues where we are ought to be.

Yet another participant shared a similar view:

Teaching online is fun though tasking and challenging in the face of power failure and demands of data bundle. However, I give the credit to ... the university. The management has ensured that we the lecturers including leaders have adequate orientation to take-up the challenges of online teaching. There has been constant training and retraining which has enable us to function well though there is still room for improvement.

As the participants stated, they had been exposed to consistent training, which had enabled them to improve their performance in online teaching and learning. In this regard, most of the participants claimed that their affiliated university had made a noble effort to ensure that there was an adequate supply of Internet facilities within the school compound in order to boost the availability of data, and as a result they were able to overcome power failures and data availability. This was further noted in the focus group discussion:

It is admirable the way the school (central management body) has strategise its provision of data to enable us (lecturers including middle-level academic leaders) engage effectively with teaching and learning. For example, the computer lab has been empowered by a solar system to ensure a 24 hours power supply including reliable subscription to a sustainable network provider. It all means we can troop to the lab to access Internet for effective teaching and learning. Although sometimes the network may still fluctuate, but it is not that bad.

Another narrative affirming this experience stated:

Indeed, the school has acted noble in taking the lead in ensuring that we didn't miss any academic year in the context of Covid-19 pandemic. Lectures were duly taught and all examination written though it was tough experience but this was achievable based on the competence level of the leadership and the entire school body ...

Based on the above narratives, it is seemingly proper to acknowledge that not only the early-career middle-level academic leaders but also the entire university body displayed a high level of competency in engaging with ICT in teaching and learning. Evidently, they are on track and hopefully they will

work towards maintaining the status quo. In this way, they will continue to participate, inspire and/or delegate others to engage the best practices of ICT in teaching and learning.

However, based on field data outside the interview and in the FGD, the participants pointed out that some of the challenges they still encountered with online learning included the difficulty of blending physical classroom teaching with online teaching, in terms of their relationship with the students, and in uploading learning materials. Also, some of the participants emphasised that though they were meant to monitor what their colleagues uploaded as teaching material on the platform, the job was made easier with the assistance of the university's ICT experts. In this regard, the participants hoped to continue to adopt best practices as time went on and to be able to lead others.

Implications of the Findings

Theoretically, the study's findings confirm the premise that leaders, irrespective of whatever leadership approach they adopt, ought to possess the task-relevant skills to qualitatively inspire others towards achieving set goals (Hersey and Blanchard 2006; Kenton 2019). Hence, the early-career academic leaders who participated in this study and expressed that they struggled to research and publish, which directly/indirectly limited their ability to sustain an apt record of publication, reflected to some extent a lack in this academic and professional competency. What this means is that they are likely unable to inspire others to research and publish. In other words, they cannot give what they don't have.

Similarly, the participants' narratives seemed to indicate that they grappled with adapting a variety of pedagogical skills that would facilitate their students' critical analysis of the lessons taught. Dictating lecture notes and using PowerPoint slides predominated their pedagogy approach, which may need some innovative improvement. Therefore, they lack the professional competency in pedagogy that is required for academic leadership in the university.

In all, the findings have contributed to knowledge creation, reflecting that early-career academic leaders encounter challenges in meeting academic and professional competencies, which impacts on their ability to provide quality university leadership and confirms that they lack the necessary skill to influence and motivate others.

The findings have implications for policy implementation. They suggest that the regulatory and advisory bodies of African universities, particularly in Nigeria and in the private university where the study was located, need to

develop stringent restrictions on the appointment of early-career scholars as academic leaders, in order to ensure quality leadership. Specifically, a policy for the appointment of early-career scholars as academic leaders should set a base limit for years of service of at least a minimum of three years for such an appointment to be made.

In addition, the policy should make provision for periodic ongoing academic and professional competency training programmes for early-career scholars who, in the face of high demand for academic leaders, are required to fill the gap, particularly in the context of massification of universities in Africa.

Recommendations/Limitations

Based on the findings of this study, some recommendations are made for university regulatory bodies, particularly the National Universities Commissions (NUC) in Nigeria and in particular the private university from where the data was drawn.

Firstly, NUC must ensure that approval and licences of operation for new universities are contingent on the availability of staff and on the accessibility of a mix of staff (both early-career and senior scholars).

Secondly, the tenure of office for the appointment of early-career academic leaders should be termed 'temporary', renewable for one year. In this way, the academic leader would be afforded ample opportunity to grow and mature.

Thirdly, there should be a mentor–mentee arrangement, with a quarterly review and report in order to monitor progress. The mentor ought to be drawn from senior academic staff of the university. The last two recommendations should be given priority in the daily running of the university by top management, such as the governing council and the vice-chancellor.

However, it is important to note that this research has some limitations. One is the fact that the data was collected only from early-career academics in a private university. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to other academics at other universities. As a result, it is recommended that a comparative study be conducted across academic leaders from both public and private universities in order to draw from a wider perspective. The second limitation is that the lack of research on academic and professional competencies of early-career academics posed challenges in interpreting the results, and hence ongoing research is needed for continual exploration.

Conclusion

This research provided important information regarding the academic and professional competencies required by middle-level academic leaders in African universities, particularly the private university from where the data was drawn, and reflected the support they need in order to continue to provide quality leadership. Therefore, it is advisable that all the shareholders, including university regulatory bodies and policy-makers, restrict the frequency of appointing early-career scholars as academic leaders, in order to improve quality academic leadership within African universities. Alternatively, if early-career scholars must be appointed as leaders to fill the gap of senior academic leaders, then continual training/orientation needed to be provided for them in order to boost their performance, otherwise quality academic and professional leadership in African universities will remain compromised. Hopefully, these findings are beneficial to university management policy-makers, facilitating an improved academic leadership appointment process as well as offering concrete orientation to existing academic leaders.

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