

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN HONG KONG HIGHER EDUCATION: HONG KONG ACADEMICS' PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES



By: Dr. Sally Wan, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Email: sallywywan@cuhk.edu.hk

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Outline



1. Background of the study
2. Theoretical framework
3. Significance of the study
4. Research aim
5. Research question
6. Methodology
7. Findings and discussion
8. Conclusion
9. Implications

Background of the study

- Higher Education
 - subject to ‘increased complexity and ambiguity coupled with the need to respond faster to complex market conditions’ (Fitzimons *et al.*, 2011: 313)
- Leadership in higher education
 - **sustainable development in higher education**
 - **challenges** facing universities

Theoretical framework

□ Distributed leadership

▣ A democratic form of self-management

- 'colleagues throughout the college have considerable influence on how things work out in practice' (Woods & Gronn, 2009:172)

▣ Sustainable improvement (Clark, 1998; Knight & Trowler, 2001; Shattock, 2003; Jones et al., 2010; Fitzimons et al., 2011)

- Link between distributed leadership and teaching and learning (Peeke, 2003)

- those with designated leadership roles may not have as strong an impact on teaching, learning and curriculum development as others within the institution

Theoretical framework

- University leadership is dispersed and distributed across *multiple levels* of the institutions (Pounder, 2001)
- *Multi-layered*, widely distributed leadership practice in higher education, through people, structures and networks (Bolden *et al.*, 2008a, 2008b, 2009)

Theoretical framework

- Spillane (2006: 102-103):
 - *“More important, what is likely to be most salient is not the fact that leadership is distributed but how leadership is distributed but how leadership is distributed ... A distributed perspective on leadership can coexist with and be used beneficially to explore hierarchical and top-down leadership approaches.”*

Figure 1: A multi-level model of leadership practice in higher education (Source: Bolden et al., 2009)

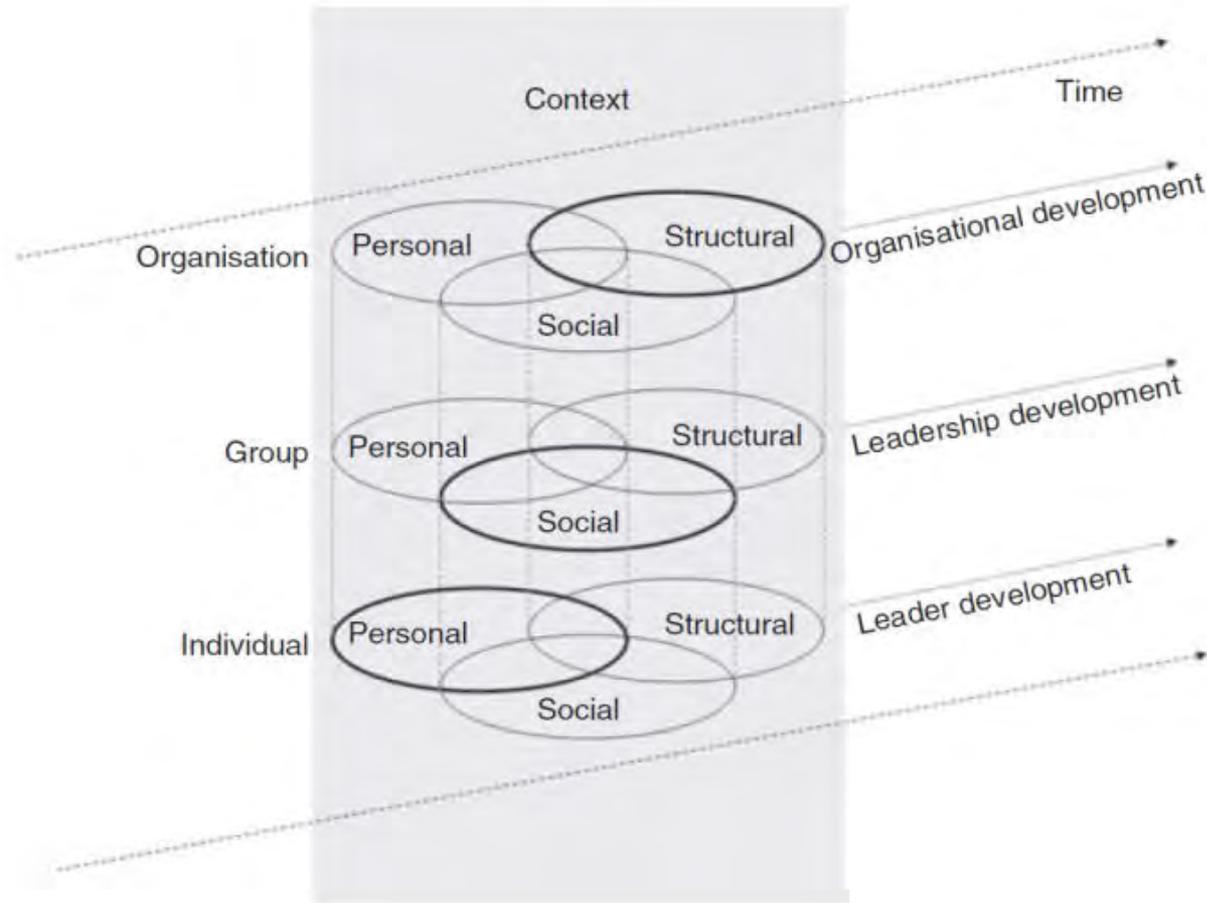
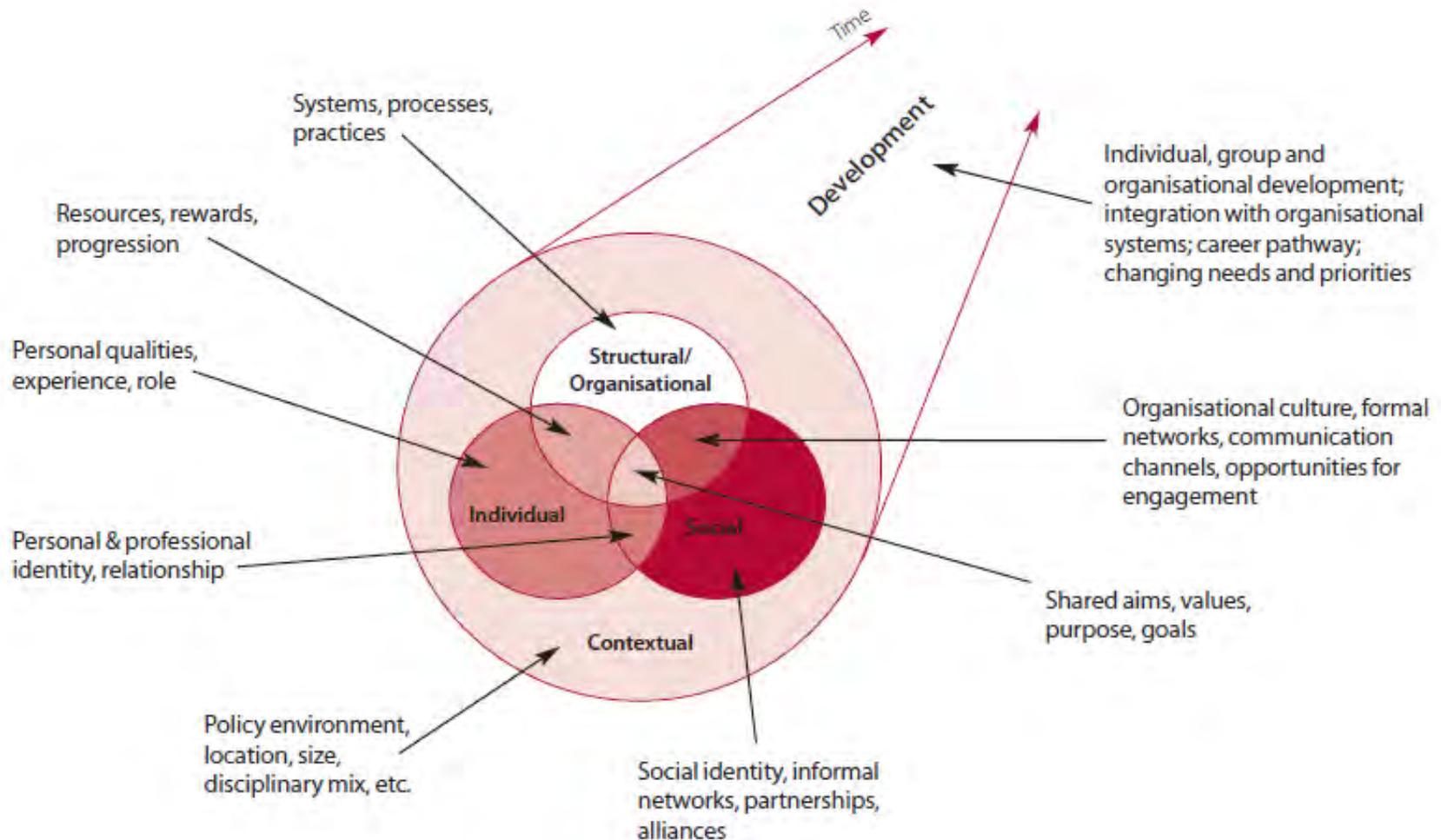


Figure 2: Dimensions of leadership in higher education (Source: Bolden, 2008b: 60)



Theoretical framework

- Collinson & Collinson (2009)
 - ▣ “blended leadership” : “heroic leaders” (individual) + “post-heroic” leadership (collective)
- Kezar (2012)
 - ▣ examined whether and how bottom-up leaders converged with top-down leadership to broaden and potentially institutionalize their work

Significance of the study

- Studies of distributed leadership in higher education (e.g. Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006; Bolden *et al.*, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Gosling *et al.*, 2009; Jones *et al.*, 2010, 2012)
 - ▣ bounded to be in the UK and Australia
 - ▣ proportion of publication of DL (distributed leadership) articles is much higher for the UK than the USA (Crawford, 2012)
- **inform** practitioners and educators in leadership **practice** in the local university environment
- give **insights** into the field of leadership studies in higher education in the local context

Research question



- *How is leadership perceived to be distributed throughout a local university in Hong Kong?*

Research aim



- To explore academic and administrative leaders' perceptions and experiences of leadership in higher education in the case university in Hong Kong

Methodology

- Using qualitative approach
- Semi-structured individual interviews
- Duration: May and June 2013
- Participants:
 - nine academics who work in a publicly funded university in Hong Kong
 - purposive sampling method (job position and ranking is a major criterion to select the information)
- Data analysis: Content analysis (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992)

Table 1: Information about key informants in the study

Key Informants	Job Title / Responsibilities
Prof. S	Vice-Chancellor
Prof. Q	Professor; Faculty Dean
Mr. P	University Curriculum Director
Prof. D	Chair Professor
Prof. H	Professor; Division Head
Dr. N	Associate Professor; Associate Dean
Dr. E	Associate Professor; Programme Director
Dr. R	Research Assistant Professor
Mr. A	Lecturer

Note¹: Pseudonym is applied for the names of the key informants for ethical reasons.

Findings and discussion



- **Distributed leadership: top-down and bottom-up processes in complex, dynamic higher education environment**
- **Distributed leadership: individual expertise versus collective wisdom**

Distributed leadership: top-down and bottom-up processes in complex, dynamic higher education environment

- Top management and the bottom (i.e. faculties, departments, divisions and individual academics) interact with each other in different ways
- Vice-chancellor and top management team
 - ▣ Lead the university development by sharing a direction with the faculty deans, who are responsible for sharing this direction with other colleagues and generating faculty-based strategies

Distributed leadership: top-down and bottom-up processes in complex, dynamic higher education environment

- Vice-chancellor explained that,
 - ▣ “We set up areas of **strategic importance**.... so the faculties would **set up their goals**. Every year, they have to develop a faculty development plan, FDP. We will look at it and give comment. We, not just me, it’s the whole SMT [senior management team], plus selective representatives such as academic chair professor. So come together, we have meetings, so look at the architecture, look at education, look at engineering. So, are they doing the right thing? So then, we give them scores and then they get the increase or the allocation for the year.” (Prof. S, 11 June 2013)

Distributed leadership: top-down and bottom-up processes in complex, dynamic higher education environment

- linkage between the vice-chancellor and the faculty dean *relies on* provosts
 - '[t]he bridge between the vice-chancellor and dean is critical, because deans are responsible for courses, personnel and financial policies' (Prof. D, 10 May 2013)

Distributed leadership: top-down and bottom-up processes in complex, dynamic higher education environment

- Delegated role of the faculty dean
 - ▣ Information flow / share the university direction
 - ▣ Lead the faculty to work out strategic plans according to the university's direction

“... as an executive, dean, the one thing that we are doing is implementing the university policy. The university may introduce a policy which may have particular expectation, may have a particular performance expectation or may have a strategic direction or whatever. So ... any dean has responsibility for trying to ensure the faculty executes those things. At the same time, things are working out in the other direction and the dean is trying to make sure the university recognizes the faculty's achievements and recognizes faculty's concerns and addresses those concerns. You are kind of working in both directions.” (Prof. Q, 16 May 2013)

Distributed leadership: top-down and bottom-up processes in complex, dynamic higher education environment

- Delegated role of the faculty dean
 - ▣ Discuss strategies and get consensus with colleagues

“Now, in term of the influence the dean has on the faculty. It can't be a top-down kind of influence, telling people to do things. Because life doesn't work like that, particularly not with academic. They don't like to be told what to do. So it has to be a much more collective form of leadership.... So they all contribute to collective decision. So every Monday morning, we have a meeting of dean and associate dean so that meeting is really a regular think tank or whatever about faculty related issues. So we make collective decision about particular things that need to be done and not just within.”

(Prof. Q, 16 May 2013)

Distributed leadership: top-down and bottom-up processes in complex, dynamic higher education environment

- Participation in decision-making in the faculty level may be limited to delegated roles or responsibilities.

“Very little, [participating in faculty decision-making] because it’s not a part of my position. I attend my division meetings, and if I am asked for my opinion, I will offer it. I respond to all the examiners’ requests when they ask me about the information. I plan on making a positive contribution to the audit process, when they are going through the UGC this year by sharing some of my teaching practices. In that respect, I am contributing but it’s not like somebody who has got formal responsibilities. (Dr. R, 28 May 2013)

Distributed leadership: top-down and bottom-up processes in complex, dynamic higher education environment

- Delegated roles, to a certain extent, may bring about an impact on the faculty level.

It's extremely difficult [to have an influence over the faculty]. We have a big faculty so by delegation, I have a lot of work, I have to delegate to my assistant deans. We have two assistant deans for learning and teaching and also delegate work to my academic secretary, Ms C, and also in close collaboration with program directors. Because they look after the quality of learning and teaching and curriculum issues of all our academic programs. The undergraduate program and the taught postgraduate program. So through collaboration, communication with the whole team of colleagues, we are able to facilitate the work. (Dr. N, 20 May 2013)

Distributed leadership: top-down and bottom-up processes in complex, dynamic higher education environment

- More participation at divisional level:
 - Formal
 - Yearly performance review
 - Development meeting
 - Monthly meetings
 - Informal
 - Emails
 - Chats

Distributed leadership: top-down and bottom-up processes in complex, dynamic higher education environment

- Leadership from the central direction to delegation of roles and responsibilities of the faculty members
 - ▣ chances to communicate & interact to make decision through participating in the meetings at the faculty level
 - ▣ BUT more divisional decision-making power at divisional level

Distributed leadership: top-down and bottom-up processes in complex, dynamic higher education environment

- “... distributing leadership is leadership that operates in numerous different levels, right? It means that it operates in a way that anybody can exercise leadership. So, you know, after all, some of them will put in proposal. As far as I concern, that is leadership, in a sense that **they are contributing to their own roles, the overall running of your own working of the system.** ... a university at this size is so complex but no one individual can ever be able to lead it all ...”

(Mr. P, 8 May 2013)

Distributed leadership: individual expertise vs. collective wisdom

- Individual academics:
 - ▣ own expertise; given professional autonomy in research and teaching in the university

“Leadership ... is somewhat different ... in a university. A university is basically a disperse organization, that means every scholar is a successful, independent individual, he does not require a pre-determined direction or structure to work. So a university is a very loose-coupling organization. This leadership means how to make every individual every department pursue excellence with its potential, achieve the best advantage, but at the same time maintain a relatively consistent organization.”
(Prof. D, 10 May 2013)

Distributed leadership: individual expertise vs. collective wisdom

- “Work together” for a central direction

“I think most of us can incorporate the direction of the university and its vision, ... I think whether the university can carry out successfully requires the bottom like us to incorporate. That means of course only I who do not incorporate won't affect much. That means if only I am successful won't make it [the university] very successful. In other words some of my colleagues may be very successful and the university will use them as a model, I believe what we do at this level is to fit them.” (Dr. E, 8 May 2013)

Distributed leadership: individual expertise vs. collective wisdom

*“... I am a strong believer in collective leadership and in **consensus building**. So I certainly don't believe that a leader should be somebody who is always telling people what to do. I don't see that. That's not my view of leadership. Surely it's not something I would feel comfortable trying to do in a leadership position. ... And I don't think...certainly in an academic environment, I don't see it as an appropriate form of leadership.” (Prof. Q, 16 May 2013)*

Distributed leadership: individual expertise vs. collective wisdom

*“Usually I have some ideas in my mind and then I do not put forward my idea first. I **consult** different parties, who are the shareholders, who have points of views on the issues. Then after collecting the ideas, I come up with a proposal.”
(Dr. N, 20 May 2013)*

Distributed leadership: individual expertise vs. collective wisdom

*“... there is a lot of informal networking when I...sometimes I would just ring someone up and sort of to say...how’s your course going. Would you mind if I sit in the class next Wednesday. You know, sometimes you can just engage people into **informal discussion**. Or just throw up ideas. Or people may be writing proposals and they email me and sort of say, I am thinking of doing this proposal, what do you think? So I’ll meet them informally and talk about their proposal and so on and so forth.” (Mr. P, 8 May 2013)*

Distributed leadership: individual expertise vs. collective wisdom

□ FINAL decision-making

- ▣ may be restricted to positions or pre-assigned roles or responsibilities

“That’s about [discussing] programme stuff, such as measures, how to deal with students’ problems, lay down certain policies, etc. That means sometimes it’s a kind of collective wisdom, however, to a certain level, possibly that is decided by the programme director.”

(Dr. E, 8 May 2013)

Conclusion

- DL: distribution of power via preassigned / delegated roles & informal roles
 - ▣ Degree of decision making varies (central/ faculty / division)
- DL as a kind of ‘social activity’ (Gronn, 2000; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001; Harris, 2008) through:
 - ▣ Consensus building
 - ▣ Consultation
 - ▣ Sharing and discussion (formal / informal)

Implications

- Need for developing leadership skills
 - ▣ Communication is vital to the whole network system (at all levels)
 - ‘a practical and everyday process of supporting, managing, developing and inspiring academic colleagues’ (Ramsden, 1998:4).
 - ▣ Building a sustainable leadership
 - ▣ Participation & collaboration: individual expertise to collective organization
 - ▣ Need support & development: ownership & empowerment

Implications

- Future studies
 - ▣ How academics with/ without delegated roles learn and engage in leadership practice thru network analysis
 - ▣ How faculty dean affect academics' leadership practice
 - ▣ Extension of the scale of the current study
 - Top management
 - Faculties & divisions
 - No. of the informants in the same faculty
 - ▣ Increase in the data collection sources (field notes/ observation / documents, etc.)

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