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**Middle-level Academics and Leadership in  
African Universities**

Numéro spécial sur  
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les universités africaines**

Guest Editor / Rédacteur invité

**Ishmael I. Munene**

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# Editorial

## Reimagined University Bureaucracy and Mid-level Academic Leadership in Africa

Ishmael I. Munene\*

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In absolute numbers, university growth in Africa has been modest relative to elementary and secondary education. Yet, in the last two decades, institutional growth has been unprecedented, ushering many graduates into middle-class status while enhancing the academic workforce and research capacity on the continent. From around three dozen national universities at independence in the 60s, the number of universities in 2017 stood at approximately 740 (Dahir 2017). They represent a broad mix of types, ownership and missions, cementing further the differentiated demand for higher education. Moreover, the surge in enrolment has been impressive. In the period 1970 to 1975, university enrolment in sub-Saharan Africa shot up by 90 per cent (Mugaju 1991). In numerical terms, the rise from 3.53 million students in 1999 to 9.54 million in 2012 represents a remarkable 170 per cent total enrolment growth on the continent (ICEF Monitor 2015). The contrasting student mix is equally impressive: full-time versus part-time; government-sponsored versus privately sponsored; and young high-school graduates versus mature adults.

These impressive developments notwithstanding, universities are still hamstrung by a governance crisis. Growth has occurred in concurrence with an increase in the disruption of learning owing to faculty and student strikes and campus closures. Hierarchical decision-making epitomised by increased administrative power at the pinnacle, coupled with the rapid incursion of corporate and business models in university management, has further exacerbated this crisis. The assault on faculty and student voices in university affairs has never been so apparent than in the current dispensation of university growth.

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The crisis occurs as universities seek to redefine their governance structures in the context of historical traditions that have determined the character of universities. The traditional governance model is constructed around faculty dominance in decision-making, both in academic and administrative affairs. In many universities in Africa, particularly state institutions, this collegial governance model is actualised either through elections or politicised appointments. These modalities for appointments to leadership roles do not guarantee the best organisational leaders who command the respect of their colleagues and can steer the institutions or their subordinate units to realise their missions. Furthermore, few universities provide induction or training in basic leadership strategies and management skills to enhance the capacity of the leaders in the discharge of their roles.

Yet universities are also a bureaucracy, the administrative set-up that carries out functions related to policies and programmes. The word 'bureaucracy' conjures up the image of a rigid, hierarchical and repetitive government entity that is corrupt and inefficient but with an overbearing reach. Others see it as a specialised and supportive service that assists in the delivery of desired outcomes. As universities in Africa have grown in scope, and overall reach, so have the administrative complexities increased and become more arduous. Accountability requirements by governments, accreditation agencies, donors and other stakeholders have meant that universities must be deliberate in the management of both internal and external affairs lest their worth be questioned.

University academics cannot ignore bureaucracy despite their allegiance to the collegial model of governance. Doing so, they might suffer the fate that has befallen several USA universities where a specialised class of managers has taken over university business, amassed inordinate decision-making power, and rendered academics impotent in influencing important decisions about classrooms, libraries and labs. At those universities, decisions on teaching and learning are rationalised according to neoliberalist short-sighted matrices, including cost-cutting, enrolment projections and job prospects. To reinvigorate and make the university in Africa sustainable, we need to envision it as consisting of what Meranze christens a 'new community of scholars' (Meranze 2020: 30). Sustainable universities in Africa, according to Paul Zeleza, will be:

better resourced, improve institutional access, equity and accountability, become more innovative in their curricula, teaching and learning, produce employable graduates, raise research productivity and conduct research that addresses the continent's pressing challenges, and establish more robust engagements with the public and private sectors, civil society and international partners. (Ligame 2019)

The critical areas of university bureaucracy that academics need to be alive to include, inter alia: strategic planning, human resource management, student services, information technology, multi-campus management, commercialisation, curricular innovation and change management. Through the Higher Education Policy Engagement Initiative (HEPI), the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) has initiated a governance and leadership induction programme for mid-level administrators, including chairs, directors and deans. These middle-level administrators are the buffer between the top leadership and the academic faculty and students, thus being in the best position to provide a mediating role in the leadership of academic functions at the foundation levels. Their strategic place and role in the overall academic hierarchy makes it imperative that they are endowed with basic knowledge and skills in the operations of the university bureaucracy.

The articles in this volume are the results of projects undertaken by a select cohort of middle-level academics from several universities across the continent who were convened by the HEPI in Accra, Ghana, in June 2019. The articles focus on a gamut of governance issues that have a bearing on mid-level university leadership. Some are empirical, with specific field data that gives insights into the manifestation of the governance issue at hand in particular institutional contexts. Other articles are more reflective, providing an introspective analysis of the subject matter. The articles do not represent the complete universe of all the governance issues in universities in Africa, but they do provide us with a snapshot of the variety of challenges that the mentees have experienced in their respective institutions. Their reflections on and interpretations of these issues provoke us to critically reconceptualise our understanding of the meaning of mid-level leadership in the context of universities in Africa. More importantly, they underscore the need to eschew the bifurcation between institutional governance and the work we do as university teachers and researchers.

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# The Hybrid Administrator-scholar Paradigm in Higher Education Leadership in Africa

Sindiso Zhou\*

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## Abstract

The higher education landscape has been in a state of flux since the turn of the twenty-first century owing to pressure to internationalise and adopt entrepreneurial approaches in response to global demands. These exigencies have not spared middle-level managers in the academy who straddle the divide between administration and scholarship. This article explores the administrator-scholar paradigm in the context of the globalisation momentum in the academy, using an autoethnographical approach, in which I examine my personal and professional experience as a department chair in two universities over a period of five years. The study pays particular attention to how the dual role was enacted and views the administrator-scholar phenomenon as a resource, not a problem, as explicated in existing research. I articulate the leadership qualities that middle-level managers – more particularly, heads of departments – need, to navigate the contested space and ambivalent landscape of higher education leadership. Institutional gaps and the absence of systemic socialisation led me to develop a domain acculturation model, Divergent Collaborative Leadership, which emphasises the administrator-scholar in the construction of professional identities in higher education in the African context.

**Keywords:** higher education, administrator-scholar, autoethnography, department chair, domain acculturation, Divergent Collaborative Leadership Model

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## Résumé

Le paysage de l'enseignement supérieur est en pleine mutation depuis le début du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle en raison de la pression exercée pour l'internationalisation et l'adoption d'approches entrepreneuriales en réponse à la demande mondiale. Ces exigences n'ont pas épargné les administrateurs intermédiaires de l'université, qui se situent à cheval entre l'administration et l'enseignement. Cet article explore le paradigme administrateur-chercheur dans le contexte de l'élan de mondialisation dans le monde universitaire, en utilisant une approche auto-ethnographique, dans laquelle j'examine mon expérience personnelle et professionnelle en tant que Chef de département dans deux universités sur une période de cinq ans. L'étude accorde une attention particulière à la manière dont ce double rôle a été mis en œuvre et considère le phénomène administrateur-chercheur comme une ressource et non comme un problème, comme l'expliquent les recherches existantes. Je décris les qualités de leadership dont les administrateurs de niveau intermédiaire (plus particulièrement les chefs de département) ont besoin pour maîtriser l'espace contesté et le paysage ambivalent du leadership dans l'enseignement supérieur. Les lacunes institutionnelles et l'absence de socialisation systémique m'ont conduit à développer un modèle d'acculturation de domaine, le leadership collaboratif et démocratique (Divergent Collaborative Leadership), qui met l'accent sur l'administrateur-chercheur dans la construction des identités professionnelles dans l'enseignement supérieur dans le contexte africain.

**Mots-clés** : enseignement supérieur, administrateur-chercheur, auto-ethnographie, chef de département, acculturation de domaine, modèle de leadership collaboratif et démocratique.

## Introduction and Background

Higher education institutions (henceforth HEIs), have been facing overwhelming pressure to conform to global twenty-first-century standards (Bartnett 2011; Kinyata and Siraje 2018). Exponential growth in student numbers coupled with alarmingly rapid technological advancements have transformed the role of administrators and scholars in the academy. The intensity and complexity of these roles escalates when the two roles must be assumed by one individual (Kinyata and Siraje 2018), in what I have termed the hybrid administrator-scholar paradigm. While the merging of administration and academia is a relatively ancient practice in the academe, scholarship on this phenomenon is limited to a conflation of the administration-scholarship enterprise experience as problematic (Simala 2015) to the smooth functioning of the two different, but related constructs.

Higher education institutions operate on three fundamental functional logics—research, teaching and service. Of these three, research and teaching focus on the overall aim of the transmission of epistemology. The creation and transmission of knowledge are the answers to the question of why HEIs exist (Kinyata and Siraje 2018), and traditional university administration focuses on compliance to the norms and establishment of order. This article examines the hybrid administrator-scholar phenomenon as a resource not a problem in the context of middle-level leadership in higher education.

A fundamental disconnect seems to exist where administration and academia are concerned. However, this article argues that the difference in role expectations does not necessarily have to imply discord. The integrity of the academy is centred on a dynamic academic enterprise supported by sound administration. Conversely, sound administration relies on a strong academic base that can transcend institutional boundaries to influence society and transform the world. Within this higher education ecosystem, middle-level managers can be described as the university employees who are tasked with the responsibility of running academic units, namely departments, schools, faculties, research institutes and centres. This article focuses on my experiences as both an academic and a department chair, known as head of department in other contexts.

The fundamental assumption driving this discussion is that middle-level managers, in their role as administrator-scholars, are strategically positioned to leverage their wide array of skills to foster innovative leadership and influence the performance of HEIs. There are hegemonies that exist regarding the production of knowledge and the enactment of practices in higher education institutions. These hegemonies are shaped by the generalised assumption of Western constructions as universal. Western conceptual schema and theoretical frameworks have been widely adopted and continue to be utilised in scholarship and administration without question (Oyewumi 1997, cited in Akioto 2011). In this work, my aim is to interrogate the practices that characterise the dual role of the administrator-scholar in higher education institutions in southern Africa, and to reflect on my journey in an attempt to glean critical learning points.

## **The Research Problem**

The prevailing discourse conceptualises the combination of academia and administration as problematic, setting up individuals for failure either as academics or as administrators, or both. While the administrator-scholar phenomenon is a constant in higher education institutions, and is as old as the academy itself, it is viewed as a problem with inherent tensions

and ambiguities (Armstrong and Woloshyn 2017). This article, instead, examines the administrator-scholar phenomenon as a hybrid that has the potential to increase efficiency, effectiveness and excellence in operations.

There has not been any concerted and documented scholarly effort to problematise the administrator-scholar experience as a resource from which to construct a middle-level leadership methodology. The focus of this work, therefore, is to explore the administrator-scholar phenomenon, specifically the middle-level category that is common to universities in Africa as elsewhere in the global higher education sector. This remains a highly contested yet under-researched area within the higher education discourse on leadership.

There is a growing body of literature on higher education leadership, department chairs included (Armstrong and Woloshyn 2017; Bryman 2007). However, whereas narratives from the higher positions of dean and vice-chancellor have been sought in academic research, there is a lacuna regarding the voices of departmental chairs in the literature. Also visibly lacking is literature on middle-level academic leadership in Africa. This article, therefore, seeks to address this gap by presenting a divergent perspective of the administrator-scholar role in higher education institutions, using an autoethnographical lens. Using this approach allowed me to give voice to my experiences as a middle-level academic also involved in administration. My experiences, rendered in the first person, are not a mere evocative narrative, but rather represent a mirror of rich experiential data that can be viewed and interrogated, without the risk of exploiting a research participant.

## Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to seek insights into how department chairs enact the complex and conflicting roles associated with the administrator-scholar paradigm, and draws from the autoethnographic narrative data that details my experiences at two universities in southern Africa.

Specifically, I sought to answer the following questions:

1. What constitutes the administrator-scholar role in a university in Africa?
2. What leadership skills did I deploy in enacting my dual role as an administrator-scholar?
3. What structures and strategies can administrator-scholars harness to gain support, sustain resilience and improve performance in this role?

## Literature Review

### *Situating the Department Chair in the Higher Education Ecosystem*

Although there is abundant literature on higher education and HEIs, much of the research focuses on those in Western countries. Scholarly inquiry into African settings from an insider perspective are scarce. Given that higher education institutions have been traditionally known for their role in the production, application and dissemination of knowledge, and that higher education and national development are strongly related (Salmi 2017; Marginson 2018; Cloete, Bunting and Van Schalkwyk 2018), it is important to examine the role of middle-level managers, the administrator-scholars, at the centre of operations in higher education spaces.

The operations of higher education institutions have transformed significantly in the past four decades (Bartnett 2003; Kinyata and Siraje 2018) and have led to changes in the nature of leadership and in governance. The issues of leadership amid a constellation of other political, economic and social factors together present higher education as a contested space. It is useful to problematise the relationship between contestation and agency at this point, particularly with reference to the dual role of middle-level managers under discussion.

A confluence of factors affects the performance of middle-level managers. At department chair level, expectations are high in two constituencies. Having to satisfy two different sets of stakeholders, namely students and institutional management, and still function as a researcher engaged with current problems seeking solution in a particular discipline can be a daunting task.

### *Conceptualising the Hybrid Administrator-scholar Role*

The integrated concept of administrator-scholar is not an entirely new phenomenon. It has been discussed by scholars, though briefly, under various labels, such as scholar-leader (Kinyata and Siraje 2018), manager-scholar (Armstrong and Woloshyn 2017) and administrator-academic (Carrol and Wolverson 2004). Kinyata and Siraje (2018) briefly broach the notion of a scholar-leader. Scholar-leaders, in this instance, are seasoned academics who are appointed into key leadership positions. The two researchers argue that the best universities have outstanding scholars at their helm. According to Kinyata and Siraje (2018), such scholar-leaders can improve the performance of a university. I find a useful and direct connection between their scholar-leader notion and the administrator-scholar paradigm that I posit as having the capacity to improve operations in all the functional logics of teaching, research and administration.

### *Defining the Administrator-scholar*

The concept refers to academics who temporarily or permanently take on management and leadership roles in universities. These employees are distinguished from academic managers, who may be in human resources, finance, research, quality assurance or other specialised fields. A similar concept is that of manager-academic, a term that came from a project on 'New Managerialism and the Management of UK Universities' (Reed 2002). An effective departmental administrator should function as an advisor, colleague, facilitator, mentor and advocate for students and management.

The practice of academics who shift from the academy to participate in university politics or infiltrate policy spaces is an example of an opportunity where knowledge and experience can be used to transform existing practices (Murunga 2019). While administration is more about leadership, academia is about responsibility for teaching, student experience and research. Ironically, academic positions provide a fertile training ground for emerging leaders who specialise in creating and retaining academic integrity and credibility (Goodall 2009). Middle-level academics are in an advantageous position, where they can use their knowledge to influence policy and reclaim higher education's original mandate of knowledge creation to make a difference in society.

While the literature discusses the phenomena of administration and scholarship as complex areas of diverse activity in HEIs, my aim is to assess closely the way the department chair enacts leadership while straddling these two positions within their varying yet intersecting practices. The discussion will emphasise the points of interface where the margins become liquid and permeable, allowing overlaps.

Administration requires a mindset and organisational approach that is significantly different to that of academia. It entails the bureaucratic performance of tasks based on institutional policies. On the other hand, academia is predominantly preoccupied with teaching and research. It is centred on interpersonal interactions and the teaching of content in which one is an expert. Similarly, research is premised on inquiry into a field of interest, asking pertinent questions and systematically seeking solutions to existing problems to advance scholarship in a particular field. The questions why and how are addressed by the theoretical approach that conceptualises everything as framed by theory. In contrast, administration seems fixated on concrete results.

Assuming the role of administrator while still practising as an academic is seldom effortless. A significant and deliberate effort is required by an individual with an academic background to be absorbed into the rhythm of administration. In this case, a seamless coexistence of administration and scholarship remains more an ideal than a reality given the seemingly diverging and conflicting expectations of the two roles. Moreover, settling and operating productively and serenely within the dual administrator-scholar role is fundamentally a skill that is acquired as opposed to mere possession of knowledge of what the position entails. The process is not osmotic; it involves willing and continuous learning coupled with determined application with the purpose of yielding measurable results.

Contemporary settings call for a complex set of objectives, ever-changing expectations, a digitally literate student population and an innovative mindset. Fowler (2015) dismisses what she refers to as the old-fashioned notion of the tension and 'contest' between academia and administration, regarding it as an exhausted, redundant idea. She acknowledges that universities are complex institutions that have a broad spectrum of stakeholders to satisfy, but believes that partnerships between academia and administration have the potential to enhance the overall student experience by improving overall service. Acculturation is needed for an administrator-scholar to close the knowledge and skills gap. Just as an academic must undergo academic acculturation in order to be initiated into academic norms, discourse and culture, administration also requires acculturation into its practices.

### *Leadership and Challenges of Universities in Africa*

In one of a series of blog posts that resulted from collaborations between the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), Mba (2017) indicates that Africa has an estimated 1,650 higher education institutions. These HEIs are currently confronting challenges that require multiple stakeholder interventions to improve their operations, performance and contribution to wider society.

The value of higher education institutions lies in their capacity to positively contribute and shape the socioeconomic development of the countries in which they are located. However, there is a disconnect between needs and skills (Alabi and Mba 2012), which is evident in inadequate financing and the poor critical mass of quality faculty. Deficiencies in governance and leadership are fingered in a long list of causes of disconnects that perpetuate challenges in the higher education spaces in Africa.

Of interest in Mba's (2017) chronicle of Africa's higher education woes are the possible interventions that can be employed to revitalise higher education in Africa. Foregrounded in this project are the World Bank Group and development agencies. The Association of African Universities (AAU) has listed capacity-building in institutional leadership and management as one of a series of interventions that can improve the state of the academy in Africa. This article is interested in the reference to deficiencies in leadership, and the focus on interventions at the level of leadership and management. The leadership-capacity-academy-performance nexus resonates with this study on middle-level managers who straddle the administrator-scholar divide in the academy.

To summarise the picture of modern universities at a crossroads, Santos (2010) alludes to the challenge of answering strong questions with weak answers. In Robertson's (2010) interpretation, weak answers are shallow and uncontextualised. They are technical in nature and they fail to link issues to social and political phenomena. On the other hand, strong answers foreground the complexity of the task and the responsibility of actors in changing the status quo. This article is interested in developing paradigms of action in response to the question of the administrator-scholar dual role. I acknowledge that the question of how middle-level managers in their dual task can take the academy to higher levels of accountability and enhance the student experience is a fundamental one that needs a practical response.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This ethnographic study employed concepts from career transition theories to adequately conceptualise career transition (Armstrong 2009; Bridges 2003; Hill 2003). Career transition theories are an appropriate theoretical lens for the exploration of an ethnography representing career transition and growth as in this study. Following Armstrong (2009) and Bridges (2003), individuals can encounter a variety of experiences during role change or role integration, such as anxiety and shock, as they traverse through unexpected territories and contexts. Unfamiliar spaces have the potential of temporarily destabilising comfort zones. Several elements come into consideration in career transitions – for example, personal and professional boundaries, including organisational culture. Furthermore, making sense of a significantly new role involves creating new relationships and acculturating to a new context and thus a new orientation (Louis 1980). The transition theories adequately illuminate how I enacted the transition, negotiation and mediation of spaces, meanings and positions that I encountered as I moved from one point in the academy to another.



## Autoethnography as Method

This study is an autoethnographic analysis of my professional identity as an administrator-scholar in a higher education ecosystem. The work emerges from my personal and professional experiences as a middle-level academic in leadership, as department chair, in two institutions in southern Africa, from 2014 to 2019. I use an autoethnographic approach to facilitate an opportunity to examine my own experience in the role of departmental chair. The fundamental intention in my pursuit was to illuminate the characteristics and dimensions of the administrator-scholar role. I called this phenomenon the hybrid administrator-scholar paradigm, as I conceptualised it as presenting a model that could inform and transform the academy, returning it to its original mandate of being a social institution creating knowledge for the service of humanity.

One significant assumption that underpins the thesis of my argument is that there are essentially novel insights into the administrator-scholar role that can be assembled and harnessed by examining my memories and beliefs (Armstrong 2008). Furthermore, the narrative discourses through which we understand ourselves and the work that we do represent a valuable source of insight (Hayler 2011). This article explores how I articulate the hybrid, dual, ambivalent and contested role of department chair through narrative and how this informs and develops my professional identities. I use the plural “identities” here in recognition of the dynamic nature of identity. Identity is continuously being constructed and reconstructed in response to contextual complexities, uncertainties and ambivalences and this is true also within the higher education sector, particularly in universities. The study applies the analytic autoethnographic approach suggested by Anderson (2006). Anderson’s propositions on analytic autoethnography present a way of reframing and reclaiming autoethnography within the analytic ethnographic paradigm.

The term ‘autoethnography’ was coined by Hayano (1979) with reference to insider anthropologists who were researching their own people in their own social worlds and sub-cultures. This approach presents the researcher as deeply self-identified as a member, in the tradition of qualitative symbolic interactionism. The method of analysis employs tenets of the progressive/regressive method following propositions by Sarte (1963). Kierkegaard (1938) contends that while life is lived moving forward, it is only when we look backwards that we understand. To locate the most relevant experiences, I used various types of autoethnography, namely, narrative self-study writing and life-history interviews, as a lens through which to examine my memories, critical perspectives and lived experiences.

In undertaking the research, I referred to diary entries that I had made over the years as a middle-level academic. I also engaged in writing a self-narrative of my memories of the experiences that I had had of being a scholar and an administrator. Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe this process as using one's own experience to examine a culture or sub-culture. In this case, I deployed my own memories of experience, which illuminated the path and allowed access to the sub-culture of the administrator-scholar role with reference to middle-level academics. I adopted Freire's (1972) call to his student collaborators to take possession of their lives. I took possession of my lived experiences to interrogate them for patterns, cultures and sub-cultures, and learning opportunities.

Autoethnographical research in essence confirms the truism that all writing is by definition creative and all reading, according to Denzin (2001), is interpretive. The researcher must remain visibly central. According to De Certeau, Jameson and Lovitt (1980), meanings that emerge from narrative may be perceived as a means of opposing institutional power. The argument is that intense singularities of personal stories have the capacity to challenge scientific discourses as they can eliminate 'time's scandals'. Identity and professional conduct are constructs whose construction depends on all the dimensions of self-narrative and self-storying and telling of lived experience within its historical, social and cultural contexts. The lived experiences of administrator-scholars can offer valuable insights into, and essential illumination of middle-level academic leadership. This article draws themes from these experiences discursively.

## **Autoethnography in Higher Education**

Autoethnographical accounts that delve into the experiential understandings of higher education spaces are rare in literature, especially with reference to Africa. Instead, autoethnography as a methodological approach is visible in research by teachers in schools (Hayler 2011; Feuerverger 2011; Clandinin and Connelly 1995). Autoethnography, as a qualitative method, is preoccupied with bringing to the fore those aspects that are suppressed by analytic methods that marginalise emotions and subjectivities. In this way, it is possible to study lived experiences to extend theory and praxis (Davies and Gannon 2006). Autoethnography is a compelling method that does not reduce the reader's trust in the writer, but enhances authenticity and trust (Trahar 2013; Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis 1997, cited in Feuerverger 2011).

With reference to my study, my selected personal experiences as a department chair in two universities in southern Africa bring to the surface my own academic trajectory. Through autoethnography as a methodology, I

acquired valuable insights into the work and identity, not only of myself as a department chair, but also of department chairs in similar contexts in Africa and beyond. One realisation that dawned on me regarding this study is the risky nature of autoethnography as a research method. Following propositions by Brogden (2010), Armstrong (2008) and Sparkes (2002), making personal experience visible and opening it up to scrutiny is taking a risk because it creates an inevitable vulnerability. Furthermore, it is common for autoethnographers to be subjected to criticisms of self-indulgence (Sparkes 2002).

This autoethnographic study interrogates my status as an administrator-scholar at different levels and dimensions. The study carefully analyses my values, perspectives of administration and scholarship and how these are reflected in interactions with myself, positions and people encountered in my workspace. I asked myself difficult questions at a personal and professional level in this intense and reflexive process. In the manner of Barnett's (2011) and Trahar's (2013) conceptualisation, I slowly initiated myself into the culture of beginning 'elephant in the room discussions', such as what it really means to be female and working in higher education at this point in time, questions about my identity as a black, African female academic in a male-dominated faculty and in a multicultural environment.

### **Delineating the Department Chair Position**

A university department is an entity that is responsible for undergraduate- and graduate-level teaching, research, university service and community engagement. In all the institutions where I have worked, as an academic and as an administrator, the head of department is appointed by the vice-chancellor on the recommendation of the department. The position of department chair, also known as head of department in some universities, is an established faculty position. Armstrong and Woloshyn (2017) define the department chair as a multifaceted middle-management position that balances faculty and senior administration. In such a position, the chair has a departmental home that provides a base, legitimacy, money and other institutional support for teaching and research. There are complicating factors surrounding the chair position.

My experiences in the higher education landscape range from administration to a mix of administration and teaching, as illustrated in Table 1. In the first year of my appointment to department chair in 2014, and despite a complete administrative workload, as an administrator-scholar I was still controlled by the dictates of the academic promotion framework, which demands a fully fledged portfolio that reflects sound and satisfactory teaching, scholarly research, university service and community engagement.

Scholarship is a deliberate engagement, with a foundation that hinges on consistent and rigorous research. Amid ambivalence, hybrid leaders are called upon to weave administration into their existing career in scholarship. Despite the existence of somewhat rigid boundaries between academic and administrative roles, which engender reactions that border on animosity and condescension, middle-level academics handle duties and reside in these two worlds, traversing the controversies and turbulence at the interface. Interpersonal issues, animosity from fellow faculty members and petty jealousy from fellow administrators were some of the barriers to efficiency and excellence in the execution of my duties. To become an administrator-scholar, one rises through faculty ranks. Administrator-scholars are ordinary academics who have noteworthy credentials and the mettle to confront the ugly side of the academy's running where the grease and grime of people management and implementation and execution nightmares are a reality. In all but the first of these posts, my academic and administrator-scholar roles were combined, as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 2.1:** Tracing the administrator-scholar trajectory

YEAR	INSTITUTION	POSITION
2010–2011	Midlands State University	Administrator
2012	Africa University	Scholar
2014–2016	Bindura University of Science Education	Administrator-scholar
2019	University of Fort Hare	Administrator-scholar

As I went back in time in my interrogation of the tensions and conflicts in the academy regarding administration and scholarship, I asked myself critical questions, which formed the framework of my autoethnography as follows:

1. What does it mean to be an administrator-scholar?
2. How do I perceive my role in relation to personal and institutional goals?
3. Why do I hold the beliefs that I have about the administrator-scholar role?
4. How do I think my perceptions inform and affect:
  - the practice of being an academic and an administrator at the same time?
  - the students I teach?
  - fellow academics?
  - senior management?

The business of trying to balance teaching, research and administration can leave you feeling as if you are going through what Hayler (2011) calls professional menopause. It is not uncommon to end up asking yourself

whether you are a middle-level leader or going through a mid-life crisis. Many administrator-scholars, including myself, have spent a considerable time in their professional life negotiating a series of ambivalences and contradictions (Edwards, Gilroy and Hartley 2002). This is similar to Armstrong and Woloshyn's (2017) description of the tensions and ambiguities that characterise the life of a department chair. It is true that administrator-scholars are unique in the orientation and execution of their professional and academic mandates. Their duties and responsibilities seem to be poles apart. As a result, leadership and management are needed on two fronts: the personal and the professional.

A middle-level academic leader needs first to manage the juggling and balancing act of being in the classroom as a lecturer and in the boardroom as a chair of meetings, without overlooking the pursuit of scholarship through rigorous research. This balancing act needs to be done before the incumbent engages in leadership of a unit, department, faculty centre or school. From a rudimentary standpoint, scholarship and leadership seem to belong to different worlds due to their basic tenets and approaches. However, they come together in the role of the twenty-first century middle-level academic, who is called upon to develop resources that facilitate the execution of the three functional logics of university operations – administration, teaching and research.

### **Entering Higher Education**

I had been teaching English in secondary and high schools for more than a decade when I was head-hunted for an administrative position in the vice-chancellor's office at a prestigious university in the metropole. It is important to state that I had studied for an undergraduate degree at this university, from which I had graduated with a first class degree, hence, the consequent head-hunting for my unique skills and attributes. This grand entry into higher education happened at a time when I was studying towards a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics. Therefore, from the onset, I was straddling administration and scholarship in very particular ways: first as a postgraduate student, and later as a lecturer and postgraduate supervisor in addition to administrative responsibilities.

While numerous testimonials and accolades had come my way concerning my capabilities and work ethic, I could not help a sense of trepidation and ambivalence as I took this vertiginous leap into the higher education ecosystem. I will fast-forward my narrative to a career move that catapulted me to new levels as a full-time lecturer, part-time doctoral student and department chair in another big higher education institution. I assumed the position of department chair for a new Department of

Languages and Communication Skills that had formerly been a unit within the Department of Education. The stakes were high. It was the feeling you get when you are handed a blank page and asked to take your best shot and make your mark. This echoes what Hayler (2011) refers to as the invisible ink of expectation.

At all the institutions of higher learning where I have worked as an academic or administrator, or both, there was a yawning gap in mentorship at the time. There was never any deliberate hand-holding. No individual was appointed to nurture me into my academic or administrative position for a specified period to facilitate my initiation into academic or administrative culture and operations. Beyond course allocation for the undergraduate courses that I was teaching, and the appointment letter for the department chair position, there was no purposeful or systematic institutional process that moulded or acculturated me into the expectations of the university.

It was clear from the onset that this was how things were done and no one had ever insistently knocked on the door of Human Resources to query this omission. While I contemplated the consequences of demanding induction, I also acknowledged the price of antagonising human resources staff or the dean of the faculty over what easily could have been interpreted as a severe case of ignorance, inexperience and incompetence. Given the possibility of misinterpretation, I deliberately chose to self-integrate and self-acculturate with diligence and humility, all set towards executing my duties with persistence and efficiency.

### ***Acculturation Shock: Straddling two Domains with Efficiency***

Despite universities recruiting from the large pool of secondary and high-school teachers, there seems to be a general lack of recognition of the need to nurture entry-level academics for the teaching practices of academia or higher-education administration. To compound the situation are the large numbers of students in undergraduate classes – 150 students would be a very small class, given that most classes contain over 200 students for university-wide courses, a phenomenon many academics commonly face (McAlpine, Amundsen and Turner 2014).

The absence of what Portnoi (2009: 187) calls systemic socialisation, what I call *domain acculturation*, created the feeling that no one in the system cared enough about process and procedure, and, consequently, quality. It became urgent for me to ensure that I closed this gap in the best possible way with the limited resources at my disposal.

### *Navigating the Administrator-scholar Territory*

Looking back on my diary entries as a rookie administrator-scholar, I am automatically drawn into the experiences, thoughts and feelings that I had at the time. My diary reflections in the first year of playing a balancing act, as what I have termed *a novice hybrid*, as an administrator-scholar, provide some indications about my identity and the role expectations:

*4 April 2014*

*Appointment to Acting Department Chair. Talk about new world. Excitement? Trepidation too! So much to do so little time.*

More diary notes detailing my experiences, voice and reaction are laid out in Table 2. I would be appointed in a substantive/permanent capacity as department chair only in 2016. However, as with all acting administrative posts, you are still expected to deliver, which contributes significantly to you getting the substantive appointment or not. It did not help that more established staff members treated me with condescension, as if saying, 'You can break your back, toil and spin, burn the midnight candle on this, but you will never get the substantive appointment!' Despite the negative energy, I persevered, consulting, researching, understudying, questioning and patiently and cautiously striving to perform with efficiency, effectiveness and excellence. On some days, it felt like walking on eggshells in combat boots. However, this ambivalence motivated me to become a result-oriented self, focusing only on performance.

### *The Unique and Hybrid Role of Administrator-scholar*

Some of the activities that I engaged in as an administrator-scholar included chairing meetings, pursuing scholarly research, writing, publication, public engagement and teaching. On a typical day, as a hybrid leader, I had to demonstrate a blend of administrative capability and scholarship in readiness to answer the call of both. While standard practice at senior levels allows administrators to abdicate some of their teaching and/or research activities, at middle level, all things come to a head; the responsibilities of student achievement did not fall away because I had been appointed department chair.

In my autoethnographic study, I engaged in an exploration of my administrator-scholar experiences, describing the personal, interpersonal and professional experiences that shaped my identity during my complex journey. The perspicacious methodology gave voice to actions, behaviours and cultures of practice in higher education, which may enable others in

similar ecosystems to reflect on, understand, learn and cope with their unique experiences (Ellis 2004). Throwing light on the binaries and ambivalences surrounding my dual and hybrid identity as an administrator-scholar forced an important interrogation and illuminated opportunities for development, transformation and divergence. This study became a project in nuancing the micro practices that develop the professional and transform current attitudes, leading to frontier thinking where role duality and hybridity are seen as a resource not a problem.

Through consciously positioning myself and adopting Wenger's (1998) brokering approach, I selected scholar roles that could improve my administration, and administrator roles that could advance my scholarship, and transferred these elements efficiently. Through a hybrid identity, a multi-membership in both domains, I wove the two identities into one and consistently made sure that they informed each other's operations to stop myself from fragmenting psychologically and conceptually.

## **Discussion**

Table 2 presents excerpts from the narrative diary entries, which detail experiences from the day I assumed duty as a department chair while retaining my duties as an academic, namely teaching, research, university and community service.

The excerpts are detailed personal, interpersonal and professional reactions, enactments and overall experiences of the dual role. The ambivalence and ambiguities are explored further in the discussion that follows.

### ***Dilemma or Distinct Advantage?***

As a middle-level leader, I encountered significant dilemmas that could also be viewed as opportunities. The challenges ranged from structural, institutional, interpersonal to personal. How I resolved them was contingent on my own biography, identity, ideology, the team in which I worked, the cultures and values of the institution and the challenges it faced, as well as the features of the higher education system within which it worked. Every dilemma has an opportunity for leadership growth on the flipside. Exploration, experimentation and grit are needed if one is to successfully navigate the slippery terrain of playing the devil's advocate.



**Table 2.2:** Experiences as an Administrator-scholar

Episodic Experiences	Mixed Reactions	Divergent Themes
**Day 1 Phenomenon AKA Clueless	Bewilderment Fear of failure Adaptation	Proactive attitude to capacity development e.g. leadership, performance, research training
**On-the-job training AKA At the deep end	Disbelief Decision to learn and learn more Stubborn resolve to thrive	Initiate and engage in mentoring relationships
Competing demands of teaching, research and administration (crossed over with teaching load)	Muddling Crafting personal standard operational strategy Priority setting	Form effective teams and networks
Bridging turbulent waters: agitated faculty vs aggressive management (departmental office space, setting the first meeting in two years)	Feeling like a ragdoll tossing in the ocean Switch to outcome-oriented mode, one goal at a time Compromise? Compassionate leadership approach	Conflict is relationship-building change leadership
Conflicts over work ethics	Play dead? Reclaim voice Display assertiveness Demand respect for the office	Hold an open door  Encourage faculty to do Masters, PhDs
Research overshadowed by teaching and administration	Maintain new status quo Craft innovative teaching-related research topics or else	Scholarship equals academy Incorporate teaching into research and vice versa

(\*\*Excerpts from personal narrative; extracted from diary entries, 2014–2016; 2019)

As an academic getting into administration while retaining my academic duties in 2014, I learnt that, contrary to the assumption of being ill equipped, I brought to the role considerable experience in student and stakeholder management. Navigating the unfamiliar terrain of being an insider of two camps, I soon discovered that I was at an advantage. No one knows students better than a lecturer does; no one knows management personnel better than a department chair does. I was suddenly equipped with valuable knowledge about two very important stakeholders and I could use this knowledge to improve the execution of my tasks. My knowledge of students, as an academic, influenced my approach to administration. Conversely, as an administrator, my practice as an academic was tinged with the hue of administration. I was constantly haunted by consequences of actions, practices and the danger of setting negative precedence.

As time progressed and I gained a firmer footing in faculty processes and management expectations, I learnt that, essentially, administration and scholarship exist on a continuum. This was a learning curve I discovered as I interacted with students, faculty and university management. I decided to perceive them not as representing opposing poles, but as two related domains existing in a continuum of practices that I could extrapolate from to feed into each other's functionality. As I went about my business as an administrator-scholar, I conceptualised an invisible thread that tied administration and scholarship together into a knot. Together they could be threaded through department operations. I gained insights into university operations from the vantage point of a dual lens, something I could never have done while standing on one side of the fence. I also gained insights into myself, my limitations as an individual caught up in the current of higher education. I could sense a possibility for the development of a paradigm of action to interface operations and smoothe the transition into the duality of administrator-scholarship.

### ***Hybrid Role, Collaborative Competencies***

From the experiences outlined in the diary entries, it is evident that the administrator-scholar phenomenon represents a hybrid position. Due to the mixed elements in their character, hybrids operate from the vantage point of access and power. As a department chair, I had access to two often conflicting and contradicting worldviews, namely university management and academia proper (teaching and research), and needed to bridge the gap. I found myself following the prospectus religiously, being constrained by policies, meetings and minutes, lecturing in the lecture hall one moment and then attending a conference in the next – it was all a milieu for the

gritty, not the faint-hearted. This picture implies that hybrids have the capacity to reconcile the two worlds through crafting and implementing policy in a context-responsive manner. Middle-level academics can empower the academy, neutralise management, call on accountability. As a change agent, I could initiate difficult conversations to bring about transformation in faculty processes.

**Table 2.3:** Shifting Towards a Divergent Collaborative Leadership Model

PARAMETERS	PRACTICES
Administrative culture	Seeking mentors Infusing experience from teaching and research to inform: leadership style, mentor choice policy in leadership
Scholarship culture	Seeking mentors In addition to disciplinary focus, engaging in inquiry to shape and enrich administrative leadership
Curriculum and pedagogic culture	Allowing student voice in curriculum and in pedagogic practice Dialogic facilitator approach
Interpersonal communication	People management and conflict resolution focusing on solutions
Personal Perspective and Gender	Infusing a feminine presence and perspective as a resource not a problem in a masculine dominated environment.

Table 3 illustrates the parameters that I listed in my diary entries and the divergent practices that I employed as a survival strategy. Institutional gaps and the lack of systemic socialisation led me to develop a domain acculturation model I called Divergent Collaborative Leadership, which emphasises the administrator-scholar in the construction of professional identities in higher education. From my experience, a potential model would include domain acculturation in specific spheres, such as administration practice, scholarship culture, pedagogy and interpersonal communication. Intentional support for hybrid leaders, such as mentoring, is important. Harmonising roles and dovetailing research with teaching and administration to achieve the academic mission is the preoccupation of an administrator-scholar. The hoops and curveballs sometimes catch the administrator-scholar unawares.

Maintaining scholarship as an administrator was yet another challenge that needed diligence and innovation for me to overcome. Time, funding, research collaborations and peer support were difficult to acquire without consistent searching. The possibility for stagnating in my scholarship was high, but academics are promoted on their credentials only, so I had to maintain my research alongside superb performance in administration, hence my striving for a healthy balance against all odds.

## **Conclusion**

Amid burgeoning student numbers and dynamic workspaces affected not least by digital technologies and globalisation, higher education spaces remain fundamentally contested spaces. The complexity associated with the administrator-scholar paradigm is a further challenge. This study profiled my experiences as an administrator-scholar in the academy. The autoethnographic study I adopted gives a holistic perspective of the experiences of straddling the administration-scholarship space, from which insights for future practice can be gleaned (Ellis 2004). This article was an initial step towards deciphering patterns of academy-specific leadership behaviours and their impact on higher education institutions. Documenting and analysing my lived experiences as an administrator-scholar in higher education was a useful enabler for developing strategic ways of working and integrating the tasks for the dual role.

Through autoethnography, and using a hybrid administrator-scholar paradigm, I developed a conscious identity (Armstrong 2008) and the capacity to navigate from one domain of operation to another. This flexibility to traverse the two diverse but intersecting disciplines becomes threaded into a personal and professional practice of administration and scholarship through brokering (Wenger 1998). Autoethnography illuminated the acculturating nature of this hybrid position as it moulded me into the multi-dimensional role of administrator-scholar (Kinyata and Siraje 2018). This is in line with the demand for fundamental shifts outlined in the literature with reference to managing the self, people and position (Armstrong and Woloshyn 2017).

The experiences I had in the course of my dual career as an administrator-scholar over the past five years indicate that middle-level academics do not receive adequate support. Due to the absence of mentorship and systemic socialisation, I had to self-acculturate. Domain acculturation became my prerogative. This called on me to be innovative. The presence of senior administrators as mentors to train incumbents would offer an environment

conducive for fomenting insights into good practice as well as operationalising existing policies. I recommend mentorship and training of middle-level administrators for good practice in both policy and practice in higher education institutions. There is need for further research on the implications of mentorship policy on professional outcomes of middle-level professionals.

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# Middle-level Academics as Institutional Managers: A Study on Leadership and Organisational Change at a Ugandan University

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## Abstract

This study examines how academic middle managers, specifically department chairs at a Ugandan university, conceptualise their leadership roles, identify the necessary skills for effective leadership of the department and reflect upon and grow from their practice and past experience in department leadership. The study was carried out at a university that is transitioning from a community-owned to a state-run institution. Data was collected from eighteen department chairs who were purposively sampled from five faculties, one institute and one school, and from four senior managers of the university, using semi-structured interviews. The data was analysed using latent thematic analysis. The findings revealed that department chairs considered their major roles to be: ensuring high academic standards, creating academic programmes, contributing to the financial soundness of the university through developing marketable programmes, ensuring accountability, etc. Nonetheless, they struggled in their new leadership roles due to limited capacity-building and mentoring initiatives for leadership. This put extra strain on the departmental chairs and affected their ability to meet the expectations of the appointing authority.

**Keywords:** Academic leaders, organisational change, department chairs, university

## Résumé

Cette étude examine la manière dont les administrateurs intermédiaires universitaires, en particulier les chefs de département dans une université ougandaise, conceptualisent leurs rôles de leadership, identifient les compétences nécessaires pour un leadership efficace du département et

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réfléchissent et se développent à partir de leur pratique et de leur expérience passée à la tête du département. L'étude a été menée dans une université qui est en train de passer d'une institution communautaire à une institution publique. Les données ont été recueillies auprès de dix-huit chefs de département, délibérément sélectionnés dans cinq facultés, une institution et une école, et auprès de quatre administrateurs supérieurs de l'université, au moyen d'entretiens semi-structurés. Les données ont été analysées à l'aide d'une analyse thématique latente. Les résultats ont révélé que les chefs de département considèrent que leurs principaux rôles sont les suivants : veiller à l'effectivité de normes académiques élevées, concevoir des programmes académiques, contribuer à la santé financière de l'université en développant des programmes commercialisables, garantir la redevabilité, etc. Néanmoins, ils ont eu du mal à assumer leurs nouveaux rôles en matière de leadership en raison du manque d'initiatives de renforcement des capacités et de mentorat en la matière. Cela a ajouté un poids supplémentaire à la charge de chef de département et affecté leurs capacités à être à la hauteur des attentes placées en eux par l'autorité qui les a nommés.

**Mots-clés :** Leaders universitaires, changement organisationnel, chefs de département, université.

## **Introduction**

The literature on higher education suggests that there has been massive expansion in the higher education sector as a result of the establishment of more private and public universities across the globe (Connell 2013; Huang 2012; Kolsaker 2008; Matovu 2018; Mok 2016; Okalany and Adipala 2016). Sammons et al. (1997) suggest the need to reconceptualise school leadership, and more so leadership at middle-level management, aligning with the views of Bassett (2016), Bisbee and Miller (2006), and Davis, Rensburg and Venter (2016), which are that leadership of universities is becoming more complex.

Leading a university with several faculties, colleges, centres, institutes and other directorates is complicated and requires several layers of management to be effective. Leadership in universities is based on two basic models: one is inherited from the public sector leadership style embedded in hierarchical layers; entailing costly administrative burdens and bureaucratic systems (Chaharbaghi 2007; Davis et al. 2016). That the second is the leadership in higher education that is gradually being appropriated by an ideology that emanates from the private sector Kolsaker (2008). Therefore, the structures of university leadership are vested in different layers with varying responsibility to manage the university sustainably.

All the layers of leadership have an important role in ensuring efficiency, competitiveness, sustainability and productivity in the university (Davis et al. 2016). University leadership is not confined to the top of the institution but cascades down to its constituent parts – the faculties, departments, schools and research institutes (De Boer, Goedegebuure and Meek 2010). Bassett (2016) notes that the delegation of responsibilities to lower levels of a school hierarchy, with the resulting considerable intensification of management work for middle-level leaders, is a consequence of educational reforms that began in the 1980s, which increased pressure on top-level hierarchy.

Academic middle managers are those members of the faculty in a university who are charged with the detailed running of academic units, departments or faculties. They play a dual role in academy and administration/management. Research about higher education leadership is extensive but has broadly focused on top management, such as vice-chancellors and deans. Middle-level leadership is important to observe because activities and behaviours at that level have significant consequences for how strategy forms within the organisation as well as explaining key organisational outcomes (Wooldridge, Schmid and Floyd 2008). In support of this view, Fullan (2015) and Harris and Jones (2017) emphasise that the middle tier is a site of system reform and is recognised as being particularly important for stirring positive change and improvement in a school. Mande, Nambatya and Nsereko (2015) observe that middle managers are important in an organisation because they deal with goal-setting and department-level decision-making. The authors further observe that middle managers invest time and effort in working out the modalities of achieving the institutional strategies and objectives set by top management, consequently ensuring that university departments, schools, faculties and units operate legally and successfully.

The available literature paints a contested picture of the role of middle-level management. Research from the 1980s notes that, because of their intermediate positions in organisations, middle managers are a source of resistance (Guth and MacMillan 1986). However, later research suggests that middle managers are important interfaces between otherwise disconnected actors and domains – for example, the top management and the lower/operating-level managers (Floyd and Wooldridge 1999; Wooldridge, Schmid and Floyd 2008) – and are potential change agents (Huy 2002). According to King and Zeithaml (2001), middle managers are more likely than top managers to penetrate the causal ambiguities that exist in the relationship between an organisation's capabilities and its economic performance. Therefore, middle managers may play a greater role than top managers in activities associated with capability development in an

organisation (Wooldridge et al. 2008). Balogun and Johnson (2004) suggest that organisations cannot be managed by small groups or single actors but require distributed and interactive leadership throughout the organisation, with middle managers as key mediators between levels and units.

Guth and MacMillan (1986) and Wooldridge and Floyd (1990) advocate for middle managers because they play essential and under-recognised strategic roles in an organisation. At the same time, middle managers face the difficult task of resolving 'the contradiction between the visionary but abstract concepts of top management and the experience-grounded concepts originating on the shop floor' (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995: 9).

There is a plethora of literature on middle management in schools and colleges (Busher and Harris 1999). However, most of the studies are Western-focused (Wise and Bush 1999; Bassett 2016; Briggs 2001; Hargreaves and Ainscow 2015; Ehrenstorfer et al. 2015; Busher, Hammerlsey-Fletcher and Turner 2007; Busher and Harris 1999; De Boer et al. 2010). Research on academic middle managers in universities in Africa is emerging but has been focused largely on deans (Davis et al. 2016; Chipunza and Matsumunyane 2018; Seale and Cross 2015, 2018; Seale 2015; Ngcamu and Teferra 2015; Jowi 2018; Kabonesa and Kase-Bwanga 2014; Shibru, Bibiso and Ousman 2017). Research on department chairs in universities is rare and essentially Western-focused (Benoit 2005; Creswell and Brown 1992; Gmelch 2013, 2015; Gmelch and Miskin 2011; Nguyen 2013; Potgieter, Basson and Coetzee 2011), and Uganda is glaringly absent from the studies. A study by Mande, Nambatya and Nsereko (2015) focused on the expansive layer of middle management at three universities in Uganda, and covered the role of academic and administrative middle managers in ensuring quality education. Their study, however, is generic, simplistic and lacks depth.

Generally, little is known about how academic middle managers at a university go about their tasks (Busher, Hammersley-Fletcher and Turner 2007; De Boer et al. 2010; Ehrenstorfer et al. 2015). In fact, De Boer et al. (2010) call for more co-ordinated research to grasp the work of middle managers in universities. Gmelch (2015: 1–2), in a study carried out in the US, observed that department leadership is of great importance in running a university, noting that: 1) departmental chairs hold the most significant position in American universities; 2) deans are only as good as their departmental chairs; 3) 80 per cent of university decisions are made at department level; 4) the departmental chair is a unique management position in America; and 5) only 3 per cent of department chairs receive management training.

Kabale University is a new university in Uganda and is the first of its kind in its transition from a community university to a public university. It is located in south-western Uganda, and was started by the community. However, with growth prospects and associated challenges, namely an unpredictable student enrolment due to competition from other new institutions in the country and the Great Lakes Region, specifically Rwanda and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), its operations became costly. Consequently, the government accepted the community's request to take it over and turn it into a public university. Kabale University (KAB) has metamorphosed from a community university to a public university, but the transition in various aspects of management has been gradual.

This study did not aim to research universities that were representative of all other universities in the two specific and divergent education ownership contexts (private and public), but rather to investigate a unique university that has experienced both private and public leadership domains. This study therefore interrogates the lived experiences of departmental chairs at Kabale University, with regard to their conceptual understanding of their leadership roles, the skills they perceived to be necessary for the leadership position and their reflection on their practice as departmental chairs under the new administration.

### **Literature Review of Academic Middle Managers in Leadership at Universities**

Academic middle managers in academic institutions are positioned at the centre of the school hierarchy, beneath senior leaders, such as principals, deputy principals and associate principals, and have a responsibility to lead teachers (Fitzgerald 2009). However, middle-level leaders perform a role that is complex, challenging and varied (Dinham 2007; Wright 2002), encompassing teaching and learning, developing collegial relationships, working with a wide range of stakeholders and managing faculties or departments (Ministry of Education 2012). Emphasising the challenging aspect of middle-level leaders, Fullan (2010) observed that the middle leadership role in schools attracts pressure from both the top and bottom of the organisation. In this regard, Fleming (2013) suggests that academic middle managers need specific forms of support and development to maximise their potential. Because of their central position, academic middle managers in a university are critical in bridging the top and senior management and the lecturers. This role, Bassett (2016) proposes, is important in translating policies into practice. In support of the 'bridging and brokering' role of middle leaders in academics, as described by Busher and Harris (1999),

various scholars argue that middle leaders are conduits of all that passes between top management and teaching staff (Brown, Rutherford and Boyle 2000; Cardno 1995; Fitzgerald 2009).

Middle leaders have to balance department concerns with the wider needs of the university, such as building collegial departmental relationships, and at the same time bear responsibility for monitoring their colleagues' performance (Fitzgerald 2009). This view is supported by Bennett (1995: 18), who suggests that 'middle management' infers a hierarchical structure that 'assumes a downward flow of authority from the leader, given in order to promote what the leader seeks'. Bennett (1995) further observed that middle managers perform the role of brokering, which involves transmitting information and commands from the top management downwards. The author claims that by being brokers, and through influencing and controlling the flow of information, middle managers hold a potentially powerful position and can be a creative force for organisational change. In contrast, however, Briggs (2001) notes that middle management, being part of the hierarchy, is more about showing loyalty to the top managers in the hierarchy than providing a nurturing environment for those they lead.

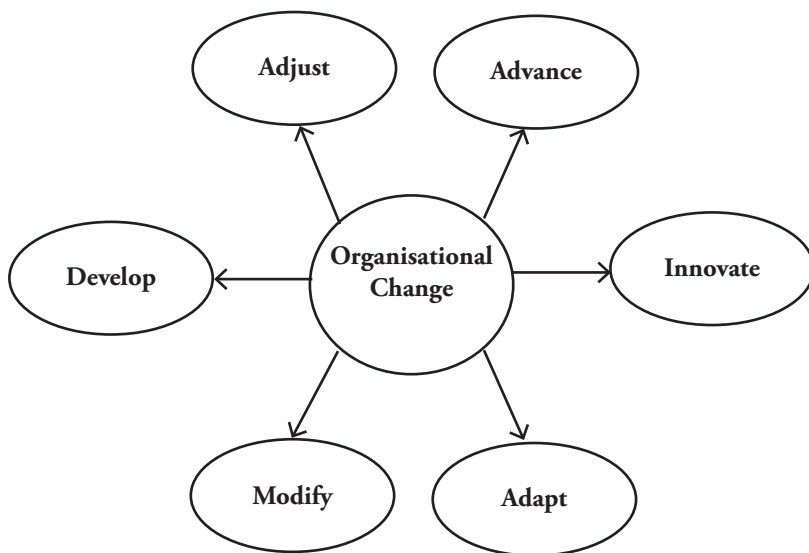
Nguyen (2013) reviewed research studies in the US and Austria on middle-level academic managers and found there to be six major tasks as head of department: departmental governance, programme management, human resource management (including administrative staff, students and teaching staff) and professional development, budget and resource management, external communication, and office management. However, Bassett's analysis (2016) of several studies identified three major roles of middle-level academic managers: instructional leadership, developing staff, and administration. Despite the variance in the numbers of roles, keen scrutiny indicates that they are actually similar.

According to various studies, middle-level academic managers carry out administrative tasks, which include conducting departmental meetings and developing centralised management systems (Busher 2005; Dinham 2007; Leaming 2006; Montez et al. 2003; Tucker 1993; Wolverton, Gmelch, Wolverton and Sarros 1999). In addition, Tucker (1993) suggests other responsibilities, such as creating long-term goals and plans for the department, serving as an advocate for the department, communicating goals to department members, and encouraging faculty members to communicate ideas for improving the department. Yet Leaming (2006) observes that departmental chairs have to co-operate with faculty members to establish department policies and lead the department to new heights. In addition, middle-level academic managers have the task of preparing and proposing department

budgets, compiling annual reports and seeking outside funding (Leaming 2006; Tucker 1993; Wolverson et al. 1999). Almost every publication written on the subject lists and details the tasks, duties, roles and responsibilities of administrators, such as deans and departmental chairs; these are also found in appointment letters and university policy manuals (Gmelch 2015). Such documentation is simplistic, repetitious and routine, and of little help in closing the gap on key elements of university leadership. This study departs from earlier studies by documenting the life stories of departmental chairs, the skills they perceive to be necessary and their reflection on their leadership roles.

### **Organisational Change Concept**

Organisational change, when planned (as in the case of Kabale University transitioning to a state-run administration), is the set of deliberate activities that move an organisation from its present status to a more desirable state (Harigopal 2006). The forces that prompt an organisation to manage planned change are diverse but include a changing workforce, advanced technology, globalisation and competitive pressures (Burnes 2004; Kotter 1996). Although many organisations crave planned change, the results are often mixed, with many studies revealing that planned changes rarely succeed (Holbeche 2006; Jarrel 2017; Meaney and Pung 2008). In this regard, organisational change is a source of great stress to contemporary workers (Dahl 2011; Stounten et al. 2018). The stress arises from the excessive pressure from the management of the organisation to make sure that the changes are implemented successfully. Indeed, management treads carefully as failure may lead to total collapse of the organisation. The process of organisational change is therefore delicate and complicated. The workforce has to learn a lot of new things speedily, and change culture as well as strategies. The architecture of the organisation changes—for example, in structural design, departmentalisation, centralisation, chain of command, work specialisation, job redesign, span of control and formalisation. Secondly, there is a change in work processes, methods and equipment. Lastly, people generally change attitudes, behaviour, perceptions and expectations. Therefore, the workforce has to adapt the new systems, cultures and technologies, develop new knowledge and skills, innovate new ideas, adjust to accommodate the new strategies and status, modify its own thinking and methods of work to match the modified systems in support of change, and advance in the areas of specialisation to consolidate the change so that it aligns with other organisational procedures and structures (see Figure 1). These alterations are indeed challenging and carry extra burden on the leadership that has to align the new mission, vision and strategy of the organisation and the workforce for the organisation to succeed.



**Figure 1:** The organisational change concept

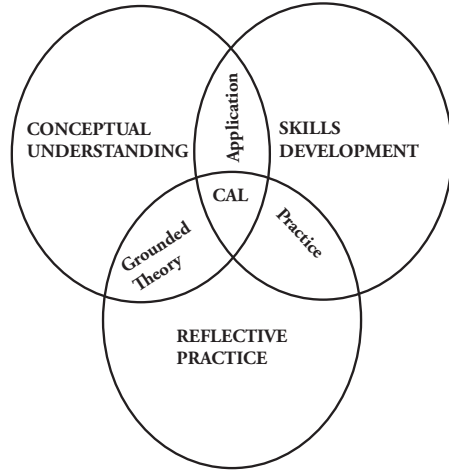
Source: Developed by Author

### **Academic Leadership**

In academic leadership, Gmelch (2013, 2015) considers three spheres – conceptual understanding, skills development, and reflective practice and their intersections – as the analytical framework for the development and analysis of the effectiveness of departmental chairs in a university (see Figure 2). Gmelch is cognisant of the fact that departmental chairs transition from faculty to administration without prior training, and thus executive development is difficult to determine (Gmelch 2013).

In relation to conceptual understanding, departmental chairs need to define academic leadership for themselves and find the right place and job fit (Gmelch 2015). They must have the ability to conceptualise the unique roles and responsibilities involved in academic leadership from a cognitive point of view that empowers them to understand the many dynamics and dimensions of leadership. New appointments as departmental chairs involve job shifts, and at the same time the complexity of institutions of higher learning means they have unique leadership challenges, which are different from those of other establishments (Gmelch 2013, 2015).





**Figure 2:** Academic leadership conceptualisation by Gmelch (2013, 2015)

Note: CAL–Comprehensive Academic Leadership

Source: Adapted from Gmelch (2013, 2015; Gmelch and Buller 2015).

Besides having a conceptual understanding of their roles and responsibilities, departmental chairs need to apply appropriate skills and behaviours in order to be successful. They have to identify the most important skills to be effective, and learn to develop those skills, through workshops, seminars, mentoring initiatives and other leadership training opportunities that may impart the key ingredients of skills development. In addition, the departmental chair should be able to reflect, correct and take action. Gmelch (2015) observes that leadership development is an ‘inner’ journey of self-knowledge, personal knowledge and corrective feedback. Departmental chairs must reflect on their day-to-day practice, which is critical in coping with troublesome divergent situations of practice.

### **Methodology**

This study is phenomenological, based on semi-structured interviews that explored the lived experiences of academic middle managers at Kabale University, in its new form as a public university in Uganda. In a phenomenological study, the researcher aims to describe a phenomenon as accurately as possible and remain true to the facts (Groenewald 2004: 44). According to Welman and Kruger (1999: 189) ‘phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved’. The phenomenological researcher is concerned

with the lived experiences of the people involved, or who were involved, with the issue that is being researched (Greene 1997; Holloway 1997; Kruger 1988; Kvale 1996; Maypole and Davies 2001; Robinson and Reed 1998).

Data was collected from semi-structured interviews with eighteen departmental chairs (selected using purposive sampling from the five faculties, one institute and one school) and four senior managers, between February and March 2019. The respondents were asked about their roles in running the departments and the challenges they faced in executing their assignment. Relevant data from the interviews was analysed using thematic analysis. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), semantic themes were developed from which latent themes were extrapolated. The analysis of the data moved beyond describing what was said and focused on interpreting and explaining it. The analysis identified and 'examined the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies – that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data' (Braun and Clarke 2006).

## **Findings**

### ***Conceptual Knowledge of the Roles of Department Chairs***

The current university leadership regime in Uganda is a result of policy reforms that were introduced by the government to regulate tertiary and higher education, with the establishment of the Uganda National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) under the enactment of the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions (Amendment) Act, 2006 (UOTIA). Article 49 of the UOTIA sets out regulations for the departments in the faculties, institutes, schools or colleges at universities. Each department must have a 'Department Board' made up of members of the department, with the responsibility of determining its own procedure, subject to approval by the board of the faculty, institute or college. The department has to manage its own academic and administrative matters, with guidance from the faculty, institute or college. Article 54 specifies that a head of department must be at least a senior lecturer, implying that the individual should have a doctorate (PhD), at least three years' teaching experience, a sound record of publication and supervision of postgraduate students.

According to the UOTIA Act 2001, amended 2006, there are two paths to the position of departmental chair. The first, and the recommended one, is through elections, where a willing candidate with the prescribed qualifications applies once the position is declared vacant by the university. All qualifying candidates are shortlisted and subjected to a rigorous election

process, which involves private lobbying and open presentations on the strategic direction each candidate would follow for the department, before being voted on by full-time teaching staff from the department. The candidate who garners the highest number of votes is declared the winner and occupies the position for four years. A candidate is eligible to seek re-election for one more consecutive term.

The essence of the electoral process is the promotion of the democratic principle, participation, as well as ownership of their departments by the academic staff, who may choose their own leaders. In the case that the aforementioned process cannot be held, the UOTIA gives the vice-chancellor powers to appoint an acting departmental chair for a period of one year without a cap. This implies that a departmental chair can be appointed for as long as the vice-chancellor wishes. The Act envisages that at some point the university management may not be able to conduct elections, yet given the importance of having a departmental chair, the position cannot remain vacant.

At Kabale University, being a newly public university, these elections had not been conducted at the time of the study. Instead, following the second path, teaching staff with a Masters' degree (assistant lecturers) had been appointed to the position of departmental chair. A senior manager explained that they had made efforts to attract staff at senior lecturer, associate professor and professor level, but with little success, because academicians at that level were comfortable with permanent jobs in other public universities and were not willing to move to new places:

Attracting academicians at senior level has not been easy partly because majority of them are settled with public universities which offer the same salary scale while those at lecturer level are assured of promotion at their universities once they fulfill the requirements. Due to the importance of departmental chairs in university management, we fill the position with available staff as a gap stop measure. (Senior manager)

Generally, the departmental chairs articulated that their main task was academic leadership. This involved ensuring that the high academic standards of the university stayed in line with the quality assurance framework of the NCHE. Therefore, departmental chairs were responsible for motivating the lecturers to commit to their work and use the full range of their capabilities for better educational outcomes.

The real teaching and learning in my department is entirely my responsibility as its head. I distribute the teaching load to the lecturers depending on their specialisations and capabilities in the different course units, monitor the teaching activities, track the coverage of the course outline, ensure that standard assessment is carried out and remedial work done if it warrants so. (Departmental chair).

The departmental chairs saw part of their role as monitoring the timetable to ensure that lecturers in the department were teaching and conducting classes. In addition, they planned and requested from the university management the instructional facilities and learning resources needed to effectively conduct lessons, such as overhead projectors, textbooks and other reading materials to be stocked in the library, and subscriptions to journals and repositories that would be of relevance to the students and teaching staff.

Departmental chairs were also responsible for developing academic programmes:

I am tasked with developing new and marketable programmes in the department. Growth of a department is determined by the number of programmes and therefore the student enrolment. (Departmental chair)

Besides this, they were responsible for monitoring the relevance of the academic programmes and reviewing them, as a requirement by the NCHE:

The departmental chairs have to ensure that the curriculum is relevant and the graduates of the various programmes have attained the required knowledge and skills from the instruction. If the curriculum is relevant they maintain it, otherwise they restructure it with the help of content experts and submit it to the senate and later NCHE for accreditation. (Senior manager)

One departmental chair observed that:

I have to keep a keen eye on the existing programmes to make sure that the content is relevant to the place of work; it is a hard task since I am not a teacher by profession but I follow the guidelines.

A senior manager emphasised that the biggest percentage of enrolled students were privately funded, and the growth of the university both in enrolment and income was due to the targeting of private students through an increase in the number of programmes, which meant that the department chairs were responsible for a wider variety of choices.

Ultimately, the departmental chairs had the administrative responsibility of managing university systems and processes to ensure a conducive learning environment. They offered leadership and strategic direction, and managed the daily operations of the department, including convening meetings as well as handling students' and lecturers' issues and complaints. This included building collegiality and offering mentorship to the staff. In addition, they arbitrated on disagreements between lecturers and students, especially on lecturers' absenteeism, lecturers changing timetables so that lessons collide, and bad relations between lecturers and students, to restore normalcy. Ensuring discipline among the staff and students in the department was essential:

If a lecturer is undermining the university system, for example dodging lessons or has any form of misbehaviour that puts the university under reputational damage, the departmental chair initiates disciplinary action against the lecturer by discussing the issue with him/her, offering counselling and if no improvement is registered, serve him/her a warning letter. If no reform is registered, the departmental chair refers the lecturer to the senior managements for further action. If the departmental chair who is the immediate supervisor of the teaching staff does not take action, the senior management will never know the challenges in the university. (Senior manager)

Relatedly, the departmental chairs carried out the human resource management of their departments. They were responsible for the availability of academic staff in the department, identifying staffing gaps and making recommendations to senior management for recruitment and promotion. Once jobs were advertised, the Departmental Board under the leadership of the departmental chair made recommendations on the applicants to the Appointments Board. Departmental chairs were not involved in the interview process, which they viewed as disempowering them, but after the selection process by the Appointments Board, the recruited academic staff were handed over to the departmental chair for deployment. The departmental chairs also made recommendations for contract renewal of teaching staff as well as for recruiting part-time staff.

A senior manager observed that departmental chairs had a duty to spearhead the professional development of their staff and themselves, although many of them had not been effective:

Many of them have paid little attention to professional development of their staff. As the immediate supervisors, they are supposed to identify knowledge gaps and we expect departmental chairs to organise seminars and workshops for their departmental staff but it is rarely done. Departmental professional development is very important because it helps to attain the departmental and university set levels of academic performance. (Senior manager)

In fact, only two departmental chairs mentioned the professional development of their staff as their responsibility and had organised seminars and workshops for their departments. They noted, however, that the staff sought opportunities independently outside the university, such as pursuing higher academic qualifications, Masters' degrees and PhDs, that would in the end qualify them for promotion and a higher salary. One departmental chair noted that personal development was a clearly defined duty:

The appointment letters explicitly mention personal development as a key responsibility of a departmental chair. Therefore, they don't expect any excuse that somebody is not able to advance in academics and or attain promotion

because they were expended by the responsibilities of headship. They expect you to lead by example and inspire others by registering personal progress in various aspects at work. You have to be a role model. (Departmental chair)

All the departmental chairs interviewed mentioned budget development as one of their key responsibilities. Within the university's financial planning framework, each chair was required to develop a plan and budget for their department for the subsequent financial year and submit them to the top management, which deliberated on what would be funded, depending on the availability of funds. One departmental chair, however, reported that they didn't have any power or control on expenditure since all university funds were pooled in one basket and managed centrally. Therefore, any expenditure for the department depended on the approval of the university Secretary, who was the accounting officer. In the end, the departmental chair might not be able to address even a simple financial need at departmental level.

Establishing and maintaining internal and external liaison with the staff and the university community is a key function of departmental chairs. Internally, departmental chairs deliver information from senior management to the teaching staff in the department. They have a reciprocal role in building cohesion within the university, by sharing important information with everybody in the department and making them feel they are part of the whole system. At the same time, departmental chairs advocate for departmental interests and channel information from the department to the senior management. They have the duty of promoting their departments and the university beyond its gates and building useful links that may result in opportunities for students and staff.

### ***Skills of Department Chairs***

The departmental chairs who participated in the study described various skills they felt were important for them to succeed in their new roles. These included:

1. Fundraising skills, to attract funding for projects for infrastructure development and research.
2. Curriculum review and development skills in order to spearhead a review of existing academic programmes and the design of new ones.
3. Negotiation skills, to arbitrate in human resource issues/conflicts involving lecturers.
4. Ability to assess learning, to ensure quality teaching.
5. Interpersonal skills, to build good relations between lecturers and students.

6. Communication skills, to communicate in all directions to staff and management.
7. Ability to balance responsibilities – teaching, leadership and professional development.
8. Knowing how to create a positive work environment to motivate staff and lecturers.
9. Fairness – in dispensing justice
10. Action planning.

However, the chairs lamented the lack of these skills, which made them unprepared for leadership, which they felt arose from no prior training.

### *Reflections by Department Chairs*

The departmental chairs revealed that not being prepared for the new leadership roles they were assigned made the position stressful for them. They reported difficulties in executing their responsibilities under trial and error because they had not received any leadership training. They had expected to be availed of leadership development programmes, such as seminars, workshops and short courses organised internally or externally to address various issues, but these had not been arranged. However, one senior manager dismissively noted that some departmental chairs had wanted to be enrolled in formal leadership training to get certificates or postgraduate diplomas.

We offer them orientation after they have been appointed, and mentoring. The mentoring is hands-on based on real-life scenarios as they emerge. Maybe the departmental chairs don't recognise that mentoring is also a form of leadership development. We have oriented them in curriculum development, budgeting and administrative procedures, monitoring and appraising staff, interpersonal skills, and many of them are really offering quality leadership than when they had just been appointed. (Senior manager)

The departmental chairs were overloaded by the combination of their core responsibilities as teaching staff and the additional responsibilities of leadership. As middle managers they were expected to carry out their leadership roles at the same time as teaching the normal load of any other lecturer. They were expected to attend meetings from time to time, which aggravated the pressure of work and further encroached on their already limited time. Some departmental chairs had enrolled for further studies and had to balance their time between teaching, leadership and personal development (their studies), which they described as 'hectic'.

It is tough to balance between my core role of teaching and departmental headship because all of them require sufficient time if I am to be effective. At the same time, I have to pursue personal development. Sometimes I cannot meet deadlines set by senior management and many times I have to work beyond the normal working hours in order to fulfil the tasks. (Department chair)

A departmental chair pursuing a PhD course noted that he was not progressing as he had planned because of the triple demands of leadership, work and studies:

My PhD supervisors are disappointed because I don't meet the timelines we mutually agree on together. I am torn between departmental leadership, lecturing and studies. I have a lag on my course.

Another department chair stated:

The work is too much. I have not been able to write any article for publication all year round. I am in a mess.

One senior manager claimed that reducing the teaching load for the departmental chair had been considered, but given that staffing levels were still low, and that departmental chairs were experts in their areas, it was hard to find replacements and the funds to pay them. It was therefore envisaged that the departmental chairs would have to devise good planning and time management to fulfill all their responsibilities.

One factor that was highlighted was tensions associated with the perceived divided loyalty between senior management and departmental staff. Since the department chairs were appointees of the vice-chancellor and had to implement university policies and programmes, the teaching staff often regarded them as an extension of the top management. One departmental chair explained that when delivering information from senior management, some members of his department accused him of conspiring with the senior management to implement directives that seemed oppressive to them. In addition, departmental staff often felt that the chair didn't sufficiently advocate for their needs 'but only accepts directives from the senior management because she is part of them'. One departmental chair said that, in his case, tension was partly caused because he had been assigned the role soon after he had joined the university:

There is resentment by some staff because they say I am a new kid on the block, I don't know their culture, I am a puppet. I think they would have considered people who had been here longer but management considered people with higher qualifications for the chairship.



The converse was that, time and again, departmental chairs were accused by senior management of colluding with the departmental staff to circumvent university policies on, for example, official working hours, absenteeism and staff misbehaviour. The departmental chairs were blamed for not taking disciplinary action as well as for not informing senior management of staff absenteeism and other practices that violated the human resource manual. One departmental chair noted:

The headship is awkward where everybody mistrusts you. The departmental staff think you are on the side of the senior management yet the senior management feels that you are protecting the department staff, you have no friends.

Three departmental chairs remarked separately:

I did not monitor the timetable and teaching seriously. I had a lot of things to complete on my desk.

It was a lonely journey and very stressing. Nobody was appreciating what I was doing.

I did not do much on establishing external relations for the university. I did not know how to do it.

## **Discussion**

Departmental chairs carry out an administrative role and are in charge of academic leadership in their departments, the core activities of which are monitoring teaching and learning, ensuring the availability of instructional facilities and resources, developing marketable programmes for the university, reviewing programmes to ensure their relevance, attracting students and contributing to financial soundness of the university. This has been observed by Gmelch and Miskin (1993) and Tucker (1993). Bassett (2016) calls the type of leadership that focuses on a school's core activity of teaching and learning, 'instructional leadership'. Other scholars have called it curriculum leadership, learning-centred leadership, professional leadership, programme management and pedagogical leadership (Bush 2008; Hallinger 2003; Nguyen 2013; Randle and Brady 1997). According to Bush (2008), departmental chairs ensure that their teaching staff are motivated, committed and use their capability for better academic outcomes. Bush (2008) further observed that administration is a function that supports the educational purposes of a school. This finding is supported by Uganda's Ministry of Education (2012), which emphasises that middle managers manage the

systems and processes for the existence of a safe school environment. The departmental chairs are central to human resource management. Bassett (2016) observed that middle-level managers carry out administrative tasks that include financial management.

Each departmental chair is tasked with the professional development of the staff in the department at the same time as his or her own personal development. However, the crowded schedule of their respective roles of leadership and teaching compromises their ability to shine in various areas. Nguyen (2016) noted that departmental chairs allocated 20 per cent of their time to personal academic work and devoted 70 to 80 per cent of their time to daily management and administration. This could partly be explained by the fact that departmental chairs felt unprepared for the leadership tasks. Fitzgerald (2009) also held the same view. Departmental chairs are stressed by the leadership role and not able to utilise their time effectively to complete the various tasks before them. In a previous study, middle-level leaders perceived that their leadership roles encroached on their time (Bassett 2016).

Unfortunately, departmental chairs assume their new positions without prior training. Gmelch (2013, 2015) and Gmelch, Wolverton, Wolverton and Hermanson (1996) observed that only 3 per cent of US campuses provided systematic academic leadership development. Departmental chairs felt that they were unprepared for the challenges of leadership (Dinham 2007) and required specific professional development to enable them to carry out their leadership roles (Bassett 2016). While the senior administrators at Kabale University claimed to have leadership-oriented staff, the fact that the departmental chairs insisted that they had not been trained suggests that training for academic leaders is not systematic. Otherwise, why would such a simple issue become contentious? Gmelch (2013) and Gmelch and Buller (2015) observe that most training programmes for academic leaders are episodic and opportunistic and, when organised internally, they are only half a day long and primarily focus on legal and fiscal issues designed as prophylactic measures to keep the institution out of trouble rather than to develop well-rounded academic leaders. Under such circumstances, departmental chairs may not realise that they have actually been trained since they have been used to rigorous training in their areas of specialisation.

At Kabale University, some departmental chairs had been appointed immediately after they joined the new university and so were challenged to understand the culture and environment of the university. Indeed, Gmelch (2013) observed that any outside appointment needs a year and a half just to become socialised into the institution. This alone poses challenges to new

departmental chairs. Gmelch (2015) urges that universities should practise 'passing the baton' – mentoring new administrators months before taking office and coaching them into their new responsibilities and roles instead of handing over the 'gavel' the day their predecessor leaves.

The departmental chairs interviewed at Kabale University experienced tension between their staff and the senior management team. Indeed, they had been appointed by the vice-chancellor, to whom their loyalty was assumed. Briggs (2001), Fullan (2010) and Harris and Jones (2017) note that equally assumed is the loyalty of departmental chairs to the department as well as to the hierarchy of line managers. In a study by Gmelch (2015), departmental chairs survived stormy years and the scathing criticism of academic administrators, and felt plagued by excessive stress and unresolved conflict. For that reason, only 25 per cent of those who were serving for extrinsic reasons (who had not applied for the positions) were willing to serve a second term. De Boer et al. (2009) observed that being in the middle is stressful, and the multiplicity of expectations and demands often leads to confusion and conflict.

The observation that departmental chairs are overloaded with work that hinders their professional growth is a pertinent concern. Bassett (2016) observed that in increasing the workload of top administrators in other activities, such as planning, more roles – especially the instructional leadership role – are being delegated to academic middle managers. Wise and Bush (1999) also observed that middle managers had difficulty fulfilling the new expectations because of a shortage of time.

The departmental chairs in the study failed to monitor the timetable and teaching quality under the pretext of excessive work. Bennett (1995) and Bullock (1988) noted that departmental chairs frequently avoid monitoring the progress of students taught by a colleague because they are embarrassed by this activity. Leaming (2006) views these failures as a neglect of duty and trust, since in not communicating potential problems to the university management, department chairs leave senior managers unaware of what is going on except through anecdote and intuition.

Establishing external networks for the university, although one of the key tasks of the departmental chairs, was nearly never done. De Boer et al. (2009) explain that departmental chairs are more involved with people management than networking. As a result, a new university will miss the opportunity to reach out to other universities and organisations that might offer support in various aspects that would spur development, for example in mentoring and professional training in leadership, as well as exchange visits.

## Conclusion

This study highlights the intricacy of the environs under which academic middle-level managers work, and echoes the results in the literature. In a nutshell, however, academic middle managers play a central role in university management as brokers. The challenges they face, especially with administrative processes and overload, can be addressed through mentoring by senior managers, such as deans and directors, assuming that they are any better. Although the senior managers in the study asserted that they did offer mentoring to departmental chairs to help them execute their work more effectively, the fact that the departmental chairs didn't regard mentoring as professional development shows a gap between the two layers of management, which could be harmonised by blending mentoring and formal management training for middle managers.

As a new university transitioning from the community/private-sector to the state-sector model, the culture under which Kabale University had been operating is changing, which calls for training and retraining of all the stakeholders if the departmental chairs are to execute their role effectively. The university management should create opportunities for departmental chairs to acquire leadership management skills and knowledge to be effective in leading their departments.

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# Leadership Philosophy and Interventions to Support Middle-level Units within Large Academic Institutions: Experiences at the Makerere Peace and Conflict Studies Centre

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## Abstract

This article discusses practical lessons on how leadership intervention philosophy can be used to design and ensure that an academic unit within a big institution realises its mandate. The interventions took place at the Peace and Conflict Studies Centre (MPCSC) at Makerere University between 2015 and 2019. The undertaking was guided by systemic leadership intervention philosophy and transformational leadership. The methods used in the intervention included: leadership interventions, secondary data analysis, narrative analysis and autoethnography. The article uses a combination of analytical and auto-biographical reporting styles. Major findings include the following: there is a leadership skilling gap between high-level and mid-level managers in large university units; in large academic institutions, mid-level managers must combine traits and process leadership approaches in order realise progress. Key observations: student enrolment drives achieved a slight improvement in numbers (from 14 % in 2015/2016 to 42 % in 2018/2019); a minor improvement in workstations led to a more than 100 per cent increment in usage by staff and students; the Centre noticed a 63 per cent completion rate of specialised skills training by staff; on average, interdisciplinary research teams perform better than single discipline teams, but the former required extra effort to keep together; the interventions led to a 70 per cent increase in community outreach through avenues such as projects, experiential learning sessions, consultancies, etc.

**Keywords:** leadership, interventions, middle-level units, academic institutions, Makerere University

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## Résumé

Cet article traite des leçons pratiques sur la façon dont la philosophie interventionniste du leadership peut être utilisée pour concevoir et garantir qu'une entité académique marginale au sein d'une grande institution exécute son mandat. Les interventions ont eu lieu au Centre d'études sur la paix et les conflits (MPCSC) de l'Université de Makerere entre 2015 et 2019. L'entreprise a été guidée par la philosophie interventionniste du leadership systémique et le leadership transformationnel. Les méthodes utilisées dans l'intervention incluaient : les interventions de leadership, l'analyse des données secondaires, l'analyse narrative et l'auto-ethnographie. L'article utilise une combinaison de styles de rapport analytique et autobiographique. Les principales conclusions sont les suivantes : il existe un écart de compétences en matière de leadership entre les administrateurs de niveau supérieur et ceux de niveau intermédiaire dans les grandes entités universitaires ; dans ces dernières, les administrateurs de niveau intermédiaire doivent combiner des qualités et user d'approches de leadership pour réussir sa mission. Principales observations : les campagnes d'inscription des étudiants ont permis d'améliorer légèrement les statistiques (de 14% en 2015/2016 à 42% en 2018/2019) ; une amélioration légère des postes de travail a entraîné une augmentation de plus de 100 pour cent de leur utilisation par le personnel et les étudiants ; le Centre a enregistré un taux d'achèvement de 63 pour cent de la formation aux compétences spécialisées par le personnel ; en moyenne, les équipes de recherche interdisciplinaires obtiennent de meilleurs résultats que les équipes monodisciplinaires, mais les premières nécessitent des efforts supplémentaires pour rester soudées ; les interventions ont entraîné une augmentation de 70 pour cent de rapprochement communautaire par le biais de projets, de sessions d'apprentissage par l'expérience, de consultations, etc.

**Mots-clés :** leadership, interventions, entités de niveau intermédiaire, institutions académiques, Université de Makerere.

## Introduction

On a bright sunny morning I cautiously opened the door to the co-ordinator's office at the Makerere University Peace and Conflict Studies Centre (MPCSC), filled with a mixture of apprehension, excitement and burdensomeness. It was 2015 and I had just been elected co-ordinator of the Centre, under the Department of Religion and Peace Studies. My election made me the first woman to lead that unit, which is sited in one of the leading universities on the African continent.<sup>1</sup> At the time of my election to the office, I was heavily pregnant. It was therefore a very heavy season for me, both

physically and in heart. Amidst that state, I remembered the wise words of my grandmother (Ms. Agnes Babirye Wakaisuka, RIP), ‘My granddaughter, you are such a strong woman and I know you will one day serve this world in a major capacity.’ The remembrance of those words encouraged me and I set out to undertake the task ahead, to deliver satisfactory services to clients and put the Peace and Conflict Studies programme on the map, locally and internationally.– Helen Nambalirwa Nkabala

The Centre had a number of challenges which included low staff morale, low student enrolment, inadequate resource mobilisation and inadequate institutional space, among others. As a Centre, it was not quite clearly positioned within the bigger university structure, especially after the transition to a collegiate administrative system. It also needed a clearer leadership philosophy alignment by the time the new co-ordinator assumed office, to execute its mandate within the department and the overall university. Faced with such challenges, a combination of the co-ordinator’s personal wit and support from a transdepartmental team enabled her to transform the Centre, and the Centre was able to register some successes and learnt the lessons contained in this article.

This article discusses practical lessons on how leadership intervention philosophy can be used to enable a marginal unit within a big academic institution to realise its mandate. The interventions took place at the Peace and Conflict Studies Centre (MPCSC) at Makerere University between 2015 and 2019, and some are still ongoing. The undertaking was guided by systemic leadership intervention philosophy and transformational leadership. The objectives of the interventions were:

1. To increase enrolment and delivery of interdisciplinary and skill-based graduate teaching;
2. To promote an interdisciplinary research culture; and
3. To increase visibility and outreach of the MPCSC at national, regional and global levels.

Using an autoethnographic lens, the authors present an analytical and autoethnographic report of part of the story of the MPCSC. The report starts with a brief history of the university and the Centre, presents the leadership gap and methodology applied, then gives a brief outline of the leadership philosophical and theoretical framework, and concludes with a discussion of the practical interventions implemented during this period and their impact.

## Leadership Needs in a Changing African University: The Makerere Case

Makerere University, which started as a small technical college in 1922, was formally incorporated under The Makerere University Act in 1970. This status continued until the enactment of the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act (UOTIA) (2008). Further amendments occurred, and in 2012 the university was transformed from a faculty-based to a collegiate system, with nine colleges and one School of Law.

Just like many African universities, Makerere has undergone rapid expansion in the past decades, in terms of the increase in student enrolment, staff recruitment, academic programmes, community outreach and internationalisation, among other areas. This growth, however, has not been followed by the requisite leadership skilling and preparation to meet the demands of a twenty-first-century university. In many cases these changes have stretched the leadership capacities of the university.

The wider context within which the expansion of African universities has taken place has been discussed by Mahmood Mamdani (2007), who explores the neoliberal reforms pushed by the World Bank on African higher education and their resulting wider implications and challenges for the African university. In his book, *Scholars in the Marketplace*, Mamdani delves into the leadership crisis that rocked the Makerere University Business School (MUBS), a semi-autonomous affiliate of Makerere University, which drew in government officials (Mamdani 2007: 206–7). The institutional reforms that Mamdani discussed started in 1992 through the urging of the World Bank and brought about enormous changes at Makerere University. The university's decision-making became decentralised to the extent that no one, neither the centre nor any of the constitutive units, had a comprehensive idea of the reforms in the university (2007: 32). Mamdani observed that university leadership had a duty to 'safeguard [academic] quality and encourage innovativeness' (2007: 54); but this presented a challenge to Makerere University.

The reforms led not only to a rapid duplication of academic programmes, especially in the humanities, which were turned into cash cows for the almost wholly privatised university, but also to people taking up university leadership positions without the requisite preparations and skilling. The university leadership has continued to address this challenge over the years. Recently there have been more calls for leadership training and more practical steps are being taken to meet this need. The principal of MUBS has since instituted several leadership training programmes to equip the managers with change management skills.

### *The Makerere Peace and Conflict Studies Centre*

By 2015, when the new co-ordinator took office, the Centre had problems in certain areas of performance, such as student enrolment and research collaboration, among others. As Mamdani (2007) discussed, the initial reforms at the university had led to some diversification in programmes offered by the department. While government and high-level university managers pushed for governance changes at Makerere University, mid-level leaders were charged with implementing the rapidly evolving university policies. But at the Centre we soon realised that there was not enough research and knowledge on how mid-level university leaders implemented these changes in relation to the university mandate, of research, teaching and community outreach.

The Makerere University Peace and Conflict Studies programme falls under the Department of Religion and Peace Studies, which is within the School of Liberal and Performing Arts, in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. The Department runs several undergraduate and graduate programmes in religion, peace and conflict studies. Of these, the Master of Arts degree in Peace and Conflict Studies commenced in 2003 as an interdisciplinary, two-year course, the primary goal of which is to produce competent and well-grounded scholars and practitioners in peace, conflict resolution and transformation. The MA programme has since produced fruitful research working with Ugandan government institutions, universities and other tertiary institutions in Uganda, East Africa and the wider sub-Saharan Africa region. It also has collaborated with institutions in Norway, the United Kingdom, and with organisations such as the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), the German scholar exchange service – DAAD, the Norwegian Programme for Research, Development and Education – NUFU, UN Women-Uganda and the United States Institute of Peace – USIP. Given Uganda's geopolitical location and its importance in the volatile region of East and Central Africa and the Great Lakes Region in particular, strengthening the existing Peace and Conflict Studies programmes and approaches enable Makerere University to contribute to peace research in the region and enrich stakeholders' interventions.

The Centre has also managed exchange programmes for students from North America, Europe and Africa's Great Lakes Region. During these exchange visits, students have visited refugee settlements and camps for Internally Displaced people (IDPs) in Uganda. In turn, Students from the Centre have visited several universities in North America and Europe. The Peace and Conflict Studies programme has also produced several

publications. In addition, the programme has hosted, convened, moderated and or facilitated several important public dialogues around governance, human security and peace-building issues in Uganda.

### **Theoretical Framework and Leadership Gap**

Middle-level academics play an important role in running universities in Africa. They provide co-ordination for faculty, design and execute academic programmes and ensure quality control. At the same time, these academics face difficult responsibilities, such as integration into a complex organisation, performance amidst rapid change, and talent development among others. Lisa Haneberg (2010) has argued that middle-level academics require coaching and induction to realise their full potential, but, in most organisations, leadership development at this level has been given little attention.

Wolverton and Gmelch (1999) carried out research on the duties of heads of departments in academic institutions in the United States and Australia, and reported that middle-level academics who are appointed to leadership and management roles were given six main responsibilities, namely: routine administration, resource management, scholarship, leadership, faculty development and resource development. Mampane (2017) has argued that since most middle-level managers in higher education are former class teachers, they require leadership training, which would equip them with 'updated abilities, interests and knowledge for leadership' (Mampane 2017: 143). Her research concluded that acquisition of leadership and management skills for effective teaching and learning by HoDs has a positive impact on learner performance and teacher commitment (Mampane 2017: 148).

The need for leadership skilling for middle-level managers at academic institutions has been affirmed by various bodies, such as the Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA). In their report, *Building Regional Higher Education Capacity Through Academic Mobility* (2011), they note that SADC universities had an increase of 5.8 per cent in foreign students that year, which presented a unique challenge in educational management (SARUA 2011: 1–2). The report also identified issues of quality assurance and staff depletion or attrition as affecting effective university education. It recommended more staff and student mobility, plus other novel ideas, such as 'diaspora lecturers'. The Inter-University Council of East Africa (IUCEA) also raised concerns about the need for skilful leadership at universities in that region. It recommended strategic leadership training and robust quality control measures to mitigate this challenge. It encouraged the engagement of middle-level managers at universities in the region, quality control and the establishment of high standards of self-assessment (IUCEA 2010).



**Leadership Intervention Frameworks and Philosophy**

It has been argued that leadership interventions are successful in enhancing leader effectiveness (Reichard and Avolio 2005). This assumption is premised on the type of leadership exercised and the nature of the interventions that are determined or designed. It was therefore important for our intervention scheme to understand the nature of leadership at the Centre. We observed that there are two major types of leadership: *Traits* leadership ('Nature') and *Process* leadership ('Nurture'). The former is the type of leadership that is based on innate qualities or capabilities, whereas the latter refers to leadership skills that are groomed qualities through training or observation. The type of leader affects interactions with followers, and this is a critical factor in determining the intervention (see Falk 2003). A review of the leadership type that the co-ordinator was providing at the Centre showed that it was a combination of both traits and process leadership. So, to achieve our goals, we agreed to design interventions that incorporated both types of leadership.

Bolman and Deal (1991) have developed a Four Framework Approach to explain four types of leadership framework and philosophy: political, human resource, symbolic and structural. They tested these frameworks on a number of leaders and managers and found that 'Managerial effectiveness is related to an emphasis on rationality and organisational structure. Leadership effectiveness is linked to symbols and culture. For men and women in comparable positions, gender is unrelated to leadership orientations or to their effectiveness as managers or leaders.' Their framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

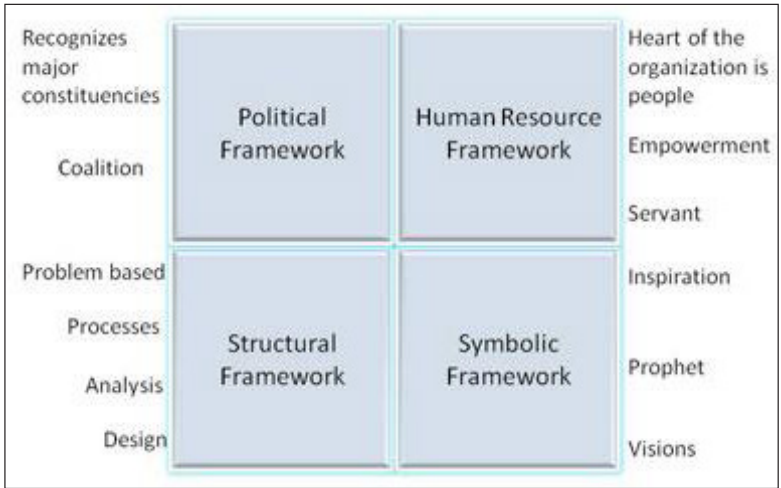


Figure 1: Leadership framework  
Source: Adapted from Bolman and Deal (1991)

The political framework considers pleasing a leader's constituency and building coalitions; the human resource framework is aimed at building the capabilities of the people who are working in the unit; the symbolic framework is focused on keeping the organisation inspired and motivated; the structural framework is concerned with organisational design and set-up. This framework was used in the interventions at the Centre, by selecting from the different sections of the grid and designing interventions in tandem. However, a limitation was recognised in terms of the structural interventions because at middle-level management there is little that can be done to change the structures in place.

Nkomo and Ngambi (2009) have used an African critical gender approach in researching women's leadership in Africa. They have generated what they refer to as the integrative framework, drawing from African feminism and postcolonial theory. They propose it as a framework that can advance the understanding of African women in leadership and management. Their critical review shows that even though women's representation in leadership had grown exponentially over thirty years (1970s to 2009), there had not been a keen study of the impact of African women on leadership and management. They observed that there is a glaring paucity of systematic research focusing directly on African women leaders and managers (Nkomo and Ngambi 2009: 53). They further argue that their integrative framework provides a way in which to apply postcolonial theory and African feminism to analyse women's leadership. The leadership interventions designed for the Peace Centre were cognisant of this approach and applied in the sense of giving African women the opportunity to explore their leadership potential and fill the observable gap.

### **Administration Theory**

Metagovernance is defined as the science of managing amalgamated groups of units, which share interests and a common vision. It is the engineering of the administrative and governance environment and conditions towards specific goals (Jessop 2008: 7). One of the key thinkers on the concept of metagovernance is Bob Jessop. He states that, '... the emergence of metagovernance...[is] part of the more general change in the forms of statehood. Metagovernance is a response to governance failure' (Jessop 2008: 218). He advances three basic modes of metagovernance, namely, 'meta-exchange', 'meta-organisation' and 'meta-hierarchy'. The first deals with redesigning markets, the second with redesigning organisations and the third with organising the conditions for self-organisation. Metagovernance is about the engineering of the political and social environment to ensure that institutions work. In Jessop's view, there are three ideal styles of

metagovernance: hierarchical, network and market styles (Jessop 2011: 106–23). Jessop postulates that, ‘The calibration of the three in an overall framework is the subject matter of meta-governance.’ (ibid.).

From this perspective, the administrator needs to be well versed in administration to apply any of the three types or variations of metagovernance. ‘Hierarchical’ means governance that lays emphasis on top-bottom structures and respects traditional power structures and positions in each organisation. ‘Network’ means the administration of organisations through purposefully establishing networks; it spreads organisational power horizontally. ‘Market’ places emphasis on the role of market forces in shaping or framing the organisation. It is suffice to note that there are scholars who think that a combination of all three is better for administrators who are dealing with a mixed administrative environment where public and private interests meet (Meuleman 2008).

Jessop’s study recognises the reality that most public academic institutions in Africa are hierarchical in power structure due to the governance bureaucracy and colonial legacies. Therefore, this leadership intervention took into consideration the hierarchical power structures at Makerere in application and analysis. A hierarchical power arrangement is one in which authority is arranged in such a way that the higher the power grid, the more sacred the one in charge is portrayed or viewed to be. Vredenburg and Brender (1998) analysed the ethical nature of hierarchical power and the implications of its abuse. They developed a ‘process’ model (1998: 1340) for analysing the impact of the abuse of hierarchical power, which contains two parameters: disrespect for people and interference with job performance. A cursory observation of power dynamics in East Africa indicates that the abuse of hierarchical power could be the dominant expression of power relations in the region. And it has caused a lot of ethical challenges in the political and administrative processes, which this study considers a bit more in the subsequent sections.

Likewise, Vredenburg and Brender (1998) also recognised that there is a need for networking at higher institutions of learning because of the nature of academic and research work. The network type means an interlocking system of power relations or interconnected groups of power holders, sometimes expressed as public–public and public–private partnerships (Sørensen and Torfing 2009). The ‘public–public’ type refers to public or state authorities collaborating on given projects or policies, whereas ‘public–private’ networks mean the collaboration between a state unit and a private entity on a given project. Sørensen and Torfing (2009) argue that networking governance is useful because it fosters democratic and effective

administration (2009: 240). It facilitates the regulation of standards across a wide spectrum of units, the conflict resolution of difficulties that result from national policy differences, broader planning purposes and the mobilisation all the stakeholders (2009: 234).

### *Collaborative Leadership*

In the intervention, there is a combination of metagovernance with collaborative leadership to encourage the development of horizontal research collaborative approaches to meet international norms of interdisciplinary and interinstitutional collaboration. Horizontal collaboration enables project teams to collaborate across institutional and organisational borders, such as across academic and business lines. It also allows for knowledge fertilisation across academic boundaries and learning best practices from cutting-edge or fast-emerging fields. At the institutional level, administrative interconnections were established between the Centre and other universities and institutions in other parts of the world. This encouraged inter-unit and interdisciplinary prospects and projects for the cross-fertilisation of research ideas and dissemination.

### *Intervention Design and Methodology*

The research methodology we used was qualitative because of its good analytical value in context-rich research that deals with leadership interventions. The interventions were premised on the acknowledgement of the need for leadership intervention at middle-management level to deliver satisfactory services to clients. The intervention was conceived using a systemic intervention philosophy, which means that the interventions were carried out within the framework of the Makerere system or structural set-up within which the Centre exists. This intervention was designed as a qualitative study aimed at observing the impact of intervention mechanisms adopted at the MPCSC and to evaluate the capacity of middle-level academic managers to transform academic units within complex institutional environments such as Makerere University.

The assumption that guided the co-ordinator's practice was that achieving sustainable leadership within a rapidly changing African university education environment is dependent on effective mid-level leadership. The key question was: How can mid-level leadership interventions enable the Peace Centre improve the delivery of its research, teaching and community outreach mandate? The methods used in the intervention included leadership interventions, secondary data analysis, narrative analysis and autoethnography. These methods are depicted in Table 1. The specific

tools used included document and records review, evaluative analysis and observations. The interventions designed included student enrolment drives, space improvements, skills training, positive reinforcement and motivation, building research teams and community outreach.

**Table 1:** Methods used

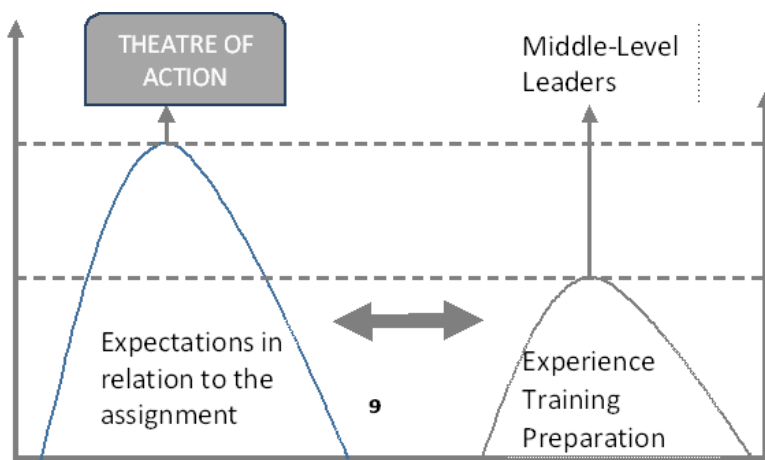
METHOD	TOOL(S)	INSTRUMENTS	EXECUTION	OUTCOME
Secondary data analysis	Document analysis	Document analysis scheme	Reports and documents analysed	Insights on theories, policy alignment, gaps and discourses
Narrative analysis	Interviews	KIIs on former managers of the Centre	Experts and key stakeholder interviews	Expert opinion and data on PSS
Autoethnography	Observation	Reporting by mid-level manager	Change analysis	Intervention impact data
Leadership interventions	Tailored interventions	Intervention monitoring	Round table discussions	Intervention impact data

The Makerere Peace and Conflict Studies Centre was used as an atypical case study because of its capacity to yield a wealth of insightful information (Gerring 2007). Such cases can act as both a methodological paradigm and a data analysis technique and platform (Flyvbjerg 2006). The study was an in-depth examination of the Peace and Conflict Studies Centre aimed at understanding how middle-level leadership interventions impact on the performance of university units.

The study sought to bridge the knowledge and implementation gap (see Figure 2) that exists between high-level and mid-level university managers. This creates a divergence between policy designers and implementers, thus affecting the university mandate to provide research, teaching and community outreach.

The interventions designed were:

1. Space improvements
2. Skills training
3. Positive reinforcement and motivation
4. Research teams building, and
5. Community outreach.



**Figure 2:** Middle-level leadership intervention knowledge and implementation gap  
Source: Authors

These interventions were designed following given leadership frameworks. Autoethnography was used for the purposes of capturing the co-ordinator's story as a leader, using a personal journal to capture changes and challenges that the MPCSC was facing. Document review was done on institutional documents, journal articles, historical accounts of Makerere University and policy documents, to get an insight into the management of the university.

### **Implementation of Practical Leadership Interventions**

The specific leadership interventions that were designed and executed included the following:

1. Enrolment drives and staff increment;
2. Environmental improvements (i.e. space increments and environment improvements);
3. Skills training (ToT skilling in virtual/online teaching; Alternative to Violence Programme skills);
4. Positive reinforcement and motivation (motivational talks and presentations);
5. Research teams building (interdisciplinary research team formation and functionality monitoring);
6. Community outreach (community-based experiential learning and consultancies); and
7. Promotion of the Centre (website development, promotional materials, dissemination, etc.).

The results of the leadership interventions are summarised in Table 2.

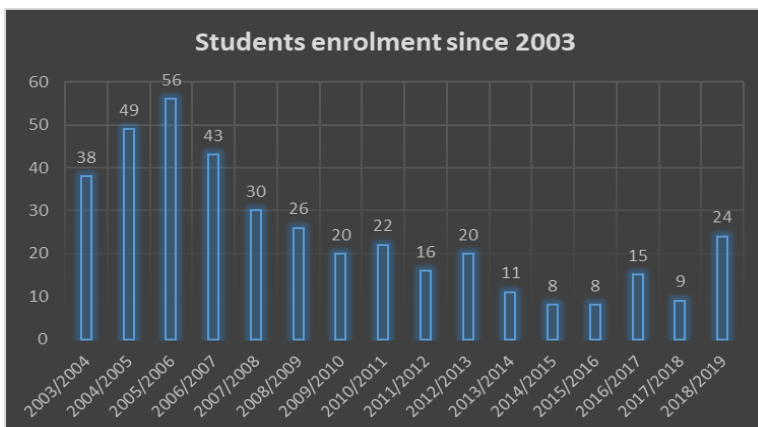
**Table 2:** Leadership intervention strategies

OBJECTIVE	INTERVENTION STRATEGY	EXECUTION	RESULTS
1. To increase enrolment and delivery of interdisciplinary and skill-based graduate teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Enrolment drives</li> <li>- ToT interventions</li> <li>- Staff increment</li> </ul>	3 Annual enrolment and recruitment drives 4 ToT and staff skilling sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Few staff engage in student enrolment drives</li> <li>- Enrolment improved between 2017-19</li> <li>- ToT improved AVP and online teaching</li> </ul>
2. To promote interdisciplinary research culture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Formation of functional research teams</li> <li>- Positive reinforcement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Two research teams suggested and formed:                              Research Team 1: departmental;                              Research Team 2: Cross-departments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Research Team 1 proved dysfunctional</li> <li>- Research Team 2 has been functional but with challenges of cohesion</li> </ul>
3. To increase visibility and outreach of the MPCSC at national, regional and global level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Engage in community-based learning</li> <li>- Provide outreach services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Targeted 1 community-based experiential learning session p.a</li> <li>- Targeted 2 major consultancies or community outreaches p.a.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 3 extended community-based experiential learning sessions executed</li> <li>- 2 consultancy proposals won and carried out</li> </ul>

***Enrolment Drives and Staff Increment***

The Centre carried out enrolment drives using online advertising, newspaper advertising through the Academic Registrar’s office and word-of-mouth promotion through our alumni. This resulted in a revival in the numbers of graduate students enrolling (see Figure 3).

The number of students enrolling for the MA Peace and Conflict Studies had dropped from the peak of fifty-six students in 2005/2006 to eight students in 2014/2015. Decreasing enrolment numbers and rapid changes in university education terrain had exerted pressure on the traditional approach to the university mandate at Makerere.



**Figure 3:** Student enrolment drives

Source: Departmental file record

The staff recruitment strategy was quite challenging because there was a government moratorium on staff recruitment at universities in Uganda except for replacements or in critical fields. So, we went through our mother Department of Religion and Peace Studies and then the college principal to engage higher-level administrators and find solutions to this challenge. The result was that some extra staff were recruited on a part-time basis. We also were able to borrow staff from other units to assist in teaching some courses and in supervising graduate students. This led to an increase in academic staff to twenty-four staff (including part-timers), as presented in Table 3, which provides a breakdown of current staff numbers.

**Table 3:** Staff capacity at the MPCSC

POSITION	CAPACITY (2014)	CAPACITY (2019)
Professor	2	4
Associate Professor	1	2
Senior Lecturer	4	7
Lecturer	5	5
Borrowed staff	0	1

The staff numbers improved a bit over the years as Table 3 shows. However, one of the biggest challenges that we still faced in 2019 was the high rate of staff turnover. Employee turnover is a general challenge for public universities in the country, and is due to inadequate remuneration. Currently, the situation is improving as a result of the salary increment in



the past two years. This increment, however, has led to the new challenge of dissatisfaction resulting from the divide between the senior staff in the rank of associate professor and above, and the middle or junior staff, including senior lecturers, lecturers and assistant lecturers. A study on the same will be of benefit to the grid. As a result, public universities are losing talented and skilled junior staff to the private sector in significant numbers.

### ***Environmental Improvements***

Under this category of leadership intervention, there was a deliberate effort geared towards improving the work environment. The MPCSC had been given some working space on the campus in a building that had been a residential house for senior staff. This house was being shared with other programmes under the Department of Performing Arts and Film. So, one side of the building was used by another department, which resulted in occasions of inconvenience to the staff and graduate students who held many learning activities there.

We approached higher-level university administrators to request better working and teaching space but had little success due to the high demand from the other units within the university. So, we settled for the existing space. Through funding from the embassy of Turkey, secured by Helen N. Nkabala the coordinator and Haji Abdu Haji Abdu Katende, a senior member of staff, we were able to acquire furnishings, a functioning boardroom and ten desktop computers for the graduate study space, and improved the staff offices. We also set up a space for making tea and coffee, plus minor gadgets for making hot drinks.

This intervention was able to make working space for twelve staff members daily (from five), which was an increase of over 100 per cent. Among the graduate students, the increase in usage was more dramatic: records on the use of study materials in the reading space showed that it increased, from six students to nineteen daily. This included students from other departments plus other staff. There was a 32 per cent increase in staff interaction at teatime in the space we provided for making hot drinks at break times.

### ***Skills Training***

We conducted Training of Trainers (ToT) sessions in order to update the skills of the staff teaching the Masters' programme on Peace and Conflict Studies. We were able to carry them out in three areas, namely: Advanced research skills in conflict studies; ToT skilling in virtual/online teaching; and Alternative to Violence Programme skills. Our records indicate that during these training sessions we had an average completion rate for each course of

63 per cent for each session (DRPS 2018). This could not be compared with earlier training because there were no records of completion of training by staff. But we think it is a commendable completion rate for staff training. However, there is room for improvement and we plan to work on this going forward. The annual staff evaluation reports indicate that staff<sup>2</sup> are more skilled than before. In addition, the students' evaluations show that 72 per cent of the staff are more confident, 83 per cent deliver their teaching well and 69 per cent carry out their supervision roles on time (DRPS 2018). However, we need to carry out a proper client and stakeholder satisfaction survey to establish these reports scientifically.

### ***Positive Reinforcement and Motivation***

Since 2017 we have conducted five motivational events, such as workshops and talks, to inspire our students and staff: three were for students, and two were for staff. During those events we had a 92 per cent attendance by the students, whereas the staff events attracted a 72 per cent attendance. Even though the level of motivation acquired by the participants is difficult to measure, the increase in engagement at the Centre by the students and staff is indicative of a more motivated faculty.

### ***Building Research Teams***

In terms of building research teams at the Centre, the co-ordinator experimented with two types so that we could compare results, as depicted in Figure 4. The first type was an in-house research team, made up of members of the same department (Department of Religion and Peace Studies). The second research team was interdisciplinary, made up of members sourced from a variety of units (see Figure 4). These teams were encouraged to work together, generate projects and disseminate research findings together, plus other activities. The formation and findings were interesting and gave us lessons for the future.

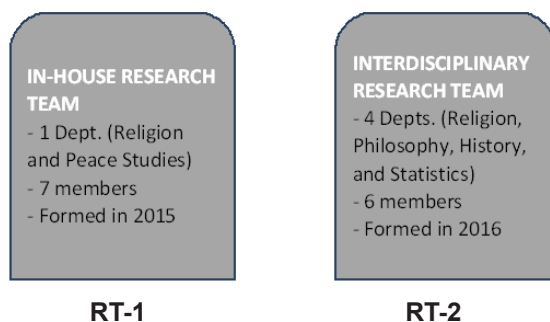


Figure 4:  
Research team composition

The performance of the two research teams was monitored, and some interesting observations have been made about their functionality, as Table 4 shows. The differences are marked: it was easier and faster to form RT-1 because the members belonged to one department; it was more difficult to build RT-2 because they came from different departments. This also affected the cohesion of the two kinds of research teams, with RT-1 scoring high while RT-2 cohesion was ranked as medium. However, the interdisciplinary research team seemed to get their proposals written faster than the in-house research team. It should be noted that this experiment is still ongoing, and more observations will be made along the way.

**Table 4:** Research teams’ performance

PERFORMANCE VARIABLE	RESEARCH TEAM	
	RT-1 (In-house)	RT-2 (Interdisciplinary)
Number of members	7	6
Year of formation	2015	2016
Average age	51 years	39 years
Disciplines represented	1	4
Proposals written (over 5 yrs)	4	11
Projects conducted	2	5
Level of team cohesion	High	Medium
Joint publications	2	10
Joint dissemination events	2	4

***Community Outreach***

The Makerere Peace and Conflict Studies Centre set out to engage in community outreach as one of the mandates of the university to make academia relevant to society. The Centre has mainly been involved in community-based experiential learning, outreach courses for the public, and consultancies for outside clients. In 2015 the Centre executed a project on experiential peace learning. It was carried out in four communities, with twenty-one students and seven staff members taking part in the project. This resulted in establishing collaborative relationships with several community-based organisations and NGOs, which included: Muslim Centre for Justice and Law (MCJL); International Alert (IA); Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI); Action for Fundamental Change and Development (AFCAD); United Religions Initiative Great Lakes (URIGL); and Inter-Religious Council of Uganda (IRCU). Table 4 shows selected community outreach projects and assignments carried out by staff at the Makerere Peace and Conflict Studies Centre.

Table 5: Selected community outreach projects

ASSIGNMENT	LOCATION	ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTION	CLIENT	PERIOD
Intermediary course in: 'Peacebuilding, human security and conflict transformation'	Bwebajja, Uganda	Designing an advanced course, materials development and delivery	Uganda Police Senior Command and Staff Training College	Jan-Feb 2019
Conflict analysis and the implementation of 1325	Kigali, Rwanda	Designed, developed and delivered 5-day training to 22 senior prison officers from the East African Community	East African Community (EAC) Secretariat	19-24 Nov. 2017
Evaluation of CSO-led programmes for countering extreme violence in Uganda	Uganda (Northern and Central regions)	Developed specialised tools for evaluation of Civil Society Organisation (CSOs)-led programmes for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)	United States Institute for Peace (USIP)	Nov 2016-Nov 2017 (1- year project)
Conflict analysis, resolution and conflict reporting	Juba, South Sudan	Designed, developed and delivered 3-day training to 15 UN personnel in Juba	United Nations Mission to South Sudan (UNMISS)	16-18 October 2017
Advanced course in: 'Peacebuilding, human security and conflict transformation'	Bwebajja, Uganda	Designing an advanced course, materials development and delivery	Uganda Police Senior Command and Staff Training College	Oct-Dec 2017
Conflict transformation training	Juba, South Sudan	Preparing materials and delivering 5-day training to 25 UN personnel in Juba	United Nations Mission to South Sudan (UNMISS)	13-17 March 2017
Advanced course in: 'Peacebuilding, human security and conflict transformation'	Bwebajja, Uganda	Designing an advanced course, materials development and delivery	Uganda Police Force (UPF)	Oct-Dec 2016
Reconciliation and social cohesion	Juba, South Sudan	Designed, developed and delivered 2-day training to 20 UN personnel in Juba	United Nations Mission to South Sudan (UNMISS)	19-20 October 2017
Conflict Transformation training	Juba, South Sudan	Materials preparation and delivered a 5-day training to 25 UN Personnel in Juba	United Nations Mission to South Sudan (UNMISS)	13-17 Feb 2017
Advanced course in: 'Peacebuilding, human security and conflict transformation'	Bwebajja, Uganda	Designing an advanced course, materials development and delivery	Uganda Police Force	Oct-Dec 2016

### ***Promotion of the Centre***

The Centre embarked on promotional activities, which included website development, promotional materials and dissemination events. The Centre's first website was launched in 2016 and it led to contact from global audiences; many students have ended up applying to study at the Centre after coming across it. In 2019, after a very competitive process, the Centre was chosen to host the first Rotary Peace Centre on the continent of Africa. This led to further growth of the Peace Programme at Makerere University as can be seen on our new website: <http://www.rpc.mak.ac.ug>.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

From the above presentation, it is evident that people react differently when faced with an opportunity to take on leadership. In the case of Helen Nambalirwa Nkabala, the co-ordinator presented in this paper, without much prior knowledge she adopted the traits of collective and distributive leadership styles, tapping into the strengths of her colleagues to drive the Centre forward. Also, the co-ordinator was very determined to transform the Peace Centre into an admirable place, and in this was again unknowingly driven by the transformational leadership style. Through this determination, by the time of concluding this publication, the Peace and Conflict Studies programme has grown to host the first and only Rotary Peace Center on the continent under the leadership of Helen Nambalirwa Nkabala. It is therefore advisable that new leaders faced with similar situations read about and engage with these styles to guide their action plans and points. The most important and most sustainable approach in the need for systemic university change and policy is deliberate and continuous holistic staff training and development avenues, through seminars and other means, for all – since they are all staff who are potential leaders. Indeed, there have been recent efforts in this line by the Makerere University Management through the office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Academic Affairs, Prof. Umar Kakumba.

### **Notes**

1. Makerere University was ranked 5th in Africa by the Times Higher Education in Africa report (2018); it was also 2nd in research output in Africa.
2. The Makerere staff review report is carried out annually but is subject to confidentiality clauses that limited the authors from sharing such data here.

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# Barriers to Middle-level Academic Leadership for Female Academics in Nigerian Higher Education

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## Abstract

With a rising number of women in middle-level higher education leadership, vast opportunities abound. Yet middle-level female academics are faced with sticky floors that jeopardise their significant inflow to senior leadership positions. By arguing that intra-feminist issues pertaining to higher education leadership's leaky pipeline have not gained sufficient attention, this study interrogates internal dynamics among middle-level female academics, to identify threats to the prevalent notion of universal sisterhood that ought to boost women's efforts at countering forces that militate against their upward movement in higher education (HE) leadership. This ethnographic work will engage with the literature, trends and narratives that are shaping women's leadership in HE in West Africa, specifically among middle-level female academics in Nigeria's public and private universities. Responding to the question of place-making for women in higher education leadership – at whose expense and to what end? – the study submits that beyond acclaimed androcentric barriers to women's participation and representation in senior higher education leadership, there are less visible contributory factors among womenfolk, which lead to role entrapment and spatial entrapment. The study proposes symbiotic interactionism for female academics to attain and remain in the upper echelons of HE leadership.

**Keywords:** middle-level university leaders, female academics, higher education leadership, symbiotic interactionism

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## Résumé

La présence croissante des femmes aux postes de direction de niveau intermédiaire dans l'enseignement supérieur ouvre un boulevard d'opportunités. Les femmes universitaires de niveau intermédiaire n'en sont pas moins confrontées à des obstacles qui compromettent leur accès aux postes de direction. En partant du principe que les questions intra-féministes relatives au « tuyau percé » (parcours parsemé d'embûches) dans l'enseignement supérieur n'ont pas reçu suffisamment d'attention, cette étude interroge les dynamiques internes au sein des femmes universitaires de niveau intermédiaire, afin d'identifier les menaces à la notion prévalente de solidarité féminine universelle qui devrait stimuler les efforts des femmes pour contrer les forces qui militent contre leur mouvement ascendant dans l'enseignement supérieur (ES). Ce travail ethnographique se penchera sur la littérature, les tendances et les récits qui façonnent le leadership féminin dans l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique de l'Ouest, en particulier chez les femmes universitaires de niveau intermédiaire dans les universités publiques et privées du Nigeria. Répondant à la question de la création d'une place pour les femmes dans le leadership de l'enseignement supérieur (aux dépens de qui et dans quel but) l'étude soutient qu'au-delà des barrières androcentriques reconnues pour la participation et la représentation du leadership féminin dans les hautes instances de l'enseignement supérieur, il existe des facteurs contributifs moins visibles chez les femmes, qui mènent au piège des rôles et au piège spatial. L'étude propose un interactionnisme symbiotique pour que les femmes universitaires atteignent et restent dans les échelons supérieurs de la gestion de l'enseignement supérieur.

**Mots-clés :** questionnaires d'université de niveau intermédiaire, femmes universitaires, leadership dans l'enseignement supérieur, interactionnisme symbiotique.

## Introduction

The importance of higher education as a crucial asset for the knowledge economy, technological advancement and socioeconomic reconstruction has been historically emphasised by scholars (Dearing 1997; Bloom et al. 2005; Materu 2007; Omotoso 2010; Oanda 2013b). Globally, higher education (HE) plays significant roles in nation-building, contributing both human and intellectual power for national development within its three cardinal functions – research, teaching and service. Beyond these, the entire paraphernalia of managing HE has been strongly influenced by internationalisation. Noting how the higher education sector in Africa has attracted attention from internal and external stakeholders, educational institutions in Africa are still fraught with challenges, including a weak

research base and poor governance, little access to funds and concerns about poor quality, among others (Jowi 2013). In Mauritania, the Ministry for Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS) is responsible for tertiary education. Problems stemming from overcrowding on campus, theory-based curriculum and low skill competencies breed failures to meet the country's needs, hence raising the country's unemployment level (Agyeman 2007). In their discourse on HE in Liberia, Gbollie and David (2014) raise questions of expansion versus quality. Stating that the quality of higher education being offered by colleges and universities remains a contentious issue despite the implementation of some reform mechanisms by government, they argue that some of the hidden challenges confronting HE quality in Liberia seem more political than educational.

As important as the quality of HE is, this work considers the quality of the leadership that drives the expected quality of HE to be equally important. Leadership entails capacity: 'the ability to skillfully encourage dialogue between all levels of decision-making, to establish processes and transparency in decision-making, to articulate values and visions clearly but not impose them' (Omotoso 2013: 58). In Nigeria, with over 100 universities, HE leadership contends with a large student population, frequent unrests due to students' riots and staff strike actions, an unstable academic calendar due to frequent closure of campuses, and a low quality of education and graduates, all closely linked to the instability of government policies (Onwuejeogwn 1992; Muoghalu 2018). This resonates with the identified disconnect between national-level policies and institutional realities (Jowi, Obamba and Sehoole 2013), which has resulted in setbacks in producing knowledge-based economies within Africa.

Quality leadership resonates with an understanding of global best practices, a consciousness of the need for transparency and accountability and a focus on institutional objectives for the improvement of HE within selected boundaries. For instance, quality leadership could be stifled by government regulations whereby the government retains supervisory authority over universities and appoints senior university managers, as occurs in Benin, Cameroon and Togo. Other factors that play a determinative role (Bloom 2005) in leadership are sensible macroeconomic management, good governance and openness to trade. Combined with these constituents, HE is indeed value-laden and it then becomes imperative to engage in a critical study of leadership as a prominent element of HE.

Within the discourse of HE, key issues of content, players and methodology have remained central. While this study does not discount content and methodology, it focuses on the players, among whom are

middle-level staff saddled with HE leadership and management, tasked with achieving institutional mandates alongside personal aspirations (Jowi 2013; Oanda 2013a). Administrative leadership as well as private-sector leadership roles held by middle-level academics make this an important group because it is from this cadre that the top management of universities are drawn globally, in the hope that they have gathered sufficient leadership skills by experience. Thus, as much as HE provides platforms for self-development and social transformation, it equally opens up spaces for power and gender relations.

About 30 per cent of businesses in Africa employ women in senior roles (Grant Thornton 2018). Discussing the constructions of women's roles and status in vocational education in Togo, Goura and Seltzer-Kelly (2013) recognised that patriarchal attitudes and authoritarian structures in Togolese society breed complications that are connected with women's social autonomy and economic self-sufficiency. The largely patriarchal systems that operate across Nigerian communities also have a strong influence on leadership patterns. They reiterate how HE reimages leadership frameworks. When a community raises a culture-based argument that men are born to be leaders and women to be followers, there is an increased tendency to absorb more men than women into leadership roles. This might have influenced leadership trends within higher institutions, which is why this study pays specific attention to women's leadership within HE.

Morley (2013) identifies key focus areas of analytical frameworks on women in HE leadership as follows: gendered divisions of labour, gender bias and misrecognition, management and masculinity, greedy organisations, and work/life balance challenges. Pereira argued in 2002 that it took women several years to enter higher education, hence the few female professors in universities. The number of women in faculties in Nigeria's higher institutions has since improved significantly (Adu-Oppong and Arthur 2015). This increase has also afforded women's participation mainly at the middle level but not in senior positions in HE leadership.

With slight variations in most parts of the world, women's representation in HE leadership has remained unstable. Although no known law prevents women's participation in HE leadership, subtle discriminations, threats and exclusion persist (Muoghalu 2018). These have been variously described as 'a problem without a name' (Friedan 1963), 'the hidden transcript' (Morley 2006), 'the hidden curriculum' (Mejuini 2013), all of which make women's reluctance to participate in leadership in higher education look natural. Many women leak out of the leadership pipeline when they fail to overcome barriers to their upward advancement. While the leaky pipeline phenomenon describes a progressive 'evaporation' or disappearance of

women as they advance in their career, this work discusses leadership's leaky pipeline in HE, pertaining to how middle-level female academics thin out of leadership as they advance in their career.

Beyond these and the structured interventions developed to encourage more women to enter leadership positions in universities, this study investigates other leakages possibly triggered via intra-feminist dynamics among mid-level career women in Nigeria's HE leadership. This study is divided into five sections, beginning with the introduction. The second section discusses the literature on women in HE; section three presents the theory and method of the study; section four focuses on the burden of middle-level female academics in HE leadership from selected Nigerian universities; and section five concludes the study.

### **Extant Literature on Women in HE Leadership**

In the recent past, the patriarchal nature of most societies has deliberately described the home, child-bearing, child-rearing and other domestic responsibilities as the private life, whereas issues regarding leadership and decision-making in the polis belong essentially to the public life. Whereas men have held on to the public life sphere, it appears that the private life sphere remains strictly the terrain of women. This means that when considered within feminist frameworks, HE leadership has retained a masculine vocabulary.

The earliest universities in West Africa, located in Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria (where the first university was established in 1948), maintained a largely male faculty. As has been argued in other spheres, the need for place-making for women in HE has been largely discussed only since the turn of the twenty-first century. This has led to the deployment of affirmative action, quota systems and targets (Odejide 2003; Morley 2013), with the sole aim of creating equity-driven participation and representation of women in HE leadership. Progressively, across the globe, there are heart-warming success stories of female advancement in leadership gained through quota systems, appointments and legislation, yet this movement is found mostly at junior to middle levels (Morley 2014). In 2017, Nyoni et al. observed that 'gender disparity in Higher Education leadership is still a comprehensive subject, even though more women have been approved for leadership positions in universities' (Nyoni et al. 2017: 46). With reference to the 'ivory basement', a critical study of leadership roles given to women shows that they are often likely to be tasked with departmental welfare, deputising for men and secretarial roles at committees, among others. Stronger decision-making roles and accountability are largely denied to women.

Scholars have extensively acknowledged the plight of women in HE, mostly based on how women are caught between two greedy institutions – the extended family and the university (Onsongo 2004; Kamau 2006; Tsikata 2007). Just as family demands take their toll on women, the university also has high expectations of women, particularly those holding leadership positions. In their work on middle-level university leaders, Garza Mitchell and Eddy (2015) affirm a masculine norm and a prevalent ‘ideal worker framework’, which may be a disincentive for women to move up. They further note that because middle-level leaders are not motivated to seek advancement, institutions lose out on a wider range of diverse leaders to take over critical senior positions. For them, ‘traditional conceptions of male leadership as the norm, a lack of succession planning and leadership development, and missed opportunities for expansion of collective leadership in the university setting’ are barriers to women’s upward movement in higher education leadership (Garza Mitchell and Eddy 2015: 79).

Although Morley (2014) agrees with the findings of the masculinisation, neoliberalisation, globalisation and managerialisation of the academy, she speculates that women may be exercising their personal decision to reject the situational logic of career progression. This may imply that, considering the limitations and challenges, many women may not consider top-level leadership desirable, an idea connected with Berlant’s ‘cruel optimism’, in which leadership roles become an obstruction to career progress (Berlant 2011). The literature has considered marginalisation, under-representation, exclusionism, risk minimisation and the cruel optimism school of thought as drawbacks to women’s upward movement in HE leadership (Berlant 2011). It has thus attempted to answer whether women desire senior leadership roles, are dismissing the roles or are being disqualified. Validating the existence of a largely masculinised HE environment, David (2015) questions the possibility of universities to achieve genuine gender equality across all students and academics in HE.

In addition, there is a core, yet underexplored array of factors that could contribute to or facilitate women’s difficulties in moving to senior positions of HE leadership. This is captured within intra-feminist attitudes; an approach that scrutinises women-to-women relations to see if they contribute to the already identified challenges of middle-level female academics’ inability to move up HE leadership ladders.

## Theory and Method of the Study

The theoretical underpinnings of this study hinge on role entrapment and spatial entrapment. Entrapment may be described as the inability to escape from a situation, wherein the target (the party to be entrapped) is ensnared by human or structural agents (the entrapping party).

Although the spatial entrapment thesis provides a general explanation 'based on an empirical regularity, or on the assertion of an empirical regularity, which relates women's gender roles to spatial limitations, particularly in terms of women's commuting distances and job-search areas' (England 1993: 236), spatial entrapment in this work is associated with how women are limited within a space (specifically the middle level) in their career in HE leadership, thereby minimising their performance or rendering them perpetually stuck at a level with little or no hope of progress in view. Issues that contribute to spatial entrapment are: difficulty in pursuing research and gaining tenure, the dual responsibilities of traditional and professional roles, and career interruptions (Dines 1993).

Role entrapment thesis draws largely from the leadership structures of higher education that allow for turn-taking via rotational and fixed terms (Morley 2013). Within this context, role entrapment describes how women are restricted to certain roles, offices and job descriptions for various socially constructed reasons, including misrecognised competence (Odejide, Akanji and Odekunle 2006) and minimising risk, thus creating space in senior positions mainly for men (Ibarra, Carter and Silva 2010). The spatial entrapment thesis affirms an observed cycle, which limits women's ability to thrive outside certain spaces (Kwesiga 2002). This could result from how they have been role-entrapped. This work recognises that role entrapment and spatial entrapment are closely connected in the discourse of gender and middle-level HE leadership. They establish how women's constructed roles within the institutions operate to hold them back at certain spaces and play recurring roles, with little or no hope of upward progress.

This study adopts a case study approach for critical and interpretative analysis. Data is sourced from two universities in Nigeria: the University of Ibadan (UI) and Covenant University (CU). The University of Ibadan was the first university in Nigeria to be established (1948) and is a public university under the Federal Government of Nigeria, whereas Covenant University is a privately owned, faith-based institution, established in 2002. Just as the University of Ibadan is an Ivy League institution in Nigeria, Covenant University ranks high in private university ratings, with a fairly large number of academic staff and a track record of commendable HE

leadership (World University Ranking 2018). In-depth interviews were conducted with eight purposively selected female academics (four at middle level and four at senior level, holding offices such as head of department, centre director, sub-dean and dean) across the two selected institutions. A semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire was also provided to fifty middle-level female academics across the two selected institutions.

In its seventy years of existence, UI has employed no female vice-chancellor and only three female deputy vice-chancellors. CU employed Professor Aize Obayan, a female vice-chancellor, from 2005 to 2012. Data from both institutions reflects how many women take leadership at the mid-level but not at senior levels.

Table 1 presents the distribution of the University of Ibadan's university management – dean, directors of institutes, professors,<sup>1</sup> acting heads of department and secretariat – by gender. One may see that the female composition of the management team in the university began to shift in their favour only from 2016 to 2017. This attempt at gender parity gave birth to gender policy at the University of Ibadan.

The deans of faculties were overwhelmingly male, but there was a marginal increase in the number of female deans from 2015 to 2017, reflecting the university's effort to increase women's representation at leadership levels of the institution. The ratio of male to female directors of institutes was more evenly balanced, although still favouring male incumbents. Between 2013 and 2017 there were more male professors than female ones. This could be attributed to an increase in role entrapment at middle level experienced by female professors than their male counterparts. During this time there was an upward trend in the number of women in the position of acting head of department showing how women get increasingly moved into the middle-level leadership.

Table 2 presents the distribution of university management, deans, professors and heads of department by gender at Covenant University. From 2013 to 2016, of the eighteen management staff, seventeen (94.4 per cent) were male while one (5.6 per cent) was female. In 2017, of the eighteen management staff, sixteen (88.8 per cent) were male and only two (11.2 per cent) were female. In 2018, there were nineteen management staff, eighteen of whom (94.7 per cent) were male. In 2019, the total number of the management team increased to twenty, of which seventeen (85 per cent) were male and three (15 per cent) female. With regard to the gender composition of deans of college, there was no female dean, except in 2015 when there was one (25 per cent), compared with three males (75 per cent). The highest number of female professors was



Table 5.1: Gender Composition of University Leadership at the University of Ibadan, 2013–2017

	2013		2014		2015		2016		2017	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
<b>Executive management</b>	5 (83%)	1 (17%)	5 (100%)	0 (0%)	5 (83%)	1 (17%)	4 (67%)	2 (33%)	5 (71%)	2 (29%)
<b>Deans of faculties</b>	13 (87%)	2 (13%)	14 (93%)	1 (7%)	13 (86%)	2 (14%)	14 (88%)	2 (12%)	15 (88%)	2 (12%)
<b>Directors of institutes</b>	13 (76%)	4 (24%)	13 (62%)	8 (38%)	15 (65%)	8 (35%)	12 (63%)	7 (37%)	14 (67%)	7 (33%)
<b>Professors</b>	194 (86%)	32 (14%)	224 (87%)	33 (13%)	293 (86%)	49 (14%)	321 (84%)	61 (16%)	336 (84%)	66 (16%)
<b>Ag. heads of dept.</b>	53 (78%)	15 (22%)	41 (71%)	17 (29%)	22 (52%)	20 (48%)	24 (62%)	15 (38%)	21 (53%)	18 (47%)
<b>Secretariat</b>	5 (83%)	1 (17%)	11 (65%)	6 (35%)	11 (69%)	5 (31%)	10 (67%)	5 (33%)	10 (63%)	6 (37%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>283</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>428</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>471</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>491</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>513</b>	<b>138</b>

Source: Report of Gender Policy Audit Committee, August 2017

Table 5.2: Gender Composition of University Leadership at Covenant University, 2013–2019

	2013		2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
<b>Management</b>	17 (94.4%)	1 (5.6%)	17 (94.4%)	1 (5.6%)	17 (94.4%)	1 (5.6%)	17 (94.4%)	1 (5.6%)	16 (88.8%)	2 (11.2%)	18 (94.7%)	1 (5.3%)	17 (85%)	3 (15%)
<b>Deans of college</b>	2 (100%)	0 (-)	2 (100%)	0 (-)	3 (75%)	1 (25%)	4 (100%)	0 (-)	4 (100%)	0 (-)	4 (100%)	0 (-)	4 (100%)	0 (-)
<b>Professor</b>	31 (91.2%)	3 (8.8%)	32 (91.4%)	3 (8.6%)	34 (87.2%)	5 (12.8%)	34 (87.2%)	5 (12.8%)	83 (90.2%)	9 (9.8%)	63 (90%)	7 (10%)	71 (93.4%)	5 (6.6%)
<b>Heads of department</b>	19 (95%)	1 (5%)	20 (95.2%)	1 (4.8%)	20 (95.2%)	1 (4.8%)	20 (91%)	2 (9%)	18 (82%)	4 (18%)	18 (78.2%)	5 (21.8%)	16 (69.6%)	7 (30.4%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>15</b>

Source: HR Department Covenant University July 2019

recorded in 2017, when there were nine (9.8 per cent) women out of ninety-two professors in the university. The highest number of female heads of departments was recorded in 2019 with seven (30.4 per cent) out of twenty-three. Just as the acclaimed low representation of women in senior HE leadership is validated in the management and professorial cadres of Covenant University, the heavy presence of women at middle level is evident at both institutions.

The quotas and gender parity legislation in HE, including university gender policies, have helped to improve women's participation in HE leadership, yet little energy is being spent to maximise these opportunities. This could be due to how leadership spaces for women remain in the 'ivory basements' (Eveline 2004), or the 'velvet ghettos' of communication, finance and human resource management (Guillaume and Pochic 2009). One may inquire to what end women have gained space in HE leadership. This question raises the need to scrutinise the kinds of leadership roles accorded to women. Inferences drawn from the gathered data show that university management is quick to place women in welfare roles, including chairing university convocation committees, as members of fund-raising committees, as deputy vice-chancellor with a portfolio of special duties, as representatives of the vice-chancellor at public functions, and, at worst, as occupants of specific offices to justify the institution's gender sensitivity. This is corroborated in the literature, establishing the potential for backlash even when gender equity initiatives sometimes connote a change in benefit schemes (Morley et al. 2005).

Women are often placed in leadership based on their oratorical prowess, smart and beautiful appearance, among other soft skills, compared with their male counterparts who gain leadership spaces based on their assertiveness, firmness and leadership track record. Commonly passed comments, such as 'she is beautiful and attractive, so she should be on the vice-chancellor's team to build goodwill' (personal communication with a female academic at the level of acting head of department), reduce women's intellectual investments and commitment to higher education to insignificance.

A scholar at the University of Ibadan shared a version of events, being female in the academia:

Being female in any field is itself a mixture of fun and challenges. Having spent the first ten years of my career life in advertising and media consultancy, I have had a fair share of honour, trust, goal-setting and goal-getting despite the ever-demanding nature of the work. A major problem encountered here is a continual pressure to meet deadlines, increase clientele and ultimately increase company's annual turnover. Caught between work pressures and

completing a PhD programme, my husband advised that I switch to the academia; my primary calling, hoping to provide ample time for family and other personal things, however I discovered that much is expected of a young academic; particularly, the female. My first couple of months as an assistant lecturer was adventurous as colleagues wondered how a 'young and beautiful' woman would survive the prevalent intellectual and sexual harassments.

That this respondent claims that academia was her primary calling shows that she had been trapped on another career path due to her inability to secure a job in an academic institution. Yet, one may deduce from the above, that the respondent was oblivious to a sexualised and hostile work environment before crossing into academia. She proceeded to share her leadership experience as follows:

A woman in the academia is faced with two major challenges: that of asserting her scholarship before students and affirming her competence amidst colleagues, particularly the male counterparts. Rising through the ranks requires a woman's decision to either pass a 'short-cut' or get there through hard work and high self-dignity. My most exciting experience was when I was appointed as acting head of department in a department staffed with only three female academics out of sixteen. I was the most senior of the women, though young and inexperienced in such administrative duties. It was obvious that my failure was expected right from outset. Interestingly, by standards including leadership style, team-building, human relations, staff welfare, financial uprightness and public relations, I succeeded in recording the most successful term in the history of that department. This is a rare version of event, seeing that women in academia are faced with series of resistance (domestic, societal, religious, personal and so on) right from the outset of their career. However, one must not join the crowd in positing that academia is a slippery terrain for women. In fact, it is one of several careers that provide a good platform for women to excel, increase their levels of resilience on the job, and also improve their commitment to functioning well within teaching, research and community service, which are the cardinal points in academia.

Another scholar, from Covenant University, expressed that working in a private university was very similar to experiences in public universities, except for a few marked differences. She asserted that:

Appointment to leadership positions in private universities do not always follow the procedures of public universities. Leadership roles are mostly need-based and focused on availability. Oftentimes, there are more women at the middle-level of departments who are compelled to take on offices of the acting HOD, sub-dean, post graduate coordinators and directors of centres. This is largely so as most professors who could have held such offices are retirees from public universities and appointed to play advisory and mentoring roles.

It worth noting that the title ‘acting’ seeks to mark middle-level career staff in leadership as not possessing full authority, as would have been in the case of ‘substantive’ office-holders.

Of her leadership experience, she noted:

I regard the leadership exposures given to women at middle-level as preparatory to senior-level leadership. However, chances are slim that most women can make it to the top; first because their male counterparts are more forceful with taking those spaces and second, because the system is often reluctant to remove a performing female leader from the middle-level leadership unless she is strongly needed at the senior level.

Often, organisations are compelled by systems (mostly based on sociocultural proclivity) to perceive women more as managers and maintainers than transformational leaders. A prevailing notion that women are better left where they are rather than engaging them with more challenging tasks reinforces role and spatial entrapment and, ultimately, the culture of retaining women in middle-level leadership.

As much as the literature has established systemic barriers that entrap women in HE leadership (Tucker 1993; Montez, Wolverton and Gmelch 2003; Odejide 2007), the selected experiences shared raise the need to highlight key issues identified by the respondents as challenges to women at middle-level HE leadership from the questionnaire. Wenneras and Wold (1997) have earlier identified that gender bias exists in judgements of excellence, even by peers. This could be probed further by engaging with findings that connect with the barriers of leadership that are possibly created and fostered by women themselves in HE.

## **Key Issues of Middle-Level Female Academics in HE Leadership from Selected Nigerian Universities**

### ***Feminist Brain Drain***

The term ‘brain drain’ refers to the international transfer of human capital resources, and it applies mainly to the migration of highly educated individuals from developing to developed countries (Gibson and McKenzie 201; Docquier 2014). One is quick to think of brain drain within the context of human capital flights, particularly of highly skilled labour into developed countries. However, when highly skilled labour diverts their skills and energies into other areas for the sake of survival, a new sort of brain drain, without emigration, ensues. This may be called ‘continental brain drain’. Mama (2005: 99) discusses how ‘scholars who remained on the continent have had their brains drained in other ways – into various entrepreneurial

and consultancy activities that soon became more essential to their survival than their professional employment as highly trained academics'. While brain drain may not necessarily be gendered, this work recognises women's transfer of intellectual skills into non-intellectual but purportedly profitable activities for survival as 'feminist brain drain'.

Women in academia are largely faced with the dilemma of introducing business or entrepreneurial interest into their services on campus in order to survive financially. Some establish business centres, cafeterias and other social services, which reinforces the perception of female academics as half-hearted or not fully fledged academics. This in turn takes its toll on the kinds of leadership roles women are offered and their performance/output in such offices. Of the eight middle-level female academics interviewed from the two institutions of focus, six (75 per cent) agreed that female academics themselves have helped to propagate and perpetuate the feminist brain drain (in terms of diverting their intellectual energies to non-intellectual activities within campuses as a norm). They agreed that feminist brain drain entraps women in middle-level HE leadership, as they are often too distracted to acquire the prerequisites for top leadership positions. The other two academics interviewed (25 per cent) were of the view that scholarship should not discount entrepreneurship. Mid-level female academics are neck-deep in administrative and academic duties yet may not earn enough to sustain themselves in Nigeria. This was corroborated by the questionnaire data, which validated the social constructions of women's multiple roles (Nkomo and Ngambi 2009) and multi-tasking skills while still entrapped within academic and HE leadership roles. However, they all agreed that it would be more profitable to take on full-time research and administration if the system provided adequately for staff welfare both on the job and on retirement.

### *Queen Bee Syndrome*

The term 'queen bee' refers to women in high positions who have achieved their professional goals in male-dominated organisations by distancing themselves from other women, and at the same time express behaviour that leads to gender stereotyping (Sobczak 2018: 54). Queen bee syndrome is suspected when the few women in senior-level leadership define their personalities in masculine terms, disparage the proficiency of their female colleagues, and fail to support other women moving into senior leadership.

On one hand, five of the eight interviewees agreed that most middle-level women in HE leadership manifest queen bee attributes as soon as they take office, due to their perceived need to build respect from

other people and establish that they are one step ahead of their female counterparts. One of the respondents stated: 'I noticed that I have lost a friend and confidant the moment she became the Acting Dean of Faculty. She simply switched me off so as to earn herself some respect. She even advised that her new role is not for people like me, whatever that meant!'. This tactic is seen as a means of survival in a male-constructed and male-dominated space.

On the other hand, the remaining three interviewees were of the view that women's personality traits contribute significantly to whether they will display queen bee attributes or not. One of the respondents expressed that:

not all women display queen bee attributes. For instance, when my mentor became Acting Head of Department, she supported her colleagues to scale hurdles they have all experienced as women in the department. I also know a colleague who was well known for her defence of fellow female colleagues even at management meetings; these are the best set among women and they still exist.

Studies have shown that women are more often forced into the queen bee syndrome when the work environment is highly masculinised, stereotypical and gender discriminatory (David 2015; Nkomo and Ngambi 2009), implying that queen bee syndrome is a by-product of systemic violence embedded in work environments. From this, one may surmise that queen bee behaviour is not consciously adopted by women; rather, the system is structured to make women obstruct each other such that they are systemically compelled to reinforce it. All the interviewees agreed with the systemic creation argument; the questionnaire data shows that they equally agreed that queen bee syndrome strains senior–junior relations at the workplace and dovetails with the mentorship crises that bedevil women in HE leadership.

### *Feminist Crab Syndrome*

Closely linked with the queen bee syndrome is the crab syndrome. It is drawn from the observed behaviour of crabs, which would rather frustrate than support efforts by another crab to escape when trapped within a space. Crab syndrome in the workplace propels colleagues to consciously disparage one another's efforts, refusing to support, enhance or promote commendable acts or activities of others at work. The crab syndrome in the workplace promotes sycophancy and reduces group efforts to futility. It is most often the culprit when certain departments become redundant within institutions (Morley 1999).

Feminist crab syndrome manifests in two ways: first, when female colleagues act or don't act, to prevent one another from being recognised or considered for promotion; second, when women at lower echelons of leadership engage in activities to undermine, disregard and disparage their female counterparts in senior leadership roles. Responding to the question: 'Do women support one another?', thirty-two (64 per cent) of the respondents strongly agreed that women do not support one another as they should. Thirteen (26 per cent) argued that the question of support would not arise if there were no women in the organisation, and the remaining five (10 per cent) were of the view that women would support women if only the system permitted them to.

Reckoning that there are men who sabotage other men, the uniqueness of women sabotaging one another lies in the consciousness that there is limited space for women within academic leadership and since this does not give room for women to learn on the job, these spaces should be reserved only for the best of women. Sadly, this mindset blinds women to the 'best' of them, since by sabotaging one another they risk losing the few spaces in senior-level leadership to their male counterparts.

One of the interviewees within a public university context noted that:

University systems, particularly the larger ones, thrive on referrals. One must enjoy favourable recommendations from the departmental level to rise into leadership. Women do not sufficiently enjoy such referrals from middle-level leadership to senior HE leadership. Several forces, including people of her gender, contribute largely to this, and when you are not promoted as a viable brand by people of your kind, who else will?

By this, she refers to the 'old boys' network', a replica of which is gaining ground among women.

Another interviewee speaking from the private university experience observed that:

The private university systems are somewhat different. Since ownership permits management to take certain decisions without recourse to committee systems, women may be assigned leadership roles as a divide-and-rule tactic aimed at entrapping staff within certain cadres for a period of time. It could also be used to validate women's incompetence in office which is more often than not reinforced by unsuspecting fellow women. For me, leadership at middle-level higher education is a trap within which your female colleagues may also help you to stay so that the burden of leadership does not fall upon them so soon.

In whatever manifestation, feminist crab syndrome remains a burden for women in HE leadership.

### *Avenger Syndrome*

Women at middle-level career on campus often embrace leadership roles to create and preserve their self-respect. In this study, twenty-five (50 per cent) of the respondents agreed that most middle-level female academics take leadership roles to gain influence and wield power, while the rest thought middle-level female academics are forced into leadership roles. However, both groups agreed that most women acquire more adversaries at this stage due to their leadership styles, stern policies and sometimes awkward practices. Also, twenty-nine (58 per cent) of the respondents agreed with the prevalence of avenger syndrome among female middle-level academics, while twenty-one (42 per cent) posited that both men and women exhibit avenger syndrome traits in HE leadership.

One of the interviewees expressed issues on the avenger syndrome as follows:

I have watched middle-level female academics falter in leadership. Very few women make it to the top, especially in Nigeria's challenging higher education environment, where cultural and religious biases militate against females in leadership. Most women lose out in senior leadership positions because they lost the confidence of those who would either vote them in or recommend them for such offices while at their mid-level leadership. We must however note that not all women are vengeful in the negative sense of it. For instance, when a female in HE leadership refuses to renew a negligent colleagues' membership of a committee (which is a positive move for institutional development) she is still accused of the avenger syndrome.

The study has established how middle-level female academics are burdened with leadership roles within the middle-level cadre (spatial entrapment) such that they are ensnared by such roles (role entrapment). Having highlighted the barriers of middle-level female academics from the selected Nigerian institutions of this study, what may be done to address the identified barriers?

Scholars have variously suggested the provision of special programmes for women, institutional and government support, rules and attitudinal change, enactment of gender policy in HE leadership, reviews of appointment and promotion procedures, among other solutions (Dines 1993; Morley 2012). However, this study takes a different path. To tackle the challenges of middle-level career women in HE leadership, women in academia must recognise the need for co-operative and supportive relationships within a system that has been structured to either stifle their efforts or retain them in the most convenient spot (middle-level cadre), as affirmed by David. Contradictory trends exist both in HE and in developing economies, such that '... the effects of neo-liberalism and managerialism have been to confine women to relatively limited roles, and not the most senior leadership positions' (David 2015: 23).



Having identified intra-feminist barriers in middle-level HE leadership, this study suggests symbiotic interactionism,<sup>2</sup> a model for intra-feminist co-operation founded on the principle of mutually shared values and strategies to address societal challenges that reinforce or ignore the plights of women. It prescribes a blend of two major concepts: symbiosis (an ecology-based concept), and interactionism (a sociological-cum-communication concept). Symbiosis in this study refers to intraspecies relationships, which are obligatory in nature, to foster interdependence amongst women (Omotoso 2014). In this context, symbiotic interactionism suggests partnership and support, by shrinking the top-bottom boundaries among women in HE leadership. It recognises social processes as products of human relations and prioritises the functions (not regarding any as trivial) of all players in processes of achieving predefined objectives (Omotoso 2020).

In whatever form, symbiotic interactionism not permit predation; rather, it promotes a frame of mind that women need each other to survive and overcome all forms of entrapment. Since men are equally caught in the web of competing for office with women, one may not expect them to support women's appointment into senior HE leadership or aid them in office.

The symbiotic interactionism model is exemplified at the Women's Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC), University of Ibadan, where studies have shown a steady growth of women into HE leadership through conscious efforts based on co-operativism, peer mentoring and feminist solidarity, to increase women's representation and women's progression to senior management (Oyelude and Omotoso 2019). Although not much has been achieved in numerical terms, the pace of women's movement studied over the last thirty years of the Centre affirms the viability of symbiotic interactionism as a plausible model to combat intra-feminist barriers in HE leadership.

## **Conclusion**

This study commenced by providing a background of higher education in West Africa. Reckoning with certain unfriendly factors, including government interference in HE leadership and management, the paper agrees with existing scholarship that the challenges that face HE in West Africa are more political than educational. The paper has specifically focused on middle-level female academics in HE leadership, noting prevalent patriarchal issues that militate against female middle-level academics' upward movement into senior leadership positions. Among other factors, the paper has presented arguments to affirm the presence of intra-feminist issues that further contribute to hold women back and the need for them to be critically addressed.

In this work, theories of role entrapment and spatial entrapment were expanded beyond conventional descriptions. Role entrapment, previously used to determine positions that minorities may and may not assume, was here introduced into a gendered discourse of HE leadership and how women get trapped within certain roles, performing the same/similar tasks over a period, thus hindering their career progress. In the same vein, spatial entrapment, which was developed to discuss geography-related workplace issues, was expanded in this article to cover arguments connecting with gender space and place-making in HE leadership. Both theories ascertained the burdens of middle-level female academics in two selected Nigerian institutions: University of Ibadan (public) and Covenant University (private). Highlighting that it is dangerous to uncritically posit that HE leadership is a slippery terrain for women, when general issues are not addressed and intra-feminist issues are swept under the carpet, the findings from both institutions show that women at middle-level HE leadership battle against feminist brain drain, queen bee syndrome and avenger syndrome in their various forms. Having noted the scholarship gap that has under-theorised intra-feminist factors that contribute to the entrapment of women at middle-level HE leadership, there is an urgent task for further research into areas of female mentorship and succession planning in HE leadership. This also relies on the urgency of HE policies to guarantee principles and processes that stipulate a minimum and maximum period within which middle-level leaders are expected to move into senior-level leadership.

By suggesting that symbiotic interactionism will address the challenges of intra-feminist issues that discourage women's upward movement in HE leadership, the work establishes the need for female academics to join forces in abhorring popular labels such as 'beautiful', 'fashionable', 'gorgeous', which are devoid of conscious acknowledgement of women's intellectual prowess and administrative capacity, in order to raise and retain women of substance and integrity in HE leadership. Overall, policies and practices in HE leadership must ensure that the internal workings of institutions support career progress without fear or favour, since academia is a platform to provide leadership and mentorship for potential leaders in other spheres.

## Notes

1. Not all professors are in leadership positions.
2. Symbiotic interactionism as discussed by Omotoso, 2020, has been found to be relevant in combating various intra-feminist issues in discourses on leadership, governance and co-operativism.

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# Compassionate Imagination and Respect for Student Diversity<sup>1</sup> in Effective Doctoral Supervision in African Universities

Saidah Mbooge Najjuma\*

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'If it is not working, change something in your behaviour'  
(Nieminin 2018: 99)

## Abstract

Achieving the purpose of the doctoral journey through productive interaction requires that the student and supervisor engage with each other's intellectual views, which means addressing any challenges posed by the student's diversity. According to Vilakazi (2016), supervisors embrace democratic justice in contributing to society by supervising students, using their expertise to take care of students' rights, enabling deliberative engagement and exposing them to critical learning. This is done through the interaction of voices, cultures, values and perspectives, amidst differences. Yet, engaging with diversity can bring about uncertainty, anxiety and other discomfort (Nieminin and Valcke 2018), which, if not handled well can be detrimental to a student's progress. Identifying, accepting and understanding differences and similarities that exist between individual students and supervisors, to fully utilise their talents and abilities during the supervisory relationship, is an important contribution to knowledge creation. This article explores the notion of compassionate imagination<sup>2</sup> as a catalyst to realising respect for student diversity in effective doctoral supervision.

**Keywords:** compassionate imagination, students' diversity, doctoral supervision, knowledge creation, African universities

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## Résumé

La réalisation de l'objectif du parcours doctoral par le biais d'une interaction productive exige que l'étudiant et le superviseur débattent des opinions intellectuelles de chacun, ce qui signifie qu'il faut relever tous les défis de diversité posés par l'étudiant. Selon Vilakazi (2016), les superviseurs adoptent l'idée d'une justice démocratique qui contribue à la société en supervisant les étudiants, en utilisant leur expertise pour protéger les droits des étudiants, en permettant une discussion convaincante et en les exposant à un apprentissage critique. Cela se fait par l'interaction des voix, des cultures, des valeurs et des perspectives, au milieu des différences. Pourtant, une discussion sur la diversité peut être source d'incertitude, d'anxiété et d'autres inconforts (Nieminen et Valcke 2018) qui, s'ils ne sont pas bien gérés, peuvent plomber l'étudiant. Identifier, accepter et comprendre les différences et les similitudes qui existent entre certains étudiants et leurs superviseurs, afin d'utiliser pleinement leurs talents et leurs capacités pendant la relation de supervision, reste une contribution importante à la création de connaissances. Cet article explore la notion d'imagination compatissante comme catalyseur pour concrétiser le respect de la diversité des étudiants dans une supervision doctorale efficace.

**Mots-clés :** imagination compatissante, diversité des étudiants, encadrement doctoral, création de connaissances, universités africaines.

## Introduction

Doctoral students differ in many ways – in intellect, character, circumstances, gender, social environments and experiences, among other characteristics – hence, managing student diversity is inevitable in doctoral supervision. Even within a group with similar origins (Maiztegui-Oñate and Santibáñez-Gruber 2008), there are multiple identities. Manathunga (2009) equates diversity to culture in the context of higher education pedagogies. That culture can meaningfully refer to ethnicity, discipline, profession, industry and workplace. In the late 1980s, many academics posited that: 'our conventional idea about culture, although useful in many ways, gave a false impression of homogeneity and unity. *One society, one culture* was the underlying assumption' (Keesing 1987: 161, 1990: 47), and this reasoning seems deceptive.

According to Loomis and Shape, quoted in Norris (2000), experiencing diversity is a common component of the quality education experience to achieve excellence. The treatment of diversity and its place in doctoral supervision are part of the broader debate on social justice, where living



diversity is a necessity in all areas of human interaction. Supervision that is key to doctoral training ought to create a balance between the supervisor and the student so they might work together with a high level of dignity.

Whereas supervisors embrace democratic justice in contributing to society by supervising students, using their expertise to take care of students' rights, enabling deliberative engagement and exposing them to critical learning (Vilakazi 2016), it should be noted that students and supervisors enter the supervisory relationship with unequal knowledge, experience and disciplinary specialisation (DIES/CREST 2018). This requires each to imagine the other's position to build a constructive and productive relationship, enable emotional intellect and ethical deliberation, which Grant (2011), Nausbaum (1998), Waghid (2006) and Vilakazi (2016) have termed 'compassionate imagining'.

The student constructs an identity by entering a community of practice as a novice and by being mentored by this community to become confident in its specific culture and norms. In mentoring the student, the supervisor needs to map out the experience and existing personal, professional skills and competencies of the student in order to plan an approach that can work for both the student and the supervisor. This is vital for the supervision to be effective and for the completion of the doctoral programme to be achieved. Compassionate imagination helps a supervisor reflect on the positive aspects of the supervisory relationship in order to design strategies that will get the best out of such an opportunity, so as to realise the development of a confident researcher, a central aspect in the supervisory process.

This article shares findings and literature about students' understanding of doctoral supervisors' compassionate imagination, the context for doctoral supervisors' exercise of compassionate imagination in respect of students' diversity, and how both deal with the contradictions that arise out of students' diversity.

## **Problem**

Doctoral students and supervisors enter the supervisory relationship with unequal knowledge, experience and disciplinary specialisation (DIES/CREST 2018), among other differences, which challenges their relationship and can be a possible explanation for non-completion of a postgraduate programme, or a longer completion time. Hence, identifying, accepting and understanding the differences and similarities that exist between individual students to fully utilise their talents and abilities during the supervisory relationship is an important contribution to scholarship throughout the

doctoral journey. While supervisors' and students' experiences of doctoral supervision relationship are clearly documented (Waghid 2006, 2010; Vilkinas 2002; Terry 2005; Manathunga and Grant 2011; Kearns et al. 2006; Green and Bowden 2012), studies on how supervisors modify their behaviour to respect students' diversity are not clearly documented, regardless of the fact that managing diversity is receiving more attention in higher education research and specifically in doctoral supervision (Maiztegui-Oñate and Santibáñez-Gruber 2008; NCHE 2013). This article seeks to discuss the question of respect for diversity through the lens of supervisors' compassionate imagination in doctoral supervision.

## Objectives

The questions addressed here are:

1. What is the understanding of students of their doctoral supervisors' compassionate imagination in respect of the students' diversity?
2. In which contexts do doctoral supervisors exercise compassionate imagination in view of student diversity?
3. How are contradictions that arise out of student diversity dealt with during the supervisory process?

## Methodology

This study is a combination of conceptual and empirical data. It adopted a qualitative approach using exploratory research design. It emerges from the author's participation in the training course for supervisors of doctoral candidates between October 2018 and February 2019, offered by Stellenbosch University, South Africa. For successful completion of the training, the participants were assigned an essay on a topic of interest in their field of research and within the context of the model of higher education. This article is an expansion of the author's preliminary essay and draws on a critical and reflective engagement with the learning materials in the form of video clips, academic publications, other participants' experience-sharing and the author's own ideas, insights, thoughts and reflection.

In addition, eight persons who had completed their PhD between 2015 and 2019, and five supervisors of doctoral candidates, were selected for the study using convenience sampling. In-depth interviews and participant observation were used to gather in-depth experiences of real-life stories (Babie 2004) of supervisory relationships, personal understanding and narratives of lived experiences that portrayed students' understanding of their doctoral supervisors' compassionate imagination; the context for

doctoral supervisors' exercise of compassionate imagination and dealing with issues of students' diversity in doctoral supervision. Analysis was enabled by triangulating all the collected materials creatively, to construct meaning out of the data gathered in relation to respect for students' diversity, presented in the section on findings.

## **Findings**

The results showed that doctoral students and supervisors had a good understanding of compassionate imagination in their interaction in the doctoral process. The context of exercising compassionate imagination varied depending on the supervisor's career trajectory. Students shared their strategies of managing contradictions arising out of their diversity, which they seemed to have underestimated but which actually worked. Supervisors mostly employed flexibility and existing policies to manage their interaction with students.

### ***Participants' Understanding of Supervisors' Compassionate Imagination in Respect of Students' Diversity***

A sense of identity can be a source of pride and joy, strength and confidence to a researcher (Sen 1989, in Agarwal, Humphries and Robeyns 2004). This shows that diversity is important in defining one's identity and there is no doubt that a huge part of how a supervisor views a student will be linked to what the supervisor perceives to be the student's diversity. Since individuals have a number of identities that impact on how they relate with others and navigate the world, it appears that diversity is consciously or unconsciously present in supervision, and the response to it takes many forms, which can be satisfying or frustrating for the student. But when students' issues relating to diversity are identified and students are given enough support, the confidence this builds helps them to become researchers in their own right. Responses that indicate participants' understanding of compassionate imagination reflect power differences, support mechanisms, ability, satisfaction, experience and skills:

We were taught the theories and skills of how to handle the clients, and as a student I wanted to develop a theory that fits my project, but the supervisor always wanted me to use her choice, and she insisted which I resisted. You cannot be somebody else; you have to be your own! I honestly tell you, from there onwards I refer to her as Dr Copy and Paste. (Mega, doctoral graduate, 2016)

The quotation above suggests a conflict of identity formation in the supervisory relationship. The doctoral student is of the opinion that the supervisor should be able to contribute to the development of innovative students who can create change after they graduate, but due to power differences this capability is overshadowed for some students. Thus, the importance for the student of being confident to stand for what s/he feels is right lays a foundation for potential future scientists.

The reponse also validates the statement that supervisors have both institutional authority and disciplinary expertise, which is necessary for them to provide strong supervision, but at the same time this can lead to uneven power relations if these factors work against an open and collaborative relationship. Such a situation can be worsened by students' attitudes towards and fear of authority, and it can constrain students from developing their own identity and greatly slow down the time of completion, since the student may be unsure of when and how to engage with the supervisor, or may decide to drop out of the programme (DIES/CREST 2018).

### **According to MacIntyre**

a central freedom of higher education would be to initiate a student into inquiry and controversy. This involves two interrelated processes. First, students should be taught to read texts scrupulously and carefully in order for them to arrive at independent interpretive judgments so that they can accept or reject their supervisors' interpretations. Second, students should be taught to subject a text to questioning, that is, to engage in systematic controversy, rivalry or conflicting points of view. (MacIntyre 1990: 231)

This involves thinking actively and carefully exploring situations from multiple perspectives and discussing ideas in an organised manner (Topp 1999: 157).

Although there are barriers to appreciating differences in any human interaction (Najjuma 2015), what is important is for supervisors to listen to the voices of students and then evaluate their own imagination, which may generate some form of understanding that guides the doctoral process. But how about creating a positive relationship between a supervisor and the doctoral student? Some of the responses in the study described doctoral students' realisation of their diversity in regard to compassionate imagination in their supervisors:

I commend my supervisor because he made me who I am today. In case you came up with a new idea, he would ask you: Did you read it? Do you understand it? Will you be able to defend it? He then helps you to work around it. That way, you will work hard to address those three questions. (Maria, doctoral candidate, 2015)

This narrative relates to building a student's capability to promote the purpose and value of knowledge production, reflected in the quality of supervision that supports a student's pride. The supervisor encouraged critical thinking from the student about her research question. Indeed, when doctoral candidates begin to see the uniqueness of their context alongside their supervisors, it becomes clear that they are able to recognise compassionate imagination in their supervisors, find evidence to defend their position and will be able to learn and trust themselves in respect of their ability, which they will likely communicate with confidence.

Peschl (2006) explores the relevance of utilising students' knowledge as a requirement in doctoral supervision. Embedded in and pre-structured by a particular frame of reference, knowledge receives its meaning and structure from this frame of reference, which includes previous social and cultural experiences. Theories of adult education also respect knowledge creation. This therefore calls for supervisors to consciously guide students in a manner appropriate to their particular context. Further, a student ought to actively participate in receiving feedback to foster transformation of understanding (Najjuma 2016).

In another interview, this respondent explained how a good comment improved her self-esteem:

My supervisor's final comment was that: 'I like the way you cite and the flow; this really earns you credit and edge. Your chapters flow perfectly well. It depicts professionalism in the field of business management.' (Mo, doctoral graduate, 2015)

We cannot say that students have no issues, but this response partly explains the need for a supervisor to focus on the strength of the student rather than on flaws (Najjuma 2016) to help improve the quality of research. It also reveals a relationship between satisfaction with the supervision and a student being able to complete the research. The capacity to recognise creativity and innovation, give verbal praise and rewards, and discuss important outcomes of completion, are important traits of compassionate imagination. Another participant reported:

Each time I met my supervisor, before any serious business, he would tell me 'funny' stories around supervisory relationships. They were really many stories. We pondered on these stories, we laughed and you could not fail to learn something. He could briefly inquire about my family and bring any other conversation to make me feel at home. This was possible to build a relationship that could allow me to navigate the process as a colleague. I think that he was trying to find out how different I am. (Doctoral graduate, 2017)

This can be a way of testing the patience of a doctoral student and is illustrative of two things. It shows that supervisors can use narratives to build rapport and enter into the student's world. It also creates a feeling that such a student is able to work with a supervisor who understands her/him well. Such a supervisor will relate to and more practically engage with the student to get the best out of him or her. Telling anecdotes relates to 'bounded intellectual intimacy' (McMorland et al. 2003: 5) – relating the self to an understanding of other people, which comes about in a non-intellectual, embodied, dialogical or conversational manner, which itself is an embodied, temporally unfolding, responsive form of understanding. This is, however, not an individual achievement, but developed and negotiated with others in the circumstances of its use and seems to stress that students can be given the opportunity to talk about their 'other business', which can be a learning ground for the supervisor to identify the gap for exercising compassionate imagination. However, some supervisors reflected an inclination to the traditional model of supervision, as shown below.

In one of the higher education institutions I visited for the study, a programme for mentoring doctoral students to progress well on their doctoral journey was in place and administered by the graduate school. One facilitator, however, wrote a note to the director, expressing discontent and questioning the objective, and in a way sought to maintain the traditional model (one-to-one) of supervision uncritically: '... you call our students and you empower them. Instead of us telling them what to do, they appear to be telling us how to supervise them. I am not going to accept that, a student must obey what I tell her/him or else they will not be able to finish' (message from a doctoral supervisor).

This partly shows resistance to change on the part of the supervisor, and the supervisor's reluctance to accept innovation by the students, which undermines the efforts of higher education to create an independent researcher in the student. It definitely illustrates a problem with diversity that may affect a students' identity formation. It is important to note that this impacts on an individual private space, where there may be a lack of accountability, a transmissive approach to education, power issues and paternalistic dependence (Parker 2009; Manathunga 2009; Pearson and Kayrooz 2004; MacKinnon 2004).

Waghid (2006) similarly argues that it is problematic to understand learning as a process in which students are supposed to know what they want, and where supervisors are simply engaged to meet the needs of students and to satisfy their demands. He observes that this ignores a primary reason for doing

a doctorate degree, which is to explore unintended and unexpected possibilities and in the process find out what one's needs are – a process in which supervisors play a crucial role, because their experience is integral to this discovery.

This frame of reference can be challenged if students reflect and step out of their normal way of thinking via the process of radical questioning. Fernandez-Duque, Bair and Posner (2000) refer to the process of questioning one's own knowledge as metacognition – the awareness of one's own knowledge and the ability to understand, control, manipulate and regulate individual cognitive processes (Najjuma 2015; Livingston 1997). The Freire method also stimulates reflection and critical thinking processes and is an effective tool in empowerment (Freire 1970).

On the other hand, supervisors' responses reveal other understandings of compassionate imagination in respect of students' diversity, as in the following comment.

Understanding that my student is different in terms of sex, experience and culture – in a way, like I myself. We have the same rights. So, as a supervisor, you must consider diversity natural and own<sup>3</sup> the challenge. (Supervisor, fifteen years of experience)

Another comment, from a supervisor with four years of experience, echoed the sentiment that some sort of respect for human dignity and trying to address the needs of your doctoral student holistically is important.

And yet others said:

I think that it is about giving the student liberty to explore her/his abilities, in their own ways, but with some guidance. If you allow much liberty, the challenges can be many. (Supervisor, five years of experience)

It means appreciating diversity in terms of expectations and reality. What I know is that the future wants trained individuals with skills pertinent to the changing needs of society, no matter what approach is applied. (Supervisor, eight years of experience)

I think that it is the gap between contextualisation and expectation, over which the supervisor decides to create spaces through which learning can take place. You can make some assumption of what might happen during the doctoral journey, but you continue to supervise, while at the same time being sensitive to those assumptions. (Supervisor, fifteen years of experience).

It is about respect and tolerance that is hidden in the recognition of the student as different and the hope that your supervision will make the student grow into the research field with their identity. (Supervisor, twelve years of experience).

These responses reveal a lot about the supervisors' appreciation of diversity, in recognising cultural rights, abilities and sensitivity to differences, and present a balanced observation. They reflect the importance of sociocultural and human rights, dignity and students' cognitive ability, which is indicative of a compassionate imagination, even when its significance may be minimal. They show the need to reflect on and/or discuss the expectations of the students with them so as to address dilemmas that might arise out of diversity and the matching of expectations.

Frick argues that:

in contemporary neoliberal formulations of supervisors, little of the complexity of culture is recognised. Supervision is cast as a mainly cognitive undertaking between rational, disembodied minds, where the supervisor is expected to proceed smoothly. It is a project to be managed, once roles and expectations have been agreed upon and Gant charts are in place. While these dynamics can be difficult to navigate, for both the student and supervisor, and offer challenges to how institutions think about supervision and who can do it, they also offer possibilities for transformation of actors in supervision in diverse formations. (Frick 2010: 89)

Nussbaum (2003) argues that there are dangers in any act of imagining, and we should not let these particular dangers lead us to admit defeat prematurely. It is in the work of imagination that we can challenge ourselves again and again. This implies that students have developed capabilities to imagine alternative possibilities and that supervisors have succeeded in establishing spaces in which meanings can be shared, understood, reflected on and contested. Waghid (2006) refers to this as 'freedom'.

### ***Context for doctoral supervisors' exercise of compassionate imagination in view of students' diversity***

Supervisors need to ensure that their students' expectations are met and encourage them to participate in some form of intellectual conversation. This will enable the students' emotional intellect and ethical deliberations inclined to the content and quality of their relationship, and help them build identity in their field. When asked what acts of supervision are considered sensitive towards diversity, students echoed some of their supervisors' best practices, while supervisors indicated some contentious acts of compassionate imagination that squeezed them between two options. One respondent commented, 'I believe that the growth I have achieved in the field of research was because I worked with my supervisor who complemented my education experience'. He recalled the supervisor saying, 'The study area is slightly new to both of us, I will be learning with you. (Excited) I will be learning with my student'. (John, doctoral candidate, 2017)



This shows some effort by the supervisor to create the space for a mutual relationship and learning with the doctoral student, as opposed to imposing a vertical relationship, and reveals the student's satisfaction. It also shows a commitment to lifelong learning by the supervisor. So, both were able to share the disciplinary knowledge, generic skills and research skills needed to complete the task and forge ways to flourish in a new field of study. In this way, both the supervisor and the student were able to negotiate the system, procedures and resources, and access each other's expertise, which would contribute to attaining the vision and goal of doctoral training. In other words, it shows that the supervisor tried to shape a confident researcher by building trust, providing mutual support and fostering sharing of knowledge in the student which enabled the student to complete the degree.

The supervisor ought to create conditions whereby students truly learn, which means that the following should be in place:

encouraging students to imagine situations beyond the parameters of their research interests, where things would be better – that is, to be caring towards students; democratising interaction, whereby students can take the initiative to imagine possibilities not otherwise thought of – that is, to be responsible towards students; and connecting with the student's story-telling with the aim of discovering untapped possibilities – that is, to be respectful towards students. (Waghid 2006: 431).

However, this threshold of learning may compromise the goal of supervision, when in considering doctoral student's diversity, in case of multiple students, each with their differences, can be time consuming and challenging on the part of the supervisor amidst multiple roles and responsibilities. Reflecting on how supervisors used their understanding of students' diversity to exercise compassionate imagination, one supervisor commented that:

I was assigned to assist the student develop a concept paper, in preparation for her registration for the doctoral programme. She chose me as her supervisor, and guided by the policy, we both agreed on each other's expectation and work methods. I tried to work within the limits of that understanding. I made her my friend and I think she forgot where to stop. At a time when she was expected to develop a conceptual framework, she told me; now that part has defeated me. You will do that for me. I think she was abusing my compassion! So, I asked her, will you now consider to have done your PhD? Please go and revisit the guidelines. She got lost for three months, and after she came back and we re-embarked on the project. (Supervisor, eight years' experience)

This is indicative of a student abusing a supervisor's strength by using the space created to exploit her and failing to effect personal growth. This brings us to reflect on the question of whether the supervisor and the student as friends can be able to respect each other professionally and how this can be dealt with to complete the doctoral journey. Guiding a student academically and providing emotional support may mean that professional expertise competes directly with the student's ability, which may interfere with academic novelty. It calls for keeping the relationship professional, even when a student and the supervisor are friends. It also requires the supervisor to divide herself to help the student academically and emotionally, which Green and Bowden (2012: 78) meant 'looking after both the whole parcel'. Kearns et al. (2006) writes that such emotional swings are discussed explicitly at induction sessions for research degree candidates. The expectation is that the research journey will begin for candidates with a sense of personal and career consequences of success.

Considering that the supervisor is directly involved in influencing and determining the agency<sup>4</sup> of the student, it is essential that guidelines that support this process are clearly stated and agreed on. In this regard, Ndejje University in Uganda has a research policy which stipulates the supervisors' responsibilities and recognises diversity. In line with Uganda's National Council for Higher Education guidelines, the university has set in place policies for the supervision of graduate students, a PhD handbook and guidelines for marking examinations, which state how students should be handled. There is a communications policy that stipulates who communicates to whom, when and where. Therefore, supervisors are expected to perform their roles within the limits of the existing policies, irrespective of the fact that the university has no specific policy on managing diversity.

According to Vilkinas (2002), the supervisor assumes different roles during the doctoral process, to enable a student to become a good researcher. Nieminen also contends that:

one of the most important responsibilities of supervisors is to change roles during the course of a study from director, to guide, to critical friend, to internal auditor and to co-author. The aim (particularly at the doctoral level of studies) is to help the candidate to evolve from a dependent novice researcher to an expert, autonomous researcher (Nieminen: 132)

Table 1 reflects Brown and Atkins's view of the supervisor's role.

This entails recognising and addressing diversity issues such as cultural concerns, intellectual abilities and money issues that could conflict with the quality of supervision and motivation to complete the doctorate. So, putting diversity at the centre of the doctoral supervisory relationship

promotes confidence and independence among the students and allows easy identification of professional direction to focus on the doctoral project. It supposes that respect for a student's diversity is inevitable when diversity is accepted. Brown and Atkins (1988) further argue that:

given a wide range of possible roles, perhaps, it is not surprising that differences in opinion can exist. Areas of potential disagreement exist at every stage of research study. What seems likely, however, is that within a general orientation, supervisors move from one role to another, which may be triggered by the personality of a doctoral student.

**Table 1:** Role of the supervisor

Director	- determining topic and method, providing ideas
Facilitator	- providing access to resources or expertise, arranging fieldwork
Advisor	- helping to resolve technical problems, suggesting alternatives
Teacher	- of research techniques
Guide	- suggesting timetable for writing up, giving feedback on progress, identifying critical path for data collection
Critic	- of design of enquiry, of draft chapters, of interpretations of data
Freedom giver	- authorises student to make decisions, supports student's decisions
Supporter	- gives encouragement, shows interest, discusses student's ideas
Friend	- extends interest and concern to non-academic aspects of student's life
Manager	- checks progress regularly, monitors study, gives systematic feedback, plans work
Examiner	- e.g. internal examiner, mock Vivas, interim progress, reports, supervisory board member

Source: Brown and Atkins (1988)

The roles highlighted in Table 1 describe the different angles and interpretations of compassionate imagination in managing students' diversity, which necessitates that the supervisors balance the student's personal, intellectual and social identity. It also underlines the necessity to seek feedback on supervision performance, getting the required skills and then to try them out.

But if we are to critically address student diversity, it can be assumed that a supervisor who attempts compassionate imagination can be expected to provide extra attention in terms of care, time and empathy to enhance their students' competencies in order to guarantee their completion. However, a student with high mental ability and a slow learner cannot be handled the same way. In fact, inter-culturality, according to Maiztegui-Oñate and

Santibáñez-Gruber (2008), demands that the supervisor modifies his/her system of teaching to facilitate the academic achievement of students with diverse origins. Where few variations exist, such as supervising a fellow staff member, the doctoral supervisor might need to make effective use of existing policies.

### ***Dealing with contradictions arising out of students' diversity in doctoral supervision***

The context in which learning takes place during graduate supervision is critical in determining the quality of the process as well as the outcome. It also influences the power dynamics, and the relationship between the supervisor and the student (Frick 2010). Grant and Lei (2001) discuss power within supervision as pertaining to two aspects: structured unequal power based on institutional position, and power based on a Foucauldian viewpoint in which power is something that exists because both are capable of acting upon each other. Given the possible mix of power differentials within the supervisory relationship, there is the opportunity for miscommunication that could lead to zones of uncertainty or even conflict. A study by Rudd (1985) shows that the reason for non-completion or late completion of a doctoral degree usually lies in a number of issues, including personal problems outside research, which tend to travel in company with other problems more directly connected to research.

When asked how they dealt with contradictions arising out of diversity during the supervisory process, doctoral students and supervisors indicated that they had adopted some strategies that worked. While this article does not focus on the politics of academic supervision, we argue that the nature and execution of doctoral supervision entails some political implications.

### ***Politics of academic supervision***

In-depth interviews with supervisors and students revealed some disquieting remarks that question how best to exercise compassionate imagination. Despite the reality that supervisors and students enter a relationship with unequal knowledge, experience and disciplinary specialisation, the responses revealed that, in most cases, supervisors did not decide on which students they wanted to supervise. Often, strong and weak students are assigned to supervisors. There are students who effectively hold supervisors at gunpoint, demanding to complete their degree even when they are not due for graduation. There was also an issue of the commoditisation of higher education where students paid to get their PhD. Some responses observed that a PhD is not for academic dwarfs, while another doctoral supervisor

commented that: 'It is okay if you have got a brilliant student but these are few and far between. With most students you have to keep up to date, so you are sure they have got it right or they won't get through the thesis examination' (Bøgelund 2015: 48).

It is important to note that supervisors are gifted differently, and, therefore, different styles of exercising the supervisory role exist. Terry (2005) documented the different styles as *laissez-faire*, pastoral, directional and contractual, and as entailing high structure and high support or low support and low structure. It suggests that supervisors should study these supervisory styles and decide how to use them creatively in advancing their students' progress.

However, the aspect of operational flexibility within the time of engagement must be considered, to synchronise with the needs of the student, which is an important aspect of compassionate imagination. For example, in the case of Joseph quoted later in this section, there was the potential need for the supervisor to temporarily engage in the 'pastoral' supervisory style when the student experienced a financial diversity.

Now, when students think that supervision does not work, do they see the problem as theirs, the supervisor's or that of institutional practice? The PhD is regarded as crucial for improving quality in the university. At undergraduate level, students are often positioned as knowledge-tellers, but at graduate level they take on a very different identity – that of knowledge-creators. This is a fundamental shift in identity and relationship to those who are already working in the field (DIES/CREST 2018), which both students and supervisors need to appreciate. It is also important to note that supervisors do not come from a vacuum, they are also a product of mentorship and systems that may not have respected diversity. Institutionalising compassionate imagination is more likely to be successful when university policies and procedures tend towards managing diversity.

Ugandan universities increasingly engage with diversity through policies and practices, managing multicultural student associations, as well as diverse academic and non-academic staff, and the theories and worldviews expounded by different faculties (Izama and CCFU 2013). Ndejje University specifically recruits staff and admits students of all religious denominations, which indicates tolerance and a respect for diversity, and supports interactions across differences, which is a mechanism that upholds diversity. It embraces phrases such as 'creating knowledge society' (Castells 1991), 'knowledge economy' (Jessop 2007), 'talentism is the new capitalism' (Schwab 2012).

### *Dealing with Contradictions Arising out of Student Diversity*

Experiencing diversity is a common component of a high-quality educational experience. To achieve excellence, it is also imperative to achieve diversity (Loomis and Sharpe, in Norris 2000). Doctoral supervision is a pedagogy in which our raced, classed and gendered bodies are present and when such supervision happens across ethnic cultures, it becomes a pedagogical site of rich possibility as well as, at times, a place of puzzling and confronting complexity (Grant and Manathunga 2011). Engaging with diversity can bring about uncertainty, anxiety and other discomfort (Nieminin and Valcke 2018), which are sometimes hidden in the absence of agreed procedures on how to progress, and which pose contradictions that put both the student and supervisor at odds, not knowing how to proceed. As the journey continues, the complex mix of excitement and anxiety is punctuated by periods of frustration, even despair (Kearns et al. 2006), which should be progressively addressed. Since it is a journey into the unknown, it is important for both parties to be aware of mutual expectations, which can be easily accessed with some means of compassionate imagination, as this student explained:

I was fortunate that from the beginning, I was allocated a very supportive professor who was following me over my progress. In the middle of my PhD journey, my progress was constrained financially and I was almost dropping out of the programme. Here, my professor could not see any more of my zeal to complete. He was keen to understand why I was regressing. He invited me and he spent a whole day with me wanting to understand why I was not progressing. He asked me very many questions about my family, my job and generally my background. After sharing with him, he inquired about my monthly income. Then he asked me to convert that amount into US dollars which was not even measuring to USD 350. I saw tears coming out of his eyes. He asked me, Jose, how do you manage, but he immediately noticed I was a real struggler who needed assistance!! He picked his phone called other officers, after which he printed a form and encouraged me to fill, sign and submit to the Research and Capacity Development Department. Within two days, I had received an email calling me to get some sustenance allowance and the department covered half of my fees. This is how my supervisor saved me from dropping out of school at an old age. He continued to give me psychological and academic mentoring that enabled me complete my doctoral journey which at one time was represented by a zigzag curve! (Jose, doctoral graduate, 2019)

This example suggests that good communication is a way of exercising compassionate imagination to address a contradiction in the student's diversity. It is a skill that the supervisor in this instance used tactfully, to provide psychological and social support within professional limits, in

addition to other roles and responsibilities. It shows that a supervisor who exercises compassionate imagination acts as a listener, canvasser, counsellor and enables a co-operative relationship with a doctoral student. The student is also expected to adhere to ethical and legal requirements to minimise negativity and the impact of the feelings of liminality,<sup>5</sup> and in the case that a liminal state occurs, a student is guided in a constructive and healing manner on how best to mitigate this.

In this respect, supervisors can consciously avoid using offensive language, seek to understand acceptable terms and deliberately take care of non-verbal insinuations, gestures and subtle prejudices, and be non-judgemental when contradictions arise. This is because such indications may imply non-acceptance and could make the relationship difficult, threaten cognition and jeopardise completion. Moreover, when supervision creates tension between a student's diversity and ethics, this goes against the universal values in Uganda's 1995 Constitution. The supervisor's responsibility should be to ensure that the students' doctoral journey unfolds as an enriching and insightful experience that will cultivate an identity, as well as values and approaches to personal and professional development (Frick et al. 2010). It should not be a miserable experience, as in this example reported by May, a doctoral graduate:

I practically dropped off the programme, when my supervisor made life difficult. He jokingly warned me that people 'from elsewhere were most likely not to complete', because they have little acceptance from existing supervisors. Indeed, I did not know he was talking about himself! As I packed my bag, a colleague, who passed through the same school, and now working as a staff asked me, 'Can you please allow me to talk to you for a minute before you go?' I said it is okay. Then he asked me. 'What is your goal of doctoral studies?' I explained. He asked again. 'Does what you study meet your goal?' I replied, Yap. He told me that 'things seem difficult and are likely to be more difficult as you progress, but why not focus on your goal?' He shared his personal experience. ... 'What I wanted is to get that expertise from my supervisor to myself. I GOT IT! Now I am Dr Col., I am now an expert in my field. That is what you need to focus on.' This dialogue helped me a lot to redefine my focus. It was a transformational moment in my doctoral studies and I finally completed. (May, doctoral graduate, 2019)

It seems clear that the student's background was a limiting factor on the doctoral journey. So, the student perhaps needed to consistently rethink her goal and ask herself, 'Will I be affected at any one point on this doctoral journey?'. This would ensure that any foreseeable negative effects would be identified. However, frustration, fear and uncertainty are inevitable in managing diversity in the doctoral process and focusing on the goal of

completion could be a better option for doctoral students to complete their doctoral journey. It also shows that students are likely to get solutions to non-completion out of sharing experiences with colleagues.

A tendency of supervisors and students to use ethnicity, identity and appearance as a yardstick to determine the ability to interact in terms of supervision, reflecting prejudices in relation to some groups, is a direct result of a biased conception of diversity. Sometimes, it is clearly indicated in how students refer to their supervisors. Some students describe their professors using nicknames that depict a myriad of attitudes, such as 'I hope today I will be able to see madam short!' Similarly, the supervisor could criticise the student who takes time to understand, in terms of ethnicity. Each of the two might even inquire what tribe the other is from before they attempt to meet.

In Uganda, common ethnic prejudices are phrased, such as: 'We cannot wait for Karamoja to develop', 'Basoga tribesmen are big-headed', 'the Baganda from eastern side of Kampala are night dancers', among others. Uganda has fifty-two ethnic groups, each with culture and language differences. The official language, though, is English, which helps to avoid using such differences as an instrument of isolation at a public institution such as Ndejje University. Although there may be no policy at a university level on terms that are offensive or acceptable, the best plan for respecting students' diversity is for supervisors to let the students share with them their preferred identities and for the supervisor to execute professional ethics. Manathunga (2009) argues for the need to ensure morally justified pedagogic interactions that are devoid of narcissism, which he calls 'compassionate rigour'. Otherwise, reluctance, failure to complete, a weak supervisory relationship and drop-out will continue to be experienced by doctoral candidates, due to the failure of their supervisors to embrace compassionate imagination as an aspect of their effective supervision.

In various ways, both student affairs professionals and faculty have a responsibility to shape campus environments that ensure equity of access as well as social and academic success (Dancy 2010). This reflects the recognition that, in the twenty-first century, the focus of schools and corporations needs to be on 'living diversity', including the diversity of thinking systems (Rosado 2006). The confusion and incoherence associated with this level of learning holds potential for new meaning that should be valued. As architects of knowledge and learning environments, universities play a pivotal role in influencing the ways in which diversity is lived and promoted (Clegg et al. 2006).



Further, Bartlett and Elliott (2008: 66) argue that:

Social engagement often engenders contexts that are appropriate for valuable change and learning, as these contexts create the space to engage with others who think differently, thus providing the opportunity for actively and developmentally transforming practices. Social engagement provides a forum for the application of skills learned and the possibility of problem-solving in their own world situations where accountability and relevance are required in formal study.

However, participation in a PhD programme in a different cultural environment ought to increase a student's independence, as well as the ability to cope with diverse situations as a competent researcher, as this student explained:

For us who studied outside the country, diversity of perspective was a very serious issue. If you want to present the reality on ground such as, in my case, the existence of or non-existence of the media law in my country, the supervisor wants to evaluate your contribution based on what he/she saw on the news bulletin. (Isaac, doctoral graduate, 2018)

This diversity of opinion is obviously and partly driven by the liberalisation of the media, which has little urge to produce credible information following government deregulation, and where ensuring accountability may be complex. However, it could be addressed by a supervisor interrogating the student's context before drawing any conclusion. Isaac's situation is one that most international doctoral students are likely to face, given that their supervisor may be unfamiliar with the student's context. Waghid (2006) reports on a similar South African experience:

Black students responded more favourably to a black university professor than to white supervisors; some students could not help feeling that they were being racially discriminated against on the ground of being a coloured with limited opportunities to move into the sphere of higher education which was reserved mostly for whites. In another study, race manifested as a silent category of social segmentation whereby there was considerable reluctance to dismantle the social order organised around that segregation. (Waghid 2006: 428)

Another student, when asked how she was progressing with her supervisor, responded: 'He is neither interested nor interested' (personal communication with a seasoned supervisor). This response is indicative of a frustrated individual who is about to drop out of a programme. However, when space for sharing experiences is opened up, such students would develop the confidence to speak up and write their own story and the supervisor would arguably evaluate the work of the student respectfully (Green 1988).

This brings us to the question of 'equality of what', put forward by Sen (1979), which could relate to accessibility to opportunities such as education and resources and respect for difference, among others. Dealing with contradictions here necessitates positive discrimination in terms of giving 'extra' to students with multiple diversities. This is where compassionate imagination supports agency in order for the programme to be completed. It calls for students to be mentored on how to negotiate for a stress-free learning space, and to engage in spaces for peer support, such as group forums, social media and question-and-answer dialogues in order to receive constructive feedback and mutual support.

For supervision to be effective, it must be an involving process that concentrates on meeting the needs of the students' programme and those of the administrative structures (Benaquisto 2000; Egan et al. 2009). The supervisor cannot be the same from day one of supervision up to the last day, since the process revolves around feelings, fears, emotions, surprises, etc, which defines the supervisor's and student's relationship. Green (1988) argues that, 'Students and supervisors are not merely functionalities in an instrumental system geared towards turning out products which meet the standards of quality control, but participants in a highly esteemed academic enterprise where they mutually assert their autonomy and prepare the ground for constant communicative interaction.' Reflecting on contradictions, still, one student commented:

When I sensed the problem, I politely talked to the dean who engaged the supervisor about a misunderstanding that had constrained our progress. My supervisor did not come to know I was involved. (Clare, doctoral graduate, 2016)

Other responses were:

When I got frustrated with the supervisor telling me to change from qualitative to quantitative four times, I simply threw the book at the supervisor's table and went out. After several weeks I receive a call from his administrator who told me that your book is here why don't you pick it? I told him that the professor does not understand me. He also agreed that it is true the professor did not understand me and referred me to George—another supervisor. When I went to George, before we could begin any business, he asked: 'Do you think you are beautiful?'. I simply moved out of his office and went to the director to request for another supervisor. (Josu, doctoral candidate, 2015)

On three meetings, my supervisor could not accept me to use a concept in my research topic. But I simply kept quiet because I did not want to fight with him, even when I knew it was good for me, since it would widen my areas for publishing. The next time I presented what he wanted and also proposed a theory which was not familiar to him, discussed it and he was

convinced it would be suitable for the study. After making corrections, I went back to him and I included the rejected concept in the title. So, he shouted ... Again this word? I convinced him that the theory would not work well when that concept was not measured. He responded, 'Are you sure? Okay then, we can include it'. So I was excited that my method worked. (Agnes, doctoral graduate, 2017)

In these two contexts, the role of middle-level managers, such as deans and directors, in handling contradictions is evident, or else doctorateness<sup>6</sup> hangs in the balance. Further, dialogues, active listening and flexibility are important ingredients of a doctoral process. It is therefore imperative to understand that respect for students' diversity helps to realise the potential in candidates. Opening up spaces for articulating expectations and negotiating the relationship and context allows the stakeholders to dialogue on the critical issues of doctorateness, and in this way to address diversity.

DIES/CREST (2018) recommend a memorandum of understanding.<sup>7</sup> According to the website *Enhancing Postgraduate Environments* (2017), the aim of a memorandum of understanding is to guide the student and supervisor to develop a sound and productive working relationship that is the result of an open discussion in which the expectations and preferences of both are clarified. By deliberating on different perspectives of rights and the challenges that come thereof, the necessity for effective management of diversity in doctoral supervision is sought. A memorandum of understanding will need to be revisited and probably reviewed during the doctoral process to cater for unforeseeable aspects of interaction, in order to develop a shared understanding. It may also include ways to deal with potential disputes or differences of opinion, roles and responsibilities, skills and knowledge, intellectual property, patents and progress and how to find help.

To successfully address issues of diversity, it is important to prepare doctoral students with a variety of skills in an induction process. At Ndejje University, for instance, students, among others, ought to know the policies that concern graduate education highlighted earlier, in order to negotiate successful supervision and completion of their doctoral studies. This also relates to the requirement of ethics on the part of the supervisor from the students' point of view. It is important to analyse similarities and differences between the student and supervisor and the different roles that supervisors have to play to meet the challenges posed by students' diversity.

Banks (2008), Sleeter and Grant (2003) and Sleeter and Stillman (2005) in Maiztegui-Oñate and Santibáñez-Gruber (2008) argue for treating diversity in a way that goes beyond mere co-existence of diverse communities in their own distinct niche, and call for an approach that appreciates diversity

as an asset, as something that can benefit society and allows us to understand multiple perspectives of reality. Related to this, the Uganda government put measures in place, such as the University and Other Tertiary Institutions Act, established by the Uganda National Council for Higher Education, and wording in Uganda's 1995 Constitution, which emphasise expanding the functional capacity of educational structures and reducing inequalities of access to education and equality in access to education. The 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda especially defines education, regardless of levels, as an entitlement for all Ugandans, recognises diversity in the form of ethnicities, minority and vulnerable groups and prohibits discrimination in the education sector. All in all, achieving doctorateness is often a consequence of extended collaboration between the candidate and the supervisor (Trafford and Leshem 2009). Passing over the threshold of doctorateness also requires that factors such as diversity are detected and addressed.

## **Discussion**

Respect for student diversity examined from a broader perspective would seem to be a major factor in a balanced understanding of the student/supervisor relationship, as they decide to work together on a common goal of doctorateness. Creating this space may entail listening and deepening understanding, exchange of information, sharing personal stories and experiences, expressing perspectives in culturally acceptable ways, clarification of viewpoints, developing collective solutions to challenges, agreeing on common values, reflecting on assumptions and learning to unlearn. Indeed, this is so because there are clear differences in terms of competencies between the supervisor and the student (DIES/ CREST 2018). ‘

The doctoral process, which views knowledge as a process and product of the interaction of voices, is concerned with the construction and transformation of understanding through the tension between multiple perspectives and opinion, meaning is thus created in the interaction between the supervisor and the student. (Dysthe, Mare and Westerheim 2006: 302)

This creates a responsible workspace in an environment where diversity is respected. Some supervisors have wide experience of supporting diverse students, whereas others are in the process of acquiring experience. For some novice supervisors, learning has just started, as the results show.

The data shows that doctoral students' understanding of compassionate imagination from the supervisors was based on their experiences of satisfaction and frustration, which also depended on the career trajectory of the supervisors. It is important to note that the doctoral supervision process trains a student in a range of skills and attitudes that will be needed during

various engagements, such as research, in academia and in other fields outside academia. This requires supervisors to imagine the implications of the diversity factors for the student, while modelling ways in which they would like their students to engage with scholarship by building the confidence and ability of the students to contribute to scholarship.

The qualities of a supervisory relationship that reflects compassionate imagination, in this study, were related to the supervisor's experience, commitment, patience, sensitivity, respect for human dignity, understanding and tolerance. Small acts of compassionate imagination, such as trust, counselling and praise, had a big impact on students' completion of their doctoral programme. However, students who were wholeheartedly embraced by their supervisors despite the diversity factor, found it difficult to draw the line between supervision and friendship. Respect for students' diversity is important in building identity of a student as a prospective supervisor. The supervisor ought to reflect on some elements proposed by Nieminen and Valcke (2008), such as utilising values and experiences that promote respect for diversity, so as to improve the outcome of their supervision relationship as they immerse students into professional culture, understanding students' differences through discourses, and employing friendly supervision styles, such as humour, to mention a few.

The data shows the kind of strategies students adopted to deal with contradictions that arose due to their diversity, including engaging with middle-level managers, use of their tacit skills, appreciating and embracing differences and sharing experiences with friends, among others. The supervisors, on the other hand, mostly embraced flexibility, application of experience and the use of existing policies to manage their interaction with doctoral students.

The context for building realistic relationships during doctoral supervision brings meaning to doctorateness. In appreciating diversity, the supervisor reveals strength of character and an all-round conscious person, which will improve their results as a supervisor. Vilkinas (2002) suggests that 'a good supervisor has research knowledge and interpersonal skills. They need to be innovative, creative problem solvers, resource oriented, work focused, decisive and dependable.' Here, a supervisor can be viewed as someone who can interact well and lead students to completion. The only constant is that a PhD is a learning experience that primarily unfolds with a supervisory relationship. A more holistic, integrated and reflexive approach on the part of supervisors, students and the institution could enhance and enrich many aspects of the PhD process and its outcome for everyone concerned.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Diversity is a form of human experience, while the doctoral process is a form of immersion that offers supervisors and doctoral students an invaluable learning and life-changing connection. Diversity must be taken into account when planning the doctoral journey, and overlooking diversity during the doctoral process should be considered unethical.

A good deal could be done in growing respect for students' diversity by providing supervisors with enough training on aptitude and attitudes. Supervisors ought to be trained at an early stage, before they accept the job, to enable them to take a sincere interest in the growth of students for the future of the research profession, and to appreciate students' diversity issues. The training may cover the time over which research occurs, the role of the supervisor, intellectual property, values and practices that support honesty, integrity and reliability, supervisory qualities, standards of quality, and recognition of when to ask for help, among other matters.

In Africa, efforts are being made by various capacity-building institutions, such as DIES/CREST at Stellenbosch and the Council for Development of Social Sciences Research in Africa in Dakar, to train doctoral supervisors and doctoral mentors and to help them build self-confidence, so that they may lay the foundation for a good supervision relationship in the first few interactions with the student and thereby achieve the goal of completing a doctorate. Additionally, supervisors may make a commitment to train themselves about professional ethics and effective monitoring strategies, and continuously build their skills in research.

To manage diversity in effective supervision, it is important to have in place a written agreement that outlines the roles, values, commitments, expectations and responsibilities. A memorandum of understanding between the student and supervisor may be developed to document the supervisory relationship. Some good practices of treating diversity need to be shared, which can be benchmarked to make the doctoral supervision enjoyable. By and large, these measures will encourage collegiality and the student will feel that she/he is being treated respectfully. This way, all students who enrol would be motivated to put some effort into their studies and would at least have the chance to succeed with sufficient abilities to fully engage in the world of research.

Respect for students' diversity in doctoral supervision seems to be a complex reality, as examined in this article. However, the development of a confident researcher is a central goal of the graduate process. Therefore, a co-ordinated approach, such as creating a work plan that would allow students

and supervisors to monitor academic performance and progress, is necessary so as to make learning more exciting. This can be enhanced if both student and supervisor adopt a completion mindset and find the best strategy to ensure timely and successful completion, irrespective of the diversity factor. This can be enhanced by documenting good and bad practices of managing student diversity in doctoral supervision and sharing recommendations, to foster the student's general wellbeing and intellectual growth. In addition, supervisors ought to promise their availability and supervise by example. This calls for honesty about their capabilities when dealing with students.

In order to deal with the challenges of diversity, improving the attitudes of supervisors and students through awareness of how diversity can be managed is important. This is possible through creating forums for sharing supervisory experiences that can be documented and published for wider sharing. It is also necessary to update data on diversity, especially on approaches that respect diversity in doctoral supervision, which can work as training materials during refresher engagements.

Mentoring supervisors is highly recommended so that they may develop new competencies in managing diversity in supervision. Therefore, supervisors must be prepared to enrol for mentoring programmes, such as those offered at Stellenbosch University and CODESRIA, among others, to help sharpen their competencies and professionalism in supervision. This suggests that universities should create policy that encourages managing diversity. This may entail reward for involvement in managing diversity, creating diversity management programmes and promoting problem-solving strategies, such as knowing who to contact when serious problems arise.

The variations in supervisors' understanding and addressing of diversity clearly indicate that they seem to be ill-equipped, and in some cases not interested, to deal with students' diversity. Yet it is an important aspect of doctorateness. Alternative models of doctoral supervision should be explored to allow sensitivity to students' unique ways. This calls for specific and unique approaches to supervision. One method that has been suggested is supervision in teams where a student can experience greater support from a wider group of supervisors. This initiative could involve distribution of tasks, team learning, shared responsibility, exchange of experiences, and more flexibility and contribution towards solving any problems around student diversity, since this could be dealt with from various angles, and it would broaden the opportunity to discuss students' challenges. It would allow staff to refer to other staff for good management practices, since all have different sets of capabilities. The students would assume a greater role in managing their supervision, which would help negotiate power issues,

since there would be less command and control by the supervisor. This can be an advantage if each member of the supervisory team has a completion mindset in relation to the students' work.

The role of middle-level managers in doctoral supervision should be emphasised. As administrators of academic units, they can ensure the PhD curriculum is implemented within the required timelines. They can help to strengthen communication along the doctoral journey, assisting in dealing with issues before they become challenges. In smoothing the way for doctoral students to pass over the threshold of doctorateness, they establish the credibility and authority of the institution, which helps to improve the image of higher education.

## Notes

1. Respect for students' diversity in this article means respect for the interests of different categories of doctoral student as well as the measures employed to address these interests and how these affect the supervisory relationship. Among the forms of diversity discussed in this article are differences in gender, age, ethnicity, class, race, income, mental abilities, perceptions, culture, diversity of thoughts, values, expectations and different languages, among others.
2. Imagining the other's position to build a constructive and productive relationship, enable emotional intellect and ethical deliberation. It helps to reflect on the positive aspects of the supervisory relationship in order to design strategies that make the most of such an opportunity and develop a confident researcher (Grant 2011; Naussbaum 1998; Waghid 2006; Vilakazi 2016).
3. Owning a challenge in this paper is conceptualised as making diversity a shared challenge of those in a supervisory relationship. This depends on the effectiveness of ownership as a benefit of collective interaction. It is about sharing the successes of doctorateness. It is important for the supervisor and the student to have a shared understanding of the context of diversity and consider it a shared challenge, irrespective of power dynamics.
4. The expression of 'agent', to borrow from Sen (1989), is employed here to denote someone who acts and brings about change and whose achievements can be judged in terms of a person's own values, capabilities, objectives and vision, whether or not the assessment is done in terms of some external criteria as well. The opposite of a person with agency is someone who is forced, oppressed or passive (Sen 1989: 19).
5. Being unable to progress, and experiencing such negative feelings, or emotions, was termed liminality by Van Gennep (1909/1960). Thus, a liminal state of consciousness describes the experience of being unable to pass through a particular threshold to new, desired and necessary conceptual understanding (Meyer and Land 2006: 19–32).



6. Entails both 'doing' and achieving a doctorate. It merges the research process and research techniques. It is a portal through which candidates have to pass which may facilitate or hinder progress (Trafford and Leshem 2009).
7. A written document that outlines the roles and expectations that the student and supervisor have of each other and how they plan to work together, thereby making the graduate journey and relationship explicit.

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# Navigating the Delicate Balance between Academia and Administration through Transformational Leadership in a South African University

Nhlanhla Landa\*

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## Abstract

This study investigated the challenges faced by middle-level academic leaders at a university in South Africa. It was guided by the transformational leadership approach. The study found that heads of departments faced many challenges, including disruption of the teaching programme, due to meetings and other responsibilities as well as persistent student protests, too much paperwork as a result of reporting to higher management, and lack of leadership induction. The study also established that there was minimal academic career growth for academics in middle-level academic leadership during the time they were in those positions, due to the pressure that came with the office, which reduced research activities. There is a lack of support in terms of capacity-building for heads of departments, which functions as an impediment to career growth among middle-level academic leaders. Once they get into leadership positions, most academics sacrifice their academic careers to satisfy the administrative demands of their office. Balancing academia and administration at the sampled university was very difficult for the middle-level managers. The study recommends that the university develops and implements a practical strategy for middle-level academic managers, which would allow them to strike a balance between the administration and academic sides of their careers.

**Keywords:** higher education, middle-level academic managers, transformative leadership

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## Résumé

Cette étude a examiné les défis auxquels sont confrontés les responsables universitaires de niveau intermédiaire dans une université d'Afrique du Sud. Elle a été guidée par l'approche du leadership transformationnel. L'étude a révélé que les chefs de département étaient confrontés à de nombreux défis, notamment la perturbation du programme d'enseignement, en raison de réunions et d'autres responsabilités, ainsi que les manifestations persistantes des étudiants, la bureaucratie excessive avec les rapports à faire pour la hiérarchie, et le manque de formation au leadership. L'étude a également établi que l'évolution de la carrière académique des universitaires occupant un poste de direction de niveau intermédiaire à l'université était minime pendant la période où ils sont en fonction, du fait de la pression qui en découle et qui a pesé sur les activités de recherche. L'absence de soutien en termes de renforcement des capacités des chefs de département constitue un obstacle à l'évolution de la carrière des responsables universitaires de niveau intermédiaire. Une fois qu'ils accèdent à des postes de direction, la plupart des universitaires sacrifient leur carrière académique pour satisfaire les exigences administratives de leur fonction. Dans l'université étudiée, il était très difficile pour les gestionnaires de niveau intermédiaire de trouver un équilibre entre le monde universitaire et l'administration. L'étude recommande que l'université développe et mette en œuvre une stratégie pratique pour les gestionnaires universitaires de niveau intermédiaire, qui leur permettrait de trouver un équilibre entre les aspects administratifs et académiques de leur carrière.

**Mots-clés :** enseignement supérieur, gestionnaires universitaires de niveau intermédiaire, leadership transformateur.

## Introduction and Background

The study documents the challenges faced by middle-level academic leaders in executing their duties at a university in South Africa. Most importantly, the article maps out ways and strategies for balancing the competing demands of academia and administration through a transformational leadership approach. The literature indicates that, often, these academics are not adequately prepared or capacitated to function successfully in these positions. They are thrown into the deep end of administration and they are often overwhelmed by the responsibilities of this role. This study was therefore motivated by the numerous challenges that often seem to drown middle-level academic leaders.

The university studied here had come under the spotlight for leadership and governance issues. At the complex centre of the matters of concern was the leadership style of the new vice-chancellor (which was not well regarded



by certain sections of the university community), the transformative decisions taken by the vice-chancellor, and the level of resistance to change. The developments contextualised above had led to the university being placed under the management of an administrator in the place of a University Council. The government, through the then Minister of Higher Education, had intervened by reinstating the vice-chancellor and dissolving the University Council before bringing in an administrator who was tasked to oversee the operations of the university for a period of twelve months. The issues at the centre of governance debates at this university cascaded down to middle-level management. These governance problems brought a unique context for the middle-level managers studied, namely a context of poverty and institutional instability.

In the context of this study, middle-level management includes course co-ordinators and heads of departments or of units within departments – the leadership that is generally not part of faculty management. Focus was given specifically to how middle-level academic leaders balanced academia and administration, in executing their duties and ensuring career growth. At the centre of the study is an experiment with a strategy package for navigating the balance between academia and administration, using a sample of heads of departments from one faculty at the university. The aim was to come up with an effective strategy for achieving some level of equanimity between academia and administration.

The starting point was acknowledging that the academia-administration scale was tilted in favour of administration. Furthermore, academics in management are often overwhelmed by their workloads, and this is attributed to inadequate resources to support their role (Gallos 2002: 174). Gevers (2016: 18) indicates that, while academics in leadership positions are generally regarded within the university ‘with a mixture of pity and apprehension as fallen people who have sold their souls for the scholarly equivalent of a mess of pottage’, it is very possible to balance academia and administration and excel in both. This calls on academics to maintain their academic selves, characterised by teaching, research and community engagement, in assuming their executive selves, characterised by university service and administration. The picture painted here is one of a precarious balance, which the study sought to establish.

As Gevers (2016) maintains, holding onto the key determinants of the academe, which include being empirical, coherent, original and creative, enhances the functionality of the academic leader in the executive post assumed. Research on university leadership in South Africa has often indicated that South African universities are characterised by ineffective and

inefficient leadership (Fullan and Scott 2009; Seale 2004), politicised and indecisive leadership (Ngcamu and Teferra 2015) and confusion (Bateman and Snell 2002). The major task in the study was, therefore, to come up with a strategy for managing the academia-administration balance, evening out the expectations and demands of both academia and administration that a middle-level manager deals with on a day-to-day basis. Also of importance in this study was the acknowledgement that, if not sufficiently balanced, one of the two areas, or both, will suffer.

The studied university is in a largely rural set-up. It is in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, which is the second-poorest province of the country (Human Research Council 2014; Statistics South Africa 2017).

### **Existing Body of Knowledge**

In South Africa, the 1997 White Paper on Education set the stage for the transformation of the higher education space. However, at that stage attention was paid to structural transformation (Soudien 2010; Fourie 1999; Bitzer and Bezuidenhout 2001; Waghid 2002; Van Wyk 2005), where focus was on ‘... sociological relationships, structural changes, efficiency, mergers of institutions, the forming of one national higher education system and institutional compliance in terms of redressing inequality (accessibility, equality of race and gender, demographical representation of staff and students of society)’ (Du Preez, Simmonds and Verhoef 2016: 3). The idea was to achieve equal and fair representation in terms of race, class, age and gender in the higher education landscape (South African Department of Education 1997), the reversal of what Ndimande (2016) calls manufactured social inequalities.

While issues of inequality and segregation still crop up in leadership in the South African higher education landscape (Bazana and Mogotsi 2017; Soudien 2015; Alexander 2007; Schrieff et al. 2005; Koen and Durrheim 2009), focus has also been on transforming the leadership styles in the universities (Van Niekerk 2015; Chipunza and Gwarinda 2010). Transformational leadership is urgently needed in the South African higher education context (Mader, Scott and Razak 2013; Seale and Cross 2016). This is because its tertiary institutions are part of a market context that is becoming increasingly demanding and competitive (Bendermacher, Egbrink, Wolfhagen and Dolmans 2016), and the transformation qualities of leaders in South African universities have been questioned (Herbst and Garg 2017).

Literature indicates that the major duties of heads of departments include department governance (Leaming 2006; Wolverson and Gmelch 2003; Montez, Wolverson and Gmelch 2003), teaching and learning

programme management (Wolverton, Gmelch, Wolverton and Sarros 1999; Leaming 2006; Tucker 1993), human resources management (Leaming 2006; Gmelch and Miskin 1993), and budget and resource management (Leaming 2006). There has been growing literature on the changing identities of academic managers and the emergence of new identities for the same. Most of this literature concentrates on the first decade after the turn of the twenty-first century, and it includes Whitchurch (2006), Henkel (2000), Barnett (2005) and Kogan and Teichler (2007).

## **Conceptual Framework**

The study was guided by the concept of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is generally change-oriented – engendering a change of individuals and change of social systems. Following Burns's (1978) use of the term 'transformational leadership' in relation to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a lot of research has been carried out to fit the concept to different contexts of leadership. While the preoccupation of a transactional leader is with the physiological, the transformational leader attends to the entire needs of the person (Hackman 2000). According to Brandis (2003), a transformational leader is idealised, has inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individual consideration. The success or failure of set goals in transformational leadership depends on the leader as much as it does on the led (Avolio and Bass 2002). Research indicates that notions of transformation in South Africa have tended to relate to race, change, efficiency and shift in organisational strategy (Ngcamu and Teffera 2015). This study extends transformation to the change in approach to academia and administration, in the process of striving for balance.

## **Research Methodology**

### ***Research Approach***

The study used a qualitative research approach. It was important that the phenomenon be studied and interpreted in its natural setting and specific context, which, in this case, was individual and personal narratives relating to middle-level leadership. This follows framing by such scholars as Swanson and Holton (1997) and, more recently, Denzin and Lincoln (2000, 2005), Schultze and Avital (2011) and Walia (2015). As Mohajan (2018) observes, qualitative research interests itself in people's experiences, meanings and relationships relating to specific samples. This study was, therefore, phenomenological in approach. Phenomenology has to do with the study of experience from the viewpoint of the individual and it focuses

on personal knowledge, personal (subjective) perspective and interpretation (Lester 1999). This study was interested in personal narratives of selected heads of departments in one faculty in the sampled university.

### ***Research Setting***

The sample consisted of six heads of departments, purposively selected from a faculty that has more than fifteen departments, institutes and centres. The interviews were conducted within the work environment, namely in the offices of the sampled participants. The researcher worked with the meetings cycle of the university as stipulated in the university calendar to set appointments with specific heads of departments. This was to avoid congesting the already heavy schedules of academic administrators. Further, and as Holloway and Wheeler (2010) indicate, research participants in interviews prefer to be interviewed where they feel comfortable and safe during the interview, and where there are as few interruptions as possible.

### **Discussion**

The study established several challenges that the middle-level managers in the sample experienced in their position as head of departments. The different narratives of the heads of department were a rich source of data. These are discussed in the section below under two major themes, namely ordinary everyday demands of administration, and rurality and notions of cultural collectivity. These are further split into several sub-themes.

#### ***Ordinary Everyday Demands of Administration***

##### *Routinisation of Academic Administration*

The participants raised several everyday challenges associated with middle-level academic leadership. The following sections discuss some of the major ones faced by the middle-level academic leaders sampled in the study.

##### *Disruption of Learning*

In the face of too much administrative work, including typing up official documents, attending meetings and dealing with students' issues, heads of departments are drowning. The participants indicated that the issue of time was affected by several problems, which related to the size of classes, disruptions of the learning programme, as well as too many responsibilities piled on their desks, among other challenges. One indicated:

Time is never on our side. There is hardly a semester when there are no disruptions of classes by the students, and once in a while by the university employees. Often, senior management ignores students' protests and they go on for very long periods. Sometimes, though, they tell employees to stay at home. (Interview: Head of Department 6)

Another indicated that when this happens, members of staff are often denied permission to enter university premises by the demonstrating students, which especially affects the working schedule of middle-level academic leaders.

The participants indicated that when student disruptions occur, dealing with other responsibilities becomes problematic. A head of department said:

When students go on strike there is often a lot of vandalism. However, what affects our time management more is that they shut down the university and there is no access to critical support offices and senior management offices. Even processing conference funding is often affected, as there are no people in the relevant offices. (Interview: Head of Department 2)

Thus, they indicated that career growth is significantly affected. The literature indicates that while middle-level academic leaders are central to university performance, they often have little autonomy (Nguyen 2012). The participants indicated that when the students' strikes are over there is often too little time to catch up, exposing them to a lot of pressure. In addition, because of this pressure, which they said is becoming the norm due to frequent student protests, heads of departments are always struggling with time management. Besides, there is a lot of paperwork that needs to be done as part of their reporting to higher management. When students fail, mostly due to the lost time, the issue still comes back to the desks of the heads of departments, confirming what Gallos (2002) stipulates, that middle-level managers are often accountable for issues over which they have no control. This points to the need for appropriate learner-management systems. All these affect the culture and quality of the university.

### *Lack of Leadership Induction*

The participants indicated that one of the major challenges they faced was the absence of orientation when they took up leadership positions. They indicated that, beyond the letter of appointment, academic leaders are on their own. One stated it thus:

There is no orientation. Once you get into the office, you have to discover things as you go by. Even your predecessor is often not interested in helping. (Interview: Head of Department 6)

Another added:

I always go around to other departments asking those who have been in head of department positions longer than me to help with information on how to do certain things and how to deal with certain situations. Therefore, you will be supposed to oversee policy implementation and adherence in the department, but there is practically very little you know. Decision-making becomes very difficult, dangerous even because you lack information. (Interview: Head of Department 3)

They generally agreed that lack of orientation was a huge obstacle as it meant they took, and stayed in, positions without adequate preparation. Head of Department 4 indicated that there was also lack of experience and skills transfer from one leader to the next since former heads of departments were reported to be always unhelpful. Skills and knowledge transfer is, however, central to success in academic leadership (Moore and Diamond 2000). The situation was compounded by very little to no capacity-building training for leaders at their level.

Furthermore, the participants indicated that while personality differences were often ignored, these always played a huge part in academic leadership as they determined whether a meeting about a simple issue was successful or not. Head of Department 1 indicated that personality differences related to departmental members' attitudes towards an individual's appointment, and towards the job itself. In addition, students' attitudes towards studying created many interpersonal issues between themselves and faculty staff, which needed mediation by the heads of departments.

### ***Rurality and Notions of Cultural Collectivity***

The narratives indicate that, in the context of the participants, the roles of a lecturer, to start with, were not always clearly demarcated. Before being appointed (or elected) as leaders, lecturers often found themselves playing the role of counsellor, because students brought them all kinds of challenges associated with education in the rural context. The lecturers also played the role of financial advisor. They were already functioning in the role of administrator, as they were informally required to deal with issues that only people already in management positions would ordinarily do. These informal duties were over and above the understood responsibilities of the lecturer, which are teaching, research and community engagement.

The above was peculiar to the sampled university's rural campus where, because most of the students come from the rural Cape, the Ubuntu paradigm pervades. The learners expected of the lecturer what

they ordinarily would expect of family and associates. Therefore, lecturers acted in loco parentis as students flooded to their offices for help in matters that were often not academic. '*Bhuti ndicela uncedo / Sisi ndicela usizo*' (Brother/Sister, kindly help me out) are common Xhosa phrases that heads of departments said lecturers often heard from students who came to their offices for help with social issues. This is a Xhosa social interaction cue used by students who felt very strongly about being helped by a *Bhuti* or *Sisi* lecturer. A participant said:

Students here are different from students in other universities where I have taught. Here, as long as you are a black lecturer they will call you *bhuti* or *sisi*, and once that happens they feel entitled to your help with anything, ranging from an opportunity to write a test late to advice on life, finance and other issues. It is even worse if you are a head of department. (Interview: Head of Department 5)

The students drew on these kinship references to communicate some social entitlement to help. Often, they got this help as academics bent to this entitlement, in the spirit of Ubuntu.

Participants indicated that students often did not recognise nor acknowledge the bureaucracy that was in place when they sought assistance with anything. This bureaucracy would include class representatives, supplemental instructors, tutors, the SRC and their course instructors. The students would skip all these and go to the *Bhuti/Sisi* who they thought would deal with their problems immediately. They viewed bureaucracy as an impediment to the resolution of their problems, and they just went straight to the head of department. This, the participants indicated, increased pressure on the heads of departments, who were already overloaded with administration duties.

The data also indicated that students would go to lecturers, especially course co-ordinators and heads of departments, to ask for part-time employment in their gardens. A head of department said:

I often entertain students who come to my office to ask for employment; all kinds of employment including working in my garden. Of course, I do not give them any, except the postgraduate ones who can work as research assistants on specific projects. (Interview: Head of Department 4)

Most of the other heads of departments in the sample also indicated having received such requests from students. This sees leaders dealing with issues related to poverty. The middle-level academic leader's role is then expected to go beyond the appointment letter to include providing humanitarian aid to the student.

A participant added:

These things can be frowned upon in Western and other contexts, but in our context, having emerged from the village ourselves, we are prompted to act; it is only natural to do so. If we cannot do anything to help, we can at least listen and give advice. (Interview: Head of Department 1)

This led to academic leaders assuming the role of counsellors, which consumed a lot of their time.

### *Stunted Career Growth*

Participants indicated that there was minimal academic career growth for academics in middle-level academic leadership positions during the time they were in those positions. They said this was due to the pressure that came with the office, which reduced the time available for research activities. One pointed out that:

Most academics stay away from these positions for purposes of career growth, resulting in some members being heads of departments for a long time. This is because it becomes difficult to do what other academics are doing, especially when it comes to research activities. (Interview: Head of Department 4)

Therefore, the heads of departments indicated, those who get into these positions, unaware of the realities that come with the post, often struggle the most. This is especially because of the lack of support in terms of capacity-building for heads of departments.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Drawing from the findings of the study discussed above, it can be concluded that the lack of orientation, absence of capacity-building programmes and the rural realities of the university sampled for the study, were critical determinants for transformational leadership among middle-level academic leaders. Lack of adequate support mechanisms for the academic administrators functioned as an impediment to career growth among middle-level academic leaders who were subjected to a lot of pressure due to the demanding needs of the positions they occupied. Often, they were not adequately prepared for these positions, as they rarely received orientation, making them stumble a lot along the way. It may also be concluded that once they get into leadership positions, most academics sacrifice their academic careers to satisfy the demands of the administration side of their office. Among middle-level managers, balancing academia and administration is an operational nightmare.



The study recommends the development of a practical and implementable balance strategy package for middle-level academic managers. This entails the middle-level leaders taking the initiative of deliberately setting boundaries between academia and management. However, this is very difficult as the boundaries between these two are increasingly becoming blurred (Whitchurch 2008). The package should include deliberate and rational allocation of time to academic and administrative activities, tasks and responsibilities by the heads of departments themselves. The success of this depends, however, on the broader development implementation of sustainable and effective student administration systems by the university, which would have the effect of limiting student protests and the consequent loss of learning time that has partly been responsible for the increased pressure on heads of departments.

The strategy package would also entail self-regulation by the heads of departments on issues like time management and delegation of duties to other members of their departments. This would include constituting several committees in the departments to attend to specific issues. The idea would be to take away part of the load that middle-level academic leaders deal with by assigning some of their duties to these committees, which would then report to the head of department. There are departments that are already successfully running outstanding course co-ordinator functions and departmental student selection committees; therefore, the study recommends the expansion of these to accommodate other responsibilities that are placed on the desk of the head of department. Besides recommending research committees, which would co-ordinate the research activities of the department, this study also suggests the formulation of research groups in the departments. These would act as a support mechanism for the middle-level academics as they would be able to collaborate on research activities with members in their research groups. The aim would be to boost the research profiles of academics involved in middle-level academic leadership.

Lastly, the study recommends that senior management devise effective capacity-development programmes for middle-level leaders. These should not be designed as a rescue package in reaction to challenges that arise, but as a proactive strategy that begins by preparing all departmental faculty for leadership. This would have the double effect of, firstly, preparing all members for leadership, such that when any one was appointed head of department, they would be able to function, and secondly, making sure there is minimal resistance as they would be aware of what leadership entails. This should be complemented by adequate leadership induction of new heads of departments, as well as all faculty that go into leadership positions.

Transformative leadership should thus take into consideration the specific context of the led, failure of which would potentially lead to resistance to leadership. The broader context, namely the external structural context, does have an impact on organisational internal leadership practices. For middle-level management to be effective in higher education institutions, there is need to design context-specific approaches. This would allow middle-level academic managers, such as heads of department, to balance academia and administration, to contribute to the effective management of higher education institutions without sacrificing their career growth, teaching, research or other important components of their career.

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# Leading an Academic Staff Union as a Middle-level Academic (2003–2013)

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## Abstract

This article examines the emergence of the author as a leader of the Universities Academic Staff Union at a university in East Africa. Using the role, resource and constraint-based theories as well as autoethnography, which is a sub-category of qualitative research, the author traces the intellectual and political ferment that enabled him to become a unionist. From the discussion that emanated from the data he collected, from memos, newspaper articles and personal memories, it became increasingly clear that as a unionist his story demonstrates tensions, contestations and in some cases expensive trade-offs. Overall, there were actions that he performed well and others that he would implement differently were he given a second chance to lead the union.

**Keywords:** autoethnography, Universities Academic Staff Union, protest literature.

## Résumé

Cet article examine l'émergence de l'auteur en tant que leader du syndicat du personnel enseignant d'une université d'Afrique de l'Est. En utilisant les théories basées sur le rôle, les ressources et les contraintes ainsi que l'auto-ethnographie, qui est une sous-catégorie de la recherche qualitative, l'auteur retrace le ferment intellectuel et politique qui lui a permis de devenir un syndicaliste. À partir de la discussion qui a émané des données qu'il a recueillies, des mémos, des articles de journaux et des souvenirs personnels, il est devenu de plus en plus clair qu'en tant que syndicaliste, son histoire témoigne de tensions, de contestations et, dans certains cas, de compromis ruineux. Dans l'ensemble, il y a des actions qu'il a bien menées et d'autres qu'il mettrait en œuvre différemment, si on lui donnait une seconde chance de diriger le syndicat.

**Mots-clés :** auto-ethnographie, syndicat du personnel enseignant d'université, littérature de manifestation estudiantine.

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## **Introduction**

Personal experience as a way of generating, documenting and disseminating knowledge has existed from time immemorial. Even then, until very recently, it has not been legitimated in the academy as an acceptable method of harnessing objective knowledge. Experience which has a knowledge constructing element to it is what has come to be called autoethnography (Bochner 2016).

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this article is to document and analyse my journey as a middle-level academic leader with a view to demonstrating how I negotiated the various knotty situations as Secretary General of the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU). I served in this position from 2003 to 2013. According to the Constitution of the union, one can offer oneself for election for two terms, each of which lasted five years. I was elected unopposed for both terms, not because I was the best candidate but because unionism is a dangerous activity in my part of the world, and it needed some tact and bravery to get involved in it. The constituents of the university I served imagined that I was invested with both. Little did they know the contradictions and compromises I had to negotiate in the course of executing my duties. My intention is to show that as a middle-level leader one has to be focused, fair, flexible, be open to negotiation and seek the guidance of the Muse and fellow human beings in decision-making.

## **Scope**

I have undertaken many responsibilities in my capacity as an academic and a private citizen. For the purposes of this study, I will focus on only one, namely when I was Secretary General of the UASU at one branch. This role required specific skills for its successful enactment, which sometimes were contradictory and at other times in harmony with one another. I have elected to write about the role I played in the union because it is the most dramatic and evocative period in my life. Not only did it provide an opportunity for me to interact with human beings in a direct and immediate way, and a window that enabled me to understand and appreciate their unique characteristics, but it also impacted my fortunes in profound ways.



## **Theoretical Framework**

Three theoretical perspectives will be used to describe and analyse my roles relative to the various roles I played from 2003 to 2013.

### ***Role Theory***

Role theory appears to be more relevant in elucidating how I assumed leadership in the Universities Academic Staff Union. My background as an undergraduate student in a Kenyan university in the 1980s shaped my view of life and attitude. Role theory refers to behaviour in general and in particular to spontaneous deeply felt behaviour (Leghan, Buda and Eisner 2007). The significant fact about role theory in relation to this study is that it attempts to explain the position or status of roles in the family as well as informal ways in which one has to stand up. The theory will enable me to explain activities and behaviour I exhibited during my active union days.

### ***Resource-based Theory***

A central tenet of resource-based theory is that organisations compete based on available resources and capabilities (Peteraf and Bergen 2003). Resource-based theorists look within an organisation and down to the market factors that the organisation must contend with. Moreover, they search for possible causes of sustainable competitive advantages that hold the environmental factors constant (ibid). This inward-looking approach is useful in analysing strategic issues (Pankaj 2010). Among them are conditions for sustained competitive advantage and diversification. I have used resource-based theory to link the role I played relative to the available resources that were at the disposal of the organisation I was responsible for heading.

This theory is appropriate because I started leading the union just as it had been formed and registered. At the time of registration, the resource base of the union was weak because members had not contributed enough money to enable the union to run its programmes. As the spokesperson, I relied on impromptu fundraising from members and well-wishers, and improvised ways of handling financial difficulties. I would, for instance, hop on a *matatu* to attend National Executive Committee meetings in the city. As the union finances gradually improved through members' subscription and by writing proposals to more established unions such as the Central Organisation of Trade Unions and American Solidarity, the Universities Academic Staff Union was able to carry out its training programmes. However, resources remained a headache especially during lockouts when union members whose salaries had been stopped would deplete the coffers.

### ***Constraints-based Theory***

This theory is based on a systematic way of solving organisational problems. The theory states that systems have constraints that they have to overcome through developing simple solutions to address complex problems (Kim, Mabin and Davies 2008). This theory has been a useful orienting framework to explain the various constraints I encountered while I was trying to accomplish my duties and how I went about solving them. A union official negotiates among uncomfortable zones. On the one hand he has to satisfy his often impatient members. Any signs of letting up on the union's declared goal is deemed as a betrayal to the cause of the union. Members are suspicious of an official who is congenial with the employer and at the same time determines to negotiate their welfare in good faith and with a free heart. On the other hand, the employer lacks trust in the union official, seeing him as a pursuer of unreasonable demands, untrustworthy and erratic. The union official is always torn between these camps of irreconcilable personalities and social forces.

### **Methodology**

The methodology I applied in collecting, collating and conflating the main ideas with regard to the role I played in the service of the community at various intervals of my life was qualitative. There are many and varied qualitative methods of research. For the purpose of this specific research, I engaged autoethnography because of its appropriateness for the task at hand. Autoethnography enabled the researcher to tease out information about his professional life. Moreover, autoethnography enabled me to connect my personal experiences to the larger community.

### ***Autoethnography***

According to Ellis (2004), autoethnography is a genre of writing in which authors draw on their own lived experiences, connect the personal and place the self and others within a social context. In this case, it involves telling my own story through what I saw and heard during my tenure as secretary general of the union, through critically reading memos and various documents such as appointment letters, warning letters, sacking letters in the context of my role as a leader at a specific time. Personal experiences also embellished and refurbished the discussion and situated it within my scholarly orientation. An indispensable attribute of autoethnography is that personal narration is as important to the person writing it as it is to the community to which that person belongs (Ilo 2018). *Facing Mount Kenya*

(Kenyatta 1938) is among the first autoethnographic works to be written in East Africa. In that monograph, the author, Jomo Kenyatta, reports research findings on his peoples' political, economic and social way of life. In the course of the discussion and narrative, the disinterested voice of the analyst is intertwined with the voice of the participant-observer of the activities of his people. Kenyatta's publication typifies the earliest form of autoethnography. It is along the same lines and in the same spirit that this discussion is undertaken.

The move away from the text as a self-contained, self-referential whole was a reading technique initiated in literary scholarship in the 1920s by the American New Critics. This method of textual engagement reached its zenith in 1967 when Barthes (1993) declared 'The Death of the Author'. The composer was dead because as soon as she or he accomplished the task of composing, the product of composition attained a self-sustaining life independent of its creator. Roland Barthes did not agree with the New Critics on many counts but on this particular one, they coincidentally concurred.

Contrary to the stance advanced by the New Critics, postmodernists view the subjectivity of the author as important in mediating the meaning of the text. The author's subject position is not necessarily in-built in the text but in the setting outside of the text. Therefore, an understanding that ascribes the origination of the text to the author enables readers to some large degree to apprehend and appreciate the author. This constitutes contemporary discursive practices. As Hirsch (2003) argues:

Hermeneutics must stress a reconstruction of the author's aims and attitudes in order to evolve guides and norms for construing the meaning of his text. ... For even though verbal meaning must conform to public norms, no mere sequence of words can represent an actual verbal meaning with reference to public norms alone. ... the array of possibilities only begins to become a more selective system of probabilities when, instead of confronting merely a word sequence, we also posit a speaker who very likely means something (Hirsch 2003: 18–19).

With these words, Hirsch, in typical postmodern mould, debunks the position held by the New Critics and, to some extent, the structuralists. I agree with Hirsch when he argues that the originator of the verbal symbol should be resurrected in the act of interpreting the text.

In this article, the author coded and analysed autoethnographic data as is done through the techniques of critical discourse analysis, especially on the role of discourse in the reproduction and challenge of dominance as Van Dijk (1993) says. I envisaged the functions I performed as strategic

acts of challenging dominance or complying with dominant authority. At every point in my role, I was keenly aware of my position as an actor among authority figures who would not necessarily agree with me. The conscious positioning of myself within my writing opened possibilities for evocative and creative ways in which I represented my realities and my research participants in the texts.

### ***Objections to the Methodology and How to Avoid Biases***

While positionality is a viable technique of generating knowledge about the self, biases could be produced and propagated instead of reliable and valid information. In fact, some scholars have objected to the use of autoethnography to generate knowledge because of its inherent subjectivity. Hufford (1995) criticises autoethnography because he envisions it as a self-indulgent and self-limiting technique for human inquiry due to its over-reliance on subjectivity. I have, however, guarded against absolute subjectivity by analysing knowledge of the self through dialectical self-questioning. Secondly, through engaging with interlocutors in my area of study, I have been sensitised as to the possible areas of encroachment of bias. On embarking on this writing, the major challenge I faced was how to deal with what I perceived as my weaknesses. It took some serious introspection before I concluded that it would benefit my readers and myself if I told the story as it was. My interlocutors were basically advisors whose views and opinions I would agree or disagree with, depending on the exigencies of time. This usually came at the time when the strike needed to be called off. Many arguments would be mounted before reaching the resolution.

### **Review of the Literature**

I will examine scholars such as Al-Alamin Mazrui, Willy Mutunga and Irungu Munene, who lived through the turbulent times at Kenya's universities during the struggle for self-determination by academic staff. Reference to people who have used their own stories, their biographies and autobiographies to construct their service to the societies they come from will be of use in weaving my own tale. Moreover, I will emphasise the criticism that has been written about them and how it contributes to the understanding of my role. Apart from Kenyatta (1938), many writers on the African continent have used part of their autobiographical work and revelations in their biographies by others to show how they have determined or influenced their professional life. Among these authors are Kaunda (1962), Mandela (2002) and Sicherman (1990).

Mazrui and Mutunga (1995) analyse the story of the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU) from its founding and demonstrate how the Kenyan state, as an employer of academic staff, crippled its operations. At the time of the agitation for the registration of UASU, Kenya was led by an absolutist government that was intolerant of challenge and dissent, especially when the challenge came from employees who were regarded as the custodians of the state's interests. The two scholars place the struggle for the survival of UASU in historical perspective and assist the reader to grasp an understanding of the hurdles the actors in the union had to overcome before they were able to register it. Mazrui and Mutunga also assist me to vividly capture those evocative days.

Munene's burden (1997) is to dramatise the evolution of the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU) from the University Staff Union (USU). This evolution was confronted all the way by an increasingly autocratic regime, which determined the roadmap of the union actors at the universities. Munene's critical narration is detailed and rich in factual findings and forms a firm background to my own narration.

There are also some artists on the African continent, such as Ousmane (1972) of Senegal, Alex La Guma (1972) of South Africa, Said Ahmed Mohamed (1980) of Tanzania, Abdilatif Abdalla (1973) and Al-Amin Mazrui (1981) of Kenya, who contributed in indirect ways to how the researcher negotiated his knotty circumstances. These works introduced me to socialist literature and modes of thinking that were not only revolutionary but were in vogue as the only fundamental way of implementing the African revolution. Finally, in my formative years at the university, I had intense interactions with Amilcar Cabral's *Unity and Struggle* (1980) and *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon (1963) respectively, which had lasting impressions on me. There is no doubt that college education opened up my realisation that the problems that human beings face are not willed by the inevitable necessity by which events must occur. On the contrary, they are caused knowingly or unknowingly by the desire of some human beings to impose disorderly processes of life on others. For me to come to that realisation, the works I read had a profound effect on my views of the world and my attitude towards life. Perhaps it was not college education alone but the momentous events unfolding around me that pushed me towards my particular outlook. While on the one hand most African countries that had gained political independence had regressed and embraced kleptocratic and totalitarian tendencies, other countries, which had not got their freedom, were struggling to be freed. In certain profound ways the literature that inspired a change of leadership in independent Africa was the same as the literature that was energising the fight for freedom in southern Africa, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia and Guinea-Bissau.

The works I interacted with influenced me directly and indirectly to participate in the effort that initiated the Universities Academic Staff Union and its activities. The reading of Abdalla (1973) exposed me to the contradictions between capital and labour in Kenya – that some members of society contribute to the creation of wealth yet they don't participate in it. I admired Kaunda's empathy and sympathy with the condition of the colonised and the degraded condition of the African. In particular, I was touched by his narrative of prisoners in Zambia and Zimbabwe during colonial days:

In prison, one goes about not knowing what to expect and this is worse when one is moved to a new prison. In Lusaka prison, we were exempt from the terrible habit of being made to strip naked and then disgracefully jumping up and down by raising one of your legs to show you were carrying nothing between your legs (Abdalla 1973: 129).

Such are the writings that jolted me until I began thinking of modest ways through which I could contribute to making the world a worthier place to live in. My interaction with my lecturers through their lectures and writings, personalities such as Austin Bukenya, Al-Amin Mazrui, Gitahi Gititi and Osotsi Mtaali Ramenga, shaped my thinking. Mazrui's play, *Kilio cha Haki* (1980) is about the exploitation of farm workers and their determination to reverse their situation. Although the workers do not succeed, the play ends on an optimistic note.

### **A Bird's Eye's View of my Life**

My life spans beyond my professional role as a unionist and a middle-level administrator at a university in Kenya. It begins slightly over thirty years earlier. I was told by my parents that I was born on 1 January 1960 at Khalumuli village in the present day Webuye West Sub-County in Bungoma. They did not know the exact date of my birth but my uncle, who was going to school at that time, recorded in a hardcover black book that I was born on Friday 1 January 1960.

### ***Primary School and High School Years***

In 1962, Kenyan leaders had successfully agitated for political independence and were about to head for the Lancaster House Conference in England. As independence was being ushered in, other plans regarding the Kenyanisation of land, which had hitherto been alienated by the British colonial government, were afoot. Four years after I was born, my parents, Nicholas Makhanu and Rezpah Naliaka, migrated from their

ancestral home to the Settlement Scheme in Kabisi. They started a new life on land that was virgin, fertile, inhabited by wild game and bearing wild fruits. In hindsight, this was reminiscent of the Adamic Garden of Eden. Between 1967 and 1973 I attended Mbakalo Primary School. Apart from the fact that it was the time when I learned basic literacy and writing skills, I cannot remember any dramatic events that could have guided me to my future role as a trade unionist.

In high school, I was introduced to science and arts subjects. My interest in science subjects evaporated instantaneously because I was irredeemably poor in mathematics. However, I attempted to read biology with some measure of success. English literature was my favourite subject. In forms five and six, I settled for literature in English, religious studies and Kiswahili. After examinations in sixth form, I had a long vacation at Mbakalo from December 1979 to August 1980, during which time Mukhisa Kituyi introduced me to the writings of leftist authors. I was not aware at that time that Kituyi had been expelled from the University of Nairobi. When he was staying at home he exuded intellectual robustness, displayed somewhat iconoclastic habits, was a role model and shared freely his views and books. In particular, Rodney's (1972) *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* was transformational to my callow mind. I read the book avidly with a view to obtaining an accurate conception of the role of Europe in the impoverishment of the continent.

At that time Kituyi also introduced me to prison literature (Soyinka 1972). It was prolix, with long-winded prose but not as abstruse as the Soyinka (1984) I was to read later at university. I read *The Man Died* many times and committed some of its passages to memory. I still remember the words of Professor George Mangakis vividly and evocatively: 'the man dies who keeps silent in the face of tranny'. Whenever I encounter a situation that I deem to be repressive, these words ring and echo in my mind as if to admonish me not to be silent. Sometime in the mid-1980s, I again interacted with Kituyi at Mautuma Secondary School, just before he was admitted at Makerere University. There he gave a memorable lecture on the struggle for independence in southern Africa. At the university I was introduced to more protest literature, including, but not limited to, South African writers Alex La Guma, Brutus (1973) and the Jamaican-born South African, Peter Abrahams (1946).

The Kenyan and Tanzanian literary scenes reflected some of the experiences that the inhabitants of the East African region were actually going through. Books such as *Sauti ya Dhiki* (The Voice of Agony), *Chembe Cha Moyo*, *Dunia Mti Mkavu* (The World is a Desiccated Tree) assisted me

to shape my thinking in a definite direction. Notwithstanding reading these works, I was cowardly and never attempted to implement what I quietly thought was the right action to take. I read and analysed these books as an academic exercise. I was very sensitive to my background, being the first-born child, and believed that if I made the necessary sacrifice, some of my family members would be broken-hearted forever. Because the characters in these works pricked my conscience, I burned and agonised within at my inaction but continually believed that one day I would surely pay the price. I lived under these conditions for the rest of my undergraduate and postgraduate studies. Looking back, I abhor my inaction and my cowardice, knowing what I had to do yet doing nothing for fear of incarceration. I feel ashamed too. What makes it particularly harrowing is that I absconded responsibility consciously.

I completed my first degree in 1984, and taught literature and Kiswahili studies for three years at North Eastern Province Girls' High School in present-day Garissa County. At that time the region was plagued by a rebel movement called Shifta, which wanted to hive off part of Kenya to Somalia. The fear of being attacked at any time and of being very far from home made many people who had been posted to teach in the region seek transfer on the very day they landed there. Incidentally, I had matured a bit and never sought to move away until I got admission to the University of Nairobi to study for a Master of Arts degree in Literature.

In Garissa, I interacted with local and expatriate teachers and made good friends with them. I was deeply touched by the lack of infrastructure and other basic amenities, including medical staff and trained teachers. This was the one reason that motivated me to stay there longer than other workers did. I completed my Master of Arts degree in 1989 and was appointed to teach Kiswahili literature at university level in October of the same year. I taught as a tutorial fellow from 1989 to 1992, when I was promoted to lecturer. At that time, Kenya was at the high-water mark of repression. There was agitation for democratic governance. Gradually, I came out of my shell and began speaking out about aspects of Kenyan life that were not right. I realised that if I did not take part in making change, I would not be at peace with my conscience.

I spoke with my family members to explain my position, a position which I had held for long and yet had not come forward to implement it. When I finally made this conscious decision, I was in harmony with all the literature of commitment I had read. It was time to come out in the open at whatever cost. Failure to do so would render all my reading and experience of suffering and oppression in vain. At the village, I joined a



progressive opposition party headed by a veteran oppositionist. I assisted in mobilising, educating and conscientising citizens to understand why the party was formed. I realised that the same fears that had bedevilled me initially were gnawing at their bones as well. I shared with them my experience and gradually, they began to understand what it meant to fight for one's rights.

### **The First Strike: The Making of a Union Leader**

On 29 November 1993, a meeting was held at Kenyatta University to explore the possibilities of registering a university staff union. Such an effort had been initiated in the 1980s but had been nipped in the bud by the then government. Similar meetings were held at the University of Nairobi, Moi University and Egerton University. Other universities were university colleges. Of these, three had not been inaugurated altogether. As happens in such first meetings, the first agenda was to nominate interim officials as a prelude to proper elections. I was nominated by the Kenyatta University fraternity as interim Assistant Secretary of the Universities Academic Staff Union, Kenyatta University Chapter. I took the responsibility cautiously, as I was aware, through experience, of what risks I was undertaking.

At the same time as the meeting took place, the interim officials launched a nationwide strike with the aim of compelling the government to register the lecturer's union, or UASU. The timing of the meeting and strike was ill-fated, for as soon as the strike was called it was dubbed illegal by government agencies and university chief administrators were directed to deal with striking lecturers accordingly. In any case it was against the law for any unregistered organisation to hold a meeting. In line with that directive, the vice-chancellor of Kenyatta University offered the 'fatherly advice' that whoever went back to work would earn her or his November 1993 salary without any reprisals. Just as Fanon says in *The Wretched of the Earth*, that the police are used in the colonial hinterland to suppress any resistance or quest for alternative sources of empowerment, it is also true for those living in a postcolonial society. As soon the strike was declared, lorries full of helmeted policemen were seen patrolling outside Kenyatta University campus. The chief executive officer of the university used soft power to entice the lecturers back to the lecture rooms. The day of the meeting was a Monday, and by Thursday of the same week less than fifty lecturers out of a workforce of about three hundred were still on strike. The rest had gone back to their stations, signed a form in which they pledged to work and denounce the strike and the strikers, and earned their pay immediately. Those who did not go back did not earn their salaries.

Ironically, some senior members of the academy went to great lengths to justify why lecturers did not need a union and allegorised the poverty of the lecturers by comparing them with the ascetic priests of the Middle Ages. Moreover, they were at pains to demonstrate that those who were at the front line of registering the union and agitating for higher pay had failed miserably to pursue the noble goals of the academy. These staff were reminiscent of the homeguards who populate the works of Wa Thiong'o (1964), such as *Weep Not Child* and *A Grain of Wheat*, that are set in the colonial period. Since the lecturers who persisted with the strike were few, they were easy prey for the government and university managers. Workers' unions thrive on the solidarity of their membership. No sooner has that solidarity been weakened than they lose their strength to bargain. The consequence of breaking the strike was the immediate dismissal of the interim chairman and secretary general of the union.

In the aftermath of their dismissal, the vice chairman and the assistant secretary general automatically took over the leadership of the union. Together with the interim vice chairman, we inherited a weakened and poor unregistered union. Since the government and university authorities were aware that the union was inconsequential to the operations of the university, they ignored it. Nonetheless, we, the remnants, stood undaunted and gallantly continued to sing 'solidarity' songs. I had to move from a more expensive apartment to a very cheap dwelling. When I received some commission for selling copies of a journal for the Writers' Association of Kenya, I was able to pay rent for ten months. Well-wishers who empathised with our objectives extended moral and material support to us. Support came from Kenya, Tanzania, Namibia and the United States. The individuals who supported us requested to remain anonymous. Perhaps it was this international fraternity and solidarity that kept the fire burning. Since the union was unregistered, its resource base was built through fundraising. We appealed to well-wishers and colleagues to donate and fundraise particularly for the purpose of sustaining the officials who had been dismissed.

By July 1994, about thirty lecturers were still on strike. Our meeting place was within Kenyatta University, near the Protestant chapel, under a tree. It was a strategic place; whenever our colleagues passed by on their way to the lecture halls they looked the other way, as if they were afraid of some nameless, malignant force peering straight at their faces. This encouraged some of them to come forward and confess that, though they supported the registration of the union, they were afraid to stand up the way we were doing. Some of them said that if they joined the strike, their families would starve. The fact that the stalwarts who remained on strike did not intimidate

those who had fallen by the wayside encouraged deserters to support the union privately. For the gesture of standing for the cause of lecturers we earned respect. Senior members of the academic fraternity gradually began empathising with the striking lecturers, and told them that they had shown strong willpower but that it was time they put their weapons in the scabbard. One professor, who was a founder member of the original University Staff Union in 1981, advised me against behaving like the Kremlin hardliners of the 1980s. I relayed the same information to my colleagues.

Shortly after this piece of advice, we held a brief meeting at a private venue and decided on the strategy to officially call off the strike. The university administration had ignored us and never imagined that we would be interested in going back to work. We wrote letters demonstrating our willingness to resume duty; after three months, the university informed the heads of our departments to allocate us a workload. On hindsight, I think that while the university administrators were operating at the behest of their mandate to hire and fire, they were very empathetic with our cause in that particular instance. They understood that university academic staff needed a forum through which they could express their grievances and yet would not openly express this gesture. We resumed our duties without much drama and quietly as if nothing had happened.

Later on in my life, when I ruminated over those events, I was reminded of the words of one of the characters in Albert Camus's (1947) novel, *La Peste*, translated as *The Plague* in English. In that novel the character, Dr Rieux, spends all his life fighting against the plague and helping to lessen the pain of plague victims when he can. The plague is so real and pervasive that it is transmuted into all areas of the life of the characters. Yet, as suddenly as the plague emerged on the scene, it equally mysteriously disappeared from the same scene. Without belabouring any philosophical and allegorical interpretations of this incident, the words of Dr. Rieux are telling:

He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never disappears or dies for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms and bookshelves; and perhaps the day would come when for the bane and the enlightening of men it roused up its rats again and sent them forth to die in a happy city. (Camus 1947)

Just like Camus's character, I believed that our return to work did not signal the end of the struggle for academic freedom for university lecturers. The struggle for academic freedom and marginalisation was part and parcel of the struggle for democratic space. As expressive space was muted, many people found solace in organisations and parties that fought against dictatorial

tendencies. After the wave of agitating for the registration of the union was temporarily put down, I went back to class to teach *Fasihi ya Kiswahili* but remained politically active in my constituency.

In 1998 I was awarded a scholarship by the Fulbright Foundation and left Kenya for the United States to study for a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Comparative Literature at Indiana University (Bloomington). Meanwhile, events were taking place at a momentous pace in Kenya. Four years after I left the country, elections were held and for the first time an opposition candidate won with a landslide victory. Within months of the election, the Universities Academic Staff Union was registered, the vice-chancellor of Kenyatta University was chased away by the restive academic staff, and elections were held in all the union's branches. I returned in 2003 to what I genuinely believed to be a transmogrified geographical space. However, I was surprised that most of the officials of the union that had been elected early in 2003 had given up union positions and had been appointed to various administrative positions in the university. They were either directors or assistant directors of various units at the university. The conversations I had with some officials revealed that they had accepted the appointments because they could strive to transform the university administrative structures from within. I reluctantly accepted these explanations but was not quite convinced because of the hurry with which they had resolved to leave the union en masse. The union had not established firm administrative structures and it was imprudent to abandon it at that juncture.

## **The Second Strike**

In September 2003, I was elected Secretary General of the UASU, Kenyatta University Chapter. I took up the position at the time of simmering industrial action. Lecturers had a raft of grievances, chief among which was poor remuneration. A strike was called immediately and without proper preparation. Consequently, it was implemented haphazardly. However, the new government that came to leadership in December 2002 was basically sympathetic to the plight of academic staff.

Some of the senior ministers in government were associated with the university in an immediate and direct way. They had been lecturers at the University of Nairobi and at Kenyatta University. As the Secretary General of the union at Kenyatta University, I was charged, together with my no-nonsense chairman of the time, with the responsibility of starting and sustaining the strike till all the demands of the lecturers were met. There were other unofficial members of the union think tank who continually raised difficult and uncomfortable questions that sensitised me to the gravity of the situation.

The task of calling meetings daily and inspiring members to support the strike during its life was arduous. These actions were so repetitive that they led to boredom and strain, not only for the members but also for other officials of the union. There was a lot of sloganeering and vituperation from myself and other officials of the union in general. With hindsight, I think the techniques of communication were wanting partly because of a lack of training. The books I had on leadership, such as Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*, were useful, but they were not sufficiently programmatic as monographs for teaching union leaders in matters of leadership and mobilisation. In my role I did not come across publications like *Trade Union Administration: A Caribbean Workers' Education Guide* (Morris 2002), in which the management of trade unions is explained simply and succinctly:

The management of trade unions in the challenging environment in which they have to operate today requires skills which were previously frowned upon by Trade unionists. These skills are basically the same as are required to run any modern organisation effectively. Financial management, accountability to Members, research and development, organisational and negotiation skills and planning for the future of the organisation are some of the approaches which successful trade unions use (Morris 2002: Preface).

Despite these weaknesses in my leadership, in consultation with members of the union it was decided that methods of disseminating information be diversified. Officials and members relayed information through the print and electronic media. This proved to be very useful because it assisted the union to elicit and enlist the support of the public. I spoke to journalists and one of them devoted a whole page to the ongoing strike in Kenya's *The Daily Nation* newspaper on 11 November 2003. Part of his statement was as follows: 'When a system remunerates doctors, engineers, architects and other civil servants at a higher level but pays those who produce those cadres at precipitately low levels, something is seriously the matter.' Opinions such as these galvanised public sympathy for the university academic staff. In brief, such choreographed opinions set the stage for sensitising the government and bringing it to the negotiation table. The strike was formally called off on 9 January 2004, after the government agreed to offer the union a salary increase.

The main weakness of the union at this point in time was its propensity to concentrate more on welfare matters, such as housing allowances, than on the core academic mandates of academic staff, including but not limited to manageable class sizes, provision of teaching facilities and research funds. This tendency consequently and subsequently led to the belief among

members of the public that university lecturers were keener on the increase of their salaries than on dispensing their core mandate of teaching, research and service to the community.

### **The Third and Fourth Strikes**

The attitude was further entrenched in the public imagination by the frequency of industrial action and lack of innovative methods of dealing with labour disputes at the universities. The third and fourth strikes that were staged on 25 October 2006 and 9 November 2011, respectively, were far less popular than the first two. The same causes that had triggered the first two strikes led to the third and fourth strikes. When, on 25 October 2006, the third strike was launched and paralysed learning in six public universities, one of the dailies in Kenya, *The Standard Newspaper*, reported tersely: ‘The strike effect was evident in all universities and campuses, though some lecturers were unaware of the start of the industrial action following confusion and coordination problems by the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU)’.

Apart from these leadership challenges, managers and the government had learned how to deal with striking university lecturers. Three days after the initiation of the 2006 strike, a judge of the industrial court issued an order directing the lecturers to renounce the strike and resume work immediately. Citing the Industrial Disputes Act, he argued that lecturers could not be on strike and at the same time be negotiating their salaries. Simultaneously, students who were sponsoring their education in the self-sponsored programme came out strongly in opposition to the strike. They demanded that lecturers be replaced as they were breaching a contract they had entered into with them. We deliberated at our various branches and resolved to suspend the strike to give negotiations a chance.

As Secretary General of the Branch, I was appointed Joint Secretary of the negotiations committee. The joint secretary’s responsibility was to record as accurately as possible the proceedings of the negotiations, as the basis on which the collective bargaining agreement could be sealed. With very few workshops to prepare me, I had to learn the art of negotiating on the job. Negotiations proceeded well for a while but when the union officials noticed some laxity on the part of the university councils, the discussions collapsed. Alongside other officials, I went back to my branch, convened a meeting and informed the members what had transpired at the negotiation table, in carefully crafted and politically charged language. The effect was electrifying; members were incensed and vowed to return to the picket line.

For their part, the university managers cracked the whip immediately. By the end of that day, 25 October 2006, I received a letter from the deputy vice-chancellor in charge of administration dismissing me from the university's employment. The UASU Branch Chairman, Joseph Kinyanjui, and I were picked up and sent to Kasarani police station for questioning for much of that day. We were declared *persona non grata* on the campus. This did not deter me from sustaining the strike from outside the university, so negotiations had to go on notwithstanding my firing. When the negotiations ended, a 30 per cent pay rise was awarded to lecturers and the sacked union leaders appealed to the Minister for Education, Science and Technology for reinstatement. Some vice-chancellors did heed to the minister's plea while others flatly refused to allow the strike leaders back on their campuses. I was one of those who were accepted back at Kenyatta University. I was later informed by an insider who insisted on anonymity that my return was allowed because I blended my union activities and academic responsibilities well.

### **How I Left the Union**

After five years, with mounting inflation and the rising cost of living, the fourth and last strike during my tenure as secretary general of the union took place. On 9 November 2011, I again headed a lecturer's strike at Kenyatta University. Although the strike was lacklustre, the union was able to agitate for a 15 per cent pay rise.

By this time the university managers had learned to use the union's Constitution to fight the union itself. One of the articles of the union's Constitution states that a member of the union, including officials, could join the university administration as a way of upward mobility. The clause was selectively used to deflate the strength of the union by poaching its strongest officials. The national Chairman of the Universities Academic Staff Union, Samuel Kubasu, was appointed by the vice-chancellor of a university in the western region of the country to be a chairman of department. When he refused, he was accused of insubordination, suspended, called for disciplinary action and summarily dismissed. The tragedy was that he could not be recruited thereafter by any other university in the country, public or private. Union officials were generally stigmatised as rabble-rousers.

Other vice-chancellors got a hint of what had happened to the national chairman of the union. One afternoon, I received a call from the vice-chancellor of my university. She informed me that she wanted to appoint me Chairman of the Department of Kiswahili and African Languages. In a thinly veiled threat, she warned that she would not like to see the scenario

that took place in one university replicated at Kenyatta University. After listening to her, I called an urgent executive committee meeting of the union at Kenyatta University chapter and let the members know what had transpired. Following a long deliberation it was resolved that since I had worked for the union for ten years, I may as well relinquish my position as secretary general, continue advising the union as an ordinary member and take up the new position as chairman of department. The following day, I informed the vice-chancellor that I had accepted her appointment.

## **Conclusion**

When I look back at my role as a leader of the Universities Academic Staff Union (Kenyatta University Chapter), I can say that there are some activities that I performed well and others that I would do differently were I to be given a second chance to be a leader. The story I have narrated clearly demonstrates that the position that I held exhibited tensions, contestations and in some cases expensive trade-offs. From interviewing members of the union at the time, I really inspired them through my eloquent expression and courage to lead from the front whenever there was a knotty issue that confronted them. Without knowing it, I executed my responsibilities within the realm of role theory effectively.

On the other hand, I failed as a manager because I envisaged my basic duty as courageously joining the strikes, with the result that I neglected committees such as the research committee, the resource committee, the publicity and the training committee among others. This is because there were financial constraints that made the committees stall in their work. Only the strike committee appeared to be effective. The main challenge I faced as a union leader was that it was difficult to balance my role as an academic and a trade unionist. Some members of the union sympathised with university managers if they came from their respective ethnic communities. Moreover, over time, the members of the union transformed from being proactive to being transactional. Before they began paying membership fees to the union, they had come out clearly to support the union's agenda in action and spirit. As soon as they began paying membership fees, they gradually but inexorably expected the officials to work for them, including going on strike for them.

Given that the success of unions depends heavily on numbers, this attitude turned out to be the single greatest undoing of the Universities Academic Staff Union at Kenyatta University. From the story I have told, the role, resource- and constraints-based theories as well as autoethnography served my purpose well. However, these analytical perspectives tend to



address the union leader without accounting for the actions of union members. We need a theory or a framework that addresses union members as proactive rather than transactional entities. This has been the undoing of the Universities Academic Staff Union a few years after its establishment.

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