



Challenges of academic healthcare leaders in a higher education context in South Africa

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Abstract

Universities are in a highly competitive environment, needing strong academic leadership. Some heads of departments have been appointed into leadership positions in a healthcare faculty after having been mere academics for a few years. They are more likely to experience challenges.

This study aimed to explore the views and understanding of heads of departments in a healthcare faculty on being appointed as academic leaders in a higher education context in South Africa. A qualitative design using 12 individual unstructured interviews was conducted with all the heads of departments in a health sciences faculty. Open coding was conducted and two themes emerged, focusing on the varied skills needed for academic leadership positions and developing leadership skills amongst senior academics. The findings indicated that development of senior academics in leadership should be undertaken by a knowledgeable professional in formal or informal settings, to encourage mentorship and more regular group meetings, while addressing the core role of a leader. Implications of these findings for a faculty of health sciences and suggestions for leadership succession in future are discussed.

Introduction

Effective leadership in any organisation is a crucial component of overall organisational success (Otara, 2015). The effective leadership of universities is a crucial issue for policy makers, leaders themselves and for university staff. Gibbs et al. (2009) state that leadership is a critical factor in sustaining and improving the quality and performance of universities. Research also shows that university leadership is fundamentally different from leadership in other contexts, and demands additional competencies. The opinion is held that there is far too little research on the leadership roles that exist in universities at departmental level (Bryman, 2007). Research is thus needed as individuals who take on leadership positions in academic health science faculties help facilitate the mission of those institutions (Detsky, 2011). It has been found that poor leadership leads to poor coordination of programmes in departments, thus having a negative effect on service delivery in universities. The current trends in higher education settings are that leadership positions are filled by academic staff who are appointed with limited experience in formal management or leadership roles and responsibilities (Parrish, 2015). Garwe (2014) states that heads of departments are mostly prominent academics who do not possess any formal training beyond their academic credentials, achievements and experiences in academia. These experiences are normally in teaching, research and community

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