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Leaders (non-faculty) in higher education: A phenomenological study on understanding their role

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Abstract: The higher education fraternity associates itself closely to academia; the environment or community concerned with the pursuit of research and education. Unsurprisingly, the faculty receive more attention in areas surrounding higher education. However, recent days are seeing vast evolutions in the higher education landscape, beginning with an escalating interest in a seamless and capable administration to support, strengthen and elevate both research and education goals to greater heights. This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine fifteen leaders (non-faculty) working in mid-senior level positions in a university in Singapore to understand their role. The findings evidently proved that leaders (non-faculty) are facilitators and enablers who perform and complete their tasks by facilitating activities, processes, events, and interactions (to and for both students and faculty), and enabling an activity or implementing a policy. Furthermore, the findings reinforced the importance of such leadership within the higher education sector, especially at a time universities explore new strategies to diversify and gain competitive advantage in a challenging environment marked by globalization, technological disruptions, unpredictable demand, and changing student needs.

Keywords: higher education leadership and management; role of higher education leadership; university leadership; phenomenology

1. Introduction

Higher education, comprising mostly universities, has the crucial responsibility of educating the future generation of leaders, politicians, professionals, and entrepreneurs, while endowed with the privilege to create new knowledge and theory through research [1]. A primary challenge is to develop and sustain universities as international entities at a time where more emphasis (and effort) is placed on establishing a global standing and gaining international recognition rather than achieving international standards of educational service and excellence [2].

To tackle these challenges, universities are internationalizing policies and implementing programmes to accommodate and respond to globalization effects to rely not only on the academic experience [3]. The core focus of university education is to prepare students for today's world [4] and for a new world not yet foreseen, and simultaneously for jobs not yet invented. Hence, a foresight is necessary, and the role of a university (and its leadership) is to educate students and prepare them for their future careers. To do this, universities must become more involved in reshaping existing structural frameworks, infrastructure development, architecture, and philosophies to be flexible towards new regulations.

Unfortunately, faculty are under immense pressure and find it hard to differentiate themselves in terms of their role, missions, and strengths [5]. Senior

faculty are embroiled in larger concerns and progressively see the need for a leader from the non-faculty domain to balance such tensions and demands, and to simultaneously perform an active and leading role in policy formulation and operations.

McClure [6] stresses the importance of non-faculty leadership in universities using evidence gathered from a study comprising administrators (non-faculty), faculty, and students, which prove that knowledge privatization and profit taking are largely an administrator-driven project, although efforts to promote innovation and entrepreneurship engender some conflict with faculty members. McClure [6] further concludes from the study that administrators (non-faculty) fulfil and facilitate academic capitalism like building infrastructure, creating new programs, cultivating donors, raising funds, setting a vision around entrepreneurship, and changing policies. However, as McClure [6] posits, a huge gap in knowledge continues to exist concerning the role of administration and non-faculty at all levels.

To meet modern demands, it is expected that non-faculty leaders in university are competent to inculcate an embracing culture towards administration, create consistent policies and practices in administration, and advocate upgrading the technological, workforce and leadership proficiencies to reduce the administrative burden on faculty and students [7]. The presence of such leadership further bridges the rift between the faculty and students, optimizing student experience at the university level as this group is empowered to bear responsibilities in capacities other than research and teaching. This study aims to understand: (1) how non-faculty individuals in university administration currently serving in leadership positions support the university's academic goals and its faculty members and (2) their role within their current job scope.

2. The call for non-faculty leadership in universities

University heads and administrators, before 1950, lacked knowledge in administration, predominantly in educational administration as the field's disciplinary practices, which were not derived from empirical studies, focused on stories told by former administrators and their prescriptions for practice based on personal experiences [7]. Although Bensimon [7], decades ago, raised concerns about most academic leaders being unschooled and unsure about the components of effective leadership, literature that came decades after still prove that this situation remains unchanged. The consensus on this issue, broadly speaking, is that there is extensive agreement on the fact that strong and effective leadership is a necessity for a healthy, reliable, and highly effective university, and the leadership crisis in the previous century is far from over [8].

In a society that appears pandemonium, university leadership (campus leaders, university presidents, and senior academic staff), is distracted by uncertainty [9]. University leaders (mostly academic staff) are pressed to re-look into persisting issues to seek solutions to problems in an evolving atmosphere that presents challenges and opportunities equally, both simultaneously co-existing in university administration and academic leadership positions.

Two dimensions, academic and administrative innovation, are slated as key for

universities if they are to be regarded as “performing organizations” but according to McClure [6], the challenge is for universities to intentionally channel their emphasis on modernizing and strengthening their administrative capabilities without shifting their primary focus away from research and teaching. Faculty are frequently stretched among varying demands and dimensions related to faculty work, and the tripartite divisions of teaching, research, and learning limit their bandwidth and pose challenges on their approach to communicate their efforts to students in areas related to service learning, personal growth, and personal development [10].

It is arguable, given the centrality of a university’s key success indicators to be likely teaching and research, that the voice of faculty is heard more dominantly across the entire spectrum of university decision-making. Unfortunately, as decision-making involving academic staff is progressive and incremental, universities struggle to strengthen strategic vision and lead strategic change roles. However, it is notable that decision-making is driven ultimately by fiduciary responsibility, and a faculty member’s role is to manage the learning process, as opposed to an administrator’s (non-faculty) role that is to manage the learning environment [11].

University leaders need to avoid two different direction setting practices that could introduce additional stress levels on their employees, which could be detrimental to both their objectives and the university’s mission. However, there are several underlying issues that stand in the way of leaders that prevent them from setting clearly defined policies and strategies. Ong [12] lists the following as concerns: (1) university leaders not actively listening to collaborative ideas and feedback from staff (which counters a positive working environment), (2) university leaders not implementing a severe and conscious professional development plan (which promotes learning and is part of a compelling working atmosphere), (3) university leaders improperly balancing competing demands such as increasing student enrolment and maintaining academic quality (which balances and distributes workload for efficient performance), and (4) university leaders succumbing to competing tensions around research and teaching, enrolment numbers and quality, and administration and academic work (which relates to tensions of managing universities in a business-like manner).

Perspectives require redesigning to replace hierarchical and bureaucratic management—in today’s context of modern universities, to be successful in administration, the terms administration and leadership must be considered synonymously. It becomes, therefore, fundamental to universities, leaders, and policy makers around the world to understand more deeply the role of leaders (non-faculty) in administrative positions.

3. Methodology

The research question “What is/are your contribution/s to administrative excellence and support to the university, how you interpret your role in higher education, and the associated challenges in this role?” was a guiding beacon in steering the research towards its aim. The research question was pivotal as it sought to: (1) delve deep into sense-making of participants’ perceptions and interpretations of their role within their university, (2) understand insights of participants’ “lived experiences” as leaders in a university, and (3) encourage participating leaders’ to ponder deeply,

critically reflect on their experiences, and vastly do some soul searching to improve and hone their leadership competencies.

To understand “lived experiences”, a qualitative methodology was regarded highly favorable, appropriate and ideal [13]. This study, therefore, adopted a phenomenological approach, among many notable qualitative methods, to gather data for analysis as the element being examined (understanding a role) is rather fluid and unpredictable using questionnaires and surveys. Creswell and Poth [14] believe that: (1) phenomenology suspends all judgements about “reality” or “states of multiple realities” until they are founded on concrete grounds, (2) phenomenology is dependent on the intentionality of consciousness, which states that consciousness is always directed towards an object, and “reality” is not divided into subject and object, but is a matter of how they appear in one’s consciousness, and (3) phenomenology refutes the subject-object dichotomy, which states that the “reality” is an aspect that is perceivable within the meaning of one’s experience.

Table 1. Participant details.

No.	Office	Functional Role	Pseudonym
1	Office of Medical Education, Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine	Provide guidance, oversee and conduct practical skills as part of medical education for medical students.	Ammal
2	Career & Attachment Office	Formulate, administer and implement the local and overseas internship programs for student community.	Ang
3	Learning Technologies & Digital Media, Centre for IT Services	Provide directions for all matters related to learning technologies and digital media to both staff and students.	Tim
4	Academic Governance & Support	Provide oversight and leadership on academic governance and support matters like convocation and freshmen welcome ceremonies.	Jasmine
5	Office of Global Education & Mobility	Provide strategic directions for overseas travel and exchange programs.	May
6	Emergency Planning and Coordination Unit, Office of Health, Safety and Emergency	Oversee and manage emergency planning unit that provides services in times of emergencies for staff and students.	Ho
7	Residential Education Unit, Student Affairs Office	Oversee and manage residential education unit that provides services for the entire campus residential population.	Mars
8	CIO Office, Centre for IT Services	Oversee various units with the IT department, coordinate high level meetings and staff engagements activities.	Ben
9	Library	Provide leadership on operational matters and special projects related to library services.	Ven
10	Office of Enterprise Risk Management, Office of Finance	Oversee management operations and provide strategic directions on risk management aspects to ensure the university is proactively engaged in mitigating risks.	Tom
11	Shared Services	Oversee and provide strategic directions for shared services department, which comprises IT, HR, FIN as key functions.	Mel
12	Inclusion & Integration Unit, Student Affairs Office	Oversee and manage inclusion and integration unit that provides services and coordinates activities to facilitate and make the campus an inclusive place for the physically challenged.	Linda
13	Student & Academic Planning	Provide leadership and guidance on student community engagement and services matters, and concurrently oversee such activities across the campus.	Chris
14	Career & Attachment Office	Provide overall directions for career and attachment services office that deals primarily with student attachments and internships.	Gerald
15	Office of Human Resources	Provide leadership and overall directions on staff training and development matters.	Kim

A set of interview questions were designed to: (1) guide and facilitate each interview session, (2) enable the collection and consolidation of essential data (primary data) in a systematic manner, (3) allow a smooth transit in-between questions and segments within the set of interview questions, (4) keep each participant engaged in a focused, yet flexible and adaptable manner throughout each session, and (5) maintain eagerness and excitement of each participating individual to ensure the themes surface in a truthful and non-manipulating way to be useful for discussion. The interviews were administered to fifteen leaders (identified through purposive sampling) in administration comprising (participant details are provided in **Table 1**) a good gender mix spanning different levels (mid to top-level executives) across various offices within [REDACTED] University in Singapore.

Each interview session lasted for about an hour. All interview sessions were audio recorded and transcribed by the author, with prudent observations made on vocal modulations, non-verbal communication (body posture, gesture, and eye movement), and other subliminal information that were inaudible (but were visible) in the recordings of the interview. These notes of observation and attention to details subsequently translated to form part of the field notes when transcribing. Even though the information appeared overwhelming, collective “rich” experiences of all participants were captured clearly by prudently tagging transcribed notes and following through on missing or ambiguous pieces for clarity with a particular focus on comprehending their role.

It was clearly noted that each participant held views and opinions that were personal, which arguably influence and alter the “reality” of the phenomenon in this study. As such, the chief focus was on the “lived experiences” of these leaders and not on their capability as individuals, nor on their effectiveness as leaders in their position; be it past or present. This approach eliminated any unforeseen ambiguity and sustained the momentum of this study.

4. Data analysis

Vagle [13] states that the conduct of phenomenological research requires a systematic approach with proper procedural steps in addressing the problem, constructing appropriate questions, assembling textual and structural descriptions, and performing data analysis. As such, there was an emphasis to comprehend each participant intuitively, their limitations, and interpretations of their role within their capacity, which helped to set the tone and guide each interview through its natural phases. It was salient to note that initial efforts to comprehend each participant intuitively, their limitations, and interpretations of their role within their capacity helped to set the tone and guide each interview through its natural phases.

As Creswell and Poth [14] support, data was built from each research question during the interview progressively, improving the understanding of how participants experience the same phenomenon differently. A vital step called horizontalization, which basically refers to a fundamental method for understanding data through a phenomenological reduction by reducing the quantity of words or having them replaced with other suitable words (without any alteration to meaning and value), was utilized.

Fundamentally, sentences were reduced to words and later replaced with other suitable appropriate words to develop clusters of meanings to erect themes during the sense-making process. Themes, meanings, and sense-making customarily unfolded distinctively in more than a single stage. As Creswell and Poth [14] iterated, the central concern of each participant was weighed against their orientation to their existing situation, as both current and earlier experiences are influencing factors to their overall perceptions of their role.

As posited by Vagle [13], interpretive writings are an ongoing and continuous process that occur concomitantly with interviews and interpretive observations. The writings did not wrap up at one attempt, and it took a series of writings and re-writings to develop the themes. Transcribed notes came in and supported as the point of reference as interpretations began emerging noticeably and verbal data was unpacked to discover the translation of “human experience”. The experience of transcribing and data analysis could be summed up in the following five sequences: (1) describing the phenomenon, (2) identifying themes as they emerge, (3) connecting them to descriptions, (4) reflecting on emerged themes, and (5) explicating essences from themes and interpreting them to form a logic. Data was reduced to bite-sized information for it to be adequately understood, synthesized, and for any patterns to be identified and analyzed.

As themes emerged and categories became clearer, further analysis and re-examination of data was performed to establish connections (or specifically identify links) between concepts and interpretations [14]. Throughout the data analysis process, theories had to be weaved and interwoven both conceptually and rationally with interpretations. Statements and themes were strung together and consolidated to form descriptions and sum up the total experiences of participants, surfacing the “essence” of the phenomenon [13].

5. Research findings

Six participants interpret their role to be that of a middle person. Ammal, for instance, sees herself playing the role of a middle person between the senior management and her subordinates, with a key purpose of conveying information to aid in the implementation of ideas. Jasmine’s role, as she interprets, is pivotal to establish students’ code of conduct and proper governance, and she feels her responsibility as a middle person is to communicate and instill good practices among students.

Mel highlights the need for university operations and resources to be centralized, as she expressed that her role supports this function well. Mel believes that her role is to act and oversee resources and timelines on fundamental matters, and she associates herself to be the central point of contact, or to that of a middle person. Chris certainly is convinced of her role as a middle person. Chris, based on her interpretation, feels that her actions assist in the process of knowledge transformation and transfer, especially since her core focus is to ensure students cope well when they transit into the industry as working adults.

The next theme that emerged visibly based on participants’ interpretation of their role is that of being a facilitator. Ho emphasized, “I think my role is as a facilitator.” She believes so because her role oftentimes requires her to interact with faculty,

improve communication among various communities within the university, and introduce new initiatives. On the other hand, Jasmine mentioned that her role is to see students through their entire journey in campus, drawing equivalence to facilitation.

There were obvious recognizable patterns and similarities from examples cited by participants between both themes: (1) middle person, and (2) facilitation. Therefore, both themes were consolidated and judiciously merged into one. An individual can act as a middle person but the role they perform essentially as a middle person would be to facilitate. Hence, there was importance (perceiving both themes as interchangeable under given circumstances and giving credit to the underpinning process of facilitation that takes place in reality) given to facilitation as the main theme – most participants interpret their role in their capacity as leaders (non-faculty) in university administration as one that facilitates activities, processes, events, and interactions (to and for both students and faculty).

In universities typically, the role of a facilitator is eminent. A facilitator's role will typically encompass the following: (1) act as the bridge to support several initiatives that revolve around complex university operations and systems, (2) interact with people with multiple personalities; be it students or faculty, (3) constantly establish relationships, and (4) mediate and resolve any conflict amicably. Facilitation is a challenging role that requires patience and the right temperament to deal with a multitude of tasks and individuals simultaneously.

Another theme that cropped up was “Enabling”. Some participants believe in the process of enabling and equate themselves to enablers. Mel clearly mentioned that her role is to enable the university. Chris emphasized that her role is crucial outside the classroom, as she enables students by providing developmental opportunities for them. As the theme of enabling unfolded, it became completely obvious that leaders in university administration are enablers, and it would be hard to imagine initiating an activity or implementing a policy without the presence of an enabler.

In the interview process, participants were also asked about the tools and resources they require to perform their role productively. According to participants' interpretation based on their role, “people” and “budget” were highlighted as the two most dominant themes. Most participants refer to the human capital when using the term “people”. To be precise, they are referring to people with appropriate skill sets, the right mindset, and proper training to perform required functions. May mentioned, “I think manpower as a resource is important. Having the right people, not just several people, but also the right skills. Before, we had the right number of people but did not have the right skills. It was not working very well. So, we hired a whole team of new staff with the right fit. I purposely profiled them before I hired them. Okay, so it was intentional and now you know, the team is a lot more stable. So, I think hiring the right people with the right fit is very important.” Ho stated, “A team, I think in my opinion, is very important and we must pick the right people with the right mindset.”

On budget, Jasmine supports her point of view on why she feels that a lack of budget limits her role, when she cited, “We started exploring two years ago for a software to do the tracking but because of budget constrain, it was shelved.” Ho agrees on the importance of budget. According to her, some budget is better than none. She recalls the challenges encountered when she ran events with a limited or restricted funding before her management decided to increase the available budget progressively

over subsequent years. She strongly feels that the limitations imposed by budget constraints are very real in challenging her scope of work but is confident that she can “make do with what is provided” to achieve her objectives. Ven highlighted that the fiscal situation was better in the past but appears to deteriorate over recent years, which he thought was rather unfortunate. He foresaw this as a likely situation that could limit his exploration and work.

The mention of people and budget correlated to the two themes that earlier surfaced on establishing the role of leaders (facilitating and enabling), which appeared to be congruent. To facilitate (activities, processes, events, and interactions) and enable (an activity or the implementing of a policy), resources such as people (with appropriate skill sets and proper training) and budget (having enough to introduce systems, revise structures, and reform technologies) are paramount and irreplaceable. However, most of the participants felt they have access to the basic tools and resources to function in their role but highlighted that their situation would improve with more of these.

To wrap up, participants were asked to outline personal contributions that they deem as significant to determine how closely their actions link and align them to interpretations of their role. The following keywords, based on participants’ responses on their contributions, surfaced: (1) streamlining processes, (2) providing directions, (3) implementing, (4) planning, and (5) supporting. There is strong association between the keywords and the two overarching themes (facilitating and enabling). There is remarkable consistency between how participants interpret their role and apply them – their contributions resonate with facilitating and enabling.

6. Discussion

All participants regard every bit of their contribution to be of significant value and view them as success factors that lead (directly or indirectly) to the following outcomes: (1) policy formulation and development, (2) organizing of events or activities, (3) financial management, procurement, and budgeting, (4) process streamlining, (5) human resource management, training and coaching, and (6) supporting the university’s function in all areas where faculty do not play any part (or has limited control over).

Organizations like universities are constantly under review to meet demands and respond effectively to requirements, and simultaneously, to be flexible and efficient [15]. Typically, large universities have more structurally complex challenges [16], and in such cases, leadership becomes pivotal to lead them through change. Towing the line of ambidexterity literature, it states that both exploration (the ability to explore new concepts or processes and develop products and services through innovation) and exploitation (the ability to leverage current competences and exploit current products and services) are necessary but is unclear to what extent this is achievable and how to attain a state of balance between the two [17].

Even though this study does not focus on participants’ expectations on how leaders should achieve university outcomes (whether in administration or otherwise), their interpretation of their role in their capacity offers a glimpse into this aspect. Two themes that surfaced on understanding their role (based on their interpretation) are: (1)

facilitator—to facilitate activities, processes, events, and interactions (to and for students and faculty), and (2) enabler—to initiate an activity or implement a policy. It is possible to associate and establish a strong link between these two themes and how participants expect leaders to achieve university outcomes. It is certain that participants are convinced of their role as facilitators and enablers. Therefore, this would mean they achieve outcomes through stimulating practices that involve an active integration of exploration and exploitation innovation [18].

Basically, their role is the connecting link that facilitates and enables activities and processes. The role of facilitating and enabling are interdependent, extends beyond their daily interaction with team members, and concurrently correlate to: (1) how they respond to changes in their environment, (2) how they shift their prioritization and practices, (3) how they focus on activities and processes to follow through changes, and (4) how they deal with the inherent tension when encountering changes, while striking a balance between the processes of exploration and exploitation innovation.

The application principles and processes involved in both facilitating and enabling are not straightforward and require intensive planning, time commitment, and coordination [17]. Participants, in their view, perform a range of activities that constitute to the overall university administration through a series of work processes that include but do not limit to: (1) process integration, (2) harnessing new technology, (3) policy revisions, (4) identifying resources, and (5) rallying their colleagues in times of change. **Figure 1** illustrates the relationship among these variables, while linking the role of participants to university administration outcomes.

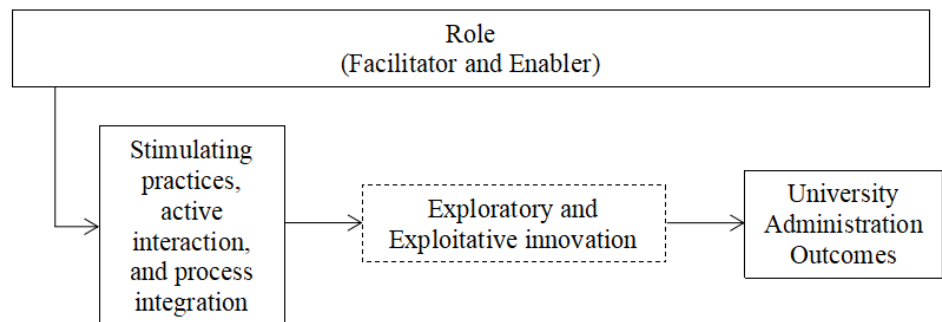


Figure 1. Linking role to university administration outcomes (Source: own).

Specifically, the concept of achieving both exploration and exploitation innovation simultaneously is daunting. It is arguably complex and challenging for most organizations and their leaders to initiate activities related to both exploration and exploitation innovation [19], and even harder to sustain them. Based on the perspectives of participants, three themes surfaced on the topic of challenges: (1) people and mindset, (2) resources and tools (budget, staffing, structure, system), and (3) governance. The first challenge (people and mindset) is best treated as an internal factor, while the other two (resources and tools, and governance) can be subject to interferences by internal and external forces, and as such, categorized under both internal and external factors.

Drawing reference to how participants perceive and interpret their role in achieving university administration outcomes through exploration and exploitation innovation (**Figure 1**), it becomes very important to relate challenges participants face

in their role to innovation and identify how these challenges affect or influence the process of exploration and exploitation innovation. Innovation is a pervasive term used in most conversations relating to organizational success, and yet little is coherent about it. Innovation is three different things: (1) an outcome, (2) a process, and (3) a mindset [18].

As innovation itself is both a process and mind-set, it then becomes baffling, conflicting, and extremely complicating to have a mindset that opposes the concept of innovation and hinders processes and activities that attempt to achieve positive outcomes for the university. The presence of mindset as a challenge exists as an experience, and as participants describe, where there is resistance to change or in accepting new ideas. Additionally, resources, tools, and governance make matters worse as they reinforce (intentionally or unintentionally) the followers' "resistance to change attitudes", thereby increasing challenges for participants as they try to overcome them.

It is consequential to note that several external factors like economic conditions, political and geo-political issues, and digital transformations place further strain on the situation and increase challenges that relate to resources and tools. In today's world, it is a reality where numerous universities face restrictions on implementing new initiatives and limitations in harnessing required budgets and systems [10]. These factors together create a barrier that hinders participants from performing their role efficiently, limits their achievements, spreads a sense of uncertainty, and applies unnecessary pressure on them, causing them to feel drained in this process. Regardless, participants as leaders are working towards achieving positive outcomes in their role against all odds.

Participants are leaders who try to balance and achieve exploration and exploitation innovation activities and processes by executing their role of facilitating and enabling but encounter challenges from some followers (respective team members) due to a rigid mindset, which creates a drift and results in a misalignment to the overall vision. Together with other external aggravating factors, this entire scenario manifests into something larger at the university level. Hence, the remedy to this situation is to prescribe an appropriate treatment at an individual level, and not target anything at the organizational level.

It is advisable to encourage and enable individuals (and groups) to deal with issues at a personal level and simultaneously pursue exploration and exploitation innovation at the subsystem level (individual, team, and unit level) rather than at the larger system level (university level). There are significant advantages in empowering every individual and this is where the role of facilitation is put to good use. Unfortunately, there is limited research focusing on achieving exploration and exploitation innovation at the level of an individual [10] and the challenge is really to have a broader grasp and comprehension on perspectives, activities, and processes that influence and concurrently enhance this concept.

Participants are in an exciting phase where the university administration is undergoing a transformation. Participants are significantly progressing on many fronts and their efforts in adopting technological tools to change the way they work, communicate, and interact transcends beyond employee processes alone, as they reach out to impact the lives of many students optimally. Their contributions support the

university well, which is on par with numerous other excellent universities in the global rankings. Such mammoth accomplishments are testament to participants' focus on facilitating and enabling activities and processes that enhance the transformative journey of the university. Participants' role as facilitators and enablers, an ability to define key priorities and sheer will to overcome challenges—all create pathways to build a dynamic and collaborative administration across the university.

7. Conclusion

Summary and significance of findings

As Altbach et al., [10] suggested, much of the literature on higher education is written by academics who focus on areas that interest them; hence, the role of professional staff in higher education institutions has been under-represented. However, over the last two decades, there has been a growing body of literature written by administrators and professional staff about the work and changing identities of their role in higher education. Gayle et al., [11] suggest that a vast number of senior university leaders are still faculty, which is not coincidental since a university's key success indicators are research and teaching, and that somehow general leadership theories in higher education seem to point to the faculty members or draw associations and correlate to the role of faculty particularly. As such, this research study shares a contrasting perspective that provides valuable insights into the role of non-faculty leaders in university administration. There were steep learning curves, but providentially, these were surmountable, and challenges were simplified due to the application of a phenomenological method.

Bensimon [7] claimed decades ago that leadership in universities is often viewed through a symbolic frame, which regards leaders primarily as facilitators of an on-going change process that never concludes. The highlight of leaders (non-faculty) in a university and their remarkable role in supporting change initiatives all align and bode well to support Bensimon's claim. This study is a dedication to university leaders (non-faculty) who are seen by many as unsung heroes, as they continue to work behind the scenes to support key activities, fortify goals, and reinforce processes that materialize university key outcomes like research and teaching.

This study inspires, with its findings, and further augments qualitative studies in future that attempt to explore new and different paradigms. The findings on their role that establish non-faculty leaders as facilitators and enablers throw some light on how they get to support an academic framework and the faculty members to achieve successful outcomes for the university. Such findings are remarkable and provide the edge for this research study's unique position that several other research studies substantially lack, especially since an understanding of the role played by leaders (non-faculty) in university administration significantly contributes to beef up existing literature in this area.

It further constitutes to an expansion of information and a concurrent development in the overall knowledge building process on areas related to university administration, non-faculty leaders and administrators, and their strategies in achieving university administration outcomes. With findings adding profound knowledge on important parameters of what leaders (non-faculty) can achieve, how

they work towards achieving common goals and overcome challenges that stand in their way, it is a possible “game-changer” as it is anticipated to promote, enhance, and augment administration as an influential source that will enable universities to shine and attain competitive advantage.

The perception of academic leaders would shift in favor of non-academic administrators when they realize the pertinence of administration, understand more profoundly the role and challenges of such individuals beyond their daily routine, and accept that critical university outcomes like research and teaching are largely dependent on the proactive contributions and actions of this group of individuals. The long-standing theories that state that they (academic leaders who are faculty) have an advantage, exert more influence than others through their extensive network and academic foundation could prove inaccurate when a leader who is a non-faculty (but a strong administrator) can wield similar or more influence over university outcomes.

The findings are significant in proving that a role in university administration is an irreplaceable and indispensable one that requires a lot of work and personal sacrifices, which are all obtainable with proper guidance, resource, training, strategic planning, and support from all faculty. Faculty must adjust to the growing presence of non-faculty leaders in higher education institutes, and that in time to come, they will form an integral part of the entire university system of rules and norms. The bottom line is that both groups (faculty and non-faculty) need to work together, and alongside others in the university ecosystem, to bring the standards of higher education system up to date, and to not upend the system. To succeed in this, they each must learn to co-exist by accepting each other’s perspectives and reconciling their differences. The emphasis on non-faculty leadership in university administration conveys an exceptionally meaningful message, and it purposefully rejuvenates a sense of responsibility, purpose, and orderliness, through which new avenues of interpretations and perceptions could manifest and pave pathways for future studies.

8. Limitations

The credibility of procedures and processes are paramount to any qualitative research and under usual (standard and regular) circumstances, the complexities involved in a research method like phenomenology need extended time and exertion. A fundamental limitation is predominant in this research study’s design. Phenomenology, as a research method, is robust and capable to meet the purpose of this study, but consequently, the obtainable data at the end could not be generalized to other research studies that employ different methods no matter how similar they might be in focus or nature.

Other limitations include: (1) sampling, (2) circumstances of individuals, and (3) aspects relatable to the participating university. As the decision was to settle for a purposeful sampling targeting non-faculty leaders who are in mid-senior administrative positions, others who hold lower ranks within the same university were uninvited to participate. As such, there is inherently a significant disadvantage to the application of purposeful sampling, and beyond any passable doubt, the result would prove otherwise different if others had been involved. It is exceptionally essential to note that as the scope of this research is limited to the “lived experiences” of selected

participating individuals primarily based on their personal views, beliefs, interpretations and perceptions, it could mean interpretations and associated meanings (and therefore specific findings) will subjectively differ if the individuals participating in this research are different—this eventually would lead to different data and therefore, completely different findings and outcomes.

Participants tend to behave differently according to their moods, which are affected by their situation. The situational circumstances under which the participants were during the interviews are not included as a factor for consideration (there is no real way of ascertaining this). Furthermore, as this study is restricted to individuals within a niche and specialized sector (higher education), the findings may not accurately reflect a common situation elsewhere in other sectors. The findings cannot be considered transferrable to other universities even though individuals may function in a similar role as the landscape, structure, and circumstances of another university could be somewhat different and present challenges that are unique, thereby leading to the emergence of various other themes.

The findings are subjective in nature as perceptions (and interpretations that create them) are in a constant state of flux (basis of multiple realities), and hence, the underpinning thought processes, opinions, and beliefs (factors that influence perceptions and interpretations) represent that of a particular moment only. The following boundaries were intentionally imposed to narrow the scope of this research study: (1) a small sample size – while a qualitative research study generally creates an opportunity for new paradigms to be created, a phenomenological method helps to designate and limit the scope of this research study to focus on the experiences of selected individuals, which is useful to make an inference to the phenomenon in study, (2) only leaders (non-faculty) in administration were deliberately selected, ensuring high consistency in findings within a specific group of professionals, and (3) offices participants originate from within the university were carefully controlled, ensuring the sample size is manageable. Clearly and understandably, the research findings derived from this study cannot be generalized to be applied across a spectrum of circumstances (or to another industry). Nonetheless, despite these, the research findings remain insightful and too true to be easily dismissed.

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