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# Re-imagining Leadership Development for Middle-level Academic Leaders in Africa

Oliver Seale\*

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## Abstract

The university today is a postmodern, neo-liberal, competitive, boundary-less knowledge conglomerate, a far cry from its historical, traditional, classical and collegial roots. Although remaining true to its primary mission of research, teaching and community engagement, its organisational form has changed significantly, with its concomitant implications for governance, leadership and management, especially in a developing world context. The regional and institutional disruptions and protests by students and other stakeholders in African countries like Algeria, Kenya, Sudan and, more recently, South Africa in the guise of the '#RhodesMustFall,' '#FeesMustFall' and '#OpenStellenbosch' campaigns, starkly illustrates this challenging, nebulous environment of higher education on the continent. The article provides a reflection and engagement on these critical issues and aims to illustrate that: (i) the global and local contexts of higher education have changed dramatically, with its concomitant added levels of complexity for academic leaders; (ii) this environment has implications for the conception and practice of leadership and management in universities, for middle level academic leaders in particular; and (iii) this setting provides the backdrop for a holistic and integrated academic leadership intervention in universities in Africa.

**Keywords:** deans, heads/chairs of schools, middle-management, leadership in higher education, MOLD

## Résumé

L'université est aujourd'hui un conglomérat de connaissances postmoderne, néolibéral, compétitif et sans frontières, loin de ses racines historiques, traditionnelles, classiques et collégiales. Bien qu'elle reste fidèle à sa mission principale de recherche, d'enseignement et d'engagement communautaire, sa forme organisationnelle a considérablement changé, avec des implications concomitantes de gouvernance, de leadership et de gestion, en particulier dans

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un monde en développement. Les perturbations et protestations régionales et institutionnelles d'étudiants et d'autres parties prenantes de pays africains comme l'Algérie, le Kenya, le Soudan et, plus récemment, l'Afrique du Sud avec des campagnes comme #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall et #OpenStellenbosch illustrent clairement cet environnement nébuleux et difficile de l'enseignement supérieur sur le continent. L'article fournit une réflexion et un engagement sur ces questions importantes et tente d'illustrer que : (i) les contextes, mondial et local, de l'enseignement supérieur ont changé de façon spectaculaire avec des niveaux supplémentaires et concomitants de complexité pour les responsables universitaires ; (ii) cet environnement a des implications pour les universités, dans la conception et la pratique du leadership et de la gestion de niveau intermédiaires en particulier les dirigeants ; et (iii) ce cadre fournit la toile de fond pour une intervention de leadership académique holistique et intégrée dans les universités en Afrique.

**Mots-clés** : doyens, directeurs d'école, cadres intermédiaires, leadership dans l'enseignement supérieur, MOLD

## Introduction

The world of higher education has changed dramatically in the past two decades, and this has had implications for its governance, leadership and management, particularly at universities (Johnson & Cross 2006; Scott *et al.* 2008; Greicar 2009; Gmelch & Buller 2015; Seale & Cross 2017). African higher education is in transition and grappling with major challenges arising out of global issues and local imperatives. It has a leadership crisis which requires a new kind of leadership and management (Jansen 2015; Seale & Cross 2015; Seale & FitzGerald 2016; Jowi 2018). Although there is rising global interest in studies on academic leadership in universities nowadays, most especially on deanship, their state of play in Africa remains under-researched and the extant literature on its contextual specificities very thin. This is worrisome.

In an attempt to remedy this situation, Jowi (2018) in a doctoral study provides an analysis on the leadership styles of deans in Kenyan universities, while Otara (2015) and Seale (2015) in their investigations on the decanal challenges, proffer guidelines for more effective leadership and management through appropriate leadership development. Academic leaders and managers play a pivotal role in advancing the strategic objectives and operational requirements for success in universities. Although credible scholars, it appears that many do not have the necessary management know-how or experience, a key requirement for academic leadership.

Another study at universities in the Gauteng province of South Africa confirms the underlying premise that leadership development for academic leaders can be an enabling, empowering instrument of change and effective performance, for deans in this case (Seale 2015). Burgoyne *et al.* (2009) and others claim that leadership development is not the panacea for addressing organisational ills, but if conceptualised, planned and managed correctly in an enabling organisational setting, it may enhance an individual's competencies and result in improved organisational outcomes. However, in South African and most universities on the continent, as Seale (2015) illustrates, approaches to leadership development do not appear to be responsive to the contextual complexity and fluidity of a changing environment. Targeted and bespoke interventions for middle-level academic leaders are almost non-existent.

It may be that universities in Africa are setting up their academic leaders for failure if they are not adequately prepared and supported with appropriate leadership development before and during their tenure. A fundamental question posed in this article is: Can middle-level academic leaders make a successful transition from a traditional, hierarchical academe to effective leadership and management practice? Cognisant of the literature and prevailing discourse, it is argued here that this is possible. The main contention, however, is that leadership development for academic leaders requires an appropriate, contextual response to the unique higher education setting in Africa.

Drawing from the current literature, trends and research, a systemic, integrated approach to leadership development is proffered here, informed by organisational strategies and objectives that are individually oriented and directed toward building leadership and management capabilities.

## **Theory and Method**

The predominant emphasis in leadership research and the current discourse has been on the human capital of individual leaders (Day 1999). This is in keeping with the traditional individualistic, heroic notions of leadership advocated by the 'leader-follower' discourse. But as pointed out by Parry (1998) and others, this approach neglects the organisational and social dimensions of leadership, as characterised by advancements in prevailing theories on transformational leadership (Huey 1994; Nirenberg 1993), team leadership (Stewart & Manz 1995; Northouse 2007; Lave & Wenger 1991), distributed leadership (Gronn 2002; Spillane *et al.* 2001) and participatory or collective leadership (Abzug & Phelps 1998; Black & Gregersen 1997).

Most leadership development approaches nowadays remain trapped in the 'heroic,' individualistic leadership frame, manifested by a 'deficit-assumption' orientation which focuses on a leader's 'weaknesses' and performance gaps, with its main purpose being remedial, by fixing the individual for the benefit of the collective (Seale 2015). However, the literature and overriding evidence points to an emerging notion of leadership development in universities that is cognisant of the individual, organisational and social dimensions of leadership, and aligned to the strategic intent and performance objectives of institutions located in a specific environmental setting (Mountford & Doidge 2005; Scott *et al.* 2008; Bolden *et al.* 2008; Greicar 2009; Gmelch & Buller 2015).

In this reconceptualisation, Seale (2015) argues that leadership development acquires and is imbued with a 'developmental-orientation' premised on building the capacity of the individual for effective performance in his or her current role and continuous professional development for career advancement. This approach is cognisant of the organisational and social dimensions of leadership which have hitherto been neglected or overlooked in responses to leadership development, as confirmed by Parry (1998). The fundamental premise in this conception is that middle-level academic leaders possess the requisite minimum knowledge, skills and demonstrable experience to do their jobs, hence their appointment (Seale 2015).

Leadership development here is directed specifically towards an enhancement of a leader's capabilities to lead and manage more effectively amidst organisational complexity and change. What this means is that leadership development in the prevailing context must be cognisant of, and responsive to, the complexities of organisational change and its concomitant implications for the social relations of middle-level academic managers. As Parry (1998) claims and the author agrees, an in-depth investigation of this change process provides a lens for reviewing and understanding the social influence processes of leadership at work in complex, organisational settings such as universities. By the same token, it provides an opportunity for reframing the conceptual and contextual setting for a more nuanced discourse on leadership development in what seems a unique environment like African higher education.

Here we draw on the literature on leadership development and current trends and data from two questionnaires that formed part of a doctoral study undertaken by Seale (2015) involving interviews with 26 deans (of whom 10 were women), their line managers, human resource managers and other key informants at six universities in the Gauteng province, South Africa: University of Pretoria (UP), University of South Africa (UNISA), University



of the Witwatersrand (Wits), University of Johannesburg (UJ), Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) and the Vaal University of Technology (VUT). It also draws on the summary data in the training needs analyses which were undertaken with participants on the Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) programmes in 2018 and 2019.

These research methods enabled commonalities and differences to be compared among participant responses and presented an opportunity to gather multiple sources of information rich in context. In order to test and triangulate the data from the questionnaires and interviews with deans, additional semi-structured interviews took place with 12 other key informants, such as the deans' line managers, human resource managers, and others, including the Chief Executive Officer of Higher Education South Africa (HESA).

## **Re-imagining Leadership Development for Middle-level Academic Leaders**

Academic leaders in most instances are not being prepared nor supported for what appears to be a unique twenty-first century higher education setting caught in the throes of global influencers and multifarious local demands for transformation, responsiveness and performativity (Gmelch & Buller 2015; Wall 2015; Seale & Cross 2017; Jowi 2018).

My predecessor warned that this is a very lonely position. I only realised it when I experienced the relief of being among peers in these sessions. (Executive Dean, North-West University, 2018)

What is becoming apparent is that the conceptual and theoretical frame of leadership development for academic leaders in this setting must be cognisant of and responsive to: (i) the changing global and local context of higher education, with its concomitant added levels of complexity; (ii) the capacity implications of a changing environment for leadership and management; and (iii) the enhancement of capital for academic leaders through leadership development for more effective individual and organisational performance (Seale 2015).

There appear to be three main phenomena or features of leadership development emerging from the literature, current discourse and research which informs the emerging theorisation on leadership development for academic leaders (see Wisniewski 2000; Duderstadt 2005; Scott *et al.* 2008; Bolden *et al.* 2008; Gmelch & Buller 2015; Wepner, Henk, & Lovell 2015; Seale 2015). These are the *leadership context*, *leadership capacity* and *leadership capital* which provide a foundation for a developmental oriented, integrated

approach to leadership development that embeds career advancement and is driven by performance management (see Figure1 below).

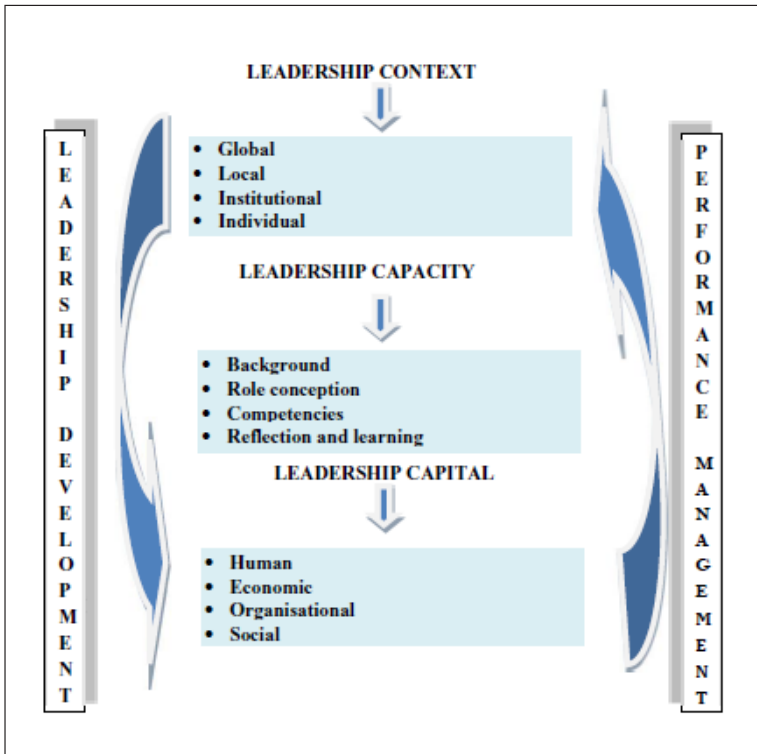


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of leadership development for deans

Firstly, there is the complex and changing leadership context characterised by global, national and institutional imperatives. But of equal importance is what the individual brings to this context in terms of background, knowledge and experience.

In their study on collective leadership in universities, Bolden *et al.* (2008) identify five groups of leadership factors which are key for leadership development in the contemporary higher education setting:

- i. *Structural and organisational* – this includes organisational systems, processes and structures; allocation and management of budgets and resources; human resources management; formal and informal communication channels; and forums for consultation and decision making.

The writers illustrate, for instance, that the nature of budgetary control and devolution, coupled with transparency in the allocation of finances, is fundamental in shaping leadership at the school/departmental level (Bolden *et al.* 2008). This resonates with the comments of some deans on the additional sources of power and authority their position provides, and how they influence desired behaviour through the use of reward or coercion, amongst staff (Seale 2015).

- ii. *Individual* – this refers to personal qualities, experience and preferences. Bolden *et al.* (2008) found a wide variation in personal styles, motivations and approaches within and between universities, ranging from highly individualistic through to team and collective approaches to leadership. This is consistent with the views articulated by the deans in South Africa, where most expressed the need for collective, ‘bottom-up’ leadership in the academe, given their important interface role and need to ensure commitment to their university’s strategic vision and plans (Seale 2015).
- iii. *Social* – this aspect incorporates the informal networks, partnerships, and alliances, organisational culture and any shared sense of purpose and identity. The concept of identity for Bolden *et al.* (2008) seemed an integral part of the motivations and experiences of leadership that are not well captured in behavioural or procedural accounts. This confirms Parry’s (1998) views on the relational and social dimensions of leadership and how they impact on individual and group identity. For a number of the deans participating in this study, especially those in merged institutions,<sup>1</sup> this appears to have been one of the most difficult leadership challenges they faced in terms of forsaking former organisational cultures and identities and creating new ones, establishing new partnerships, alliances and networks (Seale 2015).
- iv. *Contextual* – this reflects the way in which university leadership is becoming increasingly politicised and subject to external pressures. There are a number of global and local drivers and shifts which have leadership and management implications for deans in South African higher education (see Johnson & Cross 2006; Scott *et al.* 2008; Greicar 2009; Meek, Goedegebuure, Santiago & Carvalho 2010; Gmelch & Buller 2015). The introduction of ‘executive deanship’ in local universities has added another layer of complexity to an already challenging environment, as illustrated by Johnson and Cross (2006) and later confirmed by Seale and Cross (2017).

- v. *Developmental*—this refers to the ongoing and changing developmental needs of individuals, groups and organisations. What Bolden *et al.* (2008) point to here is a more holistic approach to leadership development which includes the individual, team and organisational dimensions and, as McLennan and Orkin (2009) confirm, ensures that the learning environment is enabling and empowering to deliver the desired outcomes. The focus here is not only the human, but also the economic, organisational and social dimensions of leadership development (Bolden *et al.* 2008).

As alluded to earlier, the contextual setting for middle-level academic leaders in South African higher education finds expression through the global and local challenges they are experiencing, leadership and management legacies of their respective institutions, and repositioning post-democracy.

Secondly, *leadership capacity* in this analytical frame relates to the internal means of ensuring that the fundamental requirements for academic leadership and management exist within the individual and the organisation (Wolverton *et al.* 2005; Gmelch & Buller 2015). It refers to the process of leadership development that enables and empowers the individual and organisation (Bolden *et al.* 2008; McLennan & Orkin 2009) to address the complexities of change, reflect and learn from their successes and failures, and focus on improved performance. This is in keeping with the three areas Wolverton *et al.* (2005) identify for leadership development in their study: (i) conceptual understanding of academic leadership in a specific institutional context; (ii) skill development for performance; and (iii) reflection and learning from experience.

This last dimension is key to the local context, bearing in mind the particular challenges middle-level leaders face with understanding, and enacting their academic leadership and management roles in complexity and change. For instance, most if not all the deans in South Africa expressed the value of reflection and learning from their experiences and those of their peers (Seale 2015), and Wepner *et al.* (2015) agree.

Self-reflection is not always easy, yet it is critical for moving forward. One cannot assume that deans are capable of self-reflection. Opportunities to self-reflect about what deans are thinking and doing can help them to see more clearly their own habits of mind and patterns of practice.

Not surprisingly, this component of leadership development is gaining more prominence, as can be gleaned from the work of Bolden *et al.* (2008), Scott *et al.* (2008), Greicar (2009), and Wepner, Henk and Lovell (2015) in other geographical settings.

The third phenomenon in the conceptual frame for leadership development is *leadership capital*. Although approaches to leadership development nowadays are more strategic and integrated with organisational objectives, the challenge of measuring the impact and return on investment in a systematic and comprehensive manner remains problematic (McLennan & Orkin 2009; Bolden *et al.* 2008; Gmelch & Buller 2015). Most interventions use programme impact surveys which tend to focus on participant satisfaction with the event/activities, and not on an assessment of the application of new knowledge and skills, nor individual and organisational benefits in terms of return on investment. Moreover, there appears to be a disjunction in current approaches to determining leadership and management effectiveness (see Pounder 1999; Whetten & Cameron YEAR cited in Rosser *et al.* 2003; Wall 2015) which is highlighted too by the deans in South Africa (Seale 2015).

This disjunction appears to be the central problem with determining the individual and institutional value of investment in current leadership development interventions in universities. What emerges from the literature and research is a need to develop an appropriate assessment of the impact and return on investment for leadership development which is cognisant of the leader's context and capacity. In response, the authors introduce the notion of *leadership capital* as the demonstrable, measurable outcome, value-add, or contribution to an increase of capital (human, economic, organisational and social) for the individual, institution and higher education sector (environment), arising out of relevant and appropriate leadership development interventions for academic leaders.

Human capital comprises the competencies, knowledge, and social and personality attributes embodied in the ability to perform labour for economic value (OECD 1998). As knowledge workers, middle-level academic leaders are endowed with a unique biography, knowledge, skills set, and personality traits which they contribute to their position. The main purpose of leadership development, then, is to prepare them to be effective in the role through knowledge and skills enhancement and, equally importantly, in their professional lives' post-academic leadership, in terms of career management. This is in keeping with predominant approaches to leadership development which not only focus on professional but also on personal advancement. It is corroborated by Schön's (1983) approach to reflectivity as an alternative epistemology for leadership and management, and the notion of epistemic reflexivity introduced by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992).

Economic capital refers to the amount of investment that an organisation needs to ensure that it stays solvent. It is calculated internally and is the level

of capital an organisation should have to support any operational risks it takes on (Investopedia 2014). Universities, like most contemporary organisations, face major financial constraints and are required to work smarter and 'do more with less' as public funding for higher education globally declines. Middle-level academic leaders nowadays need to ensure that they have the necessary financial resources, not only to meet but also to realise the institution's strategic objectives within a constrained environment. In addition, they face increasing demands for financial accountability, especially given the systematic dwindling in state funding to local higher education in the past two decades. In order to address their budgetary shortfalls, one of the new areas of responsibility for academic leaders is income generation as well as risk management, which requires a particular skill set and, it is argued, can be addressed through leadership development.

Organisational capital is the value to an enterprise which is derived from its philosophy and systems while leveraging its capability for delivering goods or services (Wikipedia 2019). It combines institution-specific information that affects production, augmented through output-related learning processes (Prescott & Visscher 1980) and the know-how needed to create productivity systems in terms of human skills and physical capital (Evenson & Westphal 1995). The focus here is more on the organisational culture, systems/processes and learning. The institutional management context of deans these days is characterised by the need for effective systems and processes to deliver a quality product and service. Simply put, middle-level academic leaders need to be more technology savvy and able to work smarter by developing appropriate institutional systems that enhance their institution's performance.

Cohen and Prusak (2001) describe social capital as the reserve of active connections among people based on the trust, mutual understanding, and collective values and behaviours that unite them and result in collaborative actions. As mentioned earlier, Parry (1998) stresses the importance of the social and relational aspects of leadership in a knowledge domain, which other writers refer to as team leadership (Stewart & Manz 1995; Northouse 2007; Lave & Wenger 1991), distributed leadership (Gronn 2002; Spillane *et al.* 2001) and participatory or collective leadership (Abzug & Phelps 1998; Black & Gregersen 1997).

For middle-level academic leaders, social capital means establishing and maintaining relationships of trust with both the academe and the administration, towards ensuring that there is an alignment to the institutional strategy and a commitment to the achievement of its organisational objectives. Leadership development in this context, then, provides opportunities to

systematise and sustain these crucial networks that are vital for advancing more effective leadership and management performance.

Current approaches to leadership development have focused primarily on the human and economic, and not sufficiently on the organisational and social capital dimensions (Bolden *et al.* 2008; Scott *et al.* 2008; Greicar 2009; Gmelch & Buller 2015). The emerging framework for leadership capital, as illustrated in Table 1 below, does two things: it identifies the focus, measures, outcomes and models based on the work of Schuller (2000) and, adapted for our purposes, demonstrates the important interface and potential dialectic between the individual and institutional dimensions of leadership capital.

**Table 1:** Leadership capital framework

	Human Capital	Social Capital	Economic Capital	Organisational Capital
<b>Focus</b>	Individual	Individual	↔ Institutional	Institutional
<b>Measures</b>	Duration of schooling Qualifications	Attitudes/values Membership/ participation Trust levels	↔ Solvency Financial stability Risk management	Systems/processes Performance Culture/climate Learning
<b>Outcomes</b>	Direct: income, productivity Indirect: health, civic activity	Social cohesion Economic achievement More social capital	↔ Adequate risk capital Going concern	Stability Competitiveness
<b>Model</b>	Linear	Interactive/ circular	↔ Linear	Linear

*Focus* – Human capital focuses on the individual, whereas for economic and organisational capital, it is institutional. Social capital involves relationships and a dynamic interplay between the individual and the institution in terms of the internal and external networks that it establishes. In an organisational setting like a university, the inclusion of all four types of capital is key as an impact measurement tool for leadership development, since noting Schuller (2000:6), individuals and institutions ‘are not discrete entities who exist separately from the rest of each other, or from other social units’. The effectiveness of leadership development will therefore hinge on an institutional environment which is enabling for individual success but, of equal importance, is economically viable and organisationally stable. This approach in Schuller’s (2000) view is a gestalt switch for leadership development and what the authors contend is required for middle-level academic leaders locally.

*Input/measure* – Human capital is measured primarily by levels of skills, experience and qualifications achieved. In a similar vein, economic capital is determined by the institution's solvency levels, financial stability and management of risks associated with capital investments. Social capital and organisational capital, on the other hand, are far more dispersed. Organisational capital measures include the systems and processes put in place to deliver particular goods or services and their market value, performance and organisational learning. Social capital uses an individual's attitudes or values as measures of how they impact on organisational culture, as well as their levels of active participation in internal and external networks, for personal and institutional gain.

The relevance of social and organisational capital to leadership development can be seen, for instance, in the formal and informal modes of learning, and the skills acquired by individuals through learning-by-doing in an enabling environment. Participation in networks provides access to internal and external information and ideas, as Schuller (2000) mentions, often in a relatively unstructured way. This is key, especially since academic leaders like deans for instance, are nowadays the 'bridge-builders' between the academe, administration and external role players. Human and social capital are key determinants for success in academic leadership and management roles within a complex, challenging context like South African higher education, where they are practised at multiple levels and often with quite disparate groups of stakeholders.

*Outcomes* – The main outcomes of human capital for an individual are generally an enhanced professional profile with additional knowledge and skills, improved currency in terms of income received and greater productivity. Appropriate investment in economic capital results in a financially solvent, going concern for an organisation that manages its operational risks effectively. Leadership development interventions on financial management, for instance, can assist middle-level academic leaders in becoming more prudent with expenditure and innovative in generating additional revenue for their university, once they have acquired the requisite skills set in this regard. Organisational capital provides institutional stability with adequate systems and processes in place, coupled with an enabling culture and opportunities for learning. Taken together, these features contribute not only to organisational stability but also to an enhancement of its competitiveness in relation to others. Social capital can be linked directly to organisational performance in terms of social cohesion and trust relationships – especially in a unique, contested organisational setting like the academe – as well as to a more enabling institutional climate and the leveraging of information networks for political, economic, and social gain.



*Models* – For Schuller (2000), human capital suggests a direct linear model: investments are made, in time or money, and economic returns flow to the individual and the institution. From the literature, it appears that economic and organisational capital also have similar linear approaches. In economic capital, appropriate planning and appropriate levels of financial investment result in the mitigation and more effective management of operational risks which impact on performance. Organisational capital requires direct investment in appropriate systems and processes such as, for instance, automated operational decision making which is less labour intensive and offers better returns in terms of institutional transparency and effective communication, thus contributing to an improved institutional climate of trust and willingness to work collaboratively. Here, there is a direct relationship, says Schuller (2000), between input (planning/investment) and returns (performance/climate). Analysts are able to deploy existing tools to estimate the returns on investment and institutions like universities can justify their expenditure since the outcomes are more visible and direct.

Social capital, however, has a less linear character and its quantitative returns are not so easily definable or measurable, which is one of its weaknesses. Although the level or amount of social capital present in a given relationship is often intuitive, the value that information and ideas networks add to individual and organisational performance, may be determined. For instance, a dean who has a well-established supportive relationship with his peers externally, can leverage their networked experiences when considering a particular course of action. Lessons learned and applied can then result in better and more cost-effective outcomes for the dean in question and his institution. Unlike the other forms, social capital requires an interactive/circular model that applies different metrics for different functions with its purpose being a longer-term investment, not solely linked to the provision of economic gain.

The *leadership capital* framework provides the basis for determining the individual, organisational and sectoral impact and return on investment for leadership development in a more systematic and comprehensive manner. As mentioned earlier, current assessments tend to focus quite narrowly on the human and economic returns of leadership development only. Having noted the importance of the social, relational dimensions of academic leadership and management required in top management nowadays, the author proffers the inclusion of organisational and social capital as additional measures of performance. It must be stressed that human, economic, organisational and social capital are not seen as polar opposites, in competition with each other, but rather operate in concert as a collective metric for measuring the effectiveness and ultimate value and return on investments in leadership

development. In the next section, I provide a theoretical grounding for an alternative conceptualisation of leadership development for middle-level academic leaders.

### **Understanding the Professional and Personal Development Needs of Middle-level Academic Leaders: A HELM Perspective**

When the Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) programme, a flagship initiative of Universities South Africa (USAf), was initially launched in 2002, it was conceptualised to offer vice-chancellors and senior management strategic insight into the specific challenges that exist within the South African higher education landscape as it existed at the time. HELM nowadays continues to offer valuable perspectives on the contemporary leadership and management context, complexities and challenges facing universities. It has been reconfigured and repositioned to create cutting edge solutions that address organisational and individual capacity needs for leadership and management development, in an era of complexity and change. Since its relaunch in 2018, HELM, with financial support from the Department of Higher Education and Training, has designed and offered twenty leadership and management interventions to 759 executives, senior and middle managers, and practitioners from universities in South Africa.

In order for HELM to further hone its offering and to empirically assess the value of these programmes and workshops, it conducted a baseline survey in preparation for each event. The self-reporting survey attempts, initially, to locate the participants demographically before moving beyond this to try and grasp the kinds of knowledge and skills that this level of leadership and management requires, while at the same time attempting to understand what is already in place.

Three random sets of evaluations were chosen: one from November 2018, one in December of the same year, and one which took place in June 2019. In total, there were 110 participants over the three interventions, with an average of thirty-seven respondents in each. Of these participants, there was a reasonably equal gender split, with fifty-three percent female and forty-seven percent male. The vast majority of the participants were between forty and sixty (83.6 percent), with only ten percent under forty and 6.4 percent over sixty.

In South Africa post-2003, there are three kinds of institutions: the traditional university, the comprehensive university (a combination of a traditional university and a university of technology), and universities of technology. See Figure 2 below.

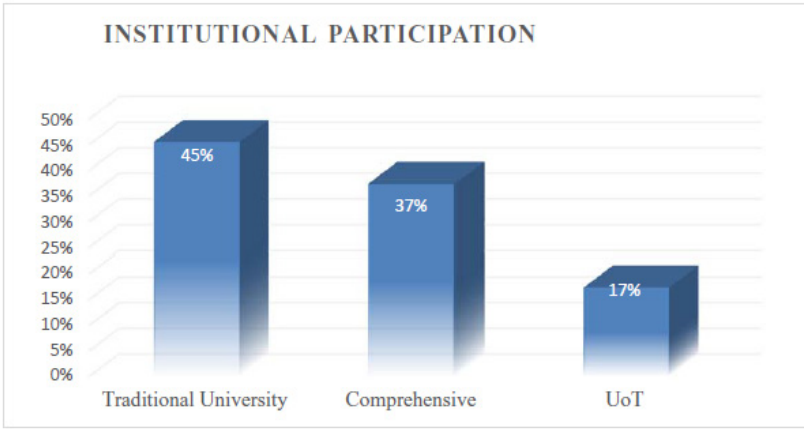


Figure 2: HELM participants by University Type

It is interesting to note that fifty of the participants were from traditional universities, forty-one from comprehensive, and only nineteen from the universities of technology. That only seventeen percent of the participants came from universities of technology suggests either a lack of interest within these institutions or, more likely, an indication that HELM is not optimally accessing this segment of the South African higher education sector.

These events were specifically targeted at the deans and heads of schools and academic departments. It is therefore not surprising that the vast majority were comprised of either heads of department (seventy-six percent) or heads of school (six percent). An additional four percent belong to various categories of deanship. Many of this level of management (sixty-four percent) have only been in the position between one and three years, and this provides a clear indication of the level of inexperience within this leadership cadre. In response to a question about whether the participants intend to pursue a career in academic leadership, the overwhelming response was 'yes'. This may come as a surprise, given that the head of department position was historically understood as a voluntary duty undertaken by senior members of academic staff on a rotational basis. It appears that what was once the historic 'sacrifice' of their own academic specialisation for more mundane, administrative services has now become a clear career choice. Given their current positions, it is inevitable that the next career move would be head of school (twenty-seven percent), thirty-two percent foresee becoming assistant or deputy dean, and thirteen percent to become executive dean. A further six percent respectively have their sights set on executive director or deputy vice-chancellor.

The participants were then asked to rank a series of skills and knowledge that will be required for them to fulfil their current role. There were fifteen questions in total – as an option between one and five – and it is interesting to note that none of the participants scored any of these questions below four, as depicted in Figure 3 below.

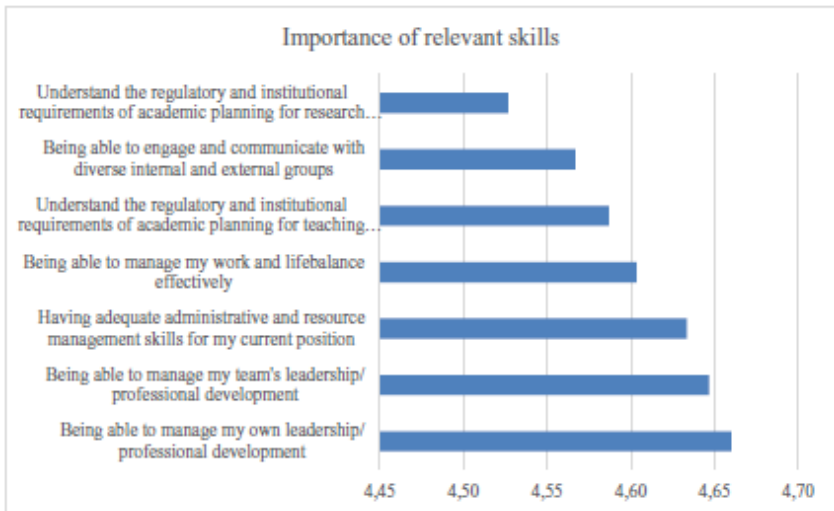


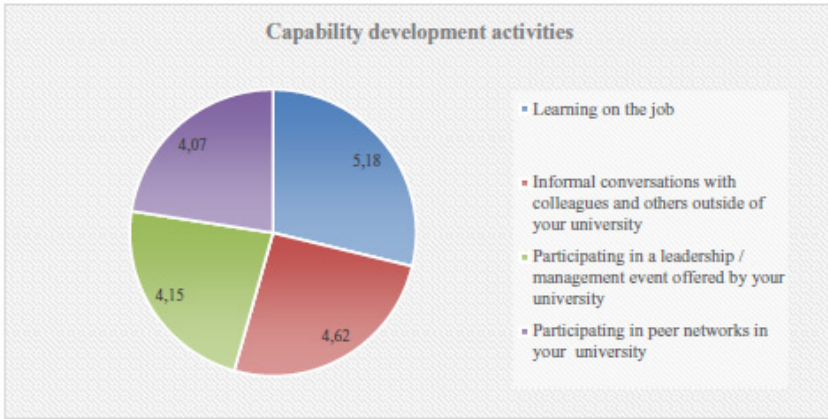
Figure 3: HE knowledge and skills requirements

Moreover, the questions can be largely broken down into two categories. In the first, those scoring under 4.5 generally referred to issues that would concern the broader, strategic positioning of the university. Questions like ‘understanding the role of risk management and business continuity within universities’ registered 4.14 as a weighted average. Understanding university funding, the regulatory and institutional requirements of academic planning, performance management systems and how to implement them, understanding the HE policy, and regulatory environment – all scored under 4.5.

In the second grouping, the issues that mattered most to them were personal and/or pertaining to the people around them. So, ‘being able to manage my own leadership/professional development’ earned 4.66 while ‘being able to manage my team’s leadership/professional development’ came in at 4.65. Other knowledge and skills deemed as important were ‘adequate administration and resource management skills for my current position’ (4.63), ‘being able to manage my work and life balance effectively’ (4.6), ‘the regulatory and institutional requirements of academic planning for teaching

and learning’ (4.59), and ‘being able to engage and communicate with diverse internal and external groups’ (4.57). Being able to focus on their own and their colleagues’ professional development with limited administrative resources while achieving a work/life balance appears paramount.

The next part of the survey attempted to rank fifteen different activities that would have an impact on university leaders and managers in the development of their own capabilities.



**Figure 4:** Leadership capability development activities

In this case, the responses were mostly lower than the previous question. It was also more difficult to establish a coherent trend within the responses. However, what was abundantly clear was that ‘learning on the job’ (5.18) earned the highest score of all the responses. There were only four activities averaged above 4. ‘Informal conversations with colleagues and others outside of your university’ (4.62), ‘participating in the leadership/management events offered by your university’ (4.15) and ‘participate in peer networks in your university’ (4.07). These findings suggest that informal, hands-on capacity development with like-minded peers, both inside and external to the university, are highly valued.

If there is a second tier of importance, it is the need for further leadership information – via books, articles and the web – and through participating in higher education leadership/management workshops, seminars, and conferences. Of less importance are those activities which require a formalised, structured intervention: ‘participating in an annual performance management review’ (3.49), ‘University induction and on-boarding programmes’ (3.42) and ‘the study of real-life workplace problems through simulations of case studies’ (3.00).

At the risk of oversimplification, these responses depict a university academic leader as one who is required to learn on the job, values the support of peers both in and outside of the university, and requires access to additional information that is relevant to his or her position. This depiction is strongly supported by the question that asked participants to rank the value offering of HELM. Asked whether participants were likely or highly likely to attend future HELM programmes, ninety-four percent responded positively, with eighty-one percent responding that they were highly likely to participate in the future.

### **A Systemic and Integrated Approach to Leadership Development for Universities in Africa**

The claim by Bensimon, Neumann and Birnbaum (1989) more than twenty years ago that there is little robust research on leadership development in universities, unfortunately, still applies. Practical guidance on effective approaches to leadership development in universities is missing, claims Huntley-Moore and Panter (2003); context is often overlooked by generic approaches, says Bass (1985); and it is generally not well recognised, understood or supported, nor are there specific interventions for leadership roles like those of dean or head of school (Debowski & Blake 2004; Gmelch & Buller 2015; Wall 2015).

What this means for universities is that they will not only need to appoint and develop leaders but, equally important, they must also become the kind of organisations that nurture and reinforce enactment of the kinds of behaviours desired in those leaders. However, a review of leadership development trends and models in universities reveals events-based rather than systemic interventions. The work of researchers such as Bolden *et al.* (2008), Scott *et al.* (2008), Greicar (2009), Seale (2015), and Gmelch and Buller (2015) illustrate that although most universities have recognised and responded to the need for leadership development, these interventions are mostly episodic, issue-driven, and not directed towards achievement of the institutional strategy and performance objectives.

Though there have been some attempts to align leadership development for academic leaders with strategic objectives and performance requirements in international and local universities, additional work is required to advance an approach that is bespoke for the individual's contextual requirements, is aligned to performance management, and includes a dimension of career management, in an integrated and systemic manner. In order to make leadership development more systematic, it should involve more than training, with developmental experiences that are meaningfully integrated

with one another, and ongoing. The major factors and influencers of a strategic approach to leadership development are captured in Figure 5 below.



Figure 5: Key influencers of a strategic approach to leadership development (LD)

The literature, current trends, and documented research findings point to: (i) the multi-layered complex context of contemporary academic leadership which requires a tailored approach to leadership development for middle-level academic leaders; (ii) the need for problem-based, action oriented leadership development that addresses the leadership and management realities of complexity, change and transition; (iii) inextricable linkages between leadership development, organisational, and individual effectiveness and performance; and (iv) changes in career planning and management approaches and a robust evaluation of the impact of leadership development and its return on investment, for individuals and their universities (Seale 2015).

Although academic leaders acknowledge the importance of training, they seem to value more the opportunities provided by action-reflection learning in situ or shared experiences with others. Most middle-level academic leaders do not receive adequate preparation for their new role and have either to draw on previous experience in an action-reflection mode or garner support from their peers, colleagues or mentors (Gmelch & Buller 2015; Wall 2015; Seale & Cross 2016). Some have established internal and external discipline-specific support networks that also provide a platform for learning and development. Very little, if any, attention has been given

to ensure that their tenure provides opportunities to enhance their capital, specifically organisational and social capital, given the human and economic value associated with access to existing – and the development of new – networks, as a major contributor to institutional and individual currency (Seale 2015).

Based on the need for a more holistic approach to leadership development, systems thinking in the authors' view provide an appropriate methodological construct for reconceptualising leadership development for deans. Systems thinking was popularised as the crucial 'fifth discipline' by author Peter Senge (1990) in his work on leadership, management, organisational development and learning. In a systems context, a set of entities (individual, organisation and environment) are directed towards a common purpose and operate according to certain rules and processes. It is the highest level into which individual and collective capacities are cast towards the creation of an enabling environment, says Littlejohn (1983:29). The rationale for adopting a systems approach to leadership development is guided by Patton's (2002) assertion that it is key to understanding and addressing, as whole entities, real world complexities like the ones deans face on a global and local front. Holistic (integrated) thinking, according to Patton (2002), is central to the systems perspective.

The Managed Organisational Leadership Development (MOLD) framework depicted below advances a systems based, developmental orientation to leadership development which ensures that the individual is enabled and empowered to perform effectively in the current job and, equally importantly, which enhances their leadership and management capacity for improved performance and career advancement. Whereas current interventions in most instances are viewed as an add-on to performance management, in the remedial, deficit orientation, this framework takes on a developmental focus, where leadership development is a systemised, managed process by the individual and the organisation and, more importantly, the driver of performance and career management.

MOLD reflects the emerging primary hypothesis in this article – that leadership development for deans is more appropriate and responsive when it:

1. embeds and is cognisant of the leadership context which is complex and constantly changing;
2. enhances individual and organisational leadership capacity through reflection and learning; and
3. expands leadership capital through individual and organisational performance and career advancement.



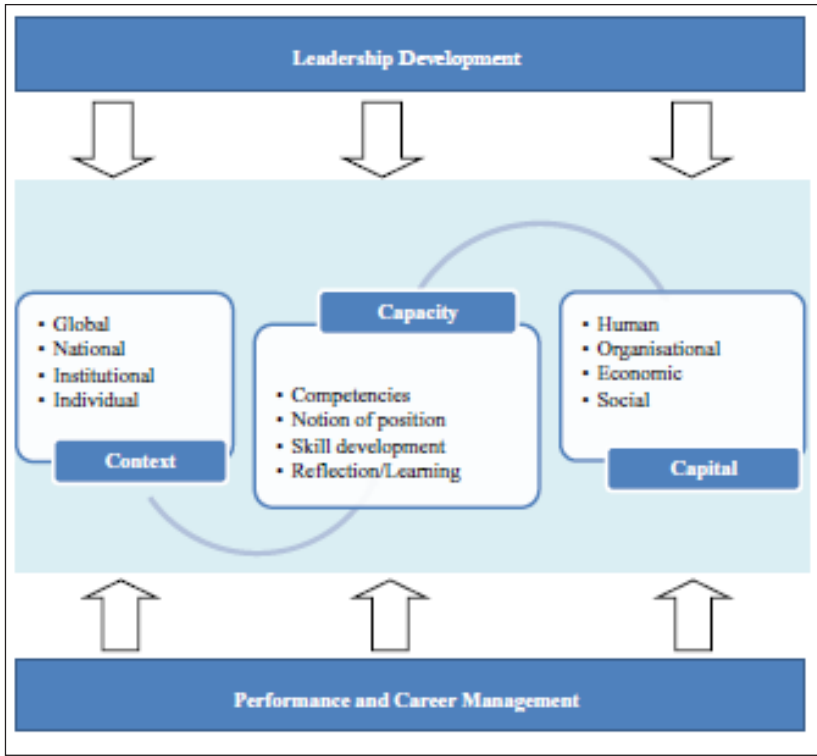


Figure 6: Framework for Managed Organisational Leadership Development (MOLD)

It is premised on the notion that middle-level academic leaders are career-oriented, embrace leadership development opportunities, and that their performance achievements are demonstrable. The framework is guided and supported by an institution that is performance oriented and provides a conducive, enabling and empowering environment for academic leadership and management. The framework embeds the ‘post-heroic’ notion of leadership, espoused by Huey (1994) and Nirenberg (1993), required for universities in the twenty-first century with its focus more on the organisational and social rather than the individual dimensions of leadership, knowledge and learning, as a collective responsibility.

In the MOLD framework, context is about what constitutes the individuals who are located and operate within a particular organisational setting. It relates to the global, national and institutional influencers which impact on their leadership and management as well as organisational legacies and cultures. Equally important is the impact of change and its complexities in a transitional environment. It is to this setting that

middle-level academic leaders bring their knowledge, skills and experience, which in essence inform their leadership capability and determine their leadership journey.

Capacity relates primarily to job readiness for deans, in terms of competencies, preparation and support for leading and managing in a complex, changing environment. The backgrounds, knowledge and experience of academic leaders relate to academia and they need to be 'schooled' in the management demands of the job. Equally important is their understanding and interpretation of their role as academic leader and, more so nowadays, administrative manager. What this means is that they require appropriate preparation, ongoing leadership development and support for their roles and responsibilities. Leadership development here is viewed as a process that enables and empowers the individual and organisation to address the complexity of change, reflect and learn from their successes and failures, and focus their combined energy towards leadership and management effectiveness.

The demonstrable outcome for MOLD is the value-add or contribution to increase capital (human, organisational, economic and social). Key to this area is how leadership effectiveness is understood, managed and measured for academic leaders. Academic leaders at South African universities are subjected to performance management within their respective institutions but there are challenges relating to it (Seale 2015). The adoption of corporate models, such as for instance the balance-score card, 360-degree evaluations, may have some value but their design and application, more often than not, do not consider the unique setting and challenges faced by universities. In addition, the approaches used are generally top-down, which elicits a negative and compliance response from most academic leaders. Respondents in the HELM surveys mentioned earlier also scored 'participating in an annual performance management review' 3.49, which is quite low compared to other findings. A major component lacking from current performance management practices is a developmental focus and the absence of career planning and professional advancement (Seale 2015), which scored the highest in the HELM surveys too.

What MOLD posits is an approach to leadership development which is not only the initiator but also the driver of performance and increased capital for the individual and his/her institution.

All three components – i.e., leadership context, leadership capacity, and leadership capital – in this approach require and are directed by specific and agreed objectives, plans and execution strategies. As demonstrated in the framework, it is argued that the university's approach to leadership

development for middle-level academic leaders should be systematised, managed by the individual and the organisation, aligned to career management and professional development but, equally important, embedded in an appropriate performance management system. The holistic approach to leadership development, as demonstrated in MOLD, is grounded in prevailing theories such as social constructivism (McMahon 1997; Parry 1998; Kukla 2000; Lambert *et al.* 2002), action-reflection learning (Dewey 1933; Schön 1983), epistemic reflexivity (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992), and social capital (Burt 1992; Tsai & Ghoshal 1998; Brass & Krackhardt 1999; Bouty 2000; Schuller 2000; Cohen & Prusak 2001) as expounded on earlier.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I reviewed current approaches to leadership development for middle-level academic leaders, and revealed that there are some gaps, especially in relation to the effectiveness of approaches and return on investment for the individual and their institution and sector. Experiences in other international higher education systems point to the ability of middle academic leaders to transcend a traditional academic role for a more strategic and executive one. This has been supported by appropriate, contextualised and systemic approaches to leadership development, which is currently missing from African higher education.

Based on the literature, current trends and research studies, and specific theoretical underpinnings on leadership context, capacity, and capital, a systematised, integrated approach to leadership development was advanced, called Managed Organisational Leadership Development (MOLD).

What the MOLD framework illustrates is that if leadership development for middle-level academic leaders is reconceptualised in a systematised, integrated manner, planned and managed correctly in an enabling organisational setting, it may enhance an individual's competencies and result in improved organisational and sectoral outcomes. However, it would be remiss in advocating MOLD as the solution for addressing the current weaknesses in local approaches to leadership development, but it does provide a platform for further investigation and engagement in the absence of any other more appropriate or adequately theorised approaches.

This is key for universities on the continent. Failure to respond on their part will perpetuate the current leadership and management complexities and leadership development shortcomings, and of greater concern, may be setting up their middle-level academic leaders for failure – with disastrous individual, institutional and sectoral implications for universities in Africa.

## Notes

1. The interviews took place during the period April 2011 – January 2012.
2. The interviews took place during the period 12-27 June 2012.
3. A total number of 101 respondents who are deans, heads of schools and academic departments.
4. Between 2002 and 2003, the South African higher education sector was restructured through mergers that resulted in the reduction of the number of universities and technikons from 36 to 23.

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# Academic Programme Leadership in African Higher Education: A Phenomenological Reflection

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## Abstract

Given a dearth of literature on the role of middle-level academics in African higher education, this article contributes to the understanding of the roles played by this cadre. In this article, I draw on my lived experiences of leadership as an academic programme coordinator in higher education studies located at a higher education unit at a South African university. I pose two phenomenological questions: 1) how is it to be an academic programme leader, from my lived experiences of leadership at a South African university? and 2) what do my lived experiences of academic programme leadership reveal about programme leadership at a South African university? To answer these questions, I utilised a personal phenomenological reflection by drawing on concepts of *lifeworld* and *being*. The results showed that academic programme leadership was demanding and required paying attention to systemic contexts of universities as well as developing skills such as decision-making, curriculum development and pedagogical leading, and communication. These findings imply a need for careful planning of university structures, such as the locus of higher education units and their operations, a clearer definition of the role of academic programme leaders/coordinators and capacity building for academic programme leaders in South African universities.

**Keywords:** middle-level academics, higher education, South African university, academic programme leadership, phenomenological reflection

## Résumé

Compte tenu du manque de littérature sur le rôle des universitaires de niveau intermédiaire dans l'enseignement supérieur africain, cet article contribue à la compréhension des rôles joués par ce personnel. Dans cet article, je m'appuie sur mes propres expériences de leadership en tant que coordinateur de

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programme académique dans l'unité d'enseignement supérieur d'une université sud-africaine. Je pose deux questions phénoménologiques, 1) comment est-ce d'être chef de programme académique à partir de mes expériences vécues de leadership dans une université sud-africaine ? Et, 2) que révèlent mes propres expériences de leadership de programme académique sur le leadership de programme dans une université sud-africaine? Pour répondre à ces questions, j'ai utilisé une réflexion phénoménologique personnelle en m'appuyant sur les concepts de monde vécu et de d'être. Les résultats ont montré que la direction de programme académique est exigeante et nécessite une attention aux contextes systémiques des universités, ainsi qu'au développement des compétences telles que la prise de décision, le développement de curriculum et la direction pédagogique, et la communication. Ces résultats appellent une planification minutieuse des structures universitaires telles que l'emplacement des unités d'enseignement supérieur et de leurs opérations, une définition plus claire du rôle des responsables/coordonateurs de programmes universitaires, et le renforcement des capacités des responsables de programmes universitaires dans les universités sud-africaines.

**Mots-clés :** universitaires de niveau intermédiaire, enseignement supérieur, université sud-africaine, leadership de programme académique, réflexion phénoménologique

## Introduction

Literature on the role of middle-level academics in Africa is generally scant. Given the intricate issues that characterise university leadership, it is important to engage with the roles middle-level academics, such as academic programme leaders, perform in academic leadership. This is pertinent in order to understand emerging leadership cultures in African higher education. More so, such an understanding would shed more light, not only on leadership challenges, but also on good leadership practices that could improve aspects of university leadership more generally in African higher education.

Having been involved in coordinating postgraduate academic programmes in the field of higher education studies at a South African university, I reflect on my lived experiences of this middle-level academic leadership. The reflection, termed 'a phenomenological reflection of academic programme leadership', draws on phenomenological concepts of *lifeworld* and *being* – I return to these concepts in the theoretical framing and methodology. While a number of studies in higher education leadership or governance have employed phenomenology in understanding lived experiences, most have tended to understand lived experiences of others (see



Van der Mescht 2004: 1-16; Jenkins 2015; Yankech 2015). This personal reflection provides first-hand information on personal lived experiences that is crucial in understanding middle-level academic programme leadership. This phenomenological reflection answers two questions: 1) how is it to be an academic programme leader, from my lived experiences of leadership at a South African university? and 2) what do my lived experiences of academic programme leadership reveal about programme leadership at a South African university?

Results from reflections on my experiences of academic leadership showed that academic programme leadership was demanding and required paying attention to systemic contexts of the universities – for example, inflexible university leadership structures impeded the smooth working of academic programme leadership. More so, because of operating somewhat differently from the mainstream education offerings, the locus of the higher education unit, as well as the academic programme leadership within it, were susceptible to ‘otherness’. Second, that there is a need for developing skills, such as curriculum development and pedagogical leading, communication, decision-making and people skills. These findings imply a need for careful planning of university structures, such as the locus of higher education units and their operations, clearer definition of the role of academic programme leaders/coordinators and capacity building for academic programme leaders in South African universities.

I present this article in seven sections. In the first section, I conceptualise the notion of middle-level academic leadership while, in the second, I briefly explain the context of academic programme leadership at the concerned university. In the third section, I provide theoretical underpinnings of my phenomenological reflection and in the fourth, I present the methodology and data used. In the fifth section, I present results and discussion by first narrating my own lived experiences of leadership as an academic programme leader before discussing what these experiences reveal about academic programme leadership. In the sixth, I engage with policy implications of the findings, followed by conclusions in the seventh section.

### **Conceptualising Middle-level Academic Leadership**

Middle-level academic leadership designates a cadre of academics who are not directly involved in senior management and leadership but play different roles that affect and shape university cultures (Thomas-Gregory 2014; Nguyen 2013). Middle-level academic leadership is conceived as a process through which academic values and identities are constructed, communicated and enacted by middle-level academics (Bolden *et al.* 2012). Examples of the

middle-level cadre include faculty deans, heads of department, officials of the academic union, course coordinators and doctoral holders involved in mentorship. Thomas-Gregory (2014) contends that the work of middle-level academics makes them responsible for the operational engagement of others, such as lecturers, senior lecturers and administrators.

While there is a dearth of literature on the role of middle-level academics in African higher education, abundant literature exists from the United States, Europe, Australia and China, among others. For example, drawing on a study that examined duties of heads of department in the United States and Australia, Wolverton, Gmelch, Wolverton and Sarros (1999) found the following major roles of heads of department: administrative tasks, resource management, scholarship, leadership, faculty development and resource development. In their study at Edith Cowan university in Australia, Pepper and Giles (2015) found that while middle-level academics enjoyed using their roles in making a difference in other people's lives within the university, they perceived their roles as overwhelming and with a sense of huge responsibility, albeit with little power. They argue that this cadre of academics perceived their roles as reactive and that the roles made this cadre feel isolated in university leadership. Similarly, Briggs (2001) contends that middle-level leaders tend to lack clear role definition, which eventually undermines their autonomy and authority. De Boer, Goedegebuure, and Meek (2009) argue that middle-level academic leadership is stressful, given the fact that there are multiple expectations and demands that generally lead this level to conflict.

### **Academic Programme Leadership/Coordination**

Generally, academic programme leaders or coordinators are part of the middle-level academic leadership. In Australia, for example, this cadre is referred to as "course coordinator, programme director or department chair and refers to academics responsible for a degree course or programme" (Ladyshevsky & Flavell 2011:128). Zutshi, Creed, Ringer, and Osborne (2013) contend that the role of academic subject coordination demands establishing connection with students and other academics, and that it requires empowerment and support. They argue that the coordination role is layered with administrative complexity. The challenge is that "the role of coordinator takes many guises, including leader, educator and manager, all of which are bundled with administrative expectation by the university" (Zutshi *et al.* 2013:58). The other challenge faced by academic programme leaders or coordinators is that they hold an ambiguous institutional position, in that while they manage courses and programmes, they do not

line manage staff, yet there is an expectation to draw on staff/faculty support to develop modules that constitute programmes (Middlehurst, Goreham & Woodfield 2009; Murphy & Curtis 2013).

Ladyshefsky and Jones (2007) contend that while course coordinators tend to be experts in their academic fields, they are usually ill prepared for the kind of leadership required by course coordination. They argue that this needs to be addressed, as course coordinators are crucial in the quality of programmes universities offer. In Australia for example, programme coordinators tend to be left out of formal leadership trainings, as their roles are not pronounced – usually embedded between a general academic staff and a head of department in the organisational charts (Ladyshefsky & Flavell 2011) – revealing a lack of serious recognition and an identity challenge to this cadre.

### **Factors for Successful Academic Leadership**

Any form of academic leadership requires thoughtful enactment. Detsky (2010) argues that a good academic leader requires to display fundamental characteristics of leadership to succeed. For example, an academic leader requires a vision of how to take the department or unit to the future; he/she needs to be an excellent communicator; he/she needs to clearly understand the core activities of the department or unit; and he/she must have people skills or emotional intelligence. Many scholars (see Black 2015; Black, Groombridge & Jones 2011) also advance these traits.

Another useful understanding is presented by Bryman (2007:2) who provides a list of important facets of leadership both at departmental and institutional levels:

- Providing direction,
- Creating a structure to support the direction,
- Fostering a supportive and collaborative environment,
- Establishing trustworthiness as a leader,
- Having personal integrity,
- Having credibility to act as a role model,
- Facilitating participation in decision-making (consultation),
- Providing communication about developments,
- Representing the department/institution to advance its cause(s) and networking on its behalf,
- Respecting existing culture while seeking to instil values through a vision for the department/institution, and protecting staff autonomy.

These facets chiefly suggest that at whatever level, leadership in higher education demands thoughtful facets on how leaders act and engage with others.

### **Academic Programme Leadership and Context at the University**

I coordinated postgraduate programmes in the field of higher education based at a higher education unit at a South African university. These programmes were hosted at the School of Education but offered by the unit, which served multiple roles of promoting the field of higher education as an area of scholarship, implementing university-wide staff development programmes and conducting institutional research. The higher education unit was essentially concerned with postgraduate studies, mostly attended by academics from South African universities who performed full time roles in their respective universities. The unit gave 40 per cent of its effort to the School of Education and 60 per cent to the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor – Teaching and Learning. At a practical level however, this arrangement presented some challenges inviting a need to engage with the locus of the unit. Further, the fact that most course participants performed full time jobs impacted on the unit's planning in terms of teaching time, programme delivery mode as well as teaching venues. Following this, the unit's operations then could not neatly meet with the expectations of administrators at the School of Education in terms of teaching times and examination results provision among others. These systemic challenges complicated academic programme leadership at the unit.

### **Theoretical Underpinning: Phenomenological Reflection**

Phenomenological reflection provides an understanding of our lived experiences. I draw on two phenomenological concepts in reflecting on my lived experiences of academic programme leadership: *lifeworld* and *being* (to be). The notion of lifeworld or *Lebenswelt* suggests that “we exist in a day-to-day world that is filled with complex meanings which form the backdrop of our everyday actions and interactions” (Finlay 1999:301), or simply, it is the world as men and women experience it (How 2003). Finlay (1999:301) argues that in existential terms, the lifeworld of an individual can be understood as comprising three universal horizons of experience: *Being a body in space* (Umwelt), *being a self in time* (Eigenwelt) and living with others (Mitwelt). Applied to academic leadership, these three horizons mean that leaders are bound to *what they are in space* meaning they exist, are bound to what they are in time, meaning that their lived experiences of leadership reflect the time in which they live, and finally that they are bound to *living with others*, meaning that they interact with colleagues, students,

administrators and others in doing their work. As such, the notion of lifeworld is pertinent to this article as, having been an academic programme leader means that I have lived experiences of leadership in a university, which I can narrate and share to help shape university leadership practice.

The notion of being is equally important in this article. In his book *Being and Time* (1962), Heidegger develops the idea of *being* (to be). He argues that in understanding being, there is a need to engage with the self-evident nature of being or the meaning of being as it is, in its essence (Spier 2018). What this means is that *to be* always means to exist in a highly context-specific way (Spier 2018). The idea of being is important in two ways. First, it foregrounds the ontological nature of existence that makes it possible for us to talk about a phenomenon – what Heidegger refers to as the *already there* (Spier 2018). Applied to the article, it means that the phenomenon *experience of academic programme leadership* is already there, and that people can relate to it, but what is different is the way different people experience the phenomenon. Therefore, it is important to share the different lived experiences to learn from each other. Second, it means there is a need to study the phenomenon within a context, which in this article is a South African university.

## Methodology and Data Production

Drawing on a phenomenological understanding, I sought to understand my lived experiences of being an academic programme leader at a South African university by posing two research questions:

1. how is it *to be* an academic programme leader, from my lived experiences of leadership at a South African university?
2. what do my lived experiences of academic programme leadership reveal about programme leadership at a South African university?

These questions follow directly from the theoretical notions of *lifeworld* and being as conceived in the article.

## Data Production

Data reported here were generated from own narratives of lived experiences of academic programme leadership. I then reflected on these narratives to unpack what the narratives implied to academic programme leadership at a South African university. Writing down the narratives allowed me to tell my stories – my lived experiences – while reflecting on them enabled me to tease out what these experiences meant in relation to academic programme leadership in my context. I call this process a phenomenological reflection.

## **Analysis of Data**

I grouped my narratives into themes. The following themes were developed: narratives regarding systemic challenges, narratives regarding induction aspects and narratives regarding required skills for academic programme leadership. In analysing the data, I drew on the theoretical frames by engaging with the phenomenological notions of *lifeworld* and *being* as espoused in the article.

## **Results and Discussion: Narrating my Lived Experiences**

In this section, I start by presenting the results or the narratives that formed my own lived experiences of academic programme leadership before reflecting on them and providing a discussion. I group the narratives under two major themes: first, systemic challenges; and second, required skills for academic leadership.

### **Systemic Challenges**

The following were my narratives that touched on systemic challenges: *mediating systemic challenges of governance structures, deciding on programme delivery mode; deciding on where to run programmes, and a perception of otherness*. I present them in turn.

#### ***Mediating Systemic Challenges of Governance Structures***

Two major aspects reflected or contributed to systemic challenges: the locus of the higher education unit with 40 per cent and 60 per cent reporting lines to the School of Education and the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor – Teaching and Learning – respectively and the offering of postgraduate programmes to students who worked full time in their respective universities or higher education institutions. For example, arriving at appropriate dates to offer courses was a challenge, as the unit needed to take into consideration when the course participants would be free. This not only made it difficult for the unit to strictly follow stipulated teaching time of the School of Education per semester, but also for the programme to adhere to dates set by the School of Education for examination reporting. This meant that grades for some courses could sometimes not be captured within the designated semester. In such cases, failure to meet the School of Education administrators' expectations caused uneasiness to academic programme leadership. While administrators were responsible for steering the general expectation as stipulated by the school within its governance

structures, there was a need to understand the unique situation of the unit – dealing with postgraduate students only, dealing with postgraduate students who worked full time in their respective institutions and running offerings that had to be negotiated in terms of teaching dates.

### ***Deciding on Programme Delivery Mode***

While the preferred programme delivery mode was face-to-face using selected days per week within semesters, this did not work smoothly for the programmes at the unit. The challenge arose because, as noted, the course participants were mostly full-time academics in their respective universities or higher education institutions, which made it difficult for them to attend classes on selected days per week, given transport, accommodation and related costs. As such, the programmes were delivered in week-long (five-day) block. The difficulty with such a delivery mode was that little time was available for in-depth engagement with the content of courses.

### ***Deciding on Where to Run Programmes***

As is expected, face-to-face courses offered by a university ought to be situated within its campuses. However, given the situation at the unit, there were complications. Standard practice was that universities sent their academics to our unit for lessons and provided transport, accommodation, and related services to their academics. However, there were instances when some universities negotiated with our unit to have our academics travel and facilitate courses at their universities. This was not always a straightforward issue to deal with, especially as that policy generally required that courses be taught within universities that offer the programme to ensure quality by making sure that teaching and learning facilities are available for the programmes.

### ***A Perception of Otherness***

As already noted, given the fact that the unit could not always neatly fit within the expectations of the school in areas like teaching within the stipulated semester and providing examination results within stipulated dates, a perception of “otherness” was implicitly felt. Administrators adhering to strict deadlines did not usually show an understanding of our unit’s unique situation. We became the “odd ones out” and, as an academic programme leader, I had to deal with the situation while maintaining the quality of the programmes I coordinated.

## **Required Skills for Academic Programme Leadership**

The following were my narratives that touched on required skills for academic programme leadership: *curriculum planning and pedagogical dimensions, communicating with colleagues, communicating with students, communicating with administrators and capacity development for academic programme leaders*. I present them in turn.

### ***Curriculum Planning and Pedagogical Dimensions***

As an academic programme leader, I took the lead in curriculum planning and pedagogical aspects of the programmes I coordinated. This entailed making sure that all courses had curriculum templates that were approved by the university senate. This was to ensure that courses were relevant and responded to the university's vision and mission. Further, that fellow academics had produced course outlines in line with the goals stipulated in the approved curriculum templates. Together with colleagues, we would ensure that courses in the programme draw on participatory pedagogies.

### ***Communicating with Colleagues – Fellow Academics***

Communicating with colleagues involved in the academic programme was an important leadership role that I played. My role demanded that I communicate aspects of the programme carefully to my colleagues. I needed to remind my colleagues about the courses they were to teach, teaching venues, the processes and engagement with external examiners, including dates for submission of students' grades.

I also dealt with queries that came from both students and academics. Depending on the nature of the problems at hand, I would then take appropriate courses of action. In general, queries concerned teaching materials, teaching and learning venues as well as lecturers' teaching methods and assessment procedures.

### ***Communicating with Students***

While individual lecturers communicated with students directly on the requirements of their courses, I played an oversight role for the programmes I coordinated. My role was to make sure that students had received all the necessary information for their studies. For example, whether they had received learning materials, course outlines, dates for courses as well as venues for programme delivery.



### ***Communicating with Administrators***

As an academic programme leader, I liaised with administrators on a number of issues, such as examination processing, examination results and students' admission. There was always tension because our unit did not fit smoothly within the operations that the administrators adhered to, given what I have already alluded to.

### ***Capacity Development on the Role of Academic Leadership***

Although I had considerable experience of academic leadership as a former deputy dean, a position I served outside South Africa, the role of programme coordination was in many ways different. First, as deputy dean I would line-manage staff, while in this role I did not. Second, I needed to understand the context in which my new university operated. There was a need to be inducted into the operations of this role within the context of this university in South Africa. I took it upon myself then to learn on the job and mediate several intricate issues that arose.

## **Discussion: Implications of my Lived Experiences Regarding Academic Programme Leadership**

### ***Systemic Challenges***

The systemic challenges experienced reveal that inflexible university governance structures and expectations impeded the smooth working of academic programme leadership. For example, the locus of the higher education unit needed to be understood and engaged holistically. There needed to be an understanding of the nature of the programmes in terms of the nature of students that were admitted as well as the programme delivery modes and times. Adherence to a "one-size fits all" perspective affected academic programme leadership. As noted, a lack of a neat fit within the school operations generally produced feelings of otherness. An understanding of the uniqueness of the operations of the unit was needed to mitigate the challenges, including feelings of otherness.

I realised that, to work within such an environment, I needed to develop excellent decision-making skills to respond to the situation at hand, while avoiding halting the programmes. For example, decisions of delivery modes different from general expectations or whether to run some courses at other universities required quick thinking and liaising with colleagues.

These findings on systemic challenges, relate to many findings in higher education environments generally. As noted earlier, Briggs (2001) contends that middle-level leaders tend to lack clear role definition, which eventually

undermines their autonomy and authority while De Boer, Goedegebuure and Meek (2009) argue that middle-level academic leadership is stressful, given the fact that there are multiple expectations and demands that generally lead this level to conflict. This talks to how universities generally tend to perceive the role of academic programme leaders or coordinators within the organisational structure. As noted by Ladyshevsky and Flavell (2011), this position suffers from a lack of identity within the academy.

### **Required Skills for Academic Leadership**

Drawing on my lived experiences, I realised that academic programme leadership in universities demands serious skills, such as decision-making, curriculum and pedagogical leading, communication, and people skills. The development and nurturing of these skills demand elaborate capacity development.

As noted, decision-making skills were vital in mediating systemic challenges. Having developed decision-making skills while serving as deputy dean in another country was useful in mediating systemic challenges. However, since this was a different context, an in-depth understanding of the environment was required.

In attending to curriculum planning and pedagogical issues, as an academic programme leader, I was required to engage and understand processes of curriculum development and innovation at my university. While I had considerable knowledge and experience in curriculum development and leadership, I needed to understand the policy environment that shaped curriculum processes and development at this South African university. This demanded understanding national higher education policy, processes such as developing curriculum templates, liaising with quality assurance colleagues on course development as well as connecting teaching content to the university's mission and visions, among other activities. In terms of academic programme leadership, this talks to openness and willingness of a leader to learn new things and enhance practice.

Drawing on my narratives of communication with colleagues and students, as an academic programme leader, I learnt the importance of mastering communication skills. Given the fact that I did not line-manage fellow academics, proper communication that got things done was extremely important. For example, dealing with academics required that I understood their modus operandi and found ways of harnessing interpersonal communication to get things done. More so, I depended on their academic citizenship – faculty's commitment to their duties without coercion (Macfarlane 2007) – to respond to their work.

Communicating with students demanded patience and constant engagement. For example, I learnt not to assume that since information was available on websites or other forms of communion, then participants would access it. In general, in dealing with both academics and students I learnt the importance of listening, articulating direction, bringing to the fore and sustaining arguments, as well as changing my views based on reason where necessary. The success of this academic leadership could be measured by the increased numbers of universities sending their academics to participate in the programmes I coordinated at the unit.

These findings tally with many authors who argue that the role of academic programme leadership requires one to develop appropriate skills. For example, as Zutshi, Creed, Ringer and Osborne (2013:58) noted, the role of academic subject coordination demands an establishment of connection with students and other academics, as well as empowerment and support.

### **Policy Implications of the Study Findings**

These findings provide three policy implications. First, a need for careful planning of university structures and a holistic understanding of its operations. This is important in allowing flexibility within the operations of the academy. For example, a need to rethink the locus of higher education units and their operations could avoid these units feeling susceptible to “otherness” as they usually operate differently from mainstream education faculties. Second, a clearer definition of the role of academic programme leadership in South African universities would allow for better attention to the roles these leaders play. This is important, given the fact that the roles played by this leadership directly talk to the issues of quality education in universities. Third, there is a need for capacity building initiatives for middle-level academic programme leaders. This is important to assist these leaders to develop the required skills for their roles. What is crucial in capacity building is the understanding of the environment and context in which middle-level academic leadership is to be enacted.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, I have drawn on phenomenological reflection to discuss my lived experiences of academic programme leadership at a South African university. This was important because studies on experiences of academic programme leadership are scant in African higher education generally. I have conceptualised the notion of middle-level academic leadership, discussed the academic programme leadership context of the concerned

university, engaged with the theoretical underpinnings of the article, discussed the methodology and data production used, presented results by first narrating the lived experiences of academic leadership before explaining their implications to academic programme leadership, and then drawn the policy implications of the findings.

I have contended that through my lived experiences, academic programme leadership was demanding and required paying attention to systemic contexts of the university, as well as developing skills such as decision-making, curriculum development and pedagogical leading, and communication. From these findings, three policy implications follow: a need for careful planning of university structures, such as the locus of higher education units and their operations, a clearer definition of the role of middle-level academic programme leaders/coordinators and capacity building for academic programme leaders in South African universities.

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# Leadership Development Schemes for Middle-level Academics in Merged Universities: The Case of Kyambogo University

George Wilson Kasule\*

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## Abstract

Does the current generation of middle-level academics in most African universities, for example deans and heads of departments, adequately possess the leadership competence required to handle prevailing and future university obligations and challenges? In response to this question, this article, through a systematic literature review, explores the status quo of leadership competence of middle-level academics; factors that hinder leadership competence development; and measures needed to enhance leadership competence in African universities established out of mergers such as Kyambogo University in Uganda. Here, it is established that the status quo of leadership competence of middle-level academics, e.g., heads of departments, need improvement; and factors that hinder leadership competence development of middle-level academics can be perceived in two dimensions, i.e. “Institutional Factors” (e.g., poor working conditions, ineffective bureaucracy, etc.) and “Personal Factors” (e.g., lack of commitment, corruption etc.). Measures needed to enhance the leadership competence of academics include upgrading university facilities, adequately involving academics in university decision-making processes, and depoliticising university management and leadership, among other things. The article concludes that middle-level academics, such as Deans and heads of departments in African universities like Kyambogo, must do all it takes to improve their leadership competence, with other factors remaining constant if they want to meaningfully address the numerous grave challenges facing university education on the African continent.

**Keywords:** Leadership development, middle-level academics, merged universities

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## Résumé

La génération actuelle d'universitaires de niveau intermédiaire dans la plupart des universités africaines (doyens, chefs de département) possède-t-elle les compétences en leadership nécessaires pour gérer les obligations et les défis actuels et futurs de l'université ? En réponse à cette question, cet article, à travers une revue systématique de la littérature, explore les compétences en leadership des universitaires de niveau intermédiaire, les facteurs qui entravent le développement des compétences en leadership, et les mesures nécessaires pour améliorer les compétences en leadership dans les universités africaines, créées à partir de fusions comme ce fut le cas avec l'Université de Kyambogo en Ouganda. Ici, il est établi que les compétences en leadership des universitaires de niveau intermédiaire, par exemple les chefs de département, doit être amélioré; et les facteurs qui freinent le développement des compétences de leadership des universitaires de niveau intermédiaire peut être perçu en deux dimensions, à savoir les « Facteurs institutionnels » (par exemple, les mauvaises conditions de travail, la bureaucratie inefficace, etc.) et les « Facteurs personnels » (par exemple le manque d'engagement, la corruption, etc.). Les mesures nécessaires pour améliorer les compétences en leadership des universitaires comprennent la modernisation des installations universitaires, la participation appropriée des universitaires aux processus décisionnels de l'université et la dépolitisation de la gestion et du leadership universitaires, entre autres choses. Le document conclut que les universitaires de niveau intermédiaire tels que les doyens et les chefs de départements des universités africaines telles que Kyambogo doivent faire tout ce qui est en leur pouvoir pour améliorer leurs compétences en leadership en restant constants sur d'autres facteurs s'ils veulent s'attaquer de manière significative aux nombreux grands défis de l'enseignement universitaire africain.

**Mots-clés :** développement du leadership, universitaires de niveau intermédiaire, universités fusionnées

## Introduction

The leadership and management of new universities often established from mergers inevitably face many challenges. Part of these challenges stem from a lack of established cultures of good institutional governance practices. The level at which this is most noticeable is in the management of academic programmes. In established institutions with sound governance practices, the Senate oversees academic programmes. The Senate is supported in this role by departmental and faculty boards headed by middle-level academics who have gone through various mentorship schemes. Operation and leadership of universities established out of mergers in Uganda leave a lot to be desired. For instance, a few years back at Kyambogo University, a



vice chancellor was fired by the University Council for disrespecting it by refusing to take its orders and also for his “autocratic leadership style” and failure to create a good working environment with staff (Talemwa 2012). Similarly, Kasozi (2013) argued that Kyambogo has failed to stabilise since its inception in 2003. I strongly agree with Kasozi’s (2013) avowal because the leadership problems at Kyambogo have persisted (e.g., see Namubiru, Onen & Oonyu 2017). This could be attributed to the fact that newly established universities in Uganda, whether established out of mergers or through conventional means, lack the critical mass of senior academics to mentor emerging academics (Kasozi 2016; Mushemeza 2016). Moreover, qualified senior academics often opt to remain in established universities, leaving the new generation of universities to confront the challenge of developing academic programmes and/or mentoring younger academics to various academic and institutional leadership positions. What this means in Uganda’s context is that often, younger academics, who would otherwise not qualify to serve as heads of departments and deans end up taking up such responsibilities in the new merged universities (see Report on Investigations into Mismanagement and Corruption at Kyambogo University, 2015). What then happens? Do the merged/new generation universities design innovative ways to ensure that their middle-level staff acquire the requisite capability to shoulder responsibilities that might be beyond their competence? If not, what exactly happens in these institutions? Thus, the current generation of both top and middle-level academics at the university, particularly the deans of faculties and heads of departments, need support to develop leadership competence required to handle the leadership challenges of the university. Kyambogo University, the focus of this article, was established in 2003 by the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act 2001 by merging Uganda Polytechnic Kyambogo (UPK), the Institute of Teacher Education, Kyambogo (ITEK) and the Uganda National Institute of Special Education (UNISE), all of which had divergent missions.

As the practice is with the merger of institutions, Kyambogo took on the assets and liabilities of the three phased out institutions (i.e., UPK, ITEK, and UNISE), including teaching staff, to execute the university’s core tasks of teaching, research and community service. It is beyond the scope of this article to comment on whether all the integrated teaching staff, had the requisite academic and professional qualifications. What is relevant is that university duties and roles have their own intellectual and professional demands which not every person can adequately perform. For instance, the Report on Investigations into Mismanagement and Corruption at Kyambogo University (2015) indicate that the reasons given for the failure to have all courses taught by accredited faculty were flimsy.

Some of the reasons given include that Kyambogo University feared that if programmes were given to the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), they would be pirated and made public; the unsettled period after the merger could not allow the accreditation process to proceed; many lecturers were part-time and not interested in writing programmes; lecturers demanded extra payments to write out the academic programmes; and it took too long for programmes to reach NCHE for accreditation. This article provides insight regarding the status quo of leadership competence of deans and heads of departments; factors that hinder leadership competence development of deans and heads of departments; and the measures needed to develop leadership competence of deans and heads of departments in a university established out of merger, using Kyambogo as a case study.

### **The Problem**

The need to have effective academic and administrative leadership in a university as a catalyst for high quality teaching, research, innovation and community development engagement, regardless of context, cannot be over-exaggerated (Tagoe 2013). This is particularly salient in universities such as Kyambogo where some of the teaching staff integrated into university service did not have the requisite academic and professional qualifications (Kasozi 2013). Accordingly, up to 2019 some of the heads of departments were Masters degree holders who assumed headship without any training in higher education management and leadership. This raises serious doubts as to whether these heads of departments who neither had doctoral and/or professorial level qualifications had the competencies to execute the demands of academic and institutional leadership at their level. Moreover, in Uganda's context, universities established out of merger are prone to have more academic and administrative leadership challenges (e.g., lack of adequate competent staff and difficulty in finding sufficient funding for infrastructure development and capacity building) than those established through conventional means (Kasozi 2016; Mushemeza 2016). That is not to mention the divergent institutional cultures and academic and professional backgrounds the integrated staff bring with them to the newly established university (McBain 2012).

### **The Concept of Mergers in Higher Education**

Mergers have traditionally been associated with the private sector amalgamation of business entities of varying sizes and organisational cultures (Baloyi & Naidoo 2016). The merger concept is widely accepted as

one of the most important strategic tools used to achieve specific business objectives (Skodvin 2014). However, away from the business perspective, we see that the demands for greater efficiency, higher quality, and reductions in public budgets have meant that more countries are looking closely at the structure of their higher education systems, and this has often resulted in extensive reforms, including mergers (Skodvin 2009). For instance, several countries, including the UK, Australia, Norway, Denmark, Finland, China, USA, South Africa and Russia have used mergers as an instrument to restructure their higher education system (Skodvin 2014; Stewart 2003).

Azziz, Hentschke, Jacobs, Jacobs and Ladd (2017) advance that some countries undertake systematic mergers of their higher education institutions motivated by the belief that “bigger is better.” However, Tevis (2015) argues that too much debt, staggering amounts of deferred maintenance, and decreased state support for public higher education institutions are some of the common reasons for mergers in higher education. Meanwhile, Wende (2013) presents a divergent view that global competition and prestige is driving universities in many countries to redefine their institutional profile, often encouraged by governments that seek to increase system diversity, thus resulting in various types of inter-institutional collaboration, including actual mergers.

For the case of Kyambogo, the government’s original vision on the merger of the three institutions (i.e., UPK, ITEK and UNISE) was to form a greater polytechnic, specialising in advancing professionalism in science, technology and teacher education, and embracing the former institutions as constituent colleges for purposes of retaining the special characteristics and core competences of those institutions (Inspectorate of Government, 2015). This agrees with McBain’s (2012) assertion that cultural challenges must be addressed during any merger process if such a merger is to succeed. Apparently, there was deviation from the original vision/concept of the merger of UPK, ITEK, and UNISE (Kasozi 2013). This is not unusual as the literature indicates that despite mergers becoming an increasingly important part of corporate strategies, not all attempts to undertake mergers are successful (Refsnes 2012). This is buttressed by Frantz (2014) who points out that numerous organisational mergers fail because the post-merger integration process fails. Accordingly, there is a need to assess whether the planned key strategic outcomes of the merger of UPK, ITEK and UNISE have been achieved, as well as assessing the extent to which, post-merger, the harmonised policies, procedures and systems are working successfully at Kyambogo University.

## Methods

Systematic literature review method was employed for this study to answer the following questions:

- What is the status quo of leadership competence of middle-level academic, e.g., deans and heads of departments in universities established out of the merger, taking Kyambogo University as a case study?
- What factors hinder their leadership competence development?
- What measures are needed to develop their leadership competence?

This method was considered appropriate for the study because it allows the researcher to understand the breadth and depth of the existing body of work regarding a particular phenomenon and identify gaps to explore (Xiao & Watson 2017). It also enables the researcher to evaluate the validity and quality of existing work against a criterion to reveal weaknesses, inconsistencies and contradictions of the phenomenon under investigation (Pare, Trudel, Jaana & Kitsiou 2015; Xiao & Watson 2017). Moreover, systematic literature review in social science research is highly acknowledged because it ensures a replicable and transparent procedure for determining what is currently known or stated about a certain occurrence, and for identifying the sources to include in the review (Kumar 2011). Finally, it broadens the researcher's knowledge base in the study area and makes it possible to contextualise the study findings (Kumar 2011).

### *Formulation of inclusion and exclusion criteria*

In order to get a credible list for the systematic review, inclusion and exclusion criteria were formulated. The inclusion criteria were as follows: a) relevance of each publication, i.e., each publication should be about leadership competence development for middle-level academics in merged universities in Africa, and Uganda in particular; b) peer reviewed articles; c) only publications written in English were considered, as that was the author's only international language; d) the literature search time span was limited to the years 2000-2019, as it is within this period that debates about developing quality university leaders have become a top priority for academics, researchers, governments, policy makers, and other stakeholders (for example, see Ayebare *et al.* 2017; Black 2015; Briggs 2001; Boer, Goedegebuure & Meek 2009; Deuren 2013; Mouton & Wildschut 2015; Yizengaw 2008). This made it possible to get a broad overview of the recent research on the quality of leadership in both conventional and merged universities in Africa, Uganda being no exception. Publications reporting on financing in higher education and research productivity in African

countries, among other things, were beyond the scope of this review, and as such were excluded from the review.

### ***Development of a Search Strategy***

In order to develop a search strategy that would lead to insight into academic and administrative leadership competence status quo, factors that hinder academic and administrative leadership competence development, and mitigation measures needed to develop academic and administrative leadership competence of deans and heads of departments at Kyambogo, various search terms were identified as being the most informative. The search descriptors included status of leadership in universities established out of merger, quality of university leaders, competence of university leaders and capacity building for university leaders, each in combination with Africa and/or Uganda. Quotation marks were employed to search for phrases. The search strategy focused on title, abstract and keywords, so as to get publications with a clear focus on leadership development of academics in merged universities in Africa and/or Uganda.

### ***Identification of relevant publications***

Four data bases were searched: The Web of Science® (WoS), Scopus, Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC) and Google Scholar. The abstracts of the publications resulting from the foregoing search strategy were screened for relevance. If the abstract provided insufficient information, then the full text was perused to determine whether or not the publication was in line with the inclusion criteria. Subsequently, twenty publications were found to have information on the quality of leadership in African universities. After perusing these publications, the author – through content analysis technique – deemed fourteen (70%) as containing useful information for the study. The literature search made it possible to gain insight into the academic and administrative leadership competence status quo; factors that hinder academic and administrative leadership competence development; and mitigation measures needed to develop academic and administrative leadership competence of deans and heads of departments at Kyambogo. This is presented in the results and discussion section.

## **Results and Discussions**

This section features some sources for the results regarding the status of leadership competence of middle-level academics, factors that hinder their leadership competence development, and measures that are needed to

develop leadership competence of middle-level academics in universities established out of mergers, such as Kyambogo.

### **Leadership Competence Status Quo of Middle-level Academics at Kyambogo University**

Findings from several documents, such as the Inspector General of Government Report on Mismanagement and Corruption at Kyambogo University (2015)<sup>1</sup> speak in detail regarding the leadership competence of deans and heads of departments at Kyambogo University. Deans and heads of departments are mandated to ensure that there are no examination leakages and other academic malpractices. However, complaints about these issues have been rife over the past few years. For instance, records of the proceedings of the Appointments Board which sat on 14 April 2014 showed that a technician in the Department of Engineering, a senior lecturer in the Department of Mechanical and Production Engineering, an assistant lecturer in the Department of Civil and Building Engineering, and a part-time lecturer in the Department of Mechanical Engineering were found to have solicited money from students for awarding students higher marks, expeditious marking of examination scripts by outsiders, passing the course, and ensuring that students successfully defended their presentations.

The four members of staff were recommended to the University Council for the termination of their contracts. However, in most cases, the culprits got “off the hook” due to the fact that investigation processes were deemed faulty. Accordingly, as a matter of urgency, this should be of concern to the University Senate because bodies such as the Inspector General of Government do not have the capacity to fully investigate the aforementioned academic cases due to their technical nature. Such investigations also require the cooperation of both errant students and lecturers in order to come to any concrete findings.

The Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act 2001, Section 53<sup>2</sup> indicates that deans, directors and heads of departments are supposed to be elected by the academic staff from among senior members of the faculty, institution, college or other academic body, in accordance with procedures proposed by the Senate and approved by the University Council. Meanwhile, for new academic bodies, the vice chancellor is mandated to appoint the dean, director or heads of departments to serve for two years. The Inspector General of Government Report on Mismanagement and Corruption at Kyambogo University (2015) indicates that regulations/guidelines for the election of deans, heads of departments and directors were passed by the University Council in 2012 and followed in the elections held in 2013.

The report further indicated that the majority of faculties and departments lacked members of staff qualified to be nominated as deans and heads of departments. It was also found that there were insufficient members of academic staff to fill the positions available because the minimum qualification required to fill these positions is that of a senior lecturer.

For one to qualify to become a senior lecturer according to Kyambogo University Human Resources Manual (2014), the candidate needed to possess a PhD in a relevant discipline; have three years of teaching or research in a reputable institution; have three recognised publications in the area of his or her specialisation; have supervised at least one graduate student to completion; and be involved as a member of a communal club, society or association. However, due to the limited numbers of academic staff with the requisite qualifications to take office as deans, directors and heads of departments, Kyambogo University has faced challenges in identifying staff to fill the positions in question as required by the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act 2001.

Consequently, most of the deans, directors and heads of departments are in acting capacity, appointed and/or recommended for appointment by the Appointments Board by the vice chancellor. Hence, Kyambogo needs to address concerns around governance at both unit and institution-wide levels through the establishment of representative committee structures, transparency in decision making, genuine consultative processes, and open channels of multi-directional communication (Mushemeza 2016).

However, in Kyambogo's context, it is important to note that because the deans, directors and heads of departments are elected by colleagues in their faculties/departments or others and serve in acting capacity, they owe an allegiance to those who elected them. As such, in many cases they are held hostage and cannot make firm decisions or discipline staff in their departments, especially if they plan to seek re-election after the expiry of their tenure, which is only four years and without renewal or extension.

Consequently, attempts to discipline errant members of academic staff are met with resistance and the deans, directors and heads of departments, more often than not, are forced into a position of surrender. For instance, the Inspector General of Government Report on Mismanagement and Corruption at Kyambogo University (2015) indicates that, at its meeting held on 17 April 2014, the Appointments Board observed that most heads of departments and deans were hesitant to take formal action against persons under their supervision because they were in office in an acting capacity.

This situation needs to be mitigated at the earliest possible opportunity because it grossly impairs effective performance management of academic

staff in a department/faculty. The summary of the leadership competence status quo of middle-level academics, e.g. deans, directors and heads of departments in an African university, such as Kyambogo, is presented in the ensuing Table below.

**Table 1:** Leadership competence status quo of middle-level academics in an African university such as Kyambogo

Status quo of leadership competence of middle-level academics in an African University such as Kyambogo	Findings	Source
	- Most universities in Africa critically face a challenge of limited capacity of governance, management and leadership.	Deuren 2013. <i>Capacity Development in Higher Education Institutions in Developing Countries</i> . Mouton & Wildschut 2015. <i>Leadership and Management Case Studies in Training in Higher Education in Africa</i> . Yizengaw 2008. <i>Challenges of Higher Education in Africa and Lessons of Experience for the Africa - U.S. Higher Education Collaboration Initiative</i> .
	- Leadership competence levels of university leaders is low.	Ayebare <i>et al.</i> , 2017. <i>Appointing and Removing Academic Staff in Public Institutions: The Level of Autonomy at Kyambogo University, Uganda</i> .
	- Most of the current university leaders especially in Africa lack appropriate leadership behaviour to handle ever-changing demands in the higher education sector.	Black 2015. <i>Qualities of Effective Leadership in Higher Education</i> .
	- Most Deans of Faculties and Heads of departments are under-prepared for the job they take up.	Boer, Goedegebuure & Meek 2009. <i>The Changing Nature of Academic Middle Management: a Framework for Analysis</i> .



The finding in Table 1 support Ogunruku's (2012) assertion that higher education institutions in Africa, such as Kyambogo, lack competent academic leaders to efficiently coordinate and manage the present and future. Similarly, several authors (Deuren 2013; Mouton & Wildschut 2015; Yizengaw 2008) all concur that most universities in Africa, Kyambogo being no exception, face a critical challenge of limited capacity of governance, management and leadership. For example, universities such as Makerere, that were seen as a success story for a premier university in Africa in recent decades regularly face closures due to staff and student unrest, mismanagement and poor leadership, among other things (Halvorsen 2016).

The results of this article, together with submissions of other scholars, such as Oanda and Sall (2016) affirm that the challenge of university governance and leadership – as identified by the 2000 World Bank report – still exist as a key limitation in the efficiency of most universities in Africa, such as Kyambogo. The findings in Table 1 concur with Wall (2015) who advances the notion that in the absence of administrative training, academic deans lack the breadth and depth of administrative leadership competence. Further, the situation of academic leaders, including vice chancellors, deans of faculties, and heads of departments, etc., lacking the breadth and depth of administrative leadership competence is grave as, revealed in Table 1. This is supported by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation's (2002) affirmation that the quality of higher education institutional staff and university managers are also lacking in a number of these competency areas.

For instance, Namubiru *et al.* (2017) established that Kyambogo University leadership lacked a shared vision and common strategies for managing transformation beyond the challenges of being non-collegial and heavily bureaucratic in nature. Furthermore, they also found that the university had myriad of leadership challenges, such as personality clashes amongst leaders; the problem of red-tape in decision making; a shortage of funds and other resources; and the interference by external agents in the affairs of the university. Namubiru *et al.* (2017) lucidly affirm that the kind of leadership exercised at Kyambogo University since its inception is partly responsible for the challenges the university is experiencing to date.

Findings herein are in accord with Ayebare, Kisiga, Gitta, Betihamah and Kimoga (2017) who indicate in their study that the appointment and removal of academic staff in Kyambogo University was not in line with what is provided for in the university's Human Resource Manual and national guiding acts, laws and standing orders of the Government of Uganda. This is a vivid indication that the leadership competence of the university

managers and leaders is debatable. Accordingly, Kyambogo University management and leadership should take heed to Salmi's (2009) supposition that talent, abundance of resources and appropriate governance are key aspects for creating a world-class university, which Kyambogo aspires to be, as suggested by its vision (i.e., To be a Centre of Academic and Professional Excellence).

Furthermore, the findings in Table 1 agree with Floyd (2009) who states that academics, more often than not, move into middle-level management and leadership roles with little or no training in management and leadership. As such, they struggle to adequately manage and lead key aspects of their role. This is buttressed by Boer, Goedegebuure and Meek's (2009) avowal that most deans of faculties and heads of departments are under-prepared for the job they take up. This inevitably requires deans and heads of departments to acquire various sets of skills, values and knowledge in order to be effective middle-level managers and leaders. In today's higher education environment, the need to develop and support good leaders and managers is critical if institutions want to operate effectively and efficiently (Floyd 2016). In summary, Table 1 suggests that the leadership competence of leaders in African universities such as Kyambogo needs improvement.

Table 2 reveals the factors that hinder leadership competence development of middle level academics in African universities like Kyambogo. These factors can be categorised into two areas: personal and institutional. However, the available literature (see Asiimwe & Steyn 2013; Floyd 2016; Megheirkouni 2016) present factors that hinder leadership competence development of middle level academics in African universities in amalgamation. This article details factors such as poor working conditions, ineffective bureaucracy, poor politics, limited academic freedom, heavy work-load, poor remuneration, government interference, inadequate funding, centralisation of authority and decision-making, poor technology infrastructure, organisational culture, and climate as institutional factors.

Meanwhile, factors such as lack of commitment, corruption, conflicting values in the institution, weakness in technology use, and lack of time value are perceived as personal factors. In this light, we see that the findings in Table 2 tend to suggest that factors that hinder leadership competence development of middle level academics in African universities, such as Kyambogo, are more institutional than personal. This perhaps is premised on the fact that previous research has concentrated more on bringing out factors hindering effective management and leadership from the institutional dimension, with less emphasis on the personal.

**Table 2:** Factors hindering leadership competence development of middle-level academics in an African university such as Kyambogo

Factors hindering leadership competence development of middle-level academics in an African university such as Kyambogo	Findings	Source
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Poor work environment (physical &amp; social)</li> <li>- Ineffective bureaucracy</li> <li>- Poor politics</li> <li>- Limited academic freedom</li> <li>- Heavy work loads</li> <li>- Poor remuneration</li> <li>- Corruption</li> </ul>	Altbach 2011. <i>The Academic Profession: The Realities of Developing Countries.</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Government interference</li> <li>- lack of commitment</li> <li>- inadequate funding</li> <li>- Poor remuneration</li> <li>- Internal politics</li> <li>- Lack of commitment</li> <li>- Unnecessary bureaucracy</li> <li>- Conflicting values in the institution</li> <li>- Centralisation of authority and decision-making</li> </ul>	Asimwe & Steyn 2013. <i>Obstacles hindering the effective governance of Universities in Uganda.</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Middle-level academics' limited authority and/or participation in decisionmaking</li> </ul>	Boyko & Jones 2010. <i>The Roles and Responsibilities of Middle Management (Chairs and Deans) in Canadian Universities.</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Poor technology infrastructure;</li> <li>- Weakness in technology use</li> <li>- Political and economic conditions</li> <li>- Lack of time value</li> <li>- Organisational culture and climate</li> </ul>	Megheirkouni 2016. 'Factors influencing leadership development in an uncertain environment'.

**Table 3:** Measures to enhance leadership competence of middle-level academics in an African university such as Kyambogo

Measures needed to enhance leadership competence development of middle-level academics in an African university such as Kyambogo	Findings	Source
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide adequate salaries and a stable career path</li> <li>- Upgrade university facilities</li> <li>- Adequately involve academics in university decision making processes.</li> <li>- Depoliticise university management and leadership</li> <li>- Provide adequate academic freedom</li> <li>- Provide targeted education and training in higher education management and leadership</li> </ul>	Altbach 2011. <i>The Academic Profession: The Realities of Developing Countries.</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ensure more operational autonomy</li> <li>- Ensure effective delegation</li> <li>- Ensure adequate provision of funds to the university</li> </ul>	Asiimwe & Steyn 2013. <i>Obstacles hindering the effective governance of Universities in Uganda.</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide clear definition between academic and administrative roles.</li> </ul>	Briggs 2001. 'Academic middle managers in further education: reflections on leadership', Research in Post-Compulsory Education.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- University structure and culture should both be well aligned in an organisation for leadership effectiveness</li> </ul>	John & Chattopadhyay 2015. <i>Factors Impacting Leadership Effectiveness: A Literature.</i>

Table 3 reveals that there are a number of measures that can be undertaken to enhance the leadership competence of middle-level academics in African universities, such as Kyambogo. The finding concurs with Ojala (2014) that middle-level academics need to acquire knowledge and skills, such as using technology effectively to improve access to knowledge. Thus, they can ably provide academic and professional leadership to the students and staff under

their jurisdiction. Similarly, the findings in Table 3 are also in agreement with Tagoe (2013) that providing leadership training can be useful in enhancing the leadership competence of university middle-level managers. Tagoe (2013) asserts that university leaders at all levels regardless of context ought to learn “to do more with less”. This is premised on the fact that according to the author’s experience and observation, more often than not, university managers at Kyambogo have a tendency of giving lack of adequate resources as an excuse for not performing their duties effectively. Nonetheless, when they are put to task to show what they have managed to do with the supposedly limited resources, they hardly show any substantial work and/or development. This kind of scenario ought to be mitigated without any compromise.

The findings in Table 3 are in accord with the work of Mayer *et al.* (2011) and Nakimuli and Turyahebwa (2015) who share the same conviction that effective university managers and leaders require targeted and appropriate training. This is owing to the fact that university education is experiencing changes in the form of expansion, diversification of provision, more heterogeneous student bodies, new funding arrangements, increasing focus on accountability and performance, globalisation, mobility and collaboration (Nakimuli & Turyahebwa 2015). Hence, prospective university leaders need to be provided with continuous professional learning and development in essential knowledge and skills if they are to perform their duties effectively.

The findings in Table 3 also correspond with Namubiru *et al.* (2017) that for African universities such as Kyambogo to function effectively and efficiently, there is a need to ensure that the university managers and leaders have a shared vision, employ a collegial kind of leadership, and are supportive to different units as well as individuals at the university. This is buttressed by Black (2015) who ascertains that in this climate of change, higher education institutions like Kyambogo are required to consider how to develop their leaders and establish what is regarded as appropriate leadership behaviour to enable them adapt to new circumstances in the higher education sector. Simala (2014) argues that as pressure continues to mount for universities such as Kyambogo to embrace change, academic and administrative leadership demands made upon middle-level academics are ever on the increase. Accordingly, Shahmandi *et al.*’s (2011) assertion speaks volumes in arguing that today’s leaders, regardless of context, need to have new knowledge, abilities and skills to effectively cope with the constant organisational changes. Hence, leaders in African universities, such as Kyambogo, are implored to follow suit. Moreover, it is irrefutable that competent leadership in a university is key to providing high quality

education, research, and community service (Shahmandi *et al.* 2011). In the final analysis, it is hereby deduced that the measures needed to enhance leadership competence of middle-level academics in African universities such as Kyambogo, must address the prevalent institutional deficiencies such as poor working conditions, ineffective administrative structure and unnecessary bureaucracy (Kasule 2015).

## Conclusion

Middle-level academics, such as heads of departments at Kyambogo, need support to enhance their leadership competence so as to have the skills required to address the challenges facing the university. As a first step, middle-level academics charged with academic and administrative leadership roles ought to be aware of the effect of institutional and personal factors on their leadership performance, and take appropriate mitigation measures. It is indisputable that no university can be better than the quality of its leadership. Accordingly, university education stakeholders need to develop and implement measures that address the institutional and personal factors limiting leadership competence development of academics at all levels, not only middle level academics.

As a policy measure, this study suggests that prospective university managers and leaders at Kyambogo, from the heads of departments to the vice chancellor, be required to undergo training in higher education management and leadership. According to the findings herein, it has been established that the literature about personal factors affecting leadership competence development of academics in African universities, such as Kyambogo, is scarce. As such, a detailed phenomenological study, involving the deans of faculties and heads of departments to profile these personal factors, is necessary. Additionally, there is need to delve into how institutional and personal factors, affect middle-level academics' management and leadership competence and the associated pragmatic mitigation measures if we want universities in Africa, such as Kyambogo, to be managed effectively.

## Notes

1. [https://www.igg.go.ug/static/files/publications/IG\\_Governance\\_Report\\_on\\_Kyambogo\\_2015\\_2.pdf](https://www.igg.go.ug/static/files/publications/IG_Governance_Report_on_Kyambogo_2015_2.pdf)
2. <https://ulii.org/system/files/legislation/act/2001/2001/universities%20and%20tertiary%20institutions%20Act%202001.pdf>

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# The Culture of Middle-level Academic Management at a Comprehensive South African University

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## Abstract

Using Critical Realism (CR), which emphasises the interplay of structure, culture, and agency, this conceptual article reflects on the culture of middle-level academic management at a comprehensive South African university which was the result of a merger of historically disparate institutions. It is important for the culture of this layer of management to be understood because it is at the nexus of senior management's strategic initiatives and the concerns of staff members and students. The article thus recommends the implementation of practices which embed the corporatist concerns of senior-level management into those aspects of the culture of middle-level academic management which are a function of the structural contexts in which the middle level academic managers operate as well as the managers' collective and individual agency. The result, the article envisages, could be an enhanced culture of middle-level academic management which makes for improved institutional governance in response to the multiple challenges being faced by the institution, such as the slow pace of transformation; increased student enrolments; student academic under-preparedness; the ever-present possibility of student protests; the demands of corporatism and the impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) on teaching and learning as well as unanswered questions around the relevance of some academic programmes.

**Keywords:** middle-level academic management, university, governance, culture, critical realism

## Résumé

Utilisant le réalisme critique qui met l'accent sur l'interaction de la structure, de la culture et du libre arbitre, cet article conceptuel réfléchit à la culture de la gestion académique de niveau intermédiaire dans une université polyvalente

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sud-africaine, résultat de la fusion d'institutions historiquement disparates. Il est important pour la culture de gestion qu'elle soit comprise car elle est au cœur d'initiatives stratégiques des autorités universitaires et de préoccupations des membres du personnel et des étudiants. L'article recommande donc la mise en œuvre de pratiques qui intègrent les préoccupations corporatistes des leaders dans les aspects de la culture de gestion académique de niveau intermédiaire qui sont fonction des contextes structurels dans lesquels opèrent les leaders universitaires de niveau intermédiaire, ainsi que de leurs intermédiaires collectifs et individuels. Le résultat voulu par le document serait une culture améliorée de la gestion académique de niveau intermédiaire qui permet une meilleure gouvernance institutionnelle, en réponse aux multiples défis auxquels l'institution est confrontée : lenteur du processus de transformation ; augmentation des inscriptions d'étudiants ; sous-préparation scolaire des étudiants ; latence des manifestations estudiantines ; exigences du corporatisme et impact de la quatrième révolution industrielle (4IR) sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage de même que sur des questions sans réponse autour de la pertinence de certains programmes académiques.

**Mots-clés** : gestion académique de niveau intermédiaire, université, gouvernance, culture, réalisme critique

## **Introduction**

The higher education sector in South Africa has been fraught with challenges since the advent of democracy in 1994. Some of these challenges have drawn attention to public university governance. However, as has been the trend globally, the focus of most of this attention has been on senior managers such as vice chancellors, their deputies and registrars (Nguyen 2013). Yet, the reality of governance, structures at universities is that they are layered. Constituting one of these layers are middle-level academic managers, such as heads of departments. These managers play a critical role in university governance as they are at the nexus of the strategic initiatives of senior management on one hand, and the concerns of academic staff, some support staff, and students on the other. There is, however, a paucity of research on this category of university management. Whereas the little research that has been conducted on middle-level academic managers has mainly focused on their roles and development needs, this conceptual article will reflect on the culture which characterises management at this level, with specific reference to a public university in South Africa. This reflection is based on the author's observations as a member of staff at the university in question since 2009.

## **Public University Governance in South Africa – Some Contextual Issues**

An example of the challenges confronting the public university sector in South Africa is the slow pace of transformation. This is especially the case at historically white universities (HWUs) and those merged institutions where at least one of the forming institutions is an HWU. Areas in which transformation is slow include the composition of university governance structures and practices (Baloyi & Naidoo 2016). A case in point is the professoriate. According to recent studies, despite transformation in higher education having been identified as a key social imperative in the post-1994 dispensation, nationally in South Africa, three in every four professors are white (Govender 2016; Govinder, Zondo & Makgoba 2013).

In addition to the slow pace of transformation, South African public universities still face challenges associated with the need to increase access to universities by students coming from historically disadvantaged demographic groups. Although the actual national participation rate is still relatively low, this increase in enrolments has put a strain on university governance, for example, in terms of financial, material and human resources (Boughey & Niven 2012; Breier & le Roux 2012; Shandler 2009). In addition, throughput rates continue to be low with a recent study revealing that despite the government spending around twenty billion rand annually on university tuition fees, about 70 percent of the students enrolled at public universities are taking about seven years to complete undergraduate degree programmes which should be completed in three to four years (Nkosi 2019). A major factor to which this has mainly been attributed is what has been described by some scholars as dysfunctionality or a toxic mix in the basic education system as a result of which many of the students are under-prepared for university studies (Bloch 2009).

Juxtaposed with the need to grow the South African economy is the call for socially responsive programmes which mitigate the effects of apartheid's legacy on South Africa's majority. One area in which this is urgent is the reduction of inequality. For example, the country's gini coefficient (a measure of the difference in incomes between the poorest and richest citizens) is reportedly amongst the highest three in the world (Creamer 2018). Senior managers at South African public universities have been accused of not making sufficient progress on this measure, as universities continue to be run on corporatist approaches. This approach is grounded in neoliberal policies adopted by the government after it abandoned the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) on the back of promises of loans from the IMF (Baatjes, Baduza & Sibiyi 2014; Harrison 2010; Ismi 2016). Maistry (2012) laments the brutality which neoliberal policies visit on

university management, especially at the middle level as they advocate the prioritisation of performativity measures and push the social concerns of higher education to the periphery. Singh (2012:7) warns that a corporatist model for the governance of South African universities is neither sustainable nor desirable because, '[t]he narrowing down of the multiple social purposes of higher education to economic imperatives is particularly worrying in contexts where democratic dispensations are new or fragile'.

As happened in many other parts of the world, the adoption of corporatism in the management of South African universities saw the introduction of corporate practices such as performance management, budgetary cuts, and outsourcing of services deemed non-core (Giroux 2014). As a result of such policies, in South Africa, the national allocation to higher education before the 2016 decision by the government to provide free tertiary education in response to the #FeesMustFall protests was only 2.7 percent of GDP. This was lower than the global 3.3 percent at the time and it negated the notion of education as a public good. Rather, education in South Africa continues to be conceptualised as a commodity from which tangible economic returns needed to be realised (Leibowitz 2012).

Due to the long history of alienation from meaningfully participating in the mainstream economy, many South African families cannot afford university fees and related costs for their children. The #FeesMustFall protests which erupted in October 2015 epitomised students' disenchantment with this state of affairs (Booyesen 2016). The protests – which had devastating effects such as the torching of buildings, arrest of students and disruption of academic programmes, – caught the university sector unawares (Langa 2017). As a result, at many of the institutions, fire-fighting approaches were adopted to deal with the protests, albeit with limited success. Thus, the protests both literally and metaphorically disrupted governance structures and practices at the institutions.

In light of these challenges and having worked at the selected comprehensive university for ten years, the author's observation of the experiences of middle-level academic managers at this university is that they often find themselves between the proverbial rock and a hard place. This is because they must balance the competing interests of different stakeholders such as senior management, academic and support staff, and students. For example, they must contend with budgetary cuts in the face of increased enrolments; secure suitable venues for large classes in competition with other departments; and come up with strategies to improve throughput rates against a background of student underpreparedness for university. In addition to having to bear heavy administrative loads, middle-level academic managers are still expected to carry out research and publish if they are to qualify for promotion to higher academic ranks.

The institution's middle-level academic managers' responses to their myriad challenges generate complexities which aggregate into a culture of management that needs to be understood, both for the purpose of enhancing it and, by extension, to improve institutional governance. Adding to these complexities is the variation in the disciplinary backgrounds of the middle-level academic managers, many of whom are not trained in management. This is in keeping with the findings by Seale & Cross (2015) that many managers at South African universities assume management positions not necessarily through training in management, but experience in their academic disciplines.

### **Conceptualising the Culture of Middle-level Academic Management**

The institution which is the focus of this paper is categorised as a comprehensive university. This is because it offers a diverse range of qualifications – from certificate to doctoral levels – across a variety of faculties. In other words, it does not focus on only one field nor level of study. The university was formed in 2005 through the merger of one HWU, one Technikon and one campus of a historically black university (HBU). With a student population of about fifty thousand, the university is hailed as an example of a successful merger as it continues to realise success in terms of rankings nationally and globally. Examples of middle-level academic managers at the university include heads of departments and centres, and campus programme coordinators.

Parallels can be drawn between the attempt to holistically understand the architecture of the culture of middle-level academic management at the selected comprehensive university and trying to repair a leaking roof. In order to effectively solve the latter problem, one needs to select the right tools from a hardware shop, or it will persist. In order to assist with explaining the architecture of the culture of middle-level academic management, it is necessary to use a theory which also provides a firm basis for the solution of any problems identified in the architecture. In the long run, this is expected to contribute not only to an enhancement of the culture of middle-level academic management but strengthening of institutional governance as well. One such theory is critical realism which will be discussed in the next section.

### **Critical Realism (CR) – The Interplay of Culture, Structure and Agency**

Critical realism (CR) has evolved as a theory since the 1970s, mainly as a result of the challenges related to shortcomings identified in the positions adopted in empirical and naturalist paradigms (Mingers 2014). Amongst the most well-known early proponents of CR is Bhaskar (1978). In recent years, the theory has been expanded by others such as Sayer (2000), Witgren (2004) and Mingers (2014).

CR looks at the interplay of structure, culture and agency (Bhaskar & Lawson 1998). Its propositions are useful to deploy to a reflection on the culture of middle-level academic management at the selected university. This is because it advocates a holistic approach to the study of social phenomena and their causal effects. The paradigm therefore enables one to go beyond normative institutional policies and strategic goals in investigating the form of this culture. This constitutes a rebuttal of the corporatist view that the management of organisations and their cultures and sub-cultures are solely shaped by the initiatives and activities of senior management.

### **The Role of Structure in Shaping the Culture of Middle Management**

CR places emphasis on ontology, that is, the study of existence – ahead of epistemology, which is the study of knowledge (Fleetwood 2005). This is because, for critical realists, the existence of the world is independent of what human beings think or know about it. Bhaskar & Lawson (1998) refer to this as the intransitive nature of reality. Appreciation of this relationship is central in CR because it makes us as human beings accept that our knowledge is fallible. We can sometimes get things wrong.

Structures are institutions or entities which, because of their properties, cause certain things to happen (Mingers 2014; Archer 2006). For example, structures give direction to social activities (Westwood & Clegg 2003). In other words, within different structures are found positions and roles played by the members who make up these structures.

Vandenberghe (2014) asserts that structures do not necessarily have to be physical. They also manifest themselves in the systems of interaction that occur between members of different social groups (Dobson 2002; Spasser 2000). In turn, they influence both public and private behavioural patterns which themselves can continue to be reproduced in society (Mingers 2014). This is in keeping with Hess' (1988) view that human lives are inextricably linked to the social structures in which they live. Their positions in these structures shape people's experiences, attitudes and behaviours. This explains why, in the context of organisations, structures such as senior management which have the capacity to exercise power over others see legitimacy in having certain expectations of those structures subordinate to them. Other than being concerned with the multiplicity and layered nature of structures which shape social reality, CR also tries to identify the mechanisms by means of which they shape social events (Willmot 2005; Denermark 2002). Bhaskar & Lawson (1998) and Layder (1994) assert that there is a reflexive or mutually influential relationship between structures and the social reality to whose form they contribute. This enables people to both be made by, and make, culture.



Another salient feature of reality in the view of critical realists is that it is hierarchically ordered or stratified (Mingers 2014; Archer 2003). As alluded to earlier, specific layers of structures have causal powers which are generative of events at subsequent levels. Once we understand the nature of these causal mechanisms, we are empowered to explain the changes for which they are responsible (Zachariadis, Scott & Barret 2010). Also important to note, particularly about social structures, is that they are very context-bound. They apply only to specific times, space, cultures or sub- cultures in contrast with natural laws which are usually universal in nature (Mingers 2014).

### **Structures at the Selected Comprehensive University**

Quinn (2012) says examples of structures in an institution of higher learning are faculties, deans, heads of departments, academic hierarchy as well as external examining bodies. To these layers can be added middle-level academic management. At the selected comprehensive university, senior management structures include the Management Executive Committee (MEC) and Executive Leadership Group (ELG). These structures exert an influence on those layers below them, such as middle management. For example, it is the responsibility of senior management structures to craft the strategy of the university. This is then cascaded to the middle and lower level managers. As a result, heads of departments and centres are expected to craft strategic trajectories for their departments and centres which are derived from the faculty, divisional and institutional strategic thrusts. With respect to strategy formulation, therefore, the culture of middle-level academic managers at the selected university can be conceptualised as a reflection of that of senior management, as there is very limited room available to the middle-level managers for strategic creativity. Any attempt at creativity might, for example, mean that the middle-level academic manager will not get material, financial or moral support from the senior managers. In this regard, Maistry (2012) laments South African middle-level academic managers' reliance on undemocratic top-down approaches to governance which do not directly consider the views of those who operate outside certain structures. This arrangement also contradicts the definition of governance which assigns power and authority to both those who govern and the governed (Booyesen 2016).

Structures such as the University's Council and Senate also make key governance decisions. Yet, few middle-level academic managers are members of these upper-level structures at the institution. There is therefore an extent to which the culture of middle-level academic management at the comprehensive university is a reflection of the governance culture of the upper level structures. Given that the professoriate at the comprehensive university

is still white male dominated, as indeed it is nationally, the culture of middle-level academic management can be conceptualised as being characterised by discontent over the slow pace of transformation at the university.

Notwithstanding the influence of senior-level management, there is an extent to which the culture of middle-level management could also be perceived as having a bearing on that of both their superiors and subordinates. This is in light of the view that there exists a reflexive relationship between members of different structures as a result of which individuals are both made by, and make, culture (Layder 1994). At the selected comprehensive university, this is seen in the input which middle-level academic management makes into policy making by senior level management through, for example, responses to policy initiatives or reports on the results of policy and strategy implementation. It is also demonstrated through the execution of management functions at departmental level by the middle-level academic managers.

In addition to the influence of institutional structures, the culture of middle-level academic management at the selected university can also be viewed as a function of national management structures and practices. As Archer (2000) and Jarvis (1995) assert, social phenomena such as management are rarely free from the influence of societal institutions, such as national government. Debowski (2017) emphasises that higher education leadership, in particular, is a function of contextual factors. This is also in keeping with Bourdieu's (1986) idea of habitus which, among other factors, looks at how society is predisposed to think and act in determinant ways. An implication from this is that particular forms of social conditions produce particular forms of habitus. This is exemplified by a team of players who have to play according to the rules of the game they are engaged in (Manville 2004). In this regard, in the exercise of their responsibilities, middle-level academic managers at the comprehensive university, for example, have to conform with national legislation on academic programme development, labour and procurement laws, amongst other areas over which they have responsibility.

Also important to note about structures is the suggestion that there is always an extent to which a change in orientation at one layer may have a knock-on effect on the other layers (Bhaskar 1991; Danermark 2002). This is in keeping with the morphogenetic or changing nature of social structures (Archer 1996; Case 2015). This was seen at the selected university in 2014 when senior management decided to collapse all the strategic goals of the university into only one, 'Global Excellence and Stature (GES)'. As a result, middle-level academic managers had to formulate their departmental strategies around this one goal. In doing so, whatever strategic options they chose for their respective departments had to be embedded in GES.

The different components which constitute structures do not necessarily always work in harmony to shape the culture or sub-cultures in societies and organisations (Archer 1996; Witgren 2004). Sometimes, they pull in opposite directions. The individual, for example, brings his or her own assets and biography to the management role (Chia & King 2001; O'Mahoney & Vincent 2014). For middle-level academic managers at the selected university, these may be such that they are not directly congruent to the institution's strategic trajectory as directed by senior-level management. The culture of middle-level academic managers at the comprehensive university could therefore be viewed as being characterised by contradictions and tensions characterised in the relationship between middle-level academic managers and senior-level managers.

### **The Role of Agency – Intentionality and Choices**

Agency has to do with the intentionality and choices which people have which enable them to behave in particular ways (Quinn 2012). In playing these roles, agents therefore make certain decisions and choices. In terms of organisations, Jarvis (1985:116) says agency is, '[t]he vehicle by means of which institutions provide procedures through which human conduct is patterned'. With respect to management, agency can be said to refer to the influence which managers at any level are capable of by virtue of the power or authority which they possess. This is, for example, what enables them to direct different structures, superior or subordinate to them, to behave in certain ways. Agency is therefore, '...embedded within, and dependent upon, structural contexts' (Wright 1999:110). Archer (2003, 1996) suggests that there are basically two systems from which structures derive their agency. The first of these are the normative regulatory systems, such as legislation and policies. The second are the informal systems which are established, for example, by managers in a bid to achieve some entity-specific goals (Mingers 2012). The culture of managers at any level in an organisation can therefore be looked at as a function of how they mediate the often-conflicting interests of formally recognised agents and the informal ones (Drinkuth, Reigler & Wolf 2003). For example, at the comprehensive university in question, middle-level academic managers often have to allocate resources for the execution of certain tasks in response to requests from informal agents at departmental level. It is not in all cases that this is in conformity with what is directed by formal agents such as senior management.

Another way through which structures exercise their agency is the discourse which they use to regulate the behaviour of other structures (Foucault 1980). The culture of middle-level academic management at the selected university

can therefore be seen from the perspective of the discourse which they use to craft rules and regulations on the basis of which they run the entities under their charge. It can also be seen in the discourse which senior managers use to interact with the middle-level management. Apparent in these discourses are power differences between managers at different levels. An example is the issuing of directives to middle-level managers by senior-level managers in language that suggests that certain terms of such directives and deadlines are non-negotiable.

### **Collective Agency – ‘I am because we are’**

Archer (1996) and Drinkurth et al. (2003) point out that agents are inherently collective in nature. An individual's behavioural choices are deemed to be a function of those of the collective of which he or she is a member. The exercise of agency is therefore seen at the collective level in the policies, rules and regulations which members of different structures use to regulate the activities of either their members or those of other structures. This is in keeping with Jarvis' (1985:194) view that institutions, ‘...provide procedures through which human conduct is patterned and compelled to go in grooves deemed desirable by society’. In this regard, middle-level academic managers at the university exercise collective agency through the use of institutional rules and regulations which are commonly applicable to all their departments and centres. For example, in managing teaching and learning in their departments and centres, they largely rely on the application of the institutional policies, rules and regulations which are formulated by senior-level management. The same applies to how they manage resources, both material and human. Overall, therefore, the shape of the culture of middle-level academic management at the selected comprehensive university can be characterised as being reflective of how they implement the institutional strategies which guide teaching and learning.

### ***Individual Agency – ‘I perceive and do because I am’***

For a long time, the role of individual agency was overshadowed by the influence of social or collective agency, as it was largely assumed that activities such as management are largely influenced by the social context in which individual managers find themselves operating (Goodnow 1990; Pea 1997). However, since the 1990s, there has been a growing realisation that aspects of individual agency such as intentionality, subjectivity and identity play a critical role in shaping the cognitive experience of an individual, thus influencing their practice of management (Billet 2006). This is because there is a limit to the extent to which structures can influence the choices which individuals can make. This is why the tension between structure and

agency is acknowledged in critical realism (Archer 2006). Valsiner (2000) lists aspects of human personality such as perceptions, attitudes, motivation and attitudes amongst some of the key drivers of behaviour at individual level. Similarly, Cole (1998) suggests that personal agency contributes to the enactment, remaking and transformation of culturally-derived practices.

Lending support to the foregoing is the contention that although it is derived from the broad institutional culture, there is also an extent to which the culture of certain structures within an organisation or institution is so self-directed that it may not be possible to discern the influence of collective agency in it (Fleetwood 2005; Jarvis 1985). In this regard, the culture of middle-level management at the selected university can also be conceptualised as being reflective of the individual middle-level managers' own agency, rather than their conformity with the institutional culture of management. This manifests itself in the influence of the individual middle-level managers' biographies, personalities, aspirations and capabilities on their stewardship of their departments, centres or units. For example, some of the middle-level academic managers are members of racial groups which were discriminated against under apartheid. As a result, their management style is, to an extent, predicated on the social justice agenda which seeks to establish equality for all in South Africa. On the other hand, some of those who are members of racial groups that enjoyed privileged status prior to 1994 are often accused of perpetuating discriminatory practices of the past. Middle-level academic managers at the university therefore bring unique social and intellectual capital to the practice of management whose contribution to the making of their culture of management cannot be under-estimated. Jansen (2009) metaphorically refers to this deep influence of history and individual social biographies on individuals' subjectivities as 'knowledge in the blood.'

The influences of the middle-level academic managers' individual agency are also evident in the variations which characterise how different departments, centres and units are led. In spite of deriving guidance from institutional policies, rules regulations and strategic thrusts, there is an extent to which the individual middle-level academic managers' biographies, personalities and aspirations have a bearing on how they execute their leadership roles. Middle-level academic managers are promoted to their positions on the basis of their academic qualifications and experience, rather than management training. Due to time constraints, there are few management development opportunities for middle-level managers. This means that their management practices, notwithstanding the institutional framework and guidelines, are a function of their individual agency, for example, in the form of biographies, personality and aspirations.

## Culture

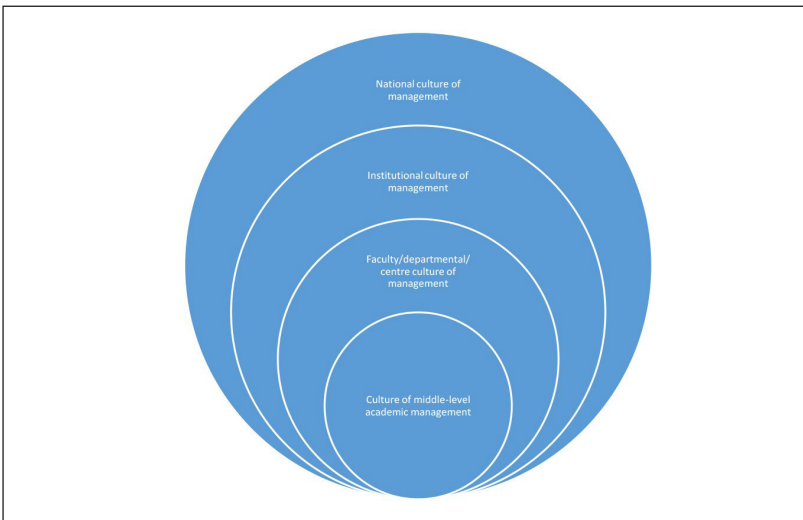
According to Quinn (2012:29), from an Archarian perspective, culture is, ‘... the ideas, beliefs, theories, values, ideologies and concepts which are manifest through discourses used by particular people at particular times.’ A certain form of the culture of middle management and attendant discourses are therefore seen as emerging from the structural arrangements at the selected comprehensive university. The culture and discourses are also influenced by the level of both individual and collective agency which the middle managers possess. One aspect of the culture would be the middle-level academic managers’ beliefs and the discourses which they use to communicate. An example is the discourse which they use to talk about the rate of transformation at the university. Depending on factors such as race and level of academic seniority, transformation at the university might be talked about as either being too slow or progressing at just the right pace.

Another aspect of the culture of middle-level academic management at the selected university might be beliefs and discourses about throughput rates. Closely related to this might be behaviours and practices aimed at improving or enhancing students’ academic success. In addition, the culture of middle-level academic managers might be seen through their responses to the demands of corporatism and student protests. In terms of the former, this culture might be seen in their acquiescence to the demand by senior management to implement performance management and, in some cases, effect budgetary cuts and the requirement for them to implement performance management. Encapsulating this culture might be forms of communication, such as circulars and memoranda sent to their own subordinates and reports sent to senior management. In terms of responses to student protests, the culture of academic middle management at the institution might be seen through their responses to demands to decolonise the curriculum and deal with disruptions to teaching schedules.

As a result of collective agency, the culture of middle-level academic management at the selected university could also be characterised by similarities in responses to the requirement to implement certain strategies, policies and regulations. For example, middle-level academic managers rely on the same performance management system to rate the performance of their subordinates. Given that human beings are also capable of their own choices and intentionality, some of which are tangential to the dictates of the structures in which they operate, there is also an extent to which the culture of middle-level academic management at the selected university will be seen in unique responses to institutional governance expectations. An example might

be responses to demands to decolonise the curriculum which will vary from one middle-level academic manager to another, depending on such factors as academic discipline and beliefs around decolonising the curriculum.

The layered nature of structures leads to the culture associated with them also being layered. The figure below which the author calls the management culture onion is a representation of the layered nature of the culture of management at the selected university. As shown in Figure 1, one layer or domain has an influence on the next one. However, as a result of reflexivity, as discussed earlier, there is also an extent to which the culture found in one inner layer influences that found in the next inner or outer layer. The overall form of the culture of middle-level academic management is therefore mediated through interactions amongst the role players found in each of the layers. For example, the national culture of management influences the culture of institutional management, as seen in requirements for senior university managers to abide by national legislation governing labour relations and financial management. Of necessity, the provisions of such legislation are incorporated into institutional policies which are then implemented at faculty and departmental levels and, ultimately, by the middle-level academic managers. As earlier pointed out, such influence can move in the reverse direction when the middle-level academic managers, through either their individual or collective agency give input which is factored into departmental/faculty, institutional and even national policy formulation.



**Figure 1:** The Management Culture Onion

## **Towards Enhancing the Culture of Middle Management at the Comprehensive University**

From the discussion on the interplay of culture, structure, and agency, the culture of middle-level academic management at the comprehensive university can be conceptualised as a function of a multiplicity of factors. At the institutional level, structures such as senior management, faculties, departmental boards and worker representative organisations play an influential role in shaping this culture. They achieve this, for example, through coming up with strategic initiatives, policies, rules or regulations related to the management of the university in the academic domains. As a result, the culture of middle-level academic management is shaped by collective agency, for example, in terms of the way in which the middle-level academic managers respond to the strategies, policies and regulations which are initiated by senior management structures such as the MEC, ELG, Senate and Council. However, the middle-level managers' biographies, personalities and aspirations are also productive of agency which has a bearing on their culture of management, for instance, as they navigate the transformation agenda or try to resolve challenges such as low student throughput rates and budgetary constraints. The way in which they do this, however, has the potential to generate tensions between them and senior management. Such tensions have the potential to constrain the effectiveness of middle-level academic management. The question therefore arises as to how, in light of such possible tensions, the culture of middle-level academic management can be enhanced at the comprehensive university. In response to this question, an overall suggestion is to search for the form of the culture of middle-level academic management in each of the layers or domains shown in Figure 1, identify any weaknesses and seek suitable ways of enhancing the culture.

Given the legacy of the selected university's forming institutions, the composition of senior governance structures at the comprehensive university appears to have limited space for middle-level academic managers, particularly those from previously disadvantaged demographic groups. This is likely to perpetuate a culture of middle-level academic management characterised by social cleavages reflective of the country's past. Yet, since 1994, it has been envisaged that the governance model appropriate for South African public universities is one characterised by democracy, which entails participative decision-making by all stakeholders (Mashabela 2011). This has been elusive in many cases as a result of which decision-making, for example, might be seen as being made in ways which are protective of the interests of certain racial groups or academic ranks. This calls for the reconfiguration of senior management structures in order to decentralise power and decision-making.



For example, instead of membership in the Senate being based on attainment of academic ranks such as professorship, even middle-level academic managers who are not professors can be incorporated into such a structure so that they can take part in decision-making. This will most likely contribute to the enhancement of their stewardship of the academic project at the university. At the same time, efforts to assist those academic managers who have not yet attained their doctorates need to be increased. In addition, a balance needs to be struck between their roles as administrators and opening up space for them to carry out research and to publish. Through attainment of doctoral qualifications and senior academic ranks such as associate and full professorships, their participation in the Senate, for example, will not just be on the basis of affirmative action, but merit as well.

Collective agency in the management of the South African university, as discussed earlier, is largely born of corporatism which itself is a product of neoliberalism. The selected comprehensive university is no exception to this challenge which Von Holdt (2012:203) says creates '...new hierarchies and distinction, new interests and new social distances'. These are often generative of conflict between different structures such as middle-level academic managers and senior managers, for example, as a result of budgetary cuts which, as earlier discussed, negatively impact on teaching and learning. Such tensions can only be reduced through a consultative approach to the budgeting process rather than a top-down one. This might assist in terms of giving a stronger voice, and therefore greater agency, to the middle-level academic managers, with respect to their budgetary requests.

Corporatism also forces middle-level academic managers to performance-manage their subordinates. More often than not, this process is also fraught with conflict and tensions, especially because of its association with performance ratings which are directly tied to monetary rewards. For example, while some middle-level academic managers are accused of consistently rating their subordinates' performance very low, others are accused of being too generous. In the former case, such ratings have often been revised downwards by senior-level managers. The effectiveness of the culture of middle-level academic managers at the university might therefore be enhanced through the formulation of a performance management system which foregrounds performance improvement through employee development and more meaningfully incentivising performance than the current tokenism which many employees, including the middle-level academic managers themselves, have stopped taking seriously.

As discussed, CR advocates a holistic approach to an analysis of all the factors which have a bearing on the culture of middle management. Elements

of the individual middle-level managers' biographies, personalities and aspirations are therefore looked into for purposes of trying to establish their influence on the culture of middle-level management. As is the case with collective agency, the influence of individual agency on the culture of middle-level academic management is often characterised by weaknesses and tensions. This is seen, for example, in how individual middle-level academic managers' identities or biographies have not adequately prepared them for management positions. In such cases, continuous learning and development in areas like leadership and human resources as well as strategic and financial management would help to assist in enhancing the middle-level academic managers' effectiveness as leaders. Closely related to this would be team-building sessions aimed at, amongst other things, creating communities of practice amongst the middle-level academic managers; management exchange programmes; and benchmarking which would also help to address such deficiencies as the inability to manage diversity and lack of emotional intelligence.

## **Conclusion**

Highlighted in this paper are the complexities which characterise the possible architecture of the culture of middle-level academic management at the selected comprehensive university in South Africa. The genesis of these complexities is in factors such as the slow pace of transformation; increased access to the university by students coming from previously disadvantaged demographic groups; corporatism; student protests; and the managers' own biographies and subjectivities. Given the critical role played by these managers at the institution, it is necessary to both understand the culture which characterises the ways in which they execute their functions, for purposes of seeking strategies by which this culture might be enhanced for improved institutional governance. Using CR, the paper has argued that for this to happen, the culture needs to be holistically analysed. This entails looking at all possible factors which influence it, instead of just looking at how it is shaped by the culture of senior management. Reflecting on the author's experiences as an academic member of staff at the selected university, the interplay of structure, culture and agency on the basis of which CR analyses social phenomena was therefore used to conceptualise and analyse the architecture of the culture of middle-level academic management. Highlighted in the conceptualisation and analysis are factors such as the causal influence of the layered nature of structures as well as the role of both collective and individual agency. Suggestions arising from this focused on the need to consider all possible factors which have a bearing on the culture of middle-level management. Examples include attending to

the possible structural tension between the middle-level academic managers and senior managers and the need to pay attention to aspects such as the middle-level academic managers' individual and collective agency as well as their career development needs. Debowski (2017) suggests this is a complex project. However, at the apex of the list of possible tools which can be used to drive it is an appreciation of the inescapable imperative of higher education management development. Middle-level academic managers can benefit immensely from senior managers who appreciate the need to professionally capacitate them through institutionalised management development programmes. On their part, the middle level academic managers should exercise both their individual and collective agency to cultivate a management culture which propels them, their subordinates, students and, indeed, the whole university towards a positive and continuous improvement trajectory. This is in light of the need for the university to effectively fulfil its mandate to contribute to socio-economic development in South Africa, the African continent and beyond, within the context of multiple challenges such as the ever-present possibility of student protests, the slow pace of transformation and the impact of 4IR on the relevance of many learning programmes.

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# Junior Academics within Middle Level Academic Leadership in Emerging Universities in Nigeria

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## Abstract

One of the emerging developments within middle level academic leadership in Nigerian universities relates to the inclusion of academics who are at the very beginning of their careers within middle level leadership. The term junior academics is used here to refer to academics who are on staff development terms, registered for doctoral studies, or just graduated from doctoral studies and starting the process of being socialized into institutional academic cultures. In most emerging (3<sup>rd</sup> generation) universities, such academics are often allocated academic and administrative roles that would otherwise be performed by middle level academics in well-established universities. This trend, occurring majorly among emerging universities, appears to be a response to the dearth of middle level academics to occupy middle level leadership positions. While this development appears to serve as an emergent response to the challenges on hand, the implications on middle level academic leadership, university administration and governance as a whole need to be critically explored. This article interrogates on how junior academics serving within middle level leadership came to be, implications on university leadership, and finally a conclusion on how this challenge can be addressed to pave the way for effective middle level academic leadership within university administration.

**Keywords:** Managers, Junior Staff, Academic, Administration, Higher education

## Résumé

L'un des événements émergents au sein du leadership académique de niveau intermédiaire dans les universités nigérianes est lié à l'inclusion d'universitaires en tout début de carrière au leadership de niveau intermédiaire. Le terme « universitaire junior » est utilisé ici pour désigner les universitaires qui

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sont inscrits aux études doctorales ou sont nouvellement diplômés de programmes doctoraux et qui entament le processus de socialisation dans les cultures académiques institutionnelles. Dans la plupart des universités émergentes (3ème génération), ces universitaires se voient souvent attribuer des rôles académiques et administratifs qui, autrement, seraient effectués par des universitaires de niveau moyen dans les universités bien établies. Cette tendance, qui se produit principalement dans les universités émergentes, semble être une réponse à la pénurie d'universitaires de niveau intermédiaire dans des postes de leader de niveau intermédiaire. Cette évolution semble répondre aux défis à relever, mais les implications sur le leadership universitaire de niveau intermédiaire, l'administration et la gouvernance universitaires dans leur ensemble doivent être examinées de manière critique. Cet article porte donc sur la manière dont les universitaires débutants servant au sein du leadership de niveau intermédiaire ont vu le jour, les implications sur le leadership universitaire, et il conclut sur la manière de relever ce défi pour ouvrir la voie à un leadership académique de niveau intermédiaire efficace au sein de l'administration universitaire.

**Mots-clés :** cadres, personnel « junior », universitaire, administration, enseignement supérieur

## **Introduction**

Higher education in Africa continues to experience change in its structures and functions (Sawyer 2004; Zeleza 2004). Traditionally, middle level administration within university systems in Nigeria (as obtains elsewhere) were, in most cases, managed by middle level academics. The reason was to allow them to provide the leadership needed for staff and students and the necessary support for top management. In the present dispensation, the reverse appears to be the case, especially in private and newly established institutions. Freshly minted doctoral degree holders – in some cases new entrants and junior scholars – now play active roles as middle level leadership. They occupy positions as heads of department, deputy deans, programme coordinators, and other middle level management responsibilities. Some factors – namely the dearth of established scholars and the not too financially and socially rewarding status of such positions coupled with the capitalist orientations of some established scholars who are motivated by economic benefits – might be responsible for this development (Deem & Lucas 2007).

The appearance of junior academics within middle level leadership is a reflection of some of the challenges faced by third generation universities in Africa as a whole. They face peculiar circumstances in terms of finance, brain drain, and other teething challenges (Yizengaw 2008). The support they receive relative to their challenges is low and some of these emerging



universities have either resigned to fate or are not doing anything to address the obstacles. By implication, a large number of emerging universities on the continent struggle to survive with the available resources (Deem & Lucas 2007). Nonetheless, this does not numb the negative impact of these survival strategies on middle level leadership and university administration and governance as a whole, hence the need to pay attention to this issue in order to pave the way for a virile middle level leadership.

The place of middle level academic leadership as key actors in the transformation process of higher education administration cannot be ignored (Santiago *et al.* 2006). Therefore, discourses regarding them have centred on their roles (Briggs 2007; Kogan, Khawas & Moses 1994; Leader 2004; Kogan *et al.* 1994); career paths (Wolverton & Gmelch 2002) and their identity as middle line managers (Deem & Lucas 2007). Studies have equally explored the contradictions inherent in their status as middle level managers and as researchers/teachers (Deem & Lucas 2007; Deem & Hillyard 2002; Floyd & Dimmock 2011) coupled with the place of gender in middle level management (Deem, Hillyard & Reed 2007). Without mincing words, these contemporary debates have shed light on the contours surrounding middle level managers. However, a clear and detailed empirical description of the experiences of budding scholars within middle level management appear lacking. This article intends to discuss the realities facing junior academics serving within middle level leadership, and the implications on university administration in Nigeria. In doing justice to this problem, the following questions become pertinent: How did we get here? What does this development portend for the junior scholars in terms of career mobility and academic development? What are the structures put in place by the affected universities to fix appropriate managers into appropriate positions? What are the implications of this development for university administration and management? How can this situation be addressed to pave the way for qualified middle academics in middle level leadership? Providing answers to these questions will involve an analytical and thematic review of literature and interrogation of existing data sets.

### **The Emergence of Junior Academics within Middle Level Management**

From observation over the years of the university system, the advent of junior academics in middle level management may be hinged on a number of factors. One of these is the increasing number of prospective applicants for university education, which has led to the creation of many universities without the required resources in terms of funding, classrooms and personnel, among others. Equally, the continued increase in the number of

tertiary institutions in Nigeria, especially the university education, in the last 15 years is unprecedented. This of course is a reflection of the continued awareness of the need for higher education in the continent, coupled with the dominance of youth within the African population. Consequently, the need to provide tertiary education to teeming youths necessitated the creation of more universities (Obasi & Eboh 2001). United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] (1998) calculated the number of tertiary education enrolment between 1975 and 1995 and found a ten-fold increase from 181,000 in 1975 to 1,750,000 in 1995 in developing countries. Currently in Nigeria, the total number of universities is 170, comprising 43 federal universities, 48 state universities and 79 private universities. While this may appear large, they are still insufficient, as the number of applicants far outnumber the available space within these universities (*The Guardian* 2018). For instance, the yearly applicants into these universities have been pegged at over 1 million (Nigeria Universities Commission 2019), which is far higher than the available space.

The extraordinary interest in university education compared to other institutions of higher learning in the country, in recent times, is intriguing (Ademola, Ogundipe & Babatunde 2014). This has further fuelled the continued pressure on university admissions in Nigeria. Young people seeking admission into tertiary institutions prefer university degrees, irrespective of the conditions associated with it. Non-degree-awarding institutions are usually considered as the last resort, and holders of diplomas from these institutions are equally eager to obtain university degrees to validate their diploma certificates (Ademola *et al.* 2014). Currently, a number of third generation universities have created conversion programmes for holders of diplomas to meet this demand. Having qualified personnel to manage this surge becomes problematic.

Another major factor responsible for the emergence of junior academics in middle level leadership is brain drain. The dearth of qualified personnel has always been a challenge in Nigeria as far back as early 1960s, as pointed out by the Nigerian Universities Commission (Nwachukwu 1977). The emigration of scholars from Nigerian universities began as far back as the Lagos University Crisis of 1965 (Nwachukwu 1977). The replacement of the incumbent vice chancellor during that period did not go well with a group of scholars and this eventually led to the mass exodus of academics from Nigeria to other parts of the world (Aliyu 2005). Since that period, university scholars have bemoaned the decay of the university system. The problem became aggravated due to funding issues and incessant military attacks on university intellectuals during the military era (Aliyu 2005). The

financial crises that hit higher education in Africa took their toll on Nigeria. Teferra (2007) summarised the causes to include the pressure relating to expansion and 'massification', leading to an outburst of student population within higher education; economic challenges in Africa; the activities of lending agencies like World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF); and poor management of limited available resources within the higher education sector. The overall effect of these issues led to brain drain in which qualified academic personnel sought greener pastures in developed countries and other African countries where their services were appreciated (Aliyu 2005). The nation witnessed the exit of qualified hands that could facilitate the training and mentoring of younger academics (Aliyu 2005). Between September 1987 and November 1998 for instance, more than 4,500 senior staff members left a university, primarily due to transfer of services, resignations and non-renewal of appointments (Aliyu 2005). The Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities (ASUU), the umbrella body of academics in the country, condemned the dearth of university lecturers and reported that universities in Nigeria had 37,504 academics out of an estimated necessary 70,000 lecturers (*Vanguard* 2016). The president of the union further remarked that out of the available lecturers as at 2012, only 40 per cent had PhDs. He further attributed this to brain drain, which became rampant in the 1980s because of poor pay, military interference and, most importantly, poor funding of these universities (*Vanguard* 2016). A series of industrial strike actions were embarked upon by university teachers to protest these anomalies; it has been said that the union has been on strike for a cumulative period of over three years since 1999 (*Vanguard* 2016). The implication of this on the regular academic calendar, coupled with the existing challenges, further challenged the production of PhD graduates. The NEEDS assessment of the staff-to-student ratio revealed that it was high (Federal Government of Nigeria 2012). In the National Open University for instance, the ratio in 2012 was 1:363; Lagos State University was 1:144; and the University of Abuja was 1:122. Newer universities like Kano State University, which was eleven years old in 2012, had only one professor and twenty-five lecturers with PhDs in the whole university; Kebbi State university had two professors and five lecturers with PhDs (Federal Government of Nigeria 2012). Aside from this, the percentage of unqualified lecturers across the nation during that period was put at fifty-seven (National Commission for Colleges of Education [NCCE] 2011). While more recent data are unavailable, evidence still suggests a deficiency of academic personnel in these universities, especially in many of the third generation universities (Ademola *et al.* 2014).

The last fifteen years also marked the mushrooming of private universities in the country. Political and religious elites took interest in higher education for socio-economic and religious gains. Establishment of private institutions thus became competitive among different strata of political and religious elites; more especially considering the loss of interest and trust in public universities among middle class and upper class members due to incessant strike action, and the unbearable cost of overseas education. While many of these elites picked up interest in setting up private institutions, a large number of them could not meet up with the demands of higher education (Ademola *et al.*, Babatunde 2014). The competition among elites to establish private universities numbered many of them to the realities surrounding university funding. For example, some less popular courses floated in these universities and which did not get the required patronage in terms of students' admission to keep the departments running were either scrambled or merged with other departments; some institutions even resorted to downsizing their workforce, all in a bid to cut the running cost (Omoriegie 2011). Consequently, for many of these third generation private universities, securing the services of young academics to carry out the role of middle level management became cost effective and less demanding, compared to the cost implications of securing the services of experienced middle level scholars.

### **Emergence of Junior Academics in Middle Level Management: Some Implications**

The accumulation of junior academics within middle level management has a number of implications for young scholars, students and the entire university community. As a matter of fact, their emergence within these areas may further create new challenges and also compound existing ones. One of the major challenges this development portends for the emerging university is the gradual loss of academic culture. Academic culture has been defined as communication channels and interaction among members of the university community (Sabaghian 2009). It is the sum total of the beliefs and attitudes held by members of the academic community. It shapes members' perceptions, thoughts and feelings regarding the university, and is usually the core of any university (Shein 1992). The impact of culture on the social behaviours of the organisation is usually strong, whether on a short- or long-term basis (Robins 2006). This can be said of any university system in terms of its culture. The presence/absence of it has a strong influence on the collegial, bureaucratic, social, economic and political life of the academic community. When this is not well developed and shared by members of the community, the academic

quality of both staff and students will be in jeopardy, and management suffers. A number of these twenty-first century universities are gradually becoming 'glorified secondary schools', lacking the distinct identifiable culture shared by members of the university community. The values of discipline, academic rigour in teaching and research, and tolerance, among others that has come to be associated with first generation universities are gradually becoming extinct and lacking in some of these new generation universities. The reasons for this are simple: the middle level managers who are supposed to have been socialised into these lifestyles and also serve as the custodians of these ideals are not available in some of these universities. Young scholars who have found themselves within middle level management and who are products of different universities, and were socialised into different university lifestyles and experiences, usually see these new positions as opportunities to display their long-held personal idiosyncrasies on the students and colleagues. In most instances, the result is usually a clash of ideas among middle level managers with different academic backgrounds.

While poor structural defects as a result of indistinctive academic culture connotes a disaster for the university system in terms of academic quality and administrative value and dispensation, its impact on the victims cannot be overlooked. The victims in this sense are the pre-tenure academics within middle level management. The university tradition across the globe is that early career academics undergo a series of training and mentoring at that stage of their careers as a precursor to the academic and administrative responsibilities awaiting them as they mature in their career. A situation in which the larger part of their budding lives is spent on middle level management makes it difficult for them to acquire the necessary skills and training at this stage of their careers. Exposing them to middle level management may make a number of them susceptible to academic lethargy and mediocrity, power drunkenness and other pitfalls. A large number of them have to combine huge teaching workloads with these responsibilities. While statistics may not be available to understand the career progression of these young people, promotion within such settings may be based on patronage rather than academic productivity. This is because the demands of administrative responsibilities may be daunting due to the difficulty in combining teaching and research with these administrative responsibilities. Currently, one of the challenges facing academics relates to the issue of quality in terms of teaching and research. Apart from that, this trend is creating a set of impatient and mobile young academics whose sole aim is to reach the top of their career ladders within the shortest time. A number of these youngsters keep transferring their services from one university to

the other, brandishing their 'administrative and publication experience' to bargain for promotion. This may not augur well for the future of university education and academic culture.

Another major implication of junior scholars within middle level management relates to undue expectations regarding junior academics. There are usually high hopes and expectations from pre-tenure scholars in institutions of higher learning in terms of strength and performance. Literature regarding young scholars in higher education has pointed out that university administrators and established scholars usually expect much from them. Consequently, as soon as they take up appointments, the expectation is that they will become functional in administration, teaching and research (Whitt 1991). Sometimes, due to the belief that they have got all the training required to be fully-fledged scholars, they may serve to provide relief from activities which have become stressful and monotonous to established scholars within the system. These assumptions serve as a justification for introducing these scholars into activities like middle level management, for which they are not prepared. Austin (2002, 2003) and Menges (1999) have attributed unrealistic expectations about what can be accomplished in the given time as one of the major challenges they face. However, the emergence of junior academics within middle level management may create a new form of tyranny within the university system. Traditionally, middle level managers within universities are experienced and established scholars who, by virtue of their training and exposure, can check the excesses of top management through established rules and regulations governing the university system. Curtailing such excesses may be lacking or difficult on the part of the young academics occupying middle level management, as they rarely enjoy the expected autonomy in decision making due to their level of experience. They may therefore become the instrument for the perpetration of dictatorial tendencies of top managers. Apart from this, participating actively in the Senate and other statutory meetings where important decisions affecting the university are taken is difficult. When they do so, the situation may make them feel intimidated because of the wide gap (in terms of experience and rank) that exists between them and their senior colleagues.

### **Conclusions: Addressing the Issue**

This section explores why urgent steps must be taken to ensure that middle level academics occupy their rightful position as an impetus for effective middle level academic leadership on the continent. Providing a straightforward answer to the challenges of pre-tenure faculty members in

middle level management may be difficult. This is because the challenges are multi-dimensional and cut across different stages. Aside from this, it is an expression of the realities around the university system as a result of a long period of neglect. Notwithstanding, this is an issue that must be addressed to pave the way for a virile middle level management in the continent without jeopardising the future of earlier career scholars. The first step in addressing this is to acknowledge its existence and to address it with urgency. Currently, it appears that the affected institutions do not regard installing earlier career academics in middle level management positions as a temporary measure, and which must be done away with as soon as possible. A number of the new generation universities appear to regard this development as a way of cutting costs and running the university within their available, meagre resources. A change in the attitude regarding this, therefore, is paramount.

The regulatory and advisory bodies on university matters must come together and enact rules that discourage this practice. Currently, pre-tenure academics with such administrative responsibilities in the country occupying the position of head of department are referred to as 'coordinators' and their tenure usually lasts a year, renewable for another year. This is a laudable practice. However, outside of this nomenclature and tenure of office, they enjoy every other privilege applicable to a substantive head of department. Privileges and opportunities outside of the main responsibilities can be reviewed with the aim of making the position less attractive to the occupants. Aside from this, there should be a mentoring framework where the activities of these early career academics are monitored by senior colleagues. In the same vein, the regulatory body must ensure that approval/licenses of operation are contingent upon availability of staff. New universities must be mentored by the old generation of universities. The process must follow a strict mentor-mentee arrangement, tracked by regular submission of reports on the realities around such emerging universities. Any erring universities must be sanctioned within the ambit of the reached agreement. The unbridled appetite for new programmes by these emerging universities, without a commensurate capacity to handle these programmes should be discouraged by the appropriate regulatory bodies. This can be achieved by firming up and reviewing the existing accreditation programmes put in place by the country's regulatory bodies.

Beyond that, there is still the dearth of qualified hands within the academy due to the prevailing socio-economic realities within the country, coupled with the attitude of the policy makers on university education. The commitment of the government to education in terms of funding is still

one of the lowest in the continent, and this in itself is an impetus for the emigration of qualified hands to greener pastures. Brain drain may continue to be a challenge if the government does not adequately fund education. Facilities are lacking and, where available, have become moribund. There is a proliferation of tertiary institutions without commensurate quality. Institutions must be made attractive for teaching and research. A situation where this is not properly addressed will not augur well for the retention of sound and quality staff in academia. Private institutions which should have addressed some of these structural gaps have not been able to do so. Many of them are also battling with the challenge of relevant facilities due to lack of funds. Leading private institutions in developed climes are privately owned and one would have thought that such notable developments would have been replicated in Africa. University education needs funding; where this is lacking, the implications are enormous. Private universities do not enjoy the financial interventions from the government, and this should be further explored. The government can collaborate with these institutions in the areas of training, grants and other human capacity building programmes that will better equip the personnel.

Further research regarding the realities within higher education in the country is still needed. Studies investigating the dynamics surrounding quality, early career academics, and so on are needed to dismantle the realities around these themes for a virile academia in Nigeria.

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# Roles, Stress and Coping Mechanisms among Middle-level Academic Leaders in Multi-campus Universities in Africa

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## Abstract

Using a critical review of literature and existing data, this article explicates the roles of middle-level academics and the stress factors that hinder their efficient and effective delivery of academic and managerial roles in multi-campus universities in Africa. The article presents both plausible and actual coping mechanisms for middle-level academic leaders. It is noted that most middle-level academic leaders ascend to positions of responsibility without any formal training for these positions, which strengthens the call for the university to offer continuous training programmes for these leaders. The article argues that an effective identification and resolution of stress in the multi-campus system is key to winning and maintaining the morale and loyalty of staff at the university. This therefore calls for the adoption of appropriate theoretical paradigms of leadership in multi-campus universities for effective middle-level academic leadership. Recommendations are provided in the form of roles of the university in how to best enhance the productivity of this cadre of university leaders in achieving the functions of teaching, research, and community service.

**Keywords:** role, stress, coping, middle-level academic, leader, multi-campus university

## Résumé

Utilisant une revue critique de la littérature et des données existantes, cet article explique les rôles des universitaires de niveau intermédiaire et les facteurs de stress qui entravent leur prestation efficace et effective des rôles académiques et de gestion dans les universités à campus multiples en Afrique. L'article présente à la

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fois des mécanismes d'adaptation plausibles et réels pour les leaders universitaires de niveau intermédiaire. Il est à noter que la plupart des leaders universitaires de niveau intermédiaire accèdent à des postes à responsabilité sans formation formelle pour ces postes, ce qui renforce l'appel aux universités de proposer des programmes de formation continue à ces leaders. Le document soutient qu'une identification et une résolution efficaces du stress dans le système à campus multiples sont essentielles pour gagner et maintenir le moral et la loyauté du personnel de l'université. Cela nécessite donc l'adoption de paradigmes théoriques appropriés de leadership dans les universités à campus multiples pour un leadership académique de niveau intermédiaire efficace. Des recommandations sont faites des rôles de l'université sur la meilleure manière d'améliorer la productivité de ce groupe de leaders universitaires dans l'accomplissement des fonctions d'enseignement, de recherche et de service communautaire.

**Mots-clés :** rôle, stress, adaptation, universitaire de niveau intermédiaire, leader, université à campus multiples

## **Introduction**

Efficient and effective leadership is crucial for the smooth existence and success of any institution (Jooste, Frantz & Waggie 2018; Otara 2015). Such leadership functions to simplify a complex institutional environment through focusing and realigning individual and communal efforts for the achievement of the vision, mission, and goals of the institution. Institutional leadership is typically structured into top, middle, and bottom layers. University top leadership typically comprises the governing council; the Senate; and the team of top management made up of the chancellor who is often titular, the vice chancellor (or rector), deputy vice chancellors, academic registrar, university secretary, and university-wide directors, such as director of research. Middle-level leadership spans from programme leader or head of department level (Milburn 2010) to the level of deans of faculties, directors of institutes, and principals of institutes (da Motta & Bolan 2008). The bottom layer consists of personnel in charge of smaller units such as committees within a programme or department.

The cadre of middle-level academics is a critical human resource whose job is to ensure that the very reasons for the existence of the university – teaching, research and community service – are realised. Hence, the middle-level academic must exercise agency in teaching, conducting and supervising research, and ensuring that findings are disseminated to create awareness as well as positive transformation in the community. As posited by many scholars, including De Boer and Goedegebuure (2009), and Wolverton,

Gmelch, Montez and Nies (2001), middle-level academic leadership is the linchpin that holds a university together. This implies that the efficiency and effectiveness of the middle-level academic in achieving this agency is dependent upon the quality of leadership within his or her working space. Good leadership enhances achievement of the academic functions for which the middle-level academic is primarily recruited into the university service. Likewise, optimum teaching, research, and community service define a good quality leadership within the working space of the middle-level academic.

However, the work of providing leadership through administration and management, and the concurrent pursuit of scholarly endeavours often do not make good bedfellows (Gmelch *et al.* 1999). Effective undertaking of one usually tends to interfere with the quality of achievement in another. The strain of trying to be effective administrators on the one hand, and attempting to protect academic autonomy and independence on the other, is likely to result in burnout. As such, many would-be good leaders at the middle academic level experience so much stress that they choose not to offer themselves for leadership positions, while those who take up the roles do not progress swiftly up the rungs of the academic ladder. This, in my opinion, is likely to result in the deleterious effect of poor administration and management on the one hand, and poor teaching and research within the university and poor community engagement outcomes on the other.

The situation above is exacerbated by the fact that middle-level academics are rarely formally trained in leadership, administration and management (Seale 2015). Most leadership and management interventions traditionally target top management; the needs of middle-level leaders are less recognised (Fielden 1991; Sanyal 1991). The literature available suggests that, of the pockets of initiatives that have been undertaken in the development of middle-level staff, much emphasis has been placed on improving academic prowess as opposed to enhancing leadership and management skills among such staff (Schofield & Commonwealth Higher Education Support Scheme 1996; Seale 2015). Hence, when it comes to the actual performance of leadership as a middle-level academic, the leader experiences a mix-up of roles. The leader's roles as a facilitator of learning, researcher, and community transformation activist are muddled by the "crisis" nature of leadership in which subordinates present problems expecting immediate solutions for which the leader is often unprepared. Such a mix-up potentially leads to poor design and implementation of teaching, research, and community engagement roles of middle-level academic leaders, which could result in a dysfunctional university system.

Research suggests that training and mentoring schemes to enhance the capacity of middle level academics for academic leadership roles need to be prioritized (Akuno, Ondieki, Barasa, Otieno, Wamuyu & Amateshe 2017; Schofield & Commonwealth Higher Education Support Scheme 1996; Seale 2015). In the absence of a robust training programme for middle-level academics across universities in Africa, a greater understanding of how middle-level academics juggle these ambivalent roles is needed. According to Akuno et al. (2017), understanding how faculty members manage the stress of participating in leadership processes, and how they engage and are engaged in several aspects of university leadership, will contribute to an overall understanding of the processes through which academic and institutional leadership evolves in universities in Africa. This would generate plausible and actual strategies that can be structured into formal training programmes and processes within universities.

However, there is a paucity of research on the roles, stress, and coping mechanisms among middle-level academic leaders in multi-campus universities. Gmelch (2002) avers that “this species [of middle-level academics] may be the least studied and most misunderstood position anywhere in the world”. Scott, Coates, and Anderson (2008) concur, pointing out that studies on how middle-level university leaders manage change in terms of their own learning and development are relatively rare. Seale (2015:3) laments that “even more worrying is that there is even less literature available on this area of research in a developing world context.” As observed by Gewer (2010:24), “today, many colleges are still struggling with the challenges associated with multi-campus management, with varying management capacity across campuses and unequal resources.” As similarly noted by Mgijima (2014), the merger of colleges into multi-campus universities has not allowed the university leadership in general, and middle-level academic leadership in particulars, to mature, stabilise, and become effective managers of the system.

This article, through a critical review of literature, exposes the challenging and stress-inducing nature of the roles of middle-level academic leaders. The coping strategies employed by leaders in these universities are appraised in a bid to negotiate their role performance at individual, family, institutional, and societal levels. The article further exposes the roles that university top management in multi-campus universities in Africa need to play in order to ease the role and ameliorate the stress concerns of middle-level academic leaders. The literature search and synthesis mainly centre on academic deans (and equivalents) and heads of departments or programmes in multi-campus universities in Africa. This phenomenon is relatively young in the

higher education landscape in Africa. The content scope is limited to the roles of the middle leadership cadre; the stresses they experience as a result of personal, social, institutional, and societal challenges in the course of discharging their roles; the strategies they can employ to cope with these stressors; and recommendations for university top management.

The point of focus in this article is that, as observed by other scholars (e.g., Bryman 2007; Detsky 2011; Gmelech 2013; Jooste *et al.* 2018; Pinheiro & Berg 2017; Seale 2015) in other contexts, little is known regarding the complexities and tensions of middle-level academic leadership and the possible mechanisms to handle multi-campus universities in Africa. This article therefore presents an understanding of the academic, managerial and work-life roles and stresses facing middle-level academic leaders in universities in Africa. The article further appraises the coping mechanisms these leaders personally (and also collectively) use to circumvent their challenges, in addition to presenting how the university setting can ameliorate these stressors for middle-level academic leaders in their pursuit of university goals. The author acknowledges, in agreement with Harman (2002), that the roles and therefore impact of middle-level leadership positions on these academics is as diverse as the personalities and levels of resilience of the academics. However, it is argued in the article that an effective identification and resolution of stress in the multi-campus system is key to winning and maintaining the morale and loyalty of staff in the university. This therefore calls for the adoption of appropriate theoretical paradigms to leadership in multi-campus universities for effective middle-level academic leadership. Before delving into the stress issues, it is important to understand the evolution of multi-campus universities, especially in Africa.

## **Evolution of Multi-Campus Universities in Africa**

Multi-campus universities are higher education institutions with two or more campuses that are geographically separated from each other and yet exist under a single university system (Pinheiro & Berg 2017). Globally, the emergence of multi-campus universities is either from mergers involving legally independent and geographically separated higher education institutions (Pinheiro *et al.* 2016) or from new campuses initiated by a single-campus institution (Leihy & Salazar 2012; Pinheiro, Charles & Jones 2015). The main aims of instituting multi-campus universities include fostering diversity in terms of the number of programmes, specialisation in the programmes offered at each campus, and coordination through sharing institutional resources. Studies (e.g., Pinheiro & Berg 2017; Seale 2015) have indicated that multi-campus universities are not a new phenomenon

per se, but they have recently become an increasing feature of contemporary higher education systems outside the western world. They are more recent in Africa, with the majority of multi-campus universities on the continent located in South Africa (Kamsteeg 2008).

Multi-campus public universities in Africa are mainly born from a merger of former higher education institutions. The massification, marketisation, and systematisation of higher education worldwide, and in Africa in particular, has been the main driver of the creation of multi-campus universities. The campuses often vary in size and each usually has its own epistemological and social character and culture, contributing to a rich diversity within the university. The degree of academic diversity within the multi-campus university is often broad in terms of the variety of fields of expertise; inter-, multi-, and cross-disciplinary research focus; and internationalisation through links, partnerships, and staff and student mobility programmes.

The major objective of mergers has been to cut administrative costs while maximising academic gains. They are intended to bring together, under one leadership or administrative framework, a number of campuses of unique academic architecture reflecting a comprehensive range of learning programmes, leading to a variety of qualifications from vocational and traditional academic to professional and postgraduate programmes across the campuses. However, mergers have often created a shift from professional autonomy and collegiality to increasing managerial control and bureaucracy, with a growing role for professional experts who manage rather than lead the institution. Hence, the multi-campus model has resulted in a plethora of concerns for the leadership entrusted with the welfare of the university. As argued by Seale (2015:ii), “the contemporary university is a postmodern, neo-liberal, competitive, boundary-less knowledge conglomerate, a far cry from its historical traditional classical and collegial roots. Although remaining true to its primary mission of research, teaching and community engagement, its organisational form has changed significantly, with concomitant implications for governance, leadership and management.” Harman (2002) observes that while some mergers work well, others do not. Those that work well are typically well managed by competent senior executives who establish, mentor and support integrative middle-level academic leadership structures that keep structural and cultural divisions to a minimum.

Jarvis (2018) posits that the whole scenario of shifting from professional autonomy and collegiality to increasing managerial control and bureaucracy in multi-campus universities has led to an increase in career-manager academics and a change in management style from a collegial to a hierar-



chical approach, referred to as managerialism. A study by Davis, Jansen van Rensburg and Venter (2016) on the impact of managerialism on the strategy work of university middle-level academic managers in a South African university suggests that middle-level academic leaders are constrained by the effects of managerialism. According to the authors, “managerialism has resulted in a tyranny of bureaucracy which translates into disempowered middle managers, a culture of conformance over collegiality, control at the cost of innovation and experimentation and an over-articulation of strategy which devalues the strategy” (p. 1480). Therefore, it is necessary to explore to a greater depth the context of middle-level academic leadership within the multi-campus university setting in Africa.

### **Context of Middle-level Academic Leadership in Multi-campus Universities in Africa**

Research on leadership in organisations has continued to proliferate with no clear definitions or answers about what counts as effective and successful leadership. Various scholars have given definitions based on personal and contextual inclinations. Jones, George, and Hill (1998:403) view leadership as the “act of inspiring, motivating and directing people’s activities to help achieve group or organisational goals.” According to Lwakabamba (2008:2), “leadership is a set of attitudes and practices – a way of working with people and a way of looking at what it means to work effectively in an institution.” Lwakabamba argues that leadership is distinct from taking command; instead, it is taking responsibility, sharing responsibility – being prepared to take decisions, building consensus, having trust relationships, and understanding that individuals in the organisation must grow together. In this sense, leadership respects the value of each individual’s contribution to goal attainment, and individuals working together as a group, so as to achieve organisational goals. Muriisa (2014:73) summarises leadership as the process through which a leader “makes an impact on others by inducing them to behave in a certain way to attain certain organisational goals.”

A related term that is often used interchangeably, but is different in meaning from leadership, is management. Kotter (1990) describes management as coping with complexity, while leadership deals with change. In this case, management serves as a tool of leadership to allocate or administer the institutional resources for fitness for purpose.

With specific reference to academic leadership, Wolverton and Gmelch (2002:35) define it as “the act of building a community of scholars to set direction and achieve common purposes through the empowerment of faculty and staff.” Ramsden, cited in Smith (2007), states that academic

leaders are people with titles, such as Head of Department, who are tasked with formal leadership responsibilities, with a role in staff development. The context of middle-level academic leadership in multi-campus universities in Africa is currently changing.

Whereas middle-level academic leaders who served their universities before the World Bank declaration of privatisation of universities had a relatively better experience of transitioning between academic and administrative roles, the later breed are confronted with a rapid, mainly horizontal expansion of institutions and academic programmes. Bisbee (2007) and Heuer (2003) argue that universities are confronted by an increasing complexity of leadership in academe that discourages many from seeking administrative positions. These authors note that universities are cluttered with administrative roles that have become very stressful with high turnovers and a high burnout rate, with significant emphasis placed on accountability, internal change, and high-performance teamwork. All this has contributed to intensifying the role of middle-level academic leaders in the multi-campus university in Africa. From my personal observation, the context is further characterised by an aging population of senior academics ready for retirement and too tired to serve in these stressful positions.

Bisbee (2007) notes that the current university has several challenges of identifying people who are willing to accept the responsibility of leadership roles in universities because of the very nature of the faculty themselves. According to Wolverton and Gmelch (2002), most faculty join university service because they are looking for autonomy and independence so as to focus on their work, and so most will not be willing to take up leadership positions, fearing criticism and a perceived lack of power. Another challenge, according to Bisbee, is the culture of higher education, which discourages the younger and more able faculty from taking up leadership positions. The faculty are rewarded for academic prowess measured by teaching, research, and community engagement in their subjects of specialisation as opposed to excellence in leadership roles. Taking up the stressful middle-level academic leadership position is thus a sacrifice at the expense of personal academic progress.

It is worth noting that most multi-campus universities result from a merger of antagonistic and rivalling institutions and other selfish forces with opposing academic values. The merger often brings under one umbrella professionals from different disciplinary fields (Pinheiro & Berg 2017) such as teacher trainers, medical educators, engineering staff, and so on. Some fields are research intensive while others are more inclined to teaching. In this case the merger is set up for conflict. When decision-making involves

democratic procedures such as voting, staff from the more populous institution are apt to win, a situation which often causes considerable animosity. Harman (2002:107) posits that “most institutional mergers, apart from being wasteful of human and material resources, inflict pain and anxiety, are disruptive and can take years to settle down.”

Some of the campuses that merge into multi-campus university do not have research as a primary goal. These campuses probably specialised in training skill-based personnel at certificate and diploma qualification levels for industry. A middle-level academic leader who heads a unit in such a situation must inculcate and develop a culture of research, but this is not easy to pursue. Research engagement is generally a problem, even among senior academics. Ensuring that staff from teaching-intensive institutions develop a reputable research capacity in the multi-campus university setting in order to compete favourably for grants and scholarships presents a stress factor to the leaders. This is coupled with deficiencies in staff capacity to handle postgraduate programmes and students, and infrastructure to support research. As observed by Muriisa (2014:79), some professors may “have no time to offer professional service because they are engaged in consultancy work; they are busy moonlighting.” Such brain circulation could leave universities with very few, if any, skilled resource persons to confront the challenges facing African universities.

The merger often brings with it a number of contestations, contradictions, debates and intellectual conflicts. Staff from different institutions come into the merger with divided loyalties, role ambiguity, heterogeneity, anarchical tendencies, conflict and self-interest. As observed by Harman (2002), merging un-complementary institutional cultures into a coherent, viable multi-campus university system presents great challenges for the leaders of such a merger. The leaders often find themselves trying to bring together individuals whose main focus and loyalty is more to their disciplinary affiliations and learned societies than to the hierarchical university management structure by which they are often disenchanted. In this case, a merger stresses the leaders in the process of strengthening academic programmes, enhancing research profiles, and consolidating policies pertaining to professional development, recruitment and promotion in the midst of a divided staff. Other related stressors that come along with the merger include sagging morale (Leithwood, Steinbach & Jantzi 2002) especially during curriculum review processes that involve restructuring of academic programmes. This comes along with cultural, territorial and seniority-based conflicts. Coupled with anxiety and confusion (Harman 2002).

Another reality to grapple with in middle-level university leadership in Africa is the number of private universities, which far exceeds that of public universities. Coupled with this, the number of private students in public universities is disproportionately greater than that of government-sponsored students (Ishengoma 2018; Marcucci, Johnstone & Ngolovoi 2008). This implies that the university operates in a context where outcome expectations are placed on its leadership from a unique clientele that operates on profit-loss terms. The universities are mainly run on a business as opposed to a service model such that the students, parents and university proprietors will demand a pass and nothing else from the system. This compromises the ethical conduct of leadership within the universities. Further, the expansion is not equalled by a parallel expansion in academic and administrative leadership at the middle-level, in terms of staff training, induction, in-role support and financial reward. Generally, there seems to be a better economic return on taking up teaching positions in several universities than offering to be grounded in a middle-level academic leadership position in a context characterised by a stressful workload with little or conditional financial benefits.

Confronted with such contextual realities, many universities are faced with the challenge of where to source leaders – whether from within or from outside the institution. Though insider candidates would be preferred because of their familiarity with the culture and goals of the organisation and proven competences, many universities prefer leaders from outside the institution on grounds of bringing in someone who is already skilled rather than training an insider. According to Heur (2003), many university administrators look down on the capabilities of internal candidates in comparison to external candidates. In my opinion, given the striking differences in institutional cultures, the external candidate from the private world will face immense disadvantages in understanding and fitting into the culture of the public university, and functioning successfully within its norms and values.

The above scenario is true and even worse for the multi-campus model universities in Africa, where middle-level academic leaders serve their primary academic role of teaching in one or more campuses, but are required to traverse all the campuses when management and administrative calls are made. This makes them grapple with ambivalence in roles as academics and as administrators and managers. It is nearly certain that the majority would end up stressed. The paucity of documented evidence of this status quo enacts persistence and greater prevalence of a hidden, subtle problem that most likely engenders mediocrity in the university system. Therefore, this study partly uncovers the mystery of how middle-level academic leaders in

multi-campus universities in Africa cope with stress from various sources, in a bid to achieve their best in their academic and managerial roles.

### **The Need to Focus on the Stressed Middle in Multi-campus Universities in Africa**

Higher education in Africa has become enmeshed in student fee hikes and accompanying upheavals (e.g., #FeesMustFall in South Africa in 2016); increased international mobility with its financing challenges (International Association of Universities [IAU] 2017); widening accessibility, retention and completion gaps for the exceptional groups; and stiff competition between the institutions. This is coupled with technological and student demographic changes. There are also stressing employment terms such as contract employment for the staff; cost increases in student registrations and education; challenges of student accommodation due to unplanned massification; and the demand for more research outputs and publications among staff. Thus, it can be argued that the university in Africa has become an entrepreneurial entity caught between free education in countries like South Africa and stiff financial constraints in all African countries. This most likely requires a more business-like management and operational model with a focus on increased market share in the face of fierce competition and multiple income streams. These demands threaten and stress academic leaders – especially the Heads of Departments and Deans – who are the middle cadre at the frontline of handling these opposing forces. Seale (2015) acknowledges that the middle leaders of the current university in Africa are faced with the challenge of a more corporate-like approach to management characterised by performativity requirements and measures geared towards a more efficient and effective generation and provision of knowledge in a very complex internal and external environment.

According to Jooste *et al.* (2018), university leadership is different from leadership in other contexts, and demands additional competencies. Inman (2011) asserts that the nature of leadership for middle-level leaders in higher education is complex and demanding, and requires a combination of management and leadership skills. Generally, research indicates that most middle-level academic leaders acquire leadership skills and experience to lead on their own. Rumbley, van't Land and Becker (2018) as well as Seale (2015), for instance, note that middle-level academic leaders in Africa take up leadership positions “without appropriate training, adequate prior experience or a clear understanding of the ambiguity and complexity of their roles,” and so they are faced with stressing challenges with which they struggle to cope. This implies that the multi-campus university system has made the

roles of these leaders more complex, which stresses them, but they have to cope in some way in order to address the continuous changes in the academic environment and to effectively act as change agents in order to lead others.

### **Theoretical Paradigm for Middle-level Academic Leadership in Multi-Campus Universities**

The importance of theory in order to understand the dynamics of leadership among middle-level academics cannot be overemphasised. Several theories are in place to inform the roles leaders assume with various cadres within an organisation in order to best fit their personal and organisational functions. These include the Trait theories, Behavioural theories (Adair 1983), Contingency theories (Fielder 1997), Power and Influence theories, Transformational and Transactional theories, Cognition theories, Cultural and Symbolic theories, Complexity and Chaos theory, and Teams and Relational Leadership theory.

Trait theories focus on individual characteristics associated with successful leaders, with little or no attention on the context of leadership. Behavioural theories (Adair 1983) emphasise a shared governance environment in higher education in which the leader's role is taken to be that of guiding and directing activities, to achieve the institutional vision. Contingency theories advocate that an effective leader is one who recognises the context and situation, and adopts different styles of leadership in different settings. Power and influence theories focus on leadership as a social exchange process characterised by the acquisition, deployment and demonstration of power and its effect on tasks, relationships and the purpose of leadership. Transformational leadership, is where the leader acts to influence, inspire and motivate followers to achieve institutional objectives. Transactional leadership, on the other hand, refers to the process of social exchange where leaders elicit certain behaviours and performance in followers through offering resources such as information, funding, projects, promotions and other rewards. Cognition theories focus on the thought processes of leaders, in which case cognitive frameworks are employed in decision-making. Cultural and symbolic theories posit that the effectiveness of a leader is perceived on the basis of the leader's ability to negotiate the institutional culture (which may be collegial, political, bureaucratic, corporate and/or entrepreneurial) to attain institutional goals. Complexity and chaos theory states that organisations are complex and chaotic, with ambiguous goals and purposes and diffuse power relations so that leaders can only perform effectively if they develop networks, listen to people on the margins, gather additional data to make ethical, complex decisions, and use multiple cognitive lenses to address complexity in the

institution. Teams and relational leadership theory assert that leadership teams characterised by open communication, trust, a willingness to challenge, a lack of hierarchy, limited politics and effective decentralisation help to make more cognitively complex decisions.

However, this article aligns with the general three theoretical assumptions of Smith (2007), adapted from the conceptual academic leadership development framework of Ramsden (1998) on effective academic leadership in higher education. These are as follows:

1. An effective middle-level academic leader must demonstrate excellence in playing the roles of teaching, research, and community engagement among the peers.
2. The middle-level cadres need to develop different leadership and coping skills through adopting different theories, so as to effectively discharge their duties under different circumstances.
3. The multi-campus university environment needs to be refocused for excellence through collaborative and motivational leadership activities that require effective interpersonal skills among all cadres of university leaders from the top to the bottom layers.

This article notes that middle-level academic leaders are constrained by various stresses during the discharge of their roles, and how they cope depends on the institutional support afforded them by lower and higher cadres of leadership within the multi-campus university. The article further draws attention to the linking pin model (Likert 1967) of engagement of leaders within the multi-campus university system and Lazarus's theory of psychological stress.

According to the linking pin model, the middle-level academic leader in one campus of the multi-campus university is a member of a number of overlapping work units within the university. In this arrangement, the middle-level academic leader has the dual task of maintaining unity and creating a sense of belonging within the group he or she supervises, and of representing that group in meetings with superior and parallel management staff from other campuses. Therefore, middle-level academic leaders in the multi-campus university setting are the linking pins within the university and so they should be focused on for leadership development activities. How they juggle the labyrinth of such roles amidst tight stresses and strains is a major concern of this article.

Lazarus's theory of psychological stress (Lazarus 1966; Lazarus & Folkman 1984) is based on the concept of cognitive appraisal, that regardless of the objective severity of the stressing situation, whether an individual experiences psychological stress depends upon the individual's evaluation of the situation

as threatening. Furthermore, when the threat is unclear, the individual's assessment rather than the characteristics of the situation per se – determine whether the circumstances are appraised as stressful or not (Roskies, Louis-Guerin & Fournier 1993). Thus, the dispositional traits of mid-level academic leaders can strongly influence the number and type of situations they perceive as stressful. Even after the evaluation of a situation as stressful, there are a number of different ways that the dispositional traits could influence the amount of distress experienced. Academics with low negative affectivity (and/or high positive affectivity) may have more resources (e.g., social support), or they may use different and more effective coping strategies.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) posit three strategies – that is, approach, avoidance and social support – that an individual could use to cope with stress. These coping strategies are defined as “conscious deliberate efforts to regulate emotion, cognition, behaviour, physiology and the environment in response to stressful events or circumstances” (Compass, Saltzman & Wadsworth 2001:89). According to Lazarus and Folkman, approach coping strategy is a problem-focused strategy that refers to active and direct engagement to a stressor in an effort to change it. Avoidant coping strategy involves cognitive or behavioural attempts to escape or disengage from the stressful situation or environment (Olah 1995). It embraces strategies like denial, distraction, substance use and other self-destructive behaviours. Social support involves seeking supportive relationships, encouragement from teachers and school personnel, among other adults, and it has been found to be a significant social resource in the development of resilience among students (Bernard 1995). Making a choice as to which of the three coping strategies to use is dependent on the individual middle academic leader. Being able to cope positively with work-life stress will reciprocally influence the performance of the middle-level academic leaders in their academic and managerial roles. It is therefore important to identify the roles that come with stress for the middle-level academic leaders in multi-campus universities in Africa.

### **The Role of Middle-level Academic Leaders**

Muriisa (2014:72) poses the question, “Is there a role for leadership in redefining the roles of the University?” Assie-Lumumba (2006) provides an answer to this question, asserting that universities – and hence university leaders – are the principal agents for the growth of scientific knowledge that serves as the dominant force through research and training, a character that sets universities apart from other higher institutions of learning. Lwakabamaba (2008) similarly asserts that the success and performance of the institution depends on leadership roles of motivating, encouraging,



planning, and empowering. Ramdass (2015:1112) notes that “[w]ithout effective [academic] leadership, the possibility of improvement in teaching and learning is limited.” The next question to raise is, “Who is an academic leader?” Lwakabamba (2008) believes that every member of the university is valuable to the attainment of organisational goals and so every individual in the university has a leadership role to play. Therefore, leadership positions in universities span from the top through the middle to the bottom.

According to Jooste *et al.* (2018) and Otara (2015), middle-level academic leaders, such as heads of departments who happen to be the senior academics within universities, play a significant role in building programmes and a community of scholars to set the direction and achieve the expectations of stakeholders in the current challenging economic times. Jooste and colleagues (2018) note that it is the role of the middle-level academic leader to steer the unit (department, faculty, school or college) to perform its envisioned functions collaboratively with other leaders through motivational leadership traits. Drucker (2011) similarly emphasises that middle-level academic leaders have a role to play, using their interpersonal skills to enhance the joint performance of members of the organisation through effective strength mobilisation. All these call for effective interpersonal skills such as academic personnel management, internal productivity, personal scholarship and external and political relations.

Otara (2015) avers that it is the role of middle-level academic leaders to promote scholarship and health for all, protect higher learning from stagnation, and provide a sound basis for advancing the faculty and university at large in meeting the demands of the national economy. Being in the middle means their role is to manage both up and down as well as laterally across the university, to “do a balancing act.” This “balancing” involves monitoring the budget, managing staff and students, conducting research, and interacting with senior management (Scott *et al.* 2008).

As academics, the deans of faculties and heads of departments are obliged to carry out teaching, research and community engagement, in addition to playing leadership roles. This means that they have to prepare for and conduct classroom instruction, constructing and scoring examinations, reading and grading papers, research and/or creative work, directing graduate theses and dissertations, providing professional services, engaging in guidance and counseling, administrative duties, professional reading, committee work, and participating in extra-curricular activities. With this breadth of roles, middle-level academic leaders are prone to stress.

A critical role of middle-level academic leaders has been identified by Muriisa (2014) as planning and initiating academic programmes, and

inspiring others to follow. In this role, the leader is expected to have the foresight to identify new research areas, and influence others to venture into those areas. In light of challenges facing universities in general and multi-campus universities in particular, middle-level academic leaders should be creative and innovative, having the requisite skills and commitment to expand and attune the roles of universities. The leaders should be senior academics with sound knowledge of university operations, so as to encourage and actively pursue institutional policies that foster conditions that develop and support quality teaching and research.

The leaders have a role of mobilising, creating, and maintaining institutional resources. This role involves student enrollment and throughput, staffing, staff publication output, community engagement and partnership development, staff development, academic planning, teaching and learning, budgeting and work allocation (University of Western Cape [UWC] 2016). This calls for entrepreneurial skills that the leaders can use to mobilise and allocate the resources in a manner that sustainably promotes the university vision, mission and goals.

Middle-level academic leaders play a crucial role to resist changes that may impact negatively on the university. The leaders are obliged to take a responsive role in adapting the organisation to the demands and constraints imposed by its environment. In this case, the leaders are expected to exercise control over the academic affairs of the unit, including managing the teaching and learning process; programme development and researcher formation; managing faculty and academic related matters; and ensuring equitable representation of the key stakeholders within the unit and beyond.

Middle-level academic leaders are responsible for the management of the academic administrative process of admissions, formative and summative assessments and moderation, practicals – as chief examiners – and the dissemination of information and policies (Ramdass 2015). Jarvis (2018:85) provides the following summary of the roles of middle-level academic leaders in multi-campus universities:

writing (reports, policies), monitoring, chairing, speech – not meetings, running a breakfast club, attending meetings and committees, emailing, managing records, being bound to strategic goals, completing paperwork, allocating work, restructuring, giving news, cajoling, bargaining for resources, allocating resources, balancing the books, generating income, budgeting, appointing staff, making people realise they have to deliver, signing off, accepting faculty support, recruiting students, checking, setting goals, directing, overseeing, gaining respect, having disciplinary knowledge, auditing, knowing the right people, helping colleagues, having informal conversations, building relationships

and networks, motivating, supporting, legitimising activities through public acknowledgement, schmoozing, giving confidence, seeking consensus, winning hearts and minds, knowing who to contact, drawing on research literature, holding privileged knowledge, supervising, reading the research papers, knowing day to day practice, articulating the vision, using the electronic workload system, mentoring, encouraging grant applications, agenda building, debriefing, mediating disputes, doing paperwork, enthusing, being a role model, using structures, working shoulder to shoulder, using data, shaping content and sequence of agenda, accessing funds.

This shows that as managers, their roles are very broad, including personal, institutional, family and societal responsibilities. This article argues that juggling these roles is a stressful venture that compromises the performance of middle-level leaders and, hence, that of the institution they serve. Below is a presentation of the broad array of actual and plausible stresses plaguing middle-level academic leaders, which are likely to be more severe in the multi-campus university setting in Africa.

### **Stress among Middle-level Academic Leaders in the Multi-campus Academe**

In the course of discharging their roles, middle-level academic leaders are faced with the reality that university education is in crisis and in a state of stagnation and irrelevance (AAU 2004); and that African universities are no longer relevant to the African economies. This is in regard to the nature of programmes offered, the nature of graduates produced, and the relationship between universities and society. The situation is even more complex in multi-campus universities that are plagued by inadequate numbers of academic staff. Various explanations have been given for the low performance of universities in Africa: high staff turnover, poor government funding, commercialisation and privatisation of higher education, increased consultancy work and massification (Kasozi 2009; Mamdani 2007; Muriisa 2014; Musisi 2003). This article observes that the plight of the academic leaders, regarding these challenges, have not been given due attention; to the effect that the middle-level academic leaders in particular are faced with mounting and unacknowledged levels of stress. Left unaddressed, the situation may degenerate into irrecoverable quality downturn which could critically undermine the purpose for which these institutions were established.

Seale (2015), with reference to the plight of the academic deans in multi-campus universities in South Africa, asserts that middle-level academic leadership in the contemporary university is complex and challenging. Similarly, Hlengwa (2014) notes that there are several leadership challenges

for the middle-level academic leaders, including issues such as lack of leadership and strategic direction from the top, diverse cultures, incomplete merger of campuses, isolation of the faculty or department, and inequitable distribution of resources among the units. This implies that multi-campus universities face the challenges of inconsistency across the campuses, with some campuses being less attractive to staff and students as they do not offer as wide a range of facilities, courses and opportunities as others. Seale (2015) notes that some campuses are remote, marginalised, forgotten, exploited, characterised by fragmentation, duplication, inconsistency and inequity. Faculty in the “better” campuses are likely to down rate and disrespect the staff and academic activities at the less attractive campuses. In addition, some campuses – especially satellite campuses – are usually vulnerable in times of university turbulence and cost-cutting strategies, and display a lower status to that of the main campus. All this presents a potential source of stress to the marginalised campus leaders who often happen to be middle-level academic leaders. The stress facing the leaders is presented in the following thematic subsections.

### ***Stress Resulting from the Research and Teaching Roles of Middle-level Academic Leaders***

Administrative demands made on the middle-level academic leaders in multi-campus universities compromise their teaching and research roles. Given that their vertical ascent to higher academic rungs mainly hinges on teaching and research (Inman 2007), the affected leaders are stressed by failing to perform in their primary roles, aware that their followers are looking up to them to draw an example to emulate. As argued by Muriisa (2014:77), inspiration of followers “comes with what the leader does.” A leader cannot inspire others to conduct research unless one also conducts research. This, I argue, is one of the main stress factors for middle-level academic leaders.

Parson (2000) is concerned that middle-level academic leaders in multi-campus universities with limited staff capacity usually take up a full teaching load in addition to the management and administrative roles. Muriisa (2014) notes that most universities in Africa have a very small fraction of their teaching staff positions filled – especially at the senior positions of senior lecturer, associate professor and full professor, purportedly due to funding shortfalls. Moreover, the same funding devil results in most of the universities being plagued by shortages of library and other essential teaching and learning resources, and the deteriorating conditions of many buildings. Under such circumstances, middle-level academic leaders are

obliged to sacrifice their time to teach as well. This results in deteriorating conditions of work and hence increased work-related stress for the few senior staff available. Their morale eventually sags.

With such a heavy load, the leaders' effectiveness and efficiency is seriously undermined. This results in quality and performance concerns in teaching, student assessment, research supervision, staff mentorship, research publications and research grants. Moreover, the student population is usually so large in certain disciplines that assessment presents an additional task for leaders. Such additional load is not adequately rewarded; the available reward systems are not designed to support the additional time that faculty need in order to incorporate assessment and continuous improvement into the classroom. In this case, most staff in the affected unit lose morale and prefer to withhold their effort, forcing the leader of the unit to shoulder the extra burden. This is very stressful. Parson argues that it is unreasonable to expect academic staff who are overworked to be able to do much about improving the quality of their teaching without reducing their workload.

### ***Stress Resulting from the Management Role of Middle-level Academic Leaders***

One of the key roles of middle-level academics is to undertake quality checks and performance management procedures. Generally, performance management is an arduous process requiring a lot of finer details for documentation and reporting. Moreover, the process often places the middle-level academic leader in an awkward, resentful position of judging colleagues, and so a vulnerable reporter to top management. As noted by Ramdass (2015:1116), middle-level leaders "have challenging academics to deal with and the communication from top management. Often this leads to tension within the department and poor human relations." Colleagues may treat the leader with suspicion and fear. The leader is under immense pressure and stress from all sides to be more productive, more accountable and more responsive to the demands of a technologically advancing society. This is a very stressful role they have to perform.

A serious managerial stress factor for middle-level academic leaders in multi-campus universities in Africa is the lack of clearly defined responsibilities and expectations of the various leadership positions (Bisbee 2007). In such cases, it is not uncommon for a head of department to take up a responsibility of a dean of faculty. Scott, Coates and Anderson (2008) observe that such confusion may strain inter-leadership relationships between the middle-level academic leaders themselves; for instance, between the head and dean.

The fact that most middle-level academic leaders join office without any prior training in management poses another serious stress factor for them. Rumbley, van Land and Becker (2018) lament that the training of higher education leaders and managers stands out as a “growth industry” which are mainly on offer in the world’s wealthier countries, or are delivered (or otherwise made possible) by providers, funders and/or partners who largely hail from the Global North. The leaders in multi-campus universities in Africa often apply their personal attributes to leadership roles, in which case they end up using trial and error approaches which result in a host of mistakes for which the leaders are often castigated. Institutions without clearly defined systems, positions, and terms of reference therefore present a stressful time to the leaders.

Leadership positions in some universities are highly politicised. As noted by Hanson and Léautier (2011), most leaders of universities in Africa are appointed and/or seconded or confirmed by government. Sometimes, students, faculty and even university premises are used for political purposes, to settle political conflicts and serve political interests. Academic and administrative issues are sometimes turned to serve political ends. So, the general political climate of the society has a decisive impact upon the appointment practices of the middle-level academic leaders. This seriously compromises their academic freedom. Some staff are appointed to leadership positions without the requisite experience in lower ranks of leadership. For instance, Wolverton and Gmelch (2002) found that only sixty percent of college deans had been department heads, and approximately only forty percent of college deans had been associate deans. Most of these appointments are politically motivated. The leaders who are not inclined to the reigning political situation are usually put in the spotlight until they feel too insecure to perform at their best, for which they are further blamed and threatened with suspensions and firing. Such situations subject the concerned leaders to unwarranted levels of stress.

Neumann and Larkin (2011) note that there is a disconnect between the top and middle management levels within universities. Top management often underfunds faculties and departments, especially those in satellite campuses, while taking unilateral decisions. There is more inclination toward corporate bureaucratic, as opposed to traditional collegial, governance. To illustrate this situation, a study by Smith (2007) reveals that departmental heads (middle-level leaders) felt threatened from top management; some of them reported receiving emails that threatened punishment for non-compliance. Such fear-instilling experiences cause stress for the affected middle-level leaders.

Scott *et al.* (2008) express a strong concern about the changing context and expectations of middle-level academic leaders, which they note to be fraught with complexities and tensions. These leaders are expected to manage their area of responsibility precisely, in addition to knowing how to develop their department and university's capacity to constantly review and improve performance. Unfortunately, as noted by Hlengwa (2014:117), the satellite campuses where this takes place "tend to be second choice for both staff and students [and they] ... feel dislocated and operate 'without the underlying rubric' of the top management." Moreover, it "takes time to get feedback from main campus" regarding requests generated for running the university at the middle level. This ultimately results in poor understanding of strategic direction, discrepancies in infrastructural provision, and hence demotivated staff. The middle-level leaders end up frustrated and stressed.

The unionisation of students and staff presents another stress factor for middle-level academic leaders in multi-campus universities. In the event of discord between the unions and the top management, the middle-level leaders are expected to be a channel of redress; the unions expect these leaders to approach the top management to attend to their grievances whereas the top management expects them to quiet the unions. This often places middle-level academic leaders in awkward positions, as they feel alienated and pressured between the warring factions.

With specific reference to multi-campus universities in South Africa, Hlengwa (2014) posits that there are key challenges related to staff and student equity and development. It is observed that the universities are predominantly white and male in their leadership and professoriate. Post-graduate programmes, particularly in certain faculties and disciplines, remain male-dominated and disproportionately white. Efforts to upscale the ratios of other races (especially Blacks, who form South Africa's majority) and women are not yielding results, given the complex historical and contextual circumstances surrounding the access, retention and completion of these other races and genders in higher education. The pressure then rests on the middle-level academic leaders, heads and deans, to even out the racial distribution, which is a very stressful venture.

### ***Stress Resulting from the Community Engagement Role of Middle-level Academic Leaders***

The community provides the lever about which the relevance of the university is gauged. With the aid of mass media, parents, communities and local authorities depict whether they feel the university leadership is doing a good job in impacting lives outside the campuses (James *et al.*

2007). The community plays a significant role in validating the authority of programme leaders through overt support and provision of resources and additional leadership from the community (Perry 2014). In the current upsurge of student numbers in universities, it takes cooperation between the campus and community leaderships to offer accommodation, security, feeding and other social services at affordable rates to the students. It takes effort on the part of the campus leadership, often provided by middle-level academic leaders – deans and heads of departments – to source for and negotiate the cost of these services. However, there could be moments when the relationship between the university and the immediate community sours as a result of misunderstandings between members of the university and the community. It would take sacrifice on the part of campus middle-level leadership and community leadership to settle these differences. Such misunderstandings are a source of stress for the middle-level academic leaders who must provide a workable solution to both the community and to the university, as well as inform the top management of the developments.

The customs of the community sometimes do not tally with those of the university. For instance, where the university may be emphasising liberal gender and racial equality and equity, the community might have a more rigid traditional take on such issues. This implies that middle-level leaders have the obligation to collect relevant information from the community so as to engender a value system that is consistent with the requirements of the community. Such clashes in values are potential sources of conflict between the university and community, which is also a potential source of stress to the middle-level academic leadership.

### ***Family-life Conflict as a Cause of Stress among Middle-level Academic Leaders***

Leadership responsibilities have been reported to impact negatively on the personal, family and social lives of the leaders. In order to be efficient and effective on the job, many of the leaders have to sacrifice other areas of their lives. They end up not having enough time for family, leisure and relaxation, which results in job stress, fatigue and anxiety. Conover (2009) observes that as leaders advance in responsibility, there is more difficulty separating work from personal time. Inman (2007) observes that leaders who are approaching retirement lack the ambition to serve at their best. They do not have the inclination to move up and lack the commitment required to serve. All this raises issues of work-life balance which affect the physical and psychological health of the leader negatively.



For women, the lack of social facilities such as child-care at their workplace or in the community is a source of stress. Most campuses and communities around the campus do not offer such facilities. Therefore, women who have access to education are prevented from high professional and academic achievement because of problems of childbearing and rearing. In addition, traditional and stereotypical tendencies in some settings cause discrimination by male counterparts. Inman (2007) notes that the process of managing the roles and responsibilities of wife, mother and career woman is both daunting and demanding. Other stress factors for the female leaders include sexual harassment at work, their innate and psychological habits of taking second place (due to the socialisation of negative self-image and deference for women), lack of understanding from husbands, having to outperform in their duty so as to get the respect of male counterparts, and societal pressures on single women which distract them from professional pursuits.

### **Coping with Stress among Middle-level Academic Leaders**

According to Harman (2002), conflict is an inherent characteristic of all healthy higher education institutions, but compromises have to be made in order to achieve institutional goals. Poor leadership can arise as a result of various factors, including stress, and leads to poor coordination of programmes in departments and thus poor service delivery in universities. Jooste *et al.* (2018) observe that heads of departments hold a pivotal role in universities in ensuring that strategic imperatives are translated into action rather than being rhetorical ambitions, in order to implement changes and outcomes of plans envisaged by the institution.

If the middle-level academic leaders get stressed, then chances are very thin that the departmental, faculty and university goals will be achieved. Therefore, heads should work closely with their deans to establish powerful partnerships that can bring about real change in universities. In this section, I present the strategies that middle-level academic leaders can employ to cope with the academic and managerial challenges they face in their positions within the multi-campus university. Specifically, these strategies can help leaders cope with stress emanating from the teaching and research challenges, management challenges, community engagement challenges, and family and social life challenges. As posited by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), the strategies are mainly positive coping (approach and social support) strategies. The article largely excludes

negative (avoidance) coping mechanisms. The strategies include the following:

- Effective time management;
- Collaboration through partnerships or networks to develop, enhance, and sustain teamwork and cooperation;
- Planning and budgeting finances effectively to avoid shortfalls;
- Organising fundraising to increase resources for the campus;
- Managing conflict and stress effectively and timely, to prevent escalation;
- Working with legislators more effectively;
- Delegation of responsibilities to colleagues, to reduce work overload;
- Effective political relationships, to convince legislators to support the campus;
- Effective communication, to champion shared mission, vision and values to internal and external audiences;
- Professionalism in managing stress through self-care, balance, adaptability, flexibility and humour;
- Building new innovative programmes;
- Intensifying efforts to achieve equity in the appointment, election and promotion of interest groups, such as women to posts in different areas, thus ensuring their participation in the decision-making and policy-making processes;
- Promoting social awareness of women's legal rights to study, work and participate in all aspects of development at all levels;
- Using mass media to change attitudes, with special attention given to campaigns for different social groups (students, parents, workers, decision-makers, employers, etc.) to eliminate sexist stereotypes and preconceived ideas.

The strategies above have been offered to avert and cope with stress arising from research and teaching, management, community engagement, and family and social life challenges among middle-level academic leaders in multi-campus universities in Africa. Jooste et al (2018) advise that in order to succeed simultaneously at teaching, research, social, and leadership tasks, development of senior academics in headship positions is very essential. Ramdass (2015) similarly notes that managers need professional development in management and leadership qualities in academia in order to improve relationships. In this regard, the university has a role to play, as presented in the section below.

## **The Role of the University in Enhancing Middle-level Academic Leaders in the Multi-campus University Setting in Africa**

Harman (2002) asserts that effective leadership and management from the top are the most important factors in assuring the success of a merger of institutions to form a multi-campus university. According to Muriisa (2014), it is the role of the top leadership of the university to define organisational goals and give a sense of direction for others to follow. The leaders at all levels therefore need to possess certain traits and behave in a certain manner in order to inspire others. In line with this, Seale (2015) argues that university top management must ensure that academics who take on middle-level academic leadership positions are supported to attain the necessary leadership and management skills to deal with the difficulties of the job, such as time management and extensive paperwork.

Given that the success of the university is measured in terms of quality research and publications, quality teaching and quality community service, all of which are realisable at the faculty and departmental levels under the leadership of middle-level academics, then there is a clear need to consistently provide refresher courses for this cadre of leaders. Bisbee (2007) states that “one way to help ensure there are trained leaders in academe is to identify potential leaders and provide them with support, training and encouragement to take on leadership roles.”

Hlengwa (2014:115) advocates for “equitable distribution of resources across all campuses irrespective of size and location” in order to enhance a holistic development of the university. Funding for academic programmes should be devolved from the centre to faculties in order to ease service acquisition and delivery. A university-wide cost centre should be established so as to minimise inter-campus rivalry and guard against discrimination and disintegration.

With specific reference to developing research capacity and ensuring quality, Harman (2002) posits that there is dire need to provide support in the form of mentoring programmes and workshops on grant writing and writing for publication in the new campuses. The university needs to provide opportunity for staff to upgrade their academic qualifications, provide funds for seeding grants, offer sabbatical leave, support staff for conferences, offer individual support such as teaching fellows and research assistants, and monitor the effectiveness of these at regular intervals.

The university should enact policies on workload such that middle-level leaders are given some time for research, teaching and social life, in addition to their leadership roles. If possible, leadership should count for promotion to associate professor and professor positions as much as teaching and research.

In addition, the teaching and learning facilities should be upgraded in order to enhance effective delivery. Staff need to be supported through workshops and trainings to adopt more economical modes of delivery which enhance student autonomy in learning such as resource-based teaching, distance learning and delivery on the internet. These modes can relieve the middle-level leaders of the burden of having to drudge in teaching in addition to undertaking managerial roles.

Harman (2002) emphasises that in successful mergers, leadership in the early stages should be strongly directive; but as the institution changes over time, the style of leadership needs to change from being controlling from the top to building morale and developing loyalty. According to Harman (2002), the survival of the merger in the face of the ever-changing, hostile political and economic environment depends on a culture of loyalty and a sense of community. Old local loyalties need to be broken down and redirected to the newly created institution. As advanced by Kamsteeg (2008), policy measures must be taken to transform the university system to do away with segregation, and instead develop an efficient and internationally recognised system that provides equal chances for all ethnic and other interest groups.

Mathebula and de Beer (2010) further suggest that even though there could be characteristic differences between the main campus and its satellite campuses, the management infrastructure of the latter should maintain common features with those of the main campus. Management should exercise consistency and equivalence across campuses, and try to provide for campus-specific and cross-campus needs that enhance a sense of belonging to the bigger university. The curriculum quality and standards and semblance of support services and facilities should be uniform across campuses. As is the case in some multi-campus universities of South Africa, new management structures should be formed so that the middle-level academics and programmes have space in all campuses. Transport should be availed for students and staff to transit between the various campuses to attend lectures and other programmes.

In general, the university should focus closely on its management approach, service delivery strategy, organisation, service delivery capabilities, performance management, human resource management and technological advancement. A university culture that allows for participatory management and innovation, reinforced by exemplary managers, should be developed to achieve university goals. Service delivery should be marked by continuous improvement, with regular examination of the university strategies to keep abreast of the latest developments. The organisational structure of the university should be more

horizontal to enhance effective communication with all stakeholders who need to have a voice in every critical decision for the good of the university. Service delivery should be tagged to the needs of the customers, ensuring that harm to the environment is minimised. Customer satisfaction should be regularly measured to assure the quality of services. The achievement of all the strategic goals and objectives of the university hinges on the organisational commitment of the employees and leaders, implying that all employees need to be empowered to assume ownership of the institution. The university environment should be conducive to maximum performance among the workforce. In the face of rapid technological changes and escalating student numbers, university top management should strategise towards technological advancement, upgrading the existing infrastructure to meet the current needs for competitiveness.

## **Conclusion**

Middle-level academic leadership can enable or constrain the successful achievement of the vision, mission and goals of a university since it is this cadre of leaders that actualise and link the university's vision, mission values and strategic goals to transformation. Middle-level leaders are responsible for the recruitment of staff and selection of students. However, most individuals who are entrusted with leadership responsibilities in universities, while highly skilled in a discipline, are talented amateurs in leadership and management. Moreover, multi-campus universities in Africa are becoming increasingly complex such that middle-level leaders face many challenges in the course of performing their roles. These challenges result in stress which the leaders must cope with in order to be effective in their various roles and responsibilities. These leaders often learn to cope on the job without any formal training. Given the complex and often contradictory expectations and demands of peers, the institution, and society, these leaders need to be taken through an in-depth and a broader knowledge base than can be provided by learning on the job. Therefore, universities should provide a formal leadership training programme for middle-level academic leaders. In addition, the university environment on the various campuses should be a semblance of the environment in the main campus where the top management sits, such that inter-campus rivalry is avoided while cross-campus communication and cooperation is enhanced. This will boost the performance of middle-level academic leaders, as they will use positive strategies of approach and social support to cope with stress.

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