

**DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION:  
RHETORIC AND REALITY**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper we present findings from research in 12 UK universities that sought to capture a range of perspectives on ‘distributed leadership’ and reveal common and competing experiences within and between institutions. From analysis of findings we identified two principle approaches to the distribution of leadership: ‘devolved’, associated with top-down influence, and ‘emergent’, associated with bottom-up and horizontal influence. We argue that whilst the academic literature largely promotes the latter, the former is equally (if not more) significant in terms of how leadership is actually enacted and perceived within universities. We conclude, therefore, that as a description of leadership practice, the concept of ‘distributed leadership’ offers little more clarity than ‘leadership’ alone. As an analytic framework it is a more promising concept drawing attention to the broader contextual, temporal and social dimensions of leadership. Fundamentally, though, we argue that distributed leadership is most influential through its rhetorical value whereby it can be used to shape perceptions of identity, participation and influence but can equally shroud the underlying dynamics of power within universities.

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## **Distributed Leadership in Higher Education: Rhetoric and Reality**

### **Introduction**

Higher Education (HE) in the UK is undergoing a major transition; changing funding mechanisms, regulation and audit, increasing customer demands, competition and internationalisation all parts of the shifting landscape. Combined with a need to deliver high quality teaching and research and engage more actively with business and community it is, perhaps, unsurprising that ‘good leadership’ is increasingly espoused as a strategic and operational imperative (HEFCE, 2004). The structure and nature of HE institutions, however, is not generally well suited to managerialism or ‘top-down’ leadership. There remains a deep-seated desire for collegiality, consultation and academic freedom (Middlehurst, 1993; Deem, 2001). In such a context, where universities must steer an uncertain path through competing and conflicting demands and expectations, how can they offer a sense of continuity, motivate staff to work towards a shared purpose and mobilise collective effort throughout the organisation rather than just from senior figures?

Partly in response to these challenges the HE sector in the UK is increasingly espousing the practice of ‘distributed leadership’ (LFHE, 2004) whereby leadership is conceived of as a process dispersed across the organisation (within systems, activities, practices and relationships) rather than residing within the traits, actions and/or capabilities of ‘leaders’ in formal positions. Despite having embraced this concept, however, it is still not clear what is actually distributed (in terms of power or accountability), the processes by which it is distributed, or whether the concept itself offers substantial benefits for either practice, analysis or policy-making.

In this paper we present findings from a research project that explores the manner in which leadership is perceived and enacted at different levels in UK universities. We will explore whether the concept of ‘distributed leadership’ offers a useful framework for understanding the nature of leadership within such organisations and will reveal some of the paradoxes and tensions faced when leading in HE.

By way of conclusion we argue that as a description of leadership practice the notion of ‘distributed leadership’ is rather too broad to be of much use. Instead, we argue, its

main value is as an analytic framework, drawing attention to the wider contextual dimensions of leadership, and as a rhetorical device, offering a way of reframing university leadership that is a potential successor to the traditional tension between ‘managerialism’ and ‘collegiality’. As with all rhetoric, however, there is a potential shadow side whereby talk of ‘distributed leadership’ may simply disguise the underlying dynamics of power and influence within universities and be used to mask creeping managerialism.

### Distributed leadership in HE

In setting out their strategic plan for the UK HE sector, HEFCE (2004: 35) define leadership as ‘agreeing strategic direction in discussion with others and communicating this within the organisation; ensuring that there is the capability, capacity and resources to deliver planned strategic outcomes; and supporting and monitoring delivery. As such this embraces elements of governance and elements of management.’

Like the rest of the education sector the majority of research on leadership and management in HE concludes that leadership in universities is widely distributed (e.g. Middlehurst, 1993; Knight and Trowler, 2001) or should be distributed across the institution (Shattock, 2003). Despite this, however, the actual processes and practices by which leadership is distributed and the implications for leadership practice and development in universities have received relatively little attention. Thus it remains unclear as to whether or not the concept of distributed leadership is being used in a primarily descriptive or normative manner and whether or not it exerts any influence on the effectiveness of leadership practice within HE institutions.

The concept of distributed leadership has become popular in recent years as an alternative to traditional ‘leader-centric’ models of leadership, suggesting instead that leadership is a property of the collective rather than the individual. Gronn (2000, 2002) describes it as ‘concertive action’ where the total is significantly more than the sum of its parts, whilst Spillane (2004: 3) proposes that ‘from a distributed perspective, leadership practice takes shape in the interactions of people and their situation, rather than from the actions of an individual leader’. This approach, therefore, has much in common with process theories of leadership (Hosking, 1988;

Wood, 2005) and a systems perspective on organisations (Senge, 1990; Wheatley, 1999). It offers a more inclusive view of organisational life whereby individuals, groups and teams at all levels collectively influence strategic direction and the reported presence of ‘leadership’. Drawing on activity theory (Engestrom, 1999) the distributed perspective places the activity or practice of leadership centre stage:

‘Activity theory emphasizes social life as a continuous flow of mediated activity; a process of ever-moving relationships between technologies, nature, ideas, persons and communities, in which the focus of action circulates to one person, then another according to the social and environmental context and the flow of action within this.’ (Woods, 2004: 5-6)

This perspective poses a serious challenge to traditional hierarchical and bureaucratic models of organisation, shifting the focus from individual post-holders to broader collectivities and social relationships. In a review of the literature Bennet et al. (2003) suggest that, despite some variations in definition, distributed leadership is based on three main premises: firstly that leadership is an *emergent* property of a group or network of interacting individuals; secondly that there is *openness* to the boundaries of leadership (i.e. who has a part to play both within and beyond the organisation); and thirdly, that *varieties of expertise* are distributed across the many, not the few. Thus, distributed leadership is represented as dynamic, relational, inclusive, collaborative and contextually-situated. It requires a system-wide perspective that not only transcends organisational levels and roles but also organisational boundaries. Thus, for example, in the field of HE one might consider the contribution of parents, students and the local community as well as academics, administrative/professional staff, members of the University Council and government policy makers.

That said, advocates of distributed leadership do not necessarily deny the key role played by people in formal leadership positions, but propose that this is just the tip of the iceberg. Spillane et al. (2004: 5) argue that leadership is ‘stretched over the social and situational contexts’ of the organisation. This approach therefore calls for the consideration and integration of context to incorporate the non-human as well as human aspects of the system. Within HE such elements would include Quality Assurance processes, physical infrastructure and IT systems, all of which shape the

mode of engagement and interaction between individuals and groups. The situated nature of leadership is viewed as ‘constitutive of leadership practice’ (ibid: 21) and hence demands recognition of leadership acts within their wider context.

By considering leadership practice as both thinking and activity that ‘emerges in the execution of leadership tasks in and through the interaction of leaders, followers and situation’ (Spillane et al., 2004: 27) distributed leadership offers a powerful post-heroic representation of leadership well suited to complex, changing and interdependent environments. The question remains, however, as to whether this represents the lived experience of leadership in HE or just an idealistic fantasy unattainable in practice. It could certainly be argued that the bureaucratic nature of HE organisations, with their imbalances of power, authority and resources, combined with recognition and career paths that tend to reward individual over collective achievement are largely at odds with the principles and premises of distributed leadership. Furthermore the somewhat abstract representations of such dispersed forms of leadership make them difficult to convey in ways as compelling as the tales of heroism and achievement recounted from more individualistic perspectives. It is the first intention of this paper therefore to put more meat on the bones of what distributed leadership might look like in practice and then to consider its utility as an account of leadership practice in HE.

## **Method**

The findings presented throughout the remainder of this paper are drawn from an investigation of the processes and perceptions of collective leadership in UK universities. This study sought to examine how leadership is perceived to be distributed throughout the organisation, how it is sustained over time, and how it is linked to organisational systems and procedures (finance, personnel, etc.). Our research also looked at the personal experience of academic and administrative leaders when taking up these roles and the value and impact of development interventions although these findings are explored more fully elsewhere ( [authors], 2007).

Our research was designed to capture a range of perspectives on leadership and leadership development in HE in order to identify common and competing

experiences and perceptions within and between institutions. In particular, we chose to focus our investigation on 12 UK HE institutions, selected to give a broad range of locations, types, sizes and disciplines. Each university was explored as a 'case', the main source of data being in-depth interviews enabling the capture of narrative accounts of leadership (as recommended by Conger, 1998 and Ospina and Sorenson, 2006), supported by additional documentary evidence as well as two collaborative workshops with representatives from the staff development divisions of participating institutions. Within each university 10 to 17 people at different levels were interviewed (Vice-Chancellors (VC)/Principals, Pro and Deputy Vice-Chancellors/Principals (PVC/DVC), Registrars, Human Resource Directors, Deans of Faculty, Heads of Schools (HOS) and Heads of Department (HOD)) although the majority of interviewees were HOSs and HODs (middle-level academic managers). The interviews generally lasted 45 minutes to one hour and covered the following topics: leadership strategy and approach; taking up a leadership role and leadership development; sharing leadership; and future issues. In total, 152 interviews were conducted, with all but two (where participants requested that only written notes be taken) being electronically recorded and subsequently transcribed. During analysis a profile of each institution was constructed from the data to reveal the key issues and factors for each leadership role and institution.

The main focus of this research was on the leadership of the academic work of the university including teaching, research and 'third stream' (business and community) activities. Within this, we were particularly interested in leadership at the school/department level as this is the main operational unit of universities, the primary source of future senior academic leaders, and the main point of interface between leadership of the institution and leadership of the academic discipline. We were interested both in how leadership is experienced at this level and how it interacts with other parts of the organisation. Notably we were looking to explore how strategic direction emerges and is negotiated between the varying actors.

## **Findings**

The findings of this study are too numerous to present within this paper, however, we will now recount the main themes relating to perceptions and experiences of distributed leadership.

### Perceptions of distributed leadership

In intention, there was a great degree of support amongst all interviewees for a leadership approach which is shared across the institution. It was interesting to note that even though the researchers deliberately did not provide the interviewees with a strict definition of the concept of ‘distributed leadership’, there was a considerable degree of commonality in the views and perceptions expressed about the idea. The majority of interviewees considered that distributed leadership was not just conceivable within the HE context, but a necessity – that it is a function that is too complex and important to leave to a small group of individuals in formal roles. Despite this, however, analysis of responses revealed a number of variations in the way in which distributed leadership was being conceived, largely dependent on the context, task, structures and personalities of significant individuals. These classifications broadly match those identified by MacBeath et al. in schools (2004) as indicated below.

- *Formal*: e.g. devolution of financial and administrative authority to schools and/or departments.
- *Pragmatic*: e.g. negotiating the division of responsibilities between roles such as VC and DVC or HOS and Deputy HOS (often with one becoming external facing and the other internal facing).
- *Strategic*: e.g. the appointment of people from outside the university to bring in new skills, knowledge and contacts (particularly in the case of the appointment of professional managers from outside the sector).
- *Incremental*: e.g. progressive opportunities for experience and responsibility such as sitting on and chairing committees; leading modules, programmes and projects; serving as a deputy.
- *Opportunistic*: e.g. people willingly taking on additional responsibilities within and outside the university (e.g. heading up project teams; sitting on academic,



professional and/or editorial boards; consulting and liaising with business and policy makers).

- *Cultural*: e.g. leadership is assumed and shared organically such as in the development of a collaborative research bid.

Whilst recognising these dimensions, however, we gathered no evidence to imply a continuum of progression from formal to cultural distribution; rather these forms appeared to complement one another as different manifestations of shared leadership (for example, formal distribution serving to facilitate cultural and opportunistic distribution). Leadership was generally seen to be distributed but within certain boundaries.

‘I think there is a perception that [leadership] is distributed based on the business plans. When the idea came in the HOSs thought they’d be able to do whatever they want and to an extent they can, but it’s within a very strict framework. [...] The structure is quite inflexible because of the way [the VC] manages so there’s a perception that you can do what you want but actually you can’t’. (School Manager, post-1992 university)

‘There is an element at which leadership is devolved but it’s to manage local issues. [A] department cannot go outside the university guidelines on its admissions policy or bid for research funding that doesn’t meet the university requirements for the funding model. The big, corporate decisions are from the very top, however, the way they are implemented locally is led by a local management. There is flexibility within the structures. I say that but of course these days we’re ever more scrutinised about what we do’. (Dean of Faculty, pre-1992 university)

Formal distribution of leadership was reported to be most evident in the area of governance and management. For instance, when asked about how distributed leadership worked in practice interviewees frequently referred to formal organisational systems and structures whereby decision-making authority is devolved or delegated via formally designated channels. Accountability for such activities is

vested in the holders of formal positions (such as HOD, HOS or Dean) whether or not they choose to execute the activity alone or in collaboration with others. Formal committees were also seen as a systematic means of sharing leadership, whereby academics and managers are brought together to make joint decisions, although the increasing tendency for such groups to be chaired by members of the senior executive, with carefully selected membership, implies significant influence from the centre/top of the organisation.

‘Leadership is distributed. If you look at our school as an example you’ve got the Dean, the Deputy Dean, the Chief Operating Officer and a large number of Associate Deans. The Associate Deans for programmes have Course Directors under each of them and then under that you have managers. It’s an incredibly distributed pyramid type of organisation’ (Dean of School, post-1992 university)

‘We do have distributed leadership [in the academic department]. There are five of us that make an executive that actually make key decisions in the department and they’re all professors. Two of them are line managers. The department is split into two and I have line managers that run these two academic streams and the people that manage them are on the executive.’ (HOD, pre-1992 university)

Although some authors (e.g. Knight and Trowler, 2001; Lumby, 2003; Harris, 2003) argue that delegation and devolution should not be confused with distributed leadership because they imply top-down rather than bottom-up influence, we found that these were by far the most frequently cited mechanisms through which leadership is shared within universities (perhaps partly as a consequence of only interviewing holders of formal leadership roles). In terms of devolution, the location of financial control (in particular control of any ‘surpluses’) was widely viewed as the most important, if not decisive, feature in the distribution of leadership. Thus, whilst it may often be the case that administration and workload are devolved rather than power and authority, financial devolution to the school/departmental level is central to the empowerment of HOS/HODs and financial transparency a key factor in the development of a more entrepreneurial culture. In effect, without devolution of

financial control it is unlikely that a culture of shared or ‘distributed’ leadership will flourish – it would appear that collaborative behaviour is correlated with control of resources.

Remaining with MacBeath et al’s (2004) taxonomy, the area where leadership is most likely to be ‘cultural’, where academics willingly take the initiative to lead and where leadership is assumed rather than given, is research. The opportunities to lead in this area are numerous; in research, academics who are not necessarily in formal management positions lead by their academic credibility and enthusiasm and anyone who is willing and able to carry out the initiative can do so (rather than relying on a designated post-holder). Leadership in this area was represented by the interviewees as spontaneous, opportunistic and emergent rather than formally ‘devolved’, although it was reported that universities are increasingly trying to ensure alignment of research with the overall strategic direction of the institution and Full Economic Costing demands a robust business model.

‘These days we’re ever more scrutinised about what we do whether it be by the RAE or whatever and if Professor Y down the corridor is doing some research that hasn’t generated any research income in the last three or four years. [...] You’re getting on very dangerous territory here because people get very uptight about academic freedom, but from a management point of view there would have to be questions asked. You’d have to say “you can research that if you want but I really need to see you earning some money doing it.” I think that has changed. [...] Even ten or fifteen years ago you just got on with what you wanted to do and you weren’t looked at as regularly to see what your grant income was.’ (Dean of Faculty, pre-1992 university)

Despite this, the area of research is frequently one where people willingly take on their first leadership and management responsibilities such as managing budgets and people. Whilst part of the reason for this clearly lies within the organisational processes and personal dispositions, our findings would lead us to believe that another significant dimension is that of ‘social identity’ (Haslam, 2004). It would appear that within the field of research, at least, it is possible for academics to take on managerial responsibilities without sensing a tension between their identities as an ‘academic’

(i.e. member of a peer group allied to a specific discipline) and as a ‘manager’ (i.e. member of a group with responsibilities allied to a specific organisation and the achievement of particular tasks). By contrast, the accounts of holders of more formal organisational posts, such as HOS, would indicate that at times there is a marked tension between these two roles, where one is torn between allegiance to ones’ academic colleagues (the discipline) and the broader university (organisation). Within our own study, such tensions were most evidenced during a period of industrial action where HOSs were expected to address managerial concerns about exam marking whilst also facing the same issues as their academic colleagues about pay and conditions.

‘That’s the other thing that is quite a strange thing because throughout the dispute on both sides there has been a tendency for there to be a “them and us” and in my situation as a HOS I’m part of “them” and I’m part of “us”. I go to meetings where I’m told by management “you must do this to them” where “them” is my colleagues and in fact myself. That’s probably true for everything in the HOS role. We are perceived to be part of management by the management and we are perceived to be part of the team by the team. There isn’t a clear divide.’ (HOS, pre-1992 university)

#### Processes of distributed leadership

In terms of the processes of distributed leadership within a particular level, in most universities members of the senior/middle management team have well-defined portfolios and responsibilities, and in this sense the formal responsibilities are perceived to be distributed amongst team members. As for promoting and trying to achieve ‘concertive action’ (Gronn, 2002), several senior management groups in our sample reported that they have been trying to develop a ‘team leadership’ approach at the centre/top with the explicit intent of providing a model that can be cascaded to other parts of the organisation.

‘I’m trying to start by developing a well functioning team at the top and if you show by example how a team can work and develop that team by having people in it who have different strengths and different capabilities so that we actually together have all the skills we need. And then each member of that

team is the Chair or leader of another team so you cascade it down.’ (VC, pre-1992 university)

Whilst members may be conscious of being part of a team, however, some may decide to opt out when it does not suit them. One senior university leader, for example, commented that when roles are tightly defined it may be difficult to get ownership from across the team as responsibilities are seen to lie at an individual rather than group level. In this sense, when responsibilities are strongly segmented there is reported to be a tendency for people to start building rivalries and a ‘silo-approach’ to management and leadership. A contrast to this would be the senior management team of another university where roles are ‘fuzzy’ and not tightly defined. This allows the VC and his/her team to be engaged in all activities and to gain a broader understanding of what is happening throughout the university. Responsibilities are delegated rather than permanently devolved depending on the context, situation and project. Developing a vision for a particular area becomes the responsibility for the whole team rather than one individual. Overall, however, it would seem that building a well-functioning top team is seen as one of the ways of embedding a culture of distributed leadership.

Whilst senior university managers may formally devolve leadership further down the organisation, whether distribution penetrates below the HOS or HOD level remains largely dependent on the leadership style of the Head and the culture of the unit. Whilst the majority of HOS/HODs in our study were happy to devolve responsibilities, several found it difficult to ‘let go’ of control, power and responsibility - sometimes due to concerns about trust and accountability and other times to protect colleagues from unnecessary distractions.

‘There are some things, which are difficult to give up because they are personal responsibilities. I’m also reluctant to distribute work to other people – I’d rather see them spend all their time on their primary jobs’. (HOD, pre-1992 university)

Similar sentiments were also evident in a number of instances where professional managers/administrators (e.g. School Managers) were appointed to work alongside

Heads. In the case of such co-leadership the division of work and responsibilities is more likely to arise from personal negotiation and adaptation rather than predefined role profiles.

Despite widespread recognition of a distributed approach to leadership, however, the majority of interviewees still expressed the need for formally recognised leaders who provide a clear vision and direction and monitor progress. Having ‘inspirational’ or ‘visionary’ leadership at the top of the organisation, in the words of many interviewees, is as important as cultivating a culture of distributed leadership. Clear vision and direction coming from a formal leader or senior team, it seems, is seen as one of the main pre-requisites for distributed leadership to work in practice. It gives people the confidence to explore new opportunities whilst being assured that they are not going in a direction that will not be supported by the university.

‘We have some very exciting people at the senior level and in turn that means we stretch ourselves. For me, I look at where the university is going and where the main thrusts are that we need to develop.’ (HOD, post-1992 university)

Such an approach at the senior level can create an enabling environment in which others can feel empowered to take action. Individual and inspirational leadership, however, is not only required at the top of the organisation with key individuals (whether or not part of the formal hierarchy) facilitating engagement, but present across the whole organisation.

‘I think in this department it would be that you can have all those nice, friendly, collegial discussions bouncing ideas around with people coming up with really good plans but ultimately you need someone to work out how to make it happen and delegate some responsibilities and make sure they’re followed up.’ (HOD, pre-1992 university)

#### Experiences of distributed leadership

Gronn (2002) expresses a concern that as distributed leadership becomes a preferred approach to leadership in organisations attention to the potential benefits and

disadvantages may be neglected. We therefore asked the interviewees in our sample about what they saw as the main benefits and challenges of this approach.

With regards to benefits, interviewees generally believed that a well managed distributed approach to leadership could be very positive for the school, department and ultimately the university. The most frequently cited benefits included: improved responsiveness to students, staff, funding agencies, etc.; greater transparency of finances (and increased financial incentives for innovation and entrepreneurship); 'managerial convenience' through the distribution of managerial workloads; and improved teamwork and communication between academic and non-academic staff.

With regards to disadvantages, in the view of the interviewees, distributed leadership should not present many problems provided that it is managed well and in transparent way. Perceived challenges, however, included: organisational fragmentation and the creation of a 'silo mentality'; reduced clarity of roles, leading to confusion and competition; slow decision-making; and an underestimation of individual differences in ability and unrealistic expectations of performance.

Interestingly these benefits and challenges imply a somewhat 'managerialist' (top-down) approach to the distribution of leadership whereby organisational impacts dominate the discourse. Whilst this is perhaps unsurprising, given the fact that all interviewees were holders of formal management roles, it gives strong clues as to how the discourse is being framed within the HE arena. This is particularly true of the potential disadvantages identified. Thus, rather than fragmentation, advocates of the 'concertive action' approach would argue that distributed leadership should lead to greater cohesion and a sense of common purpose; rather than lack of clarity, individuals should be better enabled to negotiate and agree their roles so as to minimise overlap and maximise personal fit; rather than slowing down decision making, such an approach should enable decisions to be made more rapidly, at the point of contact rather than further up the hierarchy; and with regards to capability, distributed leadership should assume a differentiation rather than commonality of expertise, drawing on individual strengths rather than depending solely on formal 'leaders'.

During the course of our interviews we noticed a number of clear tensions within university leadership and some clear pressure points where this is most strongly experienced (particularly at the HOS/HOD level). Furthermore, we were presented with a range of descriptions of leadership that appear to arise largely from these tensions and the manner in which leadership is experienced across the organisation. These accounts offer competing images to ‘distributed’ or ‘dispersed’ leadership that, perhaps, give a more graphic insight into leadership practice in HE. A selection of these is given in Table 1.

<b>Form</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example</b>
<i>Dislocated</i>	Top-down and bottom-up systems don’t match up; leadership doesn’t occur where it is needed.	Weakened central leadership where budgets are devolved to schools or faculties that make it difficult to initiate and sustain institution-wide initiatives such as corporate branding and IT.
<i>Disconnected</i>	Different parts of the institution pulling in different directions; lack of consistent/coherent direction/vision; competing agendas.	Formation of a ‘silo mentality’ within schools, with holders of devolved budgets pursuing their own objectives, not aligned with (or even counter to) the overall university mission and objectives.
<i>Disengaged</i>	Staff avoid becoming involved in leadership and management of the institution; leadership is seen as unappealing, unrewarding or unnecessary.	Leadership viewed as administration/bureaucracy rather than strategic and inter-personal – e.g. leadership and management of school/university versus academic leadership of research or discipline.
<i>Dissipated</i>	Leadership is too broadly diffused across groups with little accountability or responsibility for implementing decisions and actions.	This was a frequent criticism of the committee structure, described as a ‘washing machine’ where decisions go round and round remaining unresolved and disowned.



<i>Distant</i>	Leadership is felt to be removed from the operational level of the organisation; inaccessible, imposed; not necessarily ‘in our best interests’.	Decisions taken at senior management level and imposed with limited consultation. This situation seems to be amplified where senior managers are physically distant from academic departments.
<i>Dysfunctional</i>	Leadership fails to achieve its intentions; results in unexpected/undesirable outcomes; misalignment of performance measures.	Negative reaction to performance review and appraisal process by senior academic staff; performance measures driving individual rather than team behaviour; risk aversion and dysfunctional systems arising from failures of senior leadership.

Table 1 – Alternative accounts of leadership in HE

In presenting these findings we in no way wish to imply a paucity of leadership within UK HE, but rather to reveal the tensions and complexities inherent when exploring leadership within large, complex organisations. The descriptions given in Table 1, we feel, offer a richer account of the lived experience of managers and academics in UK universities than idealised notions of distributed leadership that dominate the literature. They reflect the frustrations at where leadership is felt to be inappropriate or ineffective and also point to the multiple and competing interpretations of leadership in HE. An example of this is evidenced in the accounts of three leaders at different levels in an institution where the VC is grappling with the tensions of devolution and centralised control

‘One of the most difficult things a VC has to do is to balance the business of central direction and control with devolving responsibility, and getting that balance right. I suspect some of the Deans here would say the balance is tipped slightly too far towards devolved responsibility and not enough towards strong central leadership. They would, however, only agree with that if the central leadership was in the direction that they wanted to go in. [...] I think that exemplifies the difficulty of getting the balance right, and it’s a constant trade-off. [...] That is a constant juggling act for a VC in a university and it’s more

difficult to do that in a university than in many other sorts of organisations because our reputation doesn't depend on a particular product, it depends on all the individual staff and they have to be empowered to develop that reputation and share it with the university.' (VC, post-1992 university)

An alternative account, given by a PVC, acknowledges these tensions whilst recognising that communication and decision-making structures within the university remain largely influenced by the legacy of a previous VC.

'The point about leadership and my perception of it is that I think it's quite dislocated, and I think that goes back to the difficulties that they had. The previous VC has left his mark on this institution [...] Universities have long memories and I think that has influenced how things are set up here. There is a good example of a leader in the VC [...] but I don't think the structures affect clear lines of communication or decision-making. The university presents itself at one level as very devolved, so its budget is based on a devolved method and the Deans in schools are perceived at one level to have a lot of autonomy, but because they're not engaged in decision-making at the higher level they're also slightly disenfranchised from the corporate side of the university.' (PVC, post-1992 university)

Whilst at School-level this is perceived as centralised control, with the Dean acting as a buffer between managerial and collegial approaches.

'The school is very much led in a consensual fashion, but the university isn't. The leadership style of the university is non-consensual, hierarchical and bureaucratic. It doesn't build consensus and it's largely insensitive and distant. Some of them are really nice people and if they came down from on high and talked to people every now and then I think they'd get on a lot better and build a better consensus. They don't know, or appear to want to understand sometimes, and that's very sad. It's a huge distinguishing difference between the two and it's partly why I'm quite happy here. I'm sort of shielded by the Dean from that next level and I don't really want to be open to it; I think I'd rather stay shielded.' (HOS, post-1992 university)

Thus, the image of leadership appears very different from where one stands within the organisation. This is not just an issue of poor communication, but more fundamentally linked to differences of identity, personal preferences and dynamics of power and social influence. Interestingly, within the institution described here these tensions did not necessarily have adverse effects on organisational performance, on the contrary, of the 12 universities visited during our research this one seemed to have a particularly strong culture, happy and satisfied staff, and sense of place and purpose as an HE provider within the local, national and international environment. Concepts of leadership therefore, whilst inherently contested, were at least actively debated and explored.

## **Discussion**

The findings from this study indicate a general acceptance of the term ‘distributed leadership’ in HE but a wide variety of interpretations, and still more diverse experiences, of the ways in which leadership is actually distributed. In the discussion we will reflect further on the nature of distributed leadership and its utility as an approach to leadership in HE.

### The nature of distributed leadership

Despite enthusiasm for a ‘distributed’ approach to leadership managers in all of the institutions in our sample reported significant tensions between top-down and bottom-up processes of influence. In effect, all the institutions sampled are struggling with the tension between collegiality and managerialism, individual autonomy and collective engagement, loyalty to the discipline and loyalty to the institution, academic versus administrative authority, informality and formality, and inclusivity and professionalisation.

Each institution has developed its own structures, systems and processes to respond to these tensions – some incrementally over time and others through adaptive or transformational change. What is evident, however, is that the nature of these structures and how they operate are largely dependent on the holders of formal leadership positions. Thus, for example, the VC or Principal will structure the senior management team to suit his/her personal style and preferences, and HOSs and HODs

will develop their own management structures according to how they identify with the role. The distribution of leadership in HE thus becomes a dynamic negotiation and exchange between the centre/top and schools/departments and amongst informal networks of colleagues and peers. The way in which leadership is talked about by our informants draws sharp attention to the need for *both* top-down *and* bottom-up leadership, not just as an ideal but as a necessity given the nature of academic work in universities. A similar perspective, termed ‘blended leadership’, is reported by Collinson and Collinson (2006) based on their research in Further Education.

‘Many FE staff prefer a leadership approach that combines specific elements from both distributed and hierarchical perspectives which are often viewed as competing and opposing polarities within the literature. Repeatedly, respondents have expressed a preference for aspects of *both* traditional, hierarchical leadership (structure, clarity and organisation) *and* contemporary distributed leadership (team-work, communication and shared responsibility).’  
(ibid: 10 – initial emphasis)

Rather like Howell and Shamir’s (2005) representation of ‘socialised’ charismatic leadership, there remains a desire for open and genuine consultation, yet also a need to authorise individuals to act on behalf of the group for the collective interest.

It has also been mentioned that we found evidence of all the forms of distributed leadership identified by MacBeath et al. (2004) even though most of these (perhaps with the exception of ‘cultural’) are commonly associated with traditional hierarchical models of leadership. Thus, whilst this taxonomy is moderately comprehensive, it arguably gives little more clarity or precision than the term ‘leadership’ on its own. In our own research we chose not to impose a definition of distributed leadership, but rather to let the interviewees present their own understanding and experiences of the concept. From this we can identify at least two clearly interrelated yet competing representations as described below.

1. *Devolved*: when talking of distributed leadership, interviewees primarily described formal mechanisms for the distribution of operational, strategic and decision-making roles and responsibilities across the institution. Of these, devolution and

delegation were fundamental in assigning leadership responsibility to individuals, pairs, groups and teams further down the organisational hierarchy. Despite representations in the academic literature, most interviewees painted ‘distributed leadership’ as a process coordinated from the top and ‘rolled-out’ across the organisation.

2. *Emergent*: where interviewees pointed to more bottom-up and emergent processes of collaborative and informal leadership, whereby individuals, groups and teams willingly take on responsibility and generate new ideas and initiatives. This seems to be best captured by the notion of leadership as diffused or dispersed across the organisation. Leadership, from this perspective, does not adhere to clear lines of hierarchy and command, but emerges from the interplay between collective engagement and individual agency – from this perspective everyone has a part to play in the leadership of the institution whether formally recognised or not.

The main distinction between ‘devolved’ and ‘emergent’ leadership in this regard is between formal (and intentional) leadership orchestrated from the top and informal (potentially unplanned) leadership emerging from across the organisation. Whilst devolved leadership is formally embedded within organisational structures and processes emergent leadership often operates outside these parameters. Thus, for example, a researcher, lecturer or professor can exert considerable influence within an institution by virtue of their academic reputation, enthusiasm and/or connections, whether or not they are formally recognised within the university management structure. Of these two accounts, it is the latter that bears the closest resemblance to ‘distributed leadership’ as most commonly described in the literature (e.g. Gronn, 2000; Harris, 2003; Lumby, 2003) but is the least prevalent within our own data (possibly because our informants were selected on the basis of holding formal offices of devolved authority).

Our study clearly supports the view that in order to be effective organisational leadership in HE needs to strike some form of balance between these processes. Inevitably this may shift depending on the nature of the task - with a ‘devolved’ approach most likely to be acceptable for the management of finances and an ‘emergent’ approach for the development of new research ideas. The role of

HOS/HOD may be defined as constantly seeking an integration of these two processes - one such mechanism being the Annual Strategic Planning Exercise whereby schools and departments present their business plan in relation to the institutional strategy.

Ultimately, however, an understanding of how leadership is enacted within HE is incomplete without an appreciation of the dynamics of power and influence within and beyond institutions. Broadly the two forms of distributed leadership cited earlier draw on different sources of power – the first on ‘hard’ power (through formal authority and control of resources) and the second on ‘soft’ power (charisma, expertise, relationships, etc.) yet such a representation is overly simplistic due to the complex interplay and interdependence between these dimensions. Thus, as Foucault argues ‘power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere’ (Foucault, 1978-86, 1:93). In focussing on the dynamics of power within universities we must not neglect the wider political context of UK HE. Universities are at the forefront of the government’s drive towards the ‘knowledge economy’ and improved leadership and management are regarded as key enablers (Leitch, 2006). The search for distributed leadership in universities is not merely born of ideological commitment to inclusivity and participation but rather through increasing commercial and market pressures (Olssen and Peters, 2005) – the need to do more with less.

#### The utility of distributed leadership

From the account given so far the concept of ‘distributed leadership’, as used by our interviewees, is applied very broadly and incorporates examples of individualised, top-down and formalised as well as shared, bottom-up and emergent leadership. It could be argued, therefore, that as a *description* of leadership in HE this concept offers little more clarity than the term ‘leadership’ on its own. Despite this, however, it still appears that, as a concept, it has a certain resonance and appeal to academic managers, perhaps due to the connection with notions of collegiality, participative decision-making and the nature of academic work.

As an *analytic framework* for exploring leadership the concept of distributed leadership is more promising. Its fundamental value, in this respect, is to draw attention to the wider constituents of leadership – the systems, processes and

structures (both formal and informal) all of which shape leadership practice. To this extent, the manner in which budgets and resources are handled, forums for communication and participation, and reward and recognition, are fundamental aspects of leadership – influencing (and being influenced by) the manner in which leaders and their constituents engage. This perspective also draws attention to the temporal dimensions of leadership, encouraging us to take a longer-term view of the situation – to consider the changing motivations, actions and experiences of individuals over the course of their career. Furthermore, as an analytic framework distributed leadership encourages recognition of different forms of leadership and influence (including top-down, bottom-up and horizontal) and a consideration of leadership activity that occurs outside traditional hierarchical channels of command and authority, frequently beyond organisational boundaries.

Fundamentally, though, our research leads us to conclude that the manner in which distributed leadership is being used in HE is primarily as a *rhetorical* device. It seems to offer an ideal to which HE institutions and their members can aspire; an alternative to the lived experience of dislocation, disconnection, disengagement, dissipation, distance and dysfunctionality. Indeed, in describing their negative experiences of leadership interviewees inadvertently paint an image of a more desirable approach – one that is located, connected, engaged, clear/in-focus, close/in-touch and functional/beneficial.

It was Pondy (1978) who first referred to leadership as a ‘language game’ whereby, through the effective use of rhetoric leaders can frame the understanding of others. Bennis (1993, cited in Goddard, 1997: 51) likewise argues that ‘effective leaders put words to the formless longings and deeply felt needs of others. They create communities out of words.’ Distributed leadership offers a persuasive discourse that embeds both concepts of collegiality and managerialism. It appears to give a framework for the integration of top-down and bottom-up decision making processes that is likely to be more flexible and responsive than the traditional committee structure whilst evading the professionalisation of management that has occurred in other sectors such as the National Health Service. In the current climate of change within UK HE whereby collegial and bureaucratic structures are increasingly giving way to corporate and enterprise cultures (McNay, 1999) such a discourse becomes

particularly significant. Within this context the notion of ‘distributed leadership’ could be used by universities to construct social identities that bring together notions such as ‘academic’ and ‘manager’ so that, for example, management is seen as an integral element of being a good academic or ‘management’ is reframed as ‘leadership’, rendering it more appealing to those resistant to managerial connotations.

Such an approach, however, is a double-edged sword – whilst distributed leadership may be used to enhance the sense of belonging and engagement in universities it may equally be utilised by those in positions of real power to give the illusion of consultation and participation whilst obscuring the true mechanisms by which decisions are reached and resources allocated. Another danger is that if organisations decide to push the ‘emergent’ approach to distributed leadership too strongly they may end up missing the very real need for individual responsibility and accountability as well as a strong sense of vision and direction. As Pearce (2004) argues it is not a case of either or, but of achieving an appropriate balance between vertical and shared leadership.

‘The issue is not vertical leadership or shared leadership. Rather the issues are: (1) when is leadership most appropriately shared? (2) How does one develop shared leadership? And (3) how does one utilize both vertical and shared leadership to leverage the capabilities of knowledge workers? It is only by addressing these issues head on that organisations will move toward a more appropriate model of leadership in the age of knowledge work.’ (ibid: 55)

The ‘shadow side’ of distributed leadership is particularly concerning when considered in the current environment where most UK universities are rationalising (if not eliminating) their main formalised mechanism for bottom-up influence and decision-making: the committee structure. In this case does ‘distributed leadership’ just offer an empty rhetoric of engagement whilst greater powers are being divested to smaller groups of people? Does it risk undermining organisational effectiveness by reducing the influence of key individuals without an appropriate forum for collective action? Or does it simply offer an illusive ideal that will fail to meet the expectations of those promoting it? As Salaman (2004: 77) warns:



‘Although the current cult of leadership may seem (and indeed present itself) in marked contrast, even opposition, to management (hence the need for definitions to clarify the differences between the two), in functional terms they are remarkably similar in that both offer to resolve the failures of organization by avoiding and individualizing them.’

In all likelihood leadership in HE is becoming more widely dispersed but in ways that may not be recognised or controllable. In time (perhaps quite soon) we may find that real influence in HE has become distributed well beyond the boundaries of institutions, to cyberspace, where student blogs, market rankings and media campaigns become the decentred locus of power.

### **Conclusion**

In this article we have presented findings from research into distributed leadership in HE. We have presented a range of complementary and competing perspectives and distinguished between two principle approaches: ‘devolved’ leadership associated with top-down influence and ‘emergent’ leadership associated with bottom-up and horizontal influence. We argue that whilst the academic literature largely promotes the latter, the former is equally (if not more) significant in terms of how leadership is actually enacted and perceived within universities.

We conclude, therefore, that as a description of leadership practice, the concept of ‘distributed leadership’ offers little more clarity than ‘leadership’ alone. As an analytic framework, we argue that it is a more promising concept, drawing attention to the broader contextual, temporal and social dimensions of leadership - it permits recognition of forms of leadership and the factors that influence and shape it that may otherwise be missed through a more individualistic and decontextualised perspective. Fundamentally, though, we argue that distributed leadership is most influential through its rhetorical value whereby it can be used to shape perceptions of identity, participation and influence but can equally shroud the underlying dynamics of power within universities.

Ultimately, it seems, distributed leadership is a political concept. Interpretations are invariably shaped by the stance of the perceiver – born of an ideological commitment

to the collective or an instrumental commitment to performance and power. It is undoubtedly a concept deserving further investigation and consideration but ultimately one that is more complex and controversial than may at first appear. What remains clear, however, is that distributed leadership is not a successor to individual leadership in HE - removing the need for formal leaders and structures. Power and influence are exerted by individuals and groups in formal roles, and by informal networks including and extending beyond them. Strong, visible, personal leadership is appreciated when it brings clarity and a sense of direction; but only when it serves to express the collective interests of organisational members. Whether or not this happens, it would seem, remains contested and a matter of perspective.

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