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A Thematic Analysis of a MOOC Discussion Forum

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Exploring Young-Level Academic Leadership:
A Thematic Analysis of a MOOC Discussion Forum

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Abstract

Higher education institutions around the world have been experiencing a great deal of pressure resulting in substantial changes. In this transformative era, institutional-level governance and the capacities of academic leaders at all levels remain highly influential to the successful functioning of universities and the maintaining of their competitive advantage. Despite a number of studies on senior and mid-level academic leadership, there is still a scarcity of research on young-level academic leaders. In particular, young-level academic leaders are those who play a decisive role in their department and the operation of their research group alongside teaching and research to promote the development of a new form of higher education. They also constitute an important component of academic leadership as they have expressed excellent competencies in welcoming change, being a form of inspiration, their receptiveness to feedback, and setting stretch goals. However, they are challenged in teaching programmes, course coordination and research projects in an era witnessing the ever-increasing impact of neo-liberalism in a more competitive environment. Therefore, this paper is intended to fill the gap to study the concepts, competencies and challenges young academic leadership. Conducting qualitative content analysis to explore the perceptions about young academic leadership in a MOOC course's discussion forum, this study explores young-level academic leadership through online discussion forums to reveal further information in comparison to traditional qualitative methodologies. This study also documents the perspectives of MOOC discussants on three main issues: the concept of young-level academic leadership, the competencies to be an effective leader, and the current challenges they encounter. Moreover, it can offer some important insights into designing the leadership framework used in academic leadership development programs.

Keywords: Young-level academic leaders, concepts, competencies, challenges, leadership development

Introduction

Which leadership traits are required to effectively lead organizations has received considerable critical attention in research and been the subject of increasing discussion (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004; Boyatzis et al., 2012; Cuddy, Kohut, & Neffinger, 2013; Dasborough, 2006; Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007; Johnson, 2002; McKee & Massimilian, 2006). In addition, the academic literature on effective formal leadership and management traits has revealed the emergence of the importance of leaders and leadership in improving the governance, learning, teaching, relevance and success of higher education institutions (Bolden, Petrov, Gosling, & Bryman, 2009; Bryman, 2007, Middlehurst, 2008; Parrish, 2013; Ramsden, 1998; Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008). At the same time, students, parents, employers and taxpayers have pressured academic leaders to further cultivate a more skilful generation to cope with the needs and demands of the 21st century (Hénard & Roseveare, 2012).

Despite the extensive literature on senior (rectors, vice rectors) or mid-level academic leadership positions (deans, vice deans, heads of department) in higher education, little is known about what young academic leadership means and what competences they need to develop and promote leadership (Juntrasook, Nairn, Bond, & Spronken-Smith, 2013; Middlehurst, 2008). As the future of higher education institutions, young academic leaders are expected to cultivate their ability to motivate others,

establish high standards of expectations and performance, set clear goals, approve of their work, and should be encouraged to put their best performance foremost (Bass, 1990). They are precious talents with a high level of knowledge who provide creative labour and generally refer to those distinguished academics who have accomplished tremendous achievements. They are not only remarkable strategists and organizers, but also talents who are able to be a part of a team (Griffiths, 2000). Despite being leaders at a starting level who can either possess or lack a mandate in the organizational structure, they play a pivotal role as a component of the core competitive strength of an institution, and thus universities can benefit from taking advantage of their decisive role in both the practices of overall departments and of running research groups, and in ensuring the improvement of the quality of education and teaching (Zhang & Zhang, 2013). Linked to those, it has been increasingly realized by scholars that high quality education is only possible when young academic leaders cultivate their talent with a solid foundation, brilliance, dedication and creativity (Fullan, 2002; Zhang & Zhang, 2013). As they go through their leadership journey, they will come across numerous financial, organizational, managerial and educational challenges. These are mostly tackled through teaching programmes, course coordination and research projects in a time witnessing the ever-expanding impact of neo-liberalism in a more competitive environment (Mercer, 2009). It is therefore timely to explore young academic leadership and their competences as well as to consider the challenges they may face.

The subject experiences of the academic leaders in question may be collected through the rich source that is online discussion forums (Jamison et al., 2018). In connection to that, massive numbers of participants enroll may in one or more Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which offer high quality education and varied topics via a flexible form of course access (Boroujeni et al., 2017). Since 2008, MOOCs have had great impact on the educational field, particularly when it comes the distance education field (Siemens, 2013). Today, after over a decade since their conception, around 1000 universities in the world offer over 12000 courses to 100 million learners via MOOCs (Shah, 2019). In particular, Kop (2011) highlighted that MOOCs allow for an open-based' learning environment in which learners can learn externally from an institution without the barriers posed by those learning institutions (Daniel, 2012; Grover et al., 2013). As MOOCs differ from traditional online courses, there are larger course bodies of students participating in the courses than would normally be the case, with those students hailing from different backgrounds and contexts (Siemens, 2013). They range from people who are engineers or architects to housewives, and from young to old. This lays the ground for applying different approaches, pedagogical contexts and aims in their learning (Grover et al., 2013). Therefore, to reach their potential, MOOCs might provide supportive learning communities which allow learners to interact with one another, promote deep learning, maintain motivation and decrease the risk of dropouts (Gillani & Eynon, 2014; Kop, Fournier, & Mak, 2011; Ramesh, Goldwasser, Huang, Daume, & Getoor, 2013).

As MOOC-based lectures are only based on videos, students typically have less interactions with their peers and instructors relative to traditional face-to-face courses (Stephens-Martinez, Hearst, & Fox, 2014). Therefore, technology-based interactions through blogs and forums are offered as potential solutions. For example, thanks to discussion forums, students and instructors have the opportunity to communicate and interact with each other (Wong et al., 2015). This is especially pertinent given that a growing body of research has investigated that discussions among peers are helpful in improving student's learning performance as well as building a learning community (Smith et al., 2015). Additionally, research evidence suggests that instructors can monitor course progress thanks to discussions taking place in a physical forum or over a digital one (Stephens- Martinez, 2015). This capacity of MOOCs has been conditioned by the active engagement of several hundred to several thousand 'learners' who feel free to organize themselves based on their learning goals, learning pace, prior knowledge and skills as well as interests (McAuley, Stewart, Siemens, & Dave Cormier, 2010).

With these benefits, analysis of online discussion forums can reveal further information compared to traditional qualitative methodologies (Jamison et al., 2018). Thus, this study aims to conduct qualitative content analyses to explore the interactions and communications regarding young academic leadership in a MOOC discussion forum offered over Canvas. The research objectives that guided this study are:

1. What does young academic leadership mean as perceived by MOOC discussion forum participants?
2. What competences do they have as perceived by MOOC discussion forum participants?
3. What challenges do they face as perceived by MOOC discussion forum participants?

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Literature review

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The Concept of Young Academic Leadership

Higher education institutions involve a variety of leadership roles, such as formal line-management and budgetary control (vertical function) or more cross-cutting ones dependent on interpersonal and social influence (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2008; Roberts et al., 2010). In general, the literature focuses on the formal roles of senior-level leaders (rectors, vice rectors) or mid-level leaders (deans, vice deans, heads of colleges/departments, heads of programmes and directors of teaching and learning) (Roberts et al., 2010; Scott et al., 2008). At the institutional level (Bolden et al., 2012), those leaders in senior or mid-level positions are mainly responsible for administrative rules, tasks and functions to manage the institutions more effectively (Ramsden, 1998). In light of this, their formal leadership responsibilities have a significant influence on work culture and productivity (Bryman, 2007). Likewise, they are viewed as being internally-oriented so as to guarantee the guidelines and strategies followed by staff and to oversee complaints. Some scholars questioned this interpretation. For example, Hofmeyer, Sheingold, Klopper, and Warland (2015) stated that those leaders have been depicted as dictatorial, which has directly impacted their relationships with staff and the culture of their work environment. Parrish (2013), Bryman (2007), and Ramsden (1998) argue that the main reason for this is that formal leaders in current academic settings have less of an outward orientation and less institutional validity to establish positive workplaces for staff due to their defined authorities.

Recent research has not treated in much detail those people who may not possess formal authority positions yet establish it through their everyday tasks and activities (Roberts et al., 2010), although there is a notional view that leadership is everyone's responsibility (Bolden et al., 2008). As Bryman (2007) laments, very little is known about the existence of a variety of leadership roles at the departmental level. This demonstrates that recent interest requires more applicable democratic societies and less hierarchical leadership (Jones, Lefoe, Harvey, & Ryland, 2012). To that end, young-level academic leadership refers to recognising and acting on opportunities without being in a formal managerial role (Roberts et al., 2010).

This definition is close to that of Taylor (2008) who emphasizes their influence on the relationships between leaders and their followers. He also added that young-level academic leadership involves establishing direction, aligning resources, generating motivation and providing inspiration to achieve mutual interests. Accordingly, young-level academic leaders, meaning those not in formal leadership positions yet who rather are perceived as leaders, must rely on distributed, collaborative, authentic models which are among the less hierarchical models of leadership (Jones et al., 2012) rather than dominating or ordering; tactics available to formal leaders (Pielstick, 2000). Accordingly, they do not have as much authority and power as senior or mid-level leaders have.

As they are not selected and thereby very often do not have any positional authority, they take initiative to address a problem or institute a new programme and thus influence people around them through their personal expertise and practice (Maxwell, 2002; Wells, 2002). Similarly, for van Linden and Fertman (1998), young-level academic leaders are those who think for themselves, communicate their thoughts, and act on their own beliefs. At the same time, they are willing to allow others to influence them in an ethical and socially responsible manner. For example, Roach and colleagues (1999) supported this idea in their earlier study, stating that young-level academic leaders are more interested in developing leadership in groups rather than as individuals, and that leadership is more about group participation and the distribution of knowledge and skills in a collaborative manner.

Based on ability, a further definition of young-level academic leadership is given by Armstrong and Gough (2019). For them, young-level academic leadership is the ability to work either individually or

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within a group to create ideas, take initiative, to influence, educate and motivate others, and to undertake actions that will bring about change for a more sustainable future. The research conducted by Zhang and Zhang (2013) tended to focus on age rather than ability. According to them, young-level academic leaders are those at an age below 40 who hail from a particular high-end talented group and are the creators of high-quality education at universities. The following definition by Dopson and colleagues (2018) is intended to emphasize the importance of leadership in the complex organizational context of universities—for them, young-level academic leaders are similar to the transformational model which allows for creating a vision and involving others in it, thereby protecting other people's interests and needs. This definition accords with that of Bryman (2007) who highlights the effectiveness of participative leadership in higher education as it "fosters a collegial atmosphere and advances a department's cause."

With the blossoming of studies on the various types of academic leadership, the conceptions of young academic leaders have been defined above based on their mandate, age, ability and university context. Linked to these different definitions, there are several works of literature which have studied the capabilities of young academic leaders.

The Capabilities of Young Academic Leaders
'Capability' describes the level of talent, gift or capacity required to differentiate high performers from those who are average, and who deliver innovations under uncertain and changing situations (Boyatzis, 2008; Scott et al., 2008). It also exceeds the minimum set of expectations for all employees, or those described as the "price for entry" (Aziz, 2018; Marcus & Pringle, 1995). In this sense, 'ability' is more connected to a more youthful scholarly administration which possesses the ability to work effectively with others to accomplish persistent improvement and advancement with a focus delineated via consensus (Scott et al., 2008). This view is connected to Ramsden's (1998) observation that young leaders are more responsive, creative, contingent thinkers when it comes to relatively uncertain cases, in order that they may help people and provide a vision and change in the future. In this perspective, as the future of higher education, young-level academic leaders should possess intellectual, observational and self-assessment skills as well as emotional maturity and respect to be able to lead and be effective (Wells, 2002). Furthermore, academic leaders have the cognitive ability to precisely analyse what's going on when the unforeseen happens, to distinguish what the human, technical or administrative dimensions are, to decide whether the issue merits tending to in detail, and afterward being able to coordinate a plan according to this analysis (Schön, 1983; Scott et al., 2008). Zenger and Folkman (2015) explore how those capabilities function in young leaders—according to them, young-level academic leaders excel in challenging the status quo and looking for innovative ways to accomplish their work more efficiently and productively. They also added that younger level academic leaders are good at setting stretch goals that require a high need for achievement and that they put all their energy into achieving their goals. Moreover, as they are more open, they ask for feedback about their performance more often and seek ways to create development opportunities and identify development resources (Wells, 2002). It is essential to bring together all of the above-listed capabilities into an overall picture of academic leadership capability. Thus, as Scott and colleagues (2008) and (Dinh, Caliskani & Zhu, 2020) reflected for academic leaders, young-level academic leaders also have some of those capabilities with regard to different qualities.

Based on personal and interpersonal capability, it is crucial for young-level academic leaders both to manage their own emotional reactions and to better understand what is happening around them. This is referred to by Goleman (2008) as the emotional intelligence to recognize their own feelings and motivate emotions in their relationships. In uncertain conditions, they are able to first control their emotions by being creative, enthusiastic, honest, kind, calculative, open-minded, and original thanks to their multiple roles as a researcher, teacher, consultant, etc. At such times it is necessary for young leaders to be selfless, responsible, capable problem solvers, and enablers. They cultivate environments for both action and personal learning (Corriero, 2006). These traits are consistent with Rogers's (2009) research which identified several innate characteristics such as intelligence, wisdom and creativity. More specifically, young-level academic leaders' interpersonal capabilities are more related to shared needs, values and beliefs instead of the vision of senior and mid-level leaders. They also appear to better listen to and

understand others' needs. Thanks to this sense of inclusiveness and interactive dialogue, they are more inclined to share their ideas, provide/accept criticism, and display/demonstrate their appreciation. Similarly, communication makes them more inclusive and thereby, they fully engage others, collaborate with them, and recognize their needs. As such, they seem more empathetic and respectful towards others (Pielstick, 2009). These interpersonal capabilities are similar to those mentioned in Scott and colleagues' (2008) study that seemed to have focused on the importance of empathising, listening to others, motivating, and influencing others around you.

Moving on now to leadership capability, recent research has revealed that the most required leadership capacities are authentic or distributed leadership competencies (Bryman, 2007; Dinh et al., 2020). Challenging the view of formally appointed leaders (Pearce & Conger 2003), young-level academic leaders focus on the diversified leadership process in order to shape collective action. Additionally, to tackle the complexities of higher education and continue to effectively compete, they highly rely upon their task switching and self-managing team members (Cummings & Worley, 2004). Instead of traditional leader-centric approaches, young academic leaders lead team, in a distributed manner, to involve matters concerning the development of new products and to ensure organizational change (Thamhain, 2004). They behave not as dominant characters, but rather as those who may have more experience; as a result, knowledge work becomes more team-based and requires the coordination and integration of the expertise of different people (Pearce, 2004). Young-level academic leaders, without any given power and authority, always trust and respect contributions, and collaborate together to achieve identified goals. Through shared and active engagement, young academic leadership can result in the development of a leadership capacity that can sustain improvements in higher education (Jones et al., 2011).

Regarding academic capacity, young-level academic leaders are grounded both in demonstrating teaching excellence and recognizing learning programs, as well as disseminating research and scholarship about teaching and learning. Through learning-centred approaches, these leaders pave the way for learning processes and overcome the obstacles in the way of a better future (Weimer, 2013). They are also expected to be skilled at certain social functions such as having more resources, better research collaboration, productivity, and popularity in the market (Zhu & Zayim-Kurtay, 2018).

Taken together, these studies present the different capabilities of young academic leaders, although some scholars have questioned why this potential has not been adequately harnessed. In response to this criticism, Bolden and colleagues (2008) and Hofmeyer and colleagues (2015) mentioned that, in the context of higher education, formal or top-down leadership is more embedded and possesses a significant influence over the inherent culture and power structures; thus, young academic leadership (even if potentially unplanned for) is often neglected. Smith (2005) supports this notion that less formal roles such as informal leadership positions have attracted less attention due to the main focus being on institutional, faculty or departmental leadership. Tsai and Beverton (2007) reached a similar conclusion that HEIs are too resistant to a collegial or bottom-up management style by young leaders because senior or mid-level leaders are not open or receptive enough to introduce balance. Indeed, Bryman (2007) commented that a collegial environment for mutual support among all levels of leaders is the desired context in higher education.

Challenges of Young Academic Leaders
Researchers of the field of higher education have explored some of the challenges impacting young academic leaders. For example, young academic leaders working below the level of mid-level academic leaders (Mercer, 2009) come across a number of obstacles and challenges, with a number of these challenges relating to engagement of different kinds. For example, some scholars cite that due to reduced government funding and increased accountability, young-level academic leaders must compete for financial resources, encountering difficulties in receiving subsidies and funds, having to deal with paperwork and struggling to retain high-quality staff (Cohen, 2004; Drew, 2010; Ramsden, 1998). Indeed, their leadership competencies and experience would not be adequate to deal with the magnitude or complexity of these problems, (Gardner, 1998). Additionally, some may become overwhelmed by the

lack of funding, and the political, social, and economic forces and changes within the higher education context (Dopson et al., 2018).

Other scholars point to the challenge for young academic leaders in regard to organizational issues. Their inability to be flexible and adaptable to change can represent a formidable barrier to meeting the demands of an increasingly complex, dynamic and changing university context due to neo-liberalist ideologies and the *New Managerialism* notion (Huisman, 2016). In this regard, they have difficulty in engaging their teammates in change and innovation, thus they have to cultivate a solid capacity to accept and adapt to change in others (Zenger & Folkman, 2016). In doing so, they may face new issues and challenges wherein their leadership competencies and experience are not adequate for dealing with the magnitude or complexity of the problems, alongside their inability to handle or manage an increase in workload and/or responsibilities (Gardner, 1998). In concurrence with Drew (2010), young-level academic leaders should possess critical thinking skills and be willing to take risks and to assist staff with managing the effect(s) of change and progress.

Further writers suggest that they must respond to tension in terms of educational challenges by striking a balance between teaching and research (Drew, 2010). Additionally, over the past thirty-to-forty years, as universities grew in size and complexity, young leaders have become overloaded with work, making it more difficult to find such a balance between research and teaching as well as the intensification of academic work (Mercer, 2009). In connection to that, they also face challenges in assisting students with cultivating both knowledge and values as well as equipping them for the changing context of universities (Drew, 2010). This is because they can be looked up to as spiritual guides, as mentors, as teachers, as inspirers, and/or as models (Wells, 2002). Regarding research, the barrier is to strengthen their research capacity through rigorous inquiry that yields peer-reviewed, published works at the national and international levels in a limited timeframe (Fields et al., 2019). Equally as important, research expertise can function as a barrier to young-level academic leaders because of the pressure caused by changes in most academic institutions (Evans, 2012; Scott et al., 2008).

Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopted a qualitative research approach to facilitate as detail-oriented a study regarding young-level academic leadership (Creswell, 2007). Specifically, a phenomenological design was adopted to explore the essence of this phenomenon from the perspective of the ones who have experienced it. Phenomenology mainly questions what was experienced and asks, 'What was the experience like?' (Teherani, et al., 2015). Phenomenology also attempts to interpret and describe meanings with a broader aspect; however, it does not report on any statistical relationships present among the variables (van Manen, 1990), instead focusing on the relationship between a person and the lived world (Lanigan, 1988). In this study, lived experience refers to an online discussion experience.

To that end, this study conducted a thematic analysis of discussion forums of an online course. This approach enhances the understanding of a fairly heterogeneous set of sources of data, (Bryman, 2016) using an asynchronous discussion forum. The reason why these forums are the focus is that they are accessible to a diverse context in a safe and anonymous environment. Thus, the learners have the opportunity to interact, reflect and contribute their ideas for a longer period of time and of their own volition (Bowker & Tuffin, 2004). Moreover, as they are independent in terms of time and place in an asynchronous discussion forum, they may respond more deeply and friendlier than in synchronous discussions (Hara, Bonk, & Angeli, 2000). Additionally, this approach allows for a time and cost-efficient process which results in reaching a geographically diverse sample (Fielding, Lee, & Blank, 2008).

Dataset

The dataset used in this study is comprised of the discussion forums of the MOOC course offered over Canvas entitled: "MOOCs on Leadership Development of Young Academic Leaders." This course was designed to cultivate leadership skills in emerging academic leaders based on related theories, practices,

and the sharing of experiences in this field, and thus was free and open to everyone. This course was 17-weeks long and lasted from *05.10.2020* to *29.01.2021* and was structured into five modules with each covering a different aspect of young academic leadership. The course grade was based on a quiz, discussion and assignments in each module, and at the end of the course all participants who had completed all of the modules received a certificate. In our study, we included the discussion forum posts from 05.10.2020 to 15.11.2020. This was a moderated forum, set up as part of the aforementioned course with the scope of facilitating online communication among the learners, so that they may share their experiences and information on young level academic leadership. Each student can join and contribute to discussion forums and only students and teachers, facilitators can see these forums. As the facilitators, course designers and teachers of this course, we signed in and accessed the discussion forums to extract data. In total, there have been 271 posts from all of the modules so far. We restricted our analysis to the discussion forums of four modules, as our focus has been on tracking the evolution of discussions related to young academic leadership. We intentionally excluded the discussion forum of Module 2 because this module is generally centred around the university governance structure. Thus, our study resulted in 97 messages by 68 different participants (see Table 1) being analysed. We allocated each participant a number and coded them as *P1, P2, P3,... P68* and so forth in order to protect their identity (Thomas, et al., 2019).

Participants

Participants in discussion forums were 68 registered users of MOOC course on Young Academic Leaders. Among 68 participants, we could only reach demographic characteristics of 50 participants. More than half of the participants (55%) were male. Regarding their ages, the participants were predominantly between 18 and 30 years (50%) and the percentages of those who are older than 45 years were 35%. As to their country, a considerable number of them were from the countries located in Asia (54%) while 3% were from Europe. In terms of their current role, majority of them (72%) reported working as non-academic staff members and followed by 21% non-manager academic. An inquiry into the degree each participant held revealed that most of them (47%) are holding bachelor's degree followed by PhD (23%) master's (15%) and college or high school degree (13%).

Data Analysis

Online posts have the advantage of appearing in written form, thus there is no translation or transcript needed. Although emotional communication is limited, the use of emoticons, capital letters and exclamation points were found to be ways of expressing emotions by posters in face-to-face interaction (Sullivan, 2003). In order to be better familiarized with the content, we first read all of the posts in the final data. Then, we implemented inductive thematic analysis to produce and arrange any issues that arose by following the methods suggested by Braun and Clarke (2008). With the inductive nature of the study, we derived theoretical ideas from the data rather than being formed before we collected data. Moreover, inductive approach allowed us to find answers to our research questions more explicitly than the more structured research (Bryman, 2007). As such, all of the posts were coded to identify answers to our three research questions by determining young academic leadership in terms of concept, competencies and challenges. Thus, we read all of the posts three times to ensure a consistent, systematic coding style. At first, there were 113 free codes. Then, we examined all of the codes in order to aggregate them under broader themes. During this cycle, we returned to all of the extracts to guarantee the recommended themes integrated all of the information sections, and accordingly ensure the three final themes really spoke to the complete data set. However, we did not provide direct quotations as it may jeopardize the anonymity of the learners (Thomas, et al., 2019).

To ensure validity, we consulted interrater reliability. The first author initially coded the data, then another researcher coded 10% of the randomly selected discussion threads (Bryman, 2007). This assisted with assessing any potential discrepancies in the coding (of which none were identified) and to develop further codes. In the later stage, the codes were grouped under themes and sub-themes. The themes, associated sub-themes, and codes were discussed among the three authors to reach a consensus and any disagreements were resolved during this discussion (Wigginton, Meurk, Ford, & Gartner, 2017).

Because of the latest improvements in MOOC courses, some ethical considerations are evolving. For this research, learners in discussion forums did not provide their individual consent forms. However, the MOOC courses indicated a consent statement in general. In this statement, the participants are informed that their participation in the discussion topics may be used for analysis for research purposes if this would be needed. In addition, the British Psychological Society advises it is not necessary to obtain informed consent if the data is similar to that from observations of behaviour in ªpublic situations where those observed would expect to be observed by others (British Psychological Society, 2014). Linked to that, previous research suggest that it is ethical to use these data from discussion forums for research without explicit consent as there were no specific participants in the research (Beckman, 2005; Giles et al., 2015). Nonetheless, we omitted usernames and any identifying details from the study (Salzmann-Erikson & Fathers, 2013; Salzmann-Erikson & Liledda, 2012) and reported fragments of responses as well as paraphrase longer discussion points.

Findings

The analysis resulted in three key themes with nine sub-themes (see Table 1). We have designated each sub-theme to a theme as can be seen below in our detailed description.

Table 1. Themes about young academic leadership based on the MOOC discussion forum participants

Themes	Sub-themes	Most frequent codes
Conceptualization		
	Multiple dimension	organizational change, age, mandate, emerging leader
Capabilities		
	Personal/interpersonal	creativeness, motivation, role model, targeted goal Social
	capability	effectiveness, sharing, close relationship, communication, trust, resilient
	Leadership capability	mediators, advice, autonomy,
	Academic capability	teaching, research, science, change
	Digital capability	techonology user, contribution to university governance
Challenges		
	Financial	salary, promotion
	Managerial	power, pressure
	Interpersonal	competition, demanding
	Gender issues	health, isolation, physical strength

Conceptualization of Young Academic Leadership (RQ1)

In discussion forums, academic leadership has been defined in multiple ways based on the perspectives of the forum participants: organizational context, future of higher education, age, hierarchy, and emerging position. A number of participants discussed young academic leaders' roles in developing the educational system in the changing organizational environment of universities *(P1, P6, P17)*. Participants also drew attention to the effect it has on envisioning the future of global higher education as they have the ability to make positive changes in the teaching and research fields, to create a vision as well as to contribute to society *(P6, P18, P34, P35, P36, P39, P46, P52)*.

Also, as importantly, age is mentioned when defining young-level academic leadership. One individual reported that being young is not just related to the age of the person but rather their role as a guide in what field they are in *(P49)*. This is also supported by another *(P63)* who expresses young academic leaders are those who are more of neophytes when it comes to governance instead of being young merely in terms of age.

Furthermore, participants repeatedly expressed that young academic leader (with or without a mandate) can act as policy makers or academicians that contribute to the decision-making process *(P22, P25, P29, P36, P45)*. This can be summarised by one participant who opined that young academic leader can be involved in university governance irrespective of their formal leadership position *(P16, P22)*.

Additionally, there were multiple references to the notion that young academic leaders are emerging leaders that can help develop universities *(P12, P13, P18)*. Furthermore, forum participants attributed that young leaders are typically Master's or PhD students that conduct research and present it in the name of universities *(P54, P21)*. Another participant added that this could help universities democratize and become more effective organizations *(P37)*.

Capabilities of Young Academic Leaders (RQ2)
Four sub-themes encompass the results on the competencies of young academic leaders as perceived by the MOOC discussion forum participants: personal/interpersonal capability, academic capability, leadership capability and digital capability.

Most commonly, forum users attributed personal competencies to 'creativeness' *(P22, P32, P52)*. As such, we identified several variations on this theme: some understood it as 'personal motivation and self-learning' *(P12, P33, P38)*, while others suggested that young academic leaders are role models to their peers *(P5, P16)* and lead and motivate their collaborators/followers in order to reach/achieve the targeted goal *(P29, P34)*. Furthermore, interpersonal skills could be regarded as a subset of social intelligence, but as mentioned by some participants *(P14, P28)* these encompass the more relationship-oriented aspects of social effectiveness just like a democratic leader would possess. Another participant posted young academic leaders should both have interpersonal capability and possess the willingness of their followers to perform the assigned tasks. A skilled young academic leader from the forum users' perspectives not only acquires new knowledge to share with the team but also to promote change within the university *(P37)*. Furthermore, interpersonal capabilities were repeatedly expressed by forum users as social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making *(P21, P24, P38)* or communication skills, delegation, understanding and teamwork *(P49, P50, P51, P57)*. However, discussions regarding personal and interpersonal capabilities usually centred on being inspirational, making positive changes, building trust, overcoming challenges, remaining resilient, and being receptive to the opinions of their teams *(P2, P6, P38, P50)*. Furthermore, one user *(P63)* commented that their personal and interpersonal strengths lie in their capability to learn quickly. Additionally, once having grasped or harnessed the advantages offered by this ability, they can make innovations, find more collaborators, and form a solid and supportive team.

Forum posts discussing academic capabilities often mentioned that good governance and effective academic leadership are required to promote quality in teaching and learning. For example, there was a great deal of discussion regarding assisting young academic leaders with creating a vision and cultivating/developing their skills. For instance, some users reported that young academic leaders must develop their leadership knowledge skills and competences because being an academic leader is a noble thing and an academic leader can bring about positive changes in the teaching and research fields, thereby paving the way for potential leaders in the arena of higher education *(P21, P38)*. In connection with that, one user provided an example for master students' leading roles. Participant *P37* added that a master's student leads research about a specific topic and provides their perspective besides proposing a solution to address the issue; thereby, they will promote change in the university. Another *(P3)* expressed that young academic leaders promote research and science practices as they are a source of inspiration to the diverse educational communities, because they create shared visions of science, research, and culture, and because they can bring about significant changes in higher education *(P15, P24, P27)*.

Forum users mostly expressed that young academic leaders can take an active part in the decision making process to demonstrate their leadership capacity. One user discussed this idea by stating that young academic leaders can participate in university governance directly by being the mediators

between students and the university administration. They take issues of concern (especially among students) to the university board. Furthermore, that user implied that young leaders can provide advice to university administrators regarding issues affecting students since they know students better and are more closer to them (in both age and views) than senior or mid-level leaders *(P52).* As well, some forum users repeatedly expressed that young academic leaders should display their collaborative, diversified, flexible, adaptable, accountable capabilities soa as to act actively in university governance *(P8, P30).* Similarly, most participants stated that the most essential qualities a young academic leader could have are transformational leadership abilities *(P2, P6, P49, P63, P66).* This is because followers would like to see a leader who can adopt or cultivate a smart way to lead throughout specific, measurable, and time-bound goals that are achievable for all of the stakeholders at the university *(P8, P30).* To achieve this, as stated by one participant *(P7),* they require a level of autonomy which enables them to conduct their own projects/work on their own and to learn from experience so as to promote improvement at the university.

In the discussion forums, there were certain references to the opinion that university governance should not only focus on management but also on developing skills at collaboration, problem solving, innovation and being digitally/tech savvy. They repeatedly expressed that university governance must be open to adopting the most rapid-growing technology and techniques to achieve excellency in their field. In connection to that, one user *(P39)* wrote that young academic leaders, in fact most of them from generation Y (more often referred to as *millennials*), are highly skilled technology users. Some of them *(P33, P38, P49)* supported this idea by adding that digital skills justify their interest in contributing to university governance practices. Thanks to digital means, young leaders may strengthen the academic performance and ranking to manage administrative tasks, teaching and research.

Challenges of Young Academic Leaders (RQ3)

Discussions about challenges usually centred on several topics including financial, managerial, and interpersonal challenges as well as challenges related to gender. Regarding financial issues, discussion forum participants mostly focused on promotions and salary—one *(P28)* commented that young academic leaders should further focus on whether they receive enough of a salary and/or other compensation from university administrations. They added that salary is the best motivation for them to compete among their peers as there is competition among young leaders. Besides, another *(P32)* specifically mentioned the competition among colleagues because their peers feel they have more expertise and are more experienced and talented. Yet, this can be summarised by one participant *(P2)* as young academic leaders facing the challenges in working in a demanding and competitive environment, dealing with difficult people, and being at the front-line of the most essential part of society.

As for the managerial challenges, some forum users *(P7, P20, P37, P54)* questioned whether students have any formal power in the decision-making processes in institutions or at the national level, or whether they can do so only through informal ways. This issue requires the ability to make common sense of a situation no matter how complex the environment is. Furthermore, this turbulence, as emphasized by one user *(P24),* leads to pressure on the young academic leaders who try to enhance their capabilities and improve the university as a whole.

The remaining key findings defining the challenges are those related to gender issues (as perceived by the forum participants). One individual *(P63)* reported that young female academic leaders often encounter problems specific to women, which include health, equality of interests, and influence. It is easy to see that women are often perceived as weak because they have inferior physical strength to men, while at the same time, people tend to prioritize and trust men more in leadership positions. This is strongly supported by another user *(P2),* who also provided a reminder that women in leadership positions can create productive, respectful, and inclusive environments.

Discussion

Due to the presence of vast amounts of scholarly work on senior-level and mid-level academic leaders, exploring young-level academic leadership through online discussion forums utilize a holistic presentation to uncover additional materials in comparison to traditional qualitative methodologies (Jamison et al., 2018). This study documents the perspectives of MOOC discussion users on three main issues: the concept of young-level academic leadership, the competencies necessary to be an effective leader, and the current challenges they encounter considering our participants.

In this study, the findings indicate that young-level academic leadership is an emerging position which affects and enhances their colleagues' teaching and learning experiences. This study has also revealed that young-level academic leaders ensure that tasks are completed without any problems, and also help to transform attitudes and behaviour alongside motivating people. In addition, they improve the opportunities, satisfaction, and outcomes for potential academic leaders (Samman, 2018). Furthermore, this empirical paper has promulgated a definition of young-level academic leadership based on the related literature and the findings from multi-dimensional aspects instead of one single dimension. Thus, young level academic leaders refer to academic talents who perform or take up leadership roles spontaneously and organically with or without a mandate, and who have distributed leadership skills evolving from within a networking group in the changing organizational context of universities. They are emerging leaders among professors, lecturers, researchers, PhD candidates, master's students, etc. who perform and lead academic groups, in order to work within a group or academic organization, to motivate others, and to facilitate the development of a new form of higher education.

This definition, on the one hand, complements some of the studies present in the literature, yet the other hand, it lays the emphasis on the concept of young academic leadership in regard to multi-dimensional elements which may or may not in fact be related to age, and their level (with or without a mandate) in the changing organizational context of universities. In other words, this conceptualization furnishes researchers with a notion of academic leadership that transcends individual leaders as well as including changing leadership processes in higher education contexts in more social and relevant terms. Additionally, when this term is put together with senior-level and mid-level academic leaders, there are both overlapping and diversifying elements. In terms of overlapping elements, all academic leaders in a university context must remain close to teaching, learning, research, and scholarship to bring out the best in them and their peers/students without considering the formal or emerging leadership positions (Sathye, 2004). However, as formal leaders in a vertically organized hierarchical university structure, senior and mid-level academic leaders must deal with a diversified cohort of people constituting academic, administrative, technical, and other supporting staff and students as well, on the other hand, having to deal with the complexities of administration, finance, and academia alongside a plethora of other issues in managing the university (Pani, 2017).

Secondly, our study reveals that an effective young-level academic leader has the ability to support their vision, develop effective relations and consensus among team members, and can convince others by discussing their plan which is being proposed to lead to improvement and bring about changes in the academic system. They also have the capability to diagnose what is happening around them, and they do not allow setbacks to inhibit their initiatives (Zafar, Hmedat, Chaubey, & Rehman, 2019). These capabilities are analytical for all leadership levels in the current complex university leadership environment (Cohen, 2004; Hanna, 2003). To expand their roles, all academic leaders should possess certain capabilities such as creativity, enthusiasm, honesty, humour, kindness, listening, calculative, open-mindedness, originality, perseverance, problem solving, reading, writing, social studies, athleticism, and positive work ethic and teamwork (Zafar et al., 2019).

In addition to the research mentioned above, this study moreover reveals the fact that young-level academic leaders should possess the personal capability to control their own emotions by being creative and open-minded (Scott et al., 2008); in particular, they should possess the interpersonal capability to empathise, listen to and motivate others when compared with senior or mid-level academic leaders (Zafar et al., 2019). This is because they are more open to sharing, engaging, collaborating, and communicating with others than senior and mid-level academic leaders (Pielstick, 2000). Specifically,

senior-level, and mid-level academic leaders have critical influence and power over teaching workloads to distribute, change and reward (Bryman, 2007; Hofmeyer et al., 2015). Instead of traditional leader-centric approaches, our findings in the literature call for more distributed or collaborative models among less hierarchical forms of leadership in higher education (Jones et al., 2012), with a capacity to unite people and influence their development towards change, integrity, and collective goal achievement (Avolio et al., 2004; Boyatzis et al., 2012). Being associated with Bryman's (2007) study, the results essentially affirm that building agreement through a young leader's efforts is crucial at universities.

Apart from these capabilities, the discussion forum participants placed the most emphasis on research, science and teaching when it comes to what will lead to significant changes in higher education institutions, all of which are closely linked to the literature review about competencies that confirmed the effectiveness of young leaders (Scott et al., 2008; Weimer, 2013). In particular, every academic leader at each level might be expected to possess these essential capabilities (Dinh et al., 2020). Furthermore, the results revealed that young academic leaders may promote change and bring people together in higher education institutions through their perspective and their strength at addressing the issue (Boyatzis et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the forum users mostly expressed that young academic leaders should possess digital competencies such as creativity, problem solving, critical thinking, and computational thinking skills, and digital literacy, (Cohen, 2004; Kirschner & Stoyanov, 2018; Vial, 2019). Consistent with the literature, this research specifically found that young academic leaders are capable of solving complex problems by linking together numerous elements as well as proposing new ideas (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Vuorikari et al., 2016). This result may be explained in a sense that they are born and raised in a computerized age (Coombes, 2009).

As a last point, the forum users identified a group of matters that young-level academic leaders face when it comes to financial, managerial, interpersonal challenges and challenges related to gender. These challenges are an indication they must rise to another level, must test themselves and thereby improve in the process (Burkinshaw, 2015; Zenger & Folkman, 2015). As well, relevant studies have demonstrated that senior-level or mid-level academic leaders may be trapped by similar challenges (Creswell & Brown, 1992; Gmelch & Burns, 1993; Scott et al., 2008) to those identified in this study.

More specifically, the discussions have indicated that the emergence of 'managerialism' in the administration and direction of universities may be reflected in more managerial and entrepreneurial departmental objectives (Huisman, 2016; Sotirakou, 2004). This is precisely the point at which the roles of senior-level academic leaders change from being task-oriented, such as dealing with research and teaching which scholars have had years of training and practice in, to those in which they may have precious little prior experience and expertise. Young leaders are therefore expected to be skilled at media and crisis management, fundraising, departmental relations, financial management and the principles of governance. These results are consistent with the literature (Bebbington, 2018; Scott et al., 2008) that explains that higher education institutions are often saddled with managerial and financial challenges such as reduced state funding and must make an effort to identify alternative fundraising options, and to focus on the rising importance of accountability, changing demography, growing demands for higher education, and excessive privatization and marketization. Under the recent pressure on HEIs, mid-level academic leadership positions may be characterized by high levels of role conflict for stronger institutional management and weaker departmental power in favour of the institution. It has been argued that they must therefore serve as buffers between the various conflicting forces stemming from the various internal operation modes and they must manage the academic, state and market forces effectively (Gmelch & Burns, 1993), which is also common among young academic leaders (Zenger & Folkman, 2015). Regarding interpersonal challenges, discussion forum participants reveal the fact that young academic leaders generally face challenges working in a demanding and competitive environment (Mercer, 2009). A possibility for this might be that there are issues of trust among younger leaders, their direct superiors, and peers (Zenger & Folkman, 2015).

In addition, discussion forum participants reported challenges related to gender issues, repeatedly expressing that women are being faced with certain specific challenges such as health, equality of interests, and family work balance/imbalance. Thus, people tend to prioritize and trust men more in leadership positions. This result matches those observed in previous studies that also found that universities are still granting privileges to qualifications identified with masculine traits, prioritizing men, and continuing to be shaped by highly masculinized contexts (Burkinshaw, 2015; Burkinshaw & White, 2017). This difference becomes more apparent especially in senior leadership positions which implies a resistance to the transformation of the cultures present in higher education which have been dominated by a masculine hegemony (Tomàs et.al., 2010). The findings also reveal that diverse women in leadership positions can create productive, respectful, and inclusive environments, since it has been commonly acknowledged that gender operates as a constitutive element in forming social structures, processes, and relations of power (O'Connor, 2011). These findings in our study and literature are rather disappointing since women are still seen as mere additions to ongoing processes rather than being seen as integral parts of those processes (Acker, 1990).

Implications

The discussion and findings throughout the paper contribute to the existing literature in the sense that academic leaders, irrespective of their level of seniority or experience, are more afflicted by stress and burn out today than they were in the past according to our participants (Blackburn et al., 1986; Pulkkinen et al., 2019). In this regard, developing young-level academic leaders both on their professional and personal aspects provides further benefits (both tangible and intangible) to institutions since young leaders voice new ideas, and use their energies and youthfulness to fulfil organizational goals while contributing to the well-being of the institution as a whole (Wakawa & Yamta Ali, 2018). Commonalities and differences among all levels of academic leadership suggest that higher education should strive to develop academic leadership practices to engage institutions and their faculties in coping with change in order to respond effectively to complex educational, social, political, economic, and globalisation-related concerns (Spendlove, 2007). Additionally, the analysis of online discussion forums is arguably an underused research design (Jamison et al., 2018), thus, our results potentially offer additional insight compared to traditional interviews due to the experiences of discussion forums about young academic leadership having remained unexplored (Sullivan, 2003). Similarly, compared with traditional qualitative studies, this study strengthens the idea that the participants from a wide geographical area are more open to communicate their ideas (Schneider, Kerwin, Frechtling, & Vivari, 2002) and more free to participate on their own (Mudry & Strong, 2016). Within this context offered by discussion forum, this study confirms that participants are more responsive to express their deep personal opinions and discuss sensitive issues (Allen, Vassilev, & Kennedy, 2016). Online cross communication in this study may enhance understanding, trust, and shared support through anonymity, thus, result in adding depth to the themes in qualitative research as also described by Gill and Whisnant (2012). Taken together, our findings may be useful for policy makers, researchers, online facilitators, instructors, academic leaders who may want to consider the different levels of academic leadership as well as recognise the importance of young academic leaders who do not have a formal managerial role.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite reflecting the perspectives of young-level academic leaders in a MOOC course's discussion forum, the results of this study are subject to certain limitations. First, one potential limitation of this study is that forum users may not represent all potential young academic leaders, including professors, lecturers, researchers, PhD students, master's students, etc. This issue might therefore pose a constraint to the extent to which the findings can be generalized because of the nature of qualitative research. Linked to that, being limited to the participants' posts, this study sometimes lacks the deep meaning derived from the data. Therefore, a natural progression of this work is to conduct a further study so as to establish generalizability and to transfer the findings to a more broad, inclusive, and larger discussion groups as well as identify more meaning. Given the accessible nature of online mediated research, the study is limited by the lack of direct opinions of participants because of the intention of ensuring anonymity. Thus, future qualitative data collection techniques such as face to face interviews are required to represent participant's real opinions.

Similarly, a greater focus on quantitative methods could produce interesting findings that follow-on to the data collected by this study. Thus, this study offers a framework for future research on developing a research tool and investigating academic leadership competencies at various levels in empirical studies. An additional uncontrolled factor is the impossibility to assess the perceptions of other stakeholders in a university context; therefore, further studies regarding the perceptions of students, senior-level leaders, mid-level leaders and/or policymakers would be worthwhile. Findings from the analysis show that the participants often harbour various cultural differences from different geographical areas. As such, considerably more work will need to be done to determine the different needs of academic leaders from different contexts and to enable stronger linkages to the actual working context.

Funding

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