



## **Academic Leadership: A Qualitative Approach in Higher Education**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Academic institution is a broad term and includes all institutions that provide some form of academic instruction. The scope of this paper is limited to higher education institutions only. In order to remain viable and competitive, Higher Education must continually invest in their faculty and staff keeping in mind the students' development.

Academic leadership is a special case of general leadership in as much as it refers to leadership in an academic setting or institutions. Academic institutions present a different setting than private or public sector organizations. Private organizations are guided solely by considerations of maximizing shareholder value. The government agencies and public sector organizations are guided by considerations of maximizing the value to stakeholders, which includes community at large. In academic institutions, maximizing stakeholder value refers to maximizing value to stakeholders such as students, staff, community, and funding agencies. Thus, the stakeholders in academic institutions are more diverse. These special features of academic institutions pose a different set of challenge to leadership. Effective academic leadership in higher education is a function of several factors or characteristics. These include: leadership in teaching, leadership in research, strategic vision and networking, collaborative and motivational leadership, fair and efficient management, development and recognition of performance and interpersonal skills. Faculties should rise to the challenge of valuing their educational activities alongside their research, innovation and enterprise, and to support and develop all staff, such that they will inspire our students, give them a distinctive experience and nurture their academic and personal development. This is what quality in



higher education is -- It means the educational process is such that it ensures students achieve their goals and thereby satisfies the needs of the society and help in national development.

**Key words:** academic leadership, higher education, qualitative approach

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In a society full of diversity, ideologies and opinions, higher education means different things to different people. The pluralism of views is quiet inevitable and some would opine it should be like that only. However, as we intend to discuss and learn more about qualitative approach in higher education, we should ask ourselves, what is *higher* in higher education? We, as a teacher/stakeholder of higher education, will agree that it is not just about the higher level of educational structure in the country. There is more to it. It is about knowing more and more about less and less.

India has one of the largest and diverse education systems, in the world. Privatization, widespread expansion, increased autonomy and introduction of programs in new and emerging areas has improved access to higher education. At the same time it also led to widespread concern on the quality and relevance of the higher education. To address these concerns, the National Policy on Education (NPE, 1986) and the Program of Action (PoA, 1992) that spelt out strategic plans for the policies, advocated the establishment of an independent National Accreditation agency. Consequently, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) was established in 1994 as an autonomous institution of the UGC. The mandate of NAAC as reflected in its vision statement is in making quality assurance an integral part of the functioning of Higher Education Institutions.

Let me begin with the obvious question: What is quality: we can define quality simply as 'fitness for purpose at minimum cost to society.' One can debate whether our tertiary education systems are indeed fit for use, in the sense of providing the education and training that students and society need. For India today, quality in higher education is a key priority. And this must be achieved keeping in mind the issues of relevance, costs, equity and international standards.



How do we promote a culture of quality within institutions of higher learning? What would be the elements of such a culture? Do such institutions require a different kind of leadership? Do they need a more decentralized, dialogic and democratic leadership approach? Which are the attributes of academics in creating cultures of quality?

Higher Education in India (particularly in Gujarat) is in need of radical reforms. A focus on enforcing higher standards of transparency, strengthening of the vocational and doctoral education pipeline, and professionalization of the sector through stronger institutional responsibility would help in reprioritizing efforts and working around complexities. The issue of assessing and assuring quality of Indian Higher Education is a challenge. Instead of aiming for 'world-class universities' through rankings, policy framework must improve the processes enable accountability through data collection and reporting on parameters of institutional quality. The government should leverage this tool to improve quality of the overall system. With higher education being redefined in many ways, it is becoming increasingly important for colleges and universities to find multifaceted leaders to meet the diverse challenges of a changing sector.

If we look at the activities of colleges and universities, we will realize that teaching, research and extension form the three main functions of higher education. Academic leaders need to stay close to teaching, learning, research and scholarship to bring out the best among academics. The study could help leaders in tertiary institutions to reflect on their own qualities as academic leaders and such reflection may help improve their leadership style to achieve positive outcomes.

It is important now to define the concept "leadership" in general and "academic leadership" in particular. The term leadership has been variously defined in the literature on strategic management. According to BIJUR (2000, p.167) "leadership means enhancing human potential". It is about creating the right environment for people to develop as leaders. It is also about communicating clearly and effectively. HEIFETZ and LAURIE (1997) state that leadership involves three fundamental tasks: (a) creating a holding environment (environment that facilitates achievement of goals), (b) directing, protecting, orienting, managing conflict



and shaping norms, and (c) maintaining presence and poise. Good leadership is about ensuring unity and cohesion upon decisions up and down the line.

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Effective academic leadership in higher education is a function of several factors or characteristics. These include: Leadership in teaching, leadership in research, strategic vision and networking, collaborative and motivational leadership, fair and efficient management, development and recognition of performance and interpersonal skills.

Elaborates that teaching leadership refers, for example, to bringing new ideas about teaching to the department or creating excitement about teaching. Research leadership can be evidenced, for example, by inspiring respect as a researcher, or leading by example. Strategic vision and networking are demonstrated through furthering interests of the department across the university. Collaborative and motivational leadership is demonstrated among others by honesty and integrity and openness. Fair and efficient management is evidenced by delegation, highly organized working of the department and getting things done with little



resistance. Developing and recognition of performance includes aspects such as praising and sustaining success of the staff of the department and giving good feedback to improve. Interpersonal skills refer to communicating well and having concern for others.

Following are the desirable leadership attributes in academics:

#### Leadership in Teaching:

- To set an example, prepare his/her lectures and tutorials adequately after understanding curriculum design.
- To mentor younger staff and less experienced staff.
- To provide training opportunities to them and follow an open door policy.
- To foster continual appraisal of staff within the department through student evaluation questionnaires and also through peer evaluation and self- appraisal by staff themselves.
- To encourage the use of new teaching techniques.
- To be current with subject matter, current with scholarship and using different delivery mediums.

#### Leadership in Research:

- To take active interest in research and provide support to interested staff. It doesn't mean simply publishing in A1 journals; it is about encouraging collaboration and it should be interdisciplinary.
- To creating a demonstration effect, encouraging presentation of papers in conferences, and mentoring of staff with low self-esteem.

#### Strategy, vision and networking:

- To set up short-term and long-term vision for the department.
- To have vision set in respect of three areas like teaching, research and community service.
- To have international recognition for the institution. The institution should be an institution of choice for students. For this to happen, staff should be of high caliber.

#### Collaborative and motivational leadership:



- To motivate staff in one's institution.
- To provide leadership by example, by working hard and encouraging staff quietly.
- To help the staff plan their future and keep them informed about goals and developments.
- To establish a relationship with everyone and determine their individual strengths and weaknesses and delegate clear tasks accordingly.
- To provide incentives to those who perform well and threats to others.
- Honesty, openness and integrity, positive attitude to change and innovation and inspiring people to give their best are examples of motivational leadership.

Fair and efficient management:

- Equity, balanced workload reflecting level of capability and experience of staff constitutes fair and efficient management.
- Openness, no special deals, transparency in workloads, allowing people to develop their strengths
- Delegation of clear tasks.
- Holding staff accountable and managing them through development.
- Intelligent staff needs to be recognized.

Development and recognition of performance:

- To encourage staff/ peers in seeking their goals.
- To provide financial and non-financial support and give lesser workloads to staff/ peers to help their attainment of research and higher degrees.
- Discussions on teaching evaluations, self-appraisals, and strategic plan meetings all provide opportunities to identify development needs of staff/ peers.

Interpersonal Skills:

- Be friendly, decisive and prepared to admit mistakes.
- To deal with staff on a one to one basis rather than in a group situation.
- To be task oriented.



- Theory of communicating well and having concern for others are the key interpersonal skills of leaders.
- To be sensitive to people and to treat others with respect.

### Why Worry about Quality:

Higher education is the backbone of any society. It is the qualitative approach in and for higher education that decides the quality of human resources in a country. As teachers, principals, heads of departments and planners and policy makers in education, we may be having this question in our mind - why worry about quality? It is not just because of the UGC directive that you should think of qualitative approach in higher education, rather quality should be a bottom-up approach and everyone should be conscious of why we should worry about quality of our teaching, programmes and institutions. Some of the reasons are:

1. We are entering a new regime, where competition among educational institutions for students and funds will be highly significant.
2. Students, parents or sponsoring agencies as customers of the educational institutions are now highly conscious of their rights or getting value for their money and time spent. They are now demanding good quality teaching and receiving employable skill sets.
3. As teachers, we should set and maintain our own standard continuously year after year.
4. Every institution is accountable to its stakeholders in terms of the funds (public or private) used on it.
5. One's concern for quality will improve the morale and motivation of the staff in performing their duties and responsibilities.

Thus in this way I have discussed the ways in which academic leadership could be one the qualitative approaches in higher education institutions. Faculties should rise to the challenge of valuing their educational activities alongside their research, innovation and enterprise, and to support and develop all staff, such that they will inspire our students, give them a distinctive experience and nurture their academic and personal development. It means the



educational process is such that it ensures students achieve their goals and thereby satisfies the needs of the society and help in national development.

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## **Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596**

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

[www.vidhyayanaejournal.org](http://www.vidhyayanaejournal.org)

Indexed in: ROAD & Google Scholar

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