

Reflections on Academic Leadership: Between Innovation, Resistance, and Students Freedom

Samsu Armadi¹, Bahrani²

Kutai Kartanegara University Tenggarong.

Sultan Aji Muhammad Idris State Islamic University Samarinda

samsuarmadi@gmail.com

bahrani@uinsi.ac.id

Abstract

Changes in academic leadership often bring complex dynamics. The author's experience as head of a study program provided a space for reflection on how innovation can trigger internal resistance when different paradigms collide. Efforts to provide academic freedom to students—especially in determining thesis topics and types of research—became a point of friction with some lecturers who still maintained old patterns. This article explores these empirical experiences in a narrative-analytical format, combining personal reflections with theoretical frameworks on academic leadership, scientific freedom, and the dynamics of university bureaucracy. Using a reflective qualitative approach, the article outlines five main focuses: innovation, resistance, internal conflict, leadership under pressure, and academic freedom as a student right. The findings suggest that innovation often requires challenging negotiations within organizational culture, while resistance can open the door to more constructive dialogue when managed appropriately. The article concludes with recommendations for strengthening more supportive, adaptive, and humanistic academic leadership.

Keywords: academic leadership, student freedom, educational innovation, lecturer conflict, organizational dynamics

Introduction

Academic leadership in higher education plays a strategic role in determining policy direction, the academic climate, and the quality of graduates. However, in practice, leadership is often characterized by a tension between innovation and tradition (Northouse, 2021). One crucial issue is students' academic freedom to determine research topics and the type of research for their thesis. On the other hand, academic leadership in higher education is a crucial factor in determining policy direction, academic culture, and graduate quality (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2012, p. 258). However, leadership practices often face clashes between innovative ideas and entrenched academic traditions. Change in higher education often encounters resistance, particularly when it comes to

traditional practices such as the preparation of student final assignments.

In many universities, students' final projects are still often viewed as "promise projects," where students are guided according to the interests or preferences of their supervisors. This contradicts the spirit of liberal education, which emphasizes intellectual freedom, independence, and critical thinking (Nussbaum, 2010).

Meanwhile, in many study programs, students' final assignments are still positioned as "project instruments," where the title, topic, and even the research model (e.g., classroom action research, experiments, or qualitative research) are determined by the supervisor. This often undermines student autonomy, even though academic freedom is an essential principle of higher education (Altbach, 2001, p. 210). In line with the spirit of

liberal education, students should be given the space to choose topics and research models that align with their interests, social context, and scientific developments (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 27). However, this idea often clashes with the views of educators who emphasize methodological uniformity and full control over students' interests, talents, abilities, and inspirations. Students tend to follow the supervisor's wishes, rather than what is in their own minds.

This article reflects the experience of academic leadership in implementing innovative policies related to student freedom in determining the title and research model of student final assignments, as well as the dynamics of resistance that emerged from the academic environment.

Problem of the Study

Higher education institutions are undergoing rapid transformation driven by technological advancement, global academic competition, and the shift toward student-centered learning. However, these changes do not always align with traditional academic culture. In the context of this study, the implementation of liberal academic policies—such as granting students autonomy in selecting thesis topics and determining appropriate research models—faced significant resistance from lecturers who upheld conventional and hierarchical academic norms. Thus, the central problem investigated in this study is: *How do innovation, resistance, and internal conflict shape the dynamics of academic leadership when implementing student-centered research autonomy in higher education?*

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this reflective qualitative study is to:

1. Analyze the leadership experience of implementing innovative policies that promote student freedom in determining thesis topics and research methodologies.

2. Identify the sources and forms of resistance among faculty members toward liberal academic policies.
3. Examine internal organizational conflicts arising from differing paradigms within the academic community.
4. Explore how leadership is exercised under pressure, particularly when institutional and cultural forces oppose progressive reforms.
5. Highlight the importance of academic freedom as a fundamental right of students in conducting independent scientific inquiry.

Previous Studies

Northouse (2021) emphasizes that transformational leadership facilitates institutional change by inspiring shared vision and empowering stakeholders. Like the findings of this study, Bass (1990) highlights that academic environments often resist new initiatives when they challenge established power structures. Fullan (2007) argues that educational innovation will always meet resistance because faculty members perceive changes as threats to stability. This aligns with the observed resistance to student autonomy in research selection. Altbach (2001) asserts that academic freedom is an essential component of higher education and must be protected regardless of internal institutional politics. Weimer (2013) also finds that student-centered learning enhances motivation and critical thinking but requires shifts in lecturer attitudes. Previous research by Klemencic (2016) shows that student agency in academic decision-making strengthens identity as independent learners, a central idea reflected in this study's innovation policy. Gibson et al. (2012) argue that conflict in higher education is intensified by overlapping roles, professional identities, and contestation over academic authority—supporting this study's findings on internal conflict and leadership pressure.

Literature Review

Academic Leadership

Academic leadership is defined as the process of influencing the academic community to achieve educational goals through vision, motivation, and communication (Northouse, 2021, p. 7). According to Bolden et al. (2012, p. 260), leadership in higher education is complex because it involves formal authority, organizational dynamics, and academic freedom. Academic leadership is a crucial aspect of higher education governance. Northouse (2021, p. 7) defines leadership as the process of influencing others to understand and agree on what needs to be done and how to do it effectively.

In the context of higher education, academic leadership includes efforts to manage vision, build academic culture, and direct the community of lecturers and students to achieve more meaningful educational goals (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2012, p. 258). Unlike leadership in the industrial or bureaucratic sectors, academic leadership has unique characteristics, namely: 1. Collegial context - decisions are often made through deliberation with lecturers, so leaders cannot act in an authoritarian manner. 2. Academic freedom - every lecturer and student have the right to autonomy in teaching, research, and service, so leaders must manage not only formal structures but also academic values. 3. Orientation towards the tri dharma – leadership in higher education is required to integrate education, research, and service.

Student Academic Freedom

Academic freedom is not only the right of educators, but also of students (Altbach, 2001, p. 212). Students have the right to choose research objects, models, and approaches in accordance with scientific developments and societal needs. Nussbaum (2010, p. 25) emphasized that students must be given space to explore intellectual creativity so that higher education truly fosters independent thinking. Innovative policies give students the freedom to choose thesis topics based on current

issues, such as digital literacy, artificial intelligence, green education, and even popular culture studies. As a result, research becomes more varied and relevant to the needs of the times. Academic freedom is not solely the privilege of lecturers or senior researchers, but also the right of students as aspiring scientists.

Altbach (2001, p. 212) asserts that students have the right to develop ideas, ask critical questions, and choose fields of study relevant to their interests and socio-cultural context. In the context of a thesis, students' academic freedom means providing them with the space to: Determine research models and titles that align with their interests, social sensitivities, or developments in global issues such as digital literacy, artificial intelligence, green education, and cross-cultural studies.

However, the reality in many universities shows that students are often directed—even forced—to pursue research topics and models that align with their supervisor's expertise or preferences. This creates a power asymmetry in academic relationships, ultimately limiting students' space for innovation. If this pattern persists, the thesis will lose its meaning as an original scholarly work and become merely an administrative project to fulfill graduation requirements.

Thus, expanding students' academic freedom in determining research titles and models is not simply a matter of autonomy, but also part of the transformation of academic culture toward a more democratic, relevant, and future-oriented higher education. Therefore, the success of innovation in determining thesis titles and research models is greatly influenced by the academic leadership style applied. Transformational and dialogic leadership has the potential to create a balance between innovation (student freedom), resistance (lecturer conservatism), and academic quality (maintained scientific standards).

Research Models and Types

Thesis research in higher education is a form of academic training aimed at developing students' scientific thinking skills, analyzing problems, and generating data-driven solutions. However, in practice, many study programs still limit students' choices to specific types of research, such as Classroom Action Research (CAR) for education students, or simple experiments for science students. However, students can be directed to explore other models, such as phenomenology, grounded theory, case studies, or R&D, which are more relevant to contemporary issues. This supports academic diversity while fostering students' research competencies.

a. Various Research Models

According to Creswell (2014, pp. 4–6), research can be divided into three main approaches:

1. Quantitative Research – using numbers, statistics, and measurements to test hypotheses; for example, experiments or surveys.
2. Qualitative Research – focuses on in-depth understanding of phenomena, using methods such as case studies, phenomenology, grounded theory, or ethnography.
3. Mixed Methods Research – combines quantitative and qualitative elements to gain a more comprehensive picture. In addition, students can also use research and development (R&D) to produce innovative products, for example learning media, digital applications, or teaching modules.

b. Implications in Student Theses

Freedom in choosing a research model has several implications:

- 1) Contextual Relevance: Students can adapt methods to current issues, such as phenomenology to examine students'

experiences of online learning post-pandemic, or R&D to design AI-based learning media.

- 2) Academic Diversity: Theses are no longer monotonous with repetitive PTK patterns, but rather more varied and richer in perspective.
- 3) Student Empowerment: Students learn to make critical methodological decisions, rather than simply following the supervisor's preferences.

c. Implementation Challenges

While providing this flexibility is beneficial, several challenges arise, including:

- 1) Student Readiness: Not all students have a strong methodological understanding to choose the right research model.
- 2) Competence of Supervisor: Some lecturers are only familiar with certain research models, so they object when students choose more complex methods (e.g. grounded theory).
- 3) Academic Standards: Freedom without guidance can reduce quality if students are not given proportionate direction.

d. The Role of Academic Leadership

In this context, academic leadership plays a key role. Study program leaders must:

- 1) Compiling thesis guidelines that provide space for methodological freedom.
- 2) Providing methodological training for students and lecturers to be ready to assist in various types of research.
- 3) Bridging the dialogue between innovation (student freedom) and tradition (lecturer preferences), so that a balance is created between academic freedom and research quality.

Thus, determining the model and type of research is not only a matter of methodological techniques, but also part of the dynamics of academic leadership that influences the research culture in the university environment.

Resistance to Innovation

Kotter (2012, p. 33) states that resistance is a natural reaction to change. In an academic context, resistance arises from fear of losing authority, concerns about declining quality, or rejection of new ideas perceived as threatening tradition. Resistance is a common response to change (Kotter, 2012, p. 33). In the context of higher education, resistance can arise from senior lecturers who worry about the loss of control or a decline in academic quality if students are given complete freedom. Resistance arises because some lecturers feel that students are not yet ready to determine their own research models. Lecturers are more comfortable directing students to established patterns (e.g., CAR or quasi-experiments). They also believe that this policy diminishes the lecturer's role as an "academic authority."

Method

This study uses a reflective-qualitative approach (Schön, 1983, p. 49). Data were obtained from the author's direct experiences, including interactions with students, lecturers, and organizational dynamics. The data reflections were analyzed using the framework of transformational leadership, resistance to innovation, and the concept of student academic freedom.

Results

Innovation: Providing Space for Student Creativity

As a breakthrough, the main innovation implemented was to give students the freedom to determine the topic and research model for their final project, in line with current developments, reflecting contemporary issues. For example, research on digital literacy, the use of AI in learning, and the study of

popular culture in a linguistic context. This innovation increased student motivation and the relevance of research to current developments. This step is in line with the principle of student-centered learning as outlined by Weimer (2013: 15), which states that student empowerment begins with the granting of autonomous academic responsibility. As a result, students demonstrated improved critical thinking skills and more contextual research interests.

Resistance: Paradigm Clash with Lecturers

This liberal policy sparked resistance from some lecturers accustomed to a hierarchical system. According to Fullan (2007:47), resistance often arises because change threatens their comfort zones and professional authority. Some lecturers view student freedom as a form of disorder, when in fact it represents scientific independence. Resistance arose from some lecturers who believed students were not yet mature enough to choose their own titles. They held onto the old paradigm that theses must align with the supervisor's expertise. This clash created internal tension and even led to leadership sabotage. It demonstrated how difficult it is to sustain innovation without collective support and effective communication.

In this context, leadership innovations that encourage students' freedom to choose their own research models and determine their thesis titles are considered a form of "disruption" of the old pattern that places lecturers as the center of academic authority. According to Kezar and Eckel (2002), resistance to change in higher education is usually not caused by an inability to adapt, but rather because the changes threaten established power structures, epistemological habits, and professional identities.

Internal Conflict in Leadership

The growing resistance has sparked internal conflict at the study program management level. This conflict is not only ideological but also political, as it concerns the distribution of power and

influence. Gibson et al. (2012: 108) assert that conflict within educational organizations often arises from value incompatibilities between innovators and tradition maintainers. Some lecturers openly questioned the legitimacy and direction of leadership deemed too progressive. Academic discussions often devolved into personal debates fraught with power motives. This conflict created polarization between the innovative and the status quo groups, ultimately disrupting organizational stability and the performance of the study program management team.

This conflict demonstrated that change in educational institutions requires not only academic vision but also the ability to manage emotions, communication, and the organization's social dynamics. Fullan (2001) referred to this as the "emotional labor of leadership"—the emotional burden that arises when leaders confront changing values and cultural resistance within the institution.

Leadership under Pressure

Academic leadership was tested when faced with an internal coup. Although an innovative program was considered progressive, a lack of collective support led to its derailment. This demonstrates the importance of communication, collaboration, and conflict management strategies in leading change. In stressful situations, leadership is tested by moral integrity and consistency of values. The author chose to uphold the principle of academic freedom, even though it resulted in demotion. This illustrates that true leadership is not about maintaining position, but rather about championing academic truth (Greenleaf, 2002: 27).

This situation illustrates that academic leadership in higher education often must operate in a space fraught with institutional politics. Kotter (2012) asserts that change leaders are often the target of resistance because their new ideas disrupt the comfort of old structures. In this context, leadership is not only about courage to make

decisions, but also moral fortitude in the face of pressures that can shake professional integrity.

Academic Freedom as a Student Right

Academic freedom is a fundamental right in higher education (Altbach, 2001: 210). Students have the right to determine the direction and approach of their research, if it aligns with scientific ethics. By providing this freedom, universities contribute to fostering independent, critical, and academically responsible researchers.

In addition to the title, students are also given the freedom to choose their research model. Some students choose phenomenology to examine learning experiences, while others use research and development (R&D) to design learning media. This policy broadens students' academic horizons, although it requires flexibility from lecturers in their guidance. This experience demonstrates that students are capable of scientific creativity when given the space. However, this freedom must be balanced with constructive academic guidance, not coercive intervention.

Discussion

The results of this study confirm that academic leadership in higher education is not merely about administering the administration, but also about managing cultural change. These findings reinforce Altbach's (2001, p. 213) view that student academic freedom is a crucial component of higher education quality. Policies that allow students the freedom to choose research topics and models have been shown to increase motivation and research relevance.

Dynamics of Innovation and Transformation of Academic Culture

The findings of this study demonstrate that innovation in academic leadership is inextricably linked to efforts to transform organizational culture. Providing students with the freedom to choose research models, types, and topics is a form of transformational leadership oriented toward developing individual potential (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In

practice, this policy shifts the mindset of lecturers from being "determinants of truth" to "facilitators of the scientific process."

However, as Yukl (2013) reminds us, changing values and roles in higher education organizations often trigger culture shock among academics. Lecturers accustomed to top-down guidance face challenges in adapting to a new, more dialogical paradigm. In this context, innovative leadership requires more than just a strong vision; it must also be accompanied by the ability to build trust and communication across generations of lecturers.

Student Freedom

These findings support Altbach's (2001, p. 213) view that students have the right to determine their academic direction. Academic freedom is not solely the privilege of lecturers or senior researchers, but also the right of students as aspiring scientists. Altbach (2001, p. 212) asserts that students have the right to develop ideas, ask critical questions, and choose fields of study relevant to their interests and socio-cultural context. In the context of a thesis, students' academic freedom means providing them with the space to:

Resistance as a Structural Barrier

In line with Kotter (2012, p. 35), resistance arises from a sense of loss of control and fear of change. This finding is also consistent with Kotter (2012, p. 35), who asserts that resistance is an inevitable part of change. Lecturers accustomed to old paradigms tend to reject innovative policies that they perceive as undermining their authority. The resistance that emerged in this case should not be seen solely as an obstacle, but rather as an indicator that change is underway. According to Kezar and Eckel (2002), resistance often arises when new values clash with old norms that have become part of the institution's identity. In the context of a study program, the clash between the traditional paradigm (oriented toward lecturer control) and the liberal paradigm (emphasizing student

autonomy) reflects an epistemological shift from teacher-centered learning to learner-centered research. From an organizational perspective, resistance also highlights the need for a more inclusive change communication strategy. Academic leaders need to adopt a participatory leadership approach (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011), where all parties are involved in an open dialogue regarding the direction of reform. This way, change is not imposed from above but grows through the collective awareness of the academic community.

Internal Conflict and Leadership Maturity

The internal conflicts that emerge during the innovation process illustrate that higher education is not a sterile space free from institutional politics. Rather, it is an arena for negotiating values, power, and professional identity. According to Fullan (2001), conflict is an integral part of the change process; without it, transformation will not reach the desired depth. In this reflective case, conflict becomes a learning opportunity for leaders to balance the ideals of change with the social stability of the organization. Leaders learn that resistance does not always have to be fought but can be managed through dialogue and empathy. This aligns with Schön's (1983) view that reflective leaders must be able to learn from their actions and understand the meaning behind any resistance or differing views.

Leadership Under Pressure and Academic Politics

Leadership under pressure, as experienced in this context, tests the moral and professional resilience of an academic leader. When innovative policies challenge the comfort of old structures, administrative and social pressures arise that can threaten the sustainability of a leader's position. However, as Kotter (2012) emphasized, true leaders of change are those who can remain committed to their principles even when faced with the risk of losing their position. This situation

demonstrates that academic leadership requires not only intellectual intelligence but also emotional and spiritual intelligence (moral integrity). A reflective leader must understand that position is a means, not an end, and that losing a position is not a failure if the academic values they champion remain alive in the institution's culture.

Transformational Leadership

Emphasizing the importance of transformational leadership that builds a shared vision and inspires faculty members to collectively embrace change is essential. In line with this leadership perspective, Northouse (2021, p. 185) emphasizes the importance of transformational leadership—building a shared vision, inspiring others, and facilitating adaptation. In this context, innovation should not simply be imposed from above but rather communicated through inclusive dialogue to ensure it is accepted as a shared need. Thus, even if innovations fail structurally, experience shows that academic leadership requires a balance between progressive vision and strategic conflict management.

Academic Freedom and Strengthening Students' Intellectual Ethos

One important implication of this research is the need to reinforce student academic freedom as a fundamental principle of higher education. Altbach (2001) emphasized that academic freedom belongs not only to lecturers or researchers, but also to students learning to become scientists. When students are given the freedom to determine the direction of their research, they not only learn to write but also to think, evaluate, and be accountable for scientific truth ethically.

This policy aligns with Nussbaum's (2010) idea of education for human development, which states that true education must empower students to think independently, critically, and empathize with social realities. Thus, providing space for students to be creative is not merely a technical innovation, but also a strategic step towards producing graduates who are autonomous, responsible, and possess scientific integrity.

Table 1. Summary of Academic Leadership Dynamics in Determining the Title and Research Model of a Thesis

| Aspect | Innovative Policy | Forms of Lecturer Resistance | Impact on Students | Implications for Academic Leadership |
|---|---|--|--|---|
| Determining the Thesis Title | Students are given the freedom to choose titles according to their interests, contemporary issues (digital literacy, AI, green education, popular culture). | Lecturers assess students as immature; reject topics deemed outside their expertise; encourage thesis titles to follow the supervisor's preferences. | Increase motivation, relevance, and variety of research; students feel intellectual ownership of their thesis. | Leadership needs to build consensus on topic flexibility, while maintaining academic standards. |
| Selection of Research Model/Type | Students are free to choose a research model (phenomenology). | Lecturers are more comfortable with traditional patterns (PTK/experiments); | Methodological diversity is increasing; students are | Leadership needs to provide methodological |

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|-------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| | y, case study, R&D, grounded theory, PTK, experiment). | they reject new models that are considered complex or beyond their supervisory capabilities. | learning to think critically and contextually; but some are confused by the lack of technical support. | training for lecturers and students so that innovation can be implemented properly. |
| Academic Culture | Promoting a new paradigm based on liberal education: freedom, creativity, and scientific autonomy of students. | Collective resistance takes the form of rejection, policy sabotage, and even leadership coups. | Students support innovation, but are hampered by internal conflicts among lecturers. | Leadership must be transformative, dialogic, and inclusive; changing academic culture requires effective communication strategies. |

Conclusion

From the reflection above, it can be concluded that Innovative academic leadership often faces cultural resistance and value conflicts. However, this reflection demonstrates that shifting the educational paradigm toward student freedom of thought is a strategic step in developing a generation of critical and globally competitive academics. Institutional support, faculty training, and policies that explicitly guarantee academic freedom in higher education practices are required.

This reflection demonstrates that academic leadership is a contested arena between innovation, resistance, and student freedom. Allowing students to determine the type and title of their research recognizes academic freedom and is also a step toward increasing research relevance. However, resistance from traditional lecturers demonstrates that changing academic culture requires an inclusive, dialogical, and sustainable leadership strategy. This reflection also demonstrates that academic leadership is a process fraught with competing interests. Students' freedom to determine the title and research model for their thesis is a crucial step toward a more relevant, creative, and contextual higher

education. However, lecturer resistance is a major challenge that can thwart innovation if not managed with appropriate communication and collaboration strategies.

The implication of this research is the need for transformative and dialogic academic leadership to build a balance between innovation, resistance, and student freedom in the realm of academic research. This reflection is expected to contribute to a new understanding of how academic leadership can be exercised in a humane and civilized manner. Experiences of innovation, resistance, conflict, and leadership shifts serve not only as personal insights but also as institutional lessons about the importance of courageous thinking and steadfast principles in higher education. In line with Nussbaum's (2010) view, education should not only shape intelligent professionals but also free, critical, and responsible individuals. Therefore, student academic freedom is not a threat to the system, but rather the very soul of education itself.

Suggestion

Based on the results of reflection and discussion, several suggestions can be put forward as a contribution to the

development of academic leadership and higher education culture in Indonesia:

1. Penguatan Paradigma Kepemimpinan Reflektif: Universities need to develop a leadership model that emphasizes reflective, empathetic, and participatory skills. Academic leaders must be able to understand the social dynamics of the institution and respond constructively to differing views.
2. Reconstructing an Inclusive Academic Culture: Institutions need to foster an academic culture that respects differences in paradigms and leadership styles. Academic dialogue between lecturers should be directed toward collaboration, not confrontation.
3. Developing a Transparent Evaluation System: The leadership and academic performance evaluation system needs to be based on objective and participatory indicators so that it is not used as a tool for internal politics, but rather as a means of continuously improving academic quality.

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