# Academic Staff Transition into University Leadership Roles in a Ghanaian Public University

# George Kwadwo Anane<sup>1</sup>, Yvonne Claire Dumenu<sup>2</sup>, Elijah Ofori-Badu<sup>3</sup> & Prince Awuah<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1, 2, 3 & 4</sup> Registrar's Offices, University of Energy and Natural Resources Corresponding email: george.kwadwo.anane@uenr.edu.gh

#### Abstract

Academic leadership skills are critical to the success or otherwise of universities worldwide. However, leadership preparation remains at the periphery in universities. Using questionnaire responses from 21 Heads of Departments (HoDs) at a public university, we examined HoD preparation and the impact on the stressors they face in leading their departments once appointed. The results indicate that: first, all HoDs performed academic leadership roles, but about a half of them had not received prior preparation before their appointments. Second, interdependence between HoDs' leadership preparation and the level of stressors they faced as middle-level university leaders showed ambivalent outcomes. Inferential statistics showed that only the stress of combining academic and administrative roles was found to have a significant relationship with HoDs' leadership preparation (Chi-square=0.036, p=0.05). Other stressors such as difficulty in people management, role ambiguity and administrative role stress showed no significant relationship with HoD preparation. We recommend carefully formulated training and mentorship programmes on HoD leadership preparation among universities, so that the competencies acquired can help them overcome the stressors associated with leading their departments.

*Key words:* University administration, academic departments, leadership preparation, competencies, Ghana

#### Introduction

The higher education sector is witnessing rapid changes all over the world. Current realities in higher education environments such as massification, internationalisation, quality assurance and dwindling government funding have triggered a shift in leadership models of universities (Acquaro, 2019) to respond

to complex changes (London, 2011). This paper discusses leadership development among universities with emphasis on heads of departments, who provide middlelevel academic leadership. Academic leadership development is crucial for universities for many reasons as recent scholarship re-imagines leadership roles in universities beyond the core roles of scholarship in teaching and research. According to African higher education leadership scholar.

purely self-governing and collegial model of governance imposed by the British model and adopted by universities in most Anglophone Africa is gradually giving way to corporate managerialism, a characteristic of the United States governance system (Effah, 2018: vii).

This shift in the governance structure of universities evokes the concept of effective leadership to pursue institutional strategic priorities. In the last decade, the amplification of issues relating to internationalisation, access, and equity (Altbach, Gumport & Berdahl, 2011), quality assurance, massification and funding (Effah, 2018; Neema-Aboki, 2016), require the right mix of leaders and leadership development to lead universities. The implication of these factors require that university leaders undergo the appropriate leadership preparatory training to enable them to perform their academic and professional functions in a rapidly changing environment (London, 2011). Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted the role of university leadership in challenging times. As Anane, Addo, Adusei and Addo (2020) note, the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic in the higher education sector would make leadership in universities even more complex in the future. Massification of students in universities is also expected in the coming years. For instance, government policies such as the introduction of the Free Senior High School Education Policy in Ghana has implications for increasing student numbers and the right leadership to steer the affairs of universities. This means that university leaders would likely be under pressure to handle issues such as increasing enrolment figures in the face of dwindling state funding. These factors demand that university leaders acquire competencies that will enable them to provide effective leadership.

Leadership development among middle-level university managers is important for many far-reaching reasons. Unfortunately, leadership development among middlelevel university leaders remains a grey area. As Clapp-Smith (2019) notes, academics in the higher education sector are inadequately prepared for leadership roles and presents a major long-term challenge for faculty taking headship roles. As Effah (2018) notes in Ghana, the notion of university leadership is narrowly defined as the attention is mostly on the Senior Management Team made up of the Vice Chancellor, Deans and Directors. As a result, middle-level university leaders including heads of departments are mostly at the periphery, due to the university governance structure handed over by colonial regimes. Important issues of heads of departments' training or preparation and how that impacts on their roles remain less explored. This paper explores leadership development through the lens of heads of department preparation in a case study university in Ghana. This involves the unpacking of the skills and competencies received by heads of departments through leadership training before and during their appointment. The discussion is based on a case study of a public funded university in Ghana. Two questions were posed to heads of departments: (1) What leadership development training do heads of department undergo before their appointment? and (2) How does such leadership training impact the level of stressors heads of departments face on their jobs?

# **Literature Review**

Leadership has been described in a changing academic environment over the last decades with reference to definitions, and the differences between leader and leadership development. The previous section provides background to leadership development among heads of departments in universities. This section goes further to discuss the changing definition of leadership from the last decade leading up to this study with emphasis on heads of departments' role in universities. The review begins with definitions of the concepts of leadership, establishing the differences between leader and leadership development. This is followed by an examination of the connection between academic leadership development and heads of departments preparation for leadership.

The changing nature of leadership is demonstrated over decades. A decade back it was defined as a capacity, a process, or a movement which was far from being unidimensional (Eich, 2008). Leadership has evolved to being viewed as a process of reciprocal social influence in which various actors actively interact with one another for the purpose of accomplishing a collective objective (Cullen-Lester, Maupin, & Carter, 2017; Turner & Baker, 2017). Rahardja, Moein and Lutfiani (2018) confirm the collectiveness, and refers to it as the ability to influence others (subordinates or groups); ability to direct the behaviour of subordinates or groups, have the ability or special skills in the field desired by the group, to achieve organisational or group goals.

Scholars tend to hold two mutually exclusive basic views about leadership: Grint (2019) holds a school of thought that leaders are born and that the qualities they embody are subconscious. Another school of thought (Korac-Kakabadse & Korac-Kakabadse, 2019), argues that humans need to work hard to develop these qualities before they can emerge as leaders. The "great man theory" for instance espouses personality traits which leaders intrinsically possess (ibid.) or focused on taking inventory of the characteristic traits of leaders such as intelligence, selfconfidence, determination, flexibility, sociability, and emotional maturity (Orazi, Turrini & Valotti, 2013). This approach assumes that a 'great man' naturally holds the essential skills which allow him to perform the roles of a leader. By identifying these essential traits, others can emulate them through simulated versions of leadership. During the second half of the 20th century, the discussion of leadership centred on the behaviours such as the compatibility of a leader's style and the organisational context in which he or she acts. This development coincided with the emergence of the situational or contingency leadership models which postulated that a leader's actions were dependent on varying situations prevailing at a particular time as also found in Rodic and Maric (2021).

Nowadays, leadership is viewed as an asset or capacity which can be enhanced through training. Leadership can be viewed as a capacity serving to transform a group or team about the ways of seeing, thinking, and acting so that the group may adapt to the various challenges confronting it. Recent work by Kezar and Holcombe (2017) advocates the shared leadership model, which deviates from the leader/follower dichotomy of earlier theoretical perspectives. The shared leadership model espouses that a leader gives followers the opportunity to acquire the needed skills to enhance leadership continuity. The aim is in part to ensure horizontal decision making for the purposes of participation in leadership. This is crucial for the higher education sector, where recent challenges call for the kind of leadership which helps faculty to navigate both internal and external pressures.

#### Understanding the concepts of leader and leadership development

The concepts of leader and leadership development are often used interchangeably and indeed indistinctly. Roupnel, Rinfre and Grenier (2019) argue that the indistinct use of these concepts creates the tendency for one to examine leadership as an individual phenomenon by focusing on the behaviours and skills of leaders rather than seeing it as a complex phenomenon that encompasses the interactions between leaders and their social and organisational environment. Leadership development refers to a process whereby facilitators use a series of designed activities or mental exercises to prompt participants' reflection on learning experiences and thereby promote the transfer of knowledge and skills to work settings (Kotlyar, Richardson, & Karakowsky, 2015). Leadership development is no longer just the outcome of traditional training programmes, but it is also the outcome of deliberately designed activities implemented over time with the aim of developing the abilities of staff. The focus of leadership development should, thus, be integrated into all everyday practices of an organisation and become a part of its culture and strategy (Roupnel, Rinfre & Grenier, 2019).

Leadership development is distinct from management development. This distinction is important to the successful implementation of training activities. According to Ahern and Loh (2020), leadership development involves preparing people for roles and situations beyond their current experiences including capacity building to deal with unforeseen challenges. Management development aims at equipping managers with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to enhance performance on known tasks through the application of proven solutions. Leadership development is again distinguished as individual leader development and collective leadership development. Individual leader development focuses on an individual's capacity to participate in leading (DeRue & Myers 2014). Collective leadership development on the other hand focuses on developing the capacity of the collective group to engage in the leadership process to ensure that the group skills are developed rather than individual skills (ibid.). The notion of collective leadership development emphasises leader and leadership development as interdependent processes for organisation growth. The benefits are that individuals' knowledge, skills, abilities, motivations, and identities are enhanced for effective leadership. Collective leadership development is critical for universities as the higher education environment experiences rapid changes.

#### Leadership Development in an Academic Environment

Leadership in the academic environment has become critical particularly recently as the COVID-19 pandemic sweeps across all sectors including education. The uncertainties presented by the pandemic coupled with the diverse nature of faculty roles require multiple competencies and knowledge areas to provide effective academic leadership during a crisis. Although the concept of leadership has been explicated generally in higher education administration, there remains some confusion about the concept of 'academic leadership'. Recently, Bolden, Jones, Davis and Gentle (2015:06) observe that academic leadership and management are often conflated as what is generally described as 'academic leadership' rather refers to academic management which mainly involve the "practicalities of running a large, complex organisation such as a university". The onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on higher education requires that faculty get the needed skills and knowledge for leadership particularly leading during crises. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, leadership development among middlelevel leaders in universities was receiving key attention. This is because universities required new leadership models which were more democratic and inclusive (Morris and Laipple, 2018; Hofmeyer, Sheingold and Klopper, 2015). This new focus of universities on leadership development among middle-level leaders emanates from institutional need for a higher level of academic leadership at the mid-level to address the many issues facing higher education. The underlying thrust of leadership development among universities is that faculty need to undergo well planned preparatory programmes on-the-job and off-the-job either formal or informal. This has the potential to equip faculty with the skills to understand the complexity of academic and leadership matters they are likely to deal with and how to go about them particularly in crisis situations.

# Method

# Research design

The nature of the study required a quantitative research design. In this context, frequencies and descriptive statistics were used to describe leadership preparation training programmes among past and present heads of departments. The absolute frequencies of multiple variables were used to describe the relationship between academic leadership preparation and various stressors (See cross tabulation in Table 2). Open questions confirmed the results in the items.

# Sampling procedure and sample

The sampling involved a total population of 30 past and current heads of departments across the six Schools of the University who have served at different periods from 2012 to 2020. The total sampling approach was a good way of surveying heads of departments about their opinions and experiences in leading their departments. Survey questionnaires were sent via Google Forms on the University's Google Workspace to the accessible population and 70 percent (n=21) responded (See Table 1). All the 21 respondents answered all the questions. The frequency distribution of responses on the variables was collated automatically in Google Forms.

Variable	Frequency
School of Affiliation of HoD	
Natural Resources	6
Engineering	6
Sciences	3
Agriculture and Technology	3
Management Sciences and Law	2
Geosciences	1
Rank of the HoD	
Associate Professor	1
Senior Lecturer	14
Lecturer	6
Gender	
Female	4
Male	17
Total	21

**Table 1**: Background Details of Respondents

Source: Survey (May 2020)

#### Instrument

The questionnaire had 4 sections: Background information (8 items); Preparation or training received before assuming HoD role (5 items); Preparation or Training received as HoDs (8 items); and challenges of the HoD role (Smith, 2007; Burns and Gmelch,1992) were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Very Low, 2 = Low, 3 = Moderate, 4 =High, and 5 = Very High on each of the 7 items. The challenges included the opinions of the respondents based on the 'five factors of HOD stress, measured through the Chair Stress Inventory (CSI) developed by Burns and Gmelch (1992): (Difficulty in people management); (Financial constraints to run department); (Inadequate administrative skills); (Stress of combining administrative and academic duties); (Role ambiguity); (Academic stress); and (Perceived staff/employer expectation stress).The interdependence between HoD leadership preparation and level of stress in performing their responsibilities was analysed through the Pearson Chi-Square test (See Table 3 for the cross-tabulation).

# Ethics, rigour, and trustworthiness

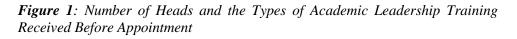
Ethical considerations are an important component of research as they ensure rigour. The role of rigour in research is to make sure the processes used to carry out research are authentic, and that methods, analysis and results are sound (Laher, Fynn and Kramer, 2019). The researchers are experienced university administrators who were aware of ethical issues in a study of this nature. As such, the general ethical rules in social science research such as informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality were followed. The researchers provided information about themselves to the participants in the emails that contained the questionnaire to explain the objective and details of the research to seek informed

consent. To ensure confidentiality, the responses from the participants were not shared with others for their use. The data was handled carefully by storing it safely and using it for academic purposes only. To ensure anonymity, the questionnaire did not collect names of the participants or any other information that could reveal their identities. As a result, coding was done using pseudonyms to further ensure the participants remained anonymous. Again, the name of the university was not stated in this paper to provide another level of anonymity. To ensure trustworthiness, triangulation of data sources and methods was used to ensure the discussion of multiple perspectives on heads of departments' leadership preparation.

# Results

# Leadership preparation among heads of department

Regarding the question of whether heads of department received leadership training before assuming the headship role, the study showed that 11 representing about 52% have had at least some form of training in relation to academic leadership, resulting in a mean that was at the base of the Likert Scale (M=1.48 and SD=0.5). The results show that heads participated in multiple leadership training programmes which were mostly organised and funded by institutions external to the University. Faculty of the university sometimes participate in training programmes organised by external institutions such as the Vice Chancellors Ghana which normally facilitates training programmes for staff of universities. These training programmes are considered as external to the university. Out of the 52% of heads who had attended leadership training programmes, 10 representing approximately 91% had participated in 'Senior Academic Leadership Training (SALT)' and 'University Administrative Procedures'. Training in 'Crisis Management' and 'IT Skills' recorded the least ranked training received by heads of department before their headship appointment (See Figure 1).





Source: Survey (May 2020)

The results further show that 48% of heads of departments did not receive any training in university leadership prior to their appointment as heads of department. These heads of departments were leading their departments without participating in any form of academic leadership training. This is because the case study university did not have a deliberate leadership policy in place. As a result, heads of departments in the case study university were susceptible to many challenges or stressors.

# The relationship between academic leadership preparation and level of challenges (stressors) faced by heads of departments

As already mentioned, university heads of department suffer multiple stressors including inadequate administrative skills, role ambiguity and rallying other faculty around the departmental vision (Rodic & Maric, 2021). The results show that more than half of the respondents (76.2%) attributed their major challenge to 'financial constraint to cater for their department'. The University operates a centralised financial management system where departments draw their finances from the central pool. The results further show that heads of department faced other challenges such as stress of combining both administrative and teaching roles (71.4%) and difficulty in people management (33.3%) (See Figure 2).

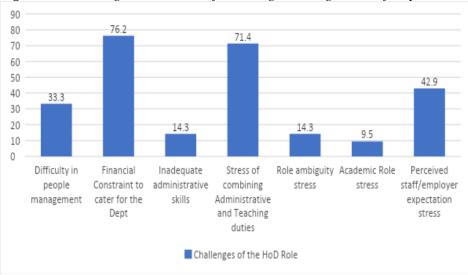


Figure 2: Percentage Distribution of Challenges Facing Heads of Department

Source: Survey (May 2020)

We analysed the interdependence between HoD preparation before and during their appointment, and the level of stressors they encountered. This was done using Chi-Square tests (p = 0.05) to perform cross tabulation on the variables on the Likert Scale (1=slight stress, 3=Moderate stress, and 5=Strong). The results show that apart from the stress of combining administrative and academic roles (p =.036), all the other stressors did not show any significance between HoD preparation and the levels of stress in people management (p=.298); stress related to finances to run department (p=.459); administrative stress (p=.473); role

ambiguity (p=.193); academic role stress (p=.213); and perceived staff/employer expectation stress (p=.067). Table 2 shows summaries of descriptive statistics on HoD preparation and the level of stress on the job.

Stressors	Did you receive training in academic leadership before your appointment as HoD?		Total	Pearson Chi- Square	P- Valu
	Yes	No			e
What is your level of stress in people management?	11 (52%)	10(48%)	21(100%)	2.425	.298
What is your level of stress regarding finances to run your department?	11(52%)	10(48%)	21(100%)	1.556	.459
What is your level of administrative stress?	11(52%)	10(48%)	21(100%)	1.499	.473
What is your level of stress in combining academic and administrative roles?	11(52%)	10(48%)	21(100%)	6.668	.036
What is your level of stress in relation to role ambiguity?	11(52%)	10(48%)	21(100%)	3.293	.193
What is your level of academic role stress?	11(52%)	10(48%)	21(100%)	3.093	.213
What is your level of stress in perceived staff/employer expectation?	11(52%)	10(48%)	21(100%)	5.409	.067

**Table 2**: Descriptive Statistics (Cross Tabulation) for the dependence of stressors on training before and during appointment

\*P-Value of less than 0.05 is significant *Source: Survey (May 2020).* 

#### Discussion

Regarding leadership preparation, the survey results found that there were ambivalent pathways to becoming heads of department in the case study university in terms of HoD preparation in academic leadership. This was because the University did not have in place a deliberate pathway to leadership development among faculty. On one hand, the survey found that a little over half of the respondents (52%) had received academic leadership training or preparation prior to their appointment as heads of departments. The results further show that the respondents were able to handle other departmental issues properly due to the preparation they received. On the other hand, 48% respondents indicated they did not undergo any academic leadership training prior to their appointment as heads of departments. As a result, a head could be appointed to lead a department without possessing any academic leadership competencies obtained through formal training such as people management, strategic planning, and students' affairs management. The above finding presupposes that the mode of headship appointment in the case study university contributes to whether faculty members acquired prior leadership competencies or otherwise. The practice where one could be appointed as head of department in the case study university without undergoing any prior leadership training could make academic leadership development a daunting task as it was not motivational enough to undergo training.

The study shows no strong interdependencies between HoD leadership training and the level of challenges they faced leading their departments except for the stress of combining administrative and academic roles which recorded a significant relationship (Chi-square=0.036, p=0.05) as discussed in Table 2 above. Thus, it is concluded that prior leadership training in the case study university was found to have reduced the level of stress of combining administrative and academic roles among HoDs. On the other hand, stressors such as role ambiguity, people management and academic role stress did not show any significant relationship with HoD preparation. This does not mean that HoDs were good to go without academic leadership training, because the objective of the study was not to establish causality per se. On the one hand, some HoDs did not receive the right leadership competencies and skills. Therefore, academic leadership training provided may not have satisfied the needs of the target staff. The university environment is dynamic and so academic leadership training needs to be informed by staff needs assessment. Without the right mixture of leadership competencies for HoDs, universities may not benefit from training organised to prepare faculty for headship roles. On the other hand, some HoDs received training, but they could not match the competencies acquired to the day-to-day headship role. This requires that the training and development programmes of the university need to be formulated based on the specific staff needs to respond with the right leadership training. Furthermore, the case study university should consider the requirements staff have for their leadership and managerial development and put in place formal training programmes. This is especially crucial, considering that about half of the respondents (48%) indicated they did not receive any academic leadership training prior to their appointment.

# Conclusion and implication for policy direction

The study has analysed leadership preparation among HoDs in a case study university in Ghana. It examined the various training programmes HoDs go through before assuming office, the training they receive as heads of departments and the challenges they face. The findings show that leadership training or preparation among HoDs is a significant issue with the case study university requiring a wide range of training for HoDs. The analyses revealed that 48% of heads in the case study university did not undergo any formal leadership training before assuming the HoD role. This suggests that about half of the heads of departments were relying on 'luck' or 'trial and error' to lead their departments. Several factors were cited by the respondents to have accounted for this situation. These included the non-existence of a formal leadership training programme or policy by the university, leadership training not a criterion for HoD appointments, and the university's inability to fund the cost of leadership training for heads and potential heads. For example, the lack of leadership training opportunities was not only a challenge for heads of departments, but other staff suffered same. Findings of the study further showed that HoDs were unable to establish whether leadership training impacted on the level of stressors they faced in the performance of their headship functions. Out of the seven stressors identified, only one (i.e., stress of combining administrative and academic roles) showed significant relationship. That is, lack of leadership preparation led to difficulties for the HoDs to combine teaching and administrative roles.

Premised on the foregoing, this study recommends that a formal manual or policy needs to be developed to provide guidelines for HoD preparation before and during their appointment. This will lead to the institutionalisation of leadership training and the implementation of same. The role of leadership preparation in the university is an institutional policy issue, as it has potential to prepare staff to better perform middle level university administrative roles, support top management to pursue the mandate of the university, and lead to sustainable development. Leadership development must become a long-term policy direction where potential leaders would be identified from departments and mentored by existing heads of departments. This can successfully happen when existing heads of departments have acquired the right skillsets to be able to train others. This will require a succession plan to cater for university-wide leadership preparation. The failure of top management to institute formal leadership preparation through training is most likely going to produce middle level managers with less experience to lead and advance the course of their departments and the university. This study thus concludes that the position of head of department is an important segment of the leadership structure among universities and must be developed adequately.

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