# Importance of clarity, hierarchy, and trust in implementing distributed leadership in higher education

*Amanda L. Lizier, University of Technology Sydney**
*Fiona Brooks, Auckland University of Technology*
*Lewis Bizo, University of Technology Sydney*

## Abstract

University leaders are increasingly focused on management tasks and metrics (Heffernan, 2020; Loomes et al., 2019), and distributed leadership has been broadly adopted as a way for leaders to navigate corporate management demands while also maintaining the collegial and communitarian character of the academy. This article discusses the findings of an indicative case study within a Faculty of an Australian University exploring the experiences of academic leaders in adopting distributed leadership. The findings highlight how a lack of agreed definitions, aims, and goals of distributed leadership constrained its adoption. The case study also contributes to understanding the roles of trust and hierarchy in how distributed leadership is experienced and their role in enabling or constraining distributed leadership. In the Faculty, academic leaders within Schools experienced distributed leadership as an exercise in delegating duties. In contrast, Faculty leaders were likely to perceive leadership as distributed although with varying degrees of success, with trust playing a key role in both groups. In highlighting the importance of clarity, hierarchy, and trust, the case study shows that there must be clarity around what distributed leadership is, what is being distributed, how it will be distributed, and trust in the implementation process and colleagues.

## Introduction

The increasing demands on global universities, the rise of New Public Management (Hood, 1991), and the adoption of management approaches from the corporate sector (Birnbaum, 2000) have influenced how universities are led (Croucher and Lacy, 2020). Proceeding decades have seen education systems globally react to political, market, and government forces that have resulted in universities being measured on publication outputs, grants and other funding received, and global league tables standings (Heffernan, 2017). These changes have had consequences for leading in higher education and the roles of leaders at different levels in the organisational hierarchy (Heffernan, 2020). At first, Deans and others in positional leadership roles were required to take on more management tasks where traditionally they might have focused on guiding research and teaching (Heffernan, 2020). Leaders have increasingly been measured on managerial expertise and metrics (Loomes et al., 2019). In response to such challenges, distributed leadership has been broadly adopted in higher education as a way for leaders to navigate the complex and competing demands of leadership in what is at once a corporate entity and a community of independent scholars.

This article contributes to understanding the significant challenges of adopting distributed leadership in higher education using a study of a Faculty of an Australian University (hereafter referred to as 'the Faculty'). The Faculty is used as an indicative case study to explore implementing a distributed leadership approach in a contemporary higher education context. The case study explored the lived experiences of academics in a Faculty that was working to adopt distributed leadership over several years and provides evidence from a point in time, around two years into a journey towards distributed leadership for the Faculty – a journey that has continued since data collection. The findings contribute to earlier research that outlines how issues of power are neglected in implementing distributed leadership (Bento, 2011; Lumby, 2019) and a lack of

* Corresponding author amanda.lizier(at)uts.edu.au

definitional clarity of what constitutes distributed leadership (Tian et al., 2016). The following sections outline key debates around distributed leadership before providing background to the case study and reporting on the method of data collection and analysis, followed by a discussion of the findings and their implications for the adoption of distributed leadership in higher education.

## Distributed leadership

Distributed leadership was originally used as a research framework before being adopted as a leadership practice within organisations (Lumby, 2019), rapidly becoming one of the most promoted forms of leadership in educational contexts (Parker, 2015). Despite widespread adoption, definitions of distributed leadership remain unresolved, making its adoption in practice problematic, demonstrated in the lack of empirical evidence of the adoption of distributed leadership in organisations (Tian et al., 2016).

Distributed leadership is often used interchangeably with terms such as 'shared', 'collective', 'emergent', and 'democratic' leadership (Spillane, 2005). Some definitions of distributed leadership view leadership as involving multiple leaders, while others position it as an organisational quality rather than a characteristic of individuals (Spillane, 2005). Others argue that distributed leadership is a way of thinking about the practices of leadership (Gronn, 2002; Spillane et al., 2001; Spillane et al., 2004). A common thread in definitions of distributed leadership is that it involves exploring leadership practice rather than leaders or their roles and routines. Within such a view, distributed leadership is considered a product of interactions between the leader, followers, and the context. It is these interactions that are critical in understanding leadership (Spillane, 2005). Although there is considerable variation in definitions of distributed leadership, there are three generally accepted premises. First, that leadership is an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals. Second, that there is openness to the boundaries of leadership, and finally that varieties of expertise are distributed across the many, not the few (Bennett et al., 2003). The most salient aspect of distributed leadership is not that leadership is distributed but how leadership is distributed. Distributing leadership per se is not necessarily beneficial. Moreover, it is necessary to explore why leadership is distributed, who controls the distribution, and what (if anything) is being distributed? (Bolden, 2011).

A prominent criticism of distributed leadership has been how power is addressed or not. A far greater understanding of the role of power in distributed leadership is needed for the concept to be used effectively in practice (Woods, 2016). A great deal of theory and research in distributed leadership suggests that it fails to sufficiently consider power dynamics and influence in the contexts in which it is adopted (Gronn, 2009; Hartley, 2009). As Lumby (2013) has noted, 'issues around distribution of power are largely ignored or referred to in passing' (581) and goes on to point out that there is often an underlying assumption that distributing leadership means that "everyone is a leader", occasionally suggesting that all staff members are included in leadership equally. In response to criticisms of distributed leadership and its implementation, some argue that it is a concept best used rhetorically rather than as an analytical tool or a way to structure management/leadership (Gosling et al., 2009).

Distributed leadership has been taken up extensively in higher education (see Bolden et al., 2009; Bolden et al., 2008; Bush, 2019; Gosling et al., 2009; Jones and Harvey, 2017; Jones et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2012; Sewerin and Holmberg, 2017). Within higher education, some have suggested that distributed leadership offers a way to balance collegiality and management and as internal values and external pressures (Bento, 2011). Distributed leadership potentially offers a way for academic leaders in higher education to manage the tension inherent in their identity-work

of being both an academic and a manager, which can often be at odds. Gosling et al. (2009) argue that distributed leadership is an effective term within higher education as it resonates both with experiences and with expectations of university staff, embracing notions of collegiality while addressing the need for management, therefore performing a rhetorical function in meaning-making and identity. It may also foreground the experience of mid-level academics, those who might be referred to as “middle leaders” (Grootenboer et al., 2017; Lipscombe et al., 2020), who often experience a tension between their identities as academics and as managers as they face increased demands to take the initiative and responsibility within their Schools and Faculties (Gosling et al., 2009). However, as Bento (2011) notes, collaboration and coercive action are not necessarily accompanied by a distribution of power. A common problem is mistaking distributed leadership for the simple delegation of tasks by management. In their research investigating distributed leadership across universities in the UK, Bolden et al. (2009) identified two main approaches to distributed leadership. It was either a devolved or “top-down” approach or an emergent or “bottom-up” approach. The authors note that although the literature and rhetoric around distributed leadership promotes the latter, universities are more likely to take a devolved approach where distributed leadership is driven from the “top” of the organisation. In response, Bolden et al. (2009) propose that distributed leadership is most influential as an analytical framework and as a rhetorical concept rather than as a way of structuring leadership in universities. In Australia, there has been increasing attention paid to leadership in the context of teaching and learning in higher education in recent decades (Jones and Harvey, 2017; Harvey and Jones, 2021). In contexts of increasing corporate managerial practices and expectations (Bosetti and Heffernan, 2021), Croucher and Lacy (2020) conducted a study of leaders from both within and outside of universities across Australia who were found to have very similar opinions about what was more important for leaders in higher education. As with research previously discussed in this article, Croucher and Lacy (2020) also refer to the tension between managerialism and collegiality in higher education and propose that distributed leadership offers a way in which to marry the two in contexts of increasing marketization and internationalisation, which have seen a shift away from collegial management to a more “corporate approach” to university leadership in Australia.

The following case study demonstrates the opportunities and challenges in facilitating a move towards more distributed forms of leadership in universities.

## Case study

### Background

The Faculty is a part of a large Australian university based in a major city. Structured into two Schools, each with a Head of School, the Faculty also has a leadership team consisting of a Dean, Deputy Dean, and several Associate Deans with various portfolios around research, teaching, and so forth. The Schools are further structured into sub-divisions focused around various discipline areas that relate to teaching and, in some cases, also research. Academic staff report to the discipline leads, who in turn report to the Head of School. Over the past three years, the Faculty has embarked on a distributed leadership journey in response to emerging and anticipated challenges facing higher education. As part of the Faculty strategy, the Faculty pursued a range of initiatives, including structural changes to the discipline-based Schools and strategic projects around staffing and culture with the stated goals of distributing leadership more effectively within the Faculty, operating more transparently in terms of decision-making, and encouraging greater accountability. Central to the implementation of distributed leadership was helping leaders within the Faculty better understand multiple layers of management and to articulate chains of responsibility and decision-making in a

complex organisation. In tandem, structural changes were made to reduce the span of control of leaders within the Faculty and better distribute the work of management.

To explore the Faculty's experience of implementing distributed leadership, a project was established to investigate lived experiences of the transition within the Faculty as a case study that could inform broader insights with applications across the University. Key to the project was ensuring that the Faculty was able to learn from the distributed leadership journey to date and use this information for reflection and change as work continued to implement distributed leadership in the Faculty. A crucial part of the case study was not to establish whether distributed leadership had been implemented or not but to explore practices of leading (Raelin, 2011) within the Faculty to identify how leaders experienced distributed leadership, what was distributed, and who or what was facilitating the distribution. The overall goal of the project was to investigate leading practices within a University Faculty to determine what enabled and constrained effective distributed leadership using the following research questions:

- What are the current practices of leading in the Faculty?
- To what extent do they reflect the initial goals of the distributed leadership strategy in the Faculty?
- What is enabling and constraining distributed leadership in the Faculty?

This article focuses on the final question, discussing how distributed leadership is enabled and constrained.

## Method

The study focused on a single Faculty within an Australian University following a request to the authors to investigate experiences of distributed leadership. All academic staff identified as having a leadership position within the Faculty were invited to voluntarily participate in semi-structured interviews conducted over two months in late 2020, for which ethics approval was obtained. In addition, all other academic staff were invited to participate in interviews with two volunteers coming forward. Ultimately, seventeen interviews were conducted with fifteen of those participants working in roles of positional leadership across the Faculty, including Discipline leaders (9), School leaders (1), and Faculty leaders (5).

The interviews used an adapted form of the Interview to the Double approach (Gherardi, 1995; Gherardi, 2019; Nicolini, 2009) to explore the lived experiences of leadership, followed by a small number of semi-structured interview questions to gain insights into specific aspects of distributed leadership. The Interview to the Double (ITTD) method aims to articulate and represent practice by asking participants to describe how a day in their job unfolds. Instead of an interview protocol consisting of interview questions or topics to cover, an interviewer in an ITTD asks participants to provide a detailed description of their next workday so that the interviewer could pass as their "double". The opening question in such an interview is along the lines of, "Tomorrow, I will replace you in your role. What do I need to know to be your double so that no one notices the switch?". Following this initial question, the interviewer employs follow up questions based on the participant's responses to gain greater detail about the practices involved with that job. Traditionally, participants in an ITTD are asked to describe their next workday; however, in the Faculty case study, asking leaders to describe only a single day did not provide sufficient depth of description to gain insights into the full range of leading practices. In a modified version of the ITTD, leaders were instead asked to describe how the interviewer would replace them over the coming week rather than the next day.

Interviews averaged one hour in duration, producing around 15 hours of recordings that were transcribed into 219 pages of data. Following their interview, leaders were offered the opportunity to review their transcripts and make clarifying changes as required, with the final version being used for the analysis using NVIVO software. Some desktop research was also carried out using Faculty documentation, including job descriptions and Faculty strategy documentation. A thematic analysis was completed to establish key themes in the data, with initial codes used at the beginning based on notes taken during the interviews, which were iteratively refined as the coding continued.

Structurally, the Faculty was divided into two Schools, each incorporating various teams aligned with either a research and/or teaching area. These teams are referred to here as discipline areas. While the discipline area varied, the job titles did not. Consequently, they have not been identified to maintain participant anonymity where selected quotations from interviews are used. Identifying participants even using generic terms is problematic due to the specific nature of some of the roles. There might only be one or two people within that role type. Instead, the designation provided is whether the leader was at a Faculty-level (above school structure - Head of School and Faculty leaders) or School-level (within schools - Discipline leaders), denoting only their relative position in the hierarchy. The findings of the analysis are discussed in the following sections, followed by a discussion of their implications for leading in higher education. Overall, the findings indicate that the key enablers/constraints (depending on one's perspective) of distributed leadership in the Faculty were: trust, and the related concepts of autonomy and agency; power; and clarity.

## Trust, autonomy, and agency

There was general agreement among all the leaders interviewed about how they defined distributed leadership yet disagreement as to whether they were experiencing distributed leadership in the Faculty. Leaders' definitions of distributed leadership focused on trust, autonomy, and agency. Trust was the key concept described by leaders, referring to areas where leaders would be trusted to make decisions and enact them. Distributed leadership, according to the leaders interviewed, meant being trusted as a professional to "get on with things" and work things out for themselves with minimal oversight. Importantly, trust also encompassed being trusted to make decisions relating to one's area of responsibility. To enable decision-making, leaders recognised that it was also necessary to have access to timely and relevant information, something that all leaders observed was sometimes lacking in the Faculty. However, it was improving and had indeed been one of the original drivers for the distributed leadership implementation. As one School-level leader noted:

> *I don't really know what I need to know, because no one's telling me what I need to know*

For School-level leaders, being trusted to make decisions was key to their descriptions of distributed leadership, along with having the autonomy and agency to do so. For example, one leader described the need for leaders of smaller teams to have 'some autonomy and agency to make decisions, and enact the University's and local area…policies [and] strategies'. The same leader further commented that this extended not only to driving strategic change but also to 'the efficient running' of their area. Leaders described distributed leadership as 'not concentrated in a single individual' and that it entailed 'sharing of responsibility'. School-level leaders did not always feel trusted to make decisions relevant to their area and felt that they were also not trusted to have the information that would have enabled them to do so. This sense of a lack of empowerment was reflected in a quote from a School-level leader, who observed that,

*…we're kind of disempowered … we're leaders, but we're not actually leaders. We're not really given the opportunity to the lead to be honest.*

Conversely, Faculty-level leaders did not feel trusted that they were acting in the best interests of the staff when they did share information. One Faculty-level leader, when talking about trust between Faculty leaders and the rest of the staff, noted that,

*I think there's still a lot of work to be done in that space … the local leaders will go in the first instance to their head of school for clarification on a matter. Sometimes they will end up in random places. Sometimes even writing to the university executive for clarification on something that they could have actually asked their head of school about. So, I think that's a … lack of trust, it needs to be worked on."*

Leaders at all levels in the Faculty identified that feeling trusted to act as a leader was a key enabler of leading practices. All leaders wanted to be trusted by "the others" yet did not always extend that trust themselves. Tensions between Faculty- and School-level leaders lead to a "them and us" dynamic between the two groups, with the added tension of School-level leaders needing to act as both leaders and followers at different times in their role as middle leaders (Grootenboer et al., 2015). As a relational concept, trust relies on both leaders and followers to create and sustain trust (Bligh, 2017). The communitarian character of academic life does not necessarily lend itself to one identifying as a follower, or indeed, a leader. One of the attractions of distributed leadership in higher education is that it performs the rhetorical function of addressing both collegiality and management (Gosling et al., 2009), as previously noted. Falls and Allen (2020) note in their study of community college Deans in the USA that middle leaders 'can be both leaders and followers by virtue of their placement in the organizational hierarchy. Their position requires them to be adept at both leading and following and transitioning between the two roles.' (24). Individuals, particularly those in leadership roles themselves, may be reluctant to identify as a follower. Despite distributed leadership taking a systems and relational view of leadership, assumptions of hierarchy remain (Grootenboer et al., 2015) in leadership needing to be "distributed" by, and to, someone. This may create tensions for those whose role calls on them to identify as both a leader and a follower. Issues of who is trusted and how that trust is gained are key enablers of distributed leadership and play out in the Faculty case study. Grice's (2019) metaphor of middle leaders being considered "spies" is apposite here as they walk a fine line between leading their teams, being part of their teams, and being a follower of other leaders. In their longitudinal research examining the relationship between trust and distributed leadership in schools, Smylie et al. (2007) found that trust is core to the performance and perceptions of distributed leadership. The Faculty case study confirmed that trust is a key element required from the outset to ensure a successful implementation of distributed leadership and its development over time, which appeared lacking from some relationships within the Faculty.

Broad agreement in defining distributed leadership from the leaders interviewed was somewhat surprising given the lack of agreement in much of the literature. Interestingly, the key areas of distributed leadership identified by leaders in the Faculty aligned with the three generally accepted premises from Bennett et al. (2003) identified earlier in this article. Like Bennett et al. (2003), leaders in the Faculty primarily defined distributed leadership as being open to the boundaries of leadership, implying that power was shared across the "levels" of leadership in the Faculty hierarchy, which shaped their expectations of distributed leadership as will be seen in the findings. Leaders across the Faculty also broadly aligned with the idea that expertise was shared across the many rather than the few. As noted above, distributed leadership was not concentrated within an individual. Evidence from leaders in the Faculty adds to these broad premises in identifying the

importance of trust as key to enabling more permeable leadership boundaries and a sharing of power within the Faculty. Importantly, as discussed above, School-level leaders did not feel trusted to act, while Faculty-level leaders felt distrusted by the School-level leaders that they were not acting in good faith when sharing information thus constraining distributed leadership.

Despite a level of agreement on what distributed leadership was, there was a clear divergence in how leadership was experienced between leaders at the Faculty-level and those within Schools at lower levels of the organisational hierarchy. Leaders at a Faculty-level who had oversight of the Faculty strategy and of implementing distributed leadership were far more likely to describe leadership in the Faculty as being distributed. However, they were also cautious about the success of the strategic initiative to date, acknowledging that it was indeed an ongoing journey. These more senior leaders in the Faculty were open in their comments that distributed leadership as a practice was still a work in progress and that it was perhaps only '30% or so there', as one Faculty-level leader noted. School-level leaders, on the other hand, did not experience responsibility as being shared nor distributed so much as tasks delegated. Very much a "top-down" or devolved approach as described by Bolden et al. (2009). Although there are similarities in the experiences of Faculty- and School-level leaders in terms of all agreeing that the work of implementing distributed leadership needed to continue to reach its full potential, the School-level leaders had a very different view about what was distributed, by whom, and to what end. One School-level leader described distributed leadership as 'a genuine invitation and opportunity for initiating … rather than just a response', which had been their experience. Another School-level leader also noted that they experienced leading as responding to decisions made by others rather than having the autonomy to act themselves. They commented,

> *To me, to be distributed it would be a kind of, the positions would entail some capacity to shape the future, not just to respond and to implement other things … I don't think leadership boils down to kind of overseeing somebody else's project and signing off on some documents.*

School-level leaders described experiencing leadership within the Faculty generally as an exercise in delegation rather than leaders being trusted and empowered to enable autonomy and agency in decision-making. Such leaders commonly juxtaposed their experience of task delegation and receiving directives with their oft unmet expectation that distributed leadership entailed allowing leaders the autonomy and agency to make decisions on matters relevant to their role and team. As another school-level leader observed,

> *distributed leadership to me … the delegation of appropriate level to give people working in specific roles greater and greater depth of understanding of why they're trying to achieve things, rather than just getting a directive, this is the new initiative.…communicate it to your colleagues. So, the distributed leadership allows you to understand why; the how and why this needs to be done and to question if it does.*

Some leaders expressed surprise that a project to explore distributed leadership was even taking place as they did not think it existed within the Faculty to be studied. As one School-level leader noted,

> *I find the idea of distributed leadership a little bit strange when I read it, when it came in the [Faculty strategy], it was the first I'd even thought that we had a distributed leadership model. I would describe it as centralised command and control, and I'm not quite sure who it's supposed to be distributed to*

The provision of timely and relevant information and being empowered to act upon it was indicative of such reports of feeling as though there were a command and control structure rather than a distributed one for School-level leaders. While conceding that there had been improvements in the distribution of information, perceptions of a lack of access to clear and timely information, and being empowered to act on it, was a common theme from School-level leaders. How one experienced access to information largely depended on one's role and its distance from the most senior roles in the Faculty hierarchy. The more senior a leader was, the less likely they were to comment on a feeling that there was a lack of pertinent information available to them. One leader saw this as,

> *…all part of the flow of power towards a centre – a sort of privilege in communication lines and expectations from a top-down model*

The "top-down model" was most evident in School-level leader descriptions of work tasks being distributed rather than feeling empowered to act and was perceived as a constraint on effective distributed leadership.

## 'Work is distributed, power is not'

Perhaps the key finding of the case study was that one's hierarchical level in the Faculty was related to their experience, and expectations of, distributed leadership. Faculty-level leaders identified distributing information as core to how they were distributing leadership, while School-level leaders identified the power to make decisions about their areas as what should be "distributed" to them. School-level leaders went further in identifying that they experienced tasks as being the thing that was "distributed" and disagreed with the premise that leadership was distributed in terms of being empowered to make decisions or effect change. The following quote from a School-level leader neatly summarised these key findings.

> *…the work is distributed, but the ability to affect the system and change it for the better is not distributed. Power is not distributed. Work is distributed, power is not distributed*

School-level leaders described requests and tasks as 'raining down' on them and as needing to 'juggle' multiple priorities. One School-level leader described their role as 'the filling in the sandwich' in needing to implement decisions made further up the organisational hierarchy. A key question was how to prioritise the perceived cascade of work when many other parts of the Faculty and the University were also asking for tasks to be completed based on their particular project imperatives. Leaders noted that while tasks and project work could be described as being distributed, this was not in the most meaningful sense of distributed leadership as they understood it. One School-level leader described their experiences in terms of someone more powerful than them telling them what to do, even though they were supposed to be a "leader" themselves:

> *… what you have is somebody who is saying, this is what you should be doing, this is how your performance is going to be measured, and somebody more powerful than them telling you to do something else.*

The plethora of projects across the University and within the Faculty reflect what Dollinger (2020) refers to as the "projectification" of higher education, where work is increasingly conceptualised through the lens of projects and work is divided into aims and potential outcomes. Such work is necessarily task-specific and time-limited (Packendorff and Lindgren, 2014), which was reflected in leaders' experiences in the Faculty. It's important to note here that such discourses also exist outside of discussions of distributed leadership in the growing literature around academic overwork. The Faculty's experiences with implementing distributed leadership occur within the context of academic

work that often sees researchers working long hours and on weekends, often on tasks that may not be impactful in terms of research (Bartlett et al., 2021). Such practices are entwined with leading and so may also be influencing participant responses.

Experiences of distributed leadership were mixed, with some School-level leaders categorically stating that what they experienced was 'centralised command and control' with 'invisible decision making' that constrained their ability to lead. In contrast, Faculty-level leaders were concerned that School-level leaders were not fully taking up opportunities to make decisions for their areas, preferring instead to defer to those more senior in the hierarchy despite being encouraged to take responsibility. Other School-level leaders conceded that perhaps leadership was actually distributed in the Faculty but, crucially, the broad perception was that it was not in the sense that the leaders interviewed understood it. As one School-level leader noted,

> *The trying to be generous side of things is, I expect the leadership probably is more distributed than I think it is, but it's a problem that I don't see it that way and it's a problem that I think a lot of my colleagues don't see and experience it that way.*

Another leader likewise observed that,

> *I actually think there probably are things that would generally count as distributed leadership, but their invisibility is a problem because I think it leads to this feeling that we're just puppets on other people's strings, which is a stifler of initiative and innovation and the agile ways of working*

The issue of perception around distributed leadership is important as it indicates that initiatives in the Faculty designed to facilitate distributed leadership may not have hit their mark or have been received differently from how they were originally intended, in part due to how leaders are defining what "distributed" looks like in terms of being empowered to act. Overwhelmingly, those in identified leadership positions saw themselves as leaders within the Faculty. The challenge was in feeling empowered to act as such and, crucially, taking up opportunities to empower themselves.

As Bento (2011) notes, a common problem in distributed leadership is mistaking it for simply delegating management tasks, something reflected in the experiences of leaders in the Faculty. This is not merely an issue for the Faculty as distributed leadership as a concept retains a hierarchical logic in assuming that someone needs to "distribute" tasks or power (Grootenboer et al., 2015). Further, the experiences of leaders reflect observations in the literature that the implementation of distributed leadership is not politically neutral and while leadership may be distributed, power is often not; disproportionately affecting those at a greater distance from power. Indeed, in the distributed leadership literature, it's argued that distribution of power has not been effectively dealt with at all (Bento, 2011), an observation confirmed by the findings here. Moreover, antecedent forms of power continue to be in place and reinforce those who previously held positions of power (Bolden, 2011). For example, as a leader in the Faculty observed,

> *…when you go to the management meetings …, we've tried to constitute as a way to kind of refer upwards and ask the questions to be responded to, but generally it's like, anything that involves a decision is not in the hands of anyone other than about three people in the faculty.*

Again, one's position in the Faculty hierarchy plays a role in whether one feels empowered to act. In the Faculty, there was a perception from leaders within the Schools that antecedent forms of power and decision-making structures continued, and they appeared reluctant to step outside of those

structures. Conversely, Faculty-level leaders were perplexed that School-level leaders appeared not to take up opportunities for empowerment when offered and, to them, seemed reluctant to make decisions.

## Lack of clarity

The lack of a common experience of distributed leadership, coupled with its somewhat uncritical adoption as a leadership practice, resulted in a challenging situation in the Faculty where the adoption of distributed leadership as a guiding principle was constrained by differing understandings of what was, or should be, distributed. Moreover, the promise of distribution without accompanying feelings of empowerment exacerbated existing tensions and trust issues in the Faculty, further constraining the implementation of distributed leadership. The experiences of the leaders in the case study represent a microcosm of tensions across higher education in their attempts to implement distributed leadership as a framework for leadership practice.

A review of the Faculty strategy documentation suggested that difficulties with implementing distributed leadership started with a lack of clarity in the initial Faculty strategy document. While the articulated goal was to “distribute leadership”, there was a lack of detail about what success looked like. Interviews with Faculty-level leaders revealed a focus on increased participation in and understanding of how decisions were made in response to concerns raised by academic leaders within the Schools and, to this end, improved information sharing. The language adopted in the Faculty around distributed leadership was potentially problematic in setting up an expectation for leaders that distributed leadership would mean distributing power across the Faculty in the form of greater trust to perform one’s role plus the autonomy and agency to make and enact decisions. Perceptions varied as to the degree to which this was possible. Leaders in the Faculty may have all defined distributed leadership as being about trust, autonomy, and agency. Still, the strategic initiative to embed distributed leadership was couched in terms of information sharing and transparency around how decisions were made by others. It must be remembered that the strategy documentation was merely a starting point for shifting to distributed leadership, however in not setting more explicit expectations about what success would look like when leadership was distributed, the Faculty perhaps missed an opportunity to start a productive conversation about what distributed leadership would look like for the Faculty – what would be distributed, by whom, and to whom – a salient lesson for future implementations of distributed leadership.

## Implications for higher education

The experiences of the Faculty raise questions about the adoption of distributed leadership in higher education more broadly. In higher education, distributed leadership has been seen as a way to balance collegiality and management and internal values and pressures, but to what extent is that attainable in practice (Bento, 2011)? Evidence from the Faculty suggests that it is very difficult to attain distributed leadership in practice, needing time, patience, clarity, and trust.

As outlined at the beginning of this article, definitional failures have dogged distributed leadership in higher education for some time (Tian et al., 2016), with failures to address issues of power commonly identified (Bento, 2011; Lumby, 2019). Shifts in expectations of leaders in universities (Heffernan, 2017; Heffernan, 2020; Loomes et al., 2019) coupled with a desire to maintain a sense of collegiality among independent scholars have provided fertile ground for the adoption of distributed leadership. Alas, a lack of clarity around what should be distributed and how has made the actual use of distributed leadership challenging and the likelihood of success lower than it otherwise might have been expected. As Bolden (2011) has noted, exploring the why, what, and how of distributed

leadership is critical to success in adopting a distributed leadership approach; something that the Faculty has not yet achieved.

Clearly articulating what is meant by the term distributed leadership appears to be critical to success in ensuring that there is a shared vision for why leadership needs to be distributed, what will be distributed, and how it will be distributed. Such clarity is also important for engendering trust between leaders and followers and in the change process. The experiences of the Faculty, and conversations in the literature around distributed leadership in higher education, suggest that Gosling et al. (2009) may have accurately suggested that distributed leadership is best used rhetorically rather than as a model or framework to guide leadership in practice. Moreover, the importance of hierarchy in experiences of distributed leadership in the Faculty can also not be overlooked.

The findings from the case study highlight the need to consider organisational and academic cultures and, most importantly, existing power structures and perceptions of what is “allowed”. Adopting distributed leadership implies that some leaders relinquish decision-making responsibilities; what is perhaps less acknowledged is that those responsibilities must then be taken up by those to be empowered, actions enabled by a sense of trust. In the context of existing academic and organisational cultures and hierarchies, this appears to be challenging for some leaders as it involves both taking up the opportunity for greater empowerment and acting against formerly established hierarchies and cultures. Aligning with observations in the literature that power is not adequately considered in discussions and use of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2009; Hartley, 2009; Lumby, 2013; Woods, 2016), the Faculty experience of distributed leadership for those at a greater power distance from senior leaders was of perceptions of delegation rather than the distribution of the power to make and enact decisions. On the other hand, Faculty-level leaders in the Faculty experienced the journey towards distributed leadership more as a process that began with providing greater access to information and transparency around decision-making but would continue beyond that. Based on evidence from the Faculty, identifying how power is already being exercised and perceived within an organisation is also crucial to attempts to adopt distributed leadership in any meaningful sense.

## Limitations

The case study is potentially constrained in not having all leaders participate and having very few other academic staff members participate. Such a small sample necessarily calls into question the generalisability of the findings across other areas of the same institution or at other institutions. Moreover, those who were interviewed may not have been entirely candid in cases where they had concerns about how the data might be used by the Faculty. Every attempt was made to de-identify leaders and provide participants with the opportunity to review their transcripts before analysis helped to allay such concerns. In future studies, the use of more collaborative and participatory methods may help to encourage general staff to participate. A further limitation is that the study was limited to academic staff, which was a necessary boundary due to the time and resources for the interviews and analysis. Further investigations in this area would benefit from the inclusion of professional (non-academic) leaders to gain broader insights into experiences of distributed leadership. The findings are therefore limited to the experience of academic leaders and places some limitations on our understandings of the complete Faculty ecosystem that includes a professional staff who are also acting in leadership roles and interact daily with the academic staff.

## Conclusion

The case study reported in this article builds on discussions of distributed leadership in the literature by indicating that trust, clarity, and hierarchy are key enablers for how distributed leadership is experienced in higher education and its successful implementation as a leadership framework. Alternatively, these aspects of leading may also be constraints depending on one's position in the Faculty. Trust, clarity, and hierarchy, depending on how they are enacted, may enable distributed leadership if they provide opportunities to take up leadership and empower leaders. On the other hand, if trust and clarity are lacking, with power perceived to reside in those nearer the apex of the hierarchy, they instead may act as a constraint on distributed leadership. The findings indicate that a leader's position in the hierarchy had a significant impact on how distributed leadership was experienced and enacted. Leaders at a greater power distance from Faculty-level leaders experienced the implementation of distributed leadership as delegation rather than a distribution of power and what they saw as a genuine devolution of responsibility. Alternatively, Faculty-level leaders saw the implementation as part of an ongoing journey to shift leadership practice and empower leaders in the Faculty through greater information sharing and transparency. A lack of early discussions as to what distributed leadership might look like and what was to be distributed and how appears to have hampered efforts to distribute leadership more effectively and was a key lesson of the project discussed in this article. The faculty's journey towards distributed leadership continues, taking these lessons about what enables and constrains distributed leadership into account, with more opportunities for discussion among leaders via various avenues and increased development opportunities.

In the current challenging and complex contexts of higher education with significant changes in what constitutes success for University leaders (Heffernan, 2017; Heffernan, 2020; Loomes et al., 2019), distributed leadership has been broadly adopted as a way for leaders to navigate increasingly corporate management demands while also maintaining the collegial and communitarian character of the academy. To succeed, greater clarity is needed for all concerned around what will be distributed, to whom, by whom, and how. As the experiences from the case study show, while the stated goals concerning distributed leadership may point in the right direction, leaders' lived experiences may be very different and affected by existing academic and organisational cultures and antecedent power structures and hierarchies.

## References


Bartlett MJ, Arslan FN, Bankston A, et al. (2021) Ten simple rules to improve academic work-life balance. *PLoS Comput Biol* 17(7): e1009124.

Bennett N, Wise C, Woods PA, et al. (2003) *Distributed leadership.* Nottingham: National College of School Leadership.

Bento F (2011) A discussion about power relations and the concept of distributed leadership in higher education institutions. *The Open Education Journal* 4: 17-23.

Birnbaum R (2000) *Management fads in Higher Education: Where they come from, what they do and why they fail.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bligh MC (2017) Leadership and Trust. In: Marques J and Dhiman S (eds) *Leadership Today: Practices for Personal and Professional Performance*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp.21-42.

Bolden R (2011) Distributed Leadership in Organizations: A Review of Theory and Research. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 13: 251-269.

Bolden R, Petrov G and Gosling J (2008) Tensions in Higher Education Leadership: Towards a Multi-Level Model of Leadership Practice. *Higher Education Quarterly* 62(4): 358-376.

Bolden R, Petrov G and Gosling J (2009) Distributed Leadership in Higher Education: Rhetoric and Reality. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 37(2): 257-277.
Bosetti L and Heffernan T (2021) Diminishing hope and utopian thinking: faculty leadership under neoliberal regime. *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 53(2): 106-120.
Bush T (2019) Distributed leadership and bureaucracy: Changing fashions in educational leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 47(1): 3-4.
Croucher G and Lacy WB (2020) Perspectives of Australian higher education leadership: convergent or divergent views and implications for the future? *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*. DOI: 10.1080/1360080X.2020.1783594. 1-14.
Dollinger M (2020) The projectification of the university: consequences and alternatives. *Teaching in Higher Education* 25(6): 669-682.
Falls A and Allen S (2020) Leader-to-follower transitions: Flexibility and awareness. *Journal of Leadership Studies* 14(2): 24-37.
Gherardi S (1995) When will he say: "Today the plates are soft"? The management of ambiguity and situated decision-making. *Studies in Cultures, Organizations and Societies* 1(1): 9-27.
Gherardi S (2019) *How to conduct a practice-based study problems and methods.* Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Pub.
Gosling J, Bolden R and Petrov G (2009) Distributed Leadership in Higher Education: What Does It Accomplish? *Leadership* 5(3): 299-310.
Grice C (2019) 007 Spies, surveillance and pedagogical middle leadership: For the good of the empire of education. *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 51(2): 165–181.
Gronn P (2002) Distributed leadership as a unit of analysis. *Leadership Quarterly* 13(4): 423-451.
Gronn P (2009) Leadership configurations. *Leadership* 5: 381–394.
Grootenboer P, Edwards-Groves C and Rönnerman K (2015) Leading practice development: Voices from the middle. *Professional Development in Education* 41(3): 508-526.
Grootenboer P, Rönnerman K and Edwards-Groves C (2017) Leading from the middle: A praxis-oriented practice. In: Grootenboer P, Edwards-Groves C and Choy S (eds) *Practice Theory Perspectives on Pedagogy and Education: Praxis, Diversity and Contestation*. Singapore: Springer Singapore, pp.243-263.
Hartley D (2009) Education policy, distributed leadership and socio-cultural theory. *Educational Review* 61: 139-150.
Harvey M and Jones S (2021) Enabling leadership capacity for higher education scholarship in learning and teaching (SOTL) through action research. *Educational Action Research* 29(2): 173-190.
Heffernan TA (2017) A fair slice of the pie? Problematising the dispersal of government funds to Australian universities. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 39(6): 658-673.
Heffernan TA (2020) Examining university leadership and the increase in workplace hostility through a Bourdieusian lens. *Higher Education Quarterly* 2020(00): 1-13.
Hood C (1991) A public management for all seasons. *Public Administration* 69(1): 3-19.
Jones S and Harvey M (2017) A distributed leadership change process model for higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management* 39(2): 126-139.
Jones S, Harvey M, Hamilton J, et al. (2017) Demonstrating the impact of a distributed leadership approach in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management* 39(2): 197-211.
Jones S, Harvey M, Lefoe G, et al. (2014) Synthesising theory and practice: Distributed leadership in higher education. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 42(5): 603-619.
Jones S, Lefoe G, Harvey M, et al. (2012) Distributed leadership: A collaborative framework for academics, executives and professionals in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management* 34(1): 67-78.
Lipscombe K, Tindall-Ford S and Grootenboer P (2020) Middle leading and influence in two Australian schools. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 48(6): 1063-1079.

Loomes S, Owens A and McCarthy G (2019) Patterns of recruitment of academic leaders to Australian universities and implications for the future of higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 41(2): 137-152.

Lumby J (2013) Distributed leadership: The uses and abuses of power. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 41(5): 581-597.

Lumby J (2019) Distributed Leadership and bureaucracy. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 47(1): 5-19.

Nicolini D (2009) Articulating practice through the Interview to the Double. *Management Learning* 40(2): 195-212.

Packendorff J and Lindgren M (2014) Projectification and its consequences: Narrow and broad conceptualisations. *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences* 17(1): 7-21.

Parker G (2015) Distributed leadership in English schools in 2014. *Management in Education* 29(3): 132-138.

Raelin J (2011) From leadership-as-practice to leaderful practice. *Leadership* 7(2): 195-211.

Sewerin T and Holmberg R (2017) Contextualizing distributed leadership in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development* 36(6): 1280-1294.

Smylie MA, Mayrowetz D, Murphy J, et al. (2007) Trust and the Development of Distributed Leadership. *Journal of School Leadership* 17(4): 469-503.

Spillane JP (2005) Distributed leadership. *The Educational Forum* 69(Winter 2005): 143-150.

Spillane JP, Halverson R and Diamond JB (2001) Investigating school leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Educational Researcher* 30(3): 23-28.

Spillane JP, Halverson R and Diamond JB (2004) Towards a theory of leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 36(1): 3-34.

Tian M, Risku M and Collin K (2016) A meta-analysis of distributed leadership from 2002 to 2013:Theory development, empirical evidence and future research focus. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 44(1): 146-164.

Woods PA (2016) Authority, power and distributed leadership. *Management in Education* 30(4): 155-160.