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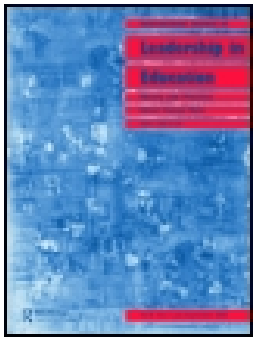
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The Evolution of Leadership Research in Higher Education for Two Decades (1995-2014): A Bibliometric and Content Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to examine the leadership research in higher education in order to shed light on its development during the last two decades by revealing the evolving trends in research on leadership in higher education, the most prominent scholars working on related research, the most popular topics in related research, and the countries in which the related studies are based. Bibliometric method was employed in the analysis of the original research and review papers published in five prominent higher education journals between 1995 and 2014: *Higher Education*, *Research in Higher Education*, *Studies in Higher Education*, *The Journal of Higher Education* and *The Review of Higher Education*. The results of this bibliometric analysis show that the majority of the related articles come from three countries: the U.S.A., the UK and Australia. It is also found that the leadership research in higher education is still very scarce and has not shown any meaningful increase during the last two decades. In addition, content analysis is used to provide more in-depth information about the topical focus, purpose and methodology of the selected articles. The results of content analyses are discussed in detail, and suggestions for the future research are provided.

Introduction

Who is a leader? And how can leadership be defined? These questions have been discussed extensively over the past century in many sectors, including business, economics and politics, as well as education. However, leadership researchers have still not reached a consensus upon a clear, agreed-upon and well-established answer to these two questions (Bush, 2008; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; Smith & Hughey, 2006; Yukl, 2002). When the trend in leadership research is reviewed, it becomes apparent that the definition of leadership is likely dependent on time, context and perspective. While earlier leadership research mostly focused on traits and behaviors of leaders, as well as the contextual/situational factors affecting leadership practices (Derue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011; Hersey, Angelini, & Carakushansky, 1982; Kirkpatrick

& Locke, 1991), recent literature emphasizes more contemporary concepts, such as vision (Guskey, 2003), transformation (Marks & Printy, 2003), strategy (Davies & Davies, 2006; Williams & Johnson, 2013), collaboration (Hallinger & Heck, 2010), etc.

The concepts of leadership and related theories have been very popular in educational research almost from the beginning of the last century. However, the trend of transferring leadership models from other sectors has somewhat changed with the realization of the unique characteristics of the school as an organization. As a result, educational researchers started to develop new leadership models that can better fit into educational contexts (Bush, 2003). For instance, the instructional leadership model, which was conceptualized during the 1980s, was introduced into the educational literature after substantial amount of research on effective schools (Hallinger, 2003, 2005; Marks & Printy, 2003). This trend resulted in greater interest in studying and developing leadership in K-12 schools, as well as the development of various new leadership models specific to the K-12 educational context (Bush, 2003).

However, the amount of scholarly work on leadership in higher education remains scarce. Despite the substantial amount of scholarly work invested in leadership studies in K-12 schools, as well as other sectors, such as business, public administration, religious organizations, etc., the amount of research on leadership in the context of higher education has remained comparatively low (Bryman & Lilley, 2009). To point out this paucity and to call for leadership research in higher education, Gmelch (2013, p. 26) states: 'The corporate world complains that they have simply progressed from the Bronze Age of leadership to the Iron Age. Institutions of higher education may still be in the Dark Ages'. Earlier studies (e.g. Bensimon, Neumann, & Birnbaum, 1989; Gmelch & Burns, 1993) also made similar points to Gmelch's alarming statement.

When we investigate the content of leadership research in the higher education sector, we note several general topics. First of all, academic leadership has been an important research topic in higher education settings (Bellibas et al., 2016; Gmelch, 2013; Kekale, 1999; Pietila, 2014). A significant portion of the related literature also aims to provide an understanding of different leadership models, such as administrative leadership (Bensimon et al., 1989), distributed leadership (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2009; Kezar, 2012; Van Ameijde, Nelson, Billsberry, & Van Meurs, 2009), transformational leadership (Abbasi & Zamani-Miandashti, 2013; Lo, Ramayah, & De Run, 2010; Martinez, 2002), servant leadership (Barnes, 2015; Wheeler, 2011), student leadership (Hu, 2011; Smart, Ethington, Riggs, & Thompson, 2002), intellectual leadership (Macfarlane, 2011; Uslu & Welch, 2018) and grassroots leadership (Kezar, Bertram Gallant, & Lester, 2011; Kezar & Lester, 2009; Thomas & Willcoxson, 1998), while some studies focused on leadership development in higher education institutions (Bolden et al., 2009; Chibucos & Green, 1989; Eich, 2008; Garcia, 2009; Smart et al., 2002; Wallace & Marchant, 2009; Yamagata-Noji, 2005). Another set of work investigated leadership behaviors, roles, skills and competencies (Antonio, 2001; Bryman, 2007; Gmelch & Miskin, 1993; Hoff, 1999; Macfarlane, 2011; Renn, 2012; Smart et al., 2002; Spendlove, 2007). Despite the existing research, it is surprising to see that there has not been any attempt to provide an extensive picture of this literature with regards to the leadership research in higher education so far.

To this end, this study aims to systematically review the leadership literature in higher education from the last two decades. With this aim, bibliometric analysis of the

research and review papers published between 1995 and 2014 in five prominent higher education journals was employed in order to reveal the trends in related research, including the numbers of related publications by years and journals, the most prominent scholars working on related research, the most cited studies, and the countries in which the related studies are based. In addition, content analyses of related papers were conducted with the aim of providing more in depth information about related studies, such as the primary topical focuses, purposes and methods.

The primary interest of the present study is describing the general profile of the leadership research in higher education, instead of providing an in-depth and detailed analysis of major findings from a limited set of papers. As is akin to all review studies, restricting this study to certain journals and a particular time period is inevitable. Therefore, in this study the research team decided to review only these five higher education journals – *Higher Education*, *Research in Higher Education*, *Studies in Higher Education*, *The Journal of Higher Education* and *The Review of Higher Education* – which have been indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection™ (WoS) database for a long time, as this database is highly respected among the community of scholars. In addition, the WoS database included detailed identifiers for each paper and was compatible with Vantage Point software, which is commonly used for conducting bibliometric analyses. Another restriction was applied to the time period to focus this review. This study is intended to focus only on articles published between 1995 and 2014. There are three reasons for this. First, this time period is recent enough to provide more meaningful insight into both the current and future trend of leadership studies. Second, some important missing information, such as abstracts, based country, etc., for some of the articles published before 1995 was noticed during the analysis of raw data from the WoS. Lastly, all the selected journals were included in WoS in this time period.

Method

In this study, bibliometric and content analysis methods were applied, in order to investigate the research on leadership in higher education. First, bibliometric analysis method was used to provide a broader picture of leadership research in higher education by exploring trends related to years, journals, countries and authors. Then, the content of selected papers was analyzed, in order to obtain more in-depth information about the methods, topical focuses and purposes of related studies.

Bibliometric analysis

The present research began with a bibliometric analysis of leadership studies in higher education. Bibliometric analysis has been used in the systematic review of research in many disciplines, with the substantial increase in scientific knowledge production since 1950 and the development of various quantitative statistical techniques. Pritchard defines bibliometric analysis method as applying mathematical and statistical techniques to communication environments, such as books (Pritchard, 1969). This method enables researchers to identify the relationships among different aspects of scientific communication by analyzing publications and documents according to their specific features. Therefore, bibliometric studies provide information on significant features of

scientific publications, such as authors, journals, institutions and countries. Through each unit of analysis, it is possible to depict the general publication structure of a discipline and/or a specific topic in a discipline (Yalçın & Esen, 2016). Bibliometric studies can be classified into four groups. The first group includes studies focusing on the analysis of citations. The second group of studies analyzes co-citations. The third group is interested in the productivity of scholars, institutions or countries. Finally, the last group focuses on the analysis of books, articles and patents (Koehler, 2001). In this study, the aim is to reveal the current state of research on leadership in higher education by conducting the third type of bibliometric analysis – that is, it focuses on the analysis of authors, journals, countries and years of publication.

The present study includes the analysis of research and review articles indexed by the WoS. Online browsing was used to find and download the publications. After analyzing the raw data, the research team decided to choose 1995 as the starting point for analysis, since there were some important missing data (such as abstracts, author names, etc.) for articles published before 1995 in some of the selected journals, and one of the selected journals, *The Review of Higher Education*, was not included in WoS before 1994. Then, VantagePoint software, which is compatible with the WoS dataset, was used for classifying the raw data. Only the original research and review articles were included in the analysis. The total number of related articles published in selected five journals between 1995 and 2014 were 3822. In order to pinpoint publications that are related to ‘leadership in higher education’, combined keywords and phrases were investigated. By searching the word ‘leader*¹’ in combined keywords and phrases, the dataset was narrowed to a total number of 182 articles. Although all of these articles included the word ‘leader’ in their title or abstract, it was noticed that leadership was not one of the primary focuses in some of these articles. For example, many articles included ‘leader’ in their abstracts just because they offered some kinds of suggestions for university leaders based on their findings. Therefore, abstracts of all 182 of these publications were investigated by two researchers separately in order to identify the articles which contained leadership as one of their core concepts. After comparing the lists of the two researchers and soliciting suggestions from other scholars in the field of higher education in some of the cases, 80 articles were selected for further analysis.

Content analysis

Although bibliometric analysis provides a large set of data and enables researchers to see the general publication trend of a specific topic, it does not give detailed information regarding the content of studies of interest. Therefore, in the second part of the present study, content analysis methods were employed, which helped to acquire an in-depth understanding of the related research and see the changes over time. In this study, the main purpose of the content analysis is to answer two questions: (1) what were the topical focuses and purposes of leadership research in higher education? and (2) which methods were used in these studies? Although we initially planned to answer these questions by investigating the abstracts of the papers only, most of the time we had to read the full papers in detail to be able to obtain the information needed. In this

stage, the same papers from the bibliometric analysis were used. This included a total of 80 articles published in five higher education journals mentioned above.

Findings

In this section, we first provide the findings of the bibliometric analysis. Information regarding the publication years, journals, countries, citations and authors of the 80 selected articles are provided in the tables below. Then, we continue with the findings of the content analysis.

Findings of bibliometric analysis

Table 1 provides the total numbers of articles on leadership in higher education published in five selected higher education journals during the last two decades.

It is evident from this analysis that there has been no meaningful increase in the number of related articles during this time period. Numbers of related articles for each five year period ranged from 16 to 22. The total number of articles on leadership in higher education has comprised only about two percent of all articles published in selected five higher education journals during the last two decades. This percentage even decreased to below two percent during the last five years.

When the number of articles was investigated by journal (see Table 2), it was found that *Higher Education* has published the most articles on leadership in higher education, with a total of 29 articles during this time period. *Studies in Higher Education*, *The*

Table 1. The number of papers on leadership in higher education (1980–2014).

Years	Numbers of related articles	Numbers of all articles	%
1995–1999	16	754	2.12
2000–2004	21	784	2.68
2005–2009	21	992	2.12
2010–2014	22	1292	1.70
Total	80	3822	2.09

Table 2. Output per journal per year.

Journals	Total	95–99	00–04	05–09	10–14
Higher Education	29	5	7	9	8
Studies in Higher Education	15	3	2	3	7
The Review of Higher Education	14	2	3	6	3
Journal of Higher Education	13	5	3	2	3
Research in Higher Education	9	1	6	1	1

Table 3. Number of papers by country.

Journals	U.S.A.	Australia	UK	Finland	China	Denmark	France	Iran	Others
Higher Education	8	6	4	3	-	2	2	2	5
Studies in Higher Education	2	5	7	-	2	-	-	-	1
The Review of Higher Education	14	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Journal of Higher Education	13	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Research in Higher Education	9	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	46	13	11	3	2	2	2	2	6

Review of Higher Education and *The Journal of Higher Education* follow *Higher Education* with 15, 14 and 13 related articles, respectively. *Research in Higher Education* has also published nine articles related to leadership in higher education during this time period.

We also investigated the numbers of related articles by country in which the article's research was based (see [Table 3](#)). It is seen that most related articles come from the U.S. A. The U.S.A. is the source country for 46 articles in the study sample. Australia and the UK have also published significant numbers of related articles, with 13 and 11 articles, respectively. In terms of the journals, it is seen that all of the related articles published in the *Journal of Higher Education* come from the U.S.A. Similarly, all related articles published in the *Review of Higher Education* and *Research in Higher Education* come from the U.S.A., except one publication for each journal with two source countries, the U.S.A. and Australia. The other two journals, especially *Higher Education*, seem to publish articles from more diverse backgrounds in terms of source countries.

[Table 4](#) shows the most cited articles among 80 articles included in this study. According to WoS data, Bryman (2007) has the highest impact in the leadership research as it received around 10 citations per year on average (based on WoS). This is a literature review article that focuses on effective leadership at departmental level in three countries, the U.S.A., the UK and Australia. Based on the review of selected studies, the author identified specific leadership behaviors associated with departmental effectiveness. It is not surprising to find out that Bryman's article receives high interest in the field since departmental level leadership is one of the most studied subjects in leadership research at higher education level and three countries included in his study are the frontier countries in the field. Kuh's (1995) study that focuses on students' out-of-class experiences, with specific attention to leadership responsibilities, is also received very high interest. This article provides a significant base to studies on student leadership since it identifies leadership responsibility as one of the most beneficial out-of-class experiences for college students. Other mostly cited articles focus on different subjects, such as leadership development, intellectual leadership, departmental leadership, strategic leadership, academic leadership, etc. In terms of journals, it is noticed that the most of the highly cited articles were published in *Studies in Higher Education*.

As the last part of our bibliometric analyses, we look at the scholars who published the most articles on leadership in higher education during the given time period. [Table 5](#) presents scholars who published at least two related articles in selected five journals. With a total of eight articles, Adrianna Kezar from the U.S.A. has been listed

Table 4. *Most cited articles based on WoS.*²

Author(s) and year	Journal	Cites/year	Total cites
Bryman (2007)	SHE	10.5	116
Kuh (1995)	JHE	9.1	210
Antonio (2001)	RsHE	5.6	95
Macfarlane (2011)	SHE	5.6	39
Knight and Trowler (2000)	SHE	5.1	92
Blackmore and Blackwell (2006)	SHE	2.8	33
Martin, Trigwell, Prosser, and Ramsden (2003)	SHE	2.4	36
Harman (2002)	HE	2.1	34
Newton (2002)	HE	1.9	31
Ramsden and Martin (1996)	SHE	1.4	30

Table 5. Author appearances for the 1995–2014 period.

Author	Number of papers
Kezar, Adrianna	8
Rosser, Vicki J.	3
Smart, John C.	3
Bastedo, Michael N.	2
Breakwell, Glynis M.	2
Gmelch, Walter H.	2
Heck, Ronald H	2
Johnsrud, Linda K.	2
Kuh, George D.	2
Lester, Jaime	2
Macfarlane, Bruce	2
Martin, Elaine	2
Ramsden, Paul	2
Sarros, James C.	2
Stark, Joan S.	2
Tytherleigh, Michelle Y.	2
Wolverton, Mimi	2
Wolverton, Marwin L.	2

as the top scholar in terms of the number of articles published. Next, Vicki J. Rosser and John C. Smart have each published three related articles. Both of these researchers are also from the U.S.A. There are also several scholars who have published two related articles, as presented in [Table 5](#). Similar to earlier findings, these results also show that scholars from the U.S.A. play a significant role in terms of the development of leadership research in higher education.

Findings of content analysis

As mentioned in the method section, we also used content analysis to provide more in depth information about selected papers. We analyzed the content of the papers according to three categories; *Method*, *Topical Focus* and *Purpose*. First, two researchers on the team worked together to determine several general themes for all three categories, after reading all of the selected articles' abstracts and discussing their content. Then, each of the two researchers worked separately and determined appropriate themes for each paper. Lastly, lists developed by the two researchers were compared and comments from the third researcher were sought in terms of disagreement. [Table 6](#) summarizes the results of the content analysis.

As seen in [Table 6](#), qualitative research methods are used most frequently in related studies, followed by quantitative research methods. There are also significant numbers of related articles written based on theoretical discussions or literature reviews. However, it is seen that the percentage of theoretical articles relative to all selected papers decreased significantly during the last five years. However, the percentage of studies that used quantitative research methods increased significantly during the same time period. Another important finding is that there have been only two related articles based on mixed method studies published in selected five journals, across this entire time frame. We also specifically looked for systematic review studies on leadership in higher education, but we could not find any such study published in the selected five journals during the focused time period.

Table 6. Results of Content Analysis.

Categories	Total	95–99	00–04	05–09	10–14
Method					
Qualitative	39	8	10	11	10
Quantitative	24	3	7	5	9
Theoretical and literature review	15	4	4	5	2
Mix method	2	1	-	-	1
Topical focus^a					
Leadership Models/Types	25	3	6	7	9
Institutional Leadership (University and College Leaders)	23	5	6	9	3
Academic Leadership (Deans and Department Chairs)	16	5	5	2	4
Student Leadership	8	1	2	1	4
Women Leadership/Gender	6	2	-	1	3
Leadership Development	6	-	1	2	3
Others (leadership in general, leadership effectiveness, etc.)	9	1	5	2	1
Purpose^a					
Association between leadership and other concepts	26	4	7	8	7
Identifying leadership roles/practices/strategies	22	5	6	6	5
Factors affecting leadership behaviors/capacity	16	4	3	4	5
Conceptualization	6	3	-	2	1
Others (demographics of leaders, evaluation of leadership, perceptions about leadership etc.,)	14	1	5	4	4

^aSeveral studies are listed in two different themes under this category.

When we investigated the related articles in terms of their topical focus, it was found that leadership models/types have been the most studied topic. When we look at this body of studies more closely, we see that several leadership models, such as transformational leadership, distributed leadership, curriculum leadership, etc., which have also been among the most popular research topics in the K-12 education level, have been studied in higher education settings. In addition, several leadership models unique to higher education settings, such as grassroots leadership, intellectual leadership, research leadership, etc., have emerged in our analyses. Besides the studies on leadership models, there are also significant numbers of studies related to institutional leadership and academic leadership. While the first set of studies focused on the leadership of senior university/college administrators, the second set of studies are interested in the leadership of deans and/or department chairs. There have also been a few studies focusing on the following topics: student leadership, women leadership/gender and leadership development. In terms of the general trends in topical focus over time, it is seen that studies focused on student leadership and women leadership/gender have increased significantly during the last five years, while the numbers of studies related to institutional leadership decreased significantly during the same time period. Apart from these two observations, we could not identify any other meaningful change in terms of trends in topical focus over time.

In the last part of our content analysis, we try to identify the purposes of related studies. As seen in Table 6, most of the related studies are aimed at investigating the relationship between leadership and different concepts, such as organizational behaviors, effectiveness, change, diversity, etc. In addition, a significant number of related studies aimed to identify the leadership roles/practices/strategies used by people in different leadership positions. Another set of studies tried to reveal the factors (gender, age, institutional/departmental setting, etc.) affecting leadership behaviors/capacity. It is

seen that the number of studies of this type significantly increased during the last 5 years. Lastly, there are also a few studies that included conceptual discussions about leadership in higher education settings. Our findings show that these types of studies were more common before the 2000s.

Discussions and conclusion

Drawing upon bibliometric and content analysis methods, the purpose of the present study was to review leadership studies in five prominent higher education journals, including *Higher Education*, *Research in Higher Education*, *Studies in Higher Education*, *The Journal of Higher Education* and *The Review of Higher Education*, published between 1995 and 2014. This analysis was conducted in order to shed light on the development of leadership research in higher education during the last two decades by revealing the evolving trends in research on leadership in higher education, the most prominent scholars working on related research, the most popular topics in related research, and the countries in which the related studies are based.

Interpretation and implications of findings

The very first finding that appears in the present study is that leadership studies occupy a very limited space in the existing research related to higher education. The number of leadership studies comprised only about two percent of the total number of studies in higher education in the five journals surveyed. The change over time does not favor leadership research either; the ratio of leadership studies to total papers has even declined in the last 5 years. This result confirms Gmelch (2013) who asserts that the focus of higher education research on leadership has been very limited comparing to the research of leadership in the corporate world. Similarly, in contrast to the case in higher education, a substantial increase has been observed in the leadership literature of K-12 education during the last three decades (Gumus et al., 2018).

It is also noted that *Higher Education* has published the highest number of papers on leadership in higher education, and is followed by *Studies in Higher Education* and *The Review of Higher Education*. The number of related articles published in *Higher Education* is equal to the total number of articles published in following two journals. The results also showed that almost half of the related articles were based in the U.S.A., followed by Australia and the UK. Conforming this, in a literature review focusing on departmental leadership effectiveness, Bryman (2007) found that most leadership studies in the higher education literature is originated from the U.S.A. This could be because that a large number of leadership models prevalent in the leadership literature were initiated in the U.S.A. Another possible explanation is that the most of the journals used in review studies could be based in the U.S.A. Indeed, it was found that all articles within the scope of this review published in the *Journal of Higher Education* – which is the U.S.A. based journal – were based in the U.S.A. Similarly, all related articles published in *The Review of Higher Education* and *Research in Higher Education* – which are also the U.S.A. based journals – come from the U.S.A., except one publication for each journal with two source countries, the U.S.A. and Australia. However, *Higher Education* and *Studies in Higher Education* are international journals, therefore articles in these two journals are diverse in terms of their source country.

This result is further indicated by the fact that US scholar Adrianna Kezar is the most productive scholar with a total of eight publications related to leadership, and she was followed by Vicki Rosser and John Smart (both also from the U.S.A.), with three articles.

The content analysis results showed that the number of qualitative studies in this area is greater than the number of quantitative, mixed method and literature review studies. The main purpose of qualitative research is to provide an in-depth understanding and explanation of a phenomenon that is little known, and therefore needs to be explored. However, quantitative research is more relevant when the researcher is interested in understanding how a relatively well-known phenomenon is projectable to a larger population (Yildirim & Simsek, 2005). Considering the fact that leadership studies in higher education are in the early development stage, it makes sense to argue that researchers mostly used qualitative methods in order to explore and understand new concepts and phenomena. In addition, it is evident from this research that very few studies used mixed methods to study leadership. This could either be because mixed method research is relatively new and not well understood compared to the two dominant methods (qualitative and quantitative), or because it poses substantial challenges to the researcher, such as consuming too much time (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011).

Another finding of the content analysis was that leadership models/types have been the most studied topic in the higher education literature on leadership. Specifically, some of these models – such as transformational leadership, distributed leadership, etc. – are also among the most popular research topics in the K-12 education level (Gumus et al., 2018). Yet, several leadership models unique to higher education settings – such as grassroots leadership, intellectual leadership, research leadership, etc. – were also the topical focus of some studies in this sample. This serves as evidence that scholars have worked on developing specific leadership models that are more relevant to higher education institutions. The relatively growing number of studies on leadership models in the last five years is promising for the future of leadership research in higher education. It seems that studies on leadership models might play a key role in the development of leadership research in higher education. Nonetheless, the present research is lacking in terms of providing more insight into how leadership models specific to higher education were conceptualized or studied. Future research can be conducted to produce more in-depth knowledge in relation to the development, scope and empirical strength of leadership models that are unique to higher education institutions.

The purposes of related studies were also reviewed in the content analysis. The results suggested that many related studies aimed at investigating the relationship between leadership and different concepts, such as organizational behaviors, effectiveness, change, diversity, etc. It is evident that researchers intended to understand if leadership was making a difference in organizational improvement. There was also a considerable amount of studies aimed at identifying the leadership roles, practices and strategies used by individuals in different leadership positions. Given the current early stage of leadership development in higher education, it seems that researchers are interested in understanding what it means to be a leader in different higher education settings. This could help revise the available leadership models and understandings, in turn creating new ones that could better fit higher education. Referring to some key scholars, Bryman (2007) argued that very little research has been conducted in higher education that examines effects of leadership on organizational effectiveness, culture

and atmosphere, as well as the behaviors and practices of leadership. Although at first glance this seems to contradict what we found in the present study, this finding of the present study does not suggest that the total number of studies investigating leadership roles/practices/strategies is abundant, nor those examining the relationship between leadership and organizational factors, are abundant. It rather implies that such topics occupy the largest proportion within the existing leadership studies in the higher education literature.

Conclusion

Universities, which are responsible for the production and distribution of knowledge, have been expected to play a key role in the time of globalization that has resulted in immense pressure toward political, economic and societal change and required nations to possess high skilled-citizens and to develop a 'knowledge society' (Altbach & Knight, 2007). The success of universities is started to seen as one of the biggest indicators of the success of nations. In such a context, the leadership practices in higher education systems at all levels become very important. For example, research has consistently indicated that the success of institutions depends heavily on the effectiveness of their leaders (Smith & Hughey, 2006). Therefore, it can be asserted that conducting research on leadership in higher education is very important given the fact that the best practices are often supported by the research-based evidence. However, the results of our analyses show that the research in higher education is still in its early developing stages, or perhaps in 'Dark Ages' as stated by Gmelch (2013). In addition, the trends do not show any evidence of a possible increase in this scholarship in the very near future.

Although the general picture is not very promising in terms of the research on leadership in higher education, several focus areas might be developed based on the findings of this study. First of all, increase research interest in leadership models and the emergence of several leadership models that are specific to higher education seem to be important steps. More research on such models could provide understanding on how leadership works and what type of leadership is more effective at the higher education level. In addition, researchers should continue their current interest in quantitative research in order to investigate the effects of leadership on different concepts. Providing more research-based evidence in terms of the importance of leadership might generate more interest to leadership studies from researchers, practitioners and policy makers.

Based on the findings of this study, it is also accurate to argue that the available knowledge about higher education leadership has largely been created and shaped by scholars from the U.S.A. Recent academic advocacy for contextualizing leadership is critical for providing a better understanding of effective leadership practices (Chen & Ke, 2014; Hallinger, 2016). It should also be note that there are significant differences between higher education systems around the world in terms the system level governance, institutional management, finance, etc. Therefore, more international research would be helpful for adapting the current knowledge base into different social, educational and economic contexts.

Limitations

Although the present research provides considerable insights into the current state of leadership research in higher education, this paper contains some limitations due to its scope. First of all, this paper it was not intended to report, discuss and analyze the findings of each study included in this review. Instead, it aimed to provide some important numbers that show the evolving trend of leadership studies over time, as well as the topical focus, methodology and purpose of those focal studies. Second, the review included papers from only five prominent higher education journals. Since these journals have the highest impact in the field, it is believed that a review of articles published in them could help derive key information regarding the substantial issues in the field of higher education. However, it should be noted that the selection of another set of journals might result in different findings in terms of countries, authors, focus topics, etc. Third, it is possible that some over-generalizations were made in conducting the content analysis, in order to create meaningful categories. Future research may focus only on one specific category, such as the effect of leadership on organizational effectiveness or leadership roles/practices/strategies, so as to carry out more in-depth analysis on a more focused number of studies.

Notes

1. Means that any word starting with leader (e.g. leaders and leadership) was included in the search.
2. Actual citations of these articles might be much higher. However, we included citations according to WoS data since our all analyses are based on WoS.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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