# Re-imagining Leadership Development for Middle-level Academic Leaders in Africa

Oliver Seale*

## Abstract

The university today is a postmodern, neo-liberal, competitive, boundary-less knowledge conglomerate, a far cry from its historical, traditional, classical and collegial roots. Although remaining true to its primary mission of research, teaching and community engagement, its organisational form has changed significantly, with its concomitant implications for governance, leadership and management, especially in a developing world context. The regional and institutional disruptions and protests by students and other stakeholders in African countries like Algeria, Kenya, Sudan and, more recently, South Africa in the guise of the '#RhodesMustFall,' '#FeesMustFall' and '#OpenStellenbosch' campaigns, starkly illustrates this challenging, nebulous environment of higher education on the continent. The article provides a reflection and engagement on these critical issues and aims to illustrate that: (i) the global and local contexts of higher education have changed dramatically, with its concomitant added levels of complexity for academic leaders; (ii) this environment has implications for the conception and practice of leadership and management in universities, for middle level academic leaders in particular; and (iii) this setting provides the backdrop for a holistic and integrated academic leadership intervention in universities in Africa.

**Keywords:** deans, heads/chairs of schools, middle-management, leadership in higher education, MOLD

## Résumé

L'université est aujourd'hui un conglomérat de connaissances1 postmoderne, néolibéral, compétitif et sans frontières, loin de ses racines historiques, traditionnelles, classiques et collégiales. Bien qu'elle reste fidèle à sa mission principale de recherche, d'enseignement et d'engagement communautaire, sa forme organisationnelle a considérablement changé, avec des implications concomitantes de gouvernance, de leadership et de gestion, en particulier dans

*   Researher and lecturer, Director of the Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) Programme, University of South Africa (USAf), Johannesburg, South Africa. Email: oliver@usaf.ac.za

un monde en développement. Les perturbations et protestations régionales et institutionnelles d'étudiants et d'autres parties prenantes de pays africains comme l'Algérie, le Kenya, le Soudan et, plus récemment, l'Afrique du Sud avec des campagnes comme #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall et #OpenStellenbosch illustrent clairement cet environnement nébuleux et difficile de l'enseignement supérieur sur le continent. L'article fournit une réflexion et un engagement sur ces questions importantes et tente d'illustrer que : (i) les contextes, mondial et local, de l'enseignement supérieur ont changé de façon spectaculaire avec des niveaux supplémentaires et concomitants de complexité pour les responsables universitaires ; (ii) cet environnement a des implications pour les universités, dans la conception et la pratique du leadership et de la gestion de niveau intermédiaires en particulier les dirigeants ; et (iii) ce cadre fournit la toile de fond pour une intervention de leadership académique holistique et intégrée dans les universités en Afrique.

**Mots-clés :** doyens, directeurs d'école, cadres intermédiaires, leadership dans l'enseignement supérieur, MOLD

## Introduction

The world of higher education has changed dramatically in the past two decades, and this has had implications for its governance, leadership and management, particularly at universities (Johnson & Cross 2006; Scott *et al.* 2008; Greicar 2009; Gmelch & Buller 2015; Seale & Cross 2017). African higher education is in transition and grappling with major challenges arising out of global issues and local imperatives. It has a leadership crisis which requires a new kind of leadership and management (Jansen 2015; Seale & Cross 2015; Seale & FitzGerald 2016; Jowi 2018). Although there is rising global interest in studies on academic leadership in universities nowadays, most especially on deanship, their state of play in Africa remains under-researched and the extant literature on its contextual specificities very thin. This is worrisome.

In an attempt to remedy this situation, Jowi (2018) in a doctoral study provides an analysis on the leadership styles of deans in Kenyan universities, while Otara (2015) and Seale (2015) in their investigations on the decanal challenges, proffer guidelines for more effective leadership and management through appropriate leadership development. Academic leaders and managers play a pivotal role in advancing the strategic objectives and operational requirements for success in universities. Although credible scholars, it appears that many do not have the necessary management know-how or experience, a key requirement for academic leadership.

Another study at universities in the Gauteng province of South Africa confirms the underlying premise that leadership development for academic leaders can be an enabling, empowering instrument of change and effective performance, for deans in this case (Seale 2015). Burgoyne *et al.* (2009) and others claim that leadership development is not the panacea for addressing organisational ills, but if conceptualised, planned and managed correctly in an enabling organisational setting, it may enhance an individual's competencies and result in improved organisational outcomes. However, in South African and most universities on the continent, as Seale (2015) illustrates, approaches to leadership development do not appear to be responsive to the contextual complexity and fluidity of a changing environment. Targeted and bespoke interventions for middle-level academic leaders are almost non-existent.

It may be that universities in Africa are setting up their academic leaders for failure if they are not adequately prepared and supported with appropriate leadership development before and during their tenure. A fundamental question posed in this article is: Can middle-level academic leaders make a successful transition from a traditional, hierarchical academe to effective leadership and management practice? Cognisant of the literature and prevailing discourse, it is argued here that this is possible. The main contention, however, is that leadership development for academic leaders requires an appropriate, contextual response to the unique higher education setting in Africa.

Drawing from the current literature, trends and research, a systemic, integrated approach to leadership development is proffered here, informed by organisational strategies and objectives that are individually oriented and directed toward building leadership and management capabilities.

## Theory and Method

The predominant emphasis in leadership research and the current discourse has been on the human capital of individual leaders (Day 1999). This is in keeping with the traditional individualistic, heroic notions of leadership advocated by the 'leader-follower' discourse. But as pointed out by Parry (1998) and others, this approach neglects the organisational and social dimensions of leadership, as characterised by advancements in prevailing theories on transformational leadership (Huey 1994; Nirenberg 1993), team leadership (Stewart & Manz 1995; Northouse 2007; Lave & Wenger 1991), distributed leadership (Gronn 2002; Spillane *et al.* 2001) and participatory or collective leadership (Abzug & Phelps 1998; Black & Gregersen 1997).

Most leadership development approaches nowadays remain trapped in the 'heroic,' individualistic leadership frame, manifested by a 'deficit-assumption' orientation which focuses on a leader's 'weaknesses' and performance gaps, with its main purpose being remedial, by fixing the individual for the benefit of the collective (Seale 2015). However, the literature and overriding evidence points to an emerging notion of leadership development in universities that is cognisant of the individual, organisational and social dimensions of leadership, and aligned to the strategic intent and performance objectives of institutions located in a specific environmental setting (Mountford & Doidge 2005; Scott *et al.* 2008; Bolden *et al.* 2008; Greicar 2009; Gmelch & Buller 2015).

In this reconceptualisation, Seale (2015) argues that leadership development acquires and is imbued with a 'developmental-orientation' premised on building the capacity of the individual for effective performance in his or her current role and continuous professional development for career advancement. This approach is cognisant of the organisational and social dimensions of leadership which have hitherto been neglected or overlooked in responses to leadership development, as confirmed by Parry (1998). The fundamental premise in this conception is that middle-level academic leaders possess the requisite minimum knowledge, skills and demonstrable experience to do their jobs, hence their appointment (Seale 2015).

Leadership development here is directed specifically towards an enhancement of a leader's capabilities to lead and manage more effectively amidst organisational complexity and change. What this means is that leadership development in the prevailing context must be cognisant of, and responsive to, the complexities of organisational change and its concomitant implications for the social relations of middle-level academic managers. As Parry (1998) claims and the author agrees, an in-depth investigation of this change process provides a lens for reviewing and understanding the social influence processes of leadership at work in complex, organisational settings such as universities. By the same token, it provides an opportunity for reframing the conceptual and contextual setting for a more nuanced discourse on leadership development in what seems a unique environment like African higher education.

Here we draw on the literature on leadership development and current trends and data from two questionnaires that formed part of a doctoral study undertaken by Seale (2015) involving interviews with 26 deans (of whom 10 were women), their line managers, human resource managers  and other key informants  at six universities in the Gauteng province, South Africa: University of Pretoria (UP), University of South Africa (UNISA), University

of the Witwatersrand (Wits), University of Johannesburg (UJ), Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) and the Vaal University of Technology (VUT). It also draws on the summary data in the training needs analyses which were undertaken with participants on the Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) programmes in 2018 and 2019.

These research methods enabled commonalities and differences to be compared among participant responses and presented an opportunity to gather multiple sources of information rich in context. In order to test and triangulate the data from the questionnaires and interviews with deans, additional semi-structured interviews took place with 12 other key informants, such as the deans' line managers, human resource managers, and others, including the Chief Executive Officer of Higher Education South Africa (HESA).

## Re-imagining Leadership Development for Middle-level Academic Leaders

Academic leaders in most instances are not being prepared nor supported for what appears to be a unique twenty-first century higher education setting caught in the throes of global influencers and multifarious local demands for transformation, responsiveness and performativity (Gmelch & Buller 2015; Wall 2015; Seale & Cross 2017; Jowi 2018).

> My predecessor warned that this is a very lonely position. I only realised it when I experienced the relief of being among peers in these sessions. (Executive Dean, North-West University, 2018)

What is becoming apparent is that the conceptual and theoretical frame of leadership development for academic leaders in this setting must be cognisant of and responsive to: (i) the changing global and local context of higher education, with its concomitant added levels of complexity; (ii) the capacity implications of a changing environment for leadership and management; and (iii) the enhancement of capital for academic leaders through leadership development for more effective individual and organisational performance (Seale 2015).

There appear to be three main phenomena or features of leadership development emerging from the literature, current discourse and research which informs the emerging theorisation on leadership development for academic leaders (see Wisniewski 2000; Duderstadt 2005; Scott et al. 2008; Bolden et al. 2008; Gmelch & Buller 2015; Wepner, Henk, & Lovell 2015; Seale 2015). These are the *leadership context*, *leadership capacity* and *leadership capital* which provide a foundation for a developmental oriented, integrated

approach to leadership development that embeds career advancement and is driven by performance management (see Figure1 below).
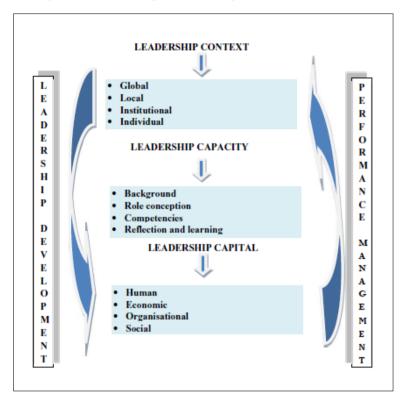


**LEADERSHIP CONTEXT**

- Global
- Local
- Institutional
- Individual

**LEADERSHIP CAPACITY**

- Background
- Role conception
- Competencies
- Reflection and learning

**LEADERSHIP CAPITAL**

- Human
- Economic
- Organisational
- Social

(Left vertical axis: LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT)
(Right vertical axis: PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT)

**Figure 1:** Conceptual framework of leadership development for deans

Firstly, there is the complex and changing leadership context characterised by global, national and institutional imperatives. But of equal importance is what the individual brings to this context in terms of background, knowledge and experience.

In their study on collective leadership in universities, Bolden *et al.* (2008) identify five groups of leadership factors which are key for leadership development in the contemporary higher education setting:

i. *Structural and organisational* – this includes organisational systems, processes and structures; allocation and management of budgets and resources; human resources management; formal and informal communication channels; and forums for consultation and decision making.

The writers illustrate, for instance, that the nature of budgetary control and devolution, coupled with transparency in the allocation of finances, is fundamental in shaping leadership at the school/departmental level (Bolden *et al.* 2008). This resonates with the comments of some deans on the additional sources of power and authority their position provides, and how they influence desired behaviour through the use of reward or coercion, amongst staff (Seale 2015).

ii. *Individual* – this refers to personal qualities, experience and preferences. Bolden *et al.* (2008) found a wide variation in personal styles, motivations and approaches within and between universities, ranging from highly individualistic through to team and collective approaches to leadership. This is consistent with the views articulated by the deans in South Africa, where most expressed the need for collective, 'bottom-up' leadership in the academe, given their important interface role and need to ensure commitment to their university's strategic vision and plans (Seale 2015).

iii. *Social* – this aspect incorporates the informal networks, partnerships, and alliances, organisational culture and any shared sense of purpose and identity. The concept of identity for Bolden *et al.* (2008) seemed an integral part of the motivations and experiences of leadership that are not well captured in behavioural or procedural accounts. This confirms Parry's (1998) views on the relational and social dimensions of leadership and how they impact on individual and group identity. For a number of the deans participating in this study, especially those in merged institutions,[1] this appears to have been one of the most difficult leadership challenges they faced in terms of forsaking former organisational cultures and identities and creating new ones, establishing new partnerships, alliances and networks (Seale 2015).

iv. *Contextual* – this reflects the way in which university leadership is becoming increasingly politicised and subject to external pressures. There are a number of global and local drivers and shifts which have leadership and management implications for deans in South African higher education (see Johnson & Cross 2006; Scott *et al.* 2008; Greicar 2009; Meek, Goedegebuure, Santiago & Carvalho 2010; Gmelch & Buller 2015). The introduction of 'executive deanship' in local universities has added another layer of complexity to an already challenging environment, as illustrated by Johnson and Cross (2006) and later confirmed by Seale and Cross (2017).

v. *Developmental* – this refers to the ongoing and changing developmental needs of individuals, groups and organisations. What Bolden *et al.* (2008) point to here is a more holistic approach to leadership development which includes the individual, team and organisational dimensions and, as McLennan and Orkin (2009) confirm, ensures that the learning environment is enabling and empowering to deliver the desired outcomes. The focus here is not only the human, but also the economic, organisational and social dimensions of leadership development (Bolden *et al.* 2008).

As alluded to earlier, the contextual setting for middle-level academic leaders in South African higher education finds expression through the global and local challenges they are experiencing, leadership and management legacies of their respective institutions, and repositioning post-democracy.

Secondly, *leadership capacity* in this analytical frame relates to the internal means of ensuring that the fundamental requirements for academic leadership and management exist within the individual and the organisation (Wolverton *et al.* 2005; Gmelch & Buller 2015). It refers to the process of leadership development that enables and empowers the individual and organisation (Bolden *et al.* 2008; McLennan & Orkin 2009) to address the complexities of change, reflect and learn from their successes and failures, and focus on improved performance. This is in keeping with the three areas Wolverton *et al.* (2005) identify for leadership development in their study: (i) conceptual understanding of academic leadership in a specific institutional context; (ii) skill development for performance; and (iii) reflection and learning from experience.

This last dimension is key to the local context, bearing in mind the particular challenges middle-level leaders face with understanding, and enacting their academic leadership and management roles in complexity and change. For instance, most if not all the deans in South Africa expressed the value of reflection and learning from their experiences and those of their peers (Seale 2015), and Wepner *et al.* (2015) agree.

> Self-reflection is not always easy, yet it is critical for moving forward. One cannot assume that deans are capable of self-reflection. Opportunities to self-reflect about what deans are thinking and doing can help them to see more clearly their own habits of mind and patterns of practice.

Not surprisingly, this component of leadership development is gaining more prominence, as can be gleaned from the work of Bolden *et al.* (2008), Scott *et al.* (2008), Greicar (2009), and Wepner, Henk and Lovell (2015) in other geographical settings.

The third phenomenon in the conceptual frame for leadership development is *leadership capital*. Although approaches to leadership development nowadays are more strategic and integrated with organisational objectives, the challenge of measuring the impact and return on investment in a systematic and comprehensive manner remains problematic (McLennan & Orkin 2009; Bolden *et al.* 2008; Gmelch & Buller 2015). Most interventions use programme impact surveys which tend to focus on participant satisfaction with the event/activities, and not on an assessment of the application of new knowledge and skills, nor individual and organisational benefits in terms of return on investment. Moreover, there appears to be a disjunction in current approaches to determining leadership and management effectiveness (see Pounder 1999; Whetten & Cameron YEAR cited in Rosser *et al.* 2003; Wall 2015) which is highlighted too by the deans in South Africa (Seale 2015).

This disjunction appears to be the central problem with determining the individual and institutional value of investment in current leadership development interventions in universities. What emerges from the literature and research is a need to develop an appropriate assessment of the impact and return on investment for leadership development which is cognisant of the leader's context and capacity. In response, the authors introduce the notion of *leadership capital* as the demonstrable, measurable outcome, value-add, or contribution to an increase of capital (human, economic, organisational and social) for the individual, institution and higher education sector (environment), arising out of relevant and appropriate leadership development interventions for academic leaders.

Human capital comprises the competencies, knowledge, and social and personality attributes embodied in the ability to perform labour for economic value (OECD 1998). As knowledge workers, middle-level academic leaders are endowed with a unique biography, knowledge, skills set, and personality traits which they contribute to their position. The main purpose of leadership development, then, is to prepare them to be effective in the role through knowledge and skills enhancement and, equally importantly, in their professional lives' post-academic leadership, in terms of career management. This is in keeping with predominant approaches to leadership development which not only focus on professional but also on personal advancement. It is corroborated by Schön's (1983) approach to reflectivity as an alternative epistemology for leadership and management, and the notion of epistemic reflexivity introduced by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992).

Economic capital refers to the amount of investment that an organisation needs to ensure that it stays solvent. It is calculated internally and is the level

of capital an organisation should have to support any operational risks it takes on (Investopedia 2014). Universities, like most contemporary organisations, face major financial constraints and are required to work smarter and 'do more with less' as public funding for higher education globally declines. Middle-level academic leaders nowadays need to ensure that they have the necessary financial resources, not only to meet but also to realise the institution's strategic objectives within a constrained environment. In addition, they face increasing demands for financial accountability, especially given the systematic dwindling in state funding to local higher education in the past two decades. In order to address their budgetary shortfalls, one of the new areas of responsibility for academic leaders is income generation as well as risk management, which requires a particular skill set and, it is argued, can be addressed through leadership development.

Organisational capital is the value to an enterprise which is derived from its philosophy and systems while leveraging its capability for delivering goods or services (Wikipedia 2019). It combines institution-specific information that affects production, augmented through output-related learning processes (Prescott & Visscher 1980) and the know-how needed to create productivity systems in terms of human skills and physical capital (Evenson & Westphal 1995). The focus here is more on the organisational culture, systems/processes and learning. The institutional management context of deans these days is characterised by the need for effective systems and processes to deliver a quality product and service. Simply put, middle-level academic leaders need to be more technology savvy and able to work smarter by developing appropriate institutional systems that enhance their institution's performance.

Cohen and Prusak (2001) describe social capital as the reserve of active connections among people based on the trust, mutual understanding, and collective values and behaviours that unite them and result in collaborative actions. As mentioned earlier, Parry (1998) stresses the importance of the social and relational aspects of leadership in a knowledge domain, which other writers refer to as team leadership (Stewart & Manz 1995; Northouse 2007; Lave & Wenger 1991), distributed leadership (Gronn 2002; Spillane *et al.* 2001) and participatory or collective leadership (Abzug & Phelps 1998; Black & Gregersen 1997).

For middle-level academic leaders, social capital means establishing and maintaining relationships of trust with both the academe and the administration, towards ensuring that there is an alignment to the institutional strategy and a commitment to the achievement of its organisational objectives. Leadership development in this context, then, provides opportunities to

systematise and sustain these crucial networks that are vital for advancing more effective leadership and management performance.

Current approaches to leadership development have focused primarily on the human and economic, and not sufficiently on the organisational and social capital dimensions (Bolden *et al.* 2008; Scott *et al.* 2008; Greicar 2009; Gmelch & Buller 2015). The emerging framework for leadership capital, as illustrated in Table 1 below, does two things: it identifies the focus, measures, outcomes and models based on the work of Schuller (2000) and, adapted for our purposes, demonstrates the important interface and potential dialectic between the individual and institutional dimensions of leadership capital.

**Table 1:** Leadership capital framework

|  | Human Capital | Social Capital |  | Economic Capital | Organisational Capital |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Focus** | Individual | Individual | ◄► | Institutional | Institutional |
| **Measures** | Duration of schooling Qualifications | Attitudes/values Membership/ participation Trust levels | ◄► | Solvency Financial stability Risk management | Systems/processes Performance Culture/climate Learning |
| **Outcomes** | Direct: income, productivity Indirect: health, civic activity | Social cohesion Economic achievement More social capital | ◄► | Adequate risk capital Going concern | Stability Competitiveness |
| **Model** | Linear | Interactive/ circular | ◄► | Linear | Linear |

*Focus* – Human capital focuses on the individual, whereas for economic and organisational capital, it is institutional. Social capital involves relationships and a dynamic interplay between the individual and the institution in terms of the internal and external networks that it establishes. In an organisational setting like a university, the inclusion of all four types of capital is key as an impact measurement tool for leadership development, since noting Schuller (2000:6), individuals and institutions 'are not discrete entities who exist separately from the rest of each other, or from other social units'. The effectiveness of leadership development will therefore hinge on an institutional environment which is enabling for individual success but, of equal importance, is economically viable and organisationally stable. This approach in Schuller's (2000) view is a gestalt switch for leadership development and what the authors contend is required for middle-level academic leaders locally.

*Input/measure* – Human capital is measured primarily by levels of skills, experience and qualifications achieved. In a similar vein, economic capital is determined by the institution's solvency levels, financial stability and management of risks associated with capital investments. Social capital and organisational capital, on the other hand, are far more dispersed. Organisational capital measures include the systems and processes put in place to deliver particular goods or services and their market value, performance and organisational learning. Social capital uses an individual's attitudes or values as measures of how they impact on organisational culture, as well as their levels of active participation in internal and external networks, for personal and institutional gain.

The relevance of social and organisational capital to leadership development can be seen, for instance, in the formal and informal modes of learning, and the skills acquired by individuals through learning-by-doing in an enabling environment. Participation in networks provides access to internal and external information and ideas, as Schuller (2000) mentions, often in a relatively unstructured way. This is key, especially since academic leaders like deans for instance, are nowadays the 'bridge-builders' between the academe, administration and external role players. Human and social capital are key determinants for success in academic leadership and management roles within a complex, challenging context like South African higher education, where they are practised at multiple levels and often with quite disparate groups of stakeholders.

*Outcomes* – The main outcomes of human capital for an individual are generally an enhanced professional profile with additional knowledge and skills, improved currency in terms of income received and greater productivity. Appropriate investment in economic capital results in a financially solvent, going concern for an organisation that manages its operational risks effectively. Leadership development interventions on financial management, for instance, can assist middle-level academic leaders in becoming more prudent with expenditure and innovative in generating additional revenue for their university, once they have acquired the requisite skills set in this regard. Organisational capital provides institutional stability with adequate systems and processes in place, coupled with an enabling culture and opportunities for learning. Taken together, these features contribute not only to organisational stability but also to an enhancement of its competiveness in relation to others. Social capital can be linked directly to organisational performance in terms of social cohesion and trust relationships – especially in a unique, contested organisational setting like the academe – as well as to a more enabling institutional climate and the leveraging of information networks for political, economic, and social gain.

*Models* – For Schuller (2000), human capital suggests a direct linear model: investments are made, in time or money, and economic returns flow to the individual and the institution. From the literature, it appears that economic and organisational capital also have similar linear approaches. In economic capital, appropriate planning and appropriate levels of financial investment result in the mitigation and more effective management of operational risks which impact on performance. Organisational capital requires direct investment in appropriate systems and processes such as, for instance, automated operational decision making which is less labour intensive and offers better returns in terms of institutional transparency and effective communication, thus contributing to an improved institutional climate of trust and willingness to work collaboratively. Here, there is a direct relationship, says Schuller (2000), between input (planning/investment) and returns (performance/climate). Analysts are able to deploy existing tools to estimate the returns on investment and institutions like universities can justify their expenditure since the outcomes are more visible and direct.

Social capital, however, has a less linear character and its quantitative returns are not so easily definable or measurable, which is one of its weaknesses. Although the level or amount of social capital present in a given relationship is often intuitive, the value that information and ideas networks add to individual and organisational performance, may be determined. For instance, a dean who has a well-established supportive relationship with his peers externally, can leverage their networked experiences when considering a particular course of action. Lessons learned and applied can then result in better and more cost-effective outcomes for the dean in question and his institution. Unlike the other forms, social capital requires an interactive/circular model that applies different metrics for different functions with its purpose being a longer-term investment, not solely linked to the provision of economic gain.

The *leadership capital* framework provides the basis for determining the individual, organisational and sectoral impact and return on investment for leadership development in a more systematic and comprehensive manner. As mentioned earlier, current assessments tend to focus quite narrowly on the human and economic returns of leadership development only. Having noted the importance of the social, relational dimensions of academic leadership and management required in top management nowadays, the author proffers the inclusion of organisational and social capital as additional measures of performance. It must be stressed that human, economic, organisational and social capital are not seen as polar opposites, in competition with each other, but rather operate in concert as a collective metric for measuring the effectiveness and ultimate value and return on investments in leadership

development. In the next section, I provide a theoretical grounding for an alternative conceptualisation of leadership development for middle-level academic leaders.

## Understanding the Professional and Personal Development Needs of Middle-level Academic Leaders: A HELM Perspective

When the Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) programme, a flagship initiative of Universities South Africa (USAf), was initially launched in 2002, it was conceptualised to offer vice-chancellors and senior management strategic insight into the specific challenges that exist within the South African higher education landscape as it existed at the time. HELM nowadays continues to offer valuable perspectives on the contemporary leadership and management context, complexities and challenges facing universities. It has been reconfigured and repositioned to create cutting edge solutions that address organisational and individual capacity needs for leadership and management development, in an era of complexity and change. Since its relaunch in 2018, HELM, with financial support from the Department of Higher Education and Training, has designed and offered twenty leadership and management interventions to 759 executives, senior and middle managers, and practitioners from universities in South Africa.

In order for HELM to further hone its offering and to empirically assess the value of these programmes and workshops, it conducted a baseline survey in preparation for each event. The self-reporting survey attempts, initially, to locate the participants demographically before moving beyond this to try and grasp the kinds of knowledge and skills that this level of leadership and management requires, while at the same time attempting to understand what is already in place.

Three random sets of evaluations were chosen: one from November 2018, one in December of the same year, and one which took place in June 2019. In total, there were 110 participants over the three interventions, with an average of thirty-seven respondents in each. Of these participants, there was a reasonably equal gender split, with fifty-three percent female and forty-seven percent male. The vast majority of the participants were between forty and sixty (83.6 percent), with only ten percent under forty and 6.4 percent over sixty.

In South Africa post-2003, there are three kinds of institutions: the traditional university, the comprehensive university (a combination of a traditional university and a university of technology), and universities of technology. See Figure 2 below.
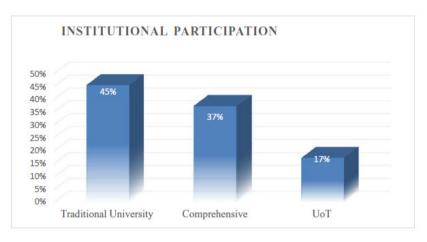
**Figure 2:** HELM participants by University Type

It is interesting to note that fifty of the participants were from traditional universities, forty-one from comprehensive, and only nineteen from the universities of technology. That only seventeen percent of the participants came from universities of technology suggests either a lack of interest within these institutions or, more likely, an indication that HELM is not optimally accessing this segment of the South African higher education sector.

These events were specifically targeted at the deans and heads of schools and academic departments. It is therefore not surprising that the vast majority were comprised of either heads of department (seventy-six percent) or heads of school (six percent). An additional four percent belong to various categories of deanship. Many of this level of management (sixty-four percent) have only been in the position between one and three years, and this provides a clear indication of the level of inexperience within this leadership cadre. In response to a question about whether the participants intend to pursue a career in academic leadership, the overwhelming response was 'yes'. This may come as a surprise, given that the head of department position was historically understood as a voluntary duty undertaken by senior members of academic staff on a rotational basis. It appears that what was once the historic 'sacrifice' of their own academic specialisation for more mundane, administrative services has now become a clear career choice. Given their current positions, it is inevitable that the next career move would be head of school (twenty-seven percent), thirty-two percent foresee becoming assistant or deputy dean, and thirteen percent to become executive dean. A further six percent respectively have their sights set on executive director or deputy vice-chancellor.

The participants were then asked to rank a series of skills and knowledge that will be required for them to fulfil their current role. There were fifteen questions in total – as an option between one and five – and it is interesting to note that none of the participants scored any of these questions below four, as depicted in Figure 3 below.
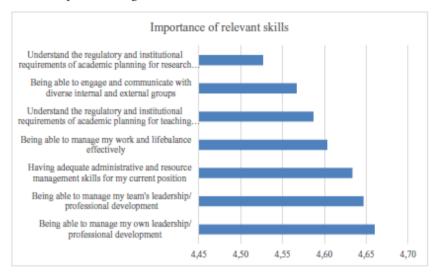


**Figure 3:** HE knowledge and skills requirements

Moreover, the questions can be largely broken down into two categories. In the first, those scoring under 4.5 generally referred to issues that would concern the broader, strategic positioning of the university. Questions like 'understanding the role of risk management and business continuity within universities' registered 4.14 as a weighted average. Understanding university funding, the regulatory and institutional requirements of academic planning, performance management systems and how to implement them, understanding the HE policy, and regulatory environment – all scored under 4.5.

In the second grouping, the issues that mattered most to them were personal and/or pertaining to the people around them. So, 'being able to manage my own leadership/professional development' earned 4.66 while 'being able to manage my team's leadership/professional development' came in at 4.65. Other knowledge and skills deemed as important were 'adequate administration and resource management skills for my current position' (4.63), 'being able to manage my work and life balance effectively' (4.6), 'the regulatory and institutional requirements of academic planning for teaching

and learning' (4.59), and 'being able to engage and communicate with diverse internal and external groups' (4.57). Being able to focus on their own and their colleagues' professional development with limited administrative resources while achieving a work/life balance appears paramount.

The next part of the survey attempted to rank fifteen different activities that would have an impact on university leaders and managers in the development of their own capabilities.
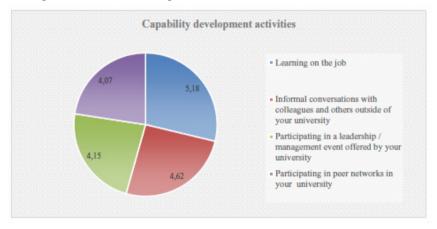


**Figure 4:** Leadership capability development activities

In this case, the responses were mostly lower than the previous question. It was also more difficult to establish a coherent trend within the responses. However, what was abundantly clear was that 'learning on the job' (5.18) earned the highest score of all the responses. There were only four activities averaged above 4. 'Informal conversations with colleagues and others outside of your university' (4.62), 'participating in the leadership/management events offered by your university' (4.15) and 'participate in peer networks in your university' (4.07). These findings suggest that informal, hands-on capacity development with like-minded peers, both inside and external to the university, are highly valued.

If there is a second tier of importance, it is the need for further leadership information – via books, articles and the web – and through participating in higher education leadership/management workshops, seminars, and conferences. Of less importance are those activities which require a formalised, structured intervention: 'participating in an annual performance management review' (3.49), 'University induction and on-boarding programmes' (3.42) and 'the study of real-life workplace problems through simulations of case studies' (3.00).

At the risk of oversimplification, these responses depict a university academic leader as one who is required to learn on the job, values the support of peers both in and outside of the university, and requires access to additional information that is relevant to his or her position. This depiction is strongly supported by the question that asked participants to rank the value offering of HELM. Asked whether participants were likely or highly likely to attend future HELM programmes, ninety-four percent responded positively, with eighty-one percent responding that they were highly likely to participate in the future.

## A Systemic and Integrated Approach to Leadership Development for Universities in Africa

The claim by Bensimon, Neumann and Birnbaum (1989) more than twenty years ago that there is little robust research on leadership development in universities, unfortunately, still applies. Practical guidance on effective approaches to leadership development in universities is missing, claims Huntley-Moore and Panter (2003); context is often overlooked by generic approaches, says Bass (1985); and it is generally not well recognised, understood or supported, nor are there specific interventions for leadership roles like those of dean or head of school (Debowski & Blake 2004; Gmelch & Buller 2015; Wall 2015).

What this means for universities is that they will not only need to appoint and develop leaders but, equally important, they must also become the kind of organisations that nurture and reinforce enactment of the kinds of behaviours desired in those leaders. However, a review of leadership development trends and models in universities reveals events-based rather than systemic interventions. The work of researchers such as Bolden *et al.* (2008), Scott *et al.* (2008), Greicar (2009), Seale (2015), and Gmelch and Buller (2015) illustrate that although most universities have recognised and responded to the need for leadership development, these interventions are mostly episodic, issue-driven, and not directed towards achievement of the institutional strategy and performance objectives.

Though there have been some attempts to align leadership development for academic leaders with strategic objectives and performance requirements in international and local universities, additional work is required to advance an approach that is bespoke for the individual's contextual requirements, is aligned to performance management, and includes a dimension of career management, in an integrated and systemic manner. In order to make leadership development more systematic, it should involve more than training, with developmental experiences that are meaningfully integrated

with one another, and ongoing. The major factors and influencers of a strategic approach to leadership development are captured in Figure 5 below.
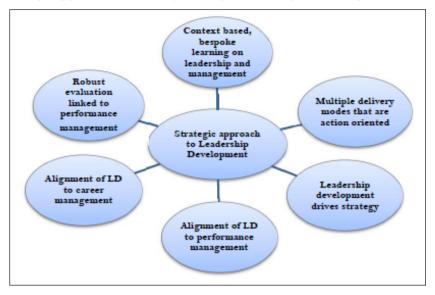


**Figure 5:** Key influencers of a strategic approach to leadership development (LD)

The literature, current trends, and documented research findings point to: (i) the multi-layered complex context of contemporary academic leadership which requires a tailored approach to leadership development for middle-level academic leaders; (ii) the need for problem-based, action oriented leadership development that addresses the leadership and management realities of complexity, change and transition; (iii) inextricable linkages between leadership development, organisational, and individual effectiveness and performance; and (iv) changes in career planning and management approaches and a robust evaluation of the impact of leadership development and its return on investment, for individuals and their universities (Seale 2015).

Although academic leaders acknowledge the importance of training, they seem to value more the opportunities provided by action-reflection learning in situ or shared experiences with others. Most middle-level academic leaders do not receive adequate preparation for their new role and have either to draw on previous experience in an action-reflection mode or garner support from their peers, colleagues or mentors (Gmelch & Buller 2015; Wall 2015; Seale & Cross 2016). Some have established internal and external discipline-specific support networks that also provide a platform for learning and development. Very little, if any, attention has been given

to ensure that their tenure provides opportunities to enhance their capital, specifically organisational and social capital, given the human and economic value associated with access to existing – and the development of new – networks, as a major contributor to institutional and individual currency (Seale 2015).

Based on the need for a more holistic approach to leadership development, systems thinking in the authors' view provide an appropriate methodological construct for reconceptualising leadership development for deans. Systems thinking was popularised as the crucial 'fifth discipline' by author Peter Senge (1990) in his work on leadership, management, organisational development and learning. In a systems context, a set of entities (individual, organisation and environment) are directed towards a common purpose and operate according to certain rules and processes. It is the highest level into which individual and collective capacities are cast towards the creation of an enabling environment, says Littlejohn (1983:29). The rationale for adopting a systems approach to leadership development is guided by Patton's (2002) assertion that it is key to understanding and addressing, as whole entities, real world complexities like the ones deans face on a global and local front. Holistic (integrated) thinking, according to Patton (2002), is central to the systems perspective.

The Managed Organisational Leadership Development (MOLD) framework depicted below advances a systems based, developmental orientation to leadership development which ensures that the individual is enabled and empowered to perform effectively in the current job and, equally importantly, which enhances their leadership and management capacity for improved performance and career advancement. Whereas current interventions in most instances are viewed as an add-on to performance management, in the remedial, deficit orientation, this framework takes on a developmental focus, where leadership development is a systemised, managed process by the individual and the organisation and, more importantly, the driver of performance and career management.

MOLD reflects the emerging primary hypothesis in this article – that leadership development for deans is more appropriate and responsive when it:

1. embeds and is cognisant of the leadership context which is complex and constantly changing;
2. enhances individual and organisational leadership capacity through reflection and learning; and
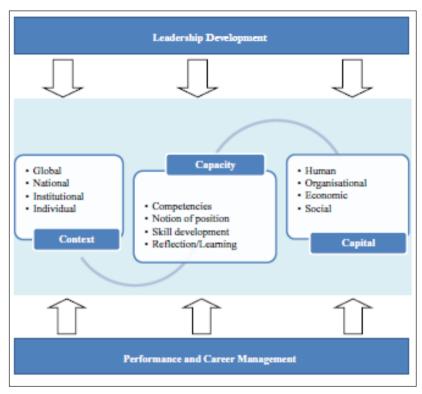3. expands leadership capital through individual and organisational performance and career advancement.

**Figure 6:** Framework for Managed Organisational Leadership Development (MOLD)

It is premised on the notion that middle-level academic leaders are career-oriented, embrace leadership development opportunities, and that their performance achievements are demonstrable. The framework is guided and supported by an institution that is performance oriented and provides a conducive, enabling and empowering environment for academic leadership and management. The framework embeds the 'post-heroic' notion of leadership, espoused by Huey (1994) and Nirenberg (1993), required for universities in the twenty-first century with its focus more on the organisational and social rather than the individual dimensions of leadership, knowledge and learning, as a collective responsibility.

In the MOLD framework, context is about what constitutes the individuals who are located and operate within a particular organisational setting. It relates to the global, national and institutional influencers which impact on their leadership and management as well as organisational legacies and cultures. Equally important is the impact of change and its complexities in a transitional environment. It is to this setting that

middle-level academic leaders bring their knowledge, skills and experience, which in essence inform their leadership capability and determine their leadership journey.

Capacity relates primarily to job readiness for deans, in terms of competencies, preparation and support for leading and managing in a complex, changing environment. The backgrounds, knowledge and experience of academic leaders relate to academia and they need to be 'schooled' in the management demands of the job. Equally important is their understanding and interpretation of their role as academic leader and, more so nowadays, administrative manager. What this means is that they require appropriate preparation, ongoing leadership development and support for their roles and responsibilities. Leadership development here is viewed as a process that enables and empowers the individual and organisation to address the complexity of change, reflect and learn from their successes and failures, and focus their combined energy towards leadership and management effectiveness.

The demonstrable outcome for MOLD is the value-add or contribution to increase capital (human, organisational, economic and social). Key to this area is how leadership effectiveness is understood, managed and measured for academic leaders. Academic leaders at South African universities are subjected to performance management within their respective institutions but there are challenges relating to it (Seale 2015). The adoption of corporate models, such as for instance the balance-score card, 360-degree evaluations, may have some value but their design and application, more often than not, do not consider the unique setting and challenges faced by universities. In addition, the approaches used are generally top-down, which elicits a negative and compliance response from most academic leaders. Respondents in the HELM surveys mentioned earlier also scored 'participating in an annual performance management review' 3.49, which is quite low compared to other findings. A major component lacking from current performance management practices is a developmental focus and the absence of career planning and professional advancement (Seale 2015), which scored the highest in the HELM surveys too.

What MOLD posits is an approach to leadership development which is not only the initiator but also the driver of performance and increased capital for the individual and his/her institution.

All three components – i.e., leadership context, leadership capacity, and leadership capital – in this approach require and are directed by specific and agreed objectives, plans and execution strategies. As demonstrated in the framework, it is argued that the university's approach to leadership

development for middle-level academic leaders should be systematised, managed by the individual and the organisation, aligned to career management and professional development but, equally important, embedded in an appropriate performance management system. The holistic approach to leadership development, as demonstrated in MOLD, is grounded in prevailing theories such as social constructivism (McMahon 1997; Parry 1998; Kukla 2000; Lambert *et al.* 2002), action-reflection learning (Dewey 1933; Schön 1983), epistemic reflexivity (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992), and social capital (Burt 1992; Tsai & Ghoshal 1998; Brass & Krackhardt 1999; Bouty 2000; Schuller 2000; Cohen & Prusak 2001) as expounded on earlier.

## Conclusion

In this article, I reviewed current approaches to leadership development for middle-level academic leaders, and revealed that there are some gaps, especially in relation to the effectiveness of approaches and return on investment for the individual and their institution and sector. Experiences in other international higher education systems point to the ability of middle academic leaders to transcend a traditional academic role for a more strategic and executive one. This has been supported by appropriate, contextualised and systemic approaches to leadership development, which is currently missing from African higher education.

Based on the literature, current trends and research studies, and specific theoretical underpinnings on leadership context, capacity, and capital, a systematised, integrated approach to leadership development was advanced, called Managed Organisational Leadership Development (MOLD).

What the MOLD framework illustrates is that if leadership development for middle-level academic leaders is reconceptualised in a systematised, integrated manner, planned and managed correctly in an enabling organisational setting, it may enhance an individual's competencies and result in improved organisational and sectoral outcomes. However, it would be remiss in advocating MOLD as the solution for addressing the current weaknesses in local approaches to leadership development, but it does provide a platform for further investigation and engagement in the absence of any other more appropriate or adequately theorised approaches.

This is key for universities on the continent. Failure to respond on their part will perpetuate the current leadership and management complexities and leadership development shortcomings, and of greater concern, may be setting up their middle-level academic leaders for failure – with disastrous individual, institutional and sectoral implications for universities in Africa.

## Notes

1. The interviews took place during the period April 2011 – January 2012.
2. The interviews took place during the period 12-27 June 2012.
3. A total number of 101 respondents who are deans, heads of schools and academic departments.
4. Between 2002 and 2003, the South African higher education sector was restructured through mergers that resulted in the reduction of the number of universities and technikons from 36 to 23.

## References

Bolden, R., Petrov, G. & Gosling, J., 2008, 'Developing collective leadership in higher education', Final Report, Research and Development Series. London: Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.

Bourdieu, P. & Wacquant, L.J.D., 1992, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology.* Oxford: Polity Press.

Bouty, I., 2000, 'Interpersonal and interaction influences on informal resource exchanges between R&D researchers across organisational boundaries', *Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 43, pp. 50-65.

Burgoyne, J., Mackness, J. & Williams, S., 2009, Research and Development Series, Final Report: Baseline Study of Leadership Development in Higher Education. Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, UK.

Cohen, D. & Prusak, L., 2001, *In Good Company: How Social Capital Makes Organisations Work,* Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Day, D.V., 1999, 'Leadership Development: A Review of Industry Best Practices', (Tech. Rep. No. 1141), Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army Research Institute.

Debowski, D. & Blake, V., 2004, 'The developmental needs of higher education academic leaders in encouraging effective teaching and learning: Seeking Educational Excellence, Teaching and Learning Forum, University of Western Australia.

Dewey, J., 1933, *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking and the Educational Process,* New York: D. C. Heath.

Duderstadt, J.J., 2005, 'The Future of Higher Education in the Knowledge-Driven, Global Economy of the 21st Century', in G.A. Jones, P.L. McCarney, & M. Skolnik, eds*., Creating Knowledge, Strengthening Nations: The Changing Role of Higher Education,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 81-101.

Everingham, C., 2001, 'Reconstituting community: social justice, social order and the politics of community', *Australian Journal of Social Issues,* vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 105-122.

Gmelch, W. & Buller, J., 2015, *Academic Leadership Capacity – A Guide to Good Practice*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Greicar, M.B., 2009, 'The Professional Preparation of Academic Deans', Paper presented at the annual meeting of the MWERA Annual Meeting, Sheraton Westport Chalet Hotel, St. Louis, MOOnline<PDF>.2013-12-29. Available at: http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p379872_index.html

Huey, J., 1994, 'The New Post-Heroic Leadership', *Fortune,* 21 February, pp. 42-50.

Huntley-Moore, S. & Panter, J., 2003, 'Does discipline matter? Issues in the design and implementation of management development programmes for heads of academic departments', Annual Conference Proceedings of HERDSA (Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia Inc.), Christchurch, New Zealand.

Investopedia - http://www.investopedia.com/terms/e/economic capital

Johnson, B. & M. Cross., 2006, 'Academic leadership under siege: possibilities and limits of executive deanship', *South African Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 187, no. 2, pp. 34-58.

Jowi, J.O., 2018, 'Deans in Kenyan universities: their leadership styles and impacts on staff commitment', PhD Dissertation at University of Twente, DOI: 10.3990/1.9789036545570. Available at https://www.utwente.nl/en/bms/ cheps/ news/james-jowi-otieno-cheps-dissertation-may-2018-final-including- cover.pdf

Kukla, A., 2000., Social *Constructivism and the Philosophy of Science,* London: Routledge.

Littlejohn, S.W., 1983, *Theories of Human Communication,* 2nd Ed., Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

McMahon, M. 1997, 'Social constructivism and the worldwide web - a paradigm for learning', Paper presented at the ASCILITE conference. Perth, Australia. Retrieved from http://www.ascilite.org/conferences/perth97/papers/Mcmahon/ Mcmahon.html

Northouse, G., 2007, Leadership Theory and Practice, 3rd Ed.,Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.

OECD., 1998, *Human Capital Investment: An International Comparison,* Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Parry, K.W., 1998, 'Grounded theory and social process: a new direction for leadership research', *Leadership Quarterly,* vol. 9, no. 1, pg. 1.

Pounder, J.S., 2001, '"New leadership" and university organisational effectiveness: exploring the relationship', *Leadership and Organisational Development Journal,* vol. 22 no. 6, pp. 281-290.

Rosser, V.J., Johnsrud, L.K. & Heck, R.H., 2003, 'Academic deans and directors: assessing their effectiveness from individual and institutional perspectives', *Journal of Higher Education,* vol. 74, no. 1, pp. 1-25.

Schuller, T., 2000, 'Social and human capital: the search for appropriate technomethodology', *Policy Studies,* vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 25-35.

Scott, G., Coates, H., & Anderson, M., 2008, 'Learning leaders in times of change: academic leadership capabilities for Australian higher education', University of Western Sydney and Australian Council for Educational Research. Available at http://www.acer.edu.au/documents/UWSACER_CarrickLeadershipReport.pdf

Seale, O., 2015, 'Building leadership and management capacity for deans in South African higher education', Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Available at: http://146.141.12.21/ handle/10539/18232

Seale, O. & Cross, M., 2017, 'Executivism and deanship in selected South African universities', *Oxford Review of Education*, vol. 44, no. 3, pp. 275-290.

Seale, O. & FitzGerald, P., 2016, 'Between a rock and a hard place: university management and the #FeesMustFall campaign', in S. Booysen, ed., *Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa,*Johannesburg: Wits Press.

Senge, P., 1990, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization,* New York: Doubleday.

Spillane, J., Halverson, R. & Diamond, J.B., 2001, 'Investigating school leadership practice: a distributed perspective', *Educational Researcher*, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 23-28.

Wall, K.J., 2015, 'Administrative development for Academic Deans in the California State University system', Unpublished PhD Thesis, California State University, San Bernadino.

Wepner, SB., Henk. B. & Lovell, S., 2015, 'Developing deans as effective leaders for today's changing educational landscape', *Journal of Higher Education Management,* vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 51-64.

Wikipedia, – Accessed 06/07/2019: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organizational_capital

Wisniewski, M., 2000, 'Leadership in higher education: implications for leadership development', *Academic Leadership, The Online Journal.*