

# **Followership is not following: Reframing followership in Western higher education**

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## **Followership is not following: Reframing followership in Western higher education**

This article examined meanings of followership in Western higher education as reported in the literature. To retrieve sources, an electronic search was implemented. The search procedure included the terms 'followership' and 'education' on six databases and other sources. Examination of relevant works found that, in Western higher education, 'followership' takes a different meaning than what is currently reported in the literature. Views of self-control and agency, and strong notions of autonomy and independence surfaced, aligning with academic ideas of critical and independent thinking, and academic freedom. Indeed, many academics did not align with the idea of being a follower as well as the perspective of followership as the deference to another individual. It was revealed that what academics do in Western higher education cannot be described by the term 'followership'. In this context, 'followership' is more accurately described as an endeavor related to contribution and making a difference; thus, a case for an afresh term was made. It was argued that a new term should acknowledge academics' autonomy and independence, and that academics 'volunteer' but do not 'subordinate.' Resultantly, the term 'endeavorship' was offered.

### **Introduction**

Followership is an established and well-researched phenomenon, particularly in leadership and management literature (Bastardo & Van Vugt, 2019; Riggio, 2020; Schott et al., 2020; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Conversely, simple electronic searches in databases uncover a lack of research on followership in education. Followership can be described as a key component in social and relational interactions amongst individuals and social groups (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). Followership behavior has been described as the willing deference to another individual, at least in some way (M. Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Thus, this behavior has been viewed as the allowing of oneself to be disproportionately influenced as opposed to influencing (Shamir, 2007; M. Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007).

Higher education institutions fall into the category of what is referred to in the literature as 'professional bureaucracy' (Lumby, 2012; Mintzberg, 1980). Workers in these institutions are usually dominated by professional or knowledge individuals (Adler et al., 2008; Wu, 2010). Higher education institutions are faced by many challenges including technological development, political issues, and the challenges surfaced by the forces of marketisation (Mathew, 2010; Pearce et al., 2018). This includes increased pressure due to globalization, changing of funding structures, and changing supply of and demand for higher education; resultantly, many higher education institutions aim for novelty, enhancement, and innovation in order to survive, or for competitive advantage (Brennan, 2008; Brown, 2008; Gibbs & Barnett, 2014; OECD, 2009). Indeed, seeking enhancement and innovation has become an important part of higher education institutions' agenda (Meek et al., 2009). This has resulted in radical adjustments to academic work (J. Blackmore & Sachs, 2000) and varying shifts in responsibilities (P. Blackmore & Blackwell, 2006). Marginson (2006) warned that there is a risk that tensions will increase as academics face greater role complexity. Davis and Jones (2014) argued for the need to shift away from the leader as the main agent of control to viewing leadership as dynamic and flexible. Understanding followership in Western higher education has the potential to provide insight on the role of academics as this becomes more complex, relevant leadership approaches, and approaches concerning strategic changes, outcomes, and innovation. In short, such understanding can foster conditions conducive to development.

According to Mebrahtu et al. (2000), Western higher education institutions are strongly associated with development, including efforts to improve the quality and relevance of educational provision. 'The West' is not limited to an ontologically fixed geographical location, but rather captures a socially, culturally, economically and politically constituted, onto-

epistemological category, sometimes understood in contrast to various iterations of the ‘non-West.’ Western nations have social and cultural positions of placing emphasis on sharing expertise, directing knowledge to benefit society, engaging the community, exchanging knowledge and encouraging developmental research (Bourn, 2020). They also have economic and political positions of affluence and adequate resources as well as providing higher education institutions with governmental support respectively. As Mohanty (2003) notes, ‘Western’ is used to refer to affluent, privileged nations and communities and ‘non-Western’ to economically and politically marginalized nations and communities. Therefore, ‘Western/non-Western’ is a designation that attempts to distinguish between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots.’ Higher education institutions in non-Western nations and communities have different political, economic, social and cultural positions, and thus different ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ (Grosfoguel, 2013). Accordingly, this article uses ‘Western’ to make a metaphorical rather than geographical distinction.

There are assumptions that Western higher education has a ‘public good’ role. It is assumed that higher education in the West takes a central role in contemporary challenges, where students need to be prepared for an increasingly complex and diverse world; it is also presumed that it takes a principal role in addressing global challenges (Stein et al., 2019). Stein et al. (2019) explain that this presumption infers an assumption that the knowledge produced by Western higher education is universally applicable and Western institutions are benevolent, though that this is not necessarily the case.

Using the literature, this article examines followership in Western higher education. To enable this, a research question on the meaning of ‘followership’ was developed. This work firstly presents the question; secondly, its respective rationale. Thirdly, the philosophical

positions. Following this, the methods including analytical framework, results, and discussion respectively. As part of the results, the studies are appraised, reviewed and thematized; in the discussion, studies' findings are analyzed, and a case is made for why the establishment of a new term is necessary. Subsequently, a new term resolving current issues with the term 'followership' is provided. Implications of the new term are then presented.

What patterns are apparent amongst the meanings of 'followership' in literature on higher education? (RQ1.)

### ***RQ1***

No work is available examining the definition of followership by applying higher education literature. Executing multiple literature searches revealed no such work since the time of the pioneering work on followership (Kelley, 1992, 1988). Indeed, Thody (2003) provides a lexicon for followership in educational contexts though does not offer a followership definition. Crossman and Crossman (2011) undertook a major review of the definition of followership though the literature reviewed was in corporate contexts. Considering that no analyses have examined the literature for the meaning that followership takes in higher education, this work aimed to fill this gap. This article investigated patterns that are apparent in the literature on the meanings of 'followership' in higher education in the Western context.

### ***Conceptual framework***

In educational environments, Fullan (1999, 2003) reported the need to accept complexity as the norm. Thus, his work and that of others (Hann, 2016; Hinchliffe & Woodward, 2004) advise sociological evaluations to better understand change. Therefore, this study adopted such a qualitative approach. Specifically, an inductive approach was taken. This allowed for the

investigation of what followership means when perceptions of academics were analyzed; indeed, this research elicited definition/s of followership based on academics' subjective meanings.

An inductive methodology is consistent with constructionist followership, the conceptualization adopted for this work. This is appropriate considering that followership is built on interpretivist roots (M. Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). To justify the adoption of this conceptualization, reference is made to conceptualizations of followership. This work did not want to prematurely exclude the meaning that followership may have based on subjective meanings of both followers and leaders: leader-centric, follower-centric, relational and role-based (M. Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) conceptualizations do not fully consider subjective meanings of both followers and leaders. In leader-centric and follower-centric conceptualizations, there is a focus on the leader and follower respectively. In the relational conceptualization, there is a focus on *the dynamics of the relationship* between a follower and leader (e.g., Hollander 2013; Liden et al., 1997). In the role-based conceptualization, there is a focus on the dynamics of the follower's role and the follower themselves: how a follower works with a leader, follower role orientations and follower schemas (Carsten et al., 2010); in this conceptualization, a clear distinction is made between a follower and a leader, this study did not want to make this characterization, as in academia, academics often take various roles which can include aspects of both followership and leadership e.g., researching, teaching, and mentoring. Thus, the view taken in this work was the constructionist conceptualization (Derue & Ashford, 2010), where followership is seen as a phenomenon that is constructed based on its meaning for both followers and leaders.

A constructionist view of followership fits a constructivist epistemological approach. Thus, this perspective was taken: knowledge is characterized by academics' consciousness. Academics can experience the same phenomenon but come out with different meanings from it;

thus, this work triangulated perceptions of different academics. This accords well with the perspective of one voluntaristic, really existing world, which is experienced and understood in different ways (Marton, 2000). Therefore, followership cannot exist without individuals who experience it and individuals, cannot experience a phenomenon without one (Marton & Pang, 2008). Resultantly, followership was considered in conjunction with academics who experience it.

## **Materials and methods**

This article examined work on followership. It accessed agents' accounts of typifications as reported in the literature.

### ***Strategy***

To search the literature, a search procedure with electronic searches was implemented. The procedure started with multiple initial scoping searches using preliminary versions of the search strategy. This allowed for scoping of the literature, assurance that no previous work existed on what is being investigated and refinement of the search strategy. The latter included the following terms: followership and education. This small number of search terms aimed to increase resulting records as scoping searches with more terms revealed minimal resulting records. The search was not limited to a publication year as this would further decrease the number of resulting records. Truncation was not implemented as the scoping searches revealed many non-relevant records e.g., literature on leadership where the term 'follower' is present (in one search:  $n > 100,000$ ).

Searches were conducted on the databases: 1) Bloomsbury Education & Childhood Studies, 2) British Education Index, 3) Emerald, 4) ScienceDirect 5) Journal Storage (JSTOR),

and 6) British Library E-Theses Online Service (EThOS). The first two were used because they encompass journals in education, third and fourth because they contain journals on leadership, the closest published field, considering there are no journals on followership, and fifth because it contains journals in the humanities and social sciences. In view of a small number of resulting records, the sixth was added to widen the search. For the same reason, searches were conducted on 1) the afore-mentioned databases, to identify relevant records that have cited studies reviewed as part of this article and 2) American Educational Research Association (AERA), British Educational Research Association (BERA), and Australian Educational Research Organisation (AERO); furthermore, reference lists of all resulting records were searched for other relevant studies. Search alerts for newly published articles matching the search were set up for the databases until 21 February 2022. Recent journal issues published by the same date and related to leadership were also searched.

The inclusion criteria consisted of studies investigating both leaders' and followers' subjective meanings of followership. Exclusion criteria comprised studies with languages other than English, and given the sociological approach, non-qualitative studies such as ones using anatomical, biochemical, mechanical, or physiological measures. These criteria reflected this work's aim of investigating the understanding of a phenomenon. Screening first took place on the titles, then abstracts and lastly full-text articles, against the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

### ***Data and evaluation***

The literature was examined. This included the extraction of relevant quotations; when quotations were analyzed, context was considered as this can support analysis and interpretation. Characteristics of studies were extracted and data were 1) located, 2) extracted, 3) grouped and 4) evaluated for quality. Locating data comprised reading the studies carefully and discarding



data unrelated to the research question. Extraction consisted of isolating data and grouping consisted of placing content within a thematic framework.

## **Results**

The electronic search resulted in the identification of 39 records. Six were identified through sources other than databases. Thus, 45 titles and abstracts were screened, with 37 excluded. Accordingly, eight full-text articles were screened for eligibility, with five excluded. Reasons for exclusion comprised investigation of non-academics ( $n = 2$ ) and leadership ( $n = 1$ ), no data collection ( $n = 1$ ) and non-higher education settings ( $n = 1$ ). In studies that met the inclusion and exclusion criteria, academics consisted of deans, professors, lecturers, and academic teachers. None of these studies declared funding. Analysis of data revealed four themes and no subthemes, with a predominance of autonomy. The studies are now appraised, reviewed and thematized.

The studies are paradigmatically aligned – they adopted constructivist perspectives which reflect anti-positivist approaches taken. They took a ‘free will’ approach with individuals seen as the creators of their environment, in other words, the studies’ stance was that of voluntarism. This is in alignment with the epistemological views adopted that, data from each interview and narrative can contribute to better understanding. Interviews (Billot et al., 2013; Leane, 2020; Nieto, 2015) and narratives (Billot et al., 2013) of studies under analysis were also in alignment with this. One study (Billot et al., 2013), used the lens of Relational Leadership Theory. Despite this theory not being an established one to investigate followership, examining interactions in ‘relational spaces’ allowed for analyses of followership complexities – this offered illuminations which cannot be captured through other lenses, leading to a better understanding of followership. The study made good application of the theory, expounding on elements which cultivated both positive and negative spaces. However, no specific approach of the theory was adopted (M. Uhl-

Bien, 2006) – this would have allowed for teasing out of nuances and further illumination. The other two studies (Leane, 2020; Nieto, 2015), did not present the theoretical lens/es deployed. This surfaced concerns as theories are always present (Trowler, 2015) – researchers do not commence their study as value-free entities but each has their personal perception/s of what followership may be. At a minimum, Trowler (2015) argues that tacit theory should be reported – this influences the lens through which followership is viewed and thus the informing of research. Thus, unexplained tacit theory affects conclusions made in these studies (Leane, 2020; Nieto, 2015) – this was considered when analyzing their findings. Similarly, when presenting findings in qualitative work, researchers can in/advertently transfer personal interpretations to participants’ words (Geertz, 1973). The potential for tacit theory and personal interpretations affecting conclusions and participants’ words respectively was lessened by all studies providing detailed data to substantiate their arguments. For example, in the study by Billot et al. (2013, p. 98), a verbatim quote of 74 words (one small paragraph) was provided to express the relationship between a ‘follower’ and leader as unclear. The studies by Leane (2020) and Nieto (2015) provided ample and robust data in comparison to published work in reputable journals. For instance, one (Leane, 2020) provided a repertory grid for participants and the other (Nieto, 2015), a full (extensive) transcript for one of the participants.

As the studies by Billot et al. (2013) and Leane (2020) had a population of academics in various disciplines, there are no concerns with data being unrepresentative. However, in the other study (Nieto, 2015), the population consisted of just academics in the business discipline; this was considered when analyzing the study’s findings – the data were not used to instigate claims but only to complement the discussions. Evaluation of whether data saturation was reached in studies under examination revealed that these do not provide an assurance of this. The study by

Leane (2020) only explained how investigating one context facilitated the reaching of saturation. The one by Nieto (2015) solely reported that when reviewing transcripts, an indication of saturation was developing. The other (Billot et al., 2013) did not offer information on said matter.

Billot et al. (2013) examined the concept of followership in the domain of teaching and learning in Western higher education institutions. Followership was revealed to be related to 'following' and responsibility, with the active use of skills, qualities and character. Specifically, followership was found to be understood as related to an active choice of engaging. A distinction surfaced between 'followership' and being a 'follower' where the latter was related to a reactive stance, or reactivity, to leaders, rules, or policy.

Academics were identified not to be aligned with being a 'follower.' Many academics did not subscribe to this idea because it does not directly reflect the academic ideas they held: critical and independent thinking, and academic freedom. This brings to the fore that for academics, these academic ideas conflict with notions of being a 'follower'. For the many academics that did not subscribe to the idea of being a 'follower,' it was revealed that their needs and characteristics required acknowledgement by respective parties such as academic leaders as this will lead to positive feelings about the work that they do. This accords well with literature reporting that academics appreciate good leaders (Martin et al., 2003; Ramsden et al., 2007; Trevelyan, 2001). Taken together, it may be posited that academics do not engage with the idea of being a 'follower,' and view 'followership' as related to an active – not passive – choice of engaging (or working); active and responsible academic work may be promoted through acknowledging academics' characteristics and needs.

Despite this, the idea of academic freedom carries a certain emphasis on responsibility, and responsibility implies accountability. Indeed, academics found negotiation and mutual respect, as essential for interactions in academic environments. Academics finding negotiation and mutual respect as essential may be explained by considering that all are engaged in and share a social setting, where each has some level of agency. Arguably, a high level of agency, considering the independence involved in academic environments and associated academic ideas of critical and independent thinking. Indeed, Billot et al. (2013) reported individual agency in academics, and that a level of agency is still the case even if the leader stands out because of their title and control of resources.

Billot et al. (2013) argue that followership is bound in a reciprocal relationship with leadership, where relational spaces are co-constructed by both followership and leadership. Billot et al. (2013) add that this relationship requires individuals to demonstrate respect, patience and openness, in order to achieve positive relational spaces. This accords well with the perceptions that academics held of 'followership' – that of taking an active choice to engage, and not being a 'follower'; this is also in harmony with the academic ideas of critical and independent thinking as well as academic freedom.

In addition to the above, followership was also revealed as complex and even fluid. Billot et al. (2013) uncovered that sometimes, 'followership' takes different meanings in the work of academics, shifting and changing depending on what they were working on. This was also the case for academics' own self-understanding of followership, where this changed depending on the main focus of their work at a given point in time. This accords with other findings in the same study (Billot et al., 2013) where self-understandings of academics did not align with the

perception their leaders had of them – with shifting self-understandings, leaders are unlikely to have an aligned perception.

Furthermore, Billot et al. (2013) reported that leaders play a crucial role in the co-construction of positive or negative relational spaces, which in turn affect culture and practices in academic environments such as quality of teaching, teaching abilities and engagement in collaborative work. Indeed, Ramsden et al. (2007) reported that positive relation spaces may lead to more productive and effective teaching and learning. Considering the level of agency observed in academics, whether positive or negative relational spaces are constructed can be argued to affect how followership is viewed by academics, which also affects practices in academic environments.

The study by Leane (2020) analyzed followership in two Western higher education institutions. The behavior of academics, their beliefs on followership and how this impacts their behavior was examined. The study established that academics make choices about their behaviors for reasons which are independent of those of leaders. Followership was associated with contributing to a process or project that one believes in. Many academics believed that there were two types of followership: active and passive. Active followership was seen as taking initiative and ownership, as a method to enhance future personal and professional potential (i.e., personal and career development), and as a learning opportunity for future leadership. Passive followership was viewed as being compliant and idle. The overall perception was that followership is an admirable endeavor related to contribution and making a difference.

According well with Billot et al. (2013), the work by Leane (2020) showed agency in academics. A high level of agency was indicated with academics making their own choices on their behavior as well as having their own reasons for these choices. For participants in the study,

followership did not mean the ‘following’ of a leader and they looked for leadership from sources other than leaders. This accords well with the work by Skorobohacz et al. (2016) identifying academics as preferring to connect with the broader university community for leadership and support.

Leane (2020) argued that academics favor independence and autonomy. This is because they exhibited following, or non-following, behaviors depending on their own beliefs or interests. They decided whether they will ‘follow’ as well as how they will ‘follow’ in a particular situation. This echoes the work by Muo (2013), establishing that academics have a strong preference for self-control and autonomy, and that they usually reject traditional, authority-based, leadership. This may be explained by academics’ belief that freedom is essential to choose how their expertise should be applied to be effective in their role (Empson, 2015). Lumby (2012) reported that academics’ expectation or demand for complete autonomy as a unique factor in higher education. This factor has implications for ‘followership’ – ‘followership’ takes a different meaning in higher education. Thus, this calls for a different term to describe this meaning.

Leane (2020) argued that followership in higher education is dependent upon the culture and values of the higher education institution. Leane (2020) stated that the complexity of higher education institutions raises the need to use a pluralist perspective: there are interacting institutional cultures and subcultures, and followership is constructed within, and is therefore heavily influenced by these. The implications for the meaning of followership in higher education is that it is fluid depending on the cultural context of the higher education institution.

The work by Nieto (2015) examined followership, effective followership and the meaning of being a ‘follower’ in (British) post-1992 universities. Post 1992-universities are the

result of governmental policy in the 1990s to expand higher education; the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) almost doubled the number of universities at the time, resulting in 84 universities. A core finding was that many academics, including lecturers, professors and deans felt disengaged with the idea of being a ‘follower’ because of issues they were experiencing in relation to leadership. For example, they did not feel recognized or rewarded, and felt a threat of dismissal if certain requirements were not met (for example, criteria).

Seemingly contrasting foci were uncovered – budgeting and student numbers, and quality of teaching and learning – this has implications for followership. The meaning of followership may change depending on context, or focus. Issues to establish stable ‘following’ were observed because of instability. For example, in one institution, there was frequent changing of the Dean. In another, there was institutional restructuring (Nieto, 2015). Issues to establish ‘following’ may be explained by academics having a perception that any point in time is a short-term interlude. Considering that restructuring as well as governmental policy changes are common occurrences in Western higher education (Smith, 2009), it may be posited that in this context, ‘following’ is more difficult to establish and takes on different meanings. This is in alignment with the work of both Billot et al. (2013) and Leane (2020) where followership as fluid was uncovered.

Nieto (2015) recognized that instability jeopardizes the idea of ‘following.’ Instability was described as a lack of stability, disruption or disruptive change. Considering that higher education institutions are situated in a constantly, potentially disruptive, changing environment (Smith, 2009), this has the implication that being a ‘follower’ is difficult to achieve consistently or in certain circumstances, difficult to achieve at all. For academics, change was reported to bring a frightening lack of ‘leadership control.’ Some participants described followership as being provided with guidance by leaders, suggesting that followership is synonymous to

‘following’ such guidance. However, when there is a changing environment, guidance is not always provided. Nieto (2015) argued that the instability brought about by change resulted in academics being unable to ‘follow.’ A notion that can be derived from these various discussions, particularly that followership cannot be achieved or is difficult to achieve in higher education institutions, is that what academics do cannot be described by the term ‘followership.’

### *Autonomy*

An ‘autonomy’ perception of followership emerged to a high degree in the literature. In the study by Billot et al. (2013), participants identified followership as being innovators, developers, volunteers, negotiators, advocates and defenders; they related followership to valuing justice and integrity within academia. This is evidenced by remembering and recounting vivid experiences of workplace cultures where they experienced a sense of belonging, respect and trust as well as encounters that encouraged support, collaboration, using and sharing resources and having a mutual vision. Narratives also evidenced this by expressing an enhanced teaching and learning environment with empathy, rewards, and responsibilities. This elaboration on followership indicates that they view followership as an autonomous endeavor.

Similarly, the following extract, relating to negative relational spaces, reveals that followership is not the ‘following’ of leaders:

You can be the Department Chair, the Program Head, and to a certain extent, even the Dean, but you can’t fire me! So is that person really a leader that has authority over what you do? [W]ith academic autonomy, there is very little control that they can have over what you do on a day-to-day basis when it comes to your teaching and your research, so it is very different from [other] organizational models. (B1) (Billot et al., 2013, p. 98)

Followership not being the ‘following’ of leaders is also indicated by statements of failure to



identify ‘common ground’ (B2) and expressions of the followership-leadership relationship as ‘tenuous’ (B3) and ‘not very clear at times’ (B4); followership was also conceptualized as working within the confines of ‘bureaucratic rules and regulations’ (B5) (Billot et al., 2013, p. 98).

In the same study (Billot et al., 2013), the following were psychological and structural factors reported in negative tones: 1) power relations that emerge from organizational processes and 2) regulations. Academics saw followership as bringing own approaches, having deep commitment to those approaches, and sharing intimate insider knowledge. This is evidenced by statements of distress over leaders’ negative behaviors that resulted in competition and constriction, or as one participant put it, ‘closed and competitive’ (B6) atmospheres. Another participant explained how people can be ‘strategically excluded . . . without any consideration for the damage being done to relationships’ (B7) (Billot et al., 2013, pp. 97–98). When followers’ own self-understandings did not align with the perception their leaders had of them, strong feelings of isolation, tension and vulnerability were expressed. Taken together, the discussions imply that followership is ‘doing things’ autonomously.

In the study by Leane (2020), individual autonomy was a prevalent aspect explicitly referenced to; additionally, the related challenge to formal authority. Over 35% of participants spoke of their own autonomy or others’ claim for, or expectation of. Followership was seen as the opportunity to contribute to something that one believes in. Discussions about autonomy were sometimes accompanied by negative comments about institutional leadership or management. The following extract provides evidence for the discussions in this paragraph:

I think that most academics have a lot of independence as academics, in the university sector most lecturers have a lot of autonomy.. [L1] I am completely responsible for what I deliver to my students, how they are formed as [graduates], I am totally responsible for being up-to-

date on what I do... Fortunately, I think I can manage my job. The biggest problem I will have with my job is bureaucracy getting in the way of it.. I have a manager but I regard that a lot of what I do, I am self- employed, and given my responsibility and it's up to me to make the most of that [L2] Leane (2020, p. 189).

In the study by Nieto (2015, p. 339), the notion of autonomy was also observed. For example, one leader suggested that followership is about accepting and taking on responsibility including making decisions:

encourage them to accept responsibility and I try and pass responsibility down to them so that instead of me making all the decisions, and inevitably I'm not going to make the right decisions all the time, or even some of the time, I involve and engage them in that decision making process (N1) (Nieto, 2015, p. 339).

### ***Nonautonomy***

To a very small extent, a 'nonautonomy' perception of followership surfaced in the literature. Followership being linked to nonautonomy, albeit with negative connotations, was observed in the work by Nieto (2015). Firstly, views that suggest managerialist thinking, with this hindering followership, were noted: 'we're getting this managerial-ism in higher education, which turns people off' (N2) (Nieto, 2015, pp. 178–179). Secondly, the meaning of followership was sometimes related to being faced with imposition/s by formal leaders on a context for which they would have little awareness. Thirdly, there was an instance where an academic admitted only registering for a PhD because they would 'get sacked' (N4) if they did not (Nieto, 2015, p. 348). Fourthly, academics did not feel included in change processes, this can be seen from the quote, 'I think a lot of colleagues are actually quite surprised if they're ever asked what do you think about something or brought into a decision making process' (N3) (Nieto, 2015, p. 192).

## *Independence*

Different methods employed by followers to manage leaders' criticism were reported (Billot et al., 2013). Passive methods reported included 1) staying silent, 2) distancing oneself, 3) acting agreeable, 4) conform, or 5) struggle to cope in changing and challenging circumstances.

Followers who did not react immediately sometimes reframed negative encounters to improving their practice and focusing on affirming personal and professional values. Active methods included critically questioning the situation and behavior of others' and their own, either publicly or in internal dialogues. When engaging in frustrating or disempowering interactions with leaders, some followers reported spiteful, accusatory, and revengeful practices or resisting, risk-taking and forming allegiances to stand their ground. Evidence of this included expressions of, 'there is no leadership here' (B8), 'we just talk and decide' (B9) and 'ratting on [the leader]' (B10) (Billot et al., 2013, p. 100). This indicates that followership does not carry the meaning of 'following' leader/s. This is further evidenced by academics being especially grateful when their leaders' showed 'genuine concern' (B11) for them (Billot et al., 2013, p. 97). Academics felt validated and sustained by respectful, empathetic, and encouraging interactions that fostered 'exuberance and pride' (B12) and allowed them to 'contribute in meaningful ways' (B13) (Billot et al., 2013, p. 97). In one university (Nieto, 2015), due to a policy of not promoting internally, prospects for promotion or recognition were limited. In this case, followership was linked to fear, resentment and feeling unappreciated, unrecognized, and unrewarded. Taken together, this paragraph indicates that followership carries the meaning of an endeavor related to oneself.

Leane (2020) identified that participants are three times more likely to look for, and find, leadership away from the institution's formal leadership structures e.g., formal leader, hierarchical structures, line-management and mentorship programs. When looking outside these

formal structures, different individual/s are looked at, including colleagues, informal mentors and even individuals external to the institution (see Leane, 2020, p. 194), indicating that followership comprises self-determination of who to look for as a leader. This is evidenced by references to the respective sources of leadership in the interview responses. Taken together, these discussions indicate ‘independence’ perceptions of followership.

### ***Belief and positive view of followership***

In the study by Leane (2020), one theme that emerged was that followership is whether to believe in an idea or leader. The following is one quote bringing this to the fore, ‘has to have faith... whether it’s a person or an idea’ (L3) (Leane, 2020, p. 121). There were views of admiration for followers – the following quote underlines this: ‘I have a lot of admiration for followers’ (L4) (Leane, 2020, p. 117). Positive perceptions included followership as the opportunity to contribute, learn or develop as well as seeking an easier life or risk avoidance. This is evidenced by the following statements: ‘A person who is cooperative, not necessarily does everything, you need people that will question things, have a bit of an independent mind, you don’t want a yes person’ (L5) and ‘I think they probably reduce their stress level, they have a slightly easier life, they don’t have to think independently about it and they can go with the collective, it’s often an easier route for them’ (L6) (Leane, 2020, pp. 119–120). Taken together, this discussion suggests followership as related to freeness in relation to what to believe and contribute in, and whether to question matters.

### **Discussion**

This qualitative article investigates followership in higher education, aiming to further the phenomenon’s understanding. The research question is put forward again:

What patterns are apparent amongst the meanings of ‘followership’ in literature on higher education? (RQ1.)

### *Patterns related to nonautonomy*

Nonautonomy – this is one of the themes that emerged in the literature. This theme emerged to a small degree, though it contrasted to the strong emergence of autonomy. This contrast may be best described as one academic stated, ‘a war zone’ (N4) (Nieto, 2015, p. 188): a struggle between followership viewed as autonomous by most but as nonautonomous by some. This suggests followership as a socially constructed phenomenon. Indeed, similar patterns have been suggested (Fitch & Van Brunt, 2016), with juxtapositioning of autonomy and being managed. Perceptions of reality of needing to read for a PhD and fearing dismissal reported in one of the studies also suggest social construction. Similarly, in the study by Leane (2020), followership was described and discussed sophisticatedly, suggesting prior existence of constructs, which have been developed and refined. Additionally, the finesse in which followership was explained (e.g., B1, L2, N1, N2) showed that ‘following’ is a choice and the individual has agency in deciding when and how they will be a ‘follower.’ Indeed, perceptions of followership demonstrated a clear understanding of the concepts of agency and choice as they related to followership. Such complex constructions posed followership as a social construct. This accords well with previous conclusions reported outside education literature (Carsten et al., 2010). The contrast between the meaning of followership in literature on higher education and that elsewhere, such as leadership and management, reinforces how followership has been presented elsewhere (Meindl, 1995): a product dependent on context. In leadership and management contexts, followership may be described as the willing deference to a leader (M. Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). However, in the context of Western higher education, the idea of followership is perceived as that of an endeavor related

to contribution and making a difference.

### ***Autonomy and independence***

Conversely to nonautonomy, autonomy and independence emerged strongly in the literature. Followership was viewed as individuals being innovators and developers and an endeavor that comprises volunteering to activities. 'Volunteering' brought to the fore that authority over followership is autonomous and thus, not a given. The theme of independence surfaced followership as not the 'following of a leader.' This is a significant finding that reveals that the idea of followership in Western higher education contrasts with definitions reported elsewhere; mainly in leadership and management literature. Indeed, Bastardo and Van Vugt (2019) reported followership as a loss of autonomy and influence, as well as diminished status and a lack of privilege *vis-à-vis* the leader. Schindler (2014) defined followership as the pursuing of a course of action, common with the leader, to achieve an organizational goal where contribution is made towards the achievement of the goal. The literature revealed that in Western higher education, followership is seen as a way that, *if one believes in* a process or project, contribution can be made to them. Equally, the literature showed that followers and leaders do not necessarily work towards the same goal. Taking this discussion together, it is unfitting to describe or define followership through notions of a loss of autonomy, or working on the same 'goal/s' in the Western higher education context.

### ***Positive perception***

A notion of 'positivity' in relation to followership emerged to a degree. For example, 'followership' enabled one to make a difference and provided opportunities to contribute to something that one believed in. Followership also provided opportunities to learn and develop.

This contrasts with reports in leadership literature, which for the most part, highlights negative connotations with the nature of followership and the follower label: followers are referred to as ineffective, lazy, or even dangerous (Ford & Harding, 2018; Schedlitzki et al., 2018). When followership is not described with negative associations, ‘following’ perspectives are adopted. For instance, Dvir and Shamir (2003) as well as Shamir (2007) presented followership as utilizing one’s intellect and problem solving, communication and interpersonal skills to actualize leaders’ agendas or plans. Lapierre (2014, p. 19) described followers as those who ‘effect the task,’ further adding, ‘Obviously followers who question every directive from their leader or work to devise alternative approaches to every proposal would be detrimental to organizational functioning.’ A ‘positivity’ perception of ‘followership’ in the Western higher education context is in direct conflict with negative connotations and ‘subjugation’ labels in leadership literature.

### *Change*

The literature surfaced followership as bringing innovation and development, indicating followership as initiating or approving change. The implications of this are that if a change is proposed, followership can be seen as a mechanism that allows engagement or lack thereof with the change, in/directly showing dis/approval. Indeed, followers reported that they can ‘volunteer’ but not ‘subordinate’ to a proposed change. Therefore, if they do not volunteer, they will not be part of the change. They may be passive, not being part of it but not communicating disapproval, or active: negotiating, advocating, or defending. Indeed, some academics reported passive behavior while others identified themselves as negotiators, advocates and defenders (Billot et al., 2013). Additionally, autocracy (i.e., autocratic non-consultative leadership), is reported to elicit negative emotions (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015) and decrease one’s engagement with their work (Nieto, 2015). Thus, followership is a mechanism for individuals that provides or withholds

‘authorization’ for change. Indeed, followership was recognized as shaping change or ‘affecting the design’ – change requires fine tuning at a local level as not all possible details of a change can be set out (exhaustive detailing of how a change is going to be implemented considering all factors is not possible). This explains why the intentions of policymakers often result in change not materializing at all or as intended (Mårtensson et al., 2014): if ‘authorization’ is not provided through followership, change is unsuccessful, mostly unadopted and systemically unaccepted. Thus, for change to be successful in Western higher education, pursuing true authorization is necessary – this can be achieved by recognizing that academics have to approve and volunteer to be part of change; this means avoiding autocracy, or managerialism. Taking this discussion together brings to the fore the nature of followership in Western higher education: an autonomous endeavor.

### ***Leadership and management discourse***

The examination of literature on followership in Western higher education reveals that in this context, the meaning surrounding the idea of followership is dissimilar to common notions found in the literature, mainly leadership and management literature. Academics view the idea of ‘followership’ as an autonomous endeavor. However, leadership and management literature romanticizes leadership, viewing ‘followership’ as subordination to the leader and ability to effect action/s only if permitted to do so. Only the leader has authority, autonomy and independence, but not the ‘follower.’ For one example, Schindler (2014, p. x) promoted an understanding of ‘followership’ of how to ‘prepare for the job,’ ‘improve your performance,’ ‘understand what is required of you’ and be an ‘exemplary follower.’ Indeed, most followership conceptualizations see the ‘follower’ as working for or with the leader; even in constructionist views, ‘followership’ and ‘leadership’ are constructed if they are both ‘claimed’ and ‘granted’ –



individuals need to claim follower roles, otherwise leadership does not materialize (M. Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). In addition to this, the very term ‘followership’ has an overtone of subjugation. Acknowledging this, the term does not apply to Western higher education context and should be rethought. There should be an understanding beyond a notion of subordination. Restricting the meaning of the concept to ‘following’ is incongruent to autonomy and independence. Thus, there is a stark contrast in understandings of ‘followership’ – there is no accordance between common notions of ‘followership’ found in the literature and meanings given to it in Western higher education. Accordingly, it is unsuitable to refine or adapt current definitions: an afresh term is necessary.

### *A new term*

A new term should acknowledge how the phenomenon currently known as ‘followership’ is understood in the Western higher education context. Principally, that of an undertaking related to autonomy and independence. Therefore, a new term should not infer subjugation. Indeed, academics ‘volunteer’ but do not ‘subordinate’; they have academic freedom and engage in critical and independent thinking. Academics make their own choices and have their own reasons for these choices.

An afresh term should be broad enough to accommodate potential variations in meaning. Academics engage in a wide range of work, and the meaning shifts and changes depending on this. In Western higher education, the phenomenon under analysis is fluid: it depends on the cultural context and stability of the higher education institution. Nonetheless, it is clearly based on ideas of contribution, making a difference, and deciding on whether to engage based on own beliefs and interests.

A new term to describe the phenomenon under analysis is offered: ‘endeavorship.’ ‘Endeavorship’ can be defined as the engagement in an ‘endeavor,’ or ‘endeavoring’; thus, an academic ‘endeavors’; it may or may not be affected by other forces such as institutional culture, relationships, grouping and ‘endeavors’ of others. The term more accurately reflects that the concept is not necessarily affected by leaders, rules, or policy, and is not related to the ‘following’ of an individual or leader. This conceptualization in Western higher education reflects the phenomenon in such context, enabling a more accurate description. This conceptualization marks a clear departure from notions found in current literature.

The term ‘Endeavorship’ can influence many aspects of academic life – how academics form their relationships with other academics and how they choose their identities, roles, actions, expressions, and responses. The term places an increased focus on commonalities between endeavorers and leaders such as engaging in actions and decisions; this can promote bi-directional understanding, strengthen communication and instigate reciprocal relationships. The use of the term can empower endeavorers and enhance the value of individuals, teams, and institutions.

The current article analyzed literature on higher education in the Western context, examining the meaning of followership. A clear contrast from current understandings of ‘followership’ is revealed. Indeed, the term itself was found unfitting and a new term proposed: ‘endeavorship.’ Conceptualizing the work of academics as engaging in an ‘endeavor’ or ‘endeavoring’ means that there is clearer recognition of what academics do and an acknowledgement of academics’ characteristics. For individuals working in this context, such acknowledgement can promote better understanding of one another, and active and responsible work. As academics do not align with managerialist views of deference or subordination,

abandoning such views and related notions of ‘following’ enables the better meeting of needs for individuals working in Western higher education. Additionally, this has the potential to enhance quality of teaching, and lead to more productive teaching and learning (Ramsden et al., 2007). Implications for policy include avoiding such views and notions, recognizing how academics view what they do. This contrasts with current shifts in higher education towards managerialism, caused by privatization, market-like competition, and resultant entrepreneurialism. For example, striving to increase private revenue and improving cost-effectiveness is leading to managerialist thinking and pursuit of ‘better management’ (Amaral et al., 2003; Kaiser et al., 2014). In some cases, governments are encouraging internal management efficiency and effectiveness, greater power and authority to university chief executives, and decreased authority to departments and teams (Kaiser et al., 2014). Therefore, while current shifts are underway, there should be clear recognition of academics’ autonomy and independence, and avoidance of ‘subordination’ ideas in both policy and practice. University leaders must be attuned to current realities – reforms to Western higher education institutions, including changes and responses to problems facing these, should avoid managerialism or governance that entertain notions of deference. Going forward, researchers are invited to conduct primary research on the meaning of the phenomenon in other higher education contexts. Describing the phenomenon as ‘endeavorship’ clearly raises a call for empirical examination of conceptualizing it in this manner. Resultantly, a call is made for the investigation of whether this description reflects the thoughts and ideas of individuals related to Western higher education. Additionally, whether this reflects the thoughts and ideas of individuals related to other higher education contexts. Further expansion of research methodologies and data collection techniques, such as those which can generate alternate information related to academics’ subjective meanings and perceptions of followership, e.g.,

ethnography, autoethnography and practice-based research as well as focus groups and questionnaires respectively, is suggested as these will vary research perspectives and types of data, enriching illuminations. Limitations of this work include the analysis of literature by only one author.

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The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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