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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 at al. 2010; Ehrenstorfer et al. 2015). In fact, De Boer at 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; Wolverton 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.

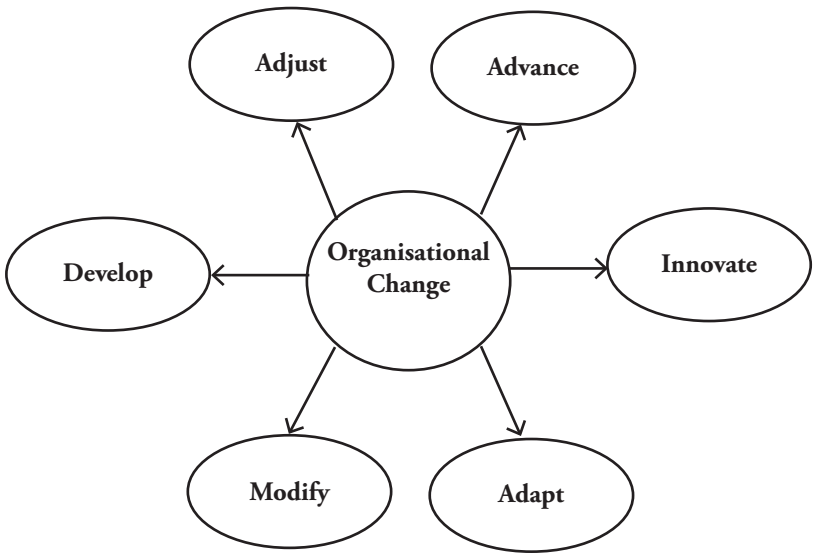

Figure 1: The organisational change concept
Source: Developed by Author

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).

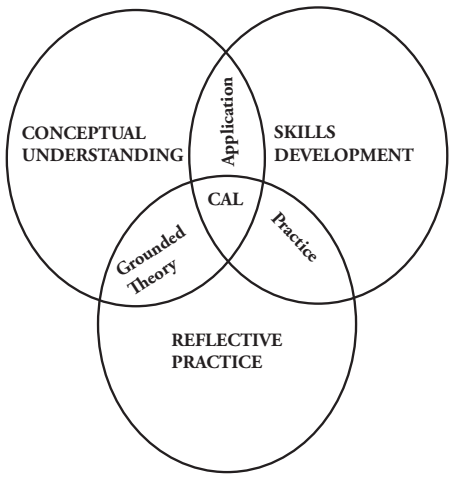

Figure 2: Academic leadership conceptualisation by Gmelch (2013, 2015)
Note: CAL–Comprehensive Academic Leadership
Source: Adapted from Gmelch (2013, 2015; Gmelch and Buller 2015).

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 whose 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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