EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY: TOWARDS MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS FOR ACADEMIC LEADERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Purpose: The study aims to enrich the discourse surrounding the necessity of managerial education for academic leaders ascending to university senior and middle management positions, such as deans and associate deans. The paper builds on the studies by Preston and Price (2012) and Floyd (2016) who point out that there is often no formal training for academics in new leadership positions.

Design/methodology/approach: A qualitative case study, complemented by qualitative content analysis using a deductive approach, was applied to examine data from open-ended questionnaires filled out by participants of the "Deans Academy" managerial training program.

Findings: The study identifies the need for management training among deans and associate deans, guided by a feedback-driven approach. It also outlines key competencies and knowledge areas to be incorporated into development programs for academic leaders.

Research limitations/implications: The findings are not universally applicable to the educational needs of all deans or academic managers, given the small sample size, the project's online-only format, and the recruitment of participants from a single organization. For a broader understanding, further research is encouraged across different higher education institutions and varied managerial training programs.

Practical implications: This study provides valuable insights for developing training program curricula tailored for academics in managerial roles within higher education institutions.

Originality/value: The research adopts an innovative "expectations and reality" framework, rooted in Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), to generate detailed evidence for creating effective managerial training programs for executive roles in academia. The insights gained contribute to the current understanding of support and training needs for senior and middle managers in higher education. The findings are particularly relevant for educators, academics, and HR professionals in higher education involved in designing and implementing training programs aimed at enhancing managerial skills in academia.

Keywords: academic, dean, manager, higher education institution, training programs.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen higher education institutions globally reassessing their traditional management structures due to factors like globalization, mass migration, and marketization (Blaschke, Frost, Hattke, 2014). This shift towards a management style characterized by "managerialism" and less participatory approaches, away from a culture of consensus and shared values, reflects broader changes documented across the sector (Vaira, 2004; Seale, Cross, 2015; Mierzwa, Mierzwa, 2020).

Research suggests that strategic changes in universities hinge on leadership, decision-making, communication, and evaluation (Stensakeer et al., 2014). Academics face challenges with reduced autonomy and increased bureaucracy (Deem, 1998; Henkel, 2005; Kolsaker, 2008), balancing roles as "managed academics" and "academic managers" while aligning personal and organizational values (Winter, 2009). Managerialism often clashes with traditional academic values (Preston, Price, 2012).

This paper builds on the study by Preston and Price (2012) and Floyd (2016) who noted that academics often lack the necessary skills for management roles, highlighting the need for adequate support. They emphasize the importance of understanding these academics' experiences to design effective training programs. Their work indicates that recognizing the challenges faced by scholars moving into management can benefit both the individuals and higher education institutions. The concept of "middle-malmanagement" is introduced, referring to tenure-track faculty who transition into dean or associate dean roles (Preston, Price, 2012; Preston, Floyd, 2016; Floyd, 2016, among others).

Drawing on the empirical case study of the Deans Academy training program, this paper seeks to assess the educational needs and experiences of deans and associate deans, aiming to enhance their managerial competence. It explores the essential content and organizational framework of a managerial training program to ensure it meets these academic managers' needs. Additionally, the research evaluates the sufficiency of the Deans Academy program in fulfilling expectations and identifies any gaps, focusing on the specific knowledge and skills needed in executive training curricula for university academic managers.

At the same time, the study does not claim to provide an exhaustive review of the prospects of the complete curriculum of managerial training programs designed specifically for deans. However, it could shed new light on the managerial specifics that can enhance the capabilities of deans in their administrative duties.

The article is structured as follows: Section two outlines the systematic literature review on evolving role of deans as leaders, the impact of new managerialism in higher education, and development programs for middle-level academic managers. Section three details the methodology employed in the study. Section four presents the findings, emphasizing feedback from the Deans Academy participants. Section five delves into a discussion on the implications

of these results. The article culminates with conclusions, limitations, and suggestions for further research.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly interest in the complex roles of deans as middle managers within academic institutions is on the rise. To synthesize the current knowledge on this topic, we conduct a systematic literature review as recommended by Czakon (2011), Thomé, Scavarda, and Scavarda (2016), and Paul and Criado (2020), utilizing two major academic databases: Elsevier Scopus and Web of Science. This comprehensive procedure is further supplemented by the snowball sampling technique (Wohlin, 2014) through the Google Scholar database to identify and highlight key research themes. These themes include the evolving role of deans as leaders, the impact of new managerialism in higher education on deanship, and the pressing need for specialized training and development programs for middle-level academic managers.

2.1. Deanship in the context of managerialism

Since the 1980s, neoliberal policies and new public management (NPM) have notably reshaped universities (Meek, Goedegebuure, De Boer, 2010; Alajoutsijärvi, Kettunen, 2016), introducing "new managerialism" which borrows practices and values from the private sector (Deem, 1998; Fanghanel, 2011; Kinman, 2014). This shift, critiqued for increasing bureaucracy and emphasizing market values over academic principles, remains ambiguous in its institutional impact (McKenna, 2020). Slaughter and Rhoades (2009) describe this as "academic capitalism," suggesting that universities benefit from incorporating business operational strategies, despite the controversies surrounding the prioritization of market logic.

On a practical level, the drive towards corporatization in the university sector has heightened cost awareness and financial valuation of research and education (Blaschke, Frost, Hattke, 2014). This shift urges universities to adopt an entrepreneurial strategy, seeking financial autonomy and encouraging innovation while navigating the midst of performance evaluations by external regulators (Meek, Goedegebuure, De Boer, 2010; Martin-Sardesai, 2016; Bezanilla et al., 2020).

However, the transition from a "collegial" to a "managerial" model in higher education is more complex and less absolute than often assumed (Meek, Goedegebuure, De Boer, 2010). Universities continuously adapt their management approaches amid the ongoing interplay between these two models, with neither establishing clear supremacy (Santiago et al., 2006). Leadership, governance, and management practices in universities can coexist harmoniously (Blaschke, Frost, Hattke, 2014), indicating that managerialism doesn't outright displace

collegialism. Instead, organizational change in universities represents a dynamic balance between these frameworks. Research and teaching, the core functions of academia, maintain considerable autonomy, showing that university activities remain largely self-governing despite growing managerial and regulatory influences (Blaschke, Frost, Hattke, 2014; Floyd, Preston, 2018). Furthermore, there's a consensus in scholarly work on the primary duties of academic deans, which include strategic and operational management, resource distribution, support services, human resources, oversight of teaching and research initiatives, student engagement, and managing external relationships (Meek, Goedegebuure, De Boer, 2010).

Nonetheless, the global shift towards managerialism in universities signifies a profound change in leadership and management within the higher education sector (McKenna, 2020; Heffernan, 2022). Deans, bridging university administration and academia, navigate the difficult balance between managerial and academic demands, facing multifaceted and often conflicting challenges (Gallos, 2002; Thian, Alam, Idris, 2016). Some of them even see their work as being financial managers and leave their traditional role of leading the faculty's research and teaching direction to those below them (Heffernan, 2022). Deans aim to manage these tensions and adapt into academic entrepreneurs with hybrid roles, thriving amidst systemic paradoxes (Bezanilla et al., 2020; Seale, 2021; Guyottot, Thelisson, 2023). Furthermore, the corporatization trend has segmented higher education into three models: traditional research, academic capitalist, and corporate universities (Alajoutsijärvi, Kettunen, 2016).

2.2. Leadership - navigating challenges

Deans are pivotal in leadership (Maddock, 2023), yet their role has evolved into a more complex one in recent years (Seale, Cross, 2016; Seale, 2021). Once primarily seen as academic leaders within their disciplines (Mandzuk, 2024), they now need skills in human resources, stakeholder relations, and financial management (Coates et al., 2010), reflecting their broader and more intricate responsibilities, including institutional leadership (Ruan, Cai, Stensaker, 2024). Today's deans face the challenge of balancing demands from university management, partners, stakeholders, and their academic and administrative teams (Mandzuk, 2015; Hasinoff, Mandzuk, 2018).

At the same time, deans increasingly struggle to balance managerial and academic values, essential for their effectiveness (Thian, Alam, Idris, 2016). Research shows a surge in negative workplace behaviors in higher education, attributed to a managerial shift and appointing deans with management backgrounds while sidelining their research accomplishments (Heffernan, 2021; Heffernan, Bosetti, 2023). Leadership effectiveness in higher education sector depends significantly on the leader's acceptance by their team (Hassan, Gallear, Sivarajah, 2018).

Research also indicates that deans' personal characteristics influence their managerial roles. Variations in age, sex, educational background, and tenure result in distinct approaches to utilizing financial and non-financial performance measures and management control systems (MCS) (Bobe, Kober, 2020). Older female deans with longer academic tenures tend to favor non-financial performance measures more than their younger, male counterparts with shorter academic careers. Male and female professors appear to be equally recommended for deanships based on their prior administrative experience. However, Henningsen, Eagly, Jonas (2022) demonstrated that for women, the appeal of deanships is influenced by the presence of more female deans and the endorsement of communal goals, such as community service. Conversely, for men, the appeal is associated with achievement-oriented goals, like receiving recognition, which drives their ambition to pursue these positions. Job satisfaction is a critical factor for deans remaining in their roles, particularly when they receive support to implement and sustain change, feel trusted to lead effectively, and enjoy camaraderie (Wepner, Henk, 2020).

2.3. Support and (lack of) training

Research on support for academic middle managers is surprisingly scarce, as Floyd (2016) notes. Literature indicates that many deans have little to no leadership training before starting their roles (Wolverton et al., 2001; Carroll, Wolverton, 2004; Hecht, 2004; Morris, Laipple, 2015). Most deans rely on informal mentoring, with many feeling unprepared for their leadership duties, lacking prior training or administrative experience, and not fully understanding their complex roles (Morris, Laipple, 2015; Seale, 2016).

At the same time, deans often perceive their managerial skills as strong, despite lacking prior experience or formal training (Vieira da Motta, Bolan, 2008). Those with education in business administration, human resources, organizational behavior or psychology feel better prepared for their roles than deans without such backgrounds (Morris, Laipple, 2015). Given this gap, Floyd (2016) underscores the critical need for customized training programs that cater to specific departmental needs, highlighting that without structured training and development, academic leaders' effectiveness is uncertain (Morris, Laipple, 2015).

The rise of managerialism has made dean roles more numerous, complex, and crucial (Preston, Price, 2012; Preston, Floyd, 2016). Yet, Hecht (2004) notes, many department heads acquire their skills through on-the-job experience and self-education. Deans often rely on their past administrative roles and interactions with faculty leaders to grasp their duties (Del Favero, 2006). Preston and Floyd (2016) note that 60% of associate deans have little to no formal management training, with 24% of those trained deeming it moderately useful or ineffective. The development of informal learning and support networks among associate deans has become an essential support system.

Drawing upon the findings of the literature review, this study seeks to explore the training requirements and experiences of deans and associate deans in the Deans Academy managerial program, aiming to fill identified gaps. We pose the following research questions: What specific training needs and expectations do newly appointed deans and associate deans have to effectively manage their departments? And what essential knowledge and skills should a managerial training program include to equip deans with crucial management capabilities? Investigating these queries will improve our understanding of how to create impactful, customized training programs for academic leaders.

3.   Methodology

Based on the questions arising from the literature review, it has been hypothesized that todays' university deans and associate deans primarily require general managerial skills and tools for effective faculty management. Given that cultivating these managerial competencies involves a nuanced process of personalized learning support (Burgoyne, Hirsh, Williams, 2004), there are certain key areas of knowledge and skills that need to be targeted and integrated into the curricula of executive training programs for senior academic leaders.

3.1. Case Study and Sample

This study adopts a qualitative case study method, following Harrison et al. (2017), focusing on a prominent public university in Poland. This institution has about 8,000 staff (academic and administrative) and 35,000 students, with 25 faculties and over 30 research units.

The research involves a diverse group of n = 54 respondents from various faculties, including n = 25 deans and n = 29 associate deans who attended the Deans Academy from 2020 to 2022, offered by the university. The group was 57% male and 43% female, spanning a broad spectrum of academic ranks from assistant to full professors, representing every university department. The sample offers a diverse representation of the university's top leadership positions, encompassing a wide range of experiences across gender, academic rank, senior administrative roles, and various university departments. Despite some limitations related to potential selection bias and the exclusive focus on deans and associate deans, the sample's diversity and balance provide a solid foundation for qualitative insights.

The Deans Academy's first edition for deans, running from November 2020 to June 2021, offered 100 hours of online instruction over nine modules in eight months. The second edition for associate deans, from April 2021 to April 2022, included 20 online sessions totaling 80 hours. Both editions' curricula were inspired by Executive MBA programs, covering topics from university governance laws and finances to team management and leadership.

The program aimed to strengthen university leadership by aligning the roles of deans and associate deans with the strategic objectives of the institution, and the efficacious management of their respective academic units.

Throughout the Deans Academy, participants were consistently invited to partake in surveys, from the program's start to its end. These surveys aimed to capture participants' self-assessments of their competencies across the program's knowledge areas, identify where their skills could be enhanced, and evaluate the individual sessions, modules, and the overall program. The collected feedback offers a detailed insight into the participants' experiences, underlining the program's strengths, areas needing enhancement, and directions for future growth. This feedback encompasses evaluations of the program's content, delivery, organization, and identified training needs for the future.

3.2. Methods

This study employs a unique approach inspired by Experiential Learning Theory (ELT; Kolb, 1984; Kolb, Kolb, 2005), using an "expectations versus reality" framework to gather detailed evidence from the case study. This evidence is crucial for shaping future managerial training programs for academia's executive roles. At its core, the method emphasizes experiential learning, especially the contrast between anticipated learning process and actual experiences. Deans Academy participants first outlined their expectations in a pre-program online open-ended survey and later provided feedback on their experiences and re-participation potential through a post-program questionnaire. This comprehensive textual data collection enables a deep dive into how educational expectations align with the realities of academic leadership training.

Qualitative methods were employed for the analysis of these textual data as a small sample size did not support quantitative methods. However, the textual data obtained from the open-ended questionnaires proved to be substantial, encompassing 102312 characters across 14616 words. The study utilizes qualitative content analysis to summarize and thematically cluster these data for subsequent analysis (Forman, Damschroder, 2007), while adopting a deductive approach (Elo, Kyngäs, 2008). A triangulation approach was also employed to capture data, add perspective, and enhance reflexivity, rather than to establish validity (Cox, Hassard, 2005).

4. Results

4.1. Expectations – before the program's start

Prior to the commencement of both iterations of the Deans Academy, participants were invited to share their views through an open-ended questionnaire on the areas of knowledge, skills, and competencies they believed should be incorporated into the Academy's curriculum. The selection of topics was initially guided by the program organizers, drawing from the Executive MBA program at the University, which encompasses finance management, legal aspects, leadership, project management, operational management, and strategic management. Nonetheless, participants were also encouraged to suggest any additional topics they considered essential for inclusion in the academy's curriculum. The results have been clustered into several broad themes reflecting the respondents' main concerns and areas of interest as shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Summary of areas of interest indicated by the respondents to be included in the training program before its start

Themes	Subthemes	Respondents' focus
1. Legal and Regulatory Compliance	Legal aspects of university functioning, employment and labor law, finance, and contract management, legal framework and compliance, rights and protections, organizational structure, contracts and procurement	Governance, administrative authority, employment matters, public procurement, legal bases for relationships, rights and protections, organizational changes, and legal support in contract development
2. Financial Management	Financial aspects, budget planning and allocation, grant and research financing, financial management and strategy, costs and expenditures, taxation and VAT issues, infrastructure and IT	Budget management, funding for research, financial policies, spending rules, investment planning, VAT management, and financial procedures for IT infrastructure
3. Organizational Development and Strategy	Strategy in higher education management, leadership styles and the role of a leader, project management, managing research and teaching activities, process management	Strategic alignment, implementation, leadership, project and process management, administrative support for research and teaching, competency and authority distribution
4. Human Resources and Employment Practices	Legal aspects of employment, employment procedures and conditions, contract types and employment rights, evaluation and development, foreign employment and internationalization, inclusion and equality	Employment practices, conditions, rights, staff evaluation and development, international employment, legal compliance in human resources, creating inclusive environments, ensuring parity, conflict management and support

Cont. table 1.

5. Leadership and the role of a leader	Leadership styles, decision-making, team dynamics, conflict resolution, employee engagement, talent management	Leadership styles, decision-making dynamics, leadership in crisis situations, the roles of deans in competency delegation, task delegation, effective team communication, feedback processes, motivating, fostering individual talent, managing internal competition
6. Quality and Academic Excellence	Managing research and teaching activities, quality management	Administrative support, quality evaluation of education and programs, development of study programs, inter-unit collaboration for enhancing teaching and research quality
7. Communication, Promotion, and Internationalization	Communication, promotion, and international cooperation	University branding, promotional strategies, international cooperation, accreditation processes, open science, and digital presence
8. Innovation and Process Management	Process management, public procurement	Managing university units, adapting to change, procurement procedures, fostering innovation through effective communication and trust-building

Source: Own elaboration.

4.2. Reality – after the program's completion

Following each module of the Deans Academy, participants were invited to complete an online survey to share their feedback on the classes and topics covered. These surveys allowed them to highlight the most engaging and beneficial aspects of the training module, offer comments, and recommend any modifications. Upon the program's conclusion, participants were once again solicited for their insights, specifically regarding which topics they deemed most valuable, any subjects they felt were absent from the academy's curriculum but should have been included, and what future training programs they would be interested in attending. To analyze the results, we have grouped them into thematic clusters based on their content. The summarized responses are presented in Tables 2, and Table 3.

Table 2.
Most interesting and useful topics according to respondents after completion of the program

Theme	Topics
1. Legal and Regulatory Compliance	Legal aspects of university functioning and structure, practical issues related to labor law and employment procedures, conflict resolution, equality issues and role of the Academic Ombudsman
2. Financial Management	Financial and economic aspects of university functioning, budget distribution, accounting issues, strategic planning of university resources, Financial aspects, and public procurement
3. Organizational Development and Strategy	Overall strategy of the university, including design, implementation, and management at various levels, strategic planning, and cooperation across different university units
4. Human Resources and Employment Practices	Staff management, employment matters, promotion and evaluation, practical application of labor law, resolving conflicts, managing responsibilities

Cont. table 2.

5. Leadership and the role of a leader	Leadership styles, the role of a leader, conflict resolution, decision-making in crisis situations, mentoring and coaching, leadership and balance between individual decision-making and collegiality
6. Quality and Academic Excellence	Quality of scientific activities and teaching, evaluation, role of leaders in fostering an environment of excellence
7. Communication, Promotion, and Internationalization	Communication styles, international cooperation, promotion strategies publication strategies and dissemination of research results
8. Innovation and Process Management	Process management, project management, public procurement procedures, science management, International cooperation, research commercialization

Source: Own elaboration.

Feedback regarding the satisfaction of participants with Deans Academy program, as depicted in Figure 1, indicates a largely positive reception. A significant majority of participants confirmed that the program fulfilled their expectations and expressed their willingness to recommend participation to others.

Table 3.
Topics that were not included in the program but should have been, according to respondents

| Theme	Topics
1. Financial and Legal Management	More on strategy of financial remuneration for employees, more financial-legal aspects, funding science
2. Organizational Structure and Administration	Competencies and responsibilities of central administration offices, functioning of the central administration and division of responsibilities, document circulation at the university
3. Leadership and Management Strategies	Succession planning, managing large budgets akin to managing a large company, personnel policy, long-term employment strategies
4. Policy and Strategy Development	Positioning and international and national strategy of the university, discrepancies between strategies and reality, university global rankings and strategies for improvement
5. Compliance and Regulations	Personal data protection and GDPR, procedures for insubordination
6. Training and Development	Specific IT system training, workshop for managing multiple duties
7. Human Resources Management	Rules for managing personnel to improve work quality, effective leadership of various types of commissions
8. Infrastructure and Workspace Quality	Improving workspace quality and creating conducive facilities
9. Academic and Educational Management	Boundary between didactics and management of didactics, more on assessments and accreditations
10. Collaboration and Communication	Cooperation with the various stakeholders, collaboration between the university units
11. Science and Research Management	Strengths and weaknesses of the adopted model of managing Polish science, management of the university in the context of other universities and the organization of science in the country

Source: Own elaboration.
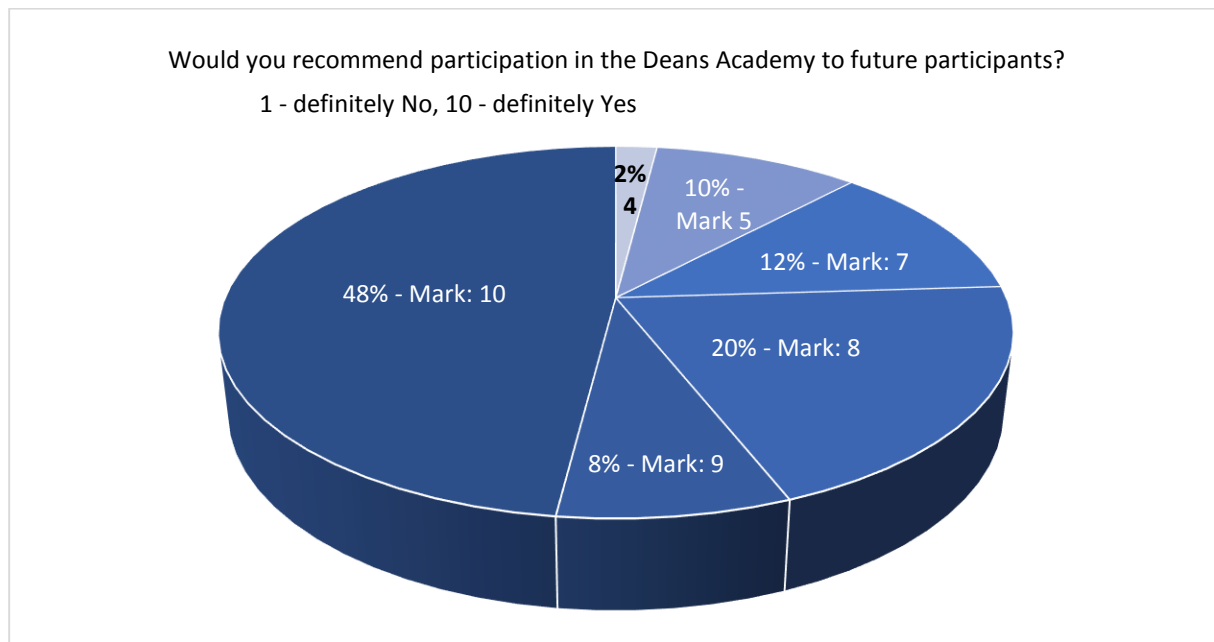
Figure 1. Recommendations of the Deans' Academy program by its participants.
Source: Own elaboration.

5. Discussion

The Deans Academy program research summarizes participant experiences, highlighting its strengths and areas for improvement. It spans the program's content, delivery, and structure, revealing important facets of dean training and pinpointing curriculum support for their roles.

5.1. Expectations expressed

Before the program start, participants in the Deans Academy expressed a variety of training needs and expectations focusing on key areas such as legal aspects, governance, and financial management. A pronounced interest in understanding the legal and procedural nuances of employing both academic and administrative staff is evident. The need for financial acumen is broadly emphasized, with participants seeking knowledge on budget planning, grant management, and navigating the intricacies of public procurement which relates to the trend of corporatization within the university sector, along with assessing the value of research and education in financial terms (Blaschke, Frost, Hattke, 2014; McKenna, 2020).

Furthermore, participants call for practical strategies in strategic planning and process management, echoing Meek, Goedegebuure, and De Boer's (2010) observations, with a focus on technology to enhance efficiency, communication, and transparency. There is a strong demand for IT training, digital strategies, and project management to meet the university's goals. Interest also extends to commercializing research, strategic partnerships, brand

protection, promoting science, and societal engagement, highlighting the university's role in innovation and public discourse.

Simultaneously, the feedback highlights a demand for customized training, as advocated by Floyd (2016), aimed at developing adaptable, communicative leaders capable of motivating their teams and fostering an inclusive, efficient academic environment, as recommended by Maddock (2023). Additionally, there is a spotlight on the necessity for conflict resolution training, underscoring the importance of acquiring skills to navigate diverse interpersonal challenges.

In summary, respondents advocate for a comprehensive, tailored training program that is vital for addressing the diverse challenges and seizing opportunities in their positions. Following the recommendations of Martin-Sardesai (2016) and Bezanilla et al. (2020), they call for resources to adeptly lead their faculties, while nurturing a culture of respect, inclusivity, and entrepreneurship.

5.2. Promises kept

Positive feedback on the Deans Academy's content and structure underscores its effectiveness in meeting participants' needs and expectations. The value placed on integration and networking underlines the significance of both educational and social elements in these initiatives. Preston and Floyd (2016) stress the importance of social aspects, noting that relationship-building and social learning provide a novel approach to management development, particularly beneficial for supporting academic middle managers.

Feedback indicates a strong emphasis on financial management and economics in the curriculum, with participants valuing insights into budgeting, planning, and resource allocation for financial sustainability and strategic decisions. Additionally, there's appreciation for coverage of legal and compliance aspects, including university governance, labor law, and employment procedures.

Leadership emerged as a key theme in the feedback, with participants valuing insights on leadership styles, the role of a leader, conflict resolution, and balancing individual decision-making and collegiality. This reflects an awareness of the intricate challenges in university leadership and a desire for effective tools and strategies to navigate these, as noted by Maddock (2023). Human resources and employment practices were emphasized, focusing on fostering inclusive and productive work environments. Participants showed interest in talent management, evaluations, labor law application, conflict resolution, and task management. The significance of conflict resolution and mediation underscored the need for interpersonal skills in dispute management and collaboration, mirroring how deans navigate complex work tensions, as studied by Guyottot and Thelisson (2023).

The program's comprehensive scope shows a keen interest in holistic development suited to the complex needs of university management across various academic disciplines. This approach is supported by research, such as Del Favero (2006), emphasizing the importance of discipline nuances in leadership training. Customized training addressing these varied themes could greatly enhance academic leaders' effectiveness and readiness for the challenges of executive management, as discussed by Gallos (2002) and Seale (2021).

5.3. Lessons learned

Respondents advocate for a more interactive and practical program, customized to the varied needs and preferences of participants, aligning with Floyd's (2016) recommendations. They emphasize the importance of advancing personal and technical skills, as Preston and Price (2012) suggested. The feedback identifies key areas for enriching the Deans Academy curriculum, including a deeper focus on financial and legal matters like budget management and employment, as well as a call for greater understanding of organizational structures and administrative procedures.

Responses also emphasize a need for enhanced leadership strategies, particularly in succession planning, and call for more specialized training opportunities like IT system workshops and managing multiple responsibilities. It advocates for a comprehensive and nuanced examination of deans' challenges and duties, with a strong focus on practical skills, and both strategic and operational knowledge. Participants appreciate content directly relevant to their roles, stressing the importance of a curriculum that merges practical assignments with applicable case studies. Filling these gaps could significantly increase the Deans Academy program's value and relevance.

Organizationally, the preference for a hybrid format indicates that, although remote learning offers effectiveness and convenience, the importance of in-person interactions is acknowledged, particularly for networking and honing soft skills within the program.

Implementing the recommendations from the Deans Academy participants can enhance the program and its structure, while also offering valuable lessons for designing future executive training programs targeted at mid-level academic managers.

6. Conclusion

The shift towards managerialism in universities, transitioning from academic-centric governance to corporate and market-driven models (Deem, 1998; Fanghanel, 2011; Kinman, 2014; McKenna, 2020), highlights the importance of managerial training for deans and associate deans. This change, reflecting the need to meet evolving expectations, makes

managing their complex roles more challenging, especially given recent societal and institutional changes (Maddock, 2023; Mandzuk, 2024).

Designing a bespoke executive program for university deans requires a tailored approach to meet the unique challenges and responsibilities of their roles. The Deans Academy stands out as an innovative solution, crafted from participant feedback before, during, and after the program. This feedback-driven approach highlights the program's effectiveness in fostering participant growth and informs ongoing and future curriculum enhancements. It stresses the significance of interactive, experiential learning, the benefits of direct engagement, and the necessity of regular updates to address the evolving needs of academic leadership. Concentrating on these aspects can make managerial training for the academic sector more effective, ensuring leaders are well-equipped to tackle higher education challenges. Crucially, foundational training should be offered to deans or associate deans before they take on their roles, providing insights into the demands they will face, informed by the experiences of current or former position holders, as recommended by Preston and Floyd (2016).

The study recognizes that its findings are not universally applicable across all higher education institutions, constrained by limitations such as a small sample size, the online-only format of the training program, and participant selection from a single organization. There is a need for additional research that includes a broader spectrum of higher education institutions and various managerial training programs, to identify the most effective design and implementation strategies for executive training programs for academic leaders. Despite these limitations, the insights gained from this study offer valuable guidance for managerial training providers throughout the university sector.

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