



# Towards inclusivity and sustainability in the leadership of an academic department in a South African university: A distributed perspective

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## Abstract

Historically, the concept of Head of Department (HOD) in a university context has been understood as a one-person role. Despite the increasing complexity of the role, the position remains exclusive and, for many academics, undesirable. Reliant only on a single individual, the position, located at the centre of complex relational interfaces, is known to generate tension and role ambiguity between the scholarly project on the one hand, and management and administrative matters on the other. In response to this problematic, in this paper, we draw on a higher education leadership study that explored the take-up of a distributed leadership approach in an academic department in a South African university. Framed by a socio-cultural conceptualisation of distributed leadership comprising a leader-plus and a practice aspect, we designed the research as an exploratory case study. Participants included the academic and administrative staff in the department and qualitative data was generated through document analysis as well as individual and focus group interviews. Findings revealed that the framework provides a useful analytical tool for departmental leadership, understood inclusively and expansively beyond the formal HOD position. Offering an empirical case of a distributed leadership approach in an academic department, we contribute to a gap in the literature and argue for further studies in other faculties and universities in the global south.

**Keywords:** Higher education, Head of department, Leadership and management, Distributed leadership, Inclusivity, Sustainability

## Introduction

Higher education leadership and management is an ambiguous and disputed practice (Sewerin & Holmberg, 2017). Conventionally, research in this area has focused on senior staff, including deans, deputy vice-chancellors, and vice-chancellors, (Chilvers et al. 2018). Consequently, less is known about the work of university middle managers, particularly heads of academic departments (Floyd, 2016). Nevertheless, studies in this under-researched area are increasing, given the critical role that middle-level academic managers play in higher education institutions around the world (Degn, 2015). However, most of these studies have a western bias (Nguyen, 2013) with only a few located in developing countries like South Africa (Davis et al., 2016). This gap in the literature provided the initial (and partial) impetus for the research we report on in this paper.

## University heads of department: A review of the literature

Chiefly, the field of leadership and management in higher education adopts a leader-centric approach (Jones et al., 2017). Accordingly, the position of HOD in the university sector is understood as a one-person role with incumbents appointed for a fixed-term period, at the conclusion of which they return to their original academic role (Chilvers et al., 2018). The position of HOD is considered central to higher education, primarily because it is “where institutional policy and procedure are predominately enacted” (Gibson, 2020, p. 365). The position has been described as complex since HODs are expected to lead the academic project in the department while also engaging tactically and diplomatically with senior management and external partners (Degn, 2015). Thus, as middle managers, they are positioned invidiously between the vision and needs of the staff they lead, and the goals and ways of working of the broader university (Floyd, 2016).

The roles associated with the position of HOD feature strongly in the literature. While these roles may vary across institutions and contexts, typically, they cluster around staff matters, curriculum and student related issues, as well as departmental administration.

Staff matters include but are not limited to

providing a sense of direction/ strategic vision, allocating staff teaching time/workload, acting as a role model, creating a positive and collegial work atmosphere and advancing the departments cause internally and externally of the institution mentoring individual staff, undertaking staff performance reviews and responsibility for staff development. (Gibson, 2020, p. 367)

Curriculum and student related issues apply at undergraduate and postgraduate level and include responsibility for the calibre of students admitted, monitoring of student progress, scheduling and supervising department examinations, overseeing departmental curricula, courses, and programmes, as well as scheduling classes and timetabling (Nguyen, 2013; Sarros et al., 1997; Sewerin & Holmberg, 2017). Typically, departmental administration

involves financial operations, budgets, resource allocations, prospectuses and policies, community and professional duties, as well as communication with senior management and others within and beyond the institution (Floyd, 2016; Nguyen, 2013; Sarros et al., 1997; Sewerin & Holmberg, 2017).

HOD roles have become much more complex in a higher education sector increasingly underpinned by globalisation, neo-liberalist ideologies, managerialism, technological advances, and market driven principles (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016; Floyd, 2016). These global changes have led to the massification of universities and the concomitant increase in student diversity (Grant et al., 2018). However, this rise in student numbers has not seen a concomitant increase in academic staff numbers, with the consequence being substantial pressure on HODs and their leadership of the academic project (Floyd, 2016). Against this backdrop, it stands to reason that role ambiguity (Chilvers et al., 2018; Nguyen, 2013) may be experienced by HODs as they attempt to hold in balance the academic project and the administration of the department. This balance is tenuous at best, and it is, most often, the academic project—the teaching and research—that is known to suffer (Gibson, 2020; Gmelch, 2000). Frustration, fatigue, stress, and burn out may be experienced by HODs as they try desperately to hold onto their academic work (Sarros et al., 1997)—the very reason they entered the academy (Chilvers et al., 2018). Therefore, for many, the pressures associated with being a HOD outweigh the rewards of the position and it is often viewed as a backward rather than a forward career step in an academic trajectory (Anderson et al., 2008; Davis et al., 2016).

The complexity of the HOD position is also very often exacerbated by the limited support HODs receive on entry into middle management. Few, if any, preparatory leadership and management training programmes are available to university managers; this is a pervasive problem according to the literature (Chilvers et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2017). Consequently, when HODs take up their middle management positions, they seldom have the knowledge, skills, and experience to be successful leaders (Bryman, 2007). Poorly prepared, they learn (or not) how to lead and manage the department while on the job (Gmelch, 2000)—a risky business to be sure. Floyd (2016) referred to this absence of a systematic approach to the training and development of HODs as institutional neglect, a stance supported by Chilvers et al. (2018, p. 431) as evidenced in the following extract.

To become skilled in their areas of research, academics spend years in mentored educational experiences; however, there appears to be limited knowledge transfer or education for those who wish to transition into management roles. How can managers be successful in handling the business and people management expectations which come with university management and administrative roles without proper mentoring, support and training?

From the discussion thus far, it can be argued that the HOD position in a university academic department requires urgent re-imagining. New approaches to departmental leadership are therefore crucial, ones that are more inclusive and that take account of local contexts, cultures, and situations. One such contemporary approach that has been touted is distributed

leadership, given that it takes account of context and, in the case of the university, a specialised and professional one (Floyd & Preston, 2018; Jones et al., 2012). Furthermore, academics, by virtue of their education, autonomy, and criticality, are leaders in their disciplinary fields with the authority to effect real change, regardless of whether they hold formal management positions or not (Floyd & Fung, 2017). Therefore, studies that focus on a distributed approach to leadership in a university context are necessary (Floyd & Fung, 2017; Jones, 2014; Jones et al., 2012), and particularly so at the middle management level.

## Distributed leadership: A research framework

Distributed leadership has been adopted widely in school leadership research (see for example Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2013; Spillane, 2006), particularly in the global north.

As a contemporary school leadership theory, distributed leadership is currently in vogue primarily because of its normative, representational, and empirical power (Harris & Spillane 2008). In the global south, distributed leadership is less well known, although it is emerging as what might be called the new kid on the block in school leadership research (Grant, 2017). However, despite its popularity, the term has been criticised because it lacks conceptual clarity and theoretical sophistication (Grant, 2017; Lumby, 2019). All too often it has become an expedient descriptor for any form of shared or collaborative leadership practice (Harris, 2013). Consequently, distributed leadership is seldom presented neutrally in the South African literature and is often promoted as the right way to lead (Grant, 2017).

In direct contrast, distributed leadership has been applied non-normatively in the literature and is considered a research framework for conceptualising and analysing leadership practice (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016; Torres, 2019). Researchers working with distributed leadership as a research framework draw on the seminal works of Gronn (2002) and Spillane et al. (2004). These theorists argued for an integrated and situated leadership framework that considers the *what* of leadership but also the *how* and *why*. This framework, underpinned by distributed cognition and activity theory, recognises how leadership is situated and cannot be extracted from its socio-cultural context or its historical and institutional settings (Grant, 2017; Spillane et al., 2004). Conceptualised in this way, distributed leadership is neither a blueprint for undertaking leadership more successfully nor is it a panacea (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016; Spillane, 2006). Instead, it functions as a context-sensitive sensing-device for registering the complex practice of school leadership (Spillane et al., 2004), involving the two aspects of leader-plus and practice.

### The leader-plus aspect

Distributive leadership has emerged in response to traditional leadership approaches including the so-called great man theory and the heroic leadership paradigm that champion the individual leader (Floyd & Preston, 2018; Yukl, 1999). Conceptualised as leadership by many, distributed leadership acknowledges many leaders who work collaboratively across organisational levels and boundaries (Azorín et al., 2020). It is referred to as the aggregated

leadership of an institution that “is dispersed among some, many, or maybe of all the members” (Gronn, 2002, p. 429).

Therefore, a distributive perspective on leadership, by its very definition, is inclusive. Drawing on the work of Blessinger and Stefani (2018), we understand inclusion as “a set of practices that help create more diverse environments” (p. 4). Diversity, a complementary term, “is grounded in the premise that having diversity in a workplace or any group provides positive benefits overall since it has the potential to draw on different strengths, viewpoints, talents, etc.” (p. 4).

Distributed leadership, therefore, is premised on the principle that all people have the potential for leadership but that it may lie latent, waiting for the appropriate socio-cultural conditions and the necessary expertise of the people in the organisation (Harris, 2004; van Dartel, 2013). Of importance is the collective wisdom co-created at different levels in the institution in pursuit of the development goals of the institution and of broader society (Ramakrishnan & Abukari 2020).

### The practice aspect

A distributed perspective on leadership is not merely about the inclusion of many leaders in leadership, however. Although crucial, this *leader-plus* aspect does not fully account for the intricacies of leadership, necessitating a focus on socio-cultural *practice* (Spillane, 2006). A practice focus is defined as

a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers and their situation. The issue is not whether leadership is distributed but how it is distributed. Most important, the interactions among leaders and followers (as distinct from an exclusive concern with leaders’ actions) are central in studying leadership practice. (Spillane, 2005, p. 385)

In keeping with its socio-cultural foundations, this perspective on practice focuses on “leaders’ thinking and action in situ” (Spillane et al., 2004, p. 10) with the unit of analysis being leadership activity. The location or site of leadership is therefore integral to the leadership practice, as are the socio-cultural tools, routines, structures, and the institutional culture. From this perspective, leadership is understood as a “dynamic organisational entity process” (Azorín, et al., 2020, p. 119) in which the researcher asks *how* features of the socio-cultural situation enable and constrain practice and, in so doing, contribute to defining and redefining it (Spillane, 2006). In other words, “material artefacts and tools are constituting components of leadership practice—they help define that practice—and are not simply devices that allow individuals to execute a task in some a priori determined fashion” (Spillane et al., 2003, p. 537).

In an increasingly unequal higher education sector, we argue that a priority for HODs and their departmental staff is the cultivation of inclusive leadership practices, i.e., practices that “respect and engage different identities and viewpoints (related to race, ethnicity, sex, gender,

sexual orientation, socio-economic class, caste, age, language, religion, disability, and their intersections) in its teaching, learning, curricula, etc.” (Blessinger & Stefani 2018, p. 5).

### Benefits of distributed leadership

Given the leader-plus aspect of a distributed leadership perspective, inclusivity of organisational members in the practice of leadership is a logical benefit. Naumov et al. (2021) stated that “distributed leadership is far more inclusive as it goes beyond a focus on team-based leadership to capture entire firms as units of analysis and importantly, takes into account their organisational environments” (p. 7). This distributed perspective on leadership affords increased prospects for organisational members to learn from one another (Shava & Tlou, 2018). It also enables capacity building since leadership opportunities are created for colleagues to work together in collaborative and supportive ways, regardless of their formal position (Sol, 2020). In so doing, the opportunity exists for personal and professional learning and a fuller understanding of the complexity of work-related issues (Melville et al., 2014). Therefore, when distributed leadership works well, “individuals are accountable and responsible for their leadership actions, new leadership roles are created, collaborative teamwork is the modus operandi and interdependent working is a cultural norm” (Shava & Tlou, 2018, p. 283). Sustainability may well be an outcome of such distributed leadership practice.

### Critiques of distributed leadership

The conceptual confusion regarding the meaning of distributed leadership is perhaps its biggest drawback (Grant, 2017). The term also lacks rigorous empirical research, particularly in the context of higher education (Ramakrishnan & Abukari, 2020). This is because “the empirical research based on distributed leadership is still largely undeveloped and evidence grounded in practice is thin” (Naumov et al., 2021, p. 9). Therefore, the higher education distributed leadership study in South Africa on which this paper is based has long been overdue.

Another significant critique of distributed leadership is the paradox of the vital role of the formal leader in the leadership practice (Spillane, 2006). It has been argued that a strong leader or leader-collective is necessary to provide guidance and direction and to instil confidence amongst colleagues (Spillane, 2006; van Dartel, 2013). This necessitates “providing time, space and opportunities and knowing when to step back to enable staff members to contribute and participate in decision making and to establish concerted action” (van Dartel, 2013, p. 12). In this way, the leadership capability and capacity of others is likely to be developed (Harris, 2013). However, questions have been posed about the redistribution of power (Zulkifly et al., 2020). For example, Grant (2017) queried whether only technical tasks are being distributed or whether authority and responsibility are also distributed.

## Methodology

The research that underpins this paper draws from a Master of Education study that sought to explore how a distributed perspective on leadership was understood and practised in an academic department in a South African university and what the constraints to, and enablements of, this leadership approach were. We adopted a small-scale qualitative case-study approach to try to interrogate the leadership of the academic department under investigation. This university department was purposively selected because it was piloting the new leadership approach. Fifteen departmental staff members (about half the staff) participated in this study. Data was generated through three focus group interviews, organised programmatically with four participants per focus group. Individual interviews were held with six participants. All interviews (focus group and individual) were semi-structured and ranged between an hour and a half and two hours in length. A range of departmental documents including meeting agendas, minutes, and departmental reports provided an additional data set.

Data was analysed using an open method of coding to identify common themes and patterns of difference (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Thereafter, the theoretical principles of distributed leadership were brought to bear on the data. The study received ethical approval from the institution at which the Master of Education candidate was registered, and ethical principles were observed throughout the study. Following Renganathan (2009), self-reflection, examination, scrutiny, and interrogation of the whole research process contributed to the trustworthiness of the findings.

The Master of Education candidate, a Namibian school principal, was an outsider to the South African higher education system, distancing him to some degree from the politics and subjectivities of the academic department under scrutiny. However, his experience as an educational leader transcended geographical contexts and provided some synergy and gave him an insider status to some degree.

The findings of this study cannot be generalised, given its case study design and small sample size. Despite this, the findings contribute to a gap in the literature, providing a much-needed account of the take-up of a distributed leadership approach in an academic department in a South African university. We suggest that follow-up studies focus on a range of university types and different academic departments and incorporate a wider range of participants, including students.

In the next section we present and discuss our findings. In presenting the data and ensuring anonymity, we use a simple coding system. The 15 participants are referred to as P1 to P15. The individual interviews are referred to as II, the focus group interviews as FGI 1 – 3 while the documents are named and dated.

## Discussion of findings

In discussing the findings, we begin with the problematic of the HOD position in the academic department. We then discuss the data in relation to the leader-plus as well as the practice aspects, core to a distributed leadership approach. The importance of the situatedness of the leadership practice is then raised. Thereafter, and in line with the theme of this journal, the paper comments on inclusivity and sustainability in the practice of leadership.

### The HOD position in the academic department as a problematic

The catalyst for the introduction of a distributed perspective on leadership in the academic department was a practical, real-world problem: the HOD position became available and there were no volunteers willing to take it up. The departmental practice of election of the HOD by peers resulted in none of the top three nominated candidates being willing to take up the position (FGI 3). This aligned with the literature that acknowledges that the HOD position is not sought after, given its complexity, and that it interferes with the scholarly work of an academic (Gibson, 2020; Gmelch, 2020). To illustrate, Participant 8 explained that

there have been crises of leadership or management in the department going back over decades, in which it was really difficult to find people who would volunteer, who would accept a nomination. (FGI 2)

This point was endorsed by Participant 15 who said,

So, I think one of the tricky things at this institution or at most universities is that often when a position of leadership becomes available nobody really wants to do it, but also the reason why nobody wants to do it sometimes is because nobody knows what it involves. (II)

Participant 9 expanded on this reasoning by referring to “the tension between being both an academic (scholarly role) and manager/leader (leadership and business/management role). Taking on both roles is often seen as being onerous, difficult, and challenging because as academics none of us have been trained as managers” (II). Participant 7 referred to the “huge workload on one person” (FGI 1) as another contributing factor. Situational factors were also considered including the point that “the Department was not in a good space” with a “break down in trust” as a consequence of a “forensic audit” (II).

Given these historical and contextual challenges, and the fact that “no one expressed an interest in being HOD” (P9, II), an alternative strategy was urgently required. Participant 7 was of the view that the traditional approach to the HOD no longer suited the department and required modification “to suit the vision of the department going forward” (FGI 1). After lengthy negotiations, the top three nominated candidates for the HOD position agreed to share the load (FGI 3), with the explicit intention to experiment with a distributed approach to leadership as a research project and see how it unfolded during their tenure (P13, II). Colleagues were supportive of this initiative: “[a]nd to put a model like that on trial, I think is



a very good idea” (P10, II). One of the initial goals of the HOD team was “to create a more trusting, inclusive, and vibrant departmental culture” (HOD team report, January 28, 2020) in which staff, academic and administrative, could thrive (P13, II). Threats to this goal included inequalities as a consequence of the institution’s colonial history, the juniorisation of staff, and the increasing reliance on contractual rather than permanent employment (HOD team report, January 28, 2020). In seeking to address these inequalities, we now turn to a discussion of numerical inclusivity in the leadership of the academic department.

### Numerical inclusivity: The leader-plus aspect

If we begin by conceptualising inclusion as the number of people participating in the practice of leadership in the academic department, i.e., the leader-plus aspect (Spillane, 2006), then many leaders (van Dartel, 2013) were immediately identifiable. The HOD team was comprised of three academics and the administrative manager (Staff meeting minutes, July 18, 2019). Given that there was no script for this distributed approach to departmental leadership, the HOD workload was distributed among the team according to their strengths and what each was passionate about (P13, II). Participant 12 described how, in dividing up the work, they “would always take responsibility for the programmes that we’re currently taking responsibility for because they kind of resonate with our strengths and our expertise” (II). Expanding on this idea, Participant 11 explained, “So I think from that aspect when we find what the other person is really good at, we almost try to incorporate that into where we are going” (II).

Other leaders, identified across the data sets, included academics and support staff in a range of pivotal roles, both formal and informal. These related mainly to the academic project, primarily teaching and research. For example, the more formal roles included qualification coordinators and course coordinators at postgraduate and undergraduate level, research chairs, project and professional development managers, a research design course coordinating team, work-integrated learning coordinators as well as a bursary scheme coordinator (FGI 1, FGI 2, FGI 3). At faculty and university level, the more formal leadership roles included representation on senate, and leadership of the teaching and learning committee, the environmental committee, the higher degrees committee, and the ethics committee. In some of these formal committees, the more senior academics held positions of chair and deputy chair (FGI 2; P15, II and P10, II). In addition to the formal roles, examples of informal leadership were also mentioned. These included i) the re-curriculation of department qualifications, as regulated by the Department of Higher Education and Training, led by academics with extensive experience in the relevant fields (P9, II; FGI 2), ii) leadership in the department building committee (FGI 2, P8), and iii) master of ceremony during departmental functions (FGI 1, P6). The basis for this leadership was dependent on one’s passion, interest, and expertise (FGI 2) and because one was good at it (FGI 1).

However, we need to move beyond mere access to leadership (Blessinger & Stefani, 2018). Like Spillane (2006), we argue that this leader-plus aspect in focusing only on individuals included in leadership, whether in formal or informal leadership roles, does not do justice to the complexity of the leadership of the academic department. Therefore, our analysis must

take a practice focus, defined as a product of the interactions of leaders, their colleagues,<sup>1</sup> and the situation in which they find themselves. It is to this discussion of leadership as a socio-cultural practice that we now turn.

### The situatedness of leadership practice

Given that the socio-cultural context is an essential element of, not just a background to or holder for, intelligent activity (Spillane et al., 2004), it is imperative that a distributed perspective on leadership practice must focus on the leaders' thinking and action in situ. The situation at the time of this leadership experiment in the academic department was principally influenced by two phenomena, one local and the other global. Locally, the academic department endured an almost eight-month period of major building renovations to the 100+ year-old education building (HOD team report, January 28, 2020). Globally, what followed was the Covid-19 pandemic and accompanying national lockdown (HOD team report, July 31, 2020). Ironically, both phenomena resulted in colleagues being obliged to leave the education building, their taken-for-granted place of work, and create an on-line office space in their homes (P13, II). This disruption was difficult for all staff involved but particularly for the administrative staff, many of whom did not have immediate access to laptops and internet connectivity (FGI 3) and so were excluded from some of the initial on-line activity.

This remote and on-line substitute for face-to-face teaching, research, and postgraduate supervision was massively disruptive to the daily routines and was experienced as overwhelming (P13, II) with colleagues feeling isolated and lonely (P9, II). The academic department faced its biggest crisis to date in working out how colleagues were to offer quality teaching and research, dispersed as they were, both geographically and psychologically. What structural innovations were necessary to bring colleagues together virtually, hold them steady, and help them thrive, despite the odds? For the purposes of this paper, we discuss two structural innovations.

#### *Friday check-in*

The Friday check-in was a weekly routine, a structural innovation, in the leadership practice of the department. Initially conceived of in a face-to-face context, it provided "regular communication and a safe and generative space for colleagues to raise any issues deemed important in our department" (HOD team report, August 10, 2020). With the onset of the building renovations and the Covid-19 pandemic, the check-in was redefined (after Spillane, 2006) and it morphed into an on-line communication mechanism with the support of Zoom as an IT tool (P12, II). It became a crucial departmental structure that provided an on-line assembly point and vital communication channel for staff during lockdown (HOD team report, July 31, 2020). As the demands of remote and on-line ways of working increased, the original purpose of the check-in was superseded by a multitude of pressing imperatives.

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1 As already mentioned, Spillane (2006) uses the term *followers* in relation to the practice of leadership. We choose, instead, to adopt the term *colleague* that we believe to be more appropriate to the higher education context.

Remote and on-line teaching, learning, and assessment challenges, the communication of Covid-related university policy, qualification and supervision discussions, as well as ensuring the wellbeing of colleagues (P13, II) competed for check-in time. Minutes of the Friday check-ins, emailed every week to the staff (P10, II), academic articles related to the topics being discussed (FGI 1, P1), as well as staff reflections and HOD team reports (FGI 2) constituted the check-in related tools of the leadership practice.

For the most part, check-ins were regarded as safe, discursive spaces that encouraged participation and inclusion of all colleagues. To illustrate, Participant 15 experienced the check-ins as

very much about hearing voices and voices of experience. So, it's not just we want your voice on a course or the date or the nuts and bolts of what we need to do in the department to get our jobs done. It's also we want to hear your voice on how you are experiencing the difficulty of your job under the current Covid challenges, and we want to hear about that as well. (II)

Participant 9 understood the weekly check-in as one of a

number of different strategies to facilitate different voices being heard . . . where different people will be asked to present, and tasks and reporting are devolved from the leadership team to others. (II)

In contrast, two participants were of the view that the Zoom technology constrained the collegiality of the check-ins. Participant 8 experienced Zoom exchanges as “extremely hierarchical in a way that is destructive of the distributed leadership model . . . the technology has eroded what we were building in terms of collegiality” (FGI 2). Participant 2 also felt that the technology had reduced some of the gains that the department had made, primarily because “you see, we can't even see other faces and how they're reacting to anything. You can't even, you don't even know it's the other person who is at the other end” (FGI 2). A way around this real constraint was to draw on the Zoom break-away meeting rooms as an alternative communicative platform.

This option, particularly where colleagues were less confident to talk in the wider Zoom forum, appeared to have worked better. Participant 6 explained,

I can speak in a meeting and not be worried about who I am. I can voice my ideas by not being afraid as to who is going to say, ‘Oh, what are you saying?’ or ‘You're saying it incorrectly’ or even ‘You're speaking English incorrectly’, because in those meetings we were told that it's not about what you are saying, it's about being part of the whole team. (FGI 1)

### *The buddy system*

A second structural innovation that was constituted in the academic department during the period of the building renovations and the Covid pandemic, was the buddy system. Aside

from the weekly Friday check-in, departmental colleagues remained isolated and vulnerable, particularly during lockdown level 5 of the Covid pandemic (FGI 2, P8). This necessitated further mechanisms for staying in touch. The idea of a buddy system, a strategy to enable inclusivity, was suggested by a colleague during a Friday check-in. The purpose of the system was “to ensure that all colleagues stay connected to each other and remain safe during the Covid-19 pandemic” (HOD team report, July 31, 2020). It involved teams of about four colleagues working in similar programmes checking in with each other outside of the formal Friday check-in (FGI 2, P2) to ascertain if anyone was sick or in any kind of need (FGI 2, P8) or to assist with the emotional and personal challenges of each other (P15, II). Pastoral care, as a consequence of the pandemic, became a priority in the department (FGI 1, P6).

The buddy system as a loose structure worked well for some teams, with colleagues supporting each other emotionally. As Participant 6 said, “Whereby when someone is down, the group will lift their spirit. Or just talking to each other, finding each other, where are you?” (FGI 1, P6). Some of the buddy teams really gelled in offering essential support to one another as is evident in this comment: “It is for my team, we talk all the time, we check on each other all the time. And it also helps because we work together” (FGI 2, P2). For another team, the support was helpful in decision-making. As Participant 4 acknowledged, “It’s a team effort where there are still individual decisions can still be made but with the support of your team” (FGI 1, P4). Participant 9 was aware of “clear communication within the teams/cells/groups working in a programme” (II).

Given this data, it seems safe to argue that the weekly Friday check-in and the buddy system were significant structures that, for the most part, enabled a sense of inclusivity and connectivity in the department. This sentiment was summed up in the words of Participant 15, who said,

The individuals in the department have a sense that they want to be heard by the leadership. I think they have a sense that they can raise things and they will be heard, and I think they have a sense of belonging even while we’re in this Covid and it’s on-line. I think there’s a sense of community that the HOD team has been able to maintain throughout the Covid challenges and the on-line meetings, which is no small ask. (II)

### **Inclusivity in the decision-making process**

Inclusivity featured strongly in the process of decision-making in the academic department as did decision-making based on consensus. Across the data sets there was reference to decisions being made by teams rather than by individuals or, in other words, what Spillane (2006) and others refer to as co-leadership. The following excerpt refers to the leadership of the HOD team.

There is no one person who is making all the decisions exclusively; decision-making is a joint exercise, and I think a lot of input comes from all . . . of our leaders. And

they're all so very different, which makes the decision making, I think, even better because of the diversity. (FGI 1, P1)

Similarly, Participant 15 described the benefit of

having four people who can support each other on challenges that arise and on strategically thinking through challenges that arise. So, on the one hand when challenges arise, you need careful strategic thinking and I think if you've got four people with different knowledge of different people and areas in the department. I think you are better off coming up with a strategy that in fact more people will buy into, because you're not just getting one perspective. (II)

However, decision-making was not only in the hands of the HOD team. Most of the participants were of the view that there were opportunities for staff to involve themselves in decision-making as is clear in this observation.

So, it also grows the department in that manner because it's not only the HOD team who are making decisions, but they also allow us to bring, to become part of, the decisions and to be the decision makers within the department. (FGI 1, P6)

Participant 13 argued for the importance of developing "heterarchical relations" in order to "work within a flatter structure and growing and leading in that way" (II). Similarly, Participant 7 described the decision-making as "a flat structure where, you know, it's shared, shared decision-making; it's collegial decision making" (FGI 1). This flatter leadership structure in the department was thought to enable a process of lateral leadership during which "leadership practices are shared by organisational members and built on interactions that involve leaders, members, and situations in the context of influencing work practices" (Musa et al., 2020, p. 185). For example, Participant 5 described how the culture of the department was such that he could "go straight to the qualification coordinator knowing that everything that I need, she will be able to resolve the issue before even the HOD team are aware of the kind of issue" (FGI 2). Participant 1 described how, in the decision-making process, "the decision is a distributed decision, it is an elective decision rather, because then everybody feels heard and the repercussion is also then felt by everybody and accepted by everybody" (FGI 1).

The concept of trust in one another was associated with an inclusive decision-making process. As Participant 1 noted, "So, I think the connection is important, the fact that they trust one another to be able to make the decisions when maybe one of them is not available" (FGI 1, P1). Participant 4 referred to a "circle of trust" that allowed for a particular scenario, in saying,

If one of them made a decision and the other two don't really disagree they'll still back the person up who has made the decision. That's my interpretation. So that's the amount of trust they've got in one another. (FGI 1)

Perhaps also because of this culture of trust, Participant 6 made the point that there was no evidence of micro-management in the department (FGI 1). Trust, it seems, was gained because of one's professional integrity.

Someone that I could go to with an issue, with someone that I know will have my back because they trust my professional integrity. And that is something that one needs to build, it doesn't just happen. So, for them [the HOD team] to have done this in this period of time and in the pandemic and all that stuff, for us to kind of feel very much more connected than what we did in a regular kind of top-down leadership structure, I think is quite phenomenal. (FGI 1, P1)

While inclusive decision making was thought to have real benefits, it also had its downsides. For example, while acknowledging that the departmental culture was "very engaging and very active in affirming members of staff in what they do," Participant 10 judiciously cautioned against "a selective affirmation syndrome" (P10, II). He explained that while the HOD team was proactive in generating an inclusive environment, this was in relation to race and gender but not age. As he said, the HOD team "has given opportunity to young members of staff to take on leadership roles, sometimes at the expense of the older members of staff" (II). A similar sentiment was shared by Participant 9 who said, "I think it highlights my comment about inclusivity being selective at times. My experience has not been one of inclusivity by the HOD team" (II).

Inclusive decision making was also experienced as time consuming (FGI 1) and therefore inefficient. According to Participant 10, this was because it was

based on consensus, which is problematic, I think. Not that consensus is bad, I mean it's a pillar, I think, of democracy. But getting consensus is sometimes cumbersome at the expense of efficiency and moving ahead. (P10, II)

This view was endorsed by Participant 9 who bemoaned the time lost with the consensus decision-making approach. Frustrated by the delay in communication, this participant reverted instead to email communication to all HOD team members but was concerned about the slow response time (II). In contrast, Participant 7 valued email communication because it seemed a faster and more transparent option and explained,

[I] think an email is quicker than actually speaking to anyone, because in an email you send an email and you cc everyone, the HOD team. And then you get a response quicker . . . I think it is so beautiful to witness . . . I find it's quite simple, but I think it's so profound in such a leadership structure. (FGI 1, P7)

On the issue of the speed of decision-making, Participant 12 was of the view that it was the status of the issue at hand that determined the speed or otherwise of the decision-making process.

So, I think that [decision-making] is a bit of both; I think it's slower when it comes to the more important new decisions that have to be made. But if it's kind of something

that's pretty simple and that you are able to deal with immediately, then you don't have to go and have a conversation and consult with other people. I don't believe, I don't think the HOD team consults on every issue, though, I think that the team members have enough confidence in each other to allow one person to take the lead in a decision. (FGI 3, P 12)

Participant 13 highlighted the importance of acknowledging the strengths of the members of her team and trusting them to lead the decision-making in the areas of their expertise. She said, "I know that my team members have strengths in areas I don't have, so they are going to make a better decision [than] I would" (FGI 3). It seems from the data presented that inclusion in the departmental decision-making processes contributed in some way towards the advancement of an inclusive culture and mindset (see Blessinger & Stefani, 2018).

We turn now to discuss how a department's inclusive culture and mindset has the potential to lead to sustainability in the leadership practice.

### Sustainability in the practice of leadership

Sustainability in the practice of leadership refers to the ability to maintain or support the practice continually over time. It is about preserving that that is valued (Bottery, 2016) that is, in this case, an inclusive and vibrant academic department leadership practice. The literature reviewed earlier showed that the traditional conceptualisation of the HOD position is unsustainable, particularly given the challenges of recruitment and retention (Bottery, 2016; Chilvers et al., 2018). Leadership sustainability, in the form of induction and succession planning, featured as a theme in this distributed leadership study.

Induction into the academic department and the university was thought to be crucial to the sustainability of the leadership practice. However, the data indicated that, historically, induction into the HOD position in the academic department was limited, resulting in discontinuity in the HOD work. As Participant 3 put it, "He came in, he hadn't been at the institution long, he didn't know the systems. There was no system of handover, no induction" (FGI 2, P3). Participant 13 described how "no-one's done an induction about Human Resources or Finance or whatever; we asked for that support [but] we never got it institutionally" (II). Participant 15 reflected on the effects of this absence of support in saying, "Ja, I guess people might have looked at previous single person leaderships over the years and thought well, when somebody leaves, where is the continuity" (P15, II).

However, a distributive approach to departmental leadership with its focus on inclusivity, was thought to incorporate induction opportunities. Participant 15 said, "I see it as distributing, sharing the leadership responsibility amongst more people but in the same process inducting more people into leadership" (P15, II). Induction into the HOD role, from this alternative perspective, was understood to take place while on the job. As Participant 2, said,

But there are people who are experiencing it, who are seeing what is required of the position, who will be able to step up at the next cycle of us needing people who lead. (FGI 2, P2)

Benefits to this on-the-job induction included: i) retaining institutional memory within the HOD team, should one of its members leave (FGI 2, P 2); ii) developing a team of colleagues “who know more about how the systems work” (FGI 2, P3); and iii) creating opportunities for leadership development according to Participant 15 who said, “So, I don’t think it’s only about sharing the load, I think it’s about more people having leadership experience” (P15, II).

Continuity and succession planning were considered an outcome of this on-the-job learning of the HOD team. Participant 3 was of the view that there was “more opportunity for people to move up and for it not to be such a shock to the system, and to bring others in” (FGI 2) while Participant 15 believed that “people might be more willing to do it [the HOD work] in this distributed mode of leadership” (II). However, continuity and succession planning were not only discussed in relation to the HOD team but were also central to the issue of coordination of qualifications housed in this academic department. For example, in a bachelor’s programme, there were academic coordinators allocated to each academic year as well as the more experienced qualification coordinator. In this coordinating team, according to Participant 9, there would be opportunities for

collaborative team leadership both in terms of the course management associated with the different staff teaching on the programme and students and the academic endeavour (curriculum and pedagogy choices and decisions), curriculum development and review, progression, formative and summative assessment; there are heaps of opportunities to participate in [including] debates about what knowledge should be included, how we teach and learn and assess, to name but a few. (P9, II)

It can be argued, therefore, that a distributive approach to departmental leadership, as evidenced in this study, incorporates the notion of sustainability. By foregrounding the drivers of induction and succession planning, change-capable managers are developed, and a leadership pipeline created (Chilvers et al., 2018); this is essential if we wish to see growth and renewal in the higher education sector (Jones et al., 2017).

## Conclusion

Historically, the concept of HOD in a university context has been understood as a one-person role. Despite the increasing complexity of the role, the position remains exclusive and, for many academics, undesirable. Reliant only on a single individual, the position, located at the centre of complex relational interfaces, is known to generate tension and role ambiguity between and among the scholarly project and management and administrative matters. In response to this problematic, in this paper, we drew on a higher education leadership study that explored the take-up of a distributed leadership approach in an academic department in a South African university. Findings revealed that a socio-cultural conceptualisation of distributed leadership comprising a leader-plus and a practice aspect, provided a useful



analytical tool for departmental leadership, understood inclusively and expansively beyond the formal HOD position. Offering an empirical case of a distributed leadership approach in an academic department, we contribute to a gap in the literature and argue, as do Shava and Tlou (2018), for further studies in other faculties and universities in the global south. We argue, along with Floyd and Fung (2017), that higher education distributed leadership studies are important because they challenge the more traditional leadership models and have more chance of success because of their collective capacity (Blessinger & Stefani, 2018) and the relative autonomy and criticality of university academics.

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