A distributed approach to leadership in an academic department in a South African university: An exploratory case study

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

(Educational Leadership and Management)

Rhodes University

By

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December 2022

Acknowledgements

Firstly and foremost, I must thank God Almighty for the wisdom and grace that sustained me throughout the completion of this project. Thank you again for affording me this great opportunity to pursue my first master's degree at Rhodes University.

Secondly, I'd like to thank my two supervisors, Dr Farhana Kajee and Professor Callie Grant, for their encouragement, guidance, advice, and motivation throughout my research. Their professional guidance, ongoing motivation, and high expectations contributed significantly to this thesis's completion. I am grateful to you and have been fortunate to work with caring supervisors. Your vast knowledge and meticulous editing have greatly benefited me.

Thirdly, I would like to thank all the participants from the university academic department who took the time to speak with me and share their insights and experiences. They generously gave up their time to participate in my research and made this project a reality. They were critical to the success of the study.

I am grateful to all my friends and acquaintances who prayed for me while I was studying. May God abundantly bless them, and please continue to pray for others studying.

Fourthly, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to:

Mr Paulus Nghinamwame (acting principal) and the Onampadhi Combined School staff for their patience and support throughout my studies.

Johanna Ndamononghenda Nahweka, my friend, for your never-ending encouragement, motivation, and advice.

Mr Robert Kraft, thank you for making me feel at home away from home during my stay in the university town

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my mother, Tabita Nghishekwa, for her wisdom and prayers. She has groomed and shaped me into the person I am today, and this degree is in her honour.

Abstract

The Head of Department (HOD) position at a university has traditionally been viewed as an individual construct. However, due to the demanding nature of such a position, it is not sought-after, as it remains exclusive and unappealing to many academics. Moreover, it is a position that does not encourage inclusive leadership. Tension and role ambiguity are known to arise between the scholarly project on the one hand and management and administrative matters on the other. To address challenges associated with this singular leadership position, an academic department at a South African university adopted a distributed leadership approach in their department as a research experiment. My study was based on this research experiment.

I designed this research as an exploratory case study, guided by a socio-cultural conceptualisation of distributed leadership that included a leader-plus and a practice aspect, defined as a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers and their situation. This qualitative case study aimed to describe and explain how a distributed leadership approach was understood and practised in an academic department. It also investigated the enablements and constraints of the approach. Data were generated through document analysis, observation, and individual and focus group interviews. The participants in this study included the departmental leadership team and the department's academic and administrative staff. Unfortunately, my study took place during the global COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdowns. I had no choice but to adapt my data generation methods due to lockdown restrictions. As a result, most data generation was done via online communication.

The study used inductive and abductive analysis to make the data meaningful to the reader. The findings revealed that different participants had different ideas about distributed leadership. Distributed leadership was understood as a socio-cultural practice rather than an individual practice with multiple leaders in relational practice. In addition, this approach was understood as a way of developing and sharing expertise by encouraging teamwork, collegiality and collective decision-making which aligns with the notion of democratic decision-making which creates a platform for the enablement of leadership in others.

The study further explored how distributed leadership was practised. The findings were that the HOD position, usually a one-person role, was reconceptualised as a HOD team comprised of three academics and the departmental administrator. The HOD team divided the work among themselves, and this was done according to each individual's expertise. In addition, leadership within the academic department was not limited to the HOD team but stretched across the department; thus,

multiple leaders were evident. Therefore, based on the data, this study discovered that a distributed approach values leadership expertise in others. Consequently, it can be used to promote an inclusive environment in which any organisation member can lead. Inclusivity in the decision-making process was also regarded as a strong practice in the academic department. As a result, this study contends that those in formal positions can develop leadership in others through a distributed leadership approach. Through that, lecturer leadership was enacted through formal faculty and university structures and informally as and when the situation required it. The enablements of this departmental leadership approach included the structural innovation of the Friday check-in as well as the buddy system. These two innovations provided the space for collegiality and the development of voice and leadership. The consultative nature of the HOD team was also viewed as an enablement.

Certain factors constrained the distributed leadership approach, one of which was the tension between the hierarchical structure of the university and the more horizontal, distributed leadership approach being piloted in the academic department. In addition to that, another constraint was also very real with the transition to Zoom as an online teaching, learning and supervision platform as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The final constraint was experienced concerning the department's history, as it was within a historically White university in South Africa. The effects of this history impacted the departmental culture and, as we know from the literature, institutional culture is extremely difficult to change.

Finally, the study concluded that conceptualising distributed leadership as a sociocultural practice with leader-plus and practice aspects provides descriptive language and a solid theoretical and analytical framework for a distributed leadership study. The study makes an important knowledge contribution in the African Higher Education context as limited research has been carried out in this area. Furthermore, in terms of practice, my study serves as a stimulus for leadership discussions that are beneficial to everyone involved in educational institutions as they promote a level of leadership reflexivity, currently absent in many institutions.

Keywords: Higher Education, Head of Department, Leadership and Management, Distributed Leadership

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List of Acronyms

COVID-19	Coronavirus disease of 2019
ELM	Education Leadership and Management
Head of Department	HOD

CHAPTER ONE: SETTING THE SCENE

1.1 Introduction

I am a Namibian school principal and am interested in educational leadership in schools and universities. Therefore, the focus of this study is educational leadership, and the site of the study is a university academic department. The study was particularly interested in a distributed approach to departmental leadership. This opening chapter sets the scene for the research. It opens by discussing the background and problem space of the research. It provides the rationale for the study and the purpose statement and then introduces the main concepts and theory. Thereafter, the chapter sketches the methodology and methods used. Finally, the chapter summarises the overall structure of this thesis.

1.2 Background and Problem Space

My interest in the topic of my study arose when I registered for a master's degree in 2020 at a South African university. I was excited about the opportunity to study in a different country on a full-time basis. Being a full-time student allowed me to be in a university academic department on campus. Like many other university academic departments, the department that provided this case study has a history of the Head of Department (HOD) leadership role as a one-person role, i.e. the accepted traditional way of leading a department. There I became involved in the departmental discussions on leadership succession, which became a problematic space. When the tenure of the previous leadership was over, no one in the department wanted to take up the role of HOD. However, as of 1st July 2019, the department embraced a distributed leadership approach and is led and managed by an HOD team. This study focused on how this distributed approach to departmental leadership is understood and practised. My interest was piqued, and I began reading literature about the HOD's role in a higher education context.

Reading about higher education leadership and management studies made me realise how important higher education leadership research is in the global south, especially studies that use a distributed leadership approach. For example, Esen et al. (2020) posit that "the available knowledge about higher education leadership has largely been created and shaped by scholars from the U.S.A" (p. 269). Furthermore, Floyd and Fung (2017, p. 1489) also found

that "while the notion of distributed leadership has been explored widely in school leadership research, it has been less widely applied to research exploring the higher education sector". Because of this, scholarly work on higher education leadership remains sparse (Esen et al., 2020).

Despite studies indicating the "potential appropriateness of distributed leadership for higher education, the literature remains focused on seeking to identify common approaches and similarities that will make it possible to implement distributed leadership approaches across the diversity of universities" (Jones, 2014, p. 132). Esen et al. (2020) also state that "despite the existing research, it is surprising that no attempt has yet been made to build a comprehensive "picture of this literature" in relation to the higher education leadership research (p. 260). This is to say further that distributed leadership has not been as "widely applied to research exploring the higher education sector" (Floyd & Fung, 2017 p. 1489). As a result, there is a void in the academic research on leadership in institutions of higher learning (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016, p. 140). Undoubtedly then, "further research is needed on what action is required to implement a distributed leadership approach" (Jones, 2014, p. 133).

Esen et al. (2020) emphasise the vital point that additional research in leadership studies in higher education is essential because the research is still in its early phases of development. I agree with Harris and DeFlaminis (2016) when they state that evidence is urgently needed "about the actual practice of distributed leadership" (p. 144). This type of research is "particularly important given the diversity of higher education and the need for leadership to be capable of adaptation to different disciplinary perspectives" (Jones, 2014, p. 133). Esen et al. (2020, p. 269) also support that "conducting research on leadership in higher education is very important given the fact that the best practices are often supported by the research-based evidence". This is what has prompted me to carry out this research.

One of the contextual challenges to this study was the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown in 2020. This global pandemic affected my study because, as Rule (2021) explains, students were instructed to leave campus and, in the case of international students, return home where possible. I, therefore, had to return home to Namibia and continue my degree remotely. Furthermore, COVID-19 influenced my study's focus and the academic department's leadership as a consequence of the move to online formats.

1.3 Rationale – Why This Research?

This study aimed to explore the leadership practices, systems and processes in the department as a case study since the reconceptualised HOD role, through interviews, document analysis and observation. The study examined how leadership is stretched over (Spillane, 2006) the leadership team occupying the formal HOD position and other department staff members who lead academic courses and research programmes, among others. In this distributed perspective on leadership, leadership is understood as a socio-cultural practice with prominence given to key aspects of the situation, including organisational routines, structures and tools (Spillane, 2005). In this study, I wanted to understand the perceptions of distributed leadership held by staff members and the leadership practices taken up amongst staff (regardless of their formal position). I was also interested in the enablements and constraints of this distributed leadership approach.

As a school principal in a Namibian school and grappling with leadership challenges, my interest in this study stemmed from my professional and academic experience.

1.3.1 Professional experience

My country's (Namibia's) education system is constantly evolving to meet the needs of modern society. The Ministry of Education replaced the 2010 National Curriculum for Basic Education with a new one in 2016. This policy ensures the continuity of the Namibian education system's founding principles as described in "Towards Education for All". A democratic education system is organised around "broad participation in decision making and the clear accountability of those who are our leaders" (Ministry of Education and Culture [MEC], 1993, p. 42). As a result, studying contemporary education leadership approaches will provide me with the knowledge which I can apply from a higher education context to a schooling context. I believe that carrying out this research has provided me with the knowledge that will help me contribute to leadership discussions in the Namibian education system and our institutions.

1.3.2 Academic experience

As academics, we need more accounts of what distributed leadership looks like in practice; therefore, the distributed leadership approach must be tested (Harris & Spillane, 2008). Jones et al. (2012) further argue that "new approaches to leadership in higher education are being explored as universities face the dual challenges of competing in a globally competitive world

while at the same time designing opportunities to build and develop sustainable leadership" (p. 67). Regarding a distributed perspective on leadership, Grant (2017) argues that "in South Africa, the empirical research base is particularly small, given the newness of the concept in educational research" (p. 462). Therefore, research into this 'new' leadership approach is needed to traverse a very different organisational landscape (Harris & Spillane, 2008). Furthermore, Hallinger (2018) contends that there is a need for scholars in Africa to focus their efforts on conducting research that will strengthen the African knowledge base in Educational Leadership and Management. Finally, what this study has also offered to the leadership literature at the academic level, is that no study, either on the African continent or globally, has explored the distributed leadership approach in the context of a university department coping with the unprecedented challenges of a pandemic such as COVID-19.

1.4 Purpose Statement

This study was designed as a qualitative case study that aimed to describe and explain how a distributed leadership approach is understood and practised in a university academic department.

1.4.1 Research questions

1. How is a distributed leadership approach understood in a university academic department?

2. How is a distributed leadership approach practised in a university academic department?

3. What are the enablements of this departmental leadership approach?

4. What are the constraints to this departmental leadership approach?

1.5 Conceptual and Theoretical Tenets

Educational leadership and management are the two major concepts that underpinned this study. As the focus of this study was a distributed leadership approach in a university academic department, the main theoretical and analytical framework was distributed leadership. The literature alerts us that there are many common-sense understandings of distributed leadership and so this study intentionally drew on the work of Spillane and his colleagues (Spillane et al., 2004; Spillane, 2006). Spillane's (2006) conceptualisation of

distributed leadership involves the leader-plus and practice components. He argues for leadership to be understood as a socio-cultural practice, and he raises the important point of the situatedness of leadership practice. The leader-plus aspect acknowledges that leading and managing an institution can involve a group of people, whereas the practice aspect emphasises the practice of leading and managing. I agree with Spillane that a distributed leadership perspective can "be used as a frame to help researchers decide what to look at when they investigate leadership" (p. 10). Chapter Two of this thesis discusses these conceptual and theoretical tenets in detail.

1.6 Methodology

This study adopted an interpretive research approach that aimed to make meaning and understand the phenomenon of my study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rowlands, 2005). This interpretive technique was appropriate for this study because it helped explore the distributed leadership approach implemented in the university academic department and, more specifically, how the concept was understood and practised. This study was designed as a qualitative case study which allowed me to "explore distributed leadership in context using a variety of data sources" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545).

Concerning sampling, the university academic department was purposely chosen because it adopted a distributed leadership approach (Merriam, 2009). All departmental staff members, the entire population of about 25 academics and administrators, were invited to participate in this study. Fifteen participants contributed to the data generation process.

I mentioned earlier that my study plans were interrupted by COVID-19. At the start of the pandemic in March 2020**,** I was in the process of developing my proposal. Consequently, I had to think strategically about how I would generate my data, given that I would be working online for the data generation process. I, therefore, adopted two main methods of data generation; document analysis and interviews. Observation and reflective journaling helped and enhanced the trustworthiness of the study. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data (Merriam, 2009).

I was an "outsider" to the South African higher education system as a researcher and Namibian school principal, which allowed me to somewhat distance myself from the politics and subjectivities of the academic department under investigation. However, my background as a pioneer in education cut across geographic boundaries and created some synergy, giving

me a modicum of "insider" status. I expand on the methodological considerations further in Chapter Three.

1.7 Outline of the Chapters in the Thesis

As already mentioned, in this opening chapter I provided background information and the study's contextual framework. I also explained what sparked my interest in conducting this research. I then opened up the study, section by section.

In Chapter Two, I examine some of the literature by providing a brief overview of the field of Educational Leadership and Management (ELM) and the distinction between the two most important concepts, leadership and management. In addition, the traditional perspectives on leadership theories and more contemporary leadership theories are explained. This chapter concludes by discussing distributed leadership theory as the theoretical and analytical framework of the study. Finally, the HOD's role in a university is discussed.

Chapter Three discusses the research methodology and orientation, including how the participants were chosen. It elaborates on the data generation methods used in the research, particularly interviews and document analysis. Finally, the chapter discusses the data analysis and how I traversed ethics to ensure the study's credibility.

In Chapter Four, I present and discuss the study's findings, which are organised in response to the four research questions. In my presentation, I discuss staff members' perceptions of the distributed leadership approach used to lead their department. I also discuss how distributed leadership has been implemented in the department and the benefits and drawbacks of this leadership approach.

In the fifth and final chapter, I summarise the findings and discuss the implications of this study for distributed leadership research and practice.

CHAPTER TWO: EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP: CONCEPTS, HISTORY AND THEORIES

2.1 Introduction

Given that this study is a leadership study, this chapter provides a brief review of the literature on educational leadership. A brief historical overview of the field of ELM is mapped. The main concepts of ELM are discussed and the relationship between them is interrogated. Thereafter, some of the pertinent theories in the field are presented. Distributed leadership as the theoretical and analytical framework for this study is then given attention. As this study is a higher education leadership study, I conclude this chapter with a review of the literature on higher education leadership and look particularly at the position of the HOD.

2.2 The Field of Educational Leadership and Management

In this section, I will provide a short history of the field of ELM, the field in which school leadership work and university leadership work is located. I will also highlight some of the problems experienced in the field of ELM. I argue that there exists a need to understand these problems to promote criticality in understanding the leadership practices in the field in particular contexts.

Educational Leadership and Management (ELM) as a field of study began in the United States in the late 1960s under the name of educational administration (Bush, 1999). During the 1960s, "reviews of research in educational leadership" started appearing in published literature (Hallinger, 2012, p. 128). It later spread to the United Kingdom, where it was renamed ELM (Bush, 1999). From 1950 to 1960, programmes and reviews reflecting educational administration (leadership and management) in the United States grew and expanded (Bush, 1999; Wang, 2018). Since the 1970s, the term "educational administration" has given way to "educational management" and, in the twenty-first century, "educational leadership" (Bush, 2019). Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, "educational leadership and management" has increasingly replaced the word "educational administration" as the discipline's more popular name (Hallinger & Chen, 2015).

Various international research studies indicate that the field of ELM faces pressing challenges. Kajee (2021) states that "one of the problems emanates from existing theory in the field, which has been chiefly concerned with efficiency and organisational functioning" (p. 461). In addition, Christie (2010) states, "there can be no doubt that the landscape of leadership, management and administration is methodologically diverse and its central concepts by no means settled" (p. 697). Although this field has a wealth of worldwide substance with progressing communities of scholars and practitioners in numerous nations, its intended results are influenced mainly by interpreting practice in educational institutions (Bush, 2003). With such practices, there is only limited understanding of how "educational leadership and management is practised" (Hallinger & Chen, 2015, p. 2). Christie (2010) adds that "scholars in the field are not fully confident that the existing research base does justice to the nature of the field and the complexity of its central concepts, particularly in times of change" (p. 698). In addition to this, because of rapidly changing times, the challenge for educational leadership scholars and those who practice it, will be to redefine what their work as leaders will be. Therefore for us to succeed as scholars, "one would need to familiarise oneself with the origins and developments of the field to comprehend the contemporary field, with all its challenges" (Kajee, 2021, p. 467).

The field of ELM has, historically, been dependent on theory from other disciplines, such as commerce, psychology and management studies. Later, it progressed from being dependent on ideas developed in other settings and became an established discipline with its theories and empirical data to test their validity in education (Bush, 1999). While it would be inaccurate to say that there is no theory in the field, the idea of a "central unifying theory is a pipe dream" (Kajee, 2021, p. 467). As a result, one of the motivators for my research was to investigate the extent of this discipline's influence, particularly in education, through research and practice and to investigate educational leadership theories to better understand the dynamics of leadership in a variety of academic contexts.

This actively illustrates that one must thoroughly understand the two central concepts in this field, leadership and management, which will be discussed in the following section.

2.3 Towards an Understanding of Educational Leadership and Management

Understanding educational organisations requires an understanding of educational management and leadership (Bush, 2019). Many scholars have attempted to provide a distinction between these two concepts. One, therefore, needs to understand the differences between the concepts of leadership and management and define them appropriately before one embarks on a study. Toor (2011) argues that leadership and management are different and distinct concepts. Similarly, Northouse (2016) claims that leadership and management are not the same, and there is a notable contrast between the two. Some managers do not engage in leadership, and some people lead even when they do not occupy management roles, therefore it is erroneous to assume that all managers are also leaders. As a result, the distinction between leaders and managers is a topic of continuing discussion. While management and leadership are related, they are not the same, according to some scholars (Algahtani, 2014). My focus is now on these two ideas in the context of this study.

2.3.1 Leadership

Northouse (2016, p. 2) claims that "there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are people who have tried to define it". Because leadership is multidimensional, providing a universal definition that encompasses all aspects of leadership (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016) is not easy. Northouse (2016) states that "leadership has gained the attention of researchers worldwide. However, a review of the scholarly studies on leadership shows that there is a wide variety of different theoretical approaches to explain the complexities of the leadership process" (p. 1). The term "leadership" is therefore frequently misinterpreted. Some people describe leadership in terms that emphasise strategy and vision because they feel that leaders are those who are at the top of organisations. Others refer to management at any level as "leadership" to describe the most transformative components, particularly staff motivation and change management (Bârgău, 2015). Another way to think about leadership is as a process of guidance based on comprehensible ideas and viewpoints that result in a "vision" for an institution (Bush, 2007). In addition, Yukl (2013, p. 7) describes leadership as "the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives". In addition, Toor (2011, p. 317) contends that "leadership relies on personal power, informal ways and means of influence, one-to-one touch and communication between leaders and followers, and coherence between the goals of leaders

and those of followers". Therefore, leadership is the process by which one person motivates a group of people to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2016). The above definitions of leadership are contrasting views of different scholars, and my study aligns with the more contemporary views of Northouse (2016) who emphasises the communication between the leaders and followers working together to achieve a common goal.

In the next section, I will explore the notion of management.

2.3.2 Management

Educational management has also attracted many definitions from different scholars. Management is not about the organisation's transformation but about maintaining well-organised and successful contemporary organisational arrangements (Bush & Sargsyan, 2013). For Toor (2011, p. 317) "management predominantly relies on position power, formal authority, and control of processes through the power of a small group who take orders directly from the top". Similarly, Connolly et al. (2019, p. 506) also state that "the term 'management' is often used with an organisational hierarchy, with those occupying higher (management) positions in the hierarchy having more power and responsibility than those lower down the (management) hierarchy". The majority of management responsibilities are task-oriented and involve staff training, mentorship of high-potential workers, and dispute resolution while sustaining moral standards and discipline (Bârgău, 2015). In addition, Connolly et al. (2019, p. 505) state that "educational management in practice entails delegation, which involves being assigned, accepting and carrying the responsibility for the proper functioning of a system in which others participate in an educational institution, and implies an organisational hierarchy". It is, therefore, a system that allows others to participate in an educational institution by being assigned to carry out responsibilities through delegation (Connolly et al., 2019). Therefore it is "a job which takes care of planning, organising, budgeting, coordinating and monitoring activities for group or organisation" (Bârgău, 2015, p. 183). This is done through the position of power the leaders hold and the structural hierarchy that goes along with executing orders and imposing authority (Toor, 2011). Thus, in general, organisational goals are achieved using the process of management (Bârgău, 2015).

After defining the two concepts, one can see a relationship between them that makes them distinct and necessary in any context, as I will explain in the following section.

2.3.3 Relationship between leadership and management

Having defined leadership and management, Toor (2011) argues that these concepts cannot be differentiated because they overlap and complement each other. Because they both concern successful goal completion, involve influence, and include working with people, leadership and management are two processes that are comparable to one another (Northhouse, 2016). Earley and Weindling (2004), in much the same way, also claim that "most writers who make the distinction between 'leadership' and 'management' recognise that the two concepts overlap and that both are necessary for organisational success" (p. 6). This means that the two concepts are distinct but necessary in any context. This is how I conceptualise these two main concepts for my study.

Furthermore, since these two concepts cover part of the same area of interest, leaders, in practice, perform a mix of leadership and management to achieve the desired results (Toor, 2011). Therefore, management and leadership require considerable attention if educational institutions like schools and universities are to function efficiently and accomplish their goals (Bush & Sargsyan, 2013). Toor (2011) continues to say that leadership or management, on their own, cannot be relied on to achieve effective teamwork or organisational goals. As a result, organisations require managers with leadership skills and leaders with managerial astuteness.

Leadership in a higher education institution was the focus of this study, hence the concept of leadership – and not management – will be interrogated further. I now move on to discuss a range of leadership theories that I believe are relevant to understanding leadership practices in higher education institutions and schools.

2.4 Leadership Theories: A Brief Overview

As this is a leadership study, I turn now to discuss a few leadership theories that have permeated the field of ELM over the last few decades. Theories of leadership explain how and why certain people become leaders and use specific leadership styles (Simuka, 2021). Balbuena et al. (2020) also explain that a leadership theory "is an application of some aspect of leadership that is used to better understand, predict, and control the success of a leader"

(p. 54). I will discuss below why it is important to understand some of these theories that are related to education and higher education.

Much of the literature argues that leadership theories are historical constructs (Hunt & Fedynich, 2018) that provide lenses to view and comprehend leadership practices in educational institutions (Bush & Glover, 2014). Hunt and Fedynich are of the view that "the evolution of the study of leadership from the late nineteenth century to the present and beyond is important to understanding the present state of leadership studies and the various methodologies for identifying effective leadership" (2018, p. 21). Bush and Glover (2014) also mention that an understanding of theory provides a guide to leadership practice for principals and other leaders, including academic Heads of Departments in universities. The field of leadership research is constantly evolving, and the emphasis is now on the traits and evolutionary concepts involved in leadership formation rather than on a specific example of a leader (Hunt & Fedynich, 2018). I move on now to discuss a few of the more common leadership theories.

2.4.1 Great man and trait theories

Some authors have argued (see Sivaruban, 2021) that the "great man theory" and "trait theory" are similar leadership theories which are enacted differently in practice. The similarities are so because they both identify actions that any leader should be capable of in their leadership situations.

Firstly, the great man theory claims that leaders are born and only those brought into being with heroic potential could become leaders; therefore, this theory believes that great men are born, not made (Khan et al., 2016). Similar to the previous theory, this one contends that exceptional leaders are born, not raised, with a natural aptitude for leadership (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). Concerning the history of the great man theory, Sivaruban (2021) narrated that this theory "is the first leadership and pioneer theory written in 1841" (p. 58). Along with that, Yaya et al. (2016, p. 19) state that "during that time, leadership was anticipated first and foremost as a male quality therefore, the term "great man" was used".

Secondly, and in a similar way to the great man theory, the same assumption is also made by the trait theory that certain qualities or traits are inherited by people, which then makes them better suited to leadership – these traits are "honesty, intelligence, great sense of humour, initiative, persistency, ambition, desire to excel, competent, integrity and conviction,

responsibility, insight, self-confidence and inspiration" (Yaya et al., 2016, p. 12). In addition to this, Amanchukwu et al. (2015) state that "similar in some ways to great man theories, the trait theory assumes that people inherit certain qualities or traits that make them better suited to leadership" (p. 8). This method of discovering distinct leadership attributes is also known as the "Great Man approach" since it was believed that the greatest leaders of the past had a similar set of traits (Kovach, 2018, p. 2).

Trait theory is one of the most important leadership theories because of its focus on characteristics and human talents in performance development and integrity and trust in employees and the organisation (Simuka, 2021). From this excerpt, it can be seen that this theory emanates from business rather than education. Concerning this trait theory, Khan et al. (2016, p. 1) add that "leaders are born or are destined by nature to be in their role at a particular time to a reflection of certain traits that envisage a potential for leadership". Therefore, trait theories typically pinpoint certain personality or behavioural features that are shared among leaders (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). Kahn et al. (2106) note that finally, early theorists focused on born leaders and traits, which differentiated them from non-leaders. Thus the trait theory "focuses exclusively on the leader, not on the followers or the situation" (Northouse, 2016, p. 40). These approaches only speak to specific traits of a leader without considering the involvement of other leaders; thus, they do not account for the impact of situations and team performance. For this reason, Sivaruban (2021) states that the great man and trait theories have come under fire due to a lack of scientific backing and gender imbalance. Apart from this, Amanchukwu et al. (2015) claim that "these theories often portray leaders as heroic, mythic and destined to rise to leadership when needed" (p. 8). Therefore, these theories "failed to provide detailed information on measuring the degree of leader traits where no solid decision can be made" (Sivaruban, 2021, p. 58).

As a result of the above criticisms, I now turn my attention to the following theory, which is contingency theory.

2.4.2 Contingency theory (situational)

Historically, contingency theories were "developed based on the weaknesses of the great man theory, trait theory, and behavioural theories" (Sivaruban, 2021, p. 61). This theory believes that there is no one leadership style that is suitable for every circumstance (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). As a result, this theory "emphasises that leadership behaviours need to be adjusted

based on the case to the situation" (Sivaruban, 2021, p. 61). Yaya et al. (2016, p. 19) state that according to the first contingency theory, leadership is either task- or relationship-oriented. According to this theory, there is no one right way to lead since the leader must adjust to each scenario based on the internal and external aspects of the environment (Khan et al., 2016). Thus, in this theory, a leader might use different leadership styles which they deem appropriate in different decision-making based on the situation, condition and circumstances (Yaya et al., 2016). Similarly, according to Northouse (2016), to be an effective leader, they have to modify their approach to fit the needs of various circumstances. This theory "theorised that there was no unsurpassed way to lead and those leaders, to be effective, must be able to adapt to the situation and transform their leadership style between task-oriented and relationship-oriented" (Nawaz & Khan, 2016, p. 2).

Like any other theory that has received criticism from other scholars, contingency theory is no exemption. Sivaruban (2021) states that contingency theory's main criticism "is the complexity and the lack of flexibility. The contingency theory lacks adequate research, and the outcome of the study has failed to explain how certain leadership qualities influence followers' human relations" (p. 61). In addition, "it does not fully address the issue of one-to-one versus group leadership in an organisational setting" (Northhouse, 2016, p. 102).

Like Bush and Glover (2014), I contend that the theories raised thus far are primarily about individual leadership and the person of the leader rather than the practice of leadership. The theories give little thought to others involved in the practice of leadership. Hunt and Fedynich (2018, p. 24) note that leadership thinking therefore evolved and, in the modern era, leadership thinking can be best characterised as "an early transition from the prior period to a more inclusive and flattened group structure". Blessinger and Stefani (2018), in the context of higher education leadership research, raise the point about the particular challenge of making inclusion a high priority in the practice of leadership. They are of the view that inclusive leadership is grounded in the following leadership styles: transformational leadership, democratic leadership and distributive leadership.

2.4.3 Transformational leadership

This is a theory whereby the person leading engages with others by building relations, resulting in increased motivation and ethics in both the leader and followers (Yaya et al., 2016). In addition, Northouse (2016, p. 162) states that "this type of leader is attentive to the

needs and motives of followers and tries to help followers reach their fullest potential". This theory indicates that leaders can have great ideas and initiatives through their capability to identify the need for change, but they cannot implement them alone. After recognising the need for adjustment, they must win the support and commitment of others, develop a change-guiding vision and then implement the change (Khan et al., 2016). Blessinger and Stefani (2018, p. 3) further claim that "one important aspect of transformational leadership is its focus on continually improving the quality of the relationship between leaders and followers and fostering self-realisation in their followers". Therefore in this theory, when the leader's qualities are combined with the engagement of the followers, effective leadership is accomplished (Yaya et al., 2016).

This theory's claim that it is the leader who inspires people to perform extraordinary things is one of its flaws (Northouse, 2016). Therefore, it has ignored leadership shared among other members and failed to recognise the leadership potential of other leaders in the organisation.

What the theories so far have in common is that they focus on the leader – on the person in the formal position rather than on the practice of leadership – and who is included and who is excluded. Democratic leadership raises issues of inclusion and exclusion in the leadership process and I discuss this next.

2.4.4 Democratic leadership

Democratic leadership is underpinned by a critical stance which does not situate leadership in an individual but in the relationship between individuals; oriented "outwardly towards contestations of power, social vision and change rather than mere inwardly to organisational goals" (Grant, forthcoming 2023). Democratic leadership involves a moral purpose which promotes the core values of social justice, democracy and equity (Angus, 2006) and mainly concerns "cultivat[ing] an environment that supports participation, sharing of ideas, and the virtues of honesty, openness, flexibility and compassion" (Starrat, 2001, p. 339). Within a democratic environment, people "share power, authority and critical decisions as ethical beings, where they take collective responsibility and action, address equity concerns and serve others and the common good" (Woods, 2007, in Grant, forthcoming 2023).

One critique of democratic leadership is that its goal, democracy, is an illusion. In this regard, Woods (2007, p. 41) argues that democracy should be understood as a "journey rather than a state to be achieved".

Having discussed a range of leadership theories, potentially relevant to a higher education leadership study, I turn, in the next section, to a discussion on distributed leadership, the theoretical and methodological framework for my study.

2.5 Distributed Leadership

Given that there are several conceptualisations of distributed leadership, for the purposes of this study, I drew on an understanding of distributed leadership as a socio-cultural practice. Using Spillane et al. (2004) and Spillane's (2006) work, I began from the premise that distributed leadership is about leadership practices that originate from the actions and activities taking place in an organisation such as a school or academic department within a university. Distributed leadership is "about leadership practices rather than leaders, roles, functions, routines, and structures" (Spillane, 2005, p. 144). These leadership practices are inclusive and encompass "both the formal and the informal forms of leadership practice within its framing, analysis and interpretation" (Harris, 2013, p. 548). However, before I discuss distributed leadership from this perspective, I talk about why distributed leadership is now so popular.

2.5.1 The popularity and common sense understanding of distributed leadership

Among the many leadership theories, distributed leadership is one theory that has drawn the attention of many scholars. Azorín et al. (2020) establish that "distributed leadership is a topic which has gained a great deal of interest among educators in recent years" (p. 117). Thus, distributed leadership has become the "normatively preferred leadership model in the 21st century" (Bush, 2013, p. 543), in schools and higher education contexts. Therefore, it is "one of the most prominent contemporary leadership theories in education" (Hairon & Goh, 2015, p. 693) and has become more widespread recently and used by numerous organisations (Sol, 2020).

Apart from being a prominent contemporary leadership theory, many scholars argue that distributed leadership has many definitions (Grant, 2017; Hartley, 2007; Lumby, 2013; Timperley, 2005). Besides that, Hairon and Goh (2015, p. 695) also claim that "the term has been used interchangeably with shared leadership, delegated leadership and democratic leadership, even though these other constructs are not synonymous to the distributed perspective of leadership". Even though this confusion is seen in the literature of many scholars, it is clarified by Hol and Ng (2017, p. 225) that "what differentiates distributed

leadership from similar concepts of leadership, such as shared leadership, is that it emerges from the interactions of a network of individuals, from conjoint as opposed to the individual agency". I now share the conceptualisation of distributed leadership as a socio-cultural practice, drawing on the work of Spillane and colleagues.

2.5.2 Defining distributed leadership

In Spillane (2006), he and colleagues (Spillane et al., 2004) conceptualised distributed leadership as having two aspects: the leader-plus aspect and the practice aspect.

When it come to the **leader-plus aspect**, there is not only one leader but multiple leaders in the practice of leadership, as and when the need arises. This idea is similar to that of Azorín et al. (2020, p. 119) who clarify that "the conception of distributed leadership moves beyond the single leader to understanding leadership as a dynamic organisational entity process, where roles and tasks are performed through the interaction of multiple leaders". Said slightly differently, Shava and Tlou (2018, p. 280) explain how the focus of a distributed leadership strategy is not on the formal duties and responsibilities that have traditionally been held by persons in leadership positions. Instead, it is concerned with how many people enact leadership, as and when the situation demands.

A distributed leadership approach sees all people as potential leaders in an organisation. Gronn (2002) explains that "distributed leadership means the aggregated leadership of an organisation is dispersed among some, many, or maybe of all the members" (p. 429). Additionally, Harris (2004) claims that allocating leadership within an organisation is equivalent to maximising its human resource potential. Distributed leadership, according to van Dartel (2013, p. 11), "does not mean that everybody leads, but that everybody has the potential to lead at some time". Instead, all team members are encouraged to participate and demonstrate their skills in tasks they know best. In their critique, Zulkifly et al. (2020, p. 5) argue that "the involvement of multiple leaders does not necessarily mean that power is distributed but rather that each leader harmonises problem-solving for different tasks as they bring unique sets of leadership roles to the team". Therefore, cooperation, sharing of information and skills, taking the initiative, accountability and responsibility are all examples of distributed leadership (van Dartel, 2013).

The **practice** aspect is understood as the outcome of the institution's leaders, followers' and their situations' interactions (Spillane, 2005). Distributed leadership "focuses upon the interactions, rather than the actions, of those in the formal and informal leadership role" (Harris & Spillane, 2008, p. 31). Carbone et al. (2017, p. 185) explain that leadership is constructed through "action and interaction that is dispersed across the institution and evident within systems, activities, practices and relationships". Similarly, Mohamed et al. (2016) mention the focus on the interactions rather than the actions of those in leadership roles and, whether they are technically labelled as leaders or not, they acknowledge the efforts of all those who contribute to the practice of leadership. This conceptualisation of distributed leadership allows for "capacity building rather than control, with empowerment rather than coercion" (Azorín et al., 2020, p. 121). MacBeath (2005) argues that these distributed leadership practices "are formal, practical, strategic, and progressive practices". Hulpia et al. (2011) are of the view that when organisational leaders work together to mobilise members' intelligence and energy to achieve their common goals, certain behaviors and activities are fostered. Explaining Spillane's leadership practices from a distributed perspective, Sol (2020, p. 3) mentions that "the leadership practice is seen as a triangle in which each side exhibits one of the three aspects (leaders, followers, and situation). At the same time, their interactions are established over a specific period of time".

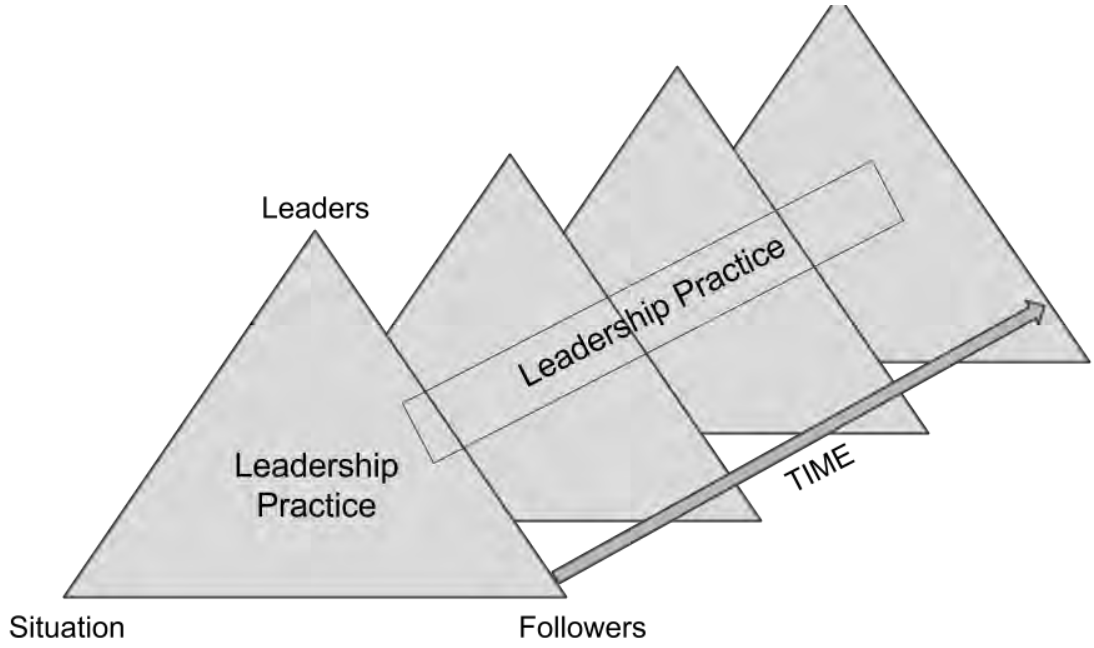

Figure 2.1: Leadership Practice from a Distributed Perspective (Spillane, 2006, p. 3)

Spillane et al. (2004) explain that the distributed leadership approach discussed above is informed by distributed cognition and cultural-historical activity theory. In keeping with its sociocultural foundations, this practice-oriented viewpoint emphasises "leaders' thinking and behavior in situ", with leadership activity serving as the unit of analysis (Spillane et al., 2004, p. 10). The "location or site of leadership is therefore integral to the leadership practice, as are the socio-cultural tools, routines, structures, and the institutional culture" (Haufiku et al., 2022, p. 5). According to this viewpoint, leadership is viewed as a "dynamic organizational entity process" (Azorn et al., 2020, p. 119), in which the researcher inquires about the characteristics of the sociocultural environment that enable and constrain practice and, in doing so, help define and redefine it (Haufiku et al., 2022; Spillane, 2006). This means that "material artefacts and tools are constituting components of leadership practice—they help define that practice—and are not simply devices that allow individuals to execute a task in some a priori determined fashion" (Spillane et al., 2003, p. 537).

Social connection is an essential component of leadership practice from a dispersed perspective (Harris, 2013). More significant than the precise leadership role or the specific leadership functions is how formal leaders engage with others, the reciprocal character of leadership or the practice of leadership (Harris, 2013). Similarly, Timperley (2005) argues that distributed leadership "is not the same as dividing task responsibilities among individuals who perform defined and separate organisational roles, but it rather comprises dynamic interactions between multiple leaders and followers" (p. 379). Spillane (2005) reminds us that the practice of leadership focuses not just on what people do, but also on how and why they do it. These questions are fundamental to any leadership practice.

The theory of distributed leadership argues that the emergence of leadership in an organisation is determined by the situation and the expertise of the organisational members. In other words, distributed leadership is concerned with what team members know best concerning their experience and knowledge and what they can bring to the leadership practice. Ramakrishnan and Abukari (2020) claim that distributed leadership "asks to identify and engage multiple leaders within an organisation based on their expertise" (p. 55). Echoing the same sentiment, Harris (2004) contends that this approach "means multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contour of expertise in an organisation, made coherent through a common culture" (p. 14). This is to say, in such an approach, team members are not only valued for the position they occupy but are also valued for what they know, which

can be shared through interactions with other team members. Jones et al. (2014, p. 607) also argue that distributed leadership "is less fixed and formal, focusing on leadership as an activity that offers a framework to encourage the active participation and partnering of experts and enthusiasts and the networks and communities of practices that are built to achieve organisational change". In their study, Ramakrishnan and Abukari (2020, p. 58) conclude that individual knowledge and collective insight at various levels are needed for distributed leadership to advance an organisation. Another important idea in distributed leadership is the centrality of the situation. In this regard, Spillane (2005) pleads that "my argument is not simply that situation is important to leadership practice, but that it constitutes leadership practice–situation defines leadership practice in interaction with leaders and followers" (p. 145). In the interaction taking place in educational organisations such as a university academic department, there will be situations that will require materials to be used to carry out these tasks. Spillane et al. (2004, p. 537) clarify that "material artefacts and tools constitute components of leadership practice–they help define that practice–and are not simply devices that allow individuals to execute a task in some a priori determined fashion".

Distributed leadership, understood in terms of the two aspects of "leader-plus and practice" (as discussed above), provides a neutral tool for theoretical and analytical work in the field of ELM. Distributed leadership is therefore neither good nor bad (Spillane, 2006). Instead, it offers a language of description – a heuristic – for describing and explaining the 'what, how and why' of leadership practice.

2.5.3 The important role of formal leadership in the distributed leadership approach

The paradox of distributive leadership, according to Fletcher and Kaufer (2003), requires appointed leaders to collaborate in order to weaken organisational hierarchy. Barnes et al. (2013) acknowledge that formal leaders are necessary for distributive leadership in order to effectively handle organisational conflicts and power struggles. Distributed leadership may, therefore, adopt a top-down leadership approach whereby the focus starts with those entrusted to lead. Van Dartel (2013, p. 12) explains that "a 'top down' initiative may acknowledge and incorporate the existing informal power of leadership relationships into more formal leadership structures in ways seen as appropriate by the senior staff who are creating the distributive structure or culture". Similarly, Harris (2013, p. 155) contends that "formal leadership plays a pivotal role in creating the conditions where purposeful and focused leadership distribution is more likely to occur". According to van Dartel (2013), a

strong leader is necessary to provide direction and guidance, inspire others' confidence and disseminate leadership. He further explains that "this means providing time, space and opportunities and knowing when to step back to enable staff members to contribute and participate in decision making and to establish concerted action" (2013, p. 12).

2.5.4 Qualities and organisational culture associated with distributed leadership

Some of the literature related to distributed leadership suggests certain leadership qualities. These include "open-mindedness, empathy, integrity and understanding of self" (Ramakrishnan & Abukari, 2020, p. 56). In addition, Ramakrishnan and Abukari (2020, p. 56) are of the view that leaders with these qualities adopt "a participatory leadership approach and encourage involvement of colleagues and assign responsibility to themselves". These qualities bring about a leadership coalition among the team members through their leader in a distributed leadership approach. Naumov et al. (2020, p. 4) state that "a leadership coalition is often powerful, it captures diverse titles, expertise, reputations and information enabling members of the organisation to set and achieve common goals". Through this coalition, members of the team will then work together by sharing activities through discussion and communication. The common methods used by leaders to distribute leadership and create opportunities for empowerment of leadership at all levels are sharing and discussion (Ramakrishnan & Abukari, 2020).

Distributed leadership can also be enacted through an organisational culture where the members continue with their formal day-to-day activities and are not confused about implementing the new leadership approach. Mohamed et al. (2016, p. 15) state that "a distributed leadership must be nurtured through organisational cultures that emphasise cooperation and teamwork and organisational-wide consensus among members around a set of shared assumptions, values and beliefs". They further clarify that "such organisational cultures are important in creating consistency in perceptions, interpretations and actions of organisational members, and foster unity of purpose and action" (Mohamed et al., 2016, p. 15).

Having discussed how distributed leadership is understood in the literature, I turn my attention to the benefits of a distributed approach to leadership.

2.5.5 Benefits of distributed leadership

One of the benefits of distributed leadership is that it can be inclusive of all organisation members, who all get a chance to be part of the leadership process. Naumov et al. (2020) state that "distributed leadership is far more inclusive as it goes beyond a focus on team-based leadership to capture entire firms as units of analysis and, importantly, takes into account their organisational environments" (p. 7). According to Ramakrishnan and Abukari (2020), this form of leadership builds the bonds within the team and between the members, where everyone feels involved, in contrast to the heroic leadership style which places most of the leadership responsibilities on one person. Distributed leaders promote ownership among the staff members, which as a result, makes them feel they are part of the organisation they work for. This leadership develops a sense of community among leaders and followers, a sense of being appreciated members of their school and a strong commitment to working together for the organisation's success (Rached & Elias, 2019). As a result of a collaboration that brings about teamwork, distributed leadership "embraces notions of collegiality and autonomy while addressing the need for management" (Gosling et al., 2009, p. 304).

In this leadership approach, decision-making can be more effective because it involves many people who bring different effective ideas to the table. For example, Sol (2020, p. 4) states that "distributed leadership brings about better decision making when more people with different backgrounds, experiences, skills, and expertise get involved in the process". In addition, Shava and Tlou (2018) state that distributed leadership more accurately reflects the division of labour that is frequently encountered in the organisation and reduces the likelihood of mistakes stemming from decisions made based on the limited information accessible to a single leader. Therefore, Ramakrishnan and Abukari (2020) assert that "in distributed leadership the result is better than individual actions because of its dynamics that allows everyone to share their expertise and imaginations and provides a scope to lead" (p. 59). Similarly, Shava and Tlou (2018, p. 283) hold the view that:

> Distributed leadership increases opportunities for the organisation to benefit from the capacities of more of its members, permits members to capitalise on the range of their individual strengths and develops among organisational members, a fuller

appreciation of interdependence and how one's behaviour or affects the organisation as a whole.

Musa et al. (2020, p. 181) concur, arguing that distributive leadership encourages all employees to bring about change as partners and provides guidelines for problem-solving, which helps to facilitate change.

Capacity building and sustainability are further potential benefits of a distributed leadership approach. Sol (2020, p. 4) states that distributed leadership "provides capacity building to sustain improvement efforts and manage changes because the practice of distributed leadership creates opportunities for people in both formal and informal leadership roles to work together in collaborative and supportive ways". Melville et al. (2014) also claim that as individuals engage in leadership, they learn more about themselves and gain a greater grasp of the problems they confront at work. This is why capacity building is essential to distributed leadership.

Having discussed some of the benefits of a distributed leadership approach, I offer some critiques of distributed leadership.

2.6 Critiques of Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership is an under-researched leadership theory which lacks empirical research. Ramakrishnan and Abukari (2020, p. 57) state that "existing research on distributed leadership in higher education is theoretically rich but empirically poor". In addition, Naumov et al. (2020) also argue that distributed leadership empirical research is still in its infancy, and there is little information based on actual experience. Distributed leadership has received criticism because of its different meanings and definitions used in the literature. It is "relatively a new concept, and it lacks a widely accepted definition" (Ramakrishnan & Abukari, 2020, p. 58). Grant (2017, p. 462) argues that "despite its popularity, the term distributed leadership is used loosely in the South African literature and lacks conceptual clarity because of its common-sense meaning". Harris, (2013, p. 547) argues that the phrase is sometimes misused as a convenient term to describe any shared, collaborative or extended leadership approach. Echoing the same sentiment, Harris and Spillane (2008, p. 32) maintain that because numerous phrases and definitions are frequently used to refer to "distributed leadership", there is conceptual overlap and confusion. Therefore, "this accumulation of allied concepts not only serves to obscure meaning but also presents a real danger that

distributed leadership will simply be used as a "catch-all" term to describe any form of devolved, shared or dispersed leadership practice" (Harris & Spillane, 2008, p. 32).

Another critique highlighted in the literature is that, although the members of an organisation are given the opportunities to lead, they remain with limited power compared with the formal leaders in the organisation. Zulkifly et al. (2020, p. 11) argue that:

> Distributed leadership may involve distribution of tasks, which to a certain degree requires leadership skills and ability to perform, employees are only exercising their leadership within the parameters of the distributed tasks, as they do not have the power to influence the decision-making.

Related to the issue of power, the distribution of authority and whether it can be distributed to other staff members in the same manner as the distribution of tasks needs to be questioned. Grant (2017, p. 462) questions: "Is it only technical tasks that are being distributed or is authority and responsibility also being distributed?" Furthermore, the distributed leadership perspective does not clarify how power is exercised between the leaders and followers in the organisation. This is relevant as Grant (2017, p. 462) suggests that "if a distributed perspective is to be useful as a conceptual lens for school leadership work, then we need to raise questions about the location and exercise of power within an organisation and examine what is distributed and how it is distributed".

To respond to the criticism of how leadership is distributed in terms of power and authority, Grant's (2017) sequential framing of distributed leadership is worth noting. Drawing from Gunter (2005), Grant (2017) developed a sequential framing of distributed leadership for the South African schooling context, which is useful in examining the distribution of power more closely (See Figure 2.2 on the next page).

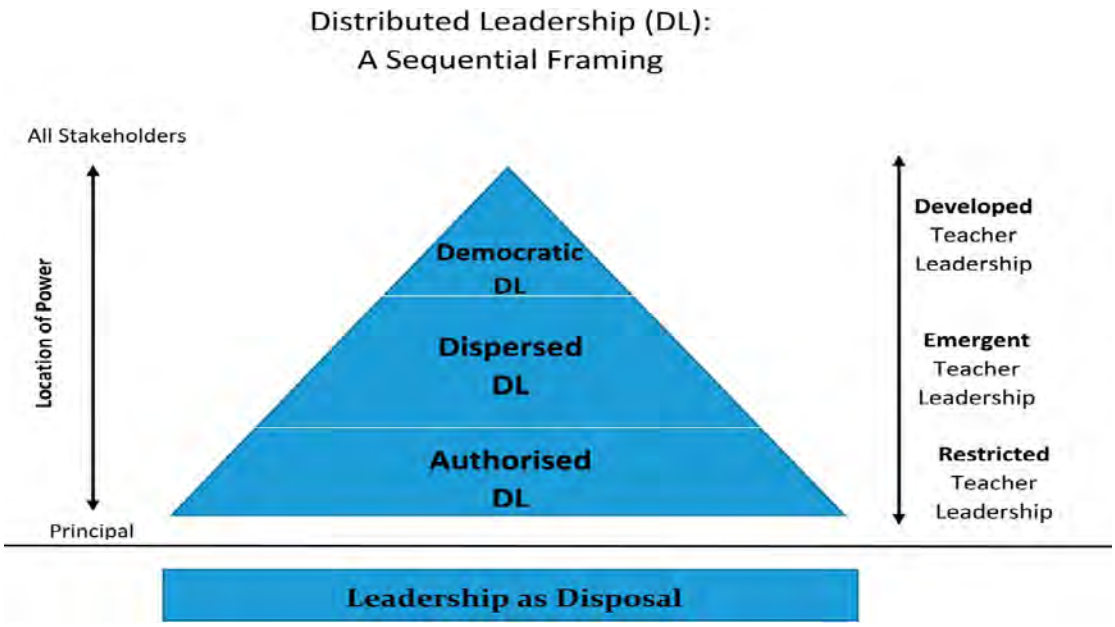

Figure 2.2: Distributed Leadership: A Sequential Framing (Grant, 2017, p. 466)

Firstly, distributed leadership as "authorised" is explained as "where work is distributed from formal leaders to others and is usually accepted since it is regarded as legitimate" (Gunter, 2005, p. 51). Through this approach, team members are invited and enabled to participate through informed delegation, and in the context of a sequentially distributed leadership framing, this is only seen as the beginning (Grant, 2017). Secondly, in organisations without a defined hierarchy, most work is done through "dispersed" distributed leadership. Most work is done in organisations using distributed leadership, which does not follow a traditional hierarchy (Gunter, 2005). Gunter (2005) further states that "this distribution is accepted through the legitimacy of the differentiated skills of those who do the work" (p. 52). Thirdly, according to Grant (2017), Democratic distributed leadership engages with organisational and societal values in a critical manner. It speaks for social change and social practice within the centre of learning by questioning the issue of power in relation to who is involved and who is excluded in educational leadership (Grant, 2017).

2.7 Distributed Leadership in Higher Education

Having discussed the distributed approach to leadership adopted in this study, it is important now to draw on literature regarding the take-up of a distributed leadership approach in higher education, given the study's focus.

The literature notes that "the notion of distributed leadership has been explored widely in school leadership research but has been less well used in higher education research" (Floyd & Fung, 2017, p. 1489) Some authors hold the view that distributed leadership is one of the most effective approaches to leadership in higher education. Jones et al. (2012) argue, for example, that "for universities to build sustainable leadership a new, more participative and collaborative approach to leadership is needed that acknowledges the individual autonomy that underpins creative and innovative thinking" (p. 68). Furthermore, according to Jones and Harvey (2017), distributed leadership can increase "involvement, participation, and consultation" as a substitute for managerialism (p. 129). Jones et al. (2012) believe that:

> The distributed leadership approach advocated embraces all institutional employees, engaged both in direct academic roles of teaching and learning and research or in indirect roles of designing new environments for learning and teaching, supporting students and providing the specialist and professional activities that underpin contemporary universities (p. 68).

The leader-plus aspect of distributed leadership is valued in the higher education literature. Jones et al. (2017) claim that distributed leadership broadens the definition of leadership to include practitioners who mentor and influence others in addition to acknowledging the value of positional leaders. In this approach, leadership shifts from being about position to being about involvement and action (Jones et al., 2017). Therefore "distributed leadership approaches in higher education need to be examined by exploring the interface between the perceived agency, identities and values systems of the leaders and the led, together with those of the organisational structures in which they are working" (Floyd & Fung, 2017, p. 1490).

2.7.1 University heads of department: A central phenomenon in my study

As already mentioned, my study is a leadership study in higher education. It is particularly interested in the position of the HOD and explores how distributed leadership was perceived and practised in a university academic department. Therefore, a discussion on the role of the HOD in a university academic department is necessary.

Historically, within a university setting, the HOD notion has been interpreted as a single-person position. Academics who have served as HODs at the university level claim that being an HOD is one of the most challenging jobs because of its complexity and difficulty. This is because of "the existence of bureaucracy which often swamped their schedules, leaving little time to focus on strategic leadership" (Inman, 2011, p. 237). The demands within these structures appear to be pulling department heads in two directions, as they are expected to accept responsibility for various new and very traditional managerial tasks while also maintaining some form of academic status (Degn, 2015). In addition, the competencies required for this position demand one to work under pressure, which adds to the challenging nature of such a position. With many roles and responsibilities in this position, HODs are at the centre of intricate relational interfaces made up of academics, students, the central administration, external entities, and support organisations (Anderson et al., 2008).

In most cases, academics appointed in HOD positions have a primary interest in research, not leadership (Inman, 2011). Management positions take academics away from academic research and scholarship to focus on leadership and management tasks assigned to their offices (Gmelch, 2000). Anderson et al. (2008) noted that as a result, many of these HODs believe that accepting these posts is a step backward rather than ahead in their academic careers. Therefore, these academics express frustration with their inability to spend much time pursuing their academic agenda, including writing and academic publishing (Gmelch, 2000). Gmelch (2000) further argues that many academics "would spend more time on their academic endeavours if they could but find it virtually impossible because of the demand of leadership duties" (p. 71). Therefore "the general impression is that the further you rise in academia, the more removed from your subject area and the lonelier it becomes" (Inman, 2011, p. 238). Consequently, academics have little interest in taking up these leadership positions, which, in their view, would take time away from conducting research and completing their academic work.

On the other hand, many scholars argue that limited training or a lack of necessary leadership and management skills can hamper the academics in these positions from succeeding. For example, Potgieter et al. (2011) state, "academics who have been placed in managerial positions [such as HODs] probably do not have the necessary skills" (p. 82). In addition, some felt that due to the change from an academic to a leadership position, their professional paths did not fully prepare them for the realities of leadership and there was a period of initial

disorientation and surprise (Inman, 2011). Bryman (2007) further elaborates that "when taking up their positions as Heads of Department, they often do not possess the skills needed to be effective leaders" (p. 7). In most cases, these academics commence their HOD role poorly prepared, and if asked where they learnt their leadership abilities, most will claim that they learnt from their job experiences (Gmelch, 2000).

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that the leadership and management of the university departments require change. In response to this, Floyd (2016) suggested that "much more needs to be done to ensure that academics who take on such roles feel supported and have the necessary leadership and management skills to deal with the highlighted difficulties of the job" (p. 20). However, while distributed leadership has been widely adopted in school leadership research (although to a lesser extent on the African continent), it is less common in higher education research (Floyd & Fung, 2017). As a result, research on a distributed leadership approach in a university setting is required. Floyd and Fung (2017) think that distributed leadership studies in higher education are crucial because as highly educated, independent and trained critics, academics are more prone to disagree with and question more conventional leadership models and behaviours. They recommend that these studies explore the interface between "the perceived agency, identities and values systems of the leaders and the led, together with those of the organisational structures in which they are working" (Floyd & Fung, 2017, p. 1490).

2.8 Conclusion

This brings us to the end of the literature review chapter. In the next chapter, attention turns to the methodological decisions taken in this study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Introduction

Chapter Three provides an overview of the study's methodological and analytical practices. In this chapter, I examine the research design and methodology of the study. According to Le Grange (2000, p. 422) methodology is "the theory of knowledge and the philosophical framework guiding a research project". Taking cognisance of this definition, I start by looking at the research approach adopted in the study. I then move on to describe aspects of the research design, providing a rationale for the decisions made regarding the selection of participants and data generation methods. I also describe how data analysis was tackled. Finally, issues of positionality and trustworthiness are also addressed.

3.2 Research approach: Qualitative Interpretive Case Study

A qualitative research approach was used in this study. This qualitative case study aimed to explore how the concept of distributed leadership was understood and practised in a university academic department. As a qualitative study researcher, I was interested not only in the physical events and behaviours that occurred but also in how the participants in my study made meaning of them and how their understandings influenced their behaviour (Maxwell, 2008). The participants' perspectives were considered regarding the existing leadership approach and its associated positives and challenges in the academic department. This meaning-making highlights the interpretive nature of my study.

As an interpretive study, the study's goal was to make sense of and comprehend concepts. Interpretive research "acknowledges the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is being explored and the situational constraints shaping this process" (Rowlands, 2005, p. 82). Interpretive research aids in our ability to comprehend human experience and communicate that understanding to a wider audience (Cohn & Lyons, 2003). These meanings are "varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). The use of an interpretive technique was appropriate for this study because it facilitated the expression of these understandings, practices, enablements and constraints of a distributed leadership approach in the university academic department. In summary, I concur with Cohn

and Lyons (2003) as I was able to look for meaningful and important knowledge and interpretations that could educate others about an experience or phenomenon, by considering the voices and ideas of the participants in my study.

This study was designed as a single case study. For Yin (2009, p. 46), a case study is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident". My research aligned with this definition because it examined distributed leadership practices in one university academic department. The goal of the case study method was "to locate the factors that account for the behaviour patterns of the given unit as an integrated totality" (Kothary, 2004, p. 113). Through that, I could identify and comprehend the factors that contributed to implementing the distributed leadership approach in the university academic department and the active participation of staff members in the department's leadership activities. In summary, this research aimed to better understand the relationship between a phenomenon, variables and context within a specific bounded system (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010).

3.3 Research Site

The research site discusses the area or location where the research was conducted. It, therefore, "implies the real world of programs, organisations, neighbourhoods, street corners and getting close enough to the people and circumstances thereby to capture what is happening" (Patton, 2002, p. 48). Furthermore, it is critical for the researcher to get closer to the research site because the action can be best understood when it is viewed in the setting in which it occurs (Patton, 2002).

The study was conducted in an academic department at a South African university. The academic department employs approximately 25–30 people, including academics and administrative personnel. The staff members are from different race groups and are of different ages with the majority being junior academics.

My rationale for choosing this academic department was that it was where the new leadership approach was implemented, which was the focus of my research. As a result, I wanted to learn how this leadership approach was perceived and practised in this university's academic department through this research. In addition, I was registered at this university and interested

in the leadership approach adopted by an academic department. To remind the reader, the research questions guiding my study are as follows:

1. How is a distributed leadership approach understood in a university academic department?
2. How is a distributed leadership approach practised in a university academic department?
3. What are the enablements of this departmental leadership approach?
4. What are the constraints to this departmental leadership approach?

Next, my attention turns to the study's participants and sampling.

3.4 The context of the study and its influence on the study's sampling and participants

I registered for my master's degree in 2020 as a full-time student at Rhodes University. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak dawned upon us while I was still at the onset of my study. Nevertheless, this pandemic has provided the context of my study as it has affected many research design decisions.

Sampling entails decision-making about which institutions or people to include in the study. Ishak and Bakar (2014) remind us that "the primary purpose of sampling for a qualitative researcher is to collect specific cases, events, or actions that can clarify or deepen the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon under study" (p. 30). In any research effort, selecting a study sample is a crucial step because it is rarely feasible, effective or ethical to analyse entire populations (Marshall, 1996). My sampling procedures encouraged me to use careful judgments "in selecting cases with a specific purpose in mind" (Ishak & Bakar, 2014, p. 32).

I chose purposive sampling for my study because purposive sampling, according to Merriam (2009, p. 77), is "based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned". This university academic department was specifically chosen for its distributed leadership approach. This study extended an invitation to all departmental staff members, a total of about 25–30 (including academics and administrators). I informed staff members via email and asked them to participate in this study. Of the total, 20 people agreed to participate informally,

which led me to believe that the study was feasible. Out of the 20 participants who provided consent, 15 took part in this study by responding to emails and participating in online interviews. Because the remaining participants did not respond to my emails, I could not interview them. I believe this is because some of them may have been unable to use online technology due to a lack of experience. The COVID-19 pandemic also became a challenge that put the entire country on lockdown. This may have affected participants' access to technology. In sharing my research plan, my attention now turns to data generation.

3.5 Data Generation

A qualitative case study helped me to explore and describe the phenomenon of distributed leadership in this university's academic department context using a variety of data sources to generate data. Data generation is "asking, watching and reviewing" (Merriam, 2009, p. 85). Document analysis, interviews and observation were the data generation techniques that elicited responses to my four research questions. These data generation methods were chosen to assist me in understanding how a distributed approach to leadership was understood and practised in the university department. Given the sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to adapt these methods of data generation due to the COVID-19 restriction. Most of the generation was done through online correspondence. After receiving ethical clearance, data collection began in mid-July and continued until February 2021 (See Appendix B).

3.5.1 Document analysis

Document analysis is a methodical process for studying or assessing written and digital documents (Bowen, 2009). Similarly, Mackieson et al. (2019) add that document analysis involves "finding, selecting, appraising, making sense of and synthesising data contained in documents both printed and electronic, which includes content and/or thematic analysis" (p. 968). This study drew on documents generated within the university department about the distributed leadership approach since 1st July 2019. These included, but were not limited to job profiles (of all staff members), agendas and minutes of meetings (check-ins, staff meetings, coordination meetings, administrative meetings, programme meetings, course meetings), reports, staff surveys, email correspondence, programme proposals and Zoom transcripts, where available. Permission to use these documents (before this proposal was approved) was given in an email the HOD team received from the Ethics Chair to discuss the possibility of such a study (Chairperson, email communication, 17. 06. 2019).

The documents used contained texts and words that had been recorded without a researcher's intervention. Therefore, they provided an accurate recording of events that had taken place in the department. In other words, documents were assumed as the most effective means of gathering data when events could no longer be observed (as a result of COVID-19) or when informants had forgotten the details (Bowen, 2009).

The challenge of collecting documents and records, even if they are already in electronic form, "can be time-consuming" (Yin, 2011, p. 148). An example would be reviewing email correspondence or staff minutes and recordings, which could take a long time and might ultimately be wasted time if some of these documents did not tie in with my study (Yin, 2011). Equally, documents usually do not provide sufficient detail to answer a research question and they sometimes are not retrievable (Bowen, 2009). As a result, a need to interview research participants arose. It was through the interview process that some of these questions could be answered.

3.5.2 Interviews

After completing the document analysis, I conducted individual and focus group interviews with members of the HOD team and some of the university academic department staff members (see Appendix C). I conducted interviews because participants were able to share their perspectives, stories and experiences of the department's distributed leadership approach (Wahyuni, 2012), Furthermore, I chose interviews because they involve face-to-face interaction between two or more people, each constructing the meanings of the other's words, expressions and gestures (Taylor et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the interviews for my studies were not conducted as planned. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which put the country on lockdown, I had to conduct these interviews online via Zoom. Although it was no longer done face to face, it was still a useful method for this study because, according to Nunkoosing (2005), the interview is the "most widely used method of generating data in qualitative social research" (p. 698). Similarly, Rowley (2012) also claims that they are "generally used in conducting qualitative research, in which the researcher is interested in collecting 'facts', or gaining insights into or understanding of opinions, attitudes, experiences, processes, behaviours, or predictions" (p. 261).

My interview strategy included individual interviews via Zoom which were conducted with three of the four members of the HOD leadership team. I conducted individual interviews to gain insight into participants' perceptions, understandings and experiences of the distributed leadership approach. A focus group interview with the entire HOD leadership team also took place via Zoom and individual interviews followed. A focus group interview via Zoom was conducted with three programme teams: the bachelor's degree team, the Postgraduate Certificate courses team and the Postgraduate degrees (Honours, Masters and PhD) team. The focus group interview was conducted to provide an interactive environment in which participants could openly discuss ideas with one another. In addition, there were four Research Chairs in this university's academic department, and I had two individual interviews with two Research Chairs through an online platform. Observations were another method used to gain a deep understanding of the situation.

3.5.3 Observations

Observation takes place in a setting "where the phenomenon of interest naturally occurs" (Merriam, 2009, p. 117). Therefore, it is a powerful tool for gaining insight and a deep understanding of situations (Cohen et al., 2018). Owens (2007) further explains that "using observational methods alongside interviewing attempts to explore, understand and interpret how others construct and experience their worlds" (p. 305). I observed departmental check-in meetings and an assembly where available staff members congregated to share ideas and reflections on their weekly activities or matters raised per the agenda. I attended weekly staff check-in meetings on my arrival at the study site earlier in 2020 and continued attending these meetings via Zoom during the lockdown period. I continued doing so until the end of October 2020. I was also available to observe any other meetings in the department where I was invited to do so (see Appendix D).

The observational data represented a first-hand encounter with the phenomenon of interest, as opposed to the second-hand account of the world obtained through the interviews (Merriam, 2009). This method is "independent of respondents' willingness to respond and as such is relatively less demanding of active cooperation on the part of respondents, as happens to be the case in the interview or the questionnaire method" (Kothary, 2004, p. 96). Whilst attending the check-in meetings, I took notes which served as a method of ensuring the reliability of triangulation and collaboration between the various findings in my study.

Instead of directly interpreting these sources, I used them to ensure trustworthiness for me to see what was going on.

The disadvantage of this observational method is that while the observer may have access to a large number of people and a wide range of information, the level of information revealed is determined by the group of members being investigated (Merriam, 2009). Another disadvantage is that "at times, the fact that some people are rarely accessible to direct observation creates an obstacle for this method to collect data effectively" (Kothary, 2004, p. 96). Furthermore, observation can be exhausting, particularly at the start of the study when everything is new, and it is unclear what is important to record and what is not. I was initially overwhelmed during the observation sessions, but they provided me with an insider perspective of the leadership practices in the academic department (Merriam, 2009). Observations must be "recorded in as much detail as possible to form the database for analysis" (Merriam, 2009, p. 137). Observations were recorded in my reflective journal which is discussed in a subsequent section. My attention now turns to provide the reader with an outline of how I analysed the data.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis is a "complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation" (Merriam, 2009, p. 176). It includes "organising, describing, understanding, accounting for and explaining data" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 643). Making sense of the data involves consolidating, reducing and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read (Merriam, 2009). Influenced by the work of Merriam, I adopted an analysis framework of different levels.

3.6.1 Inductive analysis

The inductive approach is a "systematic procedure for analysing qualitative data where the analysis is guided by specific objectives" (Thomas, 2003, p. 2). An inductive approach refers to an approach that uses a detailed reading of raw data to derive concepts, themes and models through the researcher's interpretations of the raw data (Jebreen, 2012). Jebreen (2012) further clarifies that in this method, no systematic process is used; instead, the outcome is allowed to arise from the frequent, significant themes found in the raw data. In this study, I used the inductive approach for coding and generating themes to establish connections

between my four research questions and the data that was collected. Inductive analysis was used to analyse data from transcripts of both individual and focus group interviews and various documents from the department. I noted the themes that emerged from the data during the content analysis and organised them into meaningful segments. This inductive approach allowed research findings to emerge from the "frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies" (Thomas, 2003, p. 2).

3.6.2 Abductive analysis

This study was conducted in the Social Sciences, and it was necessary to use theory as part of the interpretation to gain a deeper understanding of social meanings, structures and mechanisms (Danemark et al., 2002). The study used abduction, which implies that several possible frames of interpretation and theory needed to be chosen (Danemark et al., 2002). As part of my analysis, I drew on this study's theoretical tenets of distributed leadership. Among these theoretical tenets are the following: distributed leadership is understood as a social-cultural practice that is not limited to a formal position, is fluid and emergent, and emerges where there is expertise in an organisation. Spillane's leader-plus and practice aspect was used as an organising framework for seeing what lies within the data generated.

3.7 Researcher Positionality and Reflective Journaling

Mellinger (2020) defines researcher positionality as the "various relationships of an individual with the people and environment while recognising the influences and impact of personal background, traits, motivations, ideology and presence" (p. 93). Hallinger (2020) further emphasises the need to understand positionality because it can "help with identifying, mitigating, or even eliminating biases by improving the description or measurement of phenomena that are believed to be true, independent of context" (p. 95). Being an outsider, a master's candidate and a Namibian school principal rather than a South African academic has distanced me from the politics and subjectivities of the academic department where my study was situated. This meant I had to ask for additional clarification or details during the data generation interview phase to ensure that I understood and correctly interpreted what was articulated (Couture et al., 2012). In addition, as an outsider, I observed and questioned the study participants about their backgrounds, experiences and perceptions of the department's leadership approach (Renganathan, 2009). However, my experience as an educational leader transcended geographical boundaries and provided some synergy, a

degree of 'insider' status. My observer status in the meetings contributed to my developing insider status.

Reflexivity, crucial in this study, refers to the active process involved in every stage of a research project (Renganathan, 2009). Reflexivity is further defined by Mackieson et al. (2019) as an "awareness of the influence they are having on what they are studying and simultaneously, of how the research process is affecting them" (p. 967). Keeping a reflective journal revealed and captured the researcher's feelings while also minimising "unwanted bias which might have been caused by the researcher's introspection and insight into their reactions of feelings about ongoing work" (Yin, 2011, p. 175). Keeping a self-reflective journal entails reflection, examination, scrutiny and interrogation of the entire research process, including the researcher, research participants, data and the research context itself (Renganathan, 2009). The notes taken were not used in the findings because they served as a method of ensuring the reliability of triangulation and collaboration between the findings in my study which enhanced the trustworthiness of the study.

3.8 Trustworthiness of the Study

Researchers must indicate the "grounds and the evidence that they will use to connect their data with the claims made from, or conclusions drawn from, the data" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 245). A discussion of a few principles I embraced to enhance the trustworthiness of my study is briefly explained below.

Respect and dignity: I was aware of the ethical implications of this research and how to ensure that appropriate standards of conduct were followed in any study (Pring, 2001). To maintain respect and dignity, I upheld research ethics, or what researchers should and should not do in terms of their behaviour during research (Cohen et al., 2018).

Therefore, I informed staff members informally about the study's intentions and asked most of them individually if they wanted to participate in this study, to which many agreed. Thereafter, as a researcher, I needed "to show that there are no implicit constraints on a participant's decision to take part and that the decision is truly voluntary" (Yin, 2011, p. 46). To confirm that, I wrote letters to the department's staff members inviting them to participate in the study while also explaining their rights (voluntary participation, anonymity and the right to withdraw). Fifteen of the possible 25–30 participants were interviewed. The remaining participants declined to take part (see Appendix F).

Transparency and honesty: The participants signed consent letters because consent "protects and respects the right of self-determination and places some of the responsibility on the participant should anything go wrong in the research" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 122) (see Appendix E).

Accountability and responsibility: A planned study should also be presented understandably so that participants understand what they agree to do and are thus correctly informed (Yin, 2011). In the written permission letters, I showed an immediate plan for how the study would be carried out and its potential contribution to the literature and practice of distributed leadership. Furthermore, participants in this study had the option of remaining anonymous.

Credibility: There was a need to confirm that the data generated in this study was trustworthy. Credibility addresses "the issue of 'fit' between respondents' views and the researcher's representation of them" and asks whether the explanation makes sense in light of the description and whether that description is trustworthy (Tobin & Begley, 2004). In addition, Tobin and Begley (2004) further stated that credibility is "demonstrated through several strategies: member checks, peer debriefing, prolonged engagement, persistent observation and audit trails" (p. 391). In this study, member checking was accomplished by sending interview transcripts to participants to ensure they accurately reflected what they had said. Most of the participants responded to emails regarding member checking. In addition, corrections were made if a participant felt that what they had said was not written in the transcript. Lastly, trustworthiness was ensured through crystallisation which is defined "as incorporating multiple qualitative methods that exist on a continuum from traditional qualitative inquiry on one side to artistic inquiry on the other" (Ellingson, 2009, p. 240). This means that the qualitative nature of this study allowed findings to be crystallised to recognise the many truths that may occur through different forms of inquiry (Ellingson, 2009).

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter described the methodology and research design of the study. I also explained the site and participant selection for this study. In addition, aspects pertaining to data analysis were highlighted. Ethical considerations and approaches to enhance the trustworthiness of the study were made explicit. The analysis of the data generated from the university's academic department will be presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses the findings generated from the data. As discussed in Chapter Three, the data were collected through individual and group interviews and document analysis. In this chapter, I present a range of themes drawn from the analysis of the data which are organised in response to my research questions. To remind the reader my research questions are as follows:

1. How is a distributed leadership approach understood in a university academic department?
2. How is a distributed leadership approach practised in a university academic department?
3. What are the enablements of this departmental leadership approach?
4. What are the constraints to this departmental leadership approach?

To ensure the coherence of the chapter, the following codes listed in the table below are used.

Sources of Data	**Code**
Participants	P1– P15
Focus Group Interview	FGI, FG2, FG3
Individual Interview	II
Documents	Minutes of meetings Field notes Email communications HOD team reports

Before I present the findings in response to the first research question, I wish to make the following point.

What emerges in the data presented in this chapter is some confusion about the number of HOD team members in this academic department. Sometimes three members are mentioned and other times four. Firstly, this is because the team involved three academic members and one administrative member. Often, the administrative member was excluded from the data. Secondly, a portion of this research has been published in relation to research question 1 and 2[1].

4.2 Perceptions of the Concept of Distributed Leadership

Below are the themes that emerged in response to my first research question[2]: **How is a distributed leadership approach understood in a university academic department?** This section is organised according to the work of Spillane and colleagues (2006; Spillane et al., 2004) and draws on the central tenets of his theorisation of distributed leadership. This section also draws on data related to a theoretical understanding of the concept of distributed leadership and does not draw on any practice-related data. The practice-related data will be drawn on in the next section as it relates to Research Question 2.

4.2.1 Distributed leadership understood as a sociocultural practice

Evidence from the data revealed that participants understood distributed leadership as a sociocultural practice: "*It's a practice, a sociocultural practice that occurs in what I would call an intersubjective space"* (Participant 12, II). Based on the literature, Spillane et al. (2004, p. 9) state that distributed leadership "is also distributed socially, through other people in collaborative efforts to complete complex tasks". Such collaborative efforts are enhanced by mental action, which "is distributed situationally in the physical environment, that is through the material and cultural artefacts in an environment" (Spillane et al., 2004, p. 9). The practice of distributed leadership is, therefore, "*emerging through other people leading without a formal position, but they are partially leading"* (Participant 12, FG3).

[1] Haufiku, K. D., Grant, C., & Kajee, F. A. (2022) Towards inclusivity and sustainability in the leadership of an academic department in a South African University: a distributed perspective. *Journal of Education, 88,* 87-105. http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i88a06

[2] Please note that a small portion of Section 4.2 has been published in the article above.

4.2.2 Distributed leadership is understood as involving multiple leaders

A distributive leadership perspective stands in contrast to traditional leadership approaches, which focus on the individual leader or what Yukl refers to as the "heroic leadership paradigm" (1999, p. 292). Instead, distributed leadership is conceptualised as "leadership by many'" that is "leadership exercised by multiple leaders who work collaboratively across organisational levels and boundaries" (Azorín et al., 2020, p, 117). Data revealed that distributed leadership was perceived not as positional leadership but as giving a chance to anyone who could lead in a particular area. To support this, one of the participant's understandings of distributed leadership is that "*it is not about positional leadership at all. If you are talking about leadership from the distributed perspective, that is one aspect of leadership within a department"* (Participant 13, FG3). Additionally, another participant's understanding is that in distributed leadership, *"there isn't one central leader, there isn't one central focal person in a leadership position, but that there are, there is a team, and that is people who work together in that one position"* (Participant 2, FG 2). Sharing the same view, Participant 15 added that "*it is about creating more people in the department with experience of leadership"* (II). Therefore, defining distributed leadership, Gronn refers to it as "the aggregated leadership" of an organisation that "is dispersed among some, many, or maybe of all the members" (2002, p. 429).

The same understanding is also observed by Harris (2012), stating that distributed leadership "implies the relinquishing of some authority and power, which is not an easy task and a repositioning of the role from exclusive leadership to the new role" (p. 8). Data also revealed that those occupying formal positions should spread leadership across the whole department by trying to involve everyone. To support this claim, Participant 10 stated: "*Good leadership should be spread across an institution, and one should give an opportunity to other emerging leaders to take roles of responsibility"* (II). Participant 10 also perceived distributed leadership differently by stating:

> *I think it's an attempt to move away from a traditional leadership model that is often based on delegation; it's an attempt, I think, to get other people involved in leadership decisions and processes. It's an attempt, or it's understood, as a means to give younger members of staff a chance to take on leadership roles*.

Similarly, Participant 12 stated that distributed leadership "*is a form of leadership that assumes that everyone is a potential leader and, because everyone is a potential leader, then everyone is also a potential follower, or is a follower"* (II). In addition, Bush (2018) also shared the same understanding by stating that a distributed form of leadership "spreads leadership across the organisation" (p. 535). This could also mean that, regardless of position, "a person can initiate change, with others following" (Woods, 2004, p.5). Participant 10 also understood that distributed leadership means *"leadership is distributed across a team of people"* (II) and *"sharing the leadership responsibility amongst more people"* (Participant 15, II). "Distribution implies sharing responsibility for decision-making, for example, within leadership teams, and enabling staff to lead on specific activities, without tight accountability mechanisms" (Bush & Glover, 2012, p. 33)

4.2.3 Distributed leadership understood as a relational practice

While distributed leadership was understood as involving many leaders, it was also understood as a relational practice. This aligns with the thinking of Spillane (2006) that a distributed leadership perspective involves a leader-plus aspect and a practice aspect. Spillane reminds us that, "most importantly, the interactions among leaders and followers (as distinct from an exclusive concern with leaders' actions) are central in studying leadership practice" (2005, p. 385).

According to the data, distributed leadership is about people's relationships and how they rely on one another to have a strong working relationship. Participant 13 confirmed this by stating that distributed leadership "*is not about people but it's about people in relation to other people in pursuit of a particular motive or goal, and drawing on a variety of rules, documents, resources to try and ensure that goal or motive is achieved"* (FG3). It further means that socially, people work together as a unit guided by the rules that will help them to attain their goals. These relations come as a result of the leadership-plus aspect, which is explained by Spillane and Orlina (2005) as "the leader-plus aspect", which "acknowledges the work of all individuals who have a hand in leadership practice, whether or not they are formally designated as leaders" (p. 162). Similarly, Participant 12 stated that "*that's the space of relationships between people and objects or things. So leadership, for me, and a distributed approach, is all about relating. So it's how we relate to each other in the achievement of the object"* (II). Therefore, distributed leadership is "*dependent on a time in history and the situation"* (Participant 13, II). This is what Gronn (2002) calls intuitive

working relations by stating that "intuitive understandings are known to emerge over time when two or more organisation members rely on each other and develop a close working relationship" (p. 430).

The evidence from the data further revealed that departmental staff members' understanding of distributed leadership is that it is about the interaction that occurs when staff members are communicating and relating rather than it being about the structures or their roles in the department. From the data, Participant 9 stated that *"its emphasis is more on the interactions that take place rather than on structures and roles"* (II). Leadership-as-practice shifts our focus to the practice as it unfolds, bringing the verb "leading", rather than the noun "leader", to the forefront of our comprehension (Youngs, 2017). Therefore, understanding means people relate to one another through interaction, and distributed leadership drives the way people make decisions. Gronn concludes that "each person shares the effects of successful and unsuccessful collaborative effort" (2002, p. 433).

4.2.4 Developing and sharing expertise, thus enabling leadership in others

Data revealed that distributed leadership was thought to be about creating an environment that would allow others to lead and develop their expertise when defining leadership as a socio-cultural practice. To support this, Participant 12 revealed that distributed leadership is "*about creating a platform to enable people to develop new expertise and new experiences"* (II). In addition, participant 8 also stated that "*ideally, it is about giving opportunity so that where there is leadership potential or if someone feels passionate about a particular aspect of teaching and learning, there will be an opportunity for that person to take on a more significant role"* (FG2). Harris (2004) explains: "Distributed leadership concentrates on engaging expertise wherever it exists within the organisation rather than seeking this only through formal position or role" (p. 13). Similarly, Participant 12 stated that distributed leadership is about *"recognising things in people and then pushing them into situations that they might not feel necessarily comfortable with but that there's absolute potential for them in those spaces"* (II). This point is further supported by literature; Ramakrishnan and Abukari (2020, p. 55) claim that "distributed leadership asks to identify and engage multiple leaders within an organisation based on their expertise". Therefore, those occupying formal positions give other staff members *"an opportunity to prepare something"* (Participant 12, II), which they then have to present or share with other team members. This point was further endorsed by Participant 13 when they explained the following: "*So you are looking for leadership*

anywhere and everywhere within an organisation and you are creating an environment that's inclusive, trustworthy and generative, that people who have expertise where that expertise is needed one can draw on it and use it in the best interests of the organisation" (II). In addition, Participant 6 further commented: "*So for me, that leadership is that kind of leadership whereby the skills are distributed so that those strengths that people are having as a team, they share the strengths among them and then when they come back in their meetings"* (FG1). Leadership authority should be based on expertise rather than a formal position, and this type of leadership is frequently found within the larger professional community of teachers (Bush & Glover, 2012).

Participants' further understanding revealed that those in formal leadership positions should build on the strengths of others by providing opportunities for others to lead. To support this claim, Participant 12 stated that distributed leadership is about "*creating a space for people to share their strengths and to take leadership roles, or leadership roles in relation to those strengths and expertise they have"* (FG3). Participant 11 also stated that distributed leadership is about *"making sure that anybody can lead in any case, where they feel that they have a strength in that area"* (FG3). This is further confirmed by Harris (2013, p. 155), who states that "formal leadership plays a pivotal role in creating the conditions where purposeful and focused leadership distribution is more likely to occur". In addition, Participant 11 clarified that distributed leadership is "*not really only about mentoring somebody into a current position but making sure that anybody can lead in any case, where they feel that they have a strength in that area"* (FG3). Similarly, participant 12 further shared the same views by stating that "*it is also about the building of people's strengths, their knowledge, their expertise, and their experiences"* (FG3). This is the same view traced in the literature: "Distributive leadership is a phenomenon based on the strength of members as executors" (Musa et al., 2020, p. 181). Participant 13 also elaborated that "*it is about finding out their strength and their competencies and building on that"* (II). Sharing the same sentiment, Participant 11 stated that *"everybody has something to contribute, that they can share based on their strengths"* (FG3). Participant 8 also explained: "*So that is very new to me, and to some extent the devolvement, I don't want to call it the distribution of the power, but the devolvement of the power, has a different quality that people become responsible and they make the decisions and then that's it"* (FG2). Jones et al. (2017) state that distributed leadership "not only recognises the contribution that positional leaders make but also opens

the concept of leading up to include experts in practice, who guide and influence others" (p. 199).

The data also showed that in distributed leadership practice, the person in the formal leadership position tries to create situations in which people feel empowered to lead. Supporting this view, Participant 13 explained that distributed leadership is about "*searching for that leadership potential in a particular situation where someone stands up and says: I have the expertise and I can do something"* (II). Furthermore, it is "*about giving people confidence*" (Participant 12 II) and "*it's about recognising people, as leaders"* (Participant 12, FG3). Echoing the same sentiment, Harris (2004) contends that this leadership approach "means multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contour of expertise in an organisation, made coherent through a common culture" (p. 14). Similarly, Musa et al. (2020) assert that "distributive leadership is a practice of leadership that adopts the concept of empowerment and emphasises the interaction between organisational members as an essential unit" (p. 181).

Furthermore, data revealed that in distributed leadership, the person in the formal position could rely on someone capable of taking the lead in a given situation. Participant 13 clarified this: *"If I don't have that strength, I can rely on someone who has it to take the lead. I can only lead where I have strength, you know, and I am not going to be okay, at everything"* (FG3). This is because distributive leadership facilitates collaboration and collective practices. It is primarily about *"taking a lead on something that you're passionate about"* (Participant 11, FG3). This understanding of the concept aligns well with Bush (2018) who describes distributed leadership as a way to empower staff to "develop their leadership capabilities" (p. 535).

4.2.5 Encouraging teamwork and collective decision-making

In terms of understanding the concept of distributed leadership as a socio-cultural practice, teamwork and collective decision-making emerged strongly in the data. Teamwork is about "*trying to set up teams and making sure that those teams are in proximity with each"* (Participant 2, FG2). As a result of the data, distributed leadership is about team effort, with team members supporting individual contributions. Participant 2 confirmed this by saying "*my understanding of it is that there isn't one central leader, there isn't one central focal person in a leadership position, but there is a team and that is people who work together in*

that one position" (FG1). Participant 10 understood distributed leadership that "*leadership is distributed across a team of people"* (II). Furthermore, Participant 4 explained that distributed leadership is *"a team effort where there are still individual decisions which can still be made but with the support of your team"* (FG1). According to one transcript, "*there's not one person who is making all the decisions exclusively, decision making is a joint exercise"* (Participant 1, FG1). Participant 10 added that "*by its very nature a leadership team makes the decision collectively; in order to achieve that and in order to come to a decision, they will need to consult amongst themselves*" (II). Another participant mentioned that "*it's a team effort where there are still individual decisions that can still be made but with the support of your team"* (Participant 4, FG1). In the same vein, Participant 14 summarised distributed leadership as follows: *"Learning about leadership from each other, it's about teamwork, you are never alone because there's always support"* (FG3).

This concept of teamwork is consistent with the findings of Ramakrishnan and Abukari (2020), who explain how "this type of leadership enhances the relationship within and between the teams and makes everyone feel involved and thus reduces the stress on one leader in contrast to the heroic leadership style which puts enormous amount of stress on the leader" (p. 55). Participant 9 also mentioned that "*this is another example of an inclusive, collaborative team approach"* (II). It promotes staff members' freedom of participation in discussion platforms. Participant 13 further added that distributed leadership, "*is about authentic involvement in decision-making, not just being told what to do"* (II) because "being told what to do does not empower leaders" (Arar & Taysum, 2020, p. 756).

4.2.6 Towards inclusive leadership practices

Data also revealed that participants believed that when leadership is distributed among people, it promotes inclusivity in decision-making in the department. Expanding leadership roles creates opportunities for team members to be more inclusive. To back up this claim, Participant 9 stated: "*So if you distribute something you don't put everything in one place, you distributed it equally, so that if I look at the balancing, then so that there's a balance and so that the one end of the scale shouldn't weigh more than the other end"* (II). As a result, "it empowers the many eyes, ears, and brains in the organisation, rather than the few" (Woods, 2004, p. 5). Participant 13 was also of the opinion that leadership should be distributed as "*it's far more inclusive"* (II) and similarly, Participant 10 expressed the same opinions that, "*there are far more equity and inclusivity imperatives irrespective of whether that person is*

now capable and proficient to do that". Furthermore, participant 13 defines distributed leadership by stating that it is "*far more democratic" and "you try to be as transparent as possible so that people see what we are doing and what we are planning to do"* (II). The excerpt by Fusarelli et al. is relevant in this regard:

> Distributive leadership is a key component of deliberative democracy because deliberative democracy imposes those same duties and responsibilities on citizens the responsibility to participate in decision making, to stay informed to make the most informed decisions possible, and to work collaboratively with others in a climate of mutual respect (2011, p. 48).

4.2.7 Critiques of the concept of distributed leadership

The discussion thus far indicates that there seemed to be support for this new approach to departmental leadership; it was seen as a positive move. However, the data also indicated several concerns regarding the theory. Harris (2013, p. 547) argues that "one common misuse of the term is as a convenient descriptor for any form of shared, collaborative or extended leadership practice". Echoing the same sentiment, Harris and Spillane (2008, p. 32) maintain that "the fact that different terms and definitions are used interchangeably to refer to 'distributed leadership' results in both conceptual confusion and conceptual overlap". This confusion with the term emerged in the study. For example, Participant 10 commented that "as *a result, I'm not quite sure what a distributed leadership model is all about"* (II). Participant 10 also shared views on distributed leadership by stating that *"I think it's a jargonised term about spreading the leadership across the department or across an institution, which of course is nothing new"* (II). Similarly, it is also stated in the literature that distributed leadership has received criticism because of its different meanings and definitions used in the literature. It is a "relatively a new concept, and it lacks a widely accepted definition" (Ramakrishnan & Abukari, 2020, p. 58). Grant (2017, p. 462) argues that "despite its popularity, the term distributed leadership is used loosely in the South African literature and lacks conceptual clarity because of its common-sense meaning". This view is evident in the following extract: *"I am not sure how it is different to any other model that is based on teamwork, cooperation and on delegation of the various responsibilities to groups of people"* (Participant 10, II).

The theory was also critiqued because of its limited research base. For example, Participant 13 stated that distributed leadership is "*a lovely theory but it's theorised very poorly and, you know, there's not a lot of research, particularly on the African continent, about how it is played out in practice"*. Participant 13 further explained that distributed leadership is a complex theory and through critical reading, literature would show that the literature is problematic (II). Endorsing this idea, Participant 9 also mentioned the following:

> *The idea of distributed leadership is a way of sharing responsibility, but looking at the theory that you have got in your proposal, for me it is about the sharing, but it would be a sharing of roles and responsibilities, but that is not the way the literature describes distributed leadership* (II).

Thus it can be seen that the conceptualisation of distributed leadership was thought to be problematic in this study.

The perceptions of how distributed leadership is understood in the department have been discussed, but perceptions and actual practices are frequently very different, so I will now turn to the practices discussed in the data in relation to distributed leadership. The attention in this next section turns to the second research question: **How is distributed leadership approach practised in a university academic department?** The themes that emerged to answer the second research question are listed below.

4.3 The Practice of Distributed Leadership in the Academic Department

This section tries to answer the second research question[3], which is about how staff members in the academic department practised distributed leadership. The practices described in this section occurred in a variety of different situations and contexts and involved several leaders in the academic department. Leaders emerged as and when the need arose and where they had the expertise. These leaders included the HOD team that led the department, support staff and academics who ran various programmes in the department. Three academics and the Administrative Manager comprised the HOD team (Staff meeting minutes, 18. 07. 2019). Academics and support staff in a variety of pivotal roles, both formal and informal, were also identified as leaders across the data sets. These are primarily associated with the academic

[3] Please note that large portions of Section 4.3 have been published: Haufiku, K. D., Grant, C., & Kajee, F. A. (2022) Towards inclusivity and sustainability in the leadership of an academic department in a South African University: a distributed perspective. *Journal of Education, 88,* 87-105. http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i88a06

project, specifically teaching and research. Qualification coordinators and course coordinators at the postgraduate and undergraduate levels, for example, were more formal roles, as were the research chairs, project and professional development managers, the research design course coordinating team, work-integrated learning coordinators, and a bursary scheme coordinator (FG1, FG 2, FG 3). The more formal leadership roles at the faculty and university level included representation in the Senate, the Teaching and Learning Committee, the Environmental Committee, the Higher Degrees Committee and the Ethics Committee. The more senior academics served as chair and deputy chair of some of these formal committees (FG2; P 15, II; P10, II). Examples of informal leadership were mentioned in addition to formal roles. These included i) the re-curriculation of department qualifications, as required by the Department of Higher Education and Training, led by academics with extensive experience in the relevant fields (P9, II; FG 2); ii) leadership in the department building committee (FG 2, P8); and iii) Master of Ceremony at departmental functions (FG 1, P6). The foundation for this leadership was attributed to one's passion, interest and expertise (FG 2), as well as the fact that one was good at it (FG 1).

But why a change in leadership practice in an academic university department, particularly in relation to the HOD position, one might ask? What prompted this change in practice?

4.3.1 Reconceptualisation of the HOD team

A practical, real-world problem prompted the introduction of a distributed leadership perspective in the academic department; the HOD position became available, and no volunteers wanted to fill it. This is consistent with the literature, which acknowledges that the HOD position is unappreciated due to its complexity and interference with an academic's scholarly work (Gibson, 2020; Gmelch, 2020).

To illustrate, Participant 8 explained that "*there have been crises of leadership or management in the department going back over decades, in which it was really difficult to find people who would volunteer, who would accept a nomination"* (FG2). This point was endorsed by Participant 15: "*So, I think one of the tricky things at this institution or at most universities is that often when a position of leadership becomes available nobody really wants to do it, but also the reason why nobody wants to do it sometimes is because nobody knows what it involves"* (II). Participant 8 further added that the "*position of HOD has always been problematic in the academic department. People don't want to take it, because it takes*

them, those people, away from their first love …" (FG2). Participant 9 reasoned further by referring to "*the tension between being both an academic (scholarly role) and manager/leader (leadership and business/management role). Taking on both roles is often seen as being onerous, difficult and challenging because as academics, none of us has been trained as managers"* (II). Participant 7 noted the "*huge workload on one person*" (FGI 1) as a determining factor. Situational factors were taken into consideration; this included that "*the Department was not in a good space"* as there had been *a "breakdown in trust" because of a "forensic audit"* (Participant 9, II).

A different approach was urgently needed in light of these historical and cultural difficulties as well as the fact that *"no one expressed an interest in being HOD"* (Participant 9, II). According to Participant 7, the traditional approach to the HOD needed to be modified *"to suit the vision of the department going forward"* because it no longer suited the department (FGI, 1). After protracted discussions, the top three contenders for the HOD position decided to share the workload (FGI, 3). They also agreed to test out a distributed leadership style as a research project and observe how it developed throughout their tenure (Participant 13, II). Colleagues backed this plan, stating that *"to put a model like that on trial, I think is a very good idea"* (P10, II). To "establish a more trusting, inclusive and vibrant departmental culture" (HOD team report, 28. 01. 2020) in which academic and administrative employees could thrive was one of the HOD team's initial priorities (Participant13, II). There were however threats to this goal, which included "inequalities as a consequence of the institution's colonial history", "the unionisation of staff" and "the increasing reliance on contractual rather than permanent employment" (HOD team report, 28. 01. 2020).

4.3.2 The distribution of leadership work

The leader-plus aspect was observed in this study through the distribution of the workload for the HOD team. Participants mentioned the sharing of leadership work within the HOD team that was in charge of the department. To illustrate Participant 15 stated that:

> *…because there's four people involved, and so it means there's more people in education being involved in leading roles, and I think that that is also a good thing from the point of view of if I'm needing, if I was needing guidance on something or if I was needing, I've got more than one person to go to if that person wasn't around or available to answer whatever it was that I need* (II).

Similarly, Participant 5 also stated that *"having three people or having two people working together in one position you would have, at least have someone to show you that was facing in terms of time and in looking at some of the issues"* (FG2). Sharing the same views, participant 15 further elaborated:

> *…having four people who can support each other on challenges that arise and on strategically thinking through challenges that arise – so on the one hand when challenges that arise you need careful strategic thinking and I think if you've got four people with different knowledge of different people and areas in the department, I think you are better off of coming up with a strategy that in fact more people will buy into, because you're not just getting one perspective* (II).

Adding to this idea, participant 2 stated that in distributed leadership *"there isn't one central leader, there isn't one central focal person in a leadership position, but that there are, there is a team and that is people who work together in that one position"* (FG2). Evidence could also be traced from the leadership team report, which reads:

> Teamwork continues to be enhanced in our Department with staff sharing their teaching and learning curricula, materials and assessments. Alternative assessment tasks have, in many instances, been developed collaboratively, and staff have drawn on colleagues in the Department to moderate the alternative assessments (HOD Team Report, 1.08.2021–31.12.2021).

Leadership activities were dispersed among the team members leading the department. Participant 9 stated that:

> *The departmental leadership team has distributed the activities of leadership amongst themselves and others. I think the leadership team has tried to assign specific roles to its members. This goes a long way to sort out communication and ensures that communication is directed in a certain way, a certain direction* (II).

This was also observed practically in participant 6's statement:

> *They distribute each other's skills because probably one is stronger in management, in managing the people, the other one is stronger in working out with administration, so when you've got those people who are distributing their leadership skills, it makes*

things easy for them to work because they are looking at different things at one goal (FGI).

This point was also supported by participant 10 who also stated the following:

> *Well, the most obvious example is that there are now four people that are ostensibly part of a so-called leadership team. They each have a designated role. The role of the traditional HOD has been distributed across a team of people, and the leadership team goes to great pains to say that it is not one person that makes the decision, but the leadership team makes decisions* (II).

On the same note, participant 6, also added that:

> *…they divide each other so that they work with these different groups, and then when they meet they bring back the information about these different groups, and they then have an understanding of people because each one of them will be bringing back what they have experienced from each group within the Department* (FG1).

These leaders are familiar with their teams, have faith in them, and allow their co-leaders to exercise responsibility without interference (Bush & Glover, 2012). Further to this, participant 2 (FG2) had the same sentiment by stating:

> *They have tried to make sure that there is a person who is responsible for various things. So instead of having to work through one person in that position as HOD, they are now three of them, each person has a specific responsibility.*

Participant 8 also noted that *"the three of them work quite magically together"* (FG2). Distributing leadership is critical not only to ensure that all leadership activities are handled competently but also to maximise the collective talents and experience of all members (Bush & Glover, 2012).

4.3.3 Distributed workload of the HOD team: negotiated and drawing on expertise

Because there was no script for this distributed approach to departmental leadership, the HOD workload was distributed amongst the team members based on their strengths and areas of interest (Participant 13, II). Leadership authority should be based on expertise rather than a formal position, and this type of leadership is often found within the larger professional

community of educators (Timperley, 2005). Reinforcing this claim, Participant 12 also asserted: *"We looked at our strengths and it was quite fortunate for us, the work that we were doing prior to this, sort of covered the whole department"* (II). Endorsing the same point, Participant 11 explained that *"we looked at our strengths and our expertise and we decided that okay, this is how we are going to distribute the work that we need to accomplish together as a team in terms of the work that is expected of us"* (II). Participant 12 described how they would divide the work by "*always tak[ing] responsibility for the programmes that we're currently taking responsibility for because they kind of resonate with our strengths and our expertise"* (II). Elaborating on this notion, Participant 11 explained: *"So I think from that aspect when we find what the other person is really good at, we almost try to incorporate that into where we are going"* (II). This point was also endorsed by Participant 12, explaining the following:

> *So what we decided as a group when we came, the three of us when we took up this position, that we would split the leadership into, that the head HOD would be responsible for 50% of the department work, and the two deputies will have each 25%* (II).

Participant 11 further stated that *"so I think from that aspect when we find what the other person is really good at, we almost try to incorporate that into where we are going"* (II). Harris and DeFlaminis (2016) state that "distributed leadership essentially means that those best equipped or skilled or positioned to lead do so, in order to fulfil a particular goal or organisational requirement" (p. 144).

Each HOD was allocated different programmes as part of the leadership supervision within the department. Participant 12 explained:

> *So in terms of our programmes that we are offering, we've got very clear responsibilities, but then we, we comment on each other's reports, and ultimately the three of us will sign that together, so there are things that we do as a team* (II).

Data revealed that leadership was distributed from the leadership team to other teams through the HOD who was responsible for that team which are called programmes. For example, Participant 11 explained her role in the HOD team by stating:

Within the postgraduate programmes there are also coordinators that I work with, so it's not that just because I oversee the programme, I make all the decisions, I work with the lecturers involved, and they say okay, you are leaving gaps, you can decide what happens in that particular programme and then we can come together and discuss, and all that will fall in decision making; so I don't make the decisions just because I'm HOD that oversees that particular programme. We work with teams within the programme that we are overseeing, and I am bringing (II).

Participant 11 further added:

I'm leading the postgraduate programme, and there are lecturers involved, but at the same time within, amongst those groups, people can still work together and lead or oversee their curricula subjects and work with their teams within that particular subject, for an example (II).

Participant 13 explained: *"I don't like to take any decision unilaterally. I will if I have to, but I think it's very important to share"* (II). MacBeath (2005, p. 49) stated that "in distributed-coordinated shared leadership, group members conceptualise leadership as a process that can be shared and mutually enacted and reciprocated among group members". It is "the collaboration among individuals essentially leads to a collective identity" (Beckmann, 2017, p. 157). As a result of a collaboration that brings about teamwork, distributed leadership "embraces notions of collegiality and autonomy while addressing the need for management" (Gosling et al., 2009, p. 304).

4.3.4 Lecturer leadership enacted through formal faculty and university structures

The leadership-plus aspect of distributed leadership was demonstrated in the take up of lecturer leadership in the academic department. Multiple leaders carrying out various formal university and faculty roles were evident in the department. This was a clear indication that all people have the potential to lead dependent on the opportunities they are given. As van Dartel explains, "Distributed leadership does not mean that everybody leads, but that everybody has the potential to lead at some time" (2013, p. 11). Participant 15 explained this by stating: *"I am the Deputy Chair of the Higher Degrees Committee, well first I watched and participated, then I became the Deputy Chair for two years, and then I took on the Chair"* (II). This is an example of dispersed distributed leadership (Grant, 2017). Participant 10 also added the following:

> *I chaired many committees in the department; I've chaired the Higher Degree Committee, I've chaired the Ethics Committee, I've been in Senate for many years, so I've had lots of leadership experience at various levels in the department, but currently I'm a Chair, I have a Research Chair* (II).

In addition, Participant 8 explained their role: *"I represent the department on the Teaching and Learning Committee. This was an explanation of a faculty representation at another level"* (FG 2). Another leader-plus aspect was observed through participant 3, who explained that *"I'm the coordinator of the master's specialisation group. I do represent the Faculty on the Environmental Committee. So that's another big thing because I'm the leader of the Environmental Policy Working Group at the University*" (FG2). This clearly stated the course specialisation and faculty representation. The other participant with an additional leadership role was participant 2, who indicated that *"I have to lead the Professional Development Centre. I am the manager of that Centre. It's a Professional Development Centre, and we offer administrative support for all programmes that we have in the faculty, so my leadership comes through there"* (FG2). In addition, Participant 2 FG2 further added that *"I also Chair the coordinators' meetings for all the in-service coordinators, and I am part of the Faculty leadership team"*. This further shows the faculty representation. Participant 7 also explained that they are *"the project manager for the Honours"* (FG1) and Participant 2 noted that they are the *"practice coordinator for the undergraduate programme in the department for year one and year 2"* (FG2).

4.3.5 Lecturer leadership as emergent and dispersed

There was some evidence of the emergence of lecturer leadership in the data. In line with dispersed distributed leadership (Grant, 2017), some staff members courageously shared their expertise in all aspects that they were good at. This shows how leadership slowly emerged when some staff members willingly took up opportunities to lead. Most of them rose and offered a helping hand in what they could do best. To support this claim, Participant 13 observed that "*we had members who are not in the leadership team put up their hands and say we have the expertise and we would like to share it with you to assist in continuing the academics"* (II). Participant 11 stated, "*People have just risen to the challenge, taken risks, tried the stuff, and they've focussed on their objective of assuring the teaching, learning, research, whatever happens"* (II). Distributed leadership is used "to formalise knowledge-

sharing processes, provide knowledge assets, and motivate knowledge activities that nurture exploratory and exploitative innovation outcomes" (Fu et al., 2018, p. 389).

Further observation was made by participant 12, that one of the staff members in the department has taken up a leadership opportunity, in direct response to the national COVID-19 pandemic.

> *He has helped the students with the university online platform, and you can just see how that opportunity which he took up, and we've endorsed the opportunity, has really been good for all of us; for him and for all of us because it has really made a difference to our teaching* (II).

This is an example of emergence and transformative agency as understood from a dispersed distributed leadership lens (Grant, 2017). To illustrate further, participant 12 alluded that a member of the staff,

> *…just came into her own in terms of running the meeting. We were not aware of her, well we know her leadership potential in terms of working with students and that, but her potential in terms of running a staff meeting with about 20 people was really amazing to be able to see, and I think that that's something that we really need to nurture with her* (II).

This is also supported by McIntyre and Foti (2013, p. 47) when they state that "within self-managed teams, often there is a reliance on members to step forward and informally carry out leadership functions within the team". Harris (2012, p. 8) states that distributed leadership is "a form of leadership that is more concerned with brokering, facilitating and supporting others in leading innovation and change".

4.3.6 Changing teaching and learning practices as a consequence of the situatedness of leadership

A distributed view on leadership practices must concentrate on the leaders' thinking and action in situ since the social environment is an integral component of intelligent activity, not just a backdrop or container for it (Spillane et al., 2004). At the time of this leadership experiment, two phenomena largely affected the situation in the academic department: one local and the other global; first, an "almost eight-month period of major building renovations to the 100+-year-old education building" (HOD team report, 28. 01. 2020), followed almost

immediately by "the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying national lockdown" (HOD team report, 31. 07. 2020). Ironically, both circumstances drove co-workers to leave the building where they typically worked and establish virtual offices in their houses (P13, II). The administrative employees, many of whom did not have instant access to computers and internet connectivity (FG3) and were thus left out of some of the first online activities, found this disruption to be challenging.

This substitution for in-person instruction, research and postgraduate supervision that was conducted remotely and online was very disruptive to daily activities and was seen as overwhelming (P13, II), leaving co-workers feeling alone and isolated (P9, II).The academic Department faced its most serious crisis yet and needed to find answers to the following: As colleagues were geographically and psychologically spread out, how could they still ensure high-quality instruction and research? What ground-breaking routines, processes, and tools –essential components of leadership practice – were necessary to bring co-workers together virtually, keep them steady, and together create a welcoming atmosphere where everyone could flourish despite tremendous odds?

The situation at the time of COVID-19 forced the HOD team to think of new platforms where staff members would be able to communicate during the lockdown times. Therefore, the engagement or interactions between participants in this study during the tough times caused by the COVID-19 situation were facilitated through the adoption of different communication platforms which were used as tools to facilitate interactions that constituted leadership practices. These platforms were weekly Friday check-ins, Buddy System, WhatsApp groups, email communication, departmental leadership team meetings, program meetings, marks meeting, and many more. Oborn et al. (2013) state that "leadership enactment entails engaging with materiality–for example, offices, meeting rooms, desks, computers, reports, email distribution lists" (p. 256). Although, through carrying out this study, I became aware of some of these new departmental structures, I did not have access to all of them; however, I managed to attend the Friday check- ins and get access to some email communications. Below three of the online platforms are discussed.

4.3.6.1 Friday check-ins

The weekly Friday check-in emerged as "a crucial departmental structure which provided an online assembly point and vital communication channel for staff during lockdown" (HOD team report, 31. 07. 2020). Initially conceived in a face-to-face, pre-COVID context, it provided "regular communication and a safe and generative space for colleagues to raise any issues deemed important in our department" (HOD team report, 10. 08. 2020). As a consequence of the COVID situation, the check-in was 'redefined' (after Spillane, 2006), and using Zoom as an IT tool, changed into an online communication platform (P12, II). The routine check-in, therefore, continued throughout the lockdown, but its purpose expanded to include a multitude of pressing imperatives, such as issues associated with online teaching, learning and evaluation; the dissemination of university policy for COVID-19; talks surrounding qualifications and supervision and safeguarding the welfare of co-workers (P13, II). Tools for the check-in included, but were not limited to, weekly emails to the staff (P10, II); the Friday check-in minutes; academic publications pertinent to the issues discussed; (FG1, P1); staff reflections; and reports from the HOD team (FG 2).

Another reason for enabling check-in was that the HOD realised that staff members were not speaking out during the meeting, and there was a need to hear the voices and contributions of all the staff members in the department. To support this claim, Participant 6 explained:

> *Our leadership has discovered that people are not speaking earlier in the meetings, people are quiet in the meetings, people are afraid to say something in the meetings because of the fact that we are having the doctors, we are having the professors here, so people like us cannot say anything in the meeting* (FG1).

The check-ins became one of the platforms that gave staff members the opportunity to freely air their views and contribute to issues that were important to the leadership in the Department, Participant 4 felt the following:

> *So for me, doing that activity and allowing us to go into those rooms where we said everything that we wanted to say, it opened up and as a result of the relationship now and the way that we are participating in the meetings is different as before because we were given the opportunity to be the people that we are. It was therefore based on some of those views that clear communication was observed in the department* (FG1).

In addition to this, Participant 9 stated that *"Yes, I think there is clear communication within the teams/cells/groups working in a programme. The check-ins have also been useful in this respect. I would also like to see everybody being brought together for workshops"(*II). Harris (2012, p. 8) states that distributed leadership is "a form of leadership that is more concerned with brokering, facilitating and supporting others in leading innovation and change".

Additionally, check-ins were often seen as safe, flexible spaces that promoted participation and inclusion of all colleagues. Thus, one can argue that the check-in can be regarded as a democratic structure. To illustrate, Participant 15 explains how they experienced the check-ins:

> *…very much about hearing voices and voices of experience. So, it's not just we want your voice on a course or the date or the nuts and bolts of what we need to do in the department to get our jobs done. It's also we want to hear your voice on how you are experiencing the difficulty of your job under the current COVID challenges, and we want to hear about that as well* (II).

The weekly check-in was seen by Participant 9 as one of a *"number of different strategies to facilitate different voices being heard" … "where different people will be asked to present tasks and reporting are devolved from the leadership team to others"* (II). "The weekly check-ins continue to provide an opportunity for staff to connect, share their ideas, and discuss issues of pertinence to teaching practice and the final alternative assessments" (HOD Team report, 1 August–31 December 2020).

However, two participants disagreed and found that using Zoom restricted check-in collegiality. For Participant 8, the Zoom exchanges were experienced as "*extremely hierarchical in a way that is destructive of the distributed leadership model … the technology has eroded what we were building in terms of collegiality"* (FG2). According to Participant 2, the use of this technology eroded some of the department gains, mainly because "*you see, we can't even see other faces and how they're reacting to anything. You can't even, you don't even know it's the other person who is at the other end"* (FG2). To mitigate this constraint, Zoom break-away rooms were used as another communication platform. This appeared to work better for colleagues who were less confident to talk in the broader Zoom forum. Participant 6 explained*, "I can speak in a meeting and not be worried about who I am. I can voice my ideas by not being afraid as to who is going to say 'oh, what are you saying?' or*

'you're saying it incorrectly' or even 'you're speaking English incorrectly', because in those meetings, we were told that it's not about what you are saying, it's about being part of the whole team" (FG1). Here we can see the beginnings of a transformative and inclusive leadership approach.

4.3.6.2 Pastoral care and the buddy system

As a consequence of the national lockdown, the well-being of colleagues became a priority in the academic Department; it was the *"pastoral role that came through quite strongly because of COVID"* (FG 1, P6). An intentional move (FG1, P7) involved "*managing the emotional challenges or the personal challenges" of colleagues during the pandemic"* (P15, II). Colleagues needed additional communication channels because, aside from the weekly Friday check-in, they continued to be exposed and alone, especially during lockdown level 5 (FG2, P8). The buddy system was suggested by a colleague at a Friday check-in as a way to promote diversity. This was another illustration of dispersed distributed leadership (Grant, 2017). This system's purpose was *"to ensure that all colleagues stay connected to each other and remain safe during the COVID-19 pandemic"* (HOD team report, 31 07 2020). Small teams of four colleagues who worked in similar programmes had to *"check-in (with each other) outside the formal Friday check-in"* (FG2, P2) to make sure if "*somebody was sick or in any kind of need"* (FG2, P8).

For some teams, this flexible structure worked well because team members provided emotional support for one another, *"whereby when someone is down, the group will lift their spirit. Or just talking to each other, finding each other, where are you"* (FG1, P6). For some buddy teams who really worked well together, they were able to offer essential support to one another; "*It is for my team, we talk all the time, we check on each other all the time. And it also helps because we work together"* (FG2, P2). Another team found that the support was helpful when making decisions: "*It's a team effort where there are still individual decisions that can still be made but with the support of your team"* (FG1, P4). Participant 9 was cognisant of "*clear communication within the teams/cells/groups working in a programme*" (II). Beckman's (2017) points about the importance of collaboration and collective decision-making are pertinent here.

Based on the data, it would be reasonable to claim that the buddy system and weekly Friday check-ins were important institutional elements that, for the most part, promoted inclusivity and connectedness inside the department during the pandemic. Participant 15's comments best expressed this feeling;

> *The individuals in the department have a sense that they want to be heard by the leadership. I think they have a sense that they can raise things and they will be heard, and I think they have a sense of belonging even while we're in this COVID and it's online. So I think there's a sense of community that the HOD team has been able to maintain throughout the COVID challenges and the online meetings, which is no small ask* (II).

4.3.6.3 Leadership team meetings

Data from the interviews and documents have revealed that another crucial departmental structure of distributed leadership was the meetings within the interaction of the leadership team that took place in the department. I could clearly see that the leadership team always met with each other to make collective decisions before any action was taken. To support this, Participant 13, said that "*the leadership team meets every Monday at 4 o'clock for our meeting, and we talk about what needs to be done in the week and how we will manage the check-in that week*" (II). Besides that, another participant, Participant 11, said that *"we make that effort that every week we have set a time for the four of us to meet; every week for our check-ins*" (II). Therefore, scheduling time as a team in distributed leadership is important, and it is also supported by Bush and Glover (2012, p. 33), who state that "effective leadership teams scheduled time together for professional dialogue". Citing from the interview transcript, participant 12 stated:

> *I think because it's a small team that people feel quite free to make suggestions, to respond, and to share ideas, you know. I think that works quite well in ensuring that we're a team and work together and to give each other, affirm each other all the time, and it is a very affirming space* (II).

The staff members noticed this type of practice of the leadership team consulting with each other and making decisions. The distributed leadership team discusses issues together as a collective team and raises them with the rest of the other staff members for further input. One participant noted this*: "One of the team told me that they do not send an email before all*

three have read and agreed that it can be sent out" (Participant 9, II). In the interaction of leadership practices, team members "anticipate one another's actions and coordinate these actions in complex, high-pressure situations in which there is insufficient time for communication and planning" (McIntyre & Foti, 2013, p. 48).

A practical example was also given by participant 11, who stated:

> *When we have discussed what we would like to introduce we bring it with the staff members to say guys, this is what we were thinking, how do you feel about that? And then they give their input, so the final decision that is made is made collaboratively with the staff members, so we don't make decisions and then implement, we bounce off ideas with the rest of the staff* (II).

Similarly, one participant observed these consultations by stating that in a distributed leadership approach "*decisions are being made, in consultation with the lecturers"* (Participant 9, II). Furthermore, Participant 1 also clarified:

> *I also find that when you discuss something with one of them because everybody is informed, there's never anyone around to make a decision. There's always somebody, one of the three, that you can say 'help!' and if the others are not available, they will help you make the decision, but everybody else will be informed. So it's never a singular decision-making process* (FG1).

Therefore, the above data can explain that the meetings, consultations and all types of communication to make these consultations constitute interactions that bring about leadership practices. "The social interaction of multiple leaders is an important factor contributing to successful distributed leadership" (Hulpia & Devos, 2010, p. 567).

4.3.7 Inclusivity in the decision-making process

The academic department's decision-making process was characterised by inclusivity and consensus-based decision-making. Throughout the data sets, there was mention of teams making decisions rather than individuals; in other words, what Spillane (2006) and others refer to as "co-leadership". The HOD team is referenced in the following excerpt: *"...I think a lot of input comes from all … of our leaders. And they're all so very different, which makes the decision-making, I think, even better because of the diversity"* (Participant 1, FG1).

Participant 9 added to this point by saying "*they work as a team and do everything together which means that a decision is only made after the three leaders have communicated and reached consensus"* (II).

Impressed by the leadership approach of co-leadership, participant 15 explained that "*I like seeing that energy of a kind of collaborative leadership but also a leadership that's looking to develop a strong education community who feel like they belong to the community. So I think it feels inclusive"* (II). A participant noted the benefit of this as follows:

> *...having four people who can support each other on challenges that arise and on strategically thinking through challenges that arise. So, on the one hand, when challenges arise, you need careful strategic thinking, and I think if you've got four people with different knowledge of different people and areas in the department. I think you are better off coming up with a strategy that, in fact, more people will buy into, because you're not just getting one perspective* (II).

Furthermore, expanding on this point, assuming the leadership's hard work, Participant 1 stated that "*I think for them it must be hard, difficult, because there's a lot repetition, a lot of things are repeated or bounced off many of them*" (FG1). Although it is difficult work, it is advantageous because of the inclusivity; the team can make better decisions.

However, decision-making was not solely in the hands of the HOD team. The majority of participants agreed that there were opportunities for staff to participate in decision-making. Through these opportunities, the leadership team "*has also been very, very proactive in creating an inclusive environment and actively promoting inclusivity right across the board. And that's not only inclusivity in terms of race but also inclusivity in terms of gender"* (Participant 10, II). The advantages of involving other staff members are as follows:

> *So it also grows the department in that manner because it's not only the HOD team who are making decisions, but they also allow us to bring, to become part of, the decisions and to be the decision makers within the Department* (Participant 6, FGI, 1).

Participant 13 argued for the importance of developing *"heterarchical relations"* to *"work within a flatter structure, and growing and leading in that way"* (II). Likewise, Participant 7 described the decision-making process as *"a flat structure where, you know, it's shared,*

shared decision-making; it's collegial decision-making" (FGI 1). The department's flatter leadership structure was thought to facilitate a process of "lateral leadership" where "leadership practices are shared by organisational members and built on interactions that involve leaders, members, and situations in the context of influencing work practices" (Musa et al., 2020, p. 185).

For example, the culture of the department allowed Participant 5 to *"go straight to the qualification coordinator knowing that everything that I need, she will be able to resolve the issue before even the HOD team are aware of the kind of issue"* (FGI 2). When making decisions, Participant 1 described that "*the decision is a distributed decision, it is an elective decision rather, because then everybody feels heard and the repercussion is also then felt by everybody and accepted by everybody"* (FGI 1). Nonetheless, even though the culture of the department was "*very engaging and very active in affirming members of staff in what they do",* one participant warned against "*a selective affirmation syndrome"* (Participant 10, II). Even though the HOD team was proactive in creating an inclusive environment, he felt that this was race and gender related, but did not include age. He explained that the HOD team *"has given opportunity to young members of staff to take on leadership roles, sometimes at the expense of the older members of staff"* (II). Another participant agreed: "*I think it highlights my comment about inclusivity being selective at times. My experience has not been one of inclusivity by the HOD team"* (Participant 9, II)

An inclusive decision-making process was associated with the concept of trusting one another: "*So, I think the connection is important, the fact that they trust one another to be able to make the decisions when maybe one of them is not available"* (FGI, 1, P1). Participant 4 mentioned a "*circle of trust*" which made it possible for this scenario: *"If one of them made a decision and the other two don't really disagree, they'll still back the person up who has made the decision. That's my interpretation. So that's the amount of trust they've got in one another"* (FGI, 1). Participant 6 claimed that there was little indication of micromanagement in the department, maybe as a result of this culture of trust (FGI, 1). It appears that trust was won because of professional integrity:

> *Someone that I could go to with an issue, with someone that I know will have my back because they trust my professional integrity. And that is something that one needs to build, it doesn't just happen. So, for them [the HOD team] to have done this in this period of time and in the pandemic and all that stuff, for us to kind of feel very*

> *much more connected than what we did in a regular kind of top-down leadership structure, I think is quite phenomenal* (FGI, 1, P1).

Because of the trust*, "I think it spills over to us as well, the fact that they have such a great trust relationship with each other, we are also developing that in our little team"* (P1, FG1). Participant 4 concluded that it was because of that reason that it *"also links to the distributed because if you had the distributive model approach and you didn't trust your team or your colleagues, it would have been a big flop"* (FGI, 1).

While inclusive decision-making was thought to have real advantages, it also had drawbacks. It was perceived to be time-consuming (FGI 1) and thus inefficient. This was because they were *"based on consensus, which is problematic, I think. Not that consensus is bad. I mean, it's a pillar I think of democracy. But getting consensus is sometimes cumbersome at the expense of efficiency and moving ahead"* (P10, II). Participant 9 agreed, lamenting the time wasted with the consensus decision-making approach. This participant switched to email communication with the entire HOD team due to the communication delay, but was disturbed by the slow response time (II). On the other hand, participant 7 preferred email communication as it seemed to be a quicker and more transparent choice:

> *[I] think an email is quicker than actually speaking to anyone because in an email you send an email and you cc everyone, the HOD team. And then you get a response quicker… I think it is so beautiful to witness… I find it's quite simple, but I think it's so profound in such a leadership structure* (FGI 1, P7).

Participant 12 thought that the urgency of the problem at hand impacted how quickly decisions were made:

> *So, I think that [decision-making] is a bit of both; I think it's slower when it comes to the more important new decisions that have to be made. But if it's kind of something that's pretty simple and that you are able to deal with immediately, then you don't have to go and have a conversation and consult with other people. I don't believe, I don't think the HOD team consults on every issue, though, I think that the team members have enough confidence in each other to allow one person to take the lead in a decision* (FGI 3, P12).

Participant 13 emphasised the importance of recognising the strengths of her team members and allowing them to lead decision-making in their areas of expertise: *"I know that my team members have strengths in areas I don't have, so they are going to make a better decision I would"* (FGI 3). According to the evidence provided, participation in departmental decision-making processes appears to have advanced an inclusive culture and mindset in some way (Blessinger & Stefani, 2018).

Having discussed the practices in the academic department, I now turn to the third and fourth research questions which I discuss together.

4.4 Enablements of and Constraints to a Distributed Leadership Approach

This section summarises the data generated in response to the third and fourth research questions:

- What are the enablements of this departmental leadership approach?
- What are the constraints to this departmental leadership approach?

In this next section, the three following enablements are discussed: check-ins on Fridays, the buddy system, and departmental consultations.

4.4.1 Enablements to distributed leadership practice

4.4.4.1 Friday check-ins: platform promoting distributed leadership

The check-in was discussed in relation to the practices in section two of research question two. In this section, I will expand on how, for the most part, this structure was regarded as an enablement. The Friday check-in was viewed by the leadership team members as an opportunity for all of them to meet and talk about what was going on at the university and how the Department could respond to what was going on concerning their leadership responsibilities. To support this claim, Participant 13 stated that *"check-in came in, once a week at teatime, on a Friday"* (PII). The Friday check-in as a platform helped the HOD team to regulate the information that was going on in the Department. Participant 13 stated that it was "*a regular check-in and it was called regular because I think systems and process are important, it helps us to regulate and I think that's quite useful as a practice"* (II). Participant 12 also stated that,

> *...the practices are governed by that structure of not being able to meet individually or in groups, and I think that what we've had to do is to set up ways in which we can meet with staff in a different kind of form* (II).

Therefore, this was viewed as one of the best practices that created the needed space for a safe forum for people in the department to interact. Participant 12 further explained how successful this practice came about by stating that the check-ins have

> *... been quite a successful practice because the numbers that we get seem to increase all the time, and I think that we've got probably about 85% of staff who – that's not including staff who are obviously on sabbatical, but they are attending those check-ins* (II).

In addition to that, check-ins have really benefited some of the staff members allowing them to have a voice and to speak out about anything without concern. Participant 1 stated that:

> *I love what our leadership team is doing because they are making each one of us confront who we are and where we are and how do we deserve to be here. What do we have to add to this institution and to this team, despite our differences* (FG1).

Others called this a transformation session because they felt transformed by the process. To support this claim, Participant 4 stated,

> *I call it transformation sessions because transformation was the core topic. In those transformation sessions, we were encouraged in terms of the HOD directly saying that each person adds value and a different type of value to the whole system so that I interpret it as a collaboration because through each of us giving our strengths we collaborate, and we produce something new* (FG1).

I would therefore agree with Participant 13's views as stated:

> *I think that's what a distributed leadership practice does, is if you can create a forum, a space where people feel safe to suggest, to challenge, to critique, I think the trust hopefully will grow over time, and people will be developed through that process and feel like they have a career, they have a trajectory within the Department* (II).

In addition, MacBeath (2005, p. 364) points out that "where there is a high level of trust, differences in values and working practices can be both tolerated and challenged".

It was through this check-in platform that interactions took place and staff members were encouraged to take part and have their voices heard. Participant 11 mentioned, "*we do encourage people, everybody, to have a voice. That is why we have check-ins, and we have sessions, check-ins where we have actually focused on people having a voice"* (II). Participant 9 said that the leadership team *"have used a number of different strategies to facilitate different voices being heard"* (II), and this was done by finding a comfortable space that was inclusive of all staff members. As a practice, the leadership team, therefore, considered check-in as a safe space for staff members to share their ideas and inputs. Participant 11 supported this claim by stating that "*this is a safe space, anybody can share their views, and people have shared in some instances of either they feel that they don't have a voice because of one thing or another ... the establishment of check-ins came as an 'opportunity to give people a voice'* (FG3). Leadership develops through conversation and is dependent on a unique dynamic among the resources that participants bring to an interaction. It also implies the ability to make use of these resources (Meschitti, 2019).

4.4.4.2 Buddy system: online platform promoting distributed leadership

The buddy system was also discussed in the previous section concerning distributed leadership practices. In this section, I will discuss it further as one of the platforms that enabled distributed leadership in the Department. This was a platform that was established as a result of giving social support to those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to one of the reflective reports written by the leadership team: "The purpose of this Buddy System, a suggestion during a previous check-in meeting, is to ensure that all colleagues stay connected to each other and remain safe during the COVID-19 pandemic" (D4, 8. 05. 2020). The HOD established the "*buddy system for members to check up on each other on WhatsApp"* (P12, II). Participant 4 felt that the system worked well:

> *... especially at this moment in time because we are not in the office. So the buddy thing for me, I think I like it. It's one thing that they have developed so that we have the buddies. And it shows the expertise that they have in thinking of such a thing to happen within a group* (FG1).

Participant 2 further added:

> *It was also to check on each other during COVID, and see how the people that are in your team were, it was like small teams, I and four people in a team, so that you can check on each other and just see how the other person is doing* (FG2).

Further to giving social support the buddy system functioned as a system structure for work collaboration and check-ins. To this Participant 2 stated:

> *It was people that you are working with already on a particular programme so you could then in that space of talking to each other and check-in on each other, talk about the programme issues that you might want to discuss. So that gave another platform to collaborate on your work but also just to be, to just check on each other* (FG2).

> The buddy system seems to be working better in some programmes than others. There is still a heightened sense of concern and empathy towards colleagues as we face COVID-19, the continued lockdown and emergency remote teaching and learning together (D4, 1 August–31 December 2020).

4.4.4.3 Departmental consultations: consultative nature of the HOD team promoting distributed leadership

The data revealed that the HOD team enabled distributed leadership in the department. This was because "in this model, leadership becomes less about position and more about engagement and action" (Jones et al., 2017, p. 199). This was supported by Participant 1, who stated that "*I think a lot of input comes from all four of our leaders …. they discuss things"* (FG1). This was done because of the commitment that the leadership team showed, confirmed by Participant 8: *"Four people who are very committed both to each other and the model of leadership and to the issues in the department"* (FG2). Data further revealed that this approach to leadership enabled the HOD team to consult with each other on various issues affecting the department. It was through these consultations that they were able to make collective decisions in managing the Department. This was clarified by Participant 13 when stating:

> *The same would go for writing quarterly reports or research reports, we would meet first, discuss it, and then break up the work to write the report or put the ideas down and one of us would run with it, share it. We don't send an email out to staff or anywhere in the university without us first checking with each other and particularly with COVID and messages going to students, we've been very careful. We'll write a report or a message and circulate it to each other. We'll each interject on it and then send it out* (II).

As a result of distributed leadership, consultations were able to take place in the department, and the HOD team was able to meet as a team to discuss their roles and responsibilities, which they had distributed amongst themselves. Participant 1 was also concerned about the likelihood of repetition in the various times of consultation made by the leadership team: "*I think for them it must be hard, difficult because there's a lot repetition, a lot of things are repeated or bounced off many of them. But I think once you tease that out and in time get used to it"* (FG1). The HOD team had the sense of stability to do their work preparation. This was supported by Participant 8, who stated that the HOD leadership team,

> *...have the opportunity of bouncing ideas off each other before going into more public arenas like check-ins. Often I think there's quite a lot of preparation that has been done in terms of what their position is as a group, and that gives the Department, gives me a sense of stability* (FG2).

The data also revealed that these consultations were conducted based on the expertise of those being consulted. As a result of this leadership approach, the leadership team, as well as other department members, were able to demonstrate their expertise in various leadership talks. Participant 12 claimed that "*three of us would always take responsibility for the programmes that we're currently taking responsibility for because they kind of resonate with our strengths and our expertise"*. Participant 8 added that *"you have the specific person responsible for a specific thing"* (FG2). On the other hand, Participant 2 indicated that everyone did not have to know things based on expertise by stating: "*I don't have to go talk to the (HOD) about the in-service training, because she's not responsible for that and she doesn't have to know the day-to-day problems on whatever we are doing there"* (FG2). In addition to that, Participant 2 further added that "*it allows for a person who is hands-on and more available for you when you need them to help you with a specific situation"* (FG2). Jones et al. (2017) state that

"institutional leadership capacity is expanded through the 'concertive' action of distributed leadership, and impact is realized that is greater than the sum of individual actions" (p. 199).

Aside from the leadership team sharing responsibilities as a group, they also attempted to encourage, advise and invite other staff members to take on leadership roles in departmental activities. Jones et al. 2017 state that "a distributed leadership approach evolved through the need to engage academic and professional staff from across the university" (p.205). This was also confirmed by the academic department meeting minutes, which state that "if you identify anything on the websites that needs attention, please contact the relevant moderators" (Minutes, 18. 07. 2019). In addition, "people are asked, and people are advised to take on leadership roles, and they are invited to take on leadership roles" (P10, II).

Participant 7 also confirmed that your potential as a staff member was "*identified in the Department, and you're given opportunities to develop something that you're good at"* (FG1). Participant 12 has confirmed the above claim by stating that "*staff members viewed this as a principle drawing from the expertise of others"* (II), therefore the leadership team has made use of these opportunities by allowing those with expertise to take the lead. "*So I think from that aspect when we find what the other person is really good at, we all try to and incorporate that into where we are going"* (P11, II). Participant 3 expressed that "*I definitely feel that I play different roles in different placements, and I certainly feel that I have been given the opportunities that I need"* (P3, FG2). Participant 10 also affirmed that "*this leadership team has been very proactive also in making sure that there has been a sort of affirmation across the department. It's very, it is very engaging, very active in affirming members of staff in what they do"* (II). This evidence resonates well with Jones et al. (2017), who state that the enablement of distributed leadership had brought the evidence "of an increase in the power of experts, who were not in formal positions of leadership, to make and implement decisions" (p. 204). In the minutes of a meeting the following was noted: "*In our gathering of further information and advice, we will continue to consult with other HE academic departments regarding their contingency plans"* (Minutes Planning Doc, 23 April). The minutes of the staff meeting further states that "to have a dynamic website it needs to be updated regularly and this relies on content being created on a regular basis, this will rely heavily on the Academic Staff in the Department generating content and so is Staff driven, examples of the information that could be used" (Minutes, 18 July 2019). "I suggest

that this document be placed on Google Drive so that all staff can have access to it, have insight into the ideas and that everyone can contribute" (Minutes, Planning Doc 23 April).

After discussing the factors that enabled distributed leadership in the academic department, my attention now turns to a discussion of the constraints to a distributed leadership approach.

44.2 Constraints to a distributed leadership approach

This section summarises the data generated in response to the final research question:

What are the constraints to this departmental leadership approach?

Several constraints emerged from the analysis of the data. I will report on i) university hierarchical structures, ii) COVID-19, iii) Zoom as an online platform and iii) departmental culture within a historically White university.

4.4.2.1 University hierarchical structures: a constraint to a distributed leadership practice

According to the data, the university as an institution has clearly defined formal reporting lines that outline how all departments should function without considering the implementation of a leadership approach such as distributed leadership. The broader university leadership was thought to be "*collegial and hierarchical with clearly defined roles and responsibilities and reporting lines"* (P9, II). In addition, participant 9 further stated that "*universities are hierarchical in terms of their governance, structure and organisation"* (II). In this case, we have what Toor (2011) refers to as a management paradigm that primarily focuses on positional power, formal authority and process control through the power of a small group that directly obeys those at the top.

Within this management framework, the HOD leadership team, through the organisational hierarchy, officially reports to the office of the Dean. The reporting structure is set in a way that the roles of those in leadership positions are clear. To support this, Participant 9 explained, "*The university and the Dean's leadership role within the university's structures are located in a different paradigm of leadership. Universities are hierarchical in their organisation and structure with clear reporting lines"* (II). Participant 8 further added:

> *The university is highly hierarchical, and all you've got to do is go and look at a graduation stage, and how everybody has an order and certain people get to speak more, and it can be quite disconcerting moving from a shared collegial space into*

the extremely hierarchical nature of some of the committees and some of the gatherings that happen (FG2).

Participant 5 further added, *"that hierarchy has also given more challenges in terms of power, who makes a decision where power resides"* (FG2). Jones (2014) came to the conclusion that distributed leadership is significantly dependent on the approval and support of the official leadership structure, even while it allows more people's knowledge to be recognised and influence change.

One of the participants also commented that the role of the Dean is one of oversight within a hierarchical system of relations and it was, therefore, viewed as creating challenges to the distributed leadership approach. "*The role of the Dean is one of oversight as I understand it, but it is very hierarchical, and I can see this creating challenges to the model and to the individuals in it"* (P8, FG2). Therefore, because of the nature and the reporting line of the university, the leadership team in the academic department had to lead and act within the instructions and decisions of the hierarchical nature of the university. This was aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic where decisions had to align with government policy which was delegated down to universities. Connolly et al. (2019) contend that delegation implies an organisational hierarchy and involves being assigned, accepting and carrying the responsibility for the proper functioning of a system in which others participate. To confirm this, Participant 12 stated that "*I think the hierarchical nature of the university has meant that we're dependent on messages and decisions that are taken at the top and then come to us through the faculty, but at the same time, I feel that that has led to interference"* (II). The organisational structure and routines thus interfered with the distributed leadership approach, even though the hierarchical system could work very well alongside the distributed leadership approach.

Even though the department is led by the HOD team, the understanding of some participants is that only the HOD is solely accountable for all the leadership activities happening in the department. Capturing the same understanding, Participant 10 argued that "*in my view and experience, at the end of the day, the final decision rests with the HOD, and from the university perspective, it is the HOD where the ball stops"* (II). This also corresponds with the view stated by Participant 2 that *"the final recommendation needs to come from the HOD … So the HOD is the one who has to sign all official documents because she is the HOD of the university"* (FG1). The views above were expressed because participants understood that

"*it is the HOD who is accountable – not a team"* (P10, II).

Thus, despite letters from the University's Human Resources department endorsing the legitimacy of this distributed leadership approach in the academic department, some participants questioned the leadership team's status within the university structure, for example, "*I don't know the status of this leadership team within the university structures, and I think that's a problem that needs to be looked at"* (Participant 10, II). In support of this, one participant stated: "*While the leadership team may view themselves as equals, the university system does not*" (P9, II). The university will *"want one person who is at the top of the academic Department"* (P8, FG2). In addition, Participant 10 also criticised the legitimacy of the model with regard to the length of its experiment: "*I'm not quite sure to what extent this model is experimental or has a kind of a legitimate standing"* (II). Data further revealed that it is because of the above reasons that the distributed leadership approach was not viewed as different from the previous model used in the department. This, therefore, corresponds with Participant 10's comment, *"So that's why I don't see much difference between this model and previous models where the HOD had Deputy HODs and had assistants and had his or her own team as well"* (II). Participant 5 was of a different view: *"But I will go back to the point that maybe the solution to this is to make people become aware that these HODs are appointed by us, and they are accountable to us"* (II). In this regard, the approach was legitimate and informed by literature. It came about in response to a real problem within the academic department when no one wished to take up the vacant HOD role. The process was overseen by the Dean and it involved much negotiation, following a formal election process.

My attention now turns to a discussion of COVID-19 as a constraint to a distributed leadership approach.

4.4.2.2 COVID-19: a constraint to a distributed leadership approach

Data have revealed that one of the major challenges affecting the implementation of distributed leadership approach was the COVID-19 pandemic which affected many nations in the world of which this South African academic department was no exception. One participant expressed how they felt during the pandemic: "*It's been a challenging time for everybody, whether you're a junior or senior academic, administrator, leader or student. It's been difficult for the departmental and faculty leadership team because we've had to do things differently"* (P9, II). Data further revealed that COVID-19 threw things out of

proportion, and a lot more work was created by the new way of doing things: *"What COVID's done is it's blown that work out of all proportion and created a lot of more work"* (P13, II).

The COVID 19 pandemic was experienced as a constraint to the distributed leadership approach adopted in the academic department: *"We've got a tension between the COVID rules, and if you break those rules, you know, there can be litigation and stuff like that. So it's very much delegated top-down ways of working"* (P13, II). The university imposed its instructions on the department, which were incompatible with the distributed leadership approach. As a result of that, they were difficult for the leadership team to cope with. Data further revealed that during the lockdown, the leadership team was left with no choice but to work along with the COVID protocols which were put in place by the Higher Education legislation. To support this claim, Participant 13 explained:

> *So we cannot make a decision about anything now unless we work within the COVID protocols the Department of Higher Education legislation and then, so you wait for that, and then you wait for the university to put stuff in place, and then that information and that is sent through documents* (II).

In addition, this participant further explained that "*I think one of the biggest challenges, I alluded to it earlier, was that what COVID has done is, it's given the delegation to us from senior management has been highlighted or prioritised"* (P13, II). As a result of that, the HOD team felt like their voice in leading the department was taken away because of things that were changing quickly.

> *We just get, we don't really have as much of a voice as we have had in the past and have been used to because things are changing very quickly, and the university makes decisions, and we just get told this is what you've got to do. And I think that that's something which is quite difficult for all three of us; I know it's very difficult for me to be in that kind of situation* (P12, II).

Data revealed that after the country went into lockdown, the system and ways of doing things changed. Staff members had no choice but to work from home. "*We have had to shift all our teaching and learning online, manage, support and play a much stronger pastoral role with colleagues and students. It's not been easy. In general, I think we have coped well"* (P9, II).

Shifting the normal leadership routines to online leadership as well as teaching and learning was a challenge for the leadership team. In addition, participant 6 had the same view by indicating the following:

> *I would say Covid 19 has made it more difficult because if we were at the university, it was going to be easy for them just to call us if there is something that is needed for us to be in the staff room quickly, with an email* (II).

The new system of working from home became a challenge because not all staff members had the resources to use online platforms. Some of them were very busy to the point that they would miss their emails and then not be able to respond on time as expected. "*The fact that we are all over the place and at times someone is not on emails is doing something else, and then you miss some of the emails"* (P6, II).

4.4.2.3 Zoom as an online platform: a constraint to distributed leadership

Getting adjusted to the new and remote ways of doing things was a problem for most of the staff members in the academic department. They find using the online platform Zoom very tiring and it did not work for them.

> *For me, you know, the Zooms are quite tiring, you can't, like now we have this interview, but you're not like if you were interviewing me face-to-face you'd be able to see my facial expressions, the way I'm moving my hands, you'd be reading so much more into what I am saying, you know* (P12, II).

During the lockdown, the staff members were challenged because they were not able to see each other day to day. This made them feel less humanised. "*So I think one of the biggest things is for us not to have had the opportunity to really see each other face-to-face"* (P6, FG1). In addition, Participant 9 also stated that "*we are social beings, and so the remote online ways of working have been isolating and lonely"* (II). Although that was a challenge, the leadership team did a lot to make sure that the opportunities for staff members to meet up were created. "*But we have tried to create opportunities where we can see each other face-to-face, but they haven't been frequent"* (P6). COVID-19 was a challenge, especially for the distributed leadership approach.

The fact that the check-ins were done through an online platform drew criticism from participants. Participant 2 stated that *"the way that the check-ins started, it was an hour of meeting, but it was so much going on, and it ended up really coming across like you're arriving, you go 'Hi' to every colleague and then it's just a lecture from one person"* (FG1). "*For me, you know, the Zooms are quite tiring"* (P12, II). Participant 2 added to the criticism by saying, *"We can't even see other faces and how they're reacting"* (FG2). Similarly, Participant 12 added, "*you can't see facial expressions, the way I'm moving my hands, you'd be reading so much more into what I am saying"* (II). Participant 2 felt that *"there wasn't that sense of 'we're' in this together, we would like to hear voices of other people that we hear what, the technology sort of eroded some of the gains that we had made"* (P2, FG2).

4.4.2.4 The departmental culture within a historically white university

One of the constraints challenging the distributed leadership approach was the organisational culture of the academic department. The department's colonial history was predominantly White and male (Faculty Report, September 2021). This slowly changed with time with the department becoming more demographically representative. Participant 12 supported this and explained that the department had "*a move from a White male-dominated institution to a female-dominated institution"* (II). Participant 12 further added that in such a drastic change, *"there are all sorts of power relations around that"* (II).

Data confirmed that this academic university department has had a crisis of leadership and management for a long time. One of the participants indicated that "*there have been crises of leadership or management in the department going back over decades"* (P8, FG2). Furthermore, the departmental culture has been influenced by irregular financial activities which have resulted in a lack of trust. Participant 12 confirmed this and added:

> *We had had a very difficult period, an extensive period of autocratic leadership, as a result, there was a lack of trust. There were a few reasons why there was a lack of trust but those reasons centred around the leadership at the time* (II).

In support of this claim, Participant 13 stated that "*when we took over, the department had had a history of financial irregularities, the staff had been split into academic and administrative, and there was a lack of trust"* (II). This is an indication that the leadership team took over a department that needed to be reunited, and this corresponds with a statement made by Participant 13: *"As a Department, we inherited a department that was torn apart"*

(II). Based on the above claims, it can clearly be understood that implementing a distributed leadership approach was a challenge to the leadership team, and they had to work hard to bring about change.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has covered the findings that emerged from the four research questions. In the final chapter, I summarise the main findings, evaluate the entire research process, make recommendations for future research, and discuss any limitations of this study.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This final chapter of the thesis returns to the research goal and questions and provides a summary of the findings of the study. A few limitations of the study are provided and then the knowledge contribution is discussed. Recommendations for future research and practice are highlighted and the thesis closes with some concluding thoughts.

5.2 Research Goal and Questions

To remind the reader, this qualitative case study aimed to describe and explain how a distributed leadership approach was understood and practised in a university academic department. The following four research questions guided the study:

1. How is a distributed leadership approach understood in a university academic department?
2. How is a distributed leadership approach practised in a university academic department?
3. What are the enablements of this departmental leadership approach?
4. What are the constraints to this departmental leadership approach?

5.3 Summary of the Findings

In summary and response to the first research question: *How is a distributed leadership approach understood in a university academic department*? distributed leadership was understood as a sociocultural practice rather than an individual practice. There was no reference to the great man theory and trait theories of leadership (Khan et al., 2016). Thus, leadership was not understood in the singular but in the plural. Following Spillane (2006), the leader-plus aspect of distributed leadership was strong in the data with the approach being understood as involving multiple leaders in relational practice. A distributed leadership approach was understood as a way of developing and sharing expertise by encouraging teamwork and collective decision-making. This notion of collective decision-making aligns with the concept of democratic decision-making (Starratt, 2001; Woods, 2007). One

important purpose of the adoption of a distributed leadership approach is that it creates a platform for the enablement of leadership in others. However, the data did point to some critique of the approach and asked legitimate questions such as how a distributed approach to leadership is different from other forms of leadership such as shared leadership. The lesson learnt here is the importance of a careful theorisation of distributed leadership when using the concept as different people do understand the term differently and it can take on a common-sense meaning (Grant, 2017).

Research question 2 asked: *How is a distributed leadership approach practised in the academic department*? In response to this question, the HOD position, usually a one-person role, was reconceptualised as a HOD team. Three academics and the departmental administrator comprised the HOD team. The traditional HOD work was distributed amongst the four team members; the team divided the work among themselves which was done according to each individual's expertise (Harris, 2004) and to maximise their collective talent and experience (Bush & Glover, 2012). Thus, work-related decisions occurred heterarchically rather than hierarchically (Woods & Gronn, 2009 in Grant, 2017) within a flatter organisational structure.

Leadership within the academic department was not limited to the HOD team but stretched across the department (Spillane, 2006). Multiple leaders were evident across the many different situations during the period of the study. Lecturer leadership was enacted through formal faculty and university structures as well as informally as and when the situation required it. Many examples of dispersed distributed leadership (Grant, 2017) were evident in the study.

However, a distributed perspective on leadership is not merely about multiple leaders – the leader-plus aspect. Also crucial is the practice aspect defined as a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers and their situation (Spillane, 2005). In keeping with its sociocultural foundations, this perspective on practice focuses on the "leaders thinking and action in situ" (Spillane et al., 2004, p. 10) with the unit of analysis being the leadership activity. The major building renovations coupled with the global COVID-19 pandemic significantly framed and influenced this leadership study. As a consequence of these two events, the teaching and learning practices within the department changed significantly. The move to online and remote learning was experienced as fraught with colleagues feeling isolated and anxious. Structural innovations such as the Friday check-in and the buddy

system were introduced to ensure communication and support within a safe and collegial space. Inclusivity in the decision-making process was also regarded as a strong practice in the academic department which contributed towards the advancement of an inclusive culture and mindset (Blessinger & Stefani, 2018), a culture of trust and democratic leadership (Starratt, 2001; Woods, 2007).

Research question 3 had to do with the *enablements of this departmental leadership approach*. Enablements included the structural innovation of the Friday check-in as well as the buddy system. These two innovations provided the space for the development of voice and leadership. For the most part, they were considered safe and inclusive spaces; heterarchical rather than hierarchical which enabled communication and growth. The consultative nature of the HOD team was also viewed as an enablement.

Research question 4 asked: *What are the constraints to this departmental leadership approach*? The first constraint revolved around the tension between the hierarchical structure of the university and the more horizontal, distributed leadership approach being piloted in the academic department. The second constraint was also very real with the transition to Zoom as an online teaching, learning and supervision platform as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The final constraint was experienced in relation to the history of the department, located as it was within a historically White university in South Africa. The effects of this history impacted the departmental culture and, as we know from the literature, institutional culture is extremely difficult to change.

5.4 Limitations of the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic was a serious limiting factor to this study. It impacted the study from the conceptualisation of the study through to the choice of data generation methods and sampling. Working online with participants and moving from face-to-face to an online research environment was extremely challenging. Another limitation of the study was that I worked with about half the departmental staff, mostly academic staff. Very few administrative staff participated in the study. This may have been because of the hard lockdown and limited access to online communication platforms. These silences are evident in the data and need to be probed.

Another limiting factor was the complexity of distributed leadership as the research framework. I often found the literature contradictory and I grappled with some of the concepts.

5.5 The Study's Knowledge Contribution

Firstly, we know that the available knowledge about higher education leadership has largely been created and shaped by scholars from the U.S.A. (Esen et al., 2020). We also now know that while the concept of distributed leadership has been explored widely in school leadership research, it has been less widely applied to research exploring the higher education sector (Floyd & Fung, 2017).

As argued in the opening chapter of this thesis, there are very few studies conducted on distributed leadership in a higher education context in the global south. This study fills this gap because it explores how a distributed leadership approach was understood and practised in an academic department in a South African university. It is also likely one of its kind because the study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Secondly, the literature has argued that while there is some research on leadership in higher education, it is mostly targeted at the level of senior management, including vice-chancellors, deputy vice-chancellors and deans (Chilvers et al., 2018). Research which targets the academic HOD in a university context is limited (Floyd, 2016). This study with its focus on the HOD in an academic department contributes to this under-researched sub-field of ELM.

Thirdly, this study has contributed to the field because of its conceptualisation of distributed leadership. I argue that conceptualising distributed leadership as a sociocultural practice with the leader-plus and practice aspects (Spillane et al., 2004) provides a language of description and a strong theoretical and analytical framework for a distributed leadership study. Adopting this robust research framework safeguards researchers from conflating distributed leadership with other forms of leadership such as shared or collaborative leadership.

Fourthly, the research experiment initiated in the academic department relating to the adoption of a distributed leadership approach stimulated much discussion and dialogue around leadership and leadership practices. My study served as a further stimulus to these discussions. I argue that these leadership discussions were beneficial to everyone involved and promoted a level of leadership reflexivity in the department.

Getting people to talk about leadership and be more conscious of leadership practices can lead to a more trusting and inclusive institutional culture.

5.6 Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

Firstly, future studies on distributed leadership could draw more on the theoretical underpinnings of cultural-historical activity theory and its central principles to describe and explain leadership practices. This study, being an exploratory study, drew only on the basic tenets of distributed leadership. From a theoretical perspective, cultural-historical activity can contribute so much more to explaining the complexities and nuances of leadership practice from a socio-cultural perspective.

Secondly, a further study could follow which takes this study and replicates it in a school context. The comparisons between a higher education study and a school-based study would be interesting.

Thirdly, I suggest that further distributed leadership studies that wish to interrogate distributed leadership practices begin with a workshop which carefully unpacks the concept as a research framework. The workshop should include a warning about the common-sense usage of distributed leadership and how this can be avoided.

Fourthly, an application of distributed leadership in a school context would be useful. For example, having completed my study, I now wish to initiate a dialogue about distributed leadership during a series of continuing professional development workshops in my school.

5.7 Concluding Thoughts

This thesis nearly did not happen! With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, my plans to study on a full-time basis were derailed as were my initial ideas for the research. I had to constantly rethink the study design, given the national lockdown and the move to remote and online platforms. I am, therefore, eternally grateful that I now have a complete thesis. This study has provided me with unforgettable memories that will remain with me for the rest of my life. Looking back at how I struggled with academic writing, it is incredible to see how far I have come with the help of my supervisors. I am proud to say I have become a compassionate and dedicated worker. I am eternally grateful to everyone who helped me achieve this incredible goal. This is the end of my thesis but not my learning.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Proposal Acceptance

RHODES UNIVERSITY
Where leaders learn

20 July 2020

Mr Keneth Haufiku
[redacted]
RHODES UNIVERSITY

Dear Haufiku

REQUEST TO CONDUCT RESEARCH WITH RHODES UNIVERSITY STAFF AND/OR STUDENTS

This letter is to confirm that your request to conduct research on ***"A distributed model of leadership in a South African University*** [redacted] ***An exploratory case study"*** topic has been approved by the Ethics Committee. In my capacity as Acting HR Director, I do not have any objection should you wish to follow a coordinated approach by surveying and/or interviewing staff.

Yours sincerely

[redacted]
Acting HR Director

Appendix B: Ethical Clearance

RHODES UNIVERSITY
Where leaders learn

Education Faculty
PO Box 94, Grahamstown, 6140, South Africa
T: +27 (0) 46 603 8393
F: +27 (0) 46 603 8028
[redacted]
www.ru.ac.za

16/07/2020

Dr Farhana Kajee

Mr Keneth Haufiku

1564

[redacted]

Dear Mr Haufiku

Re: A distributed model of leadership in a South African University [redacted]: An exploratory case study -1564 Jul 2020

This letter confirms that the Higher Degree Committee has approved your research proposal, for the degree of Master of Education in Education in the Faculty of Education titled: A distributed model of leadership in a South African University [redacted] An exploratory case study

You will need ethical clearance from the [redacted] Faculty Ethics Committee before you can begin your research. The ethics review process is underway and you will receive a separate outcome notification from the Chair: [redacted] Faculty Ethics Committee.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

Chair: [redacted] Higher Degrees Committee

cc. Dr Farhana Kajee

Page 1 of 1

Appendix C: Interview questions

For the individual staff members

1. Briefly tell me something about yourself; particularly the role you play in this Department.
2. How do you feel about being asked to provide your input on some matters; particularly changes made in leadership of the department? And perhaps why do you feel this way?
3. Are you happy to continue with the interview?
4. Do you think it is important to participate in departmental activities? Elaborate
5. To what extent are your personal skills acknowledged, utilized and then shared with other staff members? Briefly explain perhaps with the aid of examples
6. Picking up from the previous question, provide examples of when you've taken a leadership role in the department and how did you find yourself in this position? Share your experiences; also mention how you felt
7. What factors/ conditions have helped to promote your engaging in some form self-directed leadership activity?
8. Does the leadership team, engage you in leadership tasks? Are opportunities in this regard created? Explain in detail.
9. How important is it to participate in the decisions that are made in the department?
10. How do you interact/cooperate with other staff members?
11. What are your views about staff engagement in making decisions related to the activities in the department?
12. How can the leadership involvement of staff be promoted? Are some of the suggestions in place at the Department?
13. Name specific changes you have seen in the department over the past few months after the leadership of the department changed.
14. Were these changes you observed positive or negative or both? Explain.
15. How would you describe the leadership practised in the [redacted]

    -the leadership team

    -program coordinators

    -other [redacted] staff members

-admin and support staff

16. From my communication, you may have observed I have used the word-Distributed Leadership; would you like to share a few thoughts on this form of leadership?

16. What are the inhibiting or constraining factors of such a leadership approach?
17. What changes would you like to see in the future with regard to leadership in the department?
18. Is there anything else you would like to tell me that I have not asked about?

Possible interview questions for the Leadership Team (HODs)

1. As a leadership team member, please describe your leadership approach.
2. Briefly explain the staff structure and how leadership pans out in the [redacted]
3. Describe your leadership style in your daily work together with other colleagues in the department. – Share examples where possible
4. Are staff members involved in decision-making? If so, why? And how do they and you feel about it?
5. As a leadership team member; what strategies do you use to empower and motivate staff members to freely take part in the day-to-day activities in the department? Has this been successful? Elaborate
6. How do you ensure that staff members take part in activities that align with their knowledge and skills?
7. What obstacles might discourage or prevent staff members from taking on leadership roles in the department?
8. In your opinion, what qualities or practices of staff are indicative of their leadership?
9. Have you changed your leadership strategies after the university was in lockdown due to COVID- 19? If so, how?
10. What leadership challenges are you facing now as a result of COVID- 19?
11. I have alluded to the term distributed leadership in my communication; briefly explain your understanding of this model. Provide examples of where you have led from this perspective.

12. As a leadership team, how do you create an environment where staff members are taking up leadership initiatives on their own? Have you reached this point in your leadership? Elaborate.
13. On the flip side, in your opinion, what are some of the constraints in adopting such a leadership model perspective?
14. Is there anything else you would like to tell me that I have not asked about?

For the focus group:

1. Describe the leadership approach practised in the education department by;

- the leadership team
- program coordinators
- other academic staff members
- admin and support staff

2. Does the leadership team promote the current leadership approach embraced amongst staff members? If so, how?
3. Based on your experience and knowledge, what resources/ structures/platforms are in place in the department for staff members to participate in this leadership approach?
4. In your opinion, what additional support, if any, would be helpful to staff members in embracing this leadership perspective?
5. Based on your experience and knowledge, what resources are in place in the department for staff members to participate in this leadership approach?
6. What factors might encourage or support staff members in taking on leadership roles in the [redacted]?
7. What benefits do you think might come from staff members' participation in departmental activities or leadership in whatever form?
8. What obstacles might discourage or prevent staff members from taking on leadership roles in the department?
9. What difficulties do you think might result from having staff members participate in this form of leadership approach and what measures do you think could be taken to remove or minimize such obstacles?
10. How does the leadership team make sense of, and respond to, your demands in relation to:

- the new leadership model,

- and how do they take action and handle the tension between these demands and challenges like the renovation of the [redacted]

-and that of the COVID-19 pandemic.

11. From my communication, you may have observed I have used the word-distributed leadership; would you like to share a few thoughts on this form of leadership?
12. Is there anything else you would like to tell me that I have not asked about?

Appendix D: Observation Tool

The following are possible questions that can guide my note taking during observations:

1. Who are the leading members sharing the role of chairperson and secretary of the meeting?
2. How are the topics discussed?
3. What are the rules of engagement?
4. What are the artifacts used?
5. How are the responsibilities shared?
6. Are there any disagreements and contradictions?

The following theoretical tenets of distributed leadership will aid with my ***observation and serve as an analytical framework***

Distributed leadership is understood as:

- A socio-cultural practice
- Like energy; fluid and emergent
- Not restricted to a formal position
- Emerges where there is expertise in an organisation
- Conceptualised as a collective
- Relational and inter-relational
- Heterarchical (rather than hierarchical) arrangement of relationships
- Principle of emergence
- The role of the formal management structure is to enable leadership in others through the creation of a collaborative and inclusive environment

Appendix E: Research Participant Informed Consent Letter

(Participant)

Project Title: **A Distributed model of leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic: A case study in a South African University** [redacted]

Kenneth Haufiku (g16h7973) from the [redacted], Rhodes University has requested my permission to participate in the above-mentioned research project.

The nature and the purpose of the research project and this informed consent declaration have been explained to me in a language that I understand.

I am aware that:

1. The purpose of the research project is to explore how the Distributed Leadership model is understood and practised in the XXXXX and to investigate what the enablements and constraints of this model of departmental leadership are.
2. I will be interviewed, either individually or as part of a focus group interview. I may be asked to do a follow-up interview, should the need arise. Interviews will take approximately 45-60 minutes and will be audio recorded on Zoom or WhatsApp.
3. By participating in this research project, I will be contributing towards Mr Haufiku's M Ed study, the purpose of which is outlined in point 1.
4. My participation is entirely voluntary and should I, at any stage, wish to withdraw from participating further, I may do so without any negative consequences.
5. I understand that participating in this study is voluntary and that I will not be compensated for participating.
6. There may be risks associated with my participation in the project. I am aware that the following steps have been taken to prevent the risks: All information shared in the group is strictly confidential, and shall not be used for purposes other than the explained research.
7. The researcher intends to publish the research results in the form of a Master's thesis submitted towards a Master's degree in Education, and perhaps later in the form of a journal article. However, confidentiality will be maintained.

8. Any further questions that I might have concerning the research or my participation will be answered by Kenneth Haufiku (kennethd888@yahoo.com), or the study supervisor Dr F Kajee (f.kajee@ru.ac.za) and Professor C Grant (c.grant@ru.ac.za).
9. By signing this informed consent declaration I am not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.
10. A copy of this informed consent declaration will be mailed to the researcher and it will be saved.

I, …….. have read the above information / confirm that the above information has been explained to me in a language that I understand and I am aware of this document's contents. I have asked all questions that I wished to ask and these have been answered to my satisfaction. I fully understand what is expected of me during the research.

I have not been pressurised in any way and I voluntarily agree to participate in the above-mentioned project.

……. …….

……. **Participant's signature** **Witness**

Date

Rhodes University, Research Office, Ethics

Ethics Coordinator: ethics-commitee@ru.ac.za

t: +27 (0) 46 603 7335 f: +27 (0) 82 739 4378

Room 220, Main Admin Building, Drostdy Road, Grahamstown, 6139

Appendix F: Email to the staff

Greetings all

I am currently registered for a M Ed in Educational Leadership and Management (ELM). The provisional title of my research is: ***A Distributed model of leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic: A case study in a South African University*** [redacted]

My research questions are:

1. How is a distributed model of leadership understood and practised in a [redacted] in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are the enablements and constraints of this model of departmental leadership?

I am sending you this email, requesting your participation in my study. I have attached two documents; one is an information letter and the other one is a research participant's informed consent letter.

Your participation in this study is voluntary, if you choose not to participate, there will be no negative consequences. If you choose to participate and wish to withdraw at any time, you will be free to do so without negative consequences.

I wish to upload my proposal on or before 4th June 2020 for the Education Higher Degrees Committee meeting of 18th June 2020. If you are willing to participate, please read through the attached documents and email me back the informed consent letter no later than 28.05.2020.

Thanking you in advance

Kind regards

Kenneth Haufiku