Human Resource Management and Development in the light of Leadership in two Austrian Higher Education Institutions

An Empirical Study

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Abstract

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The core idea of this research was to explore the perception of manager-academics with reference to their required skills and professional expertise. Of specific interest to our purposes are the ways in which leadership styles and approaches are applied at two Austrian HEIs. Since skills are a key component of manager-academics in higher education to assume leadership, this research study is concerned with investigating and illustrating perceived roles and skills essential in higher education leadership. Thus, a qualitative empirical study was conducted to explore how leadership at two HEIs in Austria is performed in the light of contemporary challenges present in the European higher education landscape. There is evidence to suggest that HE manager-academics face multi-faceted requirements and that a distributed leadership approach contributes to successful leadership on personal and organisational level. Further, overriding significance of a specific set of values referring to leadership was revealed.

Presentation

1. Introduction and Background

Nickel (2011) analysed the institutional tasks of the Austrian university landscape by providing a detailed account of the development of governance structures of universities and universities of applied sciences (UAS). Nickel (2011) found that *universities* have to compete for resources, staff and reputation with national and international scientific institutions. Furthermore, there is a change in internal hierarchy and steering-mechanism characterised by an empowerment of university management. Against this backdrop, management tools are increasingly employed to influence the activities of university members and to foster successful institutional positioning. Examples for these tools are target agreements, incentive`schemes, performance-related resource allocation and procedures for controlling, quality management, human resource management (henceforth HRM) and marketing. At the younger *UAS sector* hierarchical steering and market-orientation/competiveness have been prevalent from the beginning. Similar to universities, faculty/academics of UAS are self-organised yet to a lesser extent and they have self-governing bodies too. Given the legal structure (see table 1 below) the president and administration bodies have always been powerful entities with management functions.

The highly dynamic higher education reforms of the previous decades caused serious changes in higher education institutes (henceforth HEIs). In line with alterations in the study structure (Bologna), the funding of research, the labour regulatory frameworks and the reporting systems, associated with an increased competition in higher education and science, the internal governance mechanism changed perceptibly. This led to a greater application of management business concepts in HEIs and a rising responsibility of academics for management tasks (e.g. financial management, acquisition and third-party funds or leadership of research teams) (Nickel 2011).

However, empirical studies suggest that the implementation of these concepts does not necessarily lead to the expected positive results (Tahar et al. 2011), especially if allowance for the particular organisational nature of HEIs is not granted (Musselin 2007). In due consideration of these observations, the question arises how manager-academics (Deem & Brehony 2005) perceive the changes and challenges of higher education management and leadership and how they cope with them. According to Deem and Brehony (2005) the term manager-academic refers to "academics who take on management roles in higher education institutions, whether temporarily or permanently" (Deem & Brehony 2005, p.232).

For this reason, a comprehensive empirical investigation was carried out at two HEIs in Upper Austria, namely the University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria (UAS UA) and the Johannes Kepler University Linz (JKU), with the overall objective to derive crucial competencies and skills essential for manager-academics. The term "manager-academics" refers to heads of institutes (JKU) and heads of study programmes (UAS UA) in this study. The findings of this research contribute to HRM (recruiting policies and staff development) and organisational development insofar as they allow designing appropriate leading positions, organisational structures and processes for initiating change in HEIs.

The HEI`s contrasting background with regard to historical and legislative characteristics enriches the comparative empirical study:

	JKU	UAS UA
Year of foundation	1966	1993
Student Intake	18,845 (28/02/2014)	4,778 (15/11/2013)
Graduates	acad. year 12/13: 1,581	acad. year 12/13: 1,488
Personnel (headcount)	2,672 (31/12/2013)	acad. year 12/13: 2,294
Form of organisation	public	private (public

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		shareholder)
Restricted admission	partially	yes
Principles of teaching	previous vocational career	scientifically sound vocational career with research-oriented and practical elements
Degrees (Bologna)	Bachelor	Bachelor
	Master	Master
	PhD	
Research	basic research	
	applied research	applied research
	cooperative research	cooperative research
	development, prototyping, innovation	development, prototyping, innovation
Promotion of research associates as legal mandate	yes	no
Management	rectorate	managing director
Responsible Bodies/Authorities	rectorate (profiling), academic senate, university council, heads of faculties, heads of institutes	steering board, academic board, faculty boards, deans board
Legal directive	basic research translates into teaching, bottom-up	(basic and) applied research in line with industrial requirements, top down
Funding / financing	global budgets	subsidies in line with students intake

Table 1: Comparison of the two investigated Austrian HEIs
(Sources: www.jku.at, www.fhooe.at, Datawarehouse Austrian Higher Education Sector, Pichl, E. (2012))

2. Methodology and Research Design

2.1. Purpose and aim
This research is aimed at gaining insight into current practices and perceptions of leadership approaches, roles and skills of manager-academics considering at two Austrian HEIs. By taking as a base understanding a development of human resource and organisational development concepts, a particular focus was placed on subjective perceptions, reflections and interpretations of the interviewed manager-academics. Further, it was sought for both common ground and areas of difference within the two HEIs in terms of tasks and leadership related activities.

The research questions were:
1) How do manager-academics perceive their key roles and tasks in higher education and what is their underlying understanding of leadership?
2) Which set of competencies is required for professional higher education management to assume leadership?

2.2 Methodology and method
An explorative qualitative approach (Bryman 2012) was taken with the intention of gaining in-depth knowledge of the current higher education landscape as perceived by the participants of the examined

social world. For this purpose, 42 in-depth semi-structured face-to face interviews were conducted with manager-academics from both institutions, UAS UA (24 interviews with heads of study programmes) and JKU (18 interviews with heads of institutes). The field research was performed during July 2012 and March 2013. The individual interviews lasted between 30 to 90 minutes each and were conducted in accordance with an interview guideline consisting of the main topics and some predefined questions.

Informants were selected using a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton 2002) to reach comparability in terms of leading positions, scientific disciplines (hard and soft sciences) and gender in both HEIs. Data analysis of the written interview transcriptions was based on the methodological approach of the qualitative content analysis introduced by Gläser/Laudel (2010) with support of the software package MAXQDA. To achieve investigator triangulation, data analysis and interpretation were jointly performed by the research team.

3. Main Findings

3.1 Key tasks
The interviews revealed a high variety of functions taken on by heads of institutes (JKU) and heads of study programmes (UAS UA). They range from strategic to operative duties and are both externally or internally orientated.
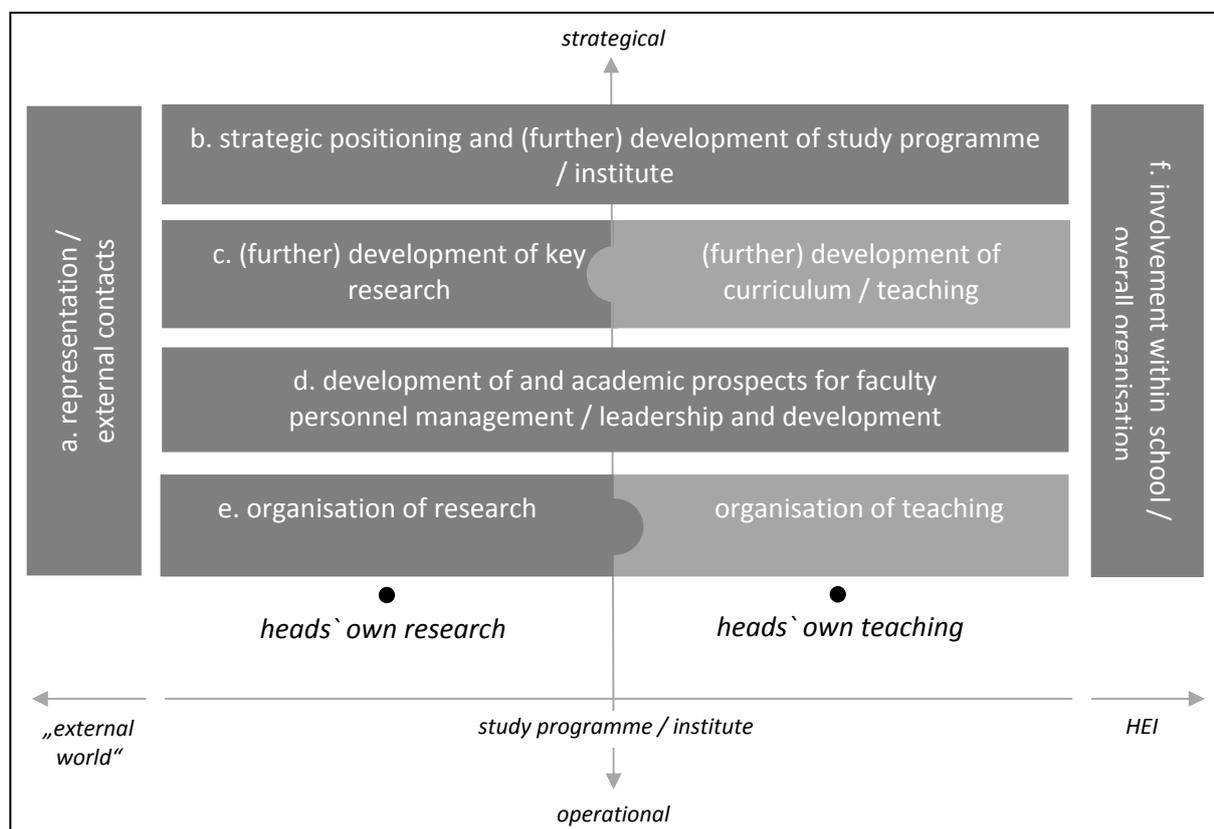

Figure 1: Key roles and tasks of heads of institutes / heads of study programmes[1]
Please find below a structured elaboration of figure 1:

a.   Representation / external contacts

Although this study revealed that manager-academics from both HEIs have to assume representative tasks and establish external contacts, the market-driven agenda and student-centred and service-oriented approach is particularly striking at the UAS UA. The three referred external stakeholders are

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prospective students, industry / vocational field and other universities / scientific community. Moreover, manager-academics highlight the increasing importance of marketing activities and require (further) support from specialised (centralised) departments and experts.

b. Strategic positioning and (further) development of study programme / institute

Common ground identified between these two HEIs is the different roles of manager-academics. Even though some heads of institutes state basic teaching objectives, their perception of tasks is primarily operative. In contrast, when it comes to research, they report a high degree of autonomy for strategic positioning of the institute in the field of research, as the vignette shows:

"[...] as head of institute [...] in teaching you are rather an employee, who carries out some duty, whereas in research you actually have to run the institute like a company." (A16, 36-36) (translated by the authors)

The most common strategic consideration at JKU concerns striking a *balance between basic and applied research*. The informants perceive an area of tension regarding the indispensability of third-party funded research to secure financial and personnel resources on the one hand, and raising dependence from industry-driven target and short-term orientation on the other hand, that contradict the less schedulable character of science. Further they face discrepancy between the high requirements for publication (top journals, etc.) and industrial demands at the university.

In contrast, heads of study programmes at the UAS UA see the strategic positioning and (further) development of the study programme relating to both, teaching and research. In the field of teaching they concentrate on objectives like high graduate employability by offering interesting key course elements, a high level of internationalisation, etc. In the field of research the question is not whether to conduct basic or applied research, but the general commitment to undertaking research within the study programme as such. Informants state a high diversification of highly research and highly teaching orientated study programmes within the UAS UA.

c. Further development of research and teaching

As expected, the objectives in research and teaching seem to be derived from the strategic positioning of the study programmes/institutes. The heads of study programmes are responsible for the curriculum of each course and therefore promote its content-related and didactical development. They point to three different responsibilities:
- to orientate the content of teaching towards the practice-oriented industrial demands
- to ensure/improve quality of the study programme for students and
- to stimulate a better integration of teaching and research.

Once more these findings bring the high market- and student-orientation of UAS UA to the fore. Heads of study programmes get inputs from industry, alumni, teachers and lecturers and study programme related research activities. For the progression of curriculum development, it is most crucial to focus on long-term outcomes, as changes tend to unfold their effects only after a certain time span. However, industrial demands are usually short term focused and thus appear to contradict the initial job profile for a study programme.

Although developments of research and teaching are described less extensively at JKU, findings point to an increasing importance of student-orientation. The related statements range from a clear approval of the perception of students as costumers to expression of astonishment about the increasing expectations from students.

d. Development of and academic prospects for faculty

Manager-academics are responsible for the career prospects of faculty. Undoubtedly, leadership and personnel management are key tasks. Please find the elaboration of this topic in section 3.3..

e. Organisation of studies and research

Manager-academics of both HEIs pointed to equal tasks in *operational management of research*, which basically range from the acquisition of research projects to supervising and counselling as well as exploitation of research results. Furthermore, they are responsible for allocation of disposable funds. However, JKU managers critically comment on the increasing intervention of the university management. Informants are involved in research projects on a regular basis, be it as researchers or project coordinators although this task constantly diminished due to management responsibilities.

Organisation of studies shows some major distinctions between the two HEIs. Even heads of institutes mentioned operative tasks in the field of teaching, their statements are not comparable to the range and prioritisation of such tasks for the heads of study programmes. First, UAS does not receive a global budget from the ministry, but gets financial funding for every individual student. Therefore, filling the student intake is essential for getting financial resources and searching for and selection of prospective students is a key task. Second, heads of study programmes see the high teaching and student orientation as one of the main USP of UAS UA.

f. Involvement within school /overall organisation

In both HEIs, the interviewees take on tasks within the faculty and overall organisation and/or are part of responsible bodies (see table 1). However, the interviews show that there is a high individual variance in that involvement.

3.2. Role perception and conflicts

Manager-academics assume a wide range of functions (strategic/operative, internal/external). However, informants point to a certain flexibility on how to fulfil one's role. Especially at UAS UA heads of study programmes highlighted this perception as positive and motivating, although it can also lead to some insecurity.

The main *role conflict* at both HEIs results from the fact that manager-academics are researchers and teachers, additionally to holding a leadership position. Hence, the different roles are in competition with each other, especially in terms of time resources. Further, primarily the respondents from JKU stated that taking over a management position within university is not desirable for research associates, since it is though that such an effort would be at the expense of scientific productivity. Consequently, it appears problematic because scientific performance is still the key factor for successful academic career.

3.3. A value based connotation of cooperative leadership

Findings reveal that the most frequently applied leadership style in both HEIs is cooperative leadership. This result is in line with the latest literature postulating that distributed/dispersed leadership seems to meet the demands of both, adaptability and flexibility of HEIs (Bolden et al. 2008; Jones et al. 2012). Hence, emphasis is placed on consensus-orientation and a joint process of defining the strategy or in other words *"developing the big picture jointly" (translated by the authors cf. B6-11).*

However, it became apparent that the understanding of leadership at the two HEIs appears to be slightly different. It was found that at the UAS UA the most dominant approach is people-orientation (leadership

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approach), while senior managers at the JKU seem to rely more on task-orientation (management approach):

UAS UA People-orientation	JKU Task-orientation
- Support and **encourage staff** - Work independently - Promote **intrinsic motivation** by self-determination - Focus on **cooperation** and community/**social cohesion** (take efforts towards forming teams, understand others, solidarity, empathy) **Human Resource Development:** „(…) it is simply vital to visualise each individual characteristics and skills and to find a suitable place promoting prospects that allow for further development" *(B10 – 28) translated by the authors)*	- Focus on **performance** - Stronger focus on **academic freedom** - Enthusiasm and passion towards research is a prerequisite - **extrinsic motivation** by incentives in addition - Focus on **individualism** "The scientific career is based on individual initiative and performance, a kind individual fighting." (A15-46) (translated by the authors) **Tendency towards harsh competition:** „If I solely concentrate on myself and my scientific success, leadership of staff is not a topic any more. And this is just the current trend" (A1-66) (translated by the authors)

Table 2: Leadership approaches at two Austrian HEIs[2]

Findings demonstrate that value-based leadership is on the rise at the two explored HEIs. The most important values identified by the respondents from both HEIs are the following:
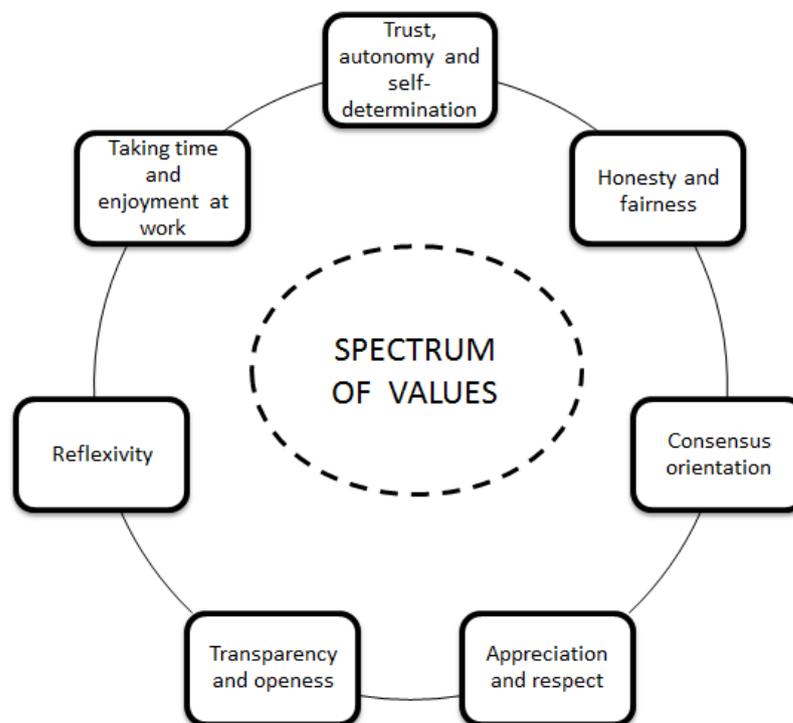

Figure 2: Spectrum of values at two Austrian HEIs

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Especially heads of study programmes (UAS UA) emphasise that leadership happens on the basis of trust (cf.B7-13). They point to shared values to increase commitment, identification, performance, success and motivation. Notably, leadership at the UAS UA seems to be more strongly related with a specific set of values.

It was found at both HEIs that the high degree of *freedom, autonomy and self-determination* is a characteristic feature of leadership, whereupon at JKU the focus seems to be even stronger. Respondents indicate that autonomy/self-determination, trust and a positive approach towards work are closely linked to each other and result in higher motivation and working place satisfaction. On the other hand, aspects which seem to have a negative effect on motivation are bureaucracy, limited participation possibilities, a research topic that attracts little interest and the leadership style by itself. In framing the significance of values this investigation revealed that trust in fellow employees and their abilities/competencies and solidarity in the team appear to be most vital in the light of leadership at both HEIs.

3.4 Set of skills and competencies of manager-academics in two Austrian HEIs

Given the previously noted manifold requirements faced by manager-academics, the underlying assumption that they are supposed to possess multifaceted skills to cover the daily challenges can be confirmed. This research identified various crucial competences, namely: scientific and professional excellence, leadership skills and experience, social skills, pedagogical and teaching competences as well as management skills and particular personal traits.
Given the extensive overlap of the set of competencies it is attempted to give a broad picture of both HEIs in the following section:

Figure 3: Set of skills and traits for professional HE leadership and management

Personal traits
First of all, it comes as no surprise that several personality traits of a leader are crucially important (e.g. House & Aditya 1997) such as empathy, capability of decision making in proper time and realisation, authenticity, self-reflection (reflection skills), self-awareness and personal integrity. Furthermore, leaders

should be mature and steady personalities possessing the following traits: determination, assertiveness, patience and general willingness for change.

Professional and scientific excellence
Informants point to proficient and recognised professional expertise related to both the respective discipline and scientific competence as a prerequisite for manager-academics. As such, professional expertise in the related vocational field is a distinctive factor which was particularly mentioned by the manager-academics of the UAS UA. This comes as no surprise since the UAS UA has a pronounced focus on applied research and occupational education. In this context, professional excellence is key so as to being recognised by colleagues, students and external stakeholders (local industry and political bodies). When it comes to professional skills, manager-academics from JKU, by contrast, indicated experiences derived from previous scientific work and knowledge on recent developments in the professional higher education (cf. A1-79).

The study also found that scientific excellence encompasses a range of skills and competencies such as proficiency in applying scientific methods, publication of scientific findings and being up to date in the related scientific field. Further, scientific reputation, active involvement in the scientific community and disposing of a network appear to be essential. Strikingly, the level of scientific excellence at the young university UAS UA is as high as at the more traditional/classic JKU. At JKU there tends to be slightly more emphasis on scientific practices in terms of being visible in the international scientific community, reputation and track record of publications. However, it is important to bear in mind that profound professional and scientific excellence is required at both HEIs.

Leadership skills and experience
In accordance with the above-mentioned leadership styles a number of skills are identified:
- **Strategic thinking**
- **Capability to trust** in staff members and their skills and the capability to delegate
- **Empathy**
- **Assertiveness and capacity to deal with conflicts:** consensus-orientation, constructive dialogue and capability of problem solving
- **Communications skills:** to inspire, motivate and convince people
- **Decision making competencies:** to actively take decisions and put them into practices

Findings demonstrate that leadership experience is highly required at both HEIs. The value of already existing leadership experience is rated high, but at the same time this experience is implicitly presupposed which is particularly true for JKU. Further, evidence from our research implies that leadership expertise and experience seem to be based on a progressive step-by-step development which gradually leads to a C-level position.

Social skills
It is generally known and was confirmed once more in this study that social skills are crucial in the daily professional life of manager-academics. Notably, the informants expressed abilities to engage in and handle conflicts (constructive dialogue, consensus-orientation), empathy, communication skills (listening, motivating, convincing), team working and trust in staff members. Furthermore, respondents highlighted their open mind towards actively approaching people and accepting their diversity. Additionally, capabilities in the field of presentation and representation in terms of public affairs are considered as vital by the respondents. It is key that manager-academics dispose of a combination of professional expertise, decision-making capability and social skills so as to promote leadership.

Management skills
Informants pointed to management skills, such as know-how in marketing, finance, project management, external representation and organisational development as competences of growing significance. The

main capabilities for heads of study programmes seem to be self-organisation (time management) and smooth organisation of the studies including operative and strategic planning. Owing to the reported increase of marketisation and external representation of departments and fields of study, marketing and representation skills gain relevance. Logically, management skills and entrepreneurial spirit become even more significant at the level of deans and rectors. When comparing UAS UA and JKU it appears that management and marketing activities are more demanding for the traditional university JKU than for the younger UAS UA. Further, drawing on the statements of various respondents a crucial success factor for professional higher education management seems to be the balanced combination of managerial and scientific skills.

Teaching competencies
In this regard, common ground was identified, since in-depth and extensive teaching competencies and comprehensive skills and knowledge in pedagogical practices and didactics are required. The combination of professional expertise, profound knowledge of the related vocational field, teaching and pedagogical competencies and social and communication skills is highly appreciated so as to guarantee high quality of teaching.

In sum then, the ideal competence portfolio of manager-academics seems to be a combination of managerial, scientific, professional and social skills enhanced by the following personal traits: authenticity, ability to reflect on oneself, self-awareness, personal integrity.

3.5 Further education and professional development (Human Resource Development)

When asked which possibilities of further education and development respondents are aware of and how they assess the situation of professional development at their institutions, the informants of both HEIs revealed a remarkably wide variety of development possibilities:
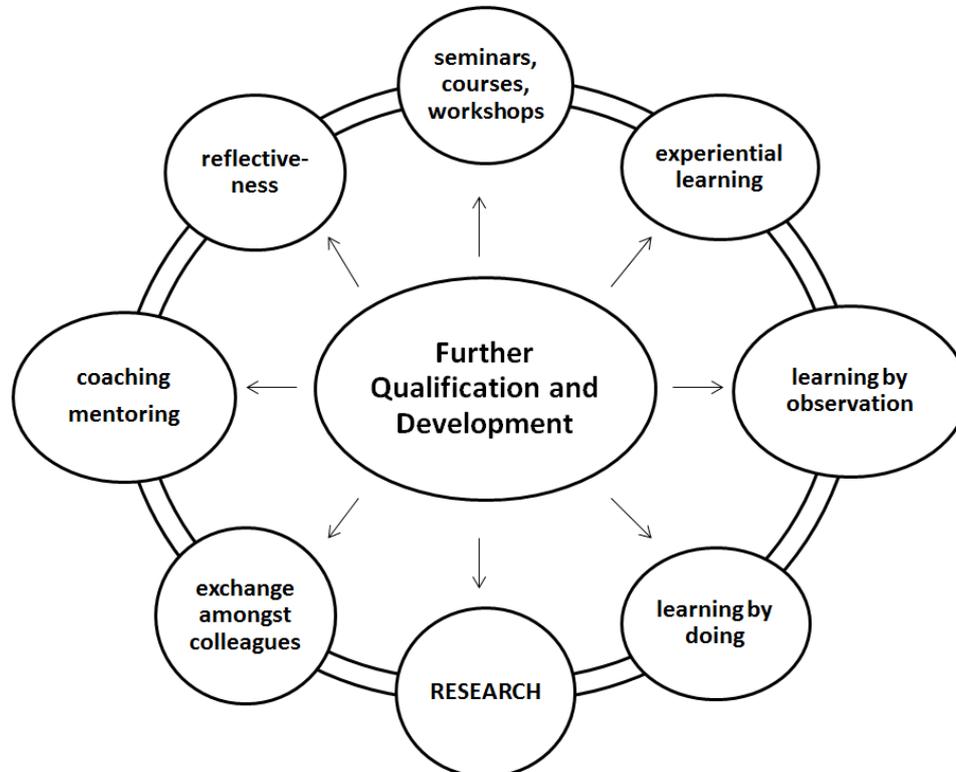

Figure 4: Pool of ideas for further qualification and development

As highlighted in the figure above research is widely seen as a means for further qualification and development. Thus, research encompasses performing research projects (including publications and attending conferences) on the one hand and cooperation with companies (enhancing up-to-date knowledge) on the other hand. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that formal (traditional) forms of further qualification (e.g. seminars or workshops) alone are insufficient to meet the requirements of professional development for manager-academics owing to time constraints caused by the manifold requirements in teaching, research, administration and management. More beneficial seems to be the combination of different modes of further education and training. Although (manager) seminars and workshops impart fresh knowledge and new methods for leaders, personal development requires other kinds of input and training additionally, for example institutionalised and complementary coaching and mentoring models strengthening the capability of self-reflection.

In addition, findings demonstrate that the above mentioned forms of learning are considered of vital importance and moreover appear extremely effective. A most beneficial source of learning seems to be informal exchange amongst colleagues and supervisors. *Coaching and mentoring* are also a key focal point for development activities in the field of higher education. Given that mentoring and coaching is currently at a rather informal level at UAS UA there is increased interest in institutionalisation.

4. Discussion and Reflection

The study revealed a wide range of functions manager-academics assume in both HEIs and accordingly a high variety of essential competencies and skills. Leadership and management requirements and skills are of crucial importance. However, on account of increasing competition in science (e.g. evaluation/rankings) both professional and scientific skills are predominant as well as in recruitment policies. Thus, although *leadership and management skills and requirements* are perceived as increasingly important by manager-academics, *professional and scientific skills are equally predominant.* Hence, leadership and management skills do not receive corresponding emphasis in manager-academics` professional daily lives (owing to the manifold requirements faced) which is in contrast not reflected in recruiting practices. Findings demonstrate that leadership expertise and experience is presupposed in many cases though it plays a significant role for manager-academics. Thus, it is recommended that recruitment policies of the HEIs could incorporate leadership and management skills as an additional criterion in the application process of leading staff. Further, trends towards professionalisation, as for instance an increasing demand for marketing and a keen scientific competition, result in a feeling of diminishing academic freedom, expressed by manager-academics.

In terms of *Human Resource Management and Development* (henceforth HRM&D*)* the findings form a broad basis for further education measures, recruitment policies and design of leading/management positions. According to respondents it is crucial that initiatives are geared towards offering tailored further education measures for different target groups each (researchers, administration staff, faculty and most notably department leaders, manager-academics and deans). Moreover, it is vital to provide internal and external further education possibilities for leaders in order to enable confidentiality and discretion. In addition, establishing formal mentoring and coaching structures at UAS UA[3] - as requested by respondents- , even at the level of faculty, would promote leadership competence. To conclude, for developing a comprehensive and integrative concept of human resource development, a wide spectrum of further education possibilities needs to be covered.

This study confirms the significance of academics' intrinsic motivation[4] in both HEIs (and in particular within the UAS UA). There is a widely shared consensus (e.g. Bass 1985, House & Aditya 1997) that leadership style has considerable impact on the motivation and output of staff. In line with Ryan et al (2000) findings suggest that leadership that allows self-determination and autonomy, affects all faculty members positively. Referring to the cognitive evaluation theory framework, which suggests that "[…] social environments can facilitate or forestall intrinsic motivation by supporting versus thwarting

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people`s innate psychological needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy […]" (Ryan & Deci 2000, p.71), it can be derived that such a social environment at the workplace could be fostered by the leadership stance. Also HRM&D might contribute to strengthening the feeling of competence by tailored training programmes. In the context of motivation, the respondents highlighted that the flexibility within their job profile enhances their intrinsic motivation. To a certain extent they can place emphasis on either research or teaching or entrepreneurial tasks in line with individual interests and/or talents. Several informants complain about excessive demands which have not been prioritised yet, which as a result might lead to quality deterioration.

Finally, values play a significant role in terms of leadership at both HEIs. Hence it seems worth discussing how a transformational leadership approach may support distributed leadership in practice. The paradigm of transformational leadership "[…] emphasizes how exceptionally effective leaders communicate and interact with others in a manner that inspires them to higher levels of performance and commitment to the leader and/or organization" (Galvin et al. 2010, p. 509).

5. Limitation and Further Research

Limitations of this research can be found in qualitative research in general, since results are generally not representative of a population. Rather they tend to generalise the theory (Brymann 2012). Hence, the quality of the theoretical inferences that are made out of qualitative data is crucial to the assessment of generalisation (Brymann 2012). As such, it is important to remind that the findings solely refer to two Austrian HEIs and cannot be transferred to the higher education landscape in Europe.

As strong values, especially trust and open communication, have turned out to be crucial for the success of leadership in HEIs the paradigm of transformational leadership seems to be a promising avenue for future research.

Notes

[1] The schematic illustration shows an analytical separation of tasks. In reality, they are connected (e.g. management of teaching operations and research operations in case of delegation of tasks between academics).
[2] However, at this point it is noteworthy that this table illustrates two opposite positions on a continuum of possible answers and depends on situational and contextual aspects.
[3] At JKU a formal mentoring system is already in existence.
[4] Intrinsic motivation is "the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one`s capacities, to explore, and to learn" (Ryan and Deci 2000, p. 70)

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