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An integrated systems model for understanding experiences of academic leadership development in Qatar

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An integrated systems model for understanding experiences of academic leadership development in Qatar

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ABSTRACT

While leadership development is acknowledged as essential for institutional growth in the higher education sector, it remains poorly understood and under researched both empirically and theoretically. Although knowledge in this area is growing in western contexts, there is little published data from the Arabic speaking world. This article addresses this gap by reporting on a Qatar National Research Fund (QNRF) funded research project which aimed to explore academic middle leaders' experiences of leadership and leadership development in Qatar. Drawing on semi structured interviews with 17 academic middle leaders, an integrated systems model for understanding leadership development in Qatar is proposed, based on three inter-related systems: intrapersonal, relational, and institutional. This model has clear implications for future leadership development policy and practice, which it is argued needs to acknowledge the nuanced and complex leadership behaviours and interactions that are required to run academic departments successfully.

KEYWORDS

leadership; careers; professional development; communication; relationships

Introduction

As universities become ever more complex organisations, having to react and develop strategies to contend with constant national and international pressures such as global student and staff recruitment and retention, teaching and research quality, and changing funding mechanisms, the need for effective academic leadership practice becomes ever more apparent. This is especially true when exploring middle leadership behaviours as it is at this level where the majority of the 'chalk face' decisions on teaching, research and scholarship are taken which arguably impact students and staff the most (Gmelch, 2019).

While the notion of academic leadership is up for debate in relation to whether the practice of leadership is more of a collaborative act occurring across an organisation rather than residing with people in formal leadership roles (Evans, 2021), it is clear that academic leadership *development* is a crucial aspect of institutional success, whoever is involved with the leadership enactment process. However, previous research undertaken

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in western contexts has shown that academic leadership development programs and activities are generally absent, inappropriate, or ineffective (Cipriano & Riccardi, 2013; Gmelch, Roberts, Ward, & Hirsch, 2017). These previous findings suggest that policy makers and senior university leaders may not fully acknowledge or understand the nuanced and complex leadership development activities that are required to respond to increased institutional complexity (Dopson et al., 2019), and that current leadership development activities are too often based on simplistic and outdated models of leadership practice (Kliewer, 2019).

Although these issues are beginning to be explored and developed in the Anglosphere, especially in the UK and USA (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017), Australia (see, for example, Jones et al., 2017; Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008), and occasionally in other contexts such as Pakistan (see, for example, Zulfqar, Valcke, Quraishi, & Devos, 2021) it is surprising to note that very little work has been done in the Arabic speaking world with a few recent exceptions (see, for example, Abdulla et al., 2022; Kemp, Gitsaki, & Zoghbor, 2017). Indeed a recently published systematic review of academic middle leadership research over the last 10 years found that authorship in this area is particularly westernised and Euro-centric with almost two-thirds of the studies reviewed located in the UK, USA or Australia (Maddock, 2023). This is significant because understanding academic leadership development in different international contexts such as Middle East and North Africa (MENA) may have key implications for more localised and culturally situated training and support for staff working within institutions in these countries, even though academics employed there work in increasingly globalised environments. Therefore, the aim of this article is to address this knowledge gap by reporting on data from a Qatar National Research Fund (QNRF) funded research project which aimed to explore academic middle leaders' experiences of leadership and leadership development in Qatar. By analysing data from an under researched academic cultural context (Qatar) and drawing on a theoretical framework based on emerging ideas on social and relational models of academic leadership development originally proposed from business and organisational studies research, the article offers a significant and original contribution to our knowledge in this area.

Following this introduction, the paper is organised over five sections. First, we outline our theoretical framework. Then, we provide contextual information about higher education in Qatar and the case study institution. Next, we outline the methods used in our study. Following that, we present our findings and analysis followed by our conclusions and implications for leadership development policy and practice in the country and beyond.

Theoretical underpinnings

To help explore middle leaders' experiences of academic leadership development in Qatar, this article extends theoretical ideas that have previously been used by the first author to frame similar comparative research on higher education leadership development in the UK (see Floyd & Preston, 2017; Preston & Floyd, 2016) which are based on concepts that have originated from business and organisational studies research. These ideas include adopting more nuanced, situated and reflective approaches to leadership development (Franken, Penney, & Branson, 2015; Kempster & Stewart, 2010) focusing on the key but often overlooked activities of

building, developing, and maintaining positive staff relationships by understanding and using appropriate language, communication, and discourse at all levels throughout the organisation (Fairhurst, 2008, 2009; Whittle, Housley, Gilchrist, Mueller, & Lenney, 2015; Wodak, Kwon, & Clarke, 2011). The arguments put forward by these authors suggest that traditional leadership development programs are often based on outdated ideas of leadership 'belonging' to one person and focus too much on procedural rather than relational and cultural issues. They argue for more introspective approaches to leadership development that are based on experiential, contextual, and naturalistic theories of learning, where leadership development is grounded in practice.

Additionally, the contention is that communication and language play a key role within an institution and that leadership is discursive. Here, it is proposed that effective institutional leadership should be centred on dialogue and connections, and that the process should involve influence and communication tactics 'distributed' and practised among all employees inside the institution rather than simply those who hold formal leadership positions.

Alongside framing the research in this article around reconceptualising academic leadership development using the above thinking, we go beyond this work by putting forward ideas we have developed elsewhere through this research project in which we argue that middle leadership development is,

> . . . a highly complex endeavour, influenced by compromises that are negotiated within multiple systems, namely the intrapersonal, relational, and institutional. (Chaaban et al., 2023, p. 2)

Using these three inter-related units of analysis, we argue that at the *intrapersonal* level academic middle leaders need certain knowledge, skills and attitudes to be successful, with leaders being under internal and external pressure (Bolden & Petrov, 2014; Smyth, 2017), while also reflecting on areas of professional identity, values, and agency across an academic's career trajectory as discussed previously in this journal (Floyd & Dimmock, 2011; Floyd & Preston, 2019). Here we view professional identity as multiple and constantly changing over a person's career, in line with social identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009). At the same time, academic leaders have to work both horizontally and vertically across a university, negotiating their way through complex *relational* systems, with collaboration and collective group processes and interactions being central to the success of departments and faculties (Abdulla et al., 2022; Bolden et al., 2012, 2013; Skorobohacz, Billot, Khong, & Murray, 2016), especially when dealing with heavily autonomous and influential people who may not be in formal leadership positions or agree with the proposed direction of travel (Bryman, 2007). The third level of analysis is *institutional*, where complex social, political and economic organisational systems interact with the broader societal and cultural narratives within which the institution operates (Dopson et al., 2019). As an example, take the notion of different and competing departmental, faculty and organisational cultures and expected behaviours within an institution, and reflect on how these interplay with and are influenced by broader cultural issues related to a country's higher education system such as Qatar – including overall aims and value systems – which in turn are influenced by and influence global higher education narratives such as globalisation and international league tables. These three

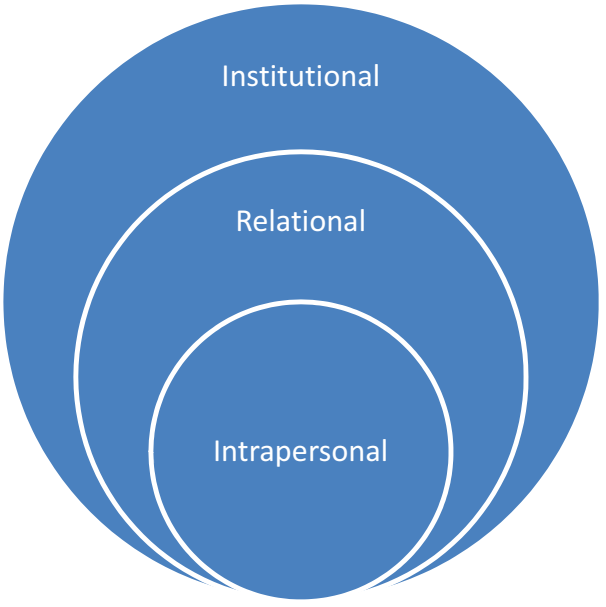

Figure 1. Interconnected systems model for understanding academic leadership development.

levels of analysis should be understood as interconnected and cross-dimensional – see Figure 1. This model will be further developed later in this article.

Thus, using the above theoretical ideas, the main research question addressed in this article is:

- What are the key intrapersonal, relational, and institutional dimensions that contribute to experiences of leadership development for academic middle leaders in Qatar?

Context

Qatar, which has been an independent state since 1971, occupies around 11,571 km2 of the Arabian Peninsula; it has a population of approximately 3 million mainly foreign nationals, with Qatari citizens making up just 12% of the inhabitants. Just over a century ago, the country was considered one of the poorest countries in the region in terms of its wealth and trading; the primary exports of the country were pearls, and even agriculture and fishing were under developed. Major economic development in the country began with the discovery of fossil fuels in 1939 and their exportation thereafter, until this point education was limited to religious teachings in informal settings (Romanowski & Du, 2020). In 1948, the first official school was opened under government funding (an all-boys school); in 1956, the department of education was established alongside the first public school for girls (MacLeod & Abou-El-Kheir, 2017). A major and somewhat controversial overhauling and revamping of the education system in Qatar was carried out in 2001 when the government took the help of RAND Corporation in an attempt to keep up with the dynamic nature of the international economic landscape (Alfadala,

Yiannouka, & Zaki, 2021). This involved two key initiatives: (1) new government-funded schools that were not operated by the Ministry of Education but by other parties in a move towards more of a marketised approach to education provision with school results being made publicly available and (2) standardised national student tests aligned with internationally-benchmarked curriculum standards (Brewer et al., 2006) More recently, in 2008, Qatar published its vision for 2030 (Qatar General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008) which saw research and higher education as a key driver for social and economic growth and sustainability and subsequently led to a substantial investment in the further development of the sector with the number of universities growing to the current number of 34. The higher education sector in Qatar currently consists of 10 public higher education institutions, 6 military institutions and 9 institutions affiliated with the Qatar Foundation, which allows international institutions to have campuses within the country. In addition, there are a further nine private institutions (Qatar Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2023).

Within this national context, the case study university is a public institution and consists of six faculties, namely, Engineering, Social Sciences, Education, Islamic Studies, Humanities, and Sciences. In 2003, the university launched a major restructuring project that reformed its educational, organisational, and infrastructure areas, as well as initiatives to improve the calibre of its learners in accordance with international labour market demands. Today, each of the faculties operate somewhat independently, with their own Dean and associated working culture, while coming under the general control and accountability of a university senior leadership team.

Methods

Design

The data discussed here were collected and analysed as part of a larger two stage, mixed-methods QNRF-funded study exploring academic leadership and leadership development in Qatar. In the study, we used an exploratory, sequential mixed methods design (Cresswell, 2014), where qualitative data are collected and analysed first, with the results being used to direct the next, quantitative phase, which in this case was a Q Methodology Study – the results of which are reported elsewhere (see Chaaban et al. 2023). Stage one of the project, on which this article is focused, involved undertaking 17 semi-structured interviews with a range of middle leaders in the case study university.

Participants

A stratified purposeful sampling approach (Bryman, 2012) was used to identify participants from the case study website. To allow for variations and similarities to be accounted for, participants were drawn from a range of disciplines (Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences) and the sample contained male and female staff with a range of ages and levels of experience. The interviewees were recruited via email and were all either department heads, associate or faculty deans. Table 1 shows the gender breakdown and nationality. To preserve anonymity, each participant was allocated

Table 1. Interview participants.

Participant	Pseudonym	Nationality	Gender
1.	Dr. Ahmad	Qatari	Male
2.	Dr. Ali	International	Male
3.	Dr. Alia	Qatari	Female
4.	Dr. Ameera	Qatari	Female
5.	Dr. Anoud	International	Female
6.	Dr. Eman	Qatari	Female
7.	Dr. Fawzia	Qatari	Female
8.	Dr. Hanadi	Qatari	Female
9.	Dr. Hind	Qatari	Female
10.	Dr. Lamia	International	Female
11.	Dr. Manal	International	Female
12.	Dr. Mohammad	International	Male
13.	Dr. Rasha	International	Female
14.	Dr. Rashid	International	Male
15.	Dr. Salem	International	Male
16.	Dr. Saud	International	Male
17.	Dr. Wadha	International	Female

a pseudonym and we have not revealed their international country of origin, academic specialism, or exact role.

Interview schedule and data collection

The interview schedule was developed based on instruments and themes that have emanated from previous research exploring academic middles leaders in the UK undertaken by the first author. This schedule was then further informed by discussions with the Qatari based research team who all had experience of working in the country as academics. The schedule was then peer reviewed and piloted before use. Final questions were based on the following key themes: *academic background and reasons for becoming an academic; reasons for taking on a leadership role; perceptions on the purpose of academic leadership; experiences of being in a leadership role including opportunities and challenges; experiences of leadership development to date and future development needs; future career plans and impact of leadership role on these.*

Following ethical approval, interview participants were sent an email invitation which included a detailed participant information sheet which identified the researchers and funder, outlined the purpose of the study, identified any benefits and drawbacks of taking part, and notified them of their right to withdraw at any time. Once participants had agreed to be interviewed, each participant was then asked to sign a consent form ensuring that they were happy to be interviewed, for the interview to be recorded, and for quotes to be used in future publications. Then the research team conducted the interviews depending on language preference and ability. For example, for those leaders who were happy to hold the interview in English, the first author (based in England and with English as their first language) conducted these online via Microsoft Teams (allowing for time differences between the two countries) with other members of the research team present. These were recorded and transcribed. Participants who preferred to be interviewed in Arabic were interviewed by one of the research team from Qatar,

Table 2. Example of thematic analysis.

Initial Codes	Themes/Categories	Concepts
Searching out new experiences	New career challenges	*Intrapersonal Dimensions*
Wanting to progress	Promotion ambitions	Career Goals
Seeking promotion		
Feeling ready to take on more responsibility		

all of whom were bilingual (with some multilingual). These interviews were conducted either via Microsoft Teams or in person. The data from these interviews were then transcribed into English and verified by another bilingual researcher. Each interview lasted for about an hour.

Analysis

Once all the transcriptions had been translated into English, they were analysed by using coding and thematic techniques outlined by Lichtman (2013) with the data being managed using NVivo. This process involved two/three researchers reading and initial coding of the transcripts using gerunds, keeping the codes active and as close to the original statements as possible (Charmaz, 2014), then merging and collapsing codes into emerging themes/categories. Key emerging concepts were then identified by reflecting on the literature in an iterative process with the emerging findings and ongoing discussion within the research team. An example of this process is shown Table 2.

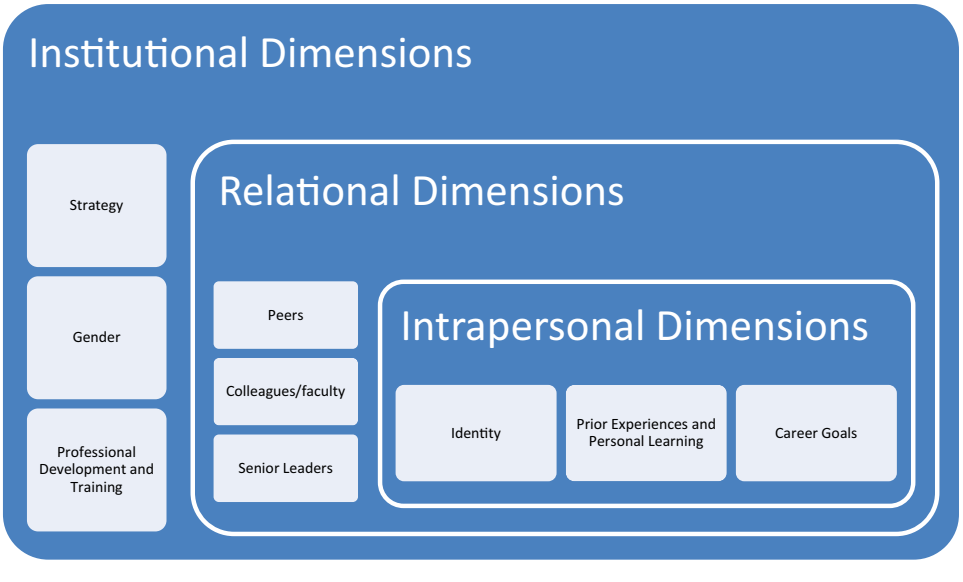

Figure 2. An integrated systems model for understanding academic leadership development in Qatar.

Findings and analysis

A proposed model for understanding leadership development in Qatar

From our results and analysis, in Figure 2 we propose an integrated systems model for understanding leadership development in Qatar (further developed from our initial model proposed earlier in this article – see Figure 1).

The proposed model shows the key dimensions related to leadership development that emerge across the three inter-related systems within which academic middle leaders are working in Qatar. These include intrapersonal dimensions linked to identity, prior experiences and personal learning, and career goals; relational dimensions linked to peers and colleagues including the influence of senior leaders; and institutional dimensions linked to strategy, gender, and professional development provision. As previously stated, we conceptualise these dimensions as interconnected and cross-dimensional. In this section, we demonstrate how this model was developed through our analysis, using a number of illustrative quotes to establish its empirical basis.

Intrapersonal dimensions

Our analysis suggests that intrapersonal dimensions of leadership development for our participants centred around the following broad themes: identity; prior experiences and personal learning; and career goals.

Identity

It was clear from our participants that leadership and leadership development was heavily inter-linked to their own values and professional identity, as the following examples show:

> Leadership was always appealing for me. I'm comfortable, definitely, in leadership positions. I cannot really accredit that to any kind of program that I took. It's just something I feel that is inherited in my personality. (Dr Ahmad)

> I'm always passionate about the work I do, so I really always give it my utmost effort, and any kind of work I do, I always like to leave an impact. I always like to make the best of it. I am quite a perfectionist and I'm always trying to see how can I do things better. (Dr Manal)

> If you're looking for someone who enjoys helping others and making a positive impact, I'm the person! (Dr Eman)

Prior experiences and personal learning

All the interviewees discussed how their prior experiences and personal learning, sometimes outside of academia, had helped develop their leadership knowledge and skills as exemplified in the following quotes:

> . . . serving on these committees has polished my talents and exposed me to a variety of situations. These involvements helped me improve myself for leadership roles by providing me with knowledge and understanding of policies, mechanism for implementing procedures, workflow, and results that can be measured against all these concerns. I was able to work in the department because of my community service, which began while I was a professor and ended when I became the department head. (Dr Hanadi)

> My experience in leadership came from outside academia. I was an activist . . . So I learned to develop goals that transcend my personal goals and look at the big picture and think of the noble goals and not being fixated on something small, like my personal goals . . . I was able to develop goals for my team that transcends the department, thinking about the college, the university and also the community. (Dr Anoud)

> Because of my previous experience, I have a better understanding of how to select skilled researchers to assist me in completing the duties effectively and successfully. I can now work independently, responsibly, and confidently. (Dr Alia)

> I took a few courses and was eager to apply what I learned to my daily life. Planning, business management, and prioritisation were among the skills I have mastered. Throughout my interactions with others, I've realised that certain priorities exist. (Dr Hind)

Career goals

All the interviewees discussed how taking on a leadership position and developing their leadership skills had been linked in some way to their career goals, as the comments below illustrate:

> To be the best I can be in whatever role I'm performing, and to make a lasting impression wherever I go. A professorship is the most important thing for me, and I'm actively pursuing that goal. No matter what happens, I'll continue to do the right thing in accordance with applicable laws and norms, and I'll never waver in my principles. (Dr Hanadi)

> I have my vision and mission for the office and what I want to achieve. But I also don't see myself at the layer of an assistant dean forever because I want to grow and I want new experiences, and I also want to take on new challenges and go higher. (Dr Rasha)

Relational dimension

Our analysis suggests that relational dimensions of leadership development for our participants centred around the following three key themes: peers, colleagues/faculty, and senior leaders.

Peers

The importance of learning and being supported by peers (other department heads) was a common view expressed by participants:

> I think because I have very good examples in the college. My colleagues were heads of department and they've been there for quite some time. I felt very supported . . . they have an open-door policy. So if there was something I wasn't very sure about, I used to ask any of my head of department colleagues. (Dr Lamia)

> Yes . . . I got support from other department heads . . . They were new in the position as well, so we were all new, but we had a very good dean . . . a very supportive Dean and we supported each other as well, all the department heads . . . (Dr. Salem)

Colleagues/Faculty

Many of the participants also discussed how they developed as a leader through working closely with their colleagues/faculty members:

> But now I'm learning also by observing colleagues and how they react to some of the decisions that I make. And that was the biggest learning curve for me because we have 40 different faculty at different ranks and dealing with each one of them is different and sometimes I make mistakes and I learned from them, hopefully . . . (Dr Ahmad)

> I prefer to work with others. I also make it a point to move through the college in such a way that my peers and students can relate to me. You don't become a leader by isolating yourself in a room and shutting the door behind you. When I'm not in a meeting, I keep my door open as a matter of principle. (Dr Hanadi)

> I understand that a person should not describe himself as a leader, but rather should be described as such by others . . . (Dr Fazia)

> So the best part of academic leadership positions is my team, working with people. And I mean, it's like personal relationships. It's caring about each other. It's like the nice moment where I feel appreciation among my team members. And the worst thing . . . the worst feeling is when I feel that I could not support someone or I disappointed someone or. . . Anyway, I feel the best part of academic leadership positions is people, the team. Human connection. (Dr Anoud)

Influence of senior leaders

Others talked of how they were or are influenced by those in senior leadership positions within their institution:

> . . . the Assistant Dean position that I'm currently holding, the person who was in that position left to pursue her postgraduate studies, and then I remember the Dean came and he was asking me, What do you think about holding an admin position? And for me he was just wanting to see my perspective on this, because he saw I was working with another director and he saw how passionate I am about the work I do. And then when he came a week later, he said, How do you feel about becoming the assistant dean? And for me, it was an opportunity. . . (Dr Manal)

> I will never forget my Dean's advice to apply to the Leadership Center, which I did. There were difficult exams, but I passed all of them, and I finished the leadership course before being appointed as an Assistant Dean . . . I continued in that position for two years, and in 2020, they offered me the current position. (Dr Hind)

> . . . I have to say that the Dean at the time was like a role model for me. He was like a transformational leader. And I really liked his style and the way he dealt with challenges. So that played a big role in my own training. And this is why I believe role models are very important for anyone wanting to learn something . . . if in an institution or in a college or department you have role models, you will learn quicker and you will learn better, I believe. Then I have to give credit to . . . the first Dean who hired me because he was an inspiration for me. So I owe him much. Most of my success, I owe him to this person. He was amazing. (Dr Anoud)

Institutional dimension

Our analysis suggests that institutional dimensions of leadership development for our participants centred around the following themes, all interacting with the broader societal and cultural narratives within which the institution operates, namely the context of Qatar: strategy, gender, and professional development and training.

Strategy

The participants all discussed how they were able to engage with and influence the strategic vision within their working environments to a greater or lesser extent, and how this impacted on their leadership development, as highlighted in the following quotes:

> The first step was to just look at where the university is going … the overall strategy and then make sure we do everything aligned with that and support the university and of course, the college. So the main driver for the team is just to be able to do something that supports the college goals and strategy and support that … of course, in support of the overall university strategy. So it's aligning all strategies together, and I think this is the starting point. (Dr Wadha)

> I am able to engage with the strategic vision, but that's because I actively seek it out … I approached the dean and then the vice president, and I'm always asking, what are the initiatives? And I think of myself as a pretty proactive person. So for me to be happy in my job, I need to be doing new things. So I like to think about the strategy of the sector and of the university. And then I think … OK, what can I do to help achieve this? And then I approach them and say, Look, this is a current priority that we have as part of the vision or mission, and I was thinking we could do A, B or C to help achieve it. And that has led to a lot of other opportunities as well. But I feel like I do get to participate in developing the strategy of the planning office. But that's probably because I go after it. (Dr Ahmad)

Gender

In a country where there has been a lot of reported societal gender imbalances, it is unsurprising that gender was one of the key institutional themes that emerged from the data. However, what was interesting was that almost all female participants talked positively about their experiences at the case study university suggesting that this institutional context perhaps did not reflect the broader society in this area, as the following comments demonstrate:

> As a result of the university's efforts, female leaders have been given the chance to shine and flourish. The experience of women in leadership positions within departments is remarkable, since women have shown their worth in these positions. (Dr Hanadi)

> Believe it or not, being in here, usually you think we are in a male-oriented environment, and you hear women saying, Yeah, the men get away with it. But I have never felt it at this level at this university because when I first came in, women were leading the university and I never felt from my colleagues that being a woman I am less respected or less thought of. (Dr Lamia)

> Because I have spent my whole career here at this university, I can't speak for other universities. But we are lucky in the sense that we had a female president for a very long part of the case study university history, and she was a very strong role model. We have also currently two female vice presidents. And we have several female deans. So we're lucky here. And part of that might be the Qatar national vision for 2030 and the priority that they placed on women's empowerment and women in education. So at the national level, there is a lot of attention on raising women up. (Dr Rasha)

Professional development and training

All the middle leaders expressed their views about their experiences of professional development and leadership training at the case study university, or lack thereof, and what they felt would have been helpful for them when taking on their role:

> I didn't really have any kind of leadership training per se. I had the handover, you know, I prefer the term handover. I have also done a brief shadowing with the previous person who was holding this portfolio. But this position was totally new to me … I think with experience, I gained a lot with time. I gained a lot of experience. And I feel to be honest, with a leadership position or with an administrative position, the first maybe year or so you're trying to understand the system, you're trying to understand how things work … (Dr Manal)

> Of course, there is always room for improvement. I think at the university, it would be great if they prepared training sessions . . . not sessions but programs for leaders . . . touching upon the duties, communication, the core role of leadership and what is our mission in the university . . . But unfortunately, that wasn't there. I do believe if I had received some official training, probably I would have been much better today. (Dr Saud)

> I think it would be good for anyone who is to hold a leadership position to go through, let's say, a course of professional development on leadership. Of course, there are different styles of leadership. So it's not just styles that you want to follow, but also you will be dealing with other leaders and they will have different styles as well. So having an understanding of the different leadership styles, the main principles of leadership, and how to work with that. I think maybe having some kind of a course that people who are to go into leadership positions have to attend would have been quite useful. Also, from what I see sometimes, shadowing the previous person in that position … (Dr Manal)

> Prior to my appointment as a head of department, I wished I'd had formal training. However, my experience in the department and my involvement on multiple committees helped. (Dr Alia)

Implications

Figure 2 provides a conceptual framework for interpreting the leadership development experiences and needs of academic middle leaders in the case university within the specific cultural context of Qatar. While acknowledging that the results from this study are not generalisable, it is hoped that this model may have some transferability for researchers in other universities and contexts who might wish to replicate and develop this study. We also contend that our model provides an original framework for future academic leadership development programs to be built around. In general terms we propose that any leadership development programs need to be underpinned by more reflective approaches to leadership development (Franken et al., 2015; Kempster & Stewart, 2010) focusing on the key activities of relationship building and communication throughout all levels of the organisation (Fairhurst, 2008, 2009; Whittle et al., 2015; Wodak et al., 2011). Any programs should also acknowledge the role that academics not in formal leadership roles, such as lecturers and course leaders with no line management responsibilities, have in the departmental leadership process (Evans, 2021; Kliewer, 2019; Youngs, 2017). We suggest that from these foundations, such programs should include activities that link to the key inter-related and nested systems from our conceptual model, namely at the *intrapersonal* level academic middle leaders, who are under increasing internal and external accountability pressures (Bolden & Petrov, 2014; Smyth, 2017), need certain knowledge, skills and attitudes to be successful while also reflecting on areas such as their professional identity and values, prior experiences, and ongoing career

trajectories (Floyd & Dimmock, 2011; Floyd & Preston, 2019). This could involve carefully auditing current skills and experiences to allow for tailored and individualised support, alongside allowing leaders space and time to constantly reflect and share their experiences. At the same time, leaders should receive ongoing support on their career development and future career plans during their tenure. Programs should also acknowledge the complex *relational* systems that middle leaders need to negotiate, with collaboration and collective group processes and interactions being seen as central (Abdulla et al., 2022; Bolden et al., 2012, 2013; Skorobohacz et al., 2016). This suggests that work should be done to develop relationships and communication pathways for academics within and between departments, perhaps using regular informal and formal meetings and social events to help strengthen these. Previous work in the UK has shown the power of informal peer networks in this regard (Preston & Floyd, 2016). Finally, any programs need to reflect deep knowledge of the *institutional* system, where complex social, political and economic organisational systems interact with the broader societal and cultural narratives within which the institution operates (Dopson et al., 2019). Thus, leaders need to have time and support to fully understand the history and culture of the department and institution within which they are working, together with a sound understanding of the local and national cultures within which these operate. Such knowledge and understanding is becoming ever more important with an increasingly diverse international faculty working in progressively globalised environments.

Conclusions

This article set out to explore the key intrapersonal, relational, and institutional dimensions that contribute to leadership development for academic middle leaders in Qatar. By collecting and analysing data from hitherto unstudied participants in an under-researched cultural context and using a theoretical framework based on relational and cultural models of leadership development and integrated systems analysis using three inter-related levels, it provides a significant and original contribution to our knowledge in this area.

Although this research was undertaken in a different cultural context, it was surprising to note that the main 'big picture' issues related to leadership development remain fairly consistent with previous work in this area. This finding points to the fact that with globalisation and increasing internationalisation of the university sector, key common factors related to leadership development appear to be evident irrespective of national context, which has implications for policy, practice and future research. Specific issues did emerge linked to cultural context, for example in relation to gender, and these issues will be explored further in a planned future publication emanating from this project. The research team have also begun to test the reliability and validity of the proposed conceptual model on a larger sample size through the use of Q Methodology (see Chaaban et al., 2023)

As academic leadership development research and understanding continues to evolve and grow both in western and non-western contexts, it is hoped that future work recognises the complexity of the subject area, together with the understanding of the interplay and integration of the different levels and systems involved in successful academic middle leader development.

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