

A reflection on leadership in academic dentistry



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This reflection is perhaps most appropriate as Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (SMU), the youngest University in South Africa, crosses the 5-year mark of its existence. It is a privilege to have served as the first Head of the School of Oral Health Sciences and subsequently as its first Deputy Vice Chancellor for Research, Postgraduate Studies and Innovation. The fact that the school have been in existence for many more years under different institutional arrangements before its incorporation into the new university (SMU) brings unique opportunities and challenges that may not be characteristic of a new dental school nor an existing dental school. It is for this reason that it would require strong, effective leadership at all levels to navigate this uniqueness for the betterment of the school as it continues to offer one of the flagship programmes of the University. At the same time adapting to the ever-increasing demands in the higher education sector, such as 'massification' of higher education and demands from the society, at large.

There are elements of effective leadership in the school as it managed to accredit all its three dental undergraduate programmes over the past five years and more recently its postgraduate programmes. There is a strong element of transformation in leadership at the school, with six out of its nine heads of department being women. Whilst this growth is encouraging, women have not yet achieved parity in opportunity to assume head of school leadership role at SMU, and in South Africa in general. This may reflect on the general pool of potential leaders in academic dentistry, particularly among women. At this point, it is important to reflect on the general need for leadership in academic dentistry, as many of the existing predominantly male senior academics age and retire.

Leadership revolves around having the personality traits that supports effective communication, motivation, inspiration and encouragement, through which leaders inspire individuals. Verma et al.¹ described five traits of leaders, which resonates with my experience in leadership, namely analytical interpreter, strategic thinker, team/camaraderie builder, emotional intelligence and commitment to 'Beta Mode' of continuous improvement. In addition to these traits, a leader in academic dentistry must have a well-developed political

acumen, which would be important in developing clear, forward-looking vision that is attainable with the often limited resources made available by the University and/or the Provincial Health Department. Dental deans need to acquire these skills not only to effectively respond to innovations and transformational changes in dental education, but also because deans have to commit major parts of the time of academics and students to providing patient care, thereby constraining the time and resources available for research. Yet, research is key to their career advancement.



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Therefore, an academic with leadership skills and previous experience of the complexities and nuances of dental academic centers should be preferred candidate to lead a dental school. With a candidate with good leadership skills, but no previous experience in a dental academic institution, there is a risk of such candidate failing to grasp the importance of the complex interrelationships between education and training, clinical services and oral health research¹. By implication, it might be strategic for institutions to develop leaders from within its ranks through a well-designed leadership skills training and succession planning.

It is clear that the potential gap in leadership in academic dentistry in general and among women in particular, would require urgent investment in training at all levels of leadership hierarchy, namely frontline leadership, service level leadership and institutional leadership. In particular, for institutional leadership, in addition to acquiring the requisite skills, there is a need to identify appropriate role models and a supportive mentorship programme. There is no doubt that the next phase of growth of the School of Oral Health Sciences at SMU would be better served by investing now in empowering and growing the pool of potential leaders, not only for SMU, but also for academic dentistry in South Africa in general.

Reference

1. Verma M, Wilson NHF, Lynch CD, Nanda A. Leadership in academic dentistry. *Journal of Dentistry*; 2019; 87; 2-6. Doi:10.1016/j.jdent.2019.05.002

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