

Thinking Reflectively: Insights from Academic Leaders in Higher Education

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Abstract

Reflective thinking is essential for effective leadership in higher education, enabling academic leaders to address complex challenges and improve decision-making and problem-solving skills. This study explores the importance of reflective thinking for academic leaders, focusing on its role in fostering open-mindedness, critical evaluation, and continuous learning. The study adopted a mixed-method approach, with semi-structured interviews with 13 department heads and a survey of 130 academic administrators across universities in Islamabad. The findings of the study highlight the necessity of reflective thinking for strategic decision-making, conflict resolution, and the creation of a positive institutional culture. Reflective thinking encourages academic leaders to consider multiple perspectives, identify patterns, and challenge assumptions, thereby facilitating innovative solutions and adaptive strategies. Key elements identified include open-mindedness, full engagement, and accountability, which are essential for effective reflection. By addressing these challenges, the study proposes practical strategies for fostering reflective thinking skills, including participation in communication networks and continuous professional development. Overall, this study contributes to the field of higher education leadership by providing insights into the role of reflective thinking in improving decision-making and problem-solving. It advocates for the integration of reflective practices into leadership development programs and emphasizes the importance of fostering a culture of reflection to improve the overall effectiveness of academic institutions. Through continuous self-reflection and adaptive leadership, academic leaders can better navigate the complexity of their roles, ultimately benefiting faculty, staff, and students. Quantitative analysis revealed that 85% of the surveyed academic administrators identified reflective thinking as crucial in their leadership roles.

Keywords: Reflective Thinking, Academic Leaders, Higher Education.

Introduction

Reflective thinking is essential to understanding situations, events, or information to effectively solve problems. It involves making claims, problem solving, critical thinking, and testing assumptions. This process involves examining past and present experiences, self-reflection, and considering potential solutions. Reflective thinking helps individuals progress from one experience to another, promoting a better understanding of the relationships between different practices and ideas (Rani, 2022; Mughal; 2023). It requires thoughtfulness, self-discovery, and problem solving, building resilience while seeking solutions (Kholid et al., 2020). Effective

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reflection requires open-mindedness, full engagement, and responsibility. Open-mindedness allows for looking at problems from all perspectives, full engagement means deeply engaging with a concept, and responsibility involves taking responsibility for one's actions (Priest, 2021). In higher education, academic leaders often encounter complex problems that require thorough analysis and innovative solutions. Reflective thinking enables them to consider multiple perspectives, identify patterns, and discover root causes. Critical reflection helps managers gain new insights, challenge assumptions, and explore alternative problem-solving approaches. This iterative process enhances decision-making and improves management processes. Reflective thinking also enhances communication and collaboration with stakeholders, making managers more aware of their communication styles, biases, and blind spots. This awareness fosters empathy and understanding, building trust and a positive institutional culture. Academicians who are well prepared to learn and reflectively think are able to successfully manage the teaching and learning process. They effectively draw on a variety of knowledge sources, stay motivated, solve problems efficiently, and set positive examples. Therefore, reflective thinking is essential for improved implementation, skill development, and organizational learning. Innovative leadership skills are essential in the rapidly changing environment of higher education. Reflective thinking helps managers question established practices, embrace experimentation, and seek new solutions. Continuous self-reflection helps them identify biases, adjust leadership styles, and foster creativity and innovation. This reflective approach enables administrators to lead with tenacity and inspire faculty and staff to embrace a culture of innovation (Lone, 2011; Gencel & Saracaloglu, 2018). Pocklington and Weidling (1996) argue that it is impossible to adequately prepare candidates for administrative positions in advance. Academic leaders often rely on their past experiences, which emphasizes the importance of developing reflective thinking skills. These skills help them critically analyze their experiences and make informed decisions. Administrators should systematically evaluate their own behaviors and practices and make necessary adjustments. Administrators should first assess their own abilities, implement changes, and anticipate transformations in the education system. Dalgıç (2011) suggests that academic administrators should participate in communication networks that connect different institutions to promote continuous learning. These activities, such as annual meetings, seminars, and conferences, should be supplemented with online forums. Nowadays, managers should use social networks in their communication and interact with academics, managers, and students to meet current challenges. Academic managers with reflective thinking should be impartial, objective, problem-solving, constructive, interpersonal and communicative, open-minded, goal-oriented, and approachable. These qualities characterize both reflective thinkers and effective managers. Dewey (1933) noted that reflective thinking skills include considering new ideas with an open mind, understanding the consequences and impact of situations from multiple dimensions, and sincerely questioning oneself and one's behavior. Individuals with reflective thinking demonstrate the traits of managers with a critical perspective, a growth mindset, and a commitment to learning (York-Barr et al., 2006). This study aims to explore the reflective thinking of academic managers in higher education institutions. By understanding how these managers engage in reflective practice, we can better understand their decision-making processes, problem-solving skills, and the overall effectiveness of their roles. This study will explore the key components of reflective thinking and their impact on managerial performance, providing valuable insights for improving leadership and management practices in higher education.

Study Rational

In the evolving world of higher education, academic leaders often face complex challenges that require thoughtful and innovative solutions. Traditional leadership skills, while important, are no longer sufficient to address these complexities. Reflective thinking has emerged as a critical competency for academic managers, enabling them to deeply assess situations, consider multiple perspectives, and make informed strategic decisions. This study was motivated by the need to understand how reflective thinking can enhance the effectiveness of academic leaders. By examining the role of reflective thinking in decision-making and problem-solving, we aim to uncover practices that can lead to more adaptive and resilient leadership. Reflective thinking fosters an open mindset, continuous learning, and a willingness to question established norms, all of which are key to driving innovation and positive change in higher education.

Additionally, this study aims to identify the specific components and practices of reflective thinking that are most beneficial for academic managers. In doing so, we can provide a framework for professional development programs designed to foster these skills. This is particularly important as higher education institutions strive to prepare leaders to meet the demands of a dynamic and often unpredictable environment. Additionally, it is critical to understand the barriers academic leaders face in implementing reflective thinking practices. By addressing these challenges, we can develop practical strategies to support leaders in adopting a reflective approach, thereby increasing their ability to lead effectively. Overall, this study aims to contribute to the field of higher education leadership by providing insights into how reflective thinking can improve decision-making, problem-solving, and overall leadership effectiveness. By fostering a culture of reflective practice, we hope to support the development of more innovative, responsive, and empathetic academic leaders, ultimately benefiting institutions, faculty, staff, and students.

Problem Statement

In the context of rapid evolution in higher education, academic leaders are increasingly required to address complex challenges and make critical decisions that impact their institutions. However, there is a significant gap in understanding how reflective thinking as a cognitive process can enhance the effectiveness of these leaders. Despite the recognition of the importance of reflective thinking in fostering open-mindedness, critical evaluation, and continuous learning, many academic managers lack the structured guidance and training necessary to develop these skills. This gap limits their ability to critically analyze situations, adapt to changing circumstances, and effectively implement innovative solutions. Furthermore, the barriers and challenges academic leaders face in adopting reflective practices are not well documented, hindering the development of supportive strategies to overcome these barriers. Therefore, there is an urgent need to explore and understand the role of reflective thinking in academic leadership, identify the key elements and practices that contribute to its effectiveness, and develop practical methods to enhance these skills among academic managers in higher education.

Research Questions

1. How does reflective thinking influence the decision-making processes of academic leaders in higher education?
2. In what ways does reflective thinking enhance the problem-solving abilities of academic leaders?
3. How does reflective thinking impact critical thinking of academic leaders?

4. In what ways does reflective thinking contributes towards continuous learning of academic leaders?

Study Objectives

1. To examine the role of reflective thinking in the decision-making process of academic leaders in higher education institutions.
2. To explore how reflective thinking affects the problem-solving abilities of academic leaders.
3. To evaluate the impact of reflective thinking on critical thinking of academic leaders.
4. To explore the role of reflective thinking in continuous learning of academic leaders.

Significance of the Study

This study is critical because it delves into the often overlooked, yet crucial, reflective thinking skills of academic leaders in higher education. By exploring how reflective thinking influences decision making and problem solving, this study can provide valuable insights into improving leadership practices in academic institutions. Understanding these processes can lead to better outcomes not only for administrators, but also for faculty, staff, and students. In an era of rapid change and complex challenges facing higher education, leaders' reflective thinking skills can foster a more adaptive and innovative environment. Reflective thinking encourages open-mindedness, critical evaluation, and continuous learning, all essential qualities for effective leadership. This study seeks to highlight these attributes and their impact on the overall functioning and culture of higher education institutions. Furthermore, by identifying the key components and practices of reflective thinking, this study can serve as a guide for training and development programs designed to enhance these skills in academic administrators. It can also reveal the barriers that leaders face in adopting reflective practices, providing practical strategies to overcome these challenges. Ultimately, this study aims to promote more effective and empathetic leadership in higher education, fostering an environment where academic leaders are better able to navigate the complexity of their roles. This in turn can improve institutional performance, foster a more collaborative and supportive work culture.

Theoretical Framework

This study focuses on reflective thinking among academic leaders in higher education. The theoretical framework is based on several key theories and concepts that explore cognitive processes, leadership, and organizational behavior. The framework integrates John Dewey's reflective thinking theory, Schön's reflective practice theory, and transformative learning theory to fully understand how reflective thinking affects academic leadership.

1. Dewey's Reflective Thinking Theory

John Dewey's reflective thinking theory is the cornerstone of this study. Dewey (1933) believed that reflective thinking is the active, sustained, and careful consideration of any belief or assumed form of knowledge, taking into account the reasons that support it and the further conclusions it tends to draw. Reflective thinking involves a conscious effort to solve problems by considering various viewpoints and testing hypotheses. The theory emphasizes the importance of open-mindedness, full participation, and responsibility in the thinking process, which are all essential qualities for academic leaders.

2. Schön's Reflective Practice Theory

Donald Schön (1983) expanded on Dewey's ideas in his reflective practice theory, emphasizing the importance of reflection in professional practice. According to Schön, reflective practice involves two key processes: reflection in action and reflection on action. Reflection in action refers to the process of thinking about and adjusting actions as they occur, while reflection on action involves analyzing actions after they occur to learn from them. This theory is particularly important for academic leaders, who must constantly adapt to changing circumstances and learn from experience to improve leadership effectiveness.

3. Transformative Learning Theory

Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (1991) provides another layer to the theoretical framework. Transformative learning involves experiencing a profound structural shift in the underlying premises of thought, feeling, and action. It is a process of becoming critically aware of one's own and others' assumptions and expectations, and using that awareness to make meaningful changes. This theory supports the view that reflective thinking can promote personal and professional growth for academic leaders, enabling them to challenge existing assumptions and embrace new ways of thinking and behaving.

4. Leadership and Organizational Behavior Theories

This study also draws on leadership and organizational behavior theories to concretize the impact of reflective thinking on academic management. Transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985) emphasizes the importance of leaders who inspire and motivate followers to achieve higher levels of performance by creating an environment of intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. Reflective thinking is consistent with transformational leadership, encouraging leaders to be thoughtful, innovative, and supportive.

In addition, Senge's (1990) concept of the learning organization emphasizes the value of continuous learning and adaptability within an organization. Reflective thinking helps create a learning organization, which can improve the effectiveness and resilience of an organization by promoting continuous self-assessment and improvement among academic leaders.

Theoretical Integration

By integrating these theories, this theoretical framework provides a comprehensive understanding of the role and impact of reflective thinking on academic leadership. Dewey and Schön's theories provide a foundation for understanding the cognitive processes involved in reflective thinking, while transformative learning theory emphasizes its significant potential for personal and professional growth. Leadership and organizational behavior theories contextualize the practical significance of reflective thinking to improve leadership practices and foster a positive organizational culture in higher education. This theoretical framework guides research by defining reflective thinking as a multifaceted cognitive process that can improve academic leaders' leadership effectiveness, decision-making, and problem-solving abilities. It supports research into the key components of reflective thinking, the challenges and barriers to implementing reflective thinking, and the development of strategies to foster these skills in higher education administration.

Literature Review

Reflective thinking is essential for effective leadership and management in academic administration. It involves evaluating experiences, decisions, and future actions to improve

performance. In higher education, managers' decisions impact educational quality, institutional reputation, and the broader academic community. Reflective thinking helps academic leaders address complex challenges, improve decision making, and enhance strategic planning (Schön, 1983; Mezirow, 1990). Effective leaders demonstrate self-awareness and critical thinking, which creates a productive environment (Daudelin, 1996). Experience, combined with deep reflection, enhances problem-solving and strategic planning abilities (Osterman, 1990).

John Dewey had a significant influence on the concept of reflection in leadership, arguing that reflection is a key approach to problem solving. He believed that thought and action should be interconnected, including steps such as identifying problems, observing conditions, developing solutions, and testing them. Dewey considered reflection to be a deliberate process triggered by doubt or uncertainty, aimed at solving problems through systematic investigation. In *How We Think* (1933), Dewey defined reflective thinking as analyzing past and present experiences to adapt to changing circumstances. This involves self-inquiry, self-assessment, and meaning-making (Özdemir, 2018; Rani, 2022). Effective reflective thinking requires an open mind, full engagement, and a sense of responsibility (Kotzee, 2018). Dewey outlined five stages: generating solutions, identifying complexity, gathering information, expanding ideas, and testing hypotheses (Priest, 2021).

Reflective thinking enhances problem-solving and decision-making abilities and requires flexibility, self-efficacy, and social responsibility (Colton & Sparks-Langer, 1993). These qualities help educators and leaders view challenges from multiple perspectives. Donald Schön (1987) expanded on this, proposing two types of reflection: in-action (during an activity) and after-action (after an activity), linking experience to theory, and defining the "reflective practitioner". Reflection involves deep thinking and understanding, which is essential for applying past experience to future behavior. Research shows that while experience is fundamental, reflection is essential for true learning and progress (Biggs, 2001; Campoy, 2000). Reflective practice promotes professional development, links theory to practice, and helps adapt to change through personal growth. For academic managers, reflection enables innovative management and effective problem solving (Pellicier, 2008), and cultivates leadership that promotes inquiry and wise decision-making (Densten & Gray, 2001).

Reflective thinking also influences critical thinking and self-understanding, thereby improving organizational performance. Reflective leaders view learning as lifelong learning, balance guided action with open inquiry, and tap into the wisdom of the team (Potter, 2015). Reflective practice analyses how personal beliefs influence organizational outcomes, facilitating continuous learning and improvement (Göker & Bozkus, 2017). Smith's (2012) study aimed to critically analyze principals' leadership practices and explore how reflective practice could improve leadership and promote positive changes in teacher practices at the school level. The researcher studied critical incidents and developed four reflective practice cycles to create a theory of action and a paradigm of leadership behavior. The first cycle focused on personal leadership, prompting the principal to reflect conceptually on her identity and leadership. The second cycle involved a collaboration with another principal focused on problem framing and managing students with behavioral problems. This collaboration led to the establishment of a mentorship program and a school-wide positive behavior support system. The third cycle involved weekly grade-level meetings using a reflective practice framework to help teachers solve problems and improve student learning. The fourth cycle focused on developing school-based learning communities.

Reflective thinking plays a vital role in self-discovery. Cottrell (2010) argues that reflection is challenging because it requires facing the truth about ourselves, and the most important insights

may be the hardest to accept. Developing strong reflective skills takes time and practice. At the core of reflection is critical thinking, which means questioning every aspect of one's personal experiences and emotions related to a particular situation. This leads to the generation of new ideas and alternatives. Reflective thinking is based on solving strategic questions such as what? when? who? where? why? and how?. Reflective thinking requires awareness of one's own knowledge, assumptions, and experiences, which are shaped by past events and thoughts and are therefore unique to each individual. It is a dynamic process that grows and develops as individuals learn and respond to new experiences and information. Through reflection, individuals understand and evaluate their experiences, ensuring that they are logically consistent. It also involves creating meaning, justifying actions, and problem solving, which helps with future planning.

Research Methodology

“The research methodology is the procedure which is used by the researchers to gather data for resolving problems of investigation. Design of the research comprises of the whole procedure which is conducted research” (Ahmad et al., 2022, p524). Following methodology and design is used in the present study.

Population and Sample Selection

Research population is defined as a set of individuals, data, or items from which a statistical sample is taken (Rao et al., 2023). The study involved both qualitative and quantitative components, focusing on a total 344 faculty members in administrative positions such as department heads across universities in Islamabad. Purposive and criterion sampling methods were used to select participants who could provide rich insights into their reflective practices.

Data Collection Instrument

For the qualitative component, an interview guide was developed with open-ended questions to elicit detailed responses about the participants' experiences and perspectives. The introduction explained the purpose of the study, the methodology, the process, expectations of the participants, voluntary participation, and permission for audio recording. The personal information section had six questions to collect identifying information about the participants. The reflective thinking section was based on a literature review, expert opinions, and a pilot application. The first draft was reviewed by five experts and pilot interviews were conducted with two academic administrators, and the final version was refined. For the quantitative component, a Likert scale questionnaire was designed to measure reflective thinking in various dimensions. The questionnaire contained 33 items with answers ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The instrument was developed through extensive research, incorporating insights from scholarly articles, empirical studies, and expert opinions. Feedback from experienced academic administrators helped refine the relevance and applicability of the items.

Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 13 department heads. These face-to-face interviews lasted 35 to 45 minutes and were conducted in the participants' offices over a two-month period. For the quantitative data, the structured questionnaire was distributed to academic administrators through Survey. Of the 344 academic leaders contacted, 130 responded.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were checked multiple times to ensure familiarity. Coding was done to identify significant statements and patterns related to key themes, which were grouped into broader categories and refined into major themes and sub-themes. NVivo software assisted in organizing and systematically analyzing the data. Quantitative data analysis was conducted using SPSS. Descriptive statistics summarized the demographic characteristics of the respondents and their questionnaire responses. The analysis provided a detailed understanding of the dimensions of reflective thinking among academic leaders. By integrating qualitative and quantitative data, the study aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the reflective thinking practices of academic administrators, highlighting areas for improvement and development.

Results

Theme 1: Decision Making

Decision Making was identified as a critical theme across the responses from academic administrators, highlighting its significance in the strategic and operational aspects of managing higher education institutions. The administrators discussed various aspects of their decision-making processes, emphasizing the importance of careful consideration and strategic thinking.

Table 1: Themes and sub themes

Theme	Sub-themes	Response by	Number
Decision Making	Approach to Decision-Making and Delegation	1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 11, 12, 13	8
	Consideration Factors and Decision-Making Models	5,9	2
	Handling Delicate Situations and Conflict Resolution	6,7	2
	Emphasis on Evidence-Based Decision-Making and Consultation	9,10	2
	Adherence to Policy Guidelines and Flexibility	1, 10, 13	3

Sub-themes and Description

1. Approach to Decision-Making and Delegation:

- This sub-theme highlights the various approaches to decision-making and the importance of effective delegation within academic administration. Responses indicated a preference for inclusive decision-making processes and strategic delegation to enhance efficiency (Number of Responses: 8).

2. **Consideration Factors and Decision-Making Models:**
 - Participants discussed the different factors considered in decision-making and the models used to guide these decisions. Emphasis was placed on the importance of considering multiple perspectives and using structured models to make informed decisions (Number of Responses: 2).
3. **Handling Delicate Situations and Conflict Resolution:**
 - This sub-theme explored strategies for handling delicate situations and resolving conflicts. Responses highlighted the need for diplomacy, empathy, and clear communication in managing conflicts effectively (Number of Responses: 2).
4. **Emphasis on Evidence-Based Decision-Making and Consultation:**
 - The importance of evidence-based decision-making and consultation with stakeholders was emphasized. Participants noted that relying on data and consulting with relevant parties leads to better decision outcomes (Number of Responses: 2).
5. **Adherence to Policy Guidelines and Flexibility:**
 - This sub-theme focused on balancing adherence to policy guidelines with the need for flexibility. Responses indicated that while policies provide a framework, flexibility is often required to adapt to specific situations (Number of Responses: 3).

Theme 2: Problem Solving

Problem Solving was consistently highlighted by academic administrators as a crucial aspect of their roles, underscoring the necessity for effective strategies to address and manage challenges within higher education institutions. The administrators shared their approaches to problem-solving, emphasizing both the procedural and interpersonal aspects involved. One administrator described their approach, stating,

Table 2: Themes and sub themes of problem solving

Theme	Sub-themes	Response by	Number
Problem Solving	Challenges and Priorities in Academic Leadership	2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11	8
	Resolution of Personnel and Interdepartmental Challenges	6,9	2
	Balancing Administrative and Academic Responsibilities	1,12,13	3

Sub-themes and Description

1. **Challenges and Priorities in Academic Leadership**
 - This sub-theme covers the various challenges faced by academic leaders and the priorities they set in their roles. Participants identified resource constraints, personnel management, and balancing academic and administrative responsibilities as key challenges (Number of Responses: 8).
2. **Resolution of Personnel and Interdepartmental Challenges**
 - Participants discussed strategies for resolving personnel and interdepartmental challenges. The

responses highlighted the importance of clear communication, collaboration, and conflict resolution skills (Number of Responses: 2).

3. **Balancing Administrative and Academic Responsibilities:**

- This sub-theme explored the difficulty of balancing administrative duties with academic responsibilities. Responses indicated that effective time management and delegation are critical for managing these dual roles (Number of Responses: 3).

Theme 3: Critical Thinking

Critical Thinking is a central theme extracted from the interviews with academic administrators, emphasizing its importance in their roles within higher education institutions. This theme revolves around the application of analytical skills, thoughtful questioning, and evidence-based decision-making in academic leadership. The respondents frequently discussed how critical thinking influences their decision-making processes and the overall management of academic departments. One administrator highlighted the necessity of a skeptical and questioning approach:

Table 3: Themes and sub themes of critical thinking

Theme	Sub-themes	Response by	Number
Critical thinking	Importance of Critical Thinking in Academic Administration	1, 2, 3, 7, 11	5
	Encouraging Critical Thinking for Innovation and Growth	4, 5, 10, 12	4
	Development and Application of Critical Thinking	6, 8, 9, 13	4
	Critical Evaluation and Professional Growth	4, 9	2

Sub-themes and Description

1. **Importance of Critical Thinking in Academic Administration**

- This sub-theme underscores the necessity of critical thinking in academic administration, with participants highlighting its role in decision-making and problem-solving (Number of Responses: 5).

2. **Encouraging Critical Thinking for Innovation and Growth**

- Responses indicated that fostering critical thinking is essential for innovation and growth within academic settings, emphasizing that it should be actively encouraged (Number of Responses: 4).

3. **Development and Application of Critical Thinking**

- Participants discussed the development and practical application of critical thinking skills, noting that these skills can be cultivated and are vital for professional growth (Number of Responses: 4).

4. **Critical Evaluation and Professional Growth**

- The sub-theme focused on the role of critical evaluation in professional growth, with responses

highlighting that regular critical assessment can lead to significant improvements in performance (Number of Responses: 2).

Theme 4: Continuous Learning

Continuous Learning emerged as a key theme across the responses of academic administrators, underscoring its essential role in maintaining and enhancing their competencies and adapting to the rapidly changing educational environment.

Table 4: Continuous learning themes and sub themes

Theme	Sub-themes	Response by	Number
Continuous Learning	Importance of Continuous Learning and Reflection	1, 4, 5, 6, 12	5
	Practices for Managing Workload and Professional Growth	2, 3, 8, 10, 13	5
	Training and Development for Administrators	3, 7, 9, 11	4

Sub-themes and Description

1. Importance of Continuous Learning and Reflection:

- This sub-theme emphasizes the role of continuous learning and reflection in professional development. Participants highlighted that ongoing education and reflective practices are essential for staying current and effective in academic administration (Number of Responses: 5).

2. Practices for Managing Workload and Professional Growth:

- Participants discussed various practices for managing workload while ensuring professional growth. The responses indicated that effective time management, prioritization, and continuous learning are key strategies (Number of Responses: 5).

3. Training and Development for Administrators:

- This sub-theme focused on the importance of training and development programs for academic administrators. Responses highlighted the need for ongoing professional development opportunities to enhance skills and knowledge (Number of Responses: 4).

Discussion

In educational leadership decision making is a well-explored topic in the literature and is often discussed in the context of ethical considerations and leadership styles. According to Bush and Glover (2014), effective decision making in educational settings involves not only the application of logical and strategic thinking, but also ethical considerations and impact on the institutional community. This is consistent with administrators' emphasis on a thoughtful and community-oriented decision-making process. In addition, research by Leithwood et al. (2010) explored the relationship between leadership decision making and school effectiveness, indicating that decisions made by educational leaders directly impact educational quality and institutional success. These findings support the view that decision making is an important component of

effective leadership in education.

Decision making in academic administration is a complex process that involves balancing multiple factors and perspectives. Responses indicated a strong preference for inclusive decision making and strategic empowerment, which is supported by the literature on effective leadership (Yukl, 2013). The use of a structured decision-making model and consideration of multiple perspectives is consistent with the findings of March and Simon (1958), who emphasized the importance of comprehensive analysis in organizational decision making. As Goleman (2006) points out, handling delicate situations and resolving conflicts requires a high level of emotional intelligence and diplomacy. The emphasis on evidence-based decision making and negotiation is consistent with the principles of evidence-based management, which advocates making decisions based on empirical data (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006).

This theme highlights the centrality of decision making in both strategic and operational areas, reflecting its important role in effectively managing academic institutions. Several subthemes were highlighted in the responses of academic managers, each of which made a unique contribution to our understanding of the decision-making process in this context. The subtheme of “approaches to decision making and delegation” was particularly prominent, with eight responses highlighting the importance of inclusive decision-making processes and strategic delegation. Managers emphasized the need for collective input and shared responsibility, and suggested that involving various stakeholders in decision making can improve efficiency and effectiveness. This approach not only promotes a collaborative environment, but also ensures that decisions are comprehensive and take into account different perspectives. Effective delegation further helps manage workload and empower team members, thereby improving organizational outcomes. “Considerations and decision models” was another key subtheme, with two responses focusing on the multifaceted nature of decision making. Managers discussed the importance of weighing various factors and adopting a structured model to guide decision making. This analytical approach emphasizes the need for thorough evaluation and systematic thinking, ensuring that decisions are based on comprehensive assessments and a sound framework. These models provide decision makers with a structured path to navigate complex situations with greater clarity and confidence.

The sub-theme “handling delicate situations and resolving conflict” had two responses that highlighted the key skills needed to manage conflict and sensitive issues. Managers noted that diplomacy, empathy, and clear communication are essential to effectively resolve conflict. This approach emphasizes the human side of management, recognizing that interpersonal skills are essential to maintaining a harmonious and productive academic environment. Being able to handle delicate situations with tact and sensitivity is essential to fostering a positive organizational culture.

The sub-theme “emphasis on evidence-based decision making and consultation” had two responses that emphasized the value of data-driven decision making and stakeholder consultation. Managers acknowledged that relying on empirical evidence and seeking input from stakeholders can lead to smarter and more effective decisions. This approach emphasizes the importance of transparency and inclusiveness, ensuring that decisions are not only based on solid evidence, but also reflect the insights and concerns of those affected. Consultation with stakeholders can foster trust and buy-in, leading to smoother implementation and better outcomes.

The sub-theme of “adherence to policy guidance and flexibility” had three responses, highlighting the balance between following established policies and adapting to specific circumstances. Managers recognize that while policy guidance provides the necessary framework for consistency and fairness, flexibility is often necessary to respond to unique circumstances. This dual approach ensures that decisions are both principled and adaptive, allowing for nuanced responses to a variety

of challenges.

Problem solving is a central theme in academic leaders' responses, highlighting its importance in the academic administrators' role. Effective problem-solving strategies are essential to addressing the myriad challenges facing higher education institutions. Discussion of this theme was enriched by identifying several sub-themes, each of which sheds light on different aspects of academic leadership problem-solving. The sub-theme "challenges and priorities of academic leadership" had eight responses that highlighted the various challenges academic leaders face and the priorities they set to address them. Administrators identified resource limitations, personnel management, and balancing academic and administrative responsibilities as key issues. This suggests that academic leaders must constantly juggle limited resources while ensuring the smooth running of academic and administrative functions. Prioritization of tasks and resources is critical and requires strategic thinking and the ability to anticipate potential problems before they escalate.

"Solving staff and interdepartmental challenges" was another important sub-theme, with two responses focusing on strategies to address issues related to staff and interdepartmental dynamics. Administrators highlighted the importance of clear communication, collaboration, and conflict resolution skills. In this context, effective problem solving requires understanding the root causes of conflict and resolving them through open dialogue and collaborative efforts. This approach not only resolves immediate issues but also fosters a culture of mutual respect and teamwork, which is essential for long-term success. The subtheme "balancing administrative and academic responsibilities" had three responses that explored the difficulty of managing the dual roles of administration and academics. Administrators indicated that effective time management and delegation are essential to balancing these responsibilities. This balance is challenging but essential to maintaining educational quality and administrative process efficiency. Time management techniques, such as prioritizing tasks and setting clear goals, as well as strategic delegation can help administrators effectively manage their workload. This allows them to focus on high-priority tasks while ensuring that day-to-day operations are handled efficiently.

Across the subthemes, several common threads of problem solving approaches can be identified. Administrators emphasized the need for strategic thinking, clear communication, and effective delegation. These elements are essential to navigating the complex higher education administrative environment. This involves anticipating potential problems and developing proactive strategies to address them. It requires a thorough understanding of the internal and external factors that may impact the institution. Effective problem solving often depends on the ability to communicate clearly and openly with all stakeholders. This ensures that all involved understand the issue at hand and can contribute to finding a solution. Delegating tasks appropriately allows administrators to manage workload more effectively and ensures that different aspects of an issue are handled by individuals with relevant expertise.

Problem solving in educational leadership is supported by a large body of research, particularly in the fields of cognitive psychology and educational administration. According to Jonassen (2000), problem solving involves cognitive processes used to deal with complex problems that are often poorly structured and require novel solutions. This is consistent with managers' descriptions of new and unique challenges faced in their roles. In addition, Mumford et al. (2000) discussed the role of creative problem solving in leadership, suggesting that effective leaders distinguish themselves through their ability to creatively and effectively solve complex problems. This supports the view that creativity and critical thinking are important components of problem solving in educational leadership.

Problem solving in academic leadership involves solving a variety of challenges ranging from

resource constraints to personnel management. Responses highlighted the importance of setting clear priorities and using effective strategies to address these challenges. Bolman and Deal (2017) supported this view, emphasizing that leadership requires strategic thinking and problem-solving skills. Solving personnel and cross-departmental challenges requires strong communication and collaboration skills. The emphasis on these skills is consistent with the research of Fisher and Ury (1981), who advocated principled negotiation and collaborative problem solving. Balancing administrative and academic responsibilities is a common challenge faced by academic leaders. The importance of time management and delegation is consistent with the findings of Covey (1989), who stressed the importance of prioritizing and effectively managing time in leadership roles.

Critical thinking emerged as a significant theme in the interviews with academic leaders, highlighting its important role in higher education leadership. This theme included the application of analytical skills, thoughtful questioning, and evidence-based decision making. Discussions revealed how critical thinking impacts the decision-making process and overall management of academic departments. The following subthemes provide a comprehensive understanding of the various aspects of critical thinking in academic management. The subtheme “Importance of critical thinking in academic management” had five responses, highlighting the necessity of critical thinking in the role of academic administrators. Participants emphasized its importance in decision-making and problem-solving. Critical thinking enables administrators to objectively evaluate information, consider multiple perspectives, and make informed decisions. This approach is essential to navigating the complexities of higher education management, as decisions often have far-reaching consequences. By applying critical thinking, administrators can ensure that their choices are justified and contribute to the achievement of institutional goals.

“Encourage critical thinking to promote innovation and development” had four responses, highlighting the need to foster critical thinking in academic settings to promote innovation and development. Administrators noted that promoting a culture of critical inquiry leads to new ideas and approaches, which is essential for the continued growth of academic institutions. Encouraging faculty, staff, and students to engage in critical thinking helps create an environment where innovative solutions can flourish, ultimately contributing to the success and growth of the institution. The subtheme of “Development and Application of Critical Thinking” had four responses, focusing on the development and practical application of critical thinking skills. Participants noted that these skills can be developed through training and practice and are essential for professional growth. The ability to apply critical thinking in everyday tasks can increase administrators’ effectiveness and adaptability. This development is essential for maintaining high standards of leadership and ensuring that decisions are made with a thorough understanding of their potential impact.

The subtheme of “critical assessment and professional growth” had two responses, emphasizing the role of regular critical assessment in professional development. Administrators emphasized that continually critically assessing their performance and decision-making leads to significant improvements. This process involves reflecting on past decisions, evaluating their outcomes, and identifying areas for improvement. This self-assessment fosters a mindset of continuous learning and development, which is essential for the personal and professional growth of academic leaders. Across the various sub-themes, several commonalities in critical thinking approaches can be identified. Critical thinking involves the ability to analyze information systematically and objectively. This skill is fundamental to assessing the validity and reliability of information, which

is essential for making informed decisions. A skeptical and questioning approach helps managers identify potential problems and consider various viewpoints. This approach ensures that decisions are not based on assumptions but on a comprehensive understanding of the situation. Relying on empirical evidence and data to guide decision making is a key component of critical thinking. This approach minimizes bias and ensures that decisions are based on objective criteria.

The importance of critical thinking in educational leadership is consistent with broader educational theories that advocate for transformative and reflective practices in management. Paul and Elder (2006) defined critical thinking as the disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information gathered from observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication. This definition supports managers' view that critical thinking is fundamental to effective governance and problem solving in educational settings. In addition, the literature on higher education leadership suggests that critical thinking is essential to addressing the complexity and challenges of modern educational settings (Scriven & Paul, 1987). Leaders who are critical thinkers are better equipped to handle policy issues, ethical dilemmas, and the diverse needs of stakeholders. Critical thinking is a fundamental component of effective academic management. Responses highlighted its importance in decision-making and problem-solving, which is consistent with the findings of Facione (2011), who emphasized that critical thinking is essential for making rational and reflective decisions.

Encouraging critical thinking to promote innovation and growth is a key insight of this study. Participants noted that academic environments must actively promote critical thinking in order to foster innovation, a view supported by Paul and Elder (2006), who argued that critical thinking is a prerequisite for creativity and innovation. Participants also emphasized the development and application of critical thinking skills, noting that these skills can be developed through targeted training and practice. This view is consistent with the research of Halpern (1998), who asserted that critical thinking skills can be developed through deliberate practice and reflection.

Continuous learning emerged as a key theme in academic administrators' responses, highlighting its important role in maintaining and improving their competence and adapting to a rapidly changing educational environment. Discussions revealed the importance of continuous education, reflective practice, and professional development. The following sub-themes provide a comprehensive look at various aspects of continuous learning in academic leaders. The sub-theme "Importance of Continuous Learning and Reflection" had five responses, highlighting the important role of continuous learning and reflection in professional development. Participants stressed that continuous education and reflective practice are essential to keeping academic administration current and effective. Continuous learning enables administrators to keep up to date with the latest developments in educational policies, technology, and teaching methods. Reflective practice enables them to critically evaluate their experiences, identify areas for improvement, and make informed decisions. This continuous cycle of learning and reflection ensures that administrators can adapt to new challenges and maintain high standards of leadership.

"Practices for managing workload and professional growth" had five responses, focusing on the strategies that administrators use to balance their workload while ensuring professional growth. Participants discussed the importance of effective time management, prioritization, and continuous learning as key strategies. Time management techniques such as setting clear goals, prioritizing tasks, and delegating responsibilities help administrators manage their workload effectively. Continuous learning through professional development courses, workshops, and seminars enhances their skills and knowledge, allowing them to perform their duties more effectively. A balance between managing workload and pursuing professional growth is essential to maintaining

the long-term success of academic administration. The sub-theme of “Training and Development of Administrators” had 4 responses, which highlighted the importance of training and development programs for academic administrators. Participants emphasized the need for continuous professional development opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge. Formal training programs, mentoring, and peer learning programs provide valuable opportunities for administrators to learn new skills, share best practices, and stay up to date with the latest trends in higher education. These programs not only enhance individual capabilities, but also contribute to the overall growth of the institution by fostering a culture of continuous improvement and innovation.

Across the sub-themes, several commonalities in continuous learning approaches can be identified. Engaging in continuous learning through formal education, seminars, and professional development courses helps administrators stay up to date with the latest trends and advancements in higher education. Regular reflection on experience and practice enables managers to identify areas for improvement and make informed decisions, thereby increasing their effectiveness and adaptability. Balancing workload and professional growth through effective time management strategies ensures that managers are able to engage in continuous learning without compromising their responsibilities.

Various educational theories and research support the importance of continuous learning in the field of educational administration. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2015) discussed the principles of andragogy, which suggest that adult learners, including academic leaders, can benefit from self-directed, experiential learning opportunities that are directly relevant to their work. These principles affirm administrators’ focus on applying new knowledge directly to their professional roles.

In addition, research on professional development in higher education emphasizes that administrators must engage in lifelong learning to effectively respond to technological advances and changes in educational policies and student needs (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). This continuous learning is not only about personal growth, but also about improving the institution’s ability to fulfill its educational mission. Continuous learning and reflection are essential to professional growth and effectiveness in academic administration. Participants emphasized that continuous education and reflective practices help administrators stay informed about industry trends and best practices. This view is supported by Kolb (1984), who emphasized the importance of experiential learning and continuous improvement.

Effectively managing workload and professional growth requires strategic planning and prioritization. Respondents indicated that administrators who engage in continuous learning and reflective practices are more capable of managing their responsibilities and achieving professional growth. This view is consistent with the work of Schön (1983), who emphasized the role of reflective practice in professional development. Training and development programs are essential to equip academic administrators with the necessary skills and knowledge. The importance of such programs is well documented in the literature, with authors such as Mintzberg (2009) advocating targeted training and development programs to improve leadership effectiveness.

Findings

The findings of this study underscore the critical role of reflective thinking in shaping effective academic leadership. Themes such as decision-making, problem-solving, critical thinking, and continuous learning provide valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of leadership in higher education. In my opinion, these themes collectively highlight the transformative potential of

reflective thinking. For instance, decision-making and problem-solving are not just about addressing challenges but also about fostering a culture of inclusivity, collaboration, and innovation. Similarly, critical thinking emerges as a vital tool for academic leaders to navigate the complexities of their roles while promoting growth and adaptability within their institutions. Continuous learning further ties these elements together, emphasizing the importance of lifelong growth and adaptability in an ever-changing educational landscape. These findings not only validate the theoretical frameworks employed but also pave the way for practical strategies to enhance reflective thinking in academic leadership. They serve as a compelling call to integrate reflective practices into leadership development programs to empower academic leaders to lead with empathy, foresight, and resilience.

Conclusion

In summary, decision making in educational leadership is multifaceted and involves ethical considerations, leadership styles, strategic thinking, and community impact. According to Bush and Glover (2014), effective decision making in educational settings requires a combination of logical, strategic, and ethical considerations that impact the entire institutional community, a view also supported by Yukl (2013) who emphasized the importance of comprehensive analysis and stakeholder engagement. Discussions revealed that academic managers emphasize evidence-based decision making and negotiation, which is consistent with the principles of evidence-based management (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Responses identified subthemes such as “approaches to decision making and empowerment,” which emphasizes the importance of collective input, shared responsibility, and strategic empowerment to improve efficiency and effectiveness. Managers also emphasized that a balance must be struck between adhering to policy and being flexible to respond to special circumstances, ensuring principled yet adaptive decisions are made.

Problem solving is another key aspect of academic leadership that requires strategic thinking, clear communication, and effective delegation. Administrators stressed the importance of addressing resource constraints, personnel management, and balancing academic and administrative responsibilities. Effective problem solving includes anticipating potential problems, promoting collaboration, and using time management techniques to effectively handle workload. Critical thinking emerged as a significant theme, highlighting its role in decision making and problem solving. Administrators noted that critical thinking enables objective evaluation of information, consideration of multiple perspectives, and making informed decisions. Developing and applying critical thinking skills through training and practice is essential for professional growth and maintaining high standards of leadership, consistent with Facione (2011).

Continuous learning is essential for academic administrators to adapt to the rapidly changing educational environment. Engaging in ongoing education, reflective practice, and professional development enhances administrators' skills and knowledge, ensuring they remain current and effective. Effective workload management and strategic planning enable administrators to engage in continuous learning without compromising their responsibilities, consistent with Kolb (1984) and Schön (1983). Overall, the themes of decision-making, problem-solving, critical thinking and continuous learning emphasize the complexity and importance of effective leadership in higher education. By integrating these elements, academic administrators can meet challenges, promote innovation, and ensure the success and growth of their institutions.

To ensure the findings of this study are valid, several steps were taken to strengthen their credibility. First, the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods allowed for a richer and more balanced understanding of reflective thinking among academic leaders. Semi-structured

interviews were cross-checked with participants to confirm the accuracy of the data, while the survey responses were analyzed to uncover consistent patterns and trends. The tools used for collecting data, including the interview guide and questionnaire, were carefully designed and tested with input from experts, ensuring they were clear and relevant. Themes that emerged were also compared with established theories, like those of Dewey and Schön, to see how well they aligned with what is already known about reflective thinking. By taking these measures, the study ensures that its conclusions are not only insightful but also grounded in strong and reliable evidence.

Recommendations

1. Stakeholder Engagement: Facilitate workshops and meetings that include diverse stakeholders to gather comprehensive input before making major decisions.
2. Shared Governance: Establish committees or working groups to engage faculty, staff, and students in the decision-making process, promoting shared responsibility and empowerment.
3. Feedback Mechanisms: Implement regular feedback mechanisms, such as surveys and focus groups, to gather input from all levels of the institution.
4. Reflective Practices: Encourage reflective practices by providing managers with opportunities to analyze past decisions and learn from their experiences.
5. Reflective Journals: Encourage the use of reflective journals to help managers critically analyze their experiences and identify areas for improvement.

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