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Editorial

Rethinking academic leadership in medical education: From seniority to scholarship and capacity building

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With advances in health professions education, the competencies of academic leaders have evolved to become more complex.[1] Academic leaders can prioritize educational needs, train faculty accordingly, and create a conducive learning environment for students. However, leadership appointments are still based on service experience rather than leadership competencies in the majority of institutions, especially low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Although it is accepted that experience contributes to professional maturity and the attributes required for higher leadership positions, it does not necessarily reflect the skills and academic abilities that leaders are expected to demonstrate in modern medical education.[2]

Leadership in contemporary medical education requires far more than administrative tenure. The changing needs of today's health professions education environment are creating a critical need for better leadership. There is a growing body of research supporting the need for academic leaders to provide evidence-based educational programming, lead efforts in curriculum innovation, develop faculty members through professional development opportunities, encourage them to engage in scholarly activity, and effectively navigate an increasing number of regulatory and governance issues.[3] While many institutions rely upon seniority as a major factor when selecting their next academic leader, these institutions often overlook candidates who have demonstrated high levels of scholarly engagement, educational expertise, and innovative leadership capabilities.

Additionally, the global increase in the number of medical schools over the last twenty years underscores the need for academic leaders with a broad range of leadership competencies.[4] As more countries establish new medical schools, the issue of assuring consistency in medical school program quality across all programs will become an increasing concern. Therefore, academic leadership extends beyond one's disciplinary expertise and includes competencies in educational scholarship, curriculum governance, and institutional strategic planning.

Within this context, capacity building for academic leadership has become an essential priority. Leadership and governance skills can no longer be assumed to be acquired with years of experience. Instead, they can be developed by a structured plan for career advancement to ensure preparedness for advanced leadership positions. In the same context, faculty development initiatives play a key role in preparing educators for future leadership roles.[3] Effective developmental strategies include post-graduate qualifications in health profession education, leadership development programs, mentoring programs, and communities of practice.

As such, strengthening the leadership potential of academic staff will be insufficient if current regulatory frameworks remain in place. Regulatory frameworks that continue to define seniority as the primary criterion for selection into governance roles will limit other forms of academic work's ability to contribute to the development of academic leaders. Academic appointments (e.g., Department Chairs, Deans, Principals) are often based on criteria for an individual’s success as a faculty member, rather than their leadership aptitude or demonstrated abilities. As a result, there is a structural mismatch between what is needed to be an effective academic leader and how academic leaders are selected.

Recognizing scholarships as a core element of academic leadership is therefore essential. The emphasis on seniority in many academic systems' appointment criteria for Department Chairs, Deans, or

Principals limits the recognition of scholarly contributions, educational innovations, and/or research productivity.[5] If there are no changes to the current regulatory frameworks that support seniority as the primary route to governance opportunities, then building leadership capability will be insufficient. The disconnect between structural requirements and selection standards for competent academic leaders creates an imbalance in the requirements for effective academic leadership. Further developing a commitment to integrating scholarship into the processes of identifying, selecting, and developing future leaders supports the development of an institution's reputation and enhances its overall academic integrity.[6] The recognition of scholarly achievements as part of the governance of the institution sends a signal to all faculty and trainees in the institution that both excellence in scholarship and the pursuit of knowledge, through inquiry and intellectual curiosity, are valued in the organizational culture.[7] Such signals are essential for cultivating vibrant research environments and sustaining long-term academic growth.

Regulatory agencies and accreditation bodies will have to develop new governance models to guide the evolutionary process. The existing governance framework may be expanded to include leadership assessment criteria that are more equally weighted and inclusive of both research productivity and other academic-related criteria, such as education and leadership skills. In addition to these suggestions, an institution may encourage its faculty to develop formal programs to strengthen their ability to lead their colleagues. Developing such a program is often part of an institution's overall strategic plan for faculty development.[4] By using transparent selection methods and considering the candidate's scholarly record, their capacity for educational leadership, and their understanding of the institution's vision, it is possible to create governance structures that are based on the individual's ability and merit and not merely the length of time they have served at the institution.

To strengthen academic leadership, there is a need to transform current hierarchical promotion models into ones based on a combination of an individual's professional experience, scholarship, and leadership ability. Experience is still an important factor; however, it must now be considered alongside evidence of their active participation in academic life and their ability to lead effectively. The development of innovative educational environments, the maintenance of research productivity, and the ongoing responsiveness to the changing requirements of medical education can all be facilitated by institutions that adopt frameworks that balance these factors.[8] As medical education evolves, the need for well-educated academic leadership will increase. To that end, it is critical to develop and identify individuals with a scholarly reputation and the ability to lead institutions to foster educational excellence and to meet the broader goals of education in the health care profession. Providing opportunities to develop individuals' leadership capacity while recognizing scholarship as a fundamental element of governance can create a pathway to stronger, more innovative, and more academically vibrant medical institutions.

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