

Distributed leadership in higher education: an analysis of heads of departments' leadership practice in the UAE

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore the extent to which leadership styles or approaches adapted by heads of department in selected independent degree awarding institution in the emirate of Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates use the distributed leadership style. This study used a qualitative research approach to achieve the research aim. Evidence from the data shows that there is always no single best approach to leadership and in all places. Leaders' approaches are driven by the context in which they practice and usually reflect a mixture of different leadership styles. Every leader is different, and they usually do not stick to one type of leadership style as evident in the findings. Leaders tend to adapt different approaches to manage different situations.

Keywords: Leadership approaches, Distributed leadership, Leaders in Higher Education.

1. 1. Introduction

Research argues that in the current global dispensation, leadership is vital not only for individual's success but also for their organizations, sectors, regions and nations (Bush, 2011). Leadership is a common concept used both in practice and in research, however its definition is still wide open for debate because the concept (leadership) is understood based on individual orientation and theoretical stances (Gill, 2006; Avolio, Walumbwa & Weber, 2009; Leadership South West, 2004). According to Miller (2018, 7) there are over 200 definitions and 70 classifications of the concept of 'leadership'. According to Leithwood (2012), leadership is the exercise of influence on organizational members and diverse stakeholders towards the identification and achievement of the organization's vision and goals. "Leadership is a process whereby an individual influence a group of individuals to achieve a common goal."- Northouse (2004, p 3). Problems with the process, position, philosophy and purity are the four major factors that hinders a unique definition for leadership (Grint, 2004). Theories of leadership have greater influence on practice in many cases and they provide a framework to select and develop the leaders. In the early 20th century, the great man theory focused mainly on leadership traits (Landis, Hill and Harvey, 2014).

In recent times, scholars have argued that there is no single leadership style that could be claimed as the best one in all circumstances for all leaders which has led to the proposition and development of new perspectives such as situational leadership theories (Thompson

and Glaso, 2015). According to these situational leadership theories, leaders should be familiar with a wide range of leadership strategies as well as possess appropriate skills and abilities to developed informed understanding of the dynamic nature of contexts in order to draw on the right leadership strategies to operate effectively and efficiently. There are also other well-known leadership models such as autocratic, democratic, action-centered, transformational, transactional and charismatic leadership approaches are widely debated among the researchers (Gill, 2006). However, the interest of this paper is on the distributed leadership in which the responsibility of a leader is separated from the hierarchy of that organization (Miller, 2018). Scholars have argued that distributed leadership has become the most preferred and influential leadership style in the 21st century, especially in educational leadership (Bush, 2011; Harris, 2010). Distributed leadership focuses on practicality; drawing on expertise wherever it exists within an organisation rather than engaging in formal processes of delegating (Bush, 2011). In this manner, everyone in the team can contribute to leadership in one way or the other based on their respective expertise or skills as well as engage with other colleagues in ways that can lead to achieving the vision of the organization.

In distributed leadership, the focus is on relationships between the individuals not the individual and it aims to identify the “effective leadership process” within the institution. This is a radical process which focusses on effective leadership not the behaviours and promotes the leadership skills in everyone in the institution not only to the top-level people

(Bolden, 2004). All these approaches are popular but there is no strong evidence to suggest which one is the most effective or preferred leadership approach to practice. Each of them has its own merits and demerits and the selection depends on the leaders' beliefs as well as experience.

According to Bush (2011), distributed leadership theory is becoming popular across educational institutions. In distributed leadership, activities and interactions are distributed to several people across the organisation, whereas in heroic leadership there is a hierarchy within the organizational structure and the heroic leaders hold the top-level positions (Gronn 2010, Harris 2004). The collegial model of leadership style adapted in distributed leadership provides opportunities for team members to lead and be involved in the process decision making. Northouse (2010) argues that this type of leadership enhances the relationship within and between the teams and makes everyone feel involved and thus reduces the stress on one leader in contrast to the heroic leadership style which puts enormous amount of stress on the leader.

Gronn (2002) believes that the distributed leadership theory is an attractive theory because it asks to identify and engage multiple leaders within an organisation based on their expertise. Further, Morrison and Arthur (2013) argue that the notion of distributed leadership could be extended across organisational and inter-organisational boundaries. According to Harris (2004), distributed leadership focuses on teamwork that involves academics, support staff and the students. This type of leadership is encouraged where there

is a multifaceted structure and collective arrangements for sharing ideas (Wenger et al 2012). Harris and Spillane (2008) advocates in favour of distributed leadership and considers it as the best approach in challenging environments where numerous types of expertise are required to make a positive impact to organisational. Distributed leadership is emergent in nature (Lumby 2003) therefore, the leaders could adopt either a supportive or directive role based on the competencies of their follower (Northouse 2010).

Leadership in general is stated as a complex phenomenon which addresses some significant issues at personal, social and organizational levels. Looking at “the future of leadership” where change is inevitable in the real world and the leaders are required to adapt quickly to manage the uncertainty and aid to the success of their organization (Herman and Mitchell, 2010). To cope well in the contemporary educational world, leaders need to be open minded, show empathy, maintain integrity and understand self (Jenkins, 2012). Leaders with these qualities believe in participatory leadership approach and encourage involvement of colleagues and assigns responsibility to them. This is a good strategy in leadership which is vital “to identify, develop and support potential future leaders from early stage”. The journey of leadership is never going end because the change remains a constant here and if they two come together then the leaders would flourish and the road for this could be distributed leadership (Tian, Risku and Collin, 2016).

According to Jones et al., (2014) the theoretical frameworks for distributed leadership roots from shared leadership theories which states that “leadership occurs laterally within sub-

organizational units in which different leaders emerge as time and circumstances change”. It is mainly concerned with the co-performance and reciprocal interdependencies of the leaders that shape leadership practice. There are “two aspects of distributed leadership” in which the “leadership plus aspect” acknowledges the involvement of many individuals in formal and non-formal leadership roles and the other “practice based aspect” in which the non-formal leaders contribute to the overall leadership of the organization (Hofmeyer et al. 2015). Trust and respect are the key variable of distributed leadership which has the democratic potentials with opportunities for employee involvement and participation (Woods and Gronn, 2009).

Existing research on distributed leadership in higher education is theoretically rich but empirically poor. Despite the growing trends of distributed leadership, the main criticism the distributed leadership face is that it does not explain the power distribution. Distribution could be imprecise and partial with scattered practice (Gronn 2010, Law, Galton and Wan 2010). Therefore, there is a need for further research to understand the practices of distributed leadership and its effectiveness (Leithwood et al., 2007, Harris and Spillane 2008). To bridge this gap, an exploration of the practice of distributed leadership in higher education based on case studies will be essential to gain empirical understanding.

1.1.Main Aim

The main aim of this research is to analyse the leadership practice of heads of departments in higher education in the UAE to determine the extent to which they practice distributed

leadership using a healthcare institution in the emirate of Abu Dhabi as a case. The use of the term 'heads of departments' in this research refers to individuals holding or occupying leadership roles at different levels within the institution, this include head of academic departments, chairs of academic research committee, examination committee and curriculum committee, academic coordinator and academic leads

1.2. Main research question

To what extend do head of departments in higher education institutions in the UAE practice distributed leadership?

2. Literature Review

Distribute leadership is relatively a new concept and it lacks a widely accepted definition. At the same time, research in higher education has found that shared forms of leadership practices are more beneficial to sustainable improvement (Knight & Trowler 2001; Shattock 2003). However, distributed leadership practices in higher education institutions are rarely investigated. Therefore, this research aims to explore the perspectives and practices of distributed leadership of academics in leadership roles in a health sciences institution in the United Arab Emirates. A similar study was conducted on Hong Kong academics and explored their perceptions about distributed leadership using a qualitative approach involving nine purposively selected academic leaders (Wan 2014). This study concluded that distributed leadership is related to individual expertise and requires a collective wisdom at different level for the development of the institution. Sharing and

discussion were the common ways by which the leader's practices distributed leadership and created opportunities to empower leadership at different levels. This approach of decentralization of power followed either a horizontal approach that distributed the authority across individuals within the faculty or a vertical approach that distributed the power from the senior management of the university to the faculty level (Wan 2014).

Denis, Langley and Rouleau (2010) study claims that contemporary healthcare education demands interprofessional education which present the leaders with a challenge of working with different professionals and navigate across the differing objectives within them to reach their goals. D'Amour et al., (2005) argue that interprofessional working is challenging because of the versatility in the skill sets and the professional culture between the interprofessional. This gap should be bridged to produce a collective action. In such scenarios, the power, prowess and permissibility required for problem solving needs to be distributed across many individuals which make the leadership practice to move away from the traditional hierarchical leadership approaches. In this settings, micro-level leadership practice is a better approach for "leading through and across boundaries in and around interprofessional teams" and there are studies confirming that distributed leadership prevails in various healthcare context (Chreim et al., 2013).

According to Ritchie and Wood (2007), in distributed leadership the result is better than individual actions because of its dynamics that allows everyone to share their expertise and imaginations and provides a scope to lead. The strength of this approach is the cognitive

interdependency of people which is achieved by collaborative work. Gronn (2009) believes that people understand and debate about distributed leadership in different ways. Mayrowetz (2008) thinks that it is a route to express democratic views and to increase the effectiveness human capacity. Spillane (2006) claims the distributed leadership is an interactive practice which stretches into the organization's social as well as the situational contexts. Leaderful practice is another background element for distributed leadership. The '4 Cs' of leaderful practice are "collective, concurrent, collaborative and compassionate all of which claims that everyone in a team or an organization can be leaders (Raelin, 2003). Leadership skills need not be limited to senior managers of an organization because it should ideally include all staff. The "British healthcare policy" invites even the patients along with clinical staff and their managers to lead the healthcare delivery for better results. But there seems to be lots of practical issues in spreading the power across as the policy makers, professional groups and the hierarchical structure within the context might interfere in decision-making and leading across the boundaries. These pitfalls have brought significant criticism to the concept of distributed leadership (Martin and Waring, 2012). Healthcare context involves multiple professionals which makes the context a complex one and to bring in any organization change power must be distributed to the front-line people from the apex. Scholars have identified distributed leadership to have the potential to achieve such a change at the organizational level because of the collective power the stakeholders would have through collaboration. It is also argued that empowering the

frontline professionals will also enhance the quality of healthcare service delivery (Martin and Waring, 2012).

Distributed leadership was the focal point of most of the discussions about educational leadership during the last two decades and leaders used it as a sensible tool to share their increasing workload and influence the other members of the team (Harris, 2013). A systematic review of studies conducted on distributed leadership from the beginning of 1996 to mid-2002 found two significant gaps that includes lack of clarity on the conceptualization and application of distributed leadership (Tian, Risku and Collin 2016). Formal leaders act as “gate keepers” in the context of distributed leadership. Effectiveness and success of distributed leadership depends on the formal leaders’ support, encouragement and acknowledgement of informal leader’s contribution (Bush and Glover, 2012).

Trust is the key factor that determines the distribution of leadership. Oduro (2004) study claims that trust allowed the leaders to distribute power through formal delegation of task and informal empowerment. So, for the subordinates to receive this authority from their supervisors they should be able to demonstrate trustworthiness in carrying out the leadership role. Strong interpersonal skills and relationship is vital to develop the trust apart from the pedagogical competence and leadership experience. From this it can be argued that culture plays a major role in distributed leadership as it may affect the harmony of interpersonal relationships. However, the distributed leadership that depends soles on

competencies and expertise might escape this trouble (Jing, 2010).

According to Timperly (2009) leadership is no longer a one-way process that follows a top-down approach as it supports the idea of empowering subordinates and accepts their influence on the leadership practice within the organization. According to Leithwood et al., (2007), the evolution of distributed leadership need not demolish the hierarchical order of leadership functions across boundaries, instead it acknowledges the co-existence of hierarchy. Lumby (2013) warned the staff that the distributed leadership increases their workload and accountability, but their autonomy and power is restricted while performing those roles. Fitzgerald and Gunter (2006) questioned the ethical aspects of distributed leadership as they felt that persuading the teachers to do more work is just another form of managerialism. Tian, Risku and Collin (2016) insists that social justice and equal opportunity was not embedded within the distributed leadership.

The effect of distributed leadership on students learning outcome was another topic heatedly debated in the last decade but there is no empirical evidence to support that it improves students learning. Anderson, Moore and Sun (2009) study did not find any correlation between the students' performance and distributed leadership in the British schools. Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2004) used the modified version of activity theory to represent the practice of distributed leadership in a triangular link between "leaders, followers and situations". This is what differentiates this concept from its alike such as "shared leadership". The challenge here for the researchers was finding a suitable

way to analyze and present the leadership as originating from the interactions of these three elements in which situations have a defined boundary. A case study conducted by Yuen, Chen and Ng, (2015) in Singapore's first project on ICT (Information Communication Technology) initiated by Ministry of Education showed the possibility of actualizing the distributed leadership even in the context where authority and hierarchy is greatly respected. This was feasible through "legalizing and empowering" the leaders at different levels in the organization. However, the participants of this study were occupying the roles of senior teacher, middle and senior level manager roles within their organization and it is assumed that they might have had enough authority to exercise the power when compared to teachers at the base level. In this context where the authority is respected it will be unlikely for the lower level staff to successfully execute leadership roles without an official designation such as an in-charge position to indicate their status to their colleagues. From the literature review it can be concluded that in distributed leadership there is scope for everyone to lead and it is an interactive process where people work collaboratively and share democratic views.

2.1. Theoretical underpinnings

A careful analysis of the background of distributed leadership reveals an interesting fact that indicates that it has its origins from political and sociological foundations; context oriented (Lumby, 2013). This is a collective concept that identifies the composition for a constructive leadership process inside an organization. Leadership contracts acknowledge

the significance of social relationships and the acceptance of leaders by their followers; thus, this new school of thought arose (Centre for Leadership Studies, 2003).

Bolden, Petrov and Gosling, (2008) argue that the theories of leadership mainly focuses on the leaders where the followers are treated as subservient and the relationship element is not very well addressed in the leadership theoretical frameworks which is vital for the process of social influence. They ask for theories that address relational elements and impact the societal process. They also claim that this “social influence process” could be effectively accomplished by means of a joint or an interpersonal process than passing on from the leaders to the followers. But the ability to influence depends on the leader, hence the practice of it is neither limited to formal leadership roles nor evenly distributed. From these arguments, it can be concluded that the context in which leader occurs influences the leadership practice; this view has been confirmed by a number of studies on leadership practice; for example, Gronn (2002) and Bolden, Petrov and Gosling (2008).

“The TenKeys® model” presents the 10 key attributes for successful practice of distributed leadership. “Polyphony, interaction, expertise, flexibility, commitment, responsibility, negotiation, decision-making, confidence control and evaluation” are those attributes that are essential for the distributed leadership (Jappinen, 2012). In this, the stakeholders who share common tasks and combined goals work together to achieve those goals. This type of leadership in education is considered as a collaborative phenomenon which might be invisible, but its ambience is easily identifiable within the educational society. “The NHS

leadership framework” presents wide variety of attributes required for a successful practice of healthcare and/or clinical leadership (Bolden, 2006). Most of them are associated with personal and relationship skills. In addition, skills in technical competence, political awareness and leadership style are also needed to succeed as a healthcare leader (Nicol, Mohanna and Cowpe, 2014).

The theoretical framework for this study emphasises that a leader should be aware of self, maintain high level of integrity, approachable and able to influence people. The leader may hold authority but should be willing to listen, motivate and show compassion. In order to practice distributed leadership effectively, a leader must be strategic thinker, flexible in approach and a reflective practitioner who is a proactive and resilient team player and who can inspire the people around through their charisma.

3. Methodology

This study used qualitative method that took ethnographic case study approach to analyse the leadership practice of heads of departments in higher education in the UAE to determine the extent to which they practice distributed leadership using a healthcare institution in the emirate of Abu Dhabi as a case. Analysing the perceptions and practices of leaders on the context of this healthcare institution required a sound understanding of participants lived experiences to interpret the existing realities in it (Guba & Lincoln 1989). Also, the nature of the research question that asked, to what extent the leaders of higher education practiced distributed leadership, required an in-depth insight (Patton 1990). Therefore, qualitative

method was considered an appropriate method for this study. The research design used for this study was ethnographic case study approach and it is appropriate as the main aim of the research was to analyse the leadership practices of the leaders within a single higher education institution. According to Tesc (1990), case study is a form of interpretive ethnographic research that involves rigorous and comprehensive study of a group or an institution.

This study was conducted at a higher education institution in the emirate of Abu Dhabi. This institution offered undergraduate degree programs in various disciplines of healthcare. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit the participants for this study. Participants in this study were academic staff who were holding or occupying leadership roles at different levels within the institution, e.g. head of academic departments, chairs of academic research committee, examination committee and curriculum committee, academic coordinator and academic leads. Purposeful sampling was appropriate for this study because of the in-depth inquiry needed for the research mandated the selection of cases that are information rich (Mertens, 1998). An email explaining the purpose of the study and invitation to take part in the study was sent to 6 selected academic staff who are holding leadership roles such as head of the department, chairs of academic research committee, examination committee and curriculum committee, academic coordinator and academic leads within the institution where the study was conducted. Personal visit and phone calls were made to discuss the same with them and asking for their participation in this research

and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured to the participants. Though the study was conducted with the employees of an organization, it did not explore anything about the organization structure and function and the focus of the study was on individuals and their own perspectives of leadership practice in general. Therefore, a formal ethical approval from the organization was not required and moreover, institution identify is not disclosed in this report to address any potential ethical dilemmas.

Study included six participants and collected data collection through open-ended semi-structured questionnaire. Qualitative questionnaire containing 10 open-ended questions was prepared based on the “Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership (CEML) framework” for “management and leadership abilities”. Questions were designed to interpret the leaders thinking abilities, people abilities and task abilities in line with the CEML framework guidelines. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011), in a semi-structured questionnaire participant were given with the liberty to express their views and this eliminates any pre-set responses.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011), discussed several importance of piloting the questionnaire. Therefore, the semi-structure questionnaire was first piloted to ensure validity and reliability of the data collected. For this purpose, the questionnaire was initially sent to an academic in leadership role to check the clarity and difficulties in wordings and readability. Following the feedback some of the questions were identified to be direct and

some were difficult to comprehend. All feedbacks were considered, and the questions were rephrased to make it easy to understand and to be more open-ended.

After piloting the questionnaire, the final version of questionnaire was sent to all six participants who consented for this study. Participants were given the freedom to express their view and an opportunity was given to them to ask for any clarification about the questionnaire if they needed. However, only 4 of the 6 returned the completed questionnaire through email and all responses were anonymized and stored electronically for analysis. Participants were acknowledged the receipt of completed questionnaire and informed that they might be approached again to authenticate the information they provided and the researcher's interpretation.

Two gentle reminders were sent to the participants who did not respond. It was assumed that the participants were no longer interested to take part in the study even though they expressed their willingness before. During an informal meeting one of the potential participants who did not respond expressed that the questionnaire was open-ended and could not be completed due to their time constraint as it asked for in-depth information.

3.1 Data analysis and findings

At first the participants' response to each question was tabulated against each other's response to the same question. In-depth analysis of the data was done through repeated reading of the responses to each question for each participant and codes were developed.

Then comparisons between participants' responses generated the themes for discussion.

Stake (1995) believes that identifying the important themes is a vital part of the qualitative research process.

Findings are presented under 10 key factors identified in the 10 open-ended qualitative Semi-structured questionnaires.

- i. Years of experience: From the data gathered it was noted that all the participants had more than 5 years of experience in leadership position in different organizations.
- ii. Development as a leader: Participants felt that their leadership style and approach evolved over the years and across the different roles they performed in different organizations.
- iii. Leadership approach: It was understood from their responses to the semi-structured questionnaire that some leaders believe in smooth administrative process to extract the maximum output from their employees. Open door policy was evident in some leaders' approach where everyone's ideas were welcomed. Teamwork was a preferred means for leaders to execute their plans and to realize their vision. Most leaders believed in distributive style of leadership and, they saw themselves as transformational leaders. All participants believed that everyone is a leader and could contribute to the betterment of their team and/or organization.
- iv. Qualities for leadership: Participants thought that open mindedness, an attitude of listening to the others, willingness to learn, fair to everyone, having commitment and being selfless were some of the important qualities of a good leader.

- v. Opportunities and challenges: Though leadership position presents with some opportunities to the leaders, but the role is not a “cake-walk” for potential and/or actual leaders as it presents enormous amount of challenges on them. Leaders go through stressful life situations which are contributed by their position and they must come across many dilemmas to make sound decisions.
- vi. Commitment: Leadership is not only for delegating the tasks as it is also to recognize and reward their subordinates and followers when and where needed. It is important that everyone feels supported and respected in a team for the best outcome.
- vii. Conflict management: Leaders had their own ways of managing conflicts which might be a smooth process or robust way depending on the situation and/or context but in general they believed in reflecting on the situation not reacting to it.
- viii. Influence: Most leaders felt that they had a positive influence on their teams through their vision and approach which was unbiased.
- ix. Strategies for staff development: Leaders recognised their employees’ contributions through rewards.
- x. Achievements: All leaders demonstrated some significant achievements in their roles which was attributed to team success.

3.2. Discussion

The findings of the study will be discussed under two themes of distributed leadership

practice. The main aim of the study was to analyse the leadership practice of heads of departments in higher education in the UAE to determine the extent to which they practice distributed leadership. Theme 1 presents the extent of distributed leadership practice by the leaders in higher education and the second theme provide recommendations about the effective leadership approach for the future.

3.2.1 Extent of practice of distributed leadership

Leaders were following distributed leadership with or without their knowledge as the findings showed. Leaders felt everyone is a valued member of the team and has the potential to contribute for the success of their team. They believed in giving equal opportunities for all and respecting the views of others.

Participant 1 reported that, *“In my opinion, leadership is a teamwork”*.

From the above quote it is evident that one of the academic leaders who took part in this study was supportive of distributed leadership because they believed that leadership does not belong to leader alone instead it is a process that is executed by the team.

Participant 2 believed that, *“I clearly show my intentions of using distributive style and where everyone’s opinion counts”*.

According to the above quote it can be interpreted that one of the academic leaders in this study applied distributed leadership in their practice and they have valued the inputs of all members involved in the process of decision making.

Participant 3 expressed that, *“Everyone gets to pitch in their ideas, everyone feels their*

value as part of the team”.

Based on the above quote it can be interpreted that one of the leaders in higher education was supporting distributed leadership practice as they have provided opportunities for all team members to share their views and this in fact enhanced their self-belief and be involved in decision-making process.

Following excerpt from the participant 4 response *“Most importantly to give each one an open margin to show his/her excellence”* showed clear display of distributed leadership style.

The above response concludes that one of academic leaders demonstrated shared leadership practices and provided equal opportunities to all member in their team and therefore, each member of the team has had the chance to be involved in decision making and excel in their role.

From the overall participants’ response, it was evident that leadership approach changes as the leaders evolve in their roles.

Participant 1 reported that, *“When I started my leadership activities, the institution largely practiced hierarchical which I was influenced by and inducted into. Authoritative leadership seemed appropriate initially, as I started working it slowly moved to authentic type of leadership as I was always influenced by culture of the organization whilst still holding to my moral values. As moved jobs and in different organizations, various*

administrative, management and leadership roles have overlapped”.

From the above quote it was evident that one of the leaders acknowledged their practice of authoritative and hierarchical leadership in the past and they have now transformed and valuing everyone’s contribution. This was an indication of transformation of leadership practice based on experience and demonstration of distributed leadership practice.

Participant 2 stated that, *“My main strategy is to recognize the contribution that all employees make to the success of the institution. This recognition will enhance their learning and development”.*

In distributed leadership practices it was essential for the leaders to recognize the contributions and values of their team members and one of academic leaders demonstrated this attribute of valuing and rewarding the performance of their team members and this was vital to develop their team members’ potential.

Participant 4 reported that, “Motivate people and create interest. Acknowledge and reward them for the contribution”.

From the above response, it can be argued that recognition is an important feature of distributed leadership practice and possessing this skill is of paramount importance for leaders who adapted distributive leadership.

3.2.2 Leadership approach for the future

From the data collected it can be argued that there cannot always be a single best approach to leadership at all time and in all places. Leaders’ approaches are driven by the context in

which they execute their leadership roles and they often use a mixed approach. However, looking at the future of higher education and the needs of 21st century, it is recommended that the use of a distributed and/or transformative leadership styles is beneficial. Distributed leadership practice has a positive influence on the followers, and it is vital for the success of any institution.

The following quote from participant 3 argues in favour of both distributed and transformative leadership styles,

“It is difficult to define a particular type but I am a firm believer of distributive leadership but the outcome seems very transformative in nature because of the vision and ideas that I put forward, and I often appear as a transformative leader because of my passion for intercultural engagement and great interest in internationalization”.

The growing trends in higher education credibility, visibility and internationalization warrants a significant change in leadership styles at universities. It is essential to develop a thorough understanding of the culture of universities and both distributed leadership and transformative leadership has the potential for intercultural engagement.

Participant 1 stated that, “Those who can’t appreciate the soft approach of admin in your team, they might need to be treated in a different way”.

The context is the key that determines leadership practice. The above statement is an example of how context determines the leadership practices. One of higher education

leaders was found to use different approaches of leadership based on the attitudes of their team members and it was appropriate for the given context as execution of leadership roles is not always an easy task and the leaders may need to use different strategies for managing different people.

Choi and Schnurr (2013) conducted a study at University of Warwick to explore the distributed leadership. Their main aim was to find out how the disagreements are solved in team where leadership is not centralized. Study paid attention to a research project which had 6 participants, and there was no nominated leader of the group. Their study found that there was lot of leadership taking place within the project even though there was no formal assignment of a leader for the group and all disagreements were solved within the team and through collaborative working. From this it can be concluded that leadership is a process that occurs even in a leaderless team and therefore, empowering all the members of a team may bring better outcomes. The significance of this study was that it shifted the focus from a traditional top-down leadership research to non-traditional forms of leaderships such as the distributed leadership.

Participant 4 reported that, “I invest in human relations – in them as individuals. I communicate what it is we are trying to achieve”.

The above response of the participant provides an example of how leaders value the relationship in their practice. It is a fundamental aspect of distributed leadership practice to value interpersonal relationships and effective communication to achieve greater outputs.

It is evident from the participant response that higher education leaders that followed distributed style of leadership were keen on building relationships with their team and striving to achieve the best through team working.

Heck and Hallinger (2009) reported that distributed leadership played an effective role in changing the academic capacity in selected schools in the United States apart from indirectly influencing the students' performance. It was mainly concerned about the implementation of day-to-day leadership practices to improve the academic capacity of the schools. The highlight of their study was it connected the distributed leadership to capacity-building strategies that are designed to impact on the teaching and learning and it laid a platform for future empirical search on leadership practice. The findings of this study supported shared or distributive leadership practices for the best practice of leadership roles.

3.3 Implications of this study:

The main implication of this study is that it gives directions for future research to focus on the applicability of distributed leadership in higher education sectors. There is a paucity of literature on leadership practices within the UAE. Further studies on leadership experience is vital to understand the leadership practices in higher education across the country and globally to explore the leadership practices in higher education in different countries so that a comparison can be made between different contexts because the practice of leadership is strongly influenced by the context, and to enhance the existing literature.

3.4 Limitations

Findings of this study presents the lived experience of academics in one institution within the emirate of Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates. Study included small number of academics and not all levels of academics were involved in the study. As a result, the findings of this study may not be generalizable to academic leaders of other institutions.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study could be strongly linked to “The TenKeys® model” which presents the key attributes required for successful practice of distributed leadership. Most participants demonstrated the key attributes such as “polyphony, interaction, expertise, flexibility, commitment, responsibility, negotiation, decision-making, confidence control and evaluation”. Every leader is different, and they usually do not stick to one type of approach to their leadership practice which was evident in the findings. Leaders tend to adapt different approaches to manage different situations. But in most circumstances, all the leaders demonstrated some form of distributed leadership approach for better outcomes. From the findings of this study it is difficult to conclude that a leadership approach is most appropriate for the future. However distributed leadership approach seems to be applicable in most circumstances because of its shared authority and independence which brings the best outcomes.

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Annexure 1: Semi-structured Questionnaire

1. How long have you been leading in the education sector?
2. How would you compare your previous and current leadership roles?
3. Do you often have feedback from your colleagues/staff about your approaches to things?
Please would you mind sharing some of it here?
4. What do you think are qualities someone needs to be able to do these kind of leadership roles effectively?
5. Leadership often comes with opportunities and challenges; please could you share some of these experiences and how you deal with them?
6. What methods have you used to gain commitment from your team?
7. Different leaders approach conflicts in different ways. What will be your way to resolve any conflict if arises?
8. How have you influenced employees to follow your strategic vision for the organization?
9. As a leader, do you have some strategies to enhance the staff learning and development?
10. Reflecting on your leadership experience, could you share one or two significant achievements of yours as a leader?