Distributed leadership in higher education: Hong Kong academics’ perceptions and practices

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Distributed leadership provides a theoretically-grounded framework with which to examine leadership practice. The concept ‘distributed leadership’ is relatively new and still lacks a widely-accepted definition. Research in higher education, at the same time, has found shared or dispersed forms of leadership, rather than hierarchical leadership, are more beneficial to sustainable improvement (Clark, 1998; Knight & Trowler, 2001; Shattock, 2003). Distributed leadership in higher education, however, is rarely examined. It is thus the aim of this study to explore Hong Kong academics’ perceptions and practices of leadership in higher education, focusing on one key research question – How is leadership perceived to be distributed throughout a local university in Hong Kong? The study uses a qualitative approach based on individual interviews with nine purposively selected academics from a case-study university in Hong Kong. The concept of distributed leadership can be found in the key informants’ understandings of leadership practice across multiple levels of the university. Distributed leadership practice is identified as a process of ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ efforts that involve different formal and informal ways of communication, and in which collective practice of leadership occurs. Leadership practice is enacted and supported through different strategies, such as a mentoring scheme, peer observation, and so on, from university level to faculty and departmental level. Implications concerning higher education leadership practice, as well as further leadership studies, are discussed at the end of the paper.

Keywords: higher education leadership; distributed leadership; Hong Kong

Background

In times of globalization and marketization, higher education in Hong Kong is subject to dynamic changes (Lee & Gopinathan, 2003; Mok, 2000, 2003; Wan, 2011). Greater attention has been paid by Hong Kong institutions to the improvement of competitiveness, their place in regional and global markets (Mok, 2005) and the promotion of lifelong learning and quality education as a means of preparing the youth of today for the knowledge-based economy (Mok, Tan, & Lee, 2000). Different reform measures have been adopted by the Hong Kong government. The government increasingly promotes comprehensive reforms of its education system, cutting down heavy curricula, pushing for teaching effectiveness and launching various management-oriented reforms in order to improve education quality (Mok, 2000; Mok, Tan, & Lee, 2000; Tse, 2002; UGC, 2001, 2010). Unavoidably, Hong Kong universities are facing challenges in the changing educational landscape in order to keep pace with the international trends and sustain their competitiveness in the worldwide market. Higher demands and pressures are therefore put on the shoulders of academics and management teams in universities.
Leadership plays a crucial role in driving change and resolving challenges in university reform. Tracing its origins back to the field of organizational theory in the early 1960s (Barnard, 1968), distributed leadership is the idea of the moment, with greater attention and increasing support in recent educational discourse (Gronn, 2000; Harris, 2004a, 2004b; Spillane, 2006). Distributed leadership has provided a theoretically-grounded framework to examine leadership practice, but the concept is relatively new, and still lacks a widely-accepted definition. In the following section, we provide a literature review about distributed leadership in higher education.

**Distributed leadership: definitions and meanings**

There is no standard definition of the term ‘distributed leadership’. Harris (2004a: p.13-14) argues that: “distributed leadership is currently in vogue’ and adds that it is a form of collective leadership, ‘in contrast to the traditional notions of leadership premised upon an individual managing hierarchical systems and structures”. Gronn (2000) states that distributed leadership is nothing new: instead, it is simply a different way to represent leadership in discourse. Even so, the term ‘distributed leadership’ has been used to label all kinds of shared leadership activity, and is frequently used to describe many types of collaborative leadership practice (Harris, 2007). Multiple definitions of distributed leadership, such as dispersed leadership, vertical leadership or shared leadership, are therefore in use (Bennett et al., 2003).

**Distributed leadership as division of labour**

Distributed leadership is, however, commonly defined as encompassing ‘division of labour’ and ‘social activity’. The starting point of distributed leadership is the division of labour within organizations. The division of labour refers to the means by which the sum of the work of an organization is arranged into roles, activities and tasks, involving an active distribution of leadership authority and agency. Distributed leadership is interpreted as “an enactment of free-will, rather than an exercise of power” (Hallinger & Lee, 2012). On the whole, this perspective reflects the concepts of division of labour, shared roles, leaders as change agents, and the transfer of responsibility from the individual to a collective (Gronn, 2000).

**Distributed leadership as social activity**

Distributed leadership relies heavily on interactions between people or on the “reciprocal interdependency between their actions” (Spillane, 2006: p.146) whereby leadership is promoted “as a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers, and their situation” rather than “as a product of a leader’s knowledge and skill” (Spillane, 2006: p.144). Spillane identifies collaborated, collective, and coordinated forms of distribution. In each case, Spillane presses us to look beyond who takes responsibility for particular functions and routines, and points out how leadership practice exists in the intersection of leaders, followers and their situations.

**Distributed leadership in higher education**

Higher Education is facing dynamic changes over the global world and critical issues such as increasing globalization, government initiatives, improving the quality of student learning, keen competition, marketization and internationalization in higher education (McRoy & Gibbs, 2009). Higher education is therefore subject to “increased complexity and ambiguity coupled with the need to respond faster to complex market conditions’ that ‘has led to new emerging patterns of accountability, inter-dependency and co-ordination” (Fitzimons et al., 2011: p.313). The current higher education system is shaped by many simultaneous
challenges and opportunities (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006), that include the decline of institutional resources (Johnstone, 1999), changing student demographics (Hurtado & Dey, 1997), and paradigm shifts in educational practice (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Attention has been drawn to the potential of distributed leadership in leading such changes in the higher education sector (Jones et al., 2010; Fitzimons et al., 2011). Research in higher education has found shared or dispersed forms of leadership, rather than hierarchical or authoritarian leadership, are more beneficial to sustainable improvement (Clark, 1998; Knight & Trowler, 2001; Shattock, 2003).

Peeke (2003) observed the link between distributed leadership and teaching and learning, arguing that those with designated leadership roles may not have as strong an impact on teaching, learning and curriculum development as others within the institution, most likely curriculum and course team leaders and even teachers. Nowadays, traditional hierarchical power structures have generally given way to distributed power (Hatcher, 2005), taking the three core elements, namely self-governance, protection from arbitrary power, and legitimacy grounded in consent into consideration, while distributed leadership is a democratic form of self-management, whereas leadership is thus dispersed and shared, such that “each staff member can act as change agent” and that “colleagues throughout the college have considerable influence on how things work out in practice” (Woods & Gronn, 2009: p.172).

Ramsden (1998) examined the distributed leadership approach in the context of higher education, in particular, the university context. It was found that external changes and challenges to universities, including global competition, increasing demands from stakeholders and reduction in available resources, have called for effective leadership at multiple levels. This view was supported by Pounder (2001) who claimed that university leadership is dispersed and distributed across multiple levels of the institutions and that distributed leadership is undoubtedly transformational in nature involving ‘helping ordinary people do extraordinary things’, elevating individuals’ visions to higher levels, and helping people to embrace change. Additionally, it is a self-reflecting form of leadership aimed at transforming leaders’ own performance through introspection (Pounder, 2001).

Bolden et al. (2008a, 2008b, 2009) explored higher education leaders’ perceptions and experiences of distributed leadership and distributed leadership approaches in twelve UK universities. They discovered a model with multi-layered and multi-faceted constituent elements of widely distributed leadership practice in higher education, through people, structures and networks (see Figures 1 and 2) whereby the ‘hybrid’ (Gronn, 2008) forms of leadership are as a result of ‘dynamic inter-play’ between five main groups of factors (individual, social, structural, contextual and developmental) (Bolden et al., 2008b). Their study indicated that higher education leaders face tensions between competing forces in universities which are described as large, complex organizations (Bolden et al., 2009; McRoy & Gibbs, 2009). Bolden et al. (2009) identified both ‘devolved’ (top-down) and ‘emergent’ (bottom-down) distributed leadership which are are of equal recognition and value in the universities. In Bolden et al. (2008b: p.60)’s words: “… there remains a dynamic tension between the need for collegiality and managerialism, individual autonomy and collective engagement, leadership of the discipline and the institution, academic versus administrative authority, informality and formality, inclusivity and professionalization, etc.” Spillane (2006: p.102-103), as cited in Bolden (2011: p. 258), maintains that:

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.

Using in-depth interviews, Collinson & Collinson (2009) examined how leadership was enacted, distributed and experienced at various hierarchical levels within further education colleges in the UK. They aimed to explore the dynamic nature of relationships between those in senior and in more junior positions, including Principals and Heads, as well as other employees in the organization. Their study found that further education employees often valued practices that combined elements of both the individual qualities of ‘heroic leaders’ and the collective nature of ‘post-heroic’ leadership. This kind of leadership was described as ‘blended leadership’ by Collinson & Collinson (2009). They concluded that this ‘blended leadership’ is an approach that values both delegation and direction, as well as both internal and external engagement, forming the basis for effective leadership. However, Collinson & Collinson (2009)’s study focused only on colleges of further education rather than other higher education settings such as universities, and their study was conducted within the UK context.

Seeing that ‘distributed leadership examines convergence from the perspective of top-down leaders getting followers to work with them on a change initiative “but fails to ‘adequately describe the convergence of bottom-up leaders with those in positions of power” (Kezar, 2012: p.728), Kezar (2012) examined whether and how bottom-up leaders converged with top-down leadership to broaden and potentially institutionalize their work, whereas convergence is believed to occur between top-down and bottom leaders who can have important outcomes such as deeper and more transformational change within a shorter timeframe and can build the leadership capacity of the organization (Kezar, 2012). Such group interaction is generated between top-down efforts that are initiated and carried out by people in positions of authority within the organization who possess formal power, and bottom-up efforts that are initiated and carried by those without positions of authority or formal power. This may typically lead to more complex solutions and ideas, greater buy-in and consensus, increased expertise to draw on, and more energy and enthusiasm for change (Pearce & Conger, 2003).

![Figure 1: A multi-level model of leadership practice in higher education (Source: Bolden et al., 2009)](image-url)
Over the past decade, there have been few studies of higher education leadership (Wan, 2013, 2014). Distributed leadership in higher education is rarely examined (e.g., Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006; Bolden et al., 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Gosling et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2010, 2012), and those studies were primarily in the UK and Australia. Crawford (2012) also noted that the proportion of publication of articles on distributed leadership is much higher for the UK than for the USA. Bolden (2011) explains that this is partly due to the influence of the National College, which has taken up the idea in many of its publications. Studying academics’ perceptions and experiences concerning leadership practice in the university from different positions can help bring about more understanding of higher education and inform practitioners and educators regarding leadership practice in the university environment.

**Methodology of this study**

Taking a qualitative approach that allows the deeper understanding of complexity of the leadership phenomena (Conger, 1998; Wolcott, 1975), one local University Grants Council (UGC)-funded university in Hong Kong was explored as a case study (McMillan, 2000). The key research question was addressed in the study was: *How is leadership perceived to be distributed throughout a local university in Hong Kong?*. This question guided the data gathering process and the subsequent analysis of the data, aiming at exploring academic and administrative leaders’ perceptions and experiences of leadership in higher education in the case university in Hong Kong.

The academics to be interviewed were chosen in a purposive manner (Patton, 1980) taking job position and role(s) into consideration. The nine selected informants had at least one year of experience working in the case university. The job positions of the key informants ranged from vice-chancellor to junior academic staff (see Table 1). Seven of the informants came from the same faculty, whilst two belonged to the top management level. The reason why seven informants were chosen from the same faculty was that the researcher wished to explore the interactions of leadership practice within the same faculty.
Table 1: The key informants for this study and their job titles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Informants</th>
<th>Job Title / Responsibilities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prof. S</td>
<td>Vice-Chancellor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prof. Q</td>
<td>Professor; Faculty Dean</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr. P</td>
<td>University Curriculum Director</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prof. D</td>
<td>Chair Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prof. H</td>
<td>Professor; Division Head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. N</td>
<td>Associate Professor; Associate Dean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. E</td>
<td>Associate Professor; Programme Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. R</td>
<td>Research Assistant Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. A</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
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Note: Pseudonyms are used here for ethical reasons.

Data collection comprised semi-structured individual interviews that took place on university campus in May and June 2013 respectively. Semi-structured interviews were used to capture narrative accounts of leadership (Bolden et al., 2008b). The duration of each in-depth interview was approximately an hour. The interviews were facilitated by the use of an interview guide that helped the researcher to be clear about the instructions and facilitate the flow of the interviews, but the exact sequence and wording was not necessarily followed with every informant (Bernard, 1995). The interview questions were designed to explore what and how academics perceive regarding higher education leadership and their experiences in leadership development. In the development of a semi-structure interview guide to guide these interviews, the researcher obtained consent from Professor Jonathan Gosling and Professor Richard Bolden to use their interview guide which was applied in their studies of distributed leadership in higher education (Bolden et al., 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Gosling et al., 2009) as a reference. The interview guide was then reviewed by an expert in higher education and finalized for interview use.

Ethical issues are important for any research that deals with real people in real world situations (Bassey, 1999). As a member of the university, it is important to keep in mind about the role of the researcher as an insider and outsider so as to make sure that the data collected are valid and avoid ‘bias and subjectivity’ (Nisbet & Watts, 1984, cited in Cohen et al., 2000:184). To protect the key informants’ rights and to ensure that the study was conducted in an ethical manner (Wiersma, 1995), research ethics approval was obtained from the university in March 2013. Permission was requested from the Office of Research of the university to interview the key informants. During the data collection process, it was important to build up trust relationship with the academics interviewed. A consent form was distributed to all informants who were voluntary participants in the study with the right to withdraw at any time. The researcher informed them about the purpose of the research, and indicated the extent of commitment required. They were also assured that research data would be kept confidential. It was clearly stated before the interview that no person could be identified. In order to maintain reliability, audio recording was used and transcripts were coded. At the start of each interview, the researcher re-stated that the purpose of study was to understand academics’ perceptions about leadership practice, and that the names of the participants would be kept confidential with pseudonyms used in order to protect their identities.
Content analysis method was applied in analysing the data (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). Emergent coding of the responses was used and categories were established after some preliminary examination of the data. The researcher reviewed the responses by listening to the recording twice. One external independent researcher was invited to help with the counter-check process. The transcriptions were sent back to the informants to give them the opportunity to clarify their ideas or expressions.

Findings and discussion

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

Leadership involves a notion of top-down and bottom-up processes in which top management and the bottom (i.e. faculties, departments, divisions and individual academics) interact with each other in different ways. Such interactions are complex, and are possibly influenced by the size of the university and the degree of academic autonomy. In the case university, there are different faculties and each faculty has its own rate of growth and development as well as its area of specialism. One key informant (Mr. P) mentioned that the case university is so large-scaled that it is difficult to control or micro-manage every unit or every individual in producing standardized outcomes. Therefore, it is the leadership of the vice-chancellor and his top management team that plays a key role in leading university development by sharing a strategic direction with the faculty deans, who are responsible for sharing this direction with other colleagues and generating faculty-based strategies. The vice-chancellor, Prof. S, 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, 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)

Meanwhile, the linkage between the vice-chancellor and the faculty dean relies on provosts who are responsible “for doing works for vice-chancellor, that means actually one person one body” (Prof. D, 10 May 2013). Prof. D stated that “[t]he bridge between the vice-chancellor and dean is critical, because deans are responsible for courses, personnel and financial policies” in that the vice-chancellor doesn’t manage academic policy but does manage financial policy due to limited resources allocation.

Information flow or sharing university direction, as indicated by the key informants, relies a lot on the delegated role of the faculty dean, who plays a role in leading a senior management team within the faculty to work out strategic plans based on the university’s direction. Prof. Q, a faculty dean, explained that:

Now, they will come up with a strategic plan for the university, the same sort of way that our faculty senior management team has done for the faculty. … you can read all the strategic plans. Now, things like that are…they are pointing at the strategic direction for the university which doesn’t necessarily say anything very specific. But nevertheless, it creates broad guidelines. So if the university, as this university, did fifty years ago, or whatever, the university decides that it’s
going to see itself as a research intensive university, therefore research is going to be very important. It becomes the responsibility of the faculty to make sure that we adopt the measures that are consistent with that kind of strategies. So we, for example, have to make sure we hire professors or staff who either already has a strong research record, or has the potential to be strong in research. So it’s kind of expectation. It comes down in the same way in the last five or six years. (Prof. Q, 16 May 2013)

He continued that,

… 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)

Communication between the university top management and the bottom level seems to be restricted to one-way communication, that is, mainly via announcements or newsletters via emails or website. Seemingly the role of the faculty dean is to pass on the central direction to the faculty members. However, he considered himself to play a role in discussing strategies and gaining consensus with his members. Prof. Q said that,

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. And I have…I mean, I have a recently large management team to work with anyway so we have six associate deans and we have four assistant deans and those are drawn from across the faculty. 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. Colleagues will bring concern related to their specific portfolio to that meeting so they can be collectively discussed or I will bring issues that are related to the faculty as a whole at the meeting and they can be discussed. (Prof. Q, 16 May 2013)

Participation in decision-making in the faculty level, however, may be limited to delegated roles or responsibilities. At the same time, Dr. N expressed her view that delegation by role is a way to have an impact at the faculty level. She said that:

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)

This kind of delegation implicitly represents a network over the whole faculty in which different people, both academics and administrators, are given responsibilities that contribute to faculty development. Yet those academics without delegated positions have a minimal influence over the faculty level and their roles may be more passive: they receive messages or participate in consultative meetings. Dr. E mentioned that:

We have a faculty dean. Faculty dean will attend some meetings. When he comes back, he will introduce [university directions] to us at the board meeting. If you don’t join any board meetings, you will not know anything. There are many meetings. It’s supposed to be monthly. Our faculty also has a strategic plan. Tomorrow will be our faculty planning day. This is the kind of occasion where university vision and policy will be informed. (Dr. E, 8 May 2013)

Dr. R also mentioned that:

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)

In the decision-making process, the faculty dean in their delegated role serves as an agent in between the central university top management level and the faculty level. His role of getting the faculty members’ understanding and mutual agreements is considered as an important issue for the university’s strategic development. Prof. D mentioned that, ‘there must be some agreement and some disagreement on a decision, but consensus must be attained during the decision-making process’ (Prof. D, 10 May 2013). On the other hand, non-delegated academics’ participation in decision-making for the faculty level seems to be marginalized in this process. The decision-making process in the university and faculty-level decision-making process is very likely oriented to be a kind of ‘top-down’ strategy. This ‘top-down’ process does not necessarily mean micro-management or control of individuals across all levels of the university. In other words, it can be interpreted as giving a central direction for dispersed development in individuals and divisions, where a process of ‘transformation’ from formal authority power to empowerment occurs. In Mr. P’s words, the idea of distributed leadership originates from the network system where interdependent and dependent relationships co-exist at the same time.

Well, you can see that this is where distributing leadership comes in. Because sometimes the convenor will take the initiative so it’s not a kind of top down…. It’s not the provost chancellor at the top…kind of feeding things down to me, which then I feel down to another hierarchy. It’s a network system where there is interaction taking place. So you might find that, for example, one of the AI leaders would actually initiate something within the post in AI. And they will come to me
and say, look at this and this is what I am going to do. And then, sometimes the faculty takes the initiative. The faculty might actually organize a meeting for all the people in their faculties who teach. So it maybe the faculty will have a common core coordinator for that faculty. So again, in terms of the running of the [university] curriculum, there are people playing leadership role in all kinds of…and probably some of them…I have very little to do with. Do you understand what I mean?… So say, for example, a faculty might have a little working group within the faculty to help people to write proposals. It may be completely independent of me. (Mr. P, 8 May 2013)

In the case university, more participation at divisional level can be found whilst there exist both formal and informal ways of communication. There appeared to be more communication at the divisional level, where the key informants expressed their influence over the division, than the faculty level. Ways of communication included a yearly performance review and development meeting, monthly meetings, emails or informal chats involving discussion or information sharing over teaching and research issues. Dr. E said that:

Our division has monthly meetings. That’s pre-set. That means sometimes we may not call a meeting, or sometimes talk about research or teaching, in which understanding university vision or how it is implemented is penetrated in the meeting. … there can be chances for voicing opinions, but whether it was heard or not is unsure. There are chances for us to have a say. (Dr. E, 8 May 2013)

We have constant 24-7 communication. That means, we could be communicating by emails at 2 am, 3am or 5am. We communicate on Saturdays and Sundays. So we are a 24-7 group. Generally I feel that the colleagues in this division, for most part, love their work. And the other means of communication are through face to face meeting. Most of us are located in this corridor or in this building. We often have lunches together and we…we have many opportunities for informal communication because we have…outside of my role as division head, I form panels and discussion groups with colleagues. … The university requires something called PRD, Performance, review and development for each member of the staff every year. So I have to do the performance review with members of my staff. So I meet them and discuss with them. I guess it’s another responsibility that I didn’t mention. Once a year and everyone needs it. (Prof. H, 14 June 2013)

At the same time, during the decision-making process at the divisional level, Prof. Q, the faculty dean, commented on his role, saying that:

I don’t think it’s appropriate for the dean to try micromanage…So, and there are lots of things that would go on within the division level and the decisions that are made in the division level which I don’t need to know about or need to interfere with. So in that sense, I wouldn’t see it in a case of imposing. There are lots of decisions that…that about things that affect the division which doesn’t really have the power to decide what it’s gonna do. …the division has a monthly division meeting and what I try to do is, at least, once a year, attend the division meeting of each of the division. So at that point, I may contribute an opinion if I am asked about whatever being discussed. But it’s not…that’s not imposing a viewpoint. It is merely engaging with what’s being discussed and expressing an opinion. (Prof. Q, 18 May 2013)
The division and its members have freedom to cope with divisional works and they can have autonomy to decide their own agendas, including calling for a meeting, teaching and learning issues, research, and so on. At the same time, the faculty dean played a minor role at the division level. This can be seen as a kind of empowerment to the bottom.

There is a spread of leadership from the central direction to delegation of roles and responsibilities of the faculty members, who have opportunities to communicate and interact and to make decisions through participating in the meetings as raised by the faculty team. However, more divisional decision power is given to the divisional level. This could be explained by the university culture. Some key informants highlighted that the predominant culture in the case university was liberal, in that academics were given a great degree of academic freedom and autonomy in research and teaching. Prof. D commented that:

This university does quite well here. It has a lot of traditions, like you can see many scholars are very young, like those just graduated work here. You can see after eight to ten years they can go to a position. Simply to say that is academic freedom… here is relatively liberal culture. That means there are not much burden, don’t need to deal with non-academic stuff…not much obstacle are involved. Then those at the bottom can go upwards very fast. This is an important aspect of leadership. (Prof. D, 10 May 2013)

From the above, compared with the relationship between the university top management and faculty, the spectrum of power influence across faculty, departments and divisions is gradually increasing. In the study, Mr. P explained that leadership is not bounded to certain levels; rather, leadership may pertain to different layers within the university. He said that:

... 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 … It’s impossible. So therefore, a leader has to be distilled in order for things to happen as it were. The leadership has to be operated in a numerous different…and different kind of leaderships. Some kind of leadership is purely about administrative, … managing. Other leadership is a kind of intellectual leadership. … the person who has got the kind of ideas and kind of spread in. Other leadership is emotional kind. … people who are providing the emotional support is a leadership within the institution. (Mr. P, 8 May 2013)

This is distributed leadership that orchestrates horizontal (across individuals in a department or a faculty) and vertical leadership (from top university management level to faculty/departmental level), featuring decentralization of power to departments/faculties and individuals. The distributed leadership model includes vertical, shared and collective forms of leadership, and encompasses top down to bottom-up processes where leadership can be exercised by individuals at the bottom level (i.e. individual, division, department, and faculty). Leadership is more obviously distributed through inter-relationships amongst individuals at divisional and faculty levels, whilst leadership is implicitly dispersed and shared from top management level. This is similar to the finding by Bolden et al. (2009:262), who observed that “[l]eadership was generally seen to be distributed but within certain
boundaries”. These ‘boundaries’ represent a cut-off existing in the capacities of an individual, a department, a division or a faculty in the university.

**Distributed leadership: individual expertise versus collective wisdom**

Distributed leadership in higher education can be seen as an extension of individual expertise to collective wisdom in supporting and sustaining the university’s development. Individual academics have their own expertise and they are given professional autonomy in research and teaching within the university, in which university governance is regarded as non-statutory (Cheng, 1997; Currie, Petersen, & Mok, 2006; Hamilton, 2007). Prof. D, currently a chair professor and formerly a provost and a faculty dean, pointed out that:

Leadership varies from different places, like in a business organization, that leadership means how you make the entire organization work hard to achieve a goal in a consistent direction. This is somewhat different from leadership 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)

Dr. R elaborated that higher education leadership is rather different from school leadership, saying that”

At a school, you may have teachers who are told by their head, ‘You are professionals.’ But then they are told what to do, when to do it. They are given pre-constructed curricula that they are not allowed to vary from significantly. In other words, all of what we consider to be hallmarks of professionalism, such as professional discretion or autonomy, things like this. They offer us none of this. So, what does leadership mean in this context? I think that’s a very different understanding of what leadership mean, compared to university like ABC, where we recognize that somebody like Dr. L in instructional technology. He is given a lot of opportunities to develop whatever he wants autonomously. And this is a different definition of leadership. So while I am … I am told, you have to meet certain goals and if you want to reach out and ask us how to do it, we will give you information, but we are not going to stand and looking over your shoulder. We are not going to give you a pre-done set of curricula. We are not going to tell you where to go. If I am in my office, or if I am at home, that’s up to me.  (Dr. R, 28 May 2013)

Although individual academics are professional and every member is an expert, the university can be regarded as a collective organization. ‘Work together’ is the university vice-chancellor’s emphasis. This concept is tightly linked with ‘vertical and shared leadership’ (Pearce, 2004), wherein the university leader is regarded as a person who provides direction but decision is derived from different parts of the university (i.e. faculties, departments). Dr. E, an associate professor, mentioned that:

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)

Meanwhile, at a different positional role as a faculty dean, Prof. Q, showed his strong faith in collective leadership, saying that:

… 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)

In telling about how ‘collective leadership’ worked out in the faculty, Prof. Q used an example of a faculty planning day, in which junior colleagues have chances to stand out as leaders in leading teams in discussing faculty planning issues. This implies a mutual, interactive process of enacting a university vision and direction from a positional role in helping the bottom level ‘grow up’. The university is regarded as a ‘collective organization’ (as described by Prof. D) and ‘family’ (as described by Prof. S), rather than a sole organization that imposes or forces the bottom level to work out.

‘Collective leadership’ can be seen as a kind of ‘hidden’ leadership practice behind distributed leadership, where collective wisdom, based on individual expertise and skills of academics, is generated. Managerial leadership appears on the surface but collaborative works can co-exist at the backdrop of the scene in higher education settings. Collective wisdom serves to create those ‘bottom-up efforts’ (Kezar, 2012) that are initiated and carried by those without positional power. Sharing and discussion are common communicative ways for enabling collective wisdom. Dr. N, an associate dean, elaborated how collective thinking works in making decisions at the departmental and divisional levels, saying that:

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)

This ‘collective wisdom’ emerges as a collegial, mutual relationship, in which individuals are empowered and enacted to converge and contribute to the faculty and departmental development. However, in certain situations, final decision-making may still be restricted to those with positions or pre-assigned roles or responsibilities. As a programme director, Dr. E, an associate professor, said that:

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)
Individual academic can contribute, although this may be dependent on delegated roles or responsibilities.

At the same time, at the university-faculty level, informal communication predominates in sharing information, implicit learning and framing (Kezar, 2012). Mr. P, a university course director, shared his experience as a university curriculum director in working with other faculties in the following:

… 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)

As concluded here, distributed leadership acts as a kind of ‘social activity’ (Gronn, 2000; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001; Harris, 2008) through sharing and discussion, through which individuals contribute their strengths to the university. In the university system there is ‘convergence’ in “the joining and/or combining of top-down efforts led by those in positions of authority and bottom-up efforts led by those without positions of authority” (Kezar, 2012:728). The converging top-down and bottom-up efforts in a distributed form of leadership interact dynamically as a result of diversity being accommodated across different faculties, different departments, and different individual experts.

**Conclusion**

Distributed leadership exists in a complex, dynamic environment in which top-down and bottom-up processes occur. In the case university, leadership practice is enacted and supported through different means (for example, a mentoring scheme, peer observation) from university level to faculty and departmental level. Top management and the bottom (i.e. faculties, departments, divisions and individual academics) levels interact with each other in different ways but leadership is more obviously distributed through inter-relationships amongst individuals at divisional and faculty levels. In top-down processes, the top management level plays a role in giving direction to the bottom via the faculty dean. The academics at the bottom level, who may have delegated or non-delegated roles and/or responsibilities, have different degrees of participation in decision-making at different levels in the faculty. More participation can be found at divisional level and communications occur in both formal and informal ways. In other words, the degree of power influence of individuals extends across faculty, departments and divisions.

In this study, distributed leadership can be seen as an extension of individual expertise to collective wisdom in the development of the university at different levels. Sharing and discussion are the common ways through which distributed leadership is practised. Opportunities for empowering leadership practice exist across different levels (i.e. university, faculty and divisional levels) and different positions (i.e. faculty deans, senior professors or junior staff). In both top-down and bottom-up processes, collective practice of leadership occurs while communication, mostly in informal ways such as discussion or sharing, helps enact leadership practice. This can be seen as a decentralization of power from the top university management to faculties, divisions and individuals. So there exist two directions of
leadership – horizontal (across individuals in a department or a faculty) and vertical leadership (from top university management level to faculty/departmental level), in which individual expertise contribute and combine to further the development of the university.

Implications

Leadership development in higher education
In the study, academics have more communication with the faculty and division rather than with the university top management level. At the same time, it showed that the power influence and participation in the university’s central direction may be marginalized. The main channel to the university’s central direction is through the faculty dean. Thorough understanding of the central direction and strategies very likely depends on the ‘quality’ of such communication. This implies that the quality may vary between different leadership styles, with potentially different impacts on individual faculty development. In a complex, dynamic system like the university, communication is always seen as an effective tool in helping enhancing leadership development (Fullan & Scott, 2009) and it is regarded as the key to “alterations in the character of the system, its processes, its procedures and its informal structure to help the organization stimulate bottom up order for free activities and also combine these initiatives into viable adaptations” (Hunt, Osborn, & Boal, 2009). Therefore, strategies for communication and participation should be carefully deliberated when generating new university policies and strategies. Communication acts as “a practical and everyday process of supporting, managing, developing and inspiring academic colleagues” (Ramsden, 1998: p.4).

In this connection, the decentralization of power from the central university top management reflects a higher degree of complexity in leadership practice. However, such a complexity may result in chaos in the organization, which can have positive or negative impacts on the development of the university. Thus, building up sustainable leadership should not be understated in academics’ leadership development. Jones et al. (2012:68) remind us that:

to build sustainable leadership a new, more participative and collaborative approach to leadership is needed that acknowledges the individual autonomy that underpins creative and innovative thinking. It proposes a distributed approach to leadership (Gronn, 2000) that, while acknowledging traditional leadership focus on the traits, skills and behaviours of individual leaders, encompasses the need to take account of contexts, situations, environments and contingencies in which leadership occurs.

The variables affecting leadership practice such as context or environmental factors (e.g. cultures) should be further understood by the delegated leaders who are responsible for planning and organization activities to empower academics’ leadership development. With the inputs of academics, executive and professional staff working in close collaboration, enacting supports and measures for academics’ leadership development should be structured and strengthened, where developing ownership, giving encouragement, collaborative opportunities, implementation and ongoing supports of collective works are provided (Kezar, 2005; Jones et al., 2012). Such multi-level engagement plays an influential role for change and development in the process of leadership (Ramsden, 1998).

Practical application of leadership skills
This study reveals that academics face challenges every day and their leadership is not restricted to technical aspects but also has an emotional component. Soft skills are required in interactional processes between different levels of one university. The practice of distributed leadership as a social activity is greatly dependent on the faculty dean, who plays a lobbying job that requires negotiation and transfers of developmental direction from top university management to faculty levels. In other words, this role requires high levels of interpersonal skills such as communication and negotiation. There should be more professional training opportunities for the faculty deans to support their routine work. At the same time, interpersonal skills of academics with delegated roles or responsibilities should also be strengthened as they need to work effectively with other academics for building on collective wisdom with each other.

**Future studies**

There is a paucity of leadership studies situated within higher education in Hong Kong. There is a need for further exploration of leadership in such a large, complex organization (Bolden et al., 2009). This study has presented the lived experiences of academics in one university in Hong Kong. Further studies of leadership experiences should be carried out so as to gain insights into leadership practice in higher education and hence enrich the current literature.

First, seeing that communication plays a significant role in leadership practice, how academics with or without delegated roles learn and engage in leadership practice could be further explored through studying interaction between different levels of the network system. At the same time, the study indicated that the faculty dean is the primary channel for passing the university direction but how the dean’s leadership style and/or leadership characteristics affect academics’ leadership practice has not yet been properly explored.

Second, in order to get a more holistic picture of leadership practice in the university, there wider sampling of informants from different levels and different faculties within the case university. Leadership practice at the top management level, including the provosts and senate members, could be investigated to explore how leadership is practiced in making decisions regarding university development. How non-academic staff members support leadership practice in higher education can also be further examined. Furthermore, as this case study was based only on individual interviews, multiple sources of data collection, including field notes, observations and documents could be used for the purposes of triangulation, in order to investigate the case in a deeper way. At the same time, case studies of other local UGC-funded universities would provide comparisons and allow us to contrast similarities and differences in leadership practices within local contexts.

Lastly, as at the time of writing the RAE 2014 had not yet taken place, there could be further explorations about how the RAE 2014, as a key quality assurance measure in Hong Kong higher education policy, affects leadership practice within a university.

**Limitations of the study**

The major limitation of this case study was that only a small number of academics were selected from a single UGC-funded university and not all levels of academics were interviewed. Moreover, due to time constraints other secondary data were not used in this
study. Furthermore,, the culture of the university was not thoroughly understood despite this investigation of leadership practices within the university. As a result, the findings of this study may not be generalizable to academics from other universities or to universities in other countries.

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