

# Leadership in academia: Key leadership behaviours and roles of formal and peer leaders

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## Abstract

The university setting presents unique leadership challenges and opportunities that existing organisational theories often overlook. This research explored effective academic leadership across different university team types, including board, research, administrative, and technical staff teams. Acknowledging that leadership extends beyond formal leaders, the study examined key leadership behaviours of both formal and peer leaders. Using a mixed-methods approach, Study 1 involved qualitative interviews with 36 employees from various university levels. Thematic analysis identified 52 leadership behaviours for formal leaders and 40 for peer leaders. In Study 2, three focus groups – each with three HR professionals – clustered these behaviours into 16 leadership roles for formal leaders and 14 for peer leaders. The variety and context-specific nature of these roles highlight the need for a tailored leadership model in academia. By identifying both formal and peer leadership roles, this research provides a foundation for developing shared leadership structures within academic teams. Moreover, the findings demonstrate the broader applicability of this classification across different team types. Ultimately, this work offers a foundation for academic teams to reflect on and discuss diverse leadership practices, inspiring both academic leaders and team members to engage in leadership more consciously and collaboratively.

## Keywords

shared leadership, academic leadership, peer leadership, leadership roles, distributed leadership, role differentiation, leadership taxonomy, higher education, university, leader roles

## Introduction

Universities have historically contributed to knowledge, culture, and societal development (Rüegg, 2004). Beyond education, they drive innovation, collaborate with stakeholders, and foster regional and national progress (Blume et al., 2017; Feola et al., 2021). Today, universities operate in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment. One challenge is the increasing competition for reputation, funding, and market position (Bolden et al., 2015). Another is the digital revolution, which challenges universities' traditional roles as primary sources of learning, with the rise of online platforms and GenAI (Moscardini et al., 2022). Additionally, research faces growing international competition amid resource scarcity (Deem, 2004; Rehbock, 2020), intensifying 'publish or perish' pressures that can affect research quality and staff well-being (Ryazanova and McNamara, 2016). These challenges fall heavily on academic leaders, who are expected to guide their institutions towards success (Rehbock, 2020).

## Leadership in academic contexts

Leadership plays a crucial role in academic staff and student success (Bryman, 2007; Samad et al., 2022). Effective academic leaders can enhance employee retention (Harris et al., 2016), job satisfaction (Kasalak et al., 2022), organisational

commitment (Mwesigwa et al., 2020), and performance (Jameel and Ahmad, 2020). Yet, it remains unclear what leadership behaviours define success in academic contexts – a gap this study addresses.

While existing organisational leadership models offer useful frameworks, many scholars argue they fall short in capturing academia's unique dynamics (Rowley and Sherman, 2003; Samad et al., 2022). More specifically, academic institutions have a specific leadership structure, blending academic and non-academic leadership (Rowley and Sherman, 2003). While administrative roles are often filled by externally recruited leaders, research groups, departments, and faculties are typically run by academic leaders, often promoted for their teaching or research rather than leadership expertise. Many faculty members find themselves in leadership roles without formal training or aspiration (Rowley and Sherman, 2003),

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often balancing leadership duties with ongoing research and teaching. Leadership mandates are also temporary, with individuals frequently returning to peer roles within the same team.

Given these unique dynamics, a context-specific understanding of effective academic leadership – defined here as leadership that improves team effectiveness and well-being – is essential. Here, it is important to recognise that universities encompass a diverse range of leadership roles, with departmental chairs and deans serving functions that differ significantly from those of research group leaders or administrative heads. While much research has focused on high-level institutional leaders, little is known about leadership within faculties and departments (Bolden et al., 2012).

Furthermore, many studies conflate academic leadership with academic management, emphasising operations rather than people leadership (Bolden et al., 2015). Notably, research leadership remains underexplored despite the crucial role research group leaders play in directing projects, mentoring junior researchers, and shaping group vision (Middlehurst et al., 2009; Rehbock, 2020). Given their impact on academic success and institutional reputation, Rehbock (2020) emphasises the need for a systemic approach to developing diverse leadership types in higher education.

A contemporary understanding of effective leadership is thus needed across all university levels – formal leaders of departments, research teams, and administrative or technical teams. Our first research aim is therefore to identify the key leadership behaviours and roles of these formal academic leaders at different levels within the university.

### *Expanding the scope of effective leadership in academia*

To deepen our understanding of effective academic leadership, it is essential to consider another defining feature of the academic environment and a cornerstone of academic identity: autonomy (Henkel, 2005). Academics typically enjoy freedom in research, teaching, and work organisation (Rehbock, 2020), resulting in democratic, decentralised decision-making processes (Bolden et al., 2012). Consequently, hierarchical leadership models are often ineffective, and shared or distributed leadership is increasingly viewed as essential (Bolden et al., 2012).

Shared leadership encompasses various structures – from co-leadership to self-steering teams – and in this study, we define it as a structure in which ‘leadership is conceived of as a process dispersed across the organisation (within systems, activities, practices and relationships), rather than residing within the traits, actions and/or capabilities of ‘leaders’ in formal positions’ (Bolden et al., 2015, 2008: 258). It involves both formal leaders and peer leaders – team members who informally assume leadership responsibilities without official recognition (e.g. organising social events to boost team cohesion).

Research in other domains, such as sports and business, has shown that peer leaders can positively influence both team performance and well-being (Butalia et al., 2025a, 2025c; D’Innocenzo et al., 2014; Edelman et al., 2024; Fransen et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2014). In education, shared leadership improves teachers’ organisational

commitment (Hulpia et al., 2009), and empowering leadership enhances job satisfaction among university employees (Horoub and Zargar, 2022). Bolden et al. (2015: 40) further argued that ‘conditions have changed and the VUCA context of contemporary higher education means that command and control are no longer a viable option, if indeed they ever were. From these perspectives, shared leadership is not simply a desirable approach to leadership within higher education but a necessity’. In the same vein, Pearce et al. (2018) argued that shared leadership is ‘a potential elixir for leading public institutions of higher learning, unleashing creative potential, focusing on pressing strategic imperatives, and enabling sustainable systems that leverage true talent to maximum effect’.

To implement shared leadership effectively, it is crucial to understand what defines strong peer leadership. While prior research has identified key behaviours and roles for peer leaders in other contexts (Edelman et al., 2024; Fransen et al., 2014; Loughhead et al., 2006; Morgeson et al., 2010), these models may not translate directly to the academic environment. Although peer leadership has been widely studied among students, for example, in the context of peer mentoring, there is still limited knowledge about how peer leadership functions among academic staff (Shook and Keup, 2012).

Kezar et al. (2011) emphasised that peer leaders within academic staff can drive meaningful change, yet empirical studies examining their behaviours and specific roles in academic settings remain scarce. Reflecting this gap, Rehbock (2020) called for further investigation into informal peer leadership among academic leaders. Adding to this concern, Floyd and Fung (2017) highlighted a persistent challenge in the implementation of shared leadership: the lack of clarity surrounding leadership roles, including ambiguous responsibilities and boundaries. In academic settings, leadership roles are often neither well-defined nor transparent, both for those in leadership positions and for those expected to engage with them. To address this gap, a clearer understanding of essential leadership behaviours and roles in academic settings is needed, not only for formal leaders, but also for peer leaders. Accordingly, the second aim of our study is to identify the key leadership behaviours and roles of peer leaders across various university levels, including faculty and departmental boards, research groups, and administrative or technical teams.

To achieve both aims, we employed a mixed-methods design inspired by Edelman et al. (2025), who examined leadership behaviours in diverse non-academic organisations. Study 1 used qualitative interviews to identify leadership behaviours among formal and peer leaders. Study 2 involved focus groups to cluster these behaviours into broader leadership roles, adapted specifically to the academic context.

### **Study 1 – Qualitative interviews to identify formal and peer leadership behaviours**

#### *Methods*

*Research design.* We employed a qualitative research design, particularly suited for exploratory studies as it captures

diverse perspectives and generates rich insights through emerging themes (Locke, 2001; Sparkes and Smith, 2013). Following the principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2001), we adopted an inductive approach in which data guides theoretical development – an appropriate method given the limited understanding of leadership behaviours in academic settings (Chun Tie et al., 2019).

Guided by this framework, we conducted qualitative interviews with university staff, coded the described leadership behaviours, and grouped similar codes under overarching categories to identify higher-order themes. These themes provided the foundation for Study 2, which uses focus groups to cluster these behaviours into broader leadership roles. This process was applied separately for formal and peer leaders.

**Participant recruitment.** Participants were recruited from a single, high-performing university that consistently ranks among the global top 100 and excels in securing international research funding. This ensured that identified leadership behaviours reflected not only participants' preferences but also institutional excellence.

Using stratified purposive sampling, we selected participants across three disciplinary domains – (1) Biomedical Sciences, (2) Science, Engineering and Technology, and (3) Humanities and Social Sciences – each with distinct organisational cultures. Within each domain, we included members from three types of teams: (1) faculty or departmental boards, (2) research groups, and (3) administrative or technical teams. To capture multiple perspectives, we included both formal leaders and team members in each stratum.

In line with saturation guidelines (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink and Kaiser, 2022), we conducted 36 interviews – 12 per domain – with participants spanning all subgroups. From 65 invitations sent to Dutch-speaking staff aged 18–65, we achieved a 55% response rate. Figure 1 provides a visual overview of participant distribution.

**Participants.** The final sample included 22 men and 14 women, with a mean age of 48.36 years ( $SD = 8.52$ ) and an average tenure of 17.57 years ( $SD = 11.27$ ), ranging

from eight months to 38 years. Most participants held a PhD ( $n = 26$ ), and 23 held leadership roles – often simultaneously serving as team members in one context and leaders in another.

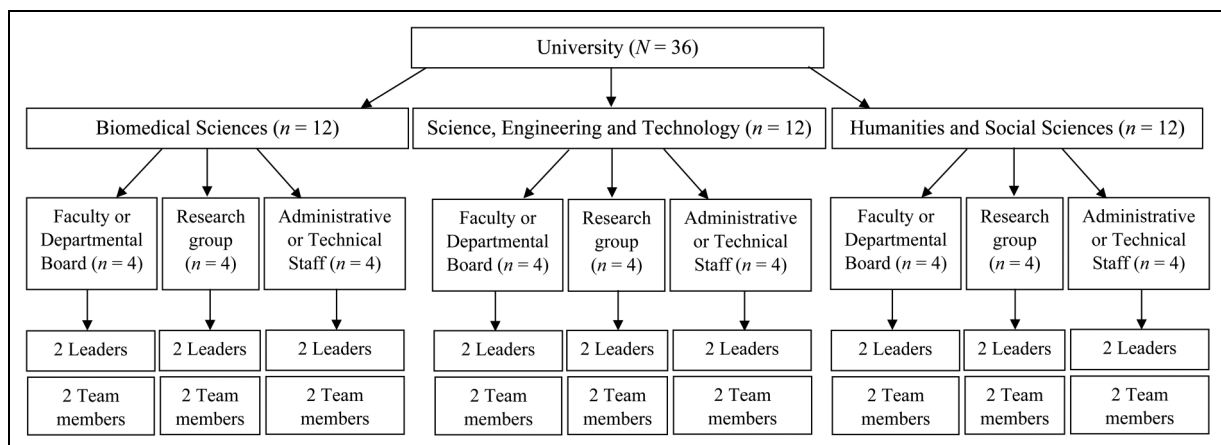
**Interview protocol.** Interviews were conducted by the second author and seven trained HR professionals (all women;  $M_{Age} = 40.63$ ,  $SD = 7.54$ ), all of whom worked at the same university and had one to nine years of coaching experience in that setting. The second author conducted the first interview and shared the recording and transcript with the team to ensure consistency. Each interviewer submitted their first interview recording for feedback.

Interviews took place online and were conducted in the participants' native language. A semi-structured format was used to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility for in-depth responses (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). The protocol, adapted from Edelmann et al. (2025), began with participants reflecting on positive leadership behaviours of peer leaders in their current team – defined as behaviours enhancing team functioning, effectiveness, satisfaction, or well-being. They then described ideal leadership behaviours in that context. This dual perspective on both their current and ideal leaders ensured a broad, representative set of behaviours. After summarising participants' responses and checking for their accuracy, the same questions were then asked regarding the leadership behaviours of *formal* leaders.

**Data analysis.** With participants' consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Identifying details were removed, and transcripts were stored securely. Analysis was conducted in NVivo following a thematic analysis approach aligned with Grounded Theory.

The process involved three steps (Dey, 1999): (1) *open coding* (i.e. breaking text into discrete parts); *axial coding* (i.e. connecting codes to identify patterns); and *selective coding* (i.e. developing overarching themes that integrate findings) (Dey, 1999).

The second author conducted open coding, while axial and selective coding were performed collaboratively through peer review within the research team. Any disagreements were resolved through team discussions involving both academics and HR professionals, incorporating diverse



**Figure 1.** Visual representation of the participants across strata.

perspectives to enhance credibility – a process known as investigator triangulation (Carter et al., 2014).

## Results

Interview durations ranged from 50 to 97 min ( $M = 70.44$ ,  $SD = 12.11$ ), resulting in a total of 42 h of recordings. Transcripts averaged 17 single-spaced pages per interview ( $SD = 3.02$ ), with over 608 pages collected across the 36 interviews. The coding process initially yielded 175 distinct behaviours for formal leaders and 143 for peer leaders. In the next step, codes with overlapping content were consolidated into broader, overarching behaviours. For instance, two peer leadership behaviours – (1) ‘Organising activities to show gratitude, giving compliments, and showing recognition by, for example, sending emails on who has received publications or awards,’ and (2) ‘Showing gratitude and recognition of someone’s work and effort’ – were merged into a single behaviour: ‘Appreciating: Acknowledging the work of colleagues, as well as creating structures or practices to explicitly show this recognition or gratitude (e.g. by sending an email to the team when a team member has received a publication or award)’.

After eight iterative rounds of revision, the final set comprised 52 leadership behaviours for formal leaders and 40 for peer leaders. Each behaviour was assigned a label and a concise description reflecting its underlying components. The complete lists of leadership behaviours are presented in Table 1 (formal leaders) and Table 2 (peer leaders).

## Study 2 – Focus groups clustering behaviours into leadership roles

### Methods

**Participants.** Twenty HR staff members from the same university were invited to participate, with nine accepting (response rate: 45%). Non-participation was due to time constraints or the inability to find a suitable date for a joint meeting. The nine participants, split evenly across three focus groups, were all university administrative staff – most from the HR Talent and Development Department, and three with educational leadership expertise. The group included two men and seven women ( $M_{Age} = 44.11$ ,  $SD = 8.08$ ), with an average of 6.78 years of university experience ( $SD = 5.36$ ).

**Research design.** Following prior research, the clustering process involved two phases: individual and group card-sorting exercises (Edelmann et al., 2025; Hawley, 2008; Thomas and Johnson, 2013). In the **individual phase**, participants completed two separate card sorts (one for formal and one for peer leadership behaviours). Each card displayed a single leadership behaviour and its definition – 52 cards for formal leaders, 40 for peer leaders. Participants grouped the cards based on content similarity, determining both the number and size of clusters, with each behaviour appearing in only one cluster. A researcher joined via video call to answer questions and document the rationale behind participants’ groupings.

In the **group phase**, participants met in person to merge their individual groupings into a consensus clustering.

Guided by a moderator, they compared, discussed, and refined their groupings to form a shared set of leadership roles.

The research team then compared results across focus groups. Following Paul (2008), two behaviours were merged if they appeared together in at least two out of the three groups. This was done separately for formal and peer leadership behaviours. At the end of the session, participants rated their perceived group consensus on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *completely*).

### Results

Group sessions, recorded with participant consent, lasted between 132 and 157 min. The average perceived consensus was high ( $M = 5.89$  on a 7-point scale).

Most of the 52 formal and 40 peer leadership behaviours were clustered consistently across groups. However, four behaviours (two formal, two peer) did not meet the consensus threshold. These were discussed by the research team until agreement was reached.

The final output included **16 leadership roles for formal leaders and 14 for peer leaders**. Each role was given a clear, descriptive label based on its underlying behaviours. The roles, their definitions, associated behaviours, and the number of citations from interviews is shown in **Table 1 (formal leaders)** and **Table 2 (peer leaders)**. Leadership roles were ranked by the number of interviews in which their associated behaviours were mentioned. Multiple citations in a single interview were counted only once.

We did not analyse differences in citation frequency across scientific domains or between leaders and team members, as these categories were included solely to ensure a representative sample and are not expected to yield substantial variation. However, to address prior calls to explore diverse forms of leadership in higher education (e.g. Rehbock, 2020), we did examine citation patterns across team types. The results show that the majority of leadership behaviours – 71.2% for formal leaders and 65% for peer leaders – were mentioned across all three team types (board teams, research teams, and administrative/technical staff teams). Only a small proportion of behaviours were unique to a single team type (5.7% for formal leaders and 12.5% for peer leaders).

### Discussion

The academic context presents unique leadership challenges that are often inadequately addressed by general organisational theories. To better understand effective academic leadership, we used a mixed-methods approach, including interviews and focus groups, to identify leadership behaviours and roles specific to universities. Importantly, we included both formal leaders and team members from board teams, research groups, and administrative/technical teams. A key aspect of our study was that we did not only examine leadership behaviours from formal leaders, but also from peer leaders.

Our classification yielded 16 leadership roles for formal leaders (comprising 52 distinct behaviours) and 14 roles for peer leaders (comprising 40 behaviours). A key finding is that most leadership behaviours were cited across the three team types (board teams, research groups, and administrative or technical teams), supporting the generalisability of our

**Table 1.** The leadership roles for formal leaders in a university context, together with their definition and underpinning leadership behaviours, ranked according to the total number of interviews in which their underpinning leadership behaviours were cited.

Formal leadership role	Underpinning behaviours	Total number of interviews in which the behaviour was cited (Interviews in board teams/research teams/administrative and technical teams)
<p><b>Task leader:</b> The formal leader dares to make decisions and communicates them quickly to the team. Furthermore, the formal leader selects the right people for the team and coordinates regular team meetings. The formal leader creates clarity around tasks and responsibilities, chooses priorities, and follows up closely. (n = 66)</p> <p><b>Conflict-resolution leader:</b> The formal leader intervenes in conflicts within the team and acts in a solution-oriented way. The formal leader also dares to have difficult conversations and intervenes when work is not being done correctly or agreements are not being kept. Above all, this person radiates calm in crisis situations. (n = 63)</p> <p><b>Social leader:</b> The formal leader organises social team activities during and/or outside work (or supports team members to do so). Furthermore, the formal leader shows interest in the employees and their work and opens up to the team but keeps an appropriate distance. (n = 55)</p>	<p><b>Coordinating team meetings:</b> Regularly planning, preparing, and leading team meetings to monitor the team's functioning and to make joint decisions.</p> <p><b>Making decisions quickly and informing the team:</b> Daring to make decisions, making concrete decisions quickly, and also communicating these decisions quickly to the team.</p> <p><b>Monitoring work:</b> Keeping an overview of all ongoing tasks and projects and following this up closely.</p> <p><b>Creating clarity about each other's work:</b> Ensuring that each other's responsibilities and current work are known and clarifying the dependencies between all team members.</p> <p><b>Creating clarity around expectations:</b> Making sure everyone knows each other's responsibilities and tasks.</p> <p><b>Providing structure:</b> Establishing a clear framework in which rules, agreements, and expectations are clear, and following this up.</p> <p><b>Prioritising:</b> Choosing not to want to do everything and focusing on things that are priorities.</p> <p><b>Daring to intervene and reprimand in case of conflict:</b> Giving employees negative feedback and reprimanding them when they do not do their work correctly or fail to honour their commitments.</p> <p><b>Remaining calm in difficult situations and during difficult conversations:</b> Communicating sensitive issues (such as critical feedback) in a constructive, polite, and respectful manner. Furthermore, patiently listening to matters with which one personally disagrees and keeping one's own emotions under control.</p> <p><b>Problem-solving:</b> Searching for solutions to work-related problems and suggesting them to the team. Also warning of possible problems in the future, correcting what goes wrong, and giving tips to prevent recurrence in the future.</p> <p><b>Solution-focused conflict management:</b> When problems or conflicts arise, keeping calm and maintaining a positive attitude by encouraging the team to focus on the content rather than on the negative emotions (e.g. by offering solutions rather than looking for blame).</p> <p><b>Mediating relational conflicts within the team:</b> Being attentive to the group dynamic by mediating conflicts within the team and helping to find a solution.</p> <p><b>Crisis management:</b> In potential crisis situations adopting a proactive attitude, coming up with quick and clear solutions, and paying attention to the well-being of team members. Offering stability so that even in crisis situations the team can stay on course.</p> <p><b>Daring to have difficult conversations:</b> Daring to have uncomfortable conversations and discussing sensitive issues (e.g. negative feedback or conflicts) quickly rather than putting them off.</p> <p><b>Spending time with team members:</b> Spending time with team members to get to know them better and showing interest and commitment in their work.</p> <p><b>Organising or encouraging social activities during work:</b> Supporting, encouraging, or self-organising informal activities during working hours with the team.</p> <p><b>Organising or encouraging social activities outside work:</b> Supporting, encouraging or self-organising informal activities outside working hours so that the team can get to know each other better.</p> <p><b>Creating a good atmosphere:</b> Ensuring a good atmosphere in the workplace by providing gifts (e.g. for special occasions, such as a team member's birthday) and leaving room for jokes and humour.</p> <p><b>Keeping an appropriate distance from the team:</b> Maintaining an appropriate distance by not being too close to the team and keeping work and private life sufficiently separate.</p> <p><b>Opening up to employees:</b> Sharing things from one's private life (both positive and negative) with the team.</p>	<p>15 (6/5/4)</p> <p>13 (7/4/2)</p> <p>10 (5/4/1)</p> <p>9 (3/2/4)</p> <p>9 (2/3/4)</p> <p>9 (2/1/6)</p> <p>1 (0/1/0)</p> <p>16 (4/4/8)</p> <p>13 (7/3/3)</p> <p>10 (5/4/1)</p> <p>8 (2/5/1)</p> <p>7 (2/1/4)</p> <p>6 (1/3/2)</p> <p>3 (2/0/1)</p> <p>13 (4/6/3)</p> <p>16 (2/6/8)</p> <p>14 (3/5/6)</p> <p>5 (1/3/1)</p> <p>4 (0/1/3)</p> <p>3 (0/1/2)</p>

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Formal leadership role	Underpinning behaviours	Total number of interviews in which the behaviour was cited (Interviews in board teams/research teams/ administrative and technical teams)
<b>Well-being leader:</b> The formal leader is attentive to the well-being of team members both at and outside of work. The formal leader is also mindful of a healthy work-life balance for team members. (n = 47)	<b>Caring for well-being at work:</b> Taking initiatives to increase employees' job satisfaction, for example, by understanding and supporting their work situation.	19 (5/6/8)
<b>Empowering leader:</b> The formal leader creates a team structure where team members are given autonomy and responsibilities and dares to delegate their own tasks to team members. (n = 44)	<b>Caring for well-being outside work:</b> Paying attention to each employee's personal well-being both spontaneously and by regularly initiating informal conversations, asking how things are going in their private life and taking the time to listen.	18 (4/8/6)
<b>Psychological safety leader:</b> The formal leader creates a safe climate within the team where every team member feels good and everyone is treated equally and where the formal leader is also sufficiently accessible to the team. (n = 37)	<b>Being mindful of employees' work-life balance:</b> Ensuring that employees have a healthy work-life balance.	10 (1/5/4)
<b>External leader:</b> The formal leader builds bridges between the own team and other teams/organisations and informs the team about relevant decisions from above. The formal leader represents the team inside and outside the organisation, and also encourages team members to communicate the work to the outside world. The formal leader communicates openly and transparently about the own decisions and ensures that team members understand the reasons underlying a decision. (n = 34)	<b>Delegating own tasks to team members:</b> Delegating own work to the team and explicitly assigning certain tasks to team members, taking into account their status, motivation, or expertise.	21 (5/8/8)
<b>Participative leader:</b> The formal leader actively seeks input from the team and also encourages the team to take initiative and work independently. (n = 30)	<b>Giving team members autonomy and responsibility:</b> Giving employees the freedom and confidence to organise their own work.	12 (4/3/5)
	<b>Creating optimal team structure:</b> Selecting team members to ensure sufficient diversity and compatibility within the team, and adjusting job functions according to efficiency.	8 (4/1/3)
	<b>Implementing a structure of shared leadership:</b> Confiding aspects of leadership to team members and possibly also appointing leaders within the team. Also ensuring transparent communication of this to the team.	3 (2/1/0)
	<b>Ensuring a safe team environment where everyone feels good:</b> Creating a safe atmosphere within the team where everyone feels good, where no one is excluded and where feelings can be openly discussed. This is done by not judging and by indicating that vulnerability can be shown.	14 (9/4/1)
	<b>Treating everyone equally:</b> Treating every employee equally and making everyone feel equally important, for example, by listening to everyone in the team regardless of their status or by ensuring a proportionate workload.	13 (5/6/2)
	<b>Being accessible:</b> Being sufficiently (physically/digitally) present and communicating one's own availability transparently to the team.	10 (3/3/4)
	<b>Building bridges with other teams:</b> Building bridges with other teams within the organisation, for example, by initiating joint projects or highlighting similarities with other teams.	9 (3/4/2)
	<b>Ensuring transparent communication:</b> Being transparent about one's own decisions and ensuring that team members understand the underlying arguments or reasons.	8 (4/2/2)
	<b>Informing the team:</b> Ensuring that the team is informed on time about, for example, the context of certain procedures and decisions. In doing so, also filtering the most relevant information and passing it on to the right people.	8 (2/1/5)
	<b>Ensuring a flow of information from higher up:</b> Ensuring that relevant information from higher up is properly communicated to the team.	4 (2/0/2)
	<b>Representing the team inside and outside the organisation:</b> Representing the team to others, both inside and outside the organisation, defending the interests of one's own team.	4 (2/2/0)
	<b>Stimulating communication with the outside world:</b> Encouraging the team to communicate their work to the outside world.	1 (1/0/0)
	<b>Asking for input from the team:</b> Wherever possible, giving every team member a say in decisions and encouraging them to express their opinions rather than just making a decision themselves.	22 (9/5/8)
	<b>Encouraging initiative:</b> Encouraging the team to take initiative and show active participation. Encouraging the team to work independently and think of ways in which their work can be more efficient.	8 (0/5/3)

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Formal leadership role	Underpinning behaviours	Total number of interviews in which the behaviour was cited (Interviews in board teams/research teams/administrative and technical teams)
<b>Team-oriented leader:</b> The formal leader puts team interests above their own by taking on less pleasant tasks and being open to input from the team. The formal leader stands up for the team in difficult situations, involves them in decisions, and looks at things from the team members' perspective. ( <i>n</i> = 18)	<b>Putting the team first:</b> Not acting out of self-interest but out of team interest. Being open to democratic discussions and input that differs from your own opinion, seeking support for decisions within the group, and also taking on less pleasant tasks yourself. <b>Looking from the perspective of the team or team members:</b> Looking at problems from the perspective of the team or particular team members and taking into account their busy schedules. <b>Standing up for one's own team:</b> Protecting the team from negative messages, standing up for the team in difficult situations (e.g. by taking the blame), and letting the team know that he/she is fully behind them.	7 (5/1/1) 6 (2/1/3) 5 (2/0/3)
<b>Directive leader:</b> The formal leader develops a vision, discusses the underlying values of the organisation, and clarifies how the work of the team members contributes to this. The formal leader then also acts consistently in line with this vision and values. ( <i>n</i> = 14)	<b>Developing and pursuing a vision:</b> Developing a vision, sharing it with the team, and clarifying how their work contributes to it. Also, follow up on whether the team acts in line with this vision. <b>Pursuing values:</b> Emphasising the societal relevance of the work the team does and discussing the organisation's values with team members. Consistently acting in line with these values, as well as one's own.	8 (5/2/1) 6 (5/1/0)
<b>Team development leader:</b> The formal leader pays attention to the development of team members by providing growth opportunities and strengthening their talents. ( <i>n</i> = 14)	<b>Caring for employee development:</b> Responding to employees' career wishes and providing growth opportunities to strengthen and further develop their talents, as well as training new employees.	14 (6/3/5)
<b>Adaptive leader:</b> The formal leader adapts one's own leadership to both the person and the situation. Furthermore, the leader is open to change and also dares to take risks. ( <i>n</i> = 13)	<b>Flexible leadership:</b> Adapting one's own leadership behaviour flexibly to both the person and the situation, keeping a good balance between all aspects of leadership. <b>Daring to initiate change:</b> Daring to take risks and having an open attitude to change.	11 (4/3/4) 2 (1/0/1)
<b>Motivational leader:</b> The formal leader shows gratitude and appreciation for the work of team members. The formal leader motivates the team by pointing out their successes, but also supports them during setbacks. ( <i>n</i> = 12)	<b>Motivating employees:</b> Reminding the team of their achievements, giving positive feedback, and cheering them up in the face of setbacks. At the same time, also encouraging the team to be better than the competition. <b>Showing gratitude:</b> Showing that the team's efforts are appreciated. Expressing gratitude to them and showing confidence that they will do their job well.	8 (1/4/3) 4 (2/1/1)
<b>Self-critical leader:</b> The formal leader dares to be vulnerable by sharing their own mistakes or uncertainties with the team. Furthermore, the leader is open to criticism and encourages team members to give criticism. ( <i>n</i> = 11)	<b>Being vulnerable:</b> Admitting one's own mistakes and sharing uncertainties or doubts with the team. Daring the team to ask for help and question themselves. <b>Allowing criticism:</b> Having an open attitude towards criticism, responding to it, and encouraging employees to give feedback.	7 (5/2/0) 4 (2/0/2)
<b>Self-developing leader:</b> The formal leader reflects on their own role as leader and is willing to develop this leadership further. ( <i>n</i> = 6)	<b>Reflecting on the own leadership role:</b> Reflecting on one's own leadership style and being prepared to develop further in this respect.	6 (3/2/1)
<b>Exemplary leader:</b> The formal leader always sets a good example. ( <i>n</i> = 1)	<b>Setting a good example:</b> Always leading by example.	1 (1/0/0)

**Table 2.** The leadership roles for peer leaders in a university context, together with their definition and underpinning leadership behaviours, ranked according to the total number of interviews in which their underpinning leadership behaviours were cited.

Peer leadership role	Underpinning behaviours	Total number of interviews in which the behaviour was cited (Interviews in board teams/research teams/administrative and technical teams)
<p><b>Proactive leader:</b> The proactive leader does not wait but is forward-looking and anticipates developments, takes on additional responsibilities, and always fulfils them. (<i>n</i> = 44)</p> <p><b>Cooperation leader:</b> The cooperation leader helps colleagues with their work and encourages knowledge sharing within the team. Furthermore, this person monitors good cooperation within the team and takes the lead during team meetings. (<i>n</i> = 40)</p> <p><b>Psychological safety leader:</b> The psychological safety leader ensures respectful and honest interactions between colleagues, creating a safe environment. This person radiates calmness, ensures transparent communication and also dares to show vulnerability towards colleagues. (<i>n</i> = 39)</p> <p><b>Social leader:</b> The social leader maintains informal contact with colleagues by organising social team activities outside work, having regular conversations, and taking initiative on special events (such as a colleague's birthday). (<i>n</i> = 39)</p> <p><b>Welfare leader:</b> The welfare leader looks after the welfare of colleagues, makes sure everyone is heard, and motivates them (e.g. by acknowledging their work). (<i>n</i> = 35)</p>	<p><b>Acting proactively and taking initiative:</b> Acting quickly and proactively taking on additional tasks and initiatives (e.g. proposing concrete ideas on how the work can be improved or made more pleasant). In addition, also thinking about what is to come and anticipating possible problems.</p> <p><b>Doing more than what is required:</b> Doing more than what is necessary and also encouraging others to do so.</p> <p><b>Taking responsibility and fulfilling commitments:</b> Taking on responsibilities and always fulfilling them, even in difficult or busy times.</p> <p><b>Helping colleagues with work:</b> Offering colleagues quick and constructive help and proactively taking over tasks from them. Advising colleagues on work-related problems and helping them in finding solutions.</p> <p><b>Encouraging knowledge sharing:</b> Regularly organising moments when knowledge, tips and experiences can be exchanged, and ensuring that good examples are shared.</p> <p><b>Monitoring team functioning and cooperation:</b> Monitoring the good functioning of the team. If there is poor cooperation, discussing it with the team and suggesting possible solutions.</p> <p><b>Coordinating team meetings:</b> Taking the responsibility for organising and preparing meetings. Also leading these meetings, keeping an eye on time, and taking notes.</p> <p><b>Making oneself vulnerable:</b> Daring to make oneself vulnerable by asking colleagues for help, admitting mistakes, and sharing one's own insecurities or doubts with colleagues.</p> <p><b>Staying calm:</b> Remaining calm at all times, putting problems into perspective, and helping colleagues to keep a positive attitude. Also, trying yourself to avoid your own irritation towards certain colleagues and to remain calm and polite.</p> <p><b>Ensuring transparent communication:</b> Daring to address unpleasant topics and being honest with colleagues instead of gossiping. Being transparent about the own interests and responsibilities.</p> <p><b>Ensuring respectful and honest interactions:</b> Treating all colleagues with respect and patience. In addition, trying to take individual needs into account and to not discriminate between colleagues of different hierarchical status.</p> <p><b>Creating a safe environment:</b> Being patient with colleagues, showing understanding, and being forgiving of mistakes.</p> <p><b>Organising social events outside of work:</b> Organising social activities outside of working hours in order to get to know each other better.</p> <p><b>Having informal contact with colleagues:</b> Maintaining good contacts with colleagues through regular informal contacts (e.g. conversations or messages).</p> <p><b>Paying attention to special events of colleagues:</b> Paying attention to important events in a colleague's private life (e.g. birthday, birth of a child) and taking the initiative for a gift or a visit.</p> <p><b>Being attentive to the well-being of colleagues:</b> Being concerned about the well-being and needs of colleagues and acting as a point of contact. Noticing when things are not going well, offering a listening ear, and offering help.</p> <p><b>Giving colleagues a voice:</b> Having an ear for free speech and ensuring that everyone is heard, regardless of their status. In addition, being easily accessible yourself.</p> <p><b>Motivating colleagues:</b> Motivating colleagues for their work, for example, by giving compliments, recognising the successes of others, and helping to uplift colleagues in the face of setbacks.</p> <p><b>Appreciating:</b> Acknowledging the work of colleagues, as well as creating structures or practices to explicitly show this recognition or gratitude (e.g. by sending an email to the team when a team member has received a publication or award).</p>	<p>23 (10/5/8)</p> <p>18 (6/6/6)</p> <p>3 (1/0/2)</p> <p>14 (3/5/6)</p> <p>12 (3/4/5)</p> <p>8 (2/3/3)</p> <p>6 (3/2/1)</p> <p>14 (7/3/4)</p> <p>11 (5/5/1)</p> <p>8 (4/3/1)</p> <p>3 (1/1/1)</p> <p>3 (2/1/0)</p> <p>21 (3/9/9)</p> <p>10 (1/5/4)</p> <p>8 (0/4/4)</p> <p>15 (6/7/2)</p> <p>9 (5/2/2)</p> <p>6 (4/1/1)</p> <p>5 (0/2/3)</p>

(continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Peer leadership role	Underpinning behaviours	Total number of interviews in which the behaviour was cited (Interviews in board teams/research teams/administrative and technical teams)
<p><b>Connecting leader:</b> The connecting leader strengthens the cohesion between the various team members, mediates conflicts to reduce tensions, and thus ensures a good atmosphere within the team. Furthermore, this person also opens up to colleagues. (<i>n</i> = 34)</p> <p><b>Liaison leader:</b> The liaison leader represents the team to the formal leader. This person shares information from higher up with the team and also dares to give critical but constructive feedback to the formal leader. (<i>n</i> = 28)</p> <p><b>Identity-strengthening leader:</b> The identity-strengthening leader puts the team's interests above the own, clarifies the common vision and always keeps this in mind. Furthermore, this person makes decisions in function of this vision and involves the team in this in order to create a support base within the team. (<i>n</i> = 25)</p> <p><b>Task leader:</b> The task leader monitors the work planning and the team goals, and ensures that the tasks are also completed. This person also ensures a fair distribution of tasks within the team. (<i>n</i> = 19)</p> <p><b>Logistics leader:</b> The logistics leader takes care of the practical organisation of the team. This person ensures that the necessary materials are available and monitors the rules of hygiene and safety on the work floor. (<i>n</i> = 12)</p> <p><b>Development leader:</b> The development leader trains (new) team members and is the point of contact regarding their needs and development wishes. (<i>n</i> = 10)</p>	<p><b>Caring for connection and integration:</b> Organising informal get-togethers with the entire team (e.g. coffee break, lunch, team meeting) to create cohesion within the team and to better integrate newcomers into the team.</p> <p><b>Reducing tensions within the team:</b> Helping to resolve conflicts within the team by naming them and searching for a solution.</p> <p><b>Creating a cheerful atmosphere:</b> Creating a fun, cheerful atmosphere at work through jokes, informal conversations, or decorating the office at festive events.</p> <p><b>Opening up to colleagues:</b> Sometimes sharing private matters or emotions with colleagues.</p> <p><b>Representing upwards:</b> Being the bridge between the team and the formal leader, for example, informing the formal leader about the team's functioning, presenting problems, and asking for the formal leader's opinion.</p> <p><b>Informing colleagues:</b> Informing colleagues about decisions and conclusions of meetings.</p> <p><b>Giving critical feedback to the formal leader:</b> Daring to give the formal leader critical but constructive feedback on his/her leadership or content-related decisions.</p> <p><b>Sharing information from above:</b> Getting information from a higher level within the organisation and transferring this information to the team.</p> <p><b>Putting the team first:</b> Acting in the interests of the team rather than out of self-interest. Showing that the team is more important than the individual by looking beyond one's own function/opinion and thinking from the perspective of the team interest.</p> <p><b>Being decisive:</b> Being decisive and confident in taking decisions. This involves extensive discussions and seeking support within the team before making a decision.</p> <p><b>Keeping a shared vision in mind:</b> Clarifying the shared vision and emphasising what everyone has in common.</p> <p><b>Following up on work:</b> Follow up on projects and ensuring tasks are done effectively. Also reminding the team of tasks and agreements and reminding them of past experiences.</p> <p><b>Setting goals and following them up:</b> Clarifying when and how the established goals are to be achieved. In addition, keeping in mind which goals the team has achieved so far and discussing goals that have not (yet) been achieved.</p> <p><b>Ensuring a fair distribution of tasks:</b> Ensuring a fair distribution of tasks, taking into account the situation and wishes of individual colleagues.</p> <p><b>Monitoring logistics:</b> Managing the practical organisation of the team, ensuring that the necessary materials are available, and monitoring the finances.</p> <p><b>Monitoring guidelines:</b> Monitoring the rules regarding order, hygiene, and safety, and reprimanding colleagues if necessary.</p> <p><b>Paying attention to the development of colleagues:</b> training (new) team members, showing interest in the further development and career wishes of colleagues and being available as a point of contact.</p>	<p>16 (2/8/6)</p> <p>10 (3/4/3)</p> <p>4 (1/2/1)</p> <p>4 (1/1/2)</p> <p>14 (4/6/4)</p> <p>5 (2/2/1)</p> <p>7 (2/1/4)</p> <p>2 (1/0/1)</p> <p>16 (7/3/6)</p> <p>5 (3/2/0)</p> <p>4 (3/1/0)</p> <p>8 (4/3/1)</p> <p>6 (3/3/0)</p> <p>5 (2/2/1)</p> <p>9 (4/4/1)</p> <p>3 (0/3/0)</p> <p>10 (2/4/4)</p>

(continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Peer leadership role	Underpinning behaviours	Total number of interviews in which the behaviour was cited (Interviews in board teams/research teams/administrative and technical teams)
<p><b>External leader:</b> The external leader represents the team externally (e.g. the press) and actively builds a network with other teams with the aim of cooperation or information exchange. (n = 3)</p>	<p><b>Representing externally:</b> Representing one's own team and their work to the outside world and taking the lead in communication with external parties (e.g. the media). <b>Encouraging external collaboration:</b> Building a network with other teams with the aim of cooperation or information exchange. Also organising social activities with these other teams.</p>	4 (1/3/0) 3 (0/3/0)
<p><b>Critical leader:</b> The critical leader dares to enter into discussion with colleagues and, if necessary, gives critical feedback. (n = 1)</p>	<p><b>Critically guiding colleagues:</b> Daring to discuss things with colleagues and, if necessary, giving critical feedback.</p>	1 (1/0/0)
<p><b>Innovative leader:</b> The innovative leader shows innovative work behaviour and dares to take alternative paths for improved work processes. (n = 1)</p>	<p><b>Displaying innovative work behaviour:</b> Daring to think out-of-the box and taking alternative paths in order to innovate and improve work processes.</p>	1 (1/0/0)

classification within a university setting. It is noteworthy that while some leadership roles appear under similar labels for both formal and peer leaders, the specific behaviours underpinning these roles may differ. This reflects how leadership is enacted differently depending on one's formal authority or peer status within the team. At the same time, there is a degree of content overlap between some formal and peer leadership roles (e.g. the role of *Social Leader*), indicating that particular leadership responsibilities may be shared across hierarchical levels. This convergence highlights the importance of collaboration between formal and peer leaders and supports the idea that effective academic leadership often emerges as a shared responsibility within teams. To effectively support such shared responsibility, leadership development initiatives should not only involve both formal and peer leaders, but also anticipate potential implementation challenges. These challenges include clarifying leadership responsibilities and boundaries to minimise role conflict, ensuring a transparent selection process for peer leaders, and involving formal leaders at all stages of implementation (Edelmann et al., 2023; Floyd and Fung, 2017). In what follows, we describe key observations about the content of the identified leadership roles and reflect on how these align with, extend, or challenge existing leadership literature.

A first observation is that ensuring efficient, high-quality work is central to academic leadership. This role of *Task Leader*, seen in both formal and peer leaders, though it was cited more often for formal leaders, includes monitoring work, providing structure, making decisions, and setting goals. Another task-related role for formal leaders is the *Directive Leader*, who develops a vision and upholds organisational values, aligning with previous research on effective departmental leadership (Benoit, 2005; Bryman, 2007; Rehbock, 2020). Our findings extend this, showing that vision development is also important for research group leaders and administrative or technical team leaders. Peer leaders also have task-focused roles, such as *Cooperation Leader* (assisting colleagues with their work, promoting knowledge sharing, and monitoring team functioning), as well as *Proactive Leader* (acting proactively and taking initiative) and *Innovative Leader* (thinking creatively to improve work processes).

A third observation is the emphasis on caring for team members' well-being, both inside and outside the workplace, seen in the *Well-being Leader* role for formal leaders and the *Welfare Leader* role for peer leaders – apparent in board teams, research teams, and administrative and technical teams. This finding highlights the shift in workplace coaching from a focus on performance management in the 1990s to the integration of well-being as a key aspect of leadership (Grant, 2017). The growing evidence that well-being is a crucial predictor of performance further emphasises the need for leaders to prioritise employees' well-being (Grant, 2017; Harter et al., 2003).

Beyond individual care, leaders also contributed to creating a positive team climate. Characteristic leadership behaviours include enhancing group cohesion, and mitigating tensions and conflicts (i.e. *Conflict-resolution Leader* for formal leaders; *Connecting Leader* for peer leaders), cultivating a psychologically safe environment (i.e. *Psychological safety Leader* for both formal and peer leaders), organising social activities (i.e. *Social Leader* for both formal and peer leaders), and

motivating team members (i.e. *Motivational Leader* for formal leaders). Creating a positive work atmosphere to support employee well-being is thus seen as a crucial aspect of academic leadership. Notably, this responsibility is viewed as shared by both formal and peer leaders, underscoring the importance of shared leadership in academic settings, whether in board teams, research groups, or administrative and technical teams (Bolden et al., 2015; Pearce et al., 2018).

Our findings advocate for the integration – rather than separation – of task and social leadership, echoing critiques of traditional role differentiation models (e.g. Bales and Slater, 1955). These dimensions are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary and interconnected in academic leadership. In this context, our results offer further insight into the various facets of task- and social-oriented leadership roles.

Several additional leadership roles extended beyond the task–social dichotomy. For instance, as Bryman (2007) noted, a key aspect of academic leadership is the ability of effective departmental leaders to foster open communication and involve team members in important decisions. Our findings confirm this, with participants highlighting the roles of *Empowering Leader* (granting autonomy and instituting a structure of shared leadership) and *Participative Leader* (seeking team input and encouraging initiative). These roles align with the work of Hulpia et al. (2009), who found that empowering leaders boosted job satisfaction among university staff. Our research also supports the idea that shared leadership is a valuable strategy in higher education, not just for students but also for academic staff (Bolden et al., 2015).

Participants also emphasised that leaders should prioritise the team's interests, advocate for them, and create a unifying vision. These qualities resonate with the identity leadership framework, which views effective leadership as creating a shared social identity (Haslam et al., 2020). According to this perspective, leaders are only effective to the extent that they successfully represent, advance, create, and embed this sense of shared social identity. This is reflected in four dimensions of identity leadership: prototypicality, advancement, entrepreneurship, and impresarioship (Steffens et al., 2014). First, leaders must be seen as part of the group (identity prototypicality), which aligns with the *Exemplary Leader* role for formal leaders. Second, they must prioritise group interests (identity advancement), reflected in the *Team-oriented Leader* role for formal leaders and *Identity-strengthening Leader* for peer leaders. Third, leaders should cultivate a sense of belonging (identity entrepreneurship), which includes enhancing group cohesion, reflected in the *Connecting Leader* role (peer leaders), and defining what the group stands for by outlining core values, norms, and ideals, reflected in the roles of *Identity-strengthening Leader* (peer leaders) and *Directive Leader* (formal leaders). Finally, leaders should make the group's identity visible (identity impresarioship), reflected by organising social activities as *Social Leader* (formal and peer leaders) or taking actions that make the group visible to people outside the group as *External Leader* (formal and peer leaders). While the identity approach to leadership has gained traction in other fields (e.g. organisations, sports, and exercise groups), its application in education contexts is still emerging. Nonetheless, the presence of identity leadership dimensions in our findings reinforces the potential of this approach for higher education leadership (Bolden et al., 2015).

When comparing the leadership roles identified in this study to those in previous contexts, notable differences emerge. Morgeson et al. (2010) outlined 15 leadership roles applicable to both formal and peer leaders in broader organisational settings, while Edelmann et al. (2025), using the same methodology as this study, identified 10 formal and 11 peer leadership roles. In contrast, our study, specifically focused on the university context, identifies 16 formal and 14 peer leadership roles. Although some roles align with those in general organisations (e.g. *Task Leader*, *Social Leader*, *Exemplary Leader*), several novel leadership aspects were observed. Here, we should take into account that less frequently cited roles may still hold significant value, as citation frequency does not always reflect a role's importance.

Firstly, the *Empowering Leader* role for formal leaders emerged, highlighting the value of shared leadership in higher education, as it enables the expertise of more people to be acknowledged and influence change (e.g. Bolden et al., 2015; Pearce et al., 2018). Jones (2014) previously emphasised that shared leadership's success depends on the endorsement and support of the formal leadership hierarchy, thereby reinforcing the importance of the *Empowering Leader* role.

Secondly, the *Adaptive Leader* role was identified, emphasising formal leaders' ability to adjust their leadership style to individuals and situations, embrace change, and take risks. This role is particularly relevant in the unpredictable environment of modern universities and is valued across board teams, research teams, and administrative and technical teams (Bolden et al., 2015).

Thirdly, participants also underscored the importance of criticism in academic leadership. This was noted for both formal leaders, who were appreciated for showing vulnerability, sharing their mistakes or uncertainties, and encouraging feedback (reflected in their role of *Self-critical Leader*), as well as peer leaders, who were recognised for their willingness to engage in discussions and offer constructive feedback when needed (in their roles of *Critical Leader* and *Liaison Leader*). While *Self-critical Leaders* and *Liaison Leaders* were cited across all team types (board teams, research teams, administrative and technical staff teams), the *Critical Leader* role for peer leaders was specifically mentioned in board teams.

Lastly, the *Psychological Safety Leader* role emerged for both formal and peer leaders, focusing on creating a safe environment and ensuring respectful, honest interactions. This role aligns with recent research highlighting the importance of formal leaders in fostering psychological safety (Frazier et al., 2017), but also emphasises that this role is valued across all academic teams, both for formal and peer leaders.

**Practical implications.** The wide range and context-specific nature of the leadership roles identified in this study highlight the need for a tailored approach to leadership within academic institutions. Our categorisation of leadership behaviours offers a useful framework for universities aiming to develop effective leadership across diverse team types.

First, this framework can prompt important conversations about the value of leadership in academia, emphasising that effective leadership takes many forms. Recognising this diversity in leadership roles may expand leaders' perspectives on how they can contribute to team effectiveness and well-being.

Second, while shared leadership is often recommended in academic settings, clear guidance on how to implement it has been lacking (Bolden et al., 2015; Rehbock, 2020). By identifying not just formal, but also peer leadership roles, our findings provide a foundation for establishing shared leadership structures. Teams can use these roles – along with the Shared Leadership Mapping Technique (Fransen et al., 2020b) – to identify key peer leaders and visualise their team's internal leadership networks on each of the roles.

Third, this role framework can inspire academic leaders – formal or informal – to adopt specific leadership behaviours aligned with their team's needs. It also offers valuable input for leadership development programmes, enabling targeted training that strengthens leadership capacity at all levels. By grounding leadership development in a clear, context-specific framework, institutions can enhance leadership effectiveness across board teams, research groups, and administrative or technical teams, ultimately supporting the success of the organisation as a whole.

**Strengths, limitations, and future research avenues.** This study contributes to the literature by presenting a novel, bottom-up categorisation of leadership roles tailored to the university context. Unlike research that focuses solely on senior leaders (e.g. deans or department heads), we examined leadership across all levels – board teams, research teams, and administrative or technical staff teams. The fact that most leadership behaviours were cited across all team types supports the generalisability of our classification. Moreover, by distinguishing between formal and peer leadership roles, the study directly responds to calls for a shared leadership model tailored to the academic context and culture (Jones, 2014).

However, several limitations point to important directions for future research. First, while citation frequency gives an indication of how commonly a behaviour was mentioned, it does not reflect its objective importance. A large-scale quantitative study is needed to assess how the presence and quality of the provided leadership in each of these roles relate to team effectiveness and well-being.

Second, our categorisation maximised role differentiation based on focus group input to prevent overlap. While this approach helps preserve the unique identity of each role, follow-up research could explore whether some roles are consistently enacted by the same individuals and could thus be meaningfully merged. Social network analysis could test correlations between role networks, and roles with high co-occurrence might be consolidated. Necessary Condition Analysis (Dul, 2023; Edelmann et al., 2024) could further clarify whether certain roles are essential for achieving positive outcomes. Prior research in sport teams, for instance, found identity-strengthening and exemplary leadership to be key roles for all leaders, instead of being separate leadership roles (Fransen et al., 2020a).

Third, data collection was conducted at a single university in a Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic context. While this enhanced the internal validity of the present study, it raises questions about the extent to which our findings can be generalised to other cultural or institutional contexts. For instance, in cultures with higher power distance, peer leadership may be less visible or accepted, potentially reducing the variety and expression of peer leadership

roles. At the same time, several elements suggest that our framework may have broader applicability. First, within our own study, the fact that a majority of behaviours and roles were consistently identified across board teams, research teams, administrative teams and technical teams indicates a degree of generalisability across different organisational subcultures. This internal consistency supports the idea that the leadership roles that we have identified may not be unique to specific academic functions, but instead reflect broader patterns of effective leadership within the university setting.

Second, regarding the cross-cultural relevance of shared leadership, recent research in sport has shown that shared leadership emerges across a wide range of cultural contexts, including high power distance societies (Butalia et al., 2025b). These findings challenge the notion that shared leadership is culturally constrained and suggest that shared leadership structures, like those described in our study, can also flourish in academic environments worldwide.

Third, in terms of the cultural validity of specific leadership roles, cross-cultural research in organisational contexts has demonstrated the robustness of identity-based leadership across diverse countries (van Dick et al., 2018). Several roles identified in our framework, including the *Team-oriented Leader*, the *Connecting Leader*, and the *Identity-strengthening Leader*, reflect aspects of this identity leadership model. This correspondence supports the view that at least some of the roles in our framework reflect culturally transferable leadership principles. Nonetheless, further research is needed to examine whether the remaining leadership roles identified in our study are also relevant and effective in other cultural contexts.

A fourth limitation of this study is that it focused solely on positive leadership behaviours to help institutions develop leadership potential. As such, it did not examine the ‘dark side’ of leadership (Mackey et al., 2021). This includes the absence or misapplication of positive behaviours (e.g. promoting a self-serving vision) but also specific toxic behaviours (Conger, 1990). Future research should explore which negative behaviours are most harmful to academic teams and how they can be prevented. While some work has identified toxic behaviours in formal academic leaders (Green, 2014), less is known about the dark side of peer leadership. Moreover, a differentiated approach across board, research, and administrative or technical teams could aid in designing context-specific prevention strategies. Addressing both the positive and negative sides of leadership is key to fostering healthy academic environments.

A final avenue for future research concerns the impact of digitalisation and hybrid work on academic leadership. As teams increasingly operate in virtual environments (e.g. online teaching, international research meetings, virtual talks and conferences), some leadership roles may become more prominent while others may need to be redefined. Team research shows that virtuality heightens the importance of trust, cohesion, and shared identity – processes often more difficult to maintain online (Breuer et al., 2016; Mathieu et al., 2019). Leadership roles that foster these aspects, such as the *Social Leader* or *Identity-Strengthening Leader*, may therefore be particularly critical in digital or hybrid contexts. Similarly, a recent systematic review on leadership in telework and remote work contexts highlights the importance

of competencies such as task-focused communication, goal management, social support, trust-building, and empowerment (Bravo-Duarte et al., 2025), pointing to greater relevance for roles such as the *Task Leader*, *Well-being Leader*, and *Empowering Leader*. Further research is needed to confirm these trends, but it seems likely that some roles will gain prominence or require new forms of expression as face-to-face interaction decreases. Understanding how formal and peer leaders navigate these dynamics could offer important insights for developing leadership in increasingly digital academic environments.


## Conclusion


This research advances understanding of the multifaceted nature of academic leadership by identifying a wide range of both formal and peer roles across all types of university teams. The emergence of novel, context-specific roles reinforces the need for a customised leadership model in academia. Our findings lay a strong foundation for future quantitative research into the impact of these roles and offer a practical framework for implementing shared leadership. Ultimately, these findings may also spark meaningful dialogue within academic teams about the many forms effective leadership can take, encouraging academic leaders to embrace and apply these roles in their daily practice.

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## Ethics approval statement

Ethical approval for conducting studies 1 and 2 was obtained from the Ethical Committee of KU Leuven (G- 2019 02 1517). All participants gave written informed consent before participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed and participation was voluntary and not compensated.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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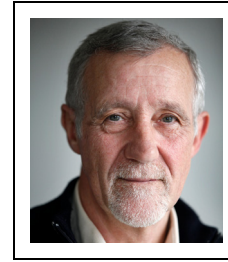
### Author biographies



**Katrien Fransen** is associate professor of leadership and coaching at KU Leuven, Belgium. Her research examines shared leadership and its impact on team effectiveness and well-being in sports, organisations, and academia. Using the social identity approach, she develops more effective leaders and supports athletes in career transitions. She has published over 70 peer-reviewed articles in top-tier journals, 16 book chapters, and one book, and delivered more than 100 international presentations. She also serves on the editorial boards of *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* and *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*. To translate research into practice, she founded *Leading Insights* ([www.leadinginsights.be](http://www.leadinginsights.be)).



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**Debora Vansteenwegen** holds a PhD in Psychology and has published on anxiety, stress, and well-being. Currently, she directs the Human Resources Department at KU Leuven, where she oversees strategic HR policy and development and plays a central role in institutional governance. Her leadership emphasises organisational culture, employee well-being, ethics, and institutional policy. Her current priorities include recruiting and onboarding international academic talent, designing academic career paths, supporting personal and leadership development for senior academic staff, and cultivating microcultures and organisational design to foster innovative research and education.