

Distributed Leadership Theory and Power Dynamics in University Governance: A Postcolonial Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This research explored the interconnection between distributed leadership and power in the governance of public universities in Uganda from a postcolonial view. Distributed leadership is touted as a collective governance model; however, its implementation in African higher education is limited by institutional and historic inequalities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020; Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2024). This study used a qualitative multiple case study approach with three public universities in Uganda. Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were used to collect data, which were analysed thematically. It was found that while distributed leadership is institutionalised, its implementation is constrained by centralised power, informal networks and politics (Tian et al., 2016; Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2024). Governance is not equitable and decisions are made by senior administrators. The study findings reveal that distributed leadership takes place within power structures inherited from colonialism. It calls for institutional and cultural changes to enable inclusive governance.

Keywords: Distributed leadership; University governance; Power dynamics; Postcolonial theory; Higher education; Uganda; Institutional leadership; Participatory governance; Decolonization; Organizational culture; Leadership practices; Governance reform

INTRODUCTION

Governance in African universities is shifting as a result of growth, accountability and managerial reform (Cloete et al., 2015; Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2024). In Uganda, public universities, like Makerere University, have governance tensions that stem from conflicting interests between stakeholders, such as government officials and lecturers. These stem from colonial administrative practices and centralised power structures (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Distributed leadership offers an approach to shared governance; however, it is influenced by power dynamics (Bolden et al., 2009). A postcolonial analysis shows the persistence of hierarchy in governance.

1.1 Research Questions

1. How is distributed leadership conceptualized and practiced in Ugandan public universities?
2. What power dynamics influence governance processes in these universities?
3. How do postcolonial legacies shape leadership distribution and authority?
4. To what extent does distributed leadership promote inclusive participation in governance?
5. What constraints and opportunities exist for transformative leadership in Ugandan universities?

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical review

Distributed Leadership Theory

Distributed leadership views leadership as a social process, rather than an individual attribute, and an outcome

of social interactions (Spillane, 2005; Tian et al., 2016). Recent studies emphasise the role of institutional practices and collaboration in the emergence of leadership (Harris, 2020; Tian et al., 2016). Collaboration and innovation are associated with distributed leadership in higher education (Jones et al., 2012). However, studies suggest it isn't necessarily distributed equally as power is centralised (Bolden et al., 2009; Harris, 2020). In Africa, bureaucracy and political control restricts participation (Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2024).

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory examines the effects of coloniality on contemporary institutions and power structures (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Africa's universities were created to serve colonialism's administrative needs, emphasising control (Heleta, 2018). Governance still retains these legacies today, which continue to maintain inequality and marginalisation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020; Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2024). Collegial and state control mix in Uganda's governance, resulting in participation challenges (Bisaso, 2017). Postcolonial theory helps understand why collegial leadership may not result in democracy.

2.2 Empirical Review

Universities in sub-Saharan Africa are plagued by a lack of autonomy and excessive government interference (Cloete et al., 2015; Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2024). Governance structures are democratic but power is centralised in the hands of senior administrators and external stakeholders. This leads to structural and governance misalignment (Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2024).

Distributed leadership is praised for addressing governance issues through collaboration and ownership (Tian et al., 2016). However, research indicates that distributed leadership is co-existing with hierarchical leadership, thereby limiting its effect (Bolden et al., 2009; Harris, 2020). For African universities, bureaucratic procedures and resource constraints also restrict participation and make distributed leadership more ideal than real (Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2024).

Power is pervasive in university governance processes and universities are shaped by mixed interests and resource allocation (Cloete et al., 2015). Governance in Uganda is politicised, reducing autonomy (Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2024). Appointments and resource allocation can be influenced by informal networking.

Postcolonial studies demonstrate that university governance in African institutions are remnants of the colonial system, characterised by a top-down approach (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). They result in hierarchically centralised decision-making, leaving others out (Heleta, 2018). This means the practice of distributed leadership is constrained by historical and structural injustice.

As such, distributed leadership and power have a complex relationship (Tian et al., 2016). Distributed leadership in postcolonial settings often occurs in fortified systems of hierarchy. Distributed leadership can even deepen power imbalances if not coupled with efforts to redress inequities.

METHODOLOGY

This research used a qualitative multiple case study approach within the interpretivist framework to explore leadership and power in Ugandan universities (Creswell & Poth, 2021). Three public universities - Makerere University, Kyambogo University and Mbarara University of Science and Technology - were purposefully chosen based on their management structures (Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2024).

The sample comprised university leaders, staff, and students. Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were used to gather data and thematic analysis was applied for data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Credibility, dependability and confirmability measures ensured trustworthiness. Informed consent and confidentiality were maintained (Creswell & Poth, 2021).

3.1 Ethical Considerations

This research followed recognised ethical guidelines to uphold the rights, dignity and well-being of participants

(Creswell & Poth, 2021). The research received ethical approval, and participants were informed about the study and its methods, giving informed consent. All individuals had the option to participate or withdraw without any repercussions (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Anonymity and confidentiality were upheld by using pseudonyms and ensuring secure data storage. Recognizing the sensitive nature of issues surrounding governance and power, steps were taken to limit harm by respectfully conducting interviews and permitting participants to refuse to provide information (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020).

The research also maintained rigour and transparency in data collection and analysis, and reduced researcher bias through reflexivity and robust processes. Moreover, the study was sensitive to institutional and cultural contexts in Ugandan universities, maintaining ethical integrity (Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2024).

RESULTS

4.1. Distributed Leadership in Institutional Context

Our research showed that distributed leadership was well recognised in the chosen universities; however, its meaning varied among participants and was shrouded in conceptual ambiguity within the institutions (Harris, 2020). Managers and senior leaders mainly conceptualised distributed leadership as a hierarchical delegation of tasks and responsibilities for efficiency and coordination. Academic staff and student leaders, on the other hand, viewed distributed leadership as an inclusive and participatory process that emphasises collective decision-making and responsibility. This suggests a clear gap between managerial and collegial views of leadership. The study revealed that distributed leadership is not a common phenomenon but is influenced by position, role and expectation, making it difficult to practice in governance.

4.1.1 Institutional Governance and Distributed Leadership

The research identified that all the universities in the sample had formal governance structures in place (such as University Councils, Senates, faculty boards and departmental committees), which supposedly promote distributed leadership. These mechanisms offer procedural opportunities for stakeholder involvement in decision-making. But, our analyses revealed these systems are often used as consultative or ceremonial spaces rather than sites of power-sharing. Critical decision-making, especially those pertaining to finances, policy and reforms, tended to be concentrated in the hands of top management (Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2024). This highlights a strong mismatch between the institutionalisation of distributed leadership and its actualisation, and that governance structures may be more concerned with compliance than participation.

4.1.2. Influences of Informal Power and Decision-Making

A key insight of the research was the influence of informal power structures. Survey respondents indicated decision-making often occurred beyond the formal institutional framework and involved senior administrators, politicians and external stakeholders playing a significant role. This was seen in various areas including recruitment, promotions and resource allocation. Personal relationships, political connections, and social networks were found to play a crucial role in decision-making processes (Cloete et al., 2015; Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2024). This tells us that the power in university governance is not just institutionalised in formal positions of authority but also relational and political, and this can have a negative impact on transparent and equitable leadership.

4.1.3. Governance Participation and Inclusion

The research surfaced uneven participation of stakeholders in governance. Although senior administrators and senior academics reported strong participation and influence in governance processes, junior academic staff and representatives of students reported limited participation, despite being included in governance processes. Student leaders, for example, reported their views were not taken into consideration or included in decision-making. Likewise, junior staff were reluctant to voice different opinions for fear of damaging their careers. These insights demonstrate that governance engagement is hierarchical and tied to power and authority (Heleta, 2018).

Thus, distributed leadership, in action, does not necessarily equate to inclusive participation, questioning the democratic nature of governance.

4.1.4. Dilemmas of Managerialism and Collegiality

This research highlighted ongoing tensions between managerial and collegial governance. Increasingly, university management was said to be favouring managerial approaches emphasising efficiency, performance and control. These strategies are designed to improve the effectiveness of universities, but were seen by academics as eroding traditional collegial principles such as collegial decision-making, academic freedom and professional autonomy (Harris, 2020). Tensions were seen in areas such as workload and resourcing, and policy change. This evidence suggests that distributed leadership occurs in a contested institutional landscape where managers' concerns often trump collegial governance practices, constraining opportunities for collaboration.

4.1.5 Postcolonial Legacies of Leadership and Power

The research showed that postcolonial influences persist in University governance in Uganda. The respondents frequently noted the continued existence of hierarchical authority, top-down decision-making and deference to leadership. This is consistent with colonial bureaucratic practices that prioritised control and restricted involvement (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Institutional cultures were reported to be unsupportive of critical thinking and challenging of authority, perpetuating power imbalances in governance. This indicates that distributed leadership is not only constrained by contemporary organisational factors but also by historical and structural factors that influence institutional cultures.

4.1.6 Constraints to Effective Distributed Leadership

Our research identified a number of constraints on effective distributed leadership in universities. They are political, financial, bureaucratic and institutional change. Political interference was particularly pronounced in appointments and decision-making process, often diminishing institutional autonomy (Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2024). Budgetary constraints also played a role in the centralised nature of decision-making, with efficiency and control in the allocation of resources a key concern. Moreover, bureaucratic structures and institutional cultures were discovered to be resistant to participatory management. These elements contribute to the perpetuation of hierarchical leadership and the constraints on transformative leadership through distributed leadership.

4.1.7. New Practices and Possibilities for Transformative Leadership

While there are challenges, the study also identified emerging practices that are promising for more transformative leadership. Certain faculties and departments were embracing participatory methods that promote engagement, co-operation and problem solving. Younger staff and change-oriented leaders were seen as change agents, encouraging open and inclusive governance. Additionally, online communication technologies were also becoming more widely used to engage stakeholders and share information (Tian et al., 2016). These trends indicate that while distributed leadership is limited, there is potential for transformation through innovation, leadership and institutional change.

DISCUSSION

This research shows that distributed leadership in Uganda's universities is limited by institutional power dynamics and legacies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Although formal structures are in place, they do not equate to power sharing (Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2024).

The continuation of informal power structures demonstrates the need to understand relational power in governance (Cloete et al., 2015). Similarly, uneven participation indicates that distributed leadership is not necessarily inclusive (Heleta, 2018).

The study also supports the use of postcolonial theory in understanding problems in governance, given the persistence of colonial legacies in governance (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Until these problems are addressed, distributed leadership is constrained in its transformative potential.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that distributed leadership in Ugandan universities is not inherently democratic but is shaped by complex power dynamics and postcolonial legacies (Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2024). Achieving inclusive governance requires structural reforms and a reconfiguration of institutional power relations.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Implications of the Findings in Practical Implications. The policy, practice and institutional leadership implications of this study are immense, especially in the context of postcolonial governance of higher education in Uganda and other postcolonial contexts. Policy implementation and governance reform become a very important priority.

The paper proves that although there is official acknowledgement of distributed leadership, there is still much window dressing as centralized authority hierarchies prevent the actual implementation of distributed leadership. As such, universities and governments should go beyond rhetoric commitments and institutionalize real policies of decentralization by transferring the power of decision making to faculties, departments and lower governance units. These reforms would also increase the level of responsiveness, ownership and accountability within institutions. It has also been suggested that distributed leadership is only effective when authority is substantively devolved as opposed to its being administratively delegated (Harris, 2020; Nabaho and Turyisingura, 2024). In the absence of these reforms, the structure of governance risks carrying on with the hierarchical control in the name of participation.

The need to strengthen institutional transparency is also necessary in dealing with the role of informal power networks that are realized in this study. The fact that personal relations and politics influence the decision-making process more than fairness and institutional credibility are weakened. Universities should thus have a clear system of recruitment, promotion and resource allocation with clear-cut criteria and accountability measures. Digital governance tools, e-governance platforms and automated reporting systems, can make a significant contribution to transparency, decrease the possibility of corruption, and increase the trust of stakeholders (Tian et al., 2016; Nabaho and Turyasingura, 2024). This transparency in governance is especially relevant in situations where informal systems of power are likely to dominate over formal institutional processes. The results also underscore the significance of the development of leadership capacity in changing governance practices. Organizations ought to invest in a well-designed leadership development program that focuses on collaborative decision-making, moral leadership, and critical awareness of power-related issues.

They can also prepare academic and administrative leaders with the skills they need to navigate complex governance environments, as well as to promote inclusivity and accountability. Studies show that leadership training is crucial in transforming organizational cultures (hierarchical models) into more participatory and distributed cultures (Harris, 2020). In this respect, mentorship programs and ongoing professional development programs can help emerging leaders especially junior staff to positively contribute to the governance processes.

The other important implication is associated with increasing stakeholder involvement. The research indicates that in as much as there is formal representation, junior staffs and students are often found to have minimal influence in the process of decision making. Universities, therefore, need to establish safe, inclusive, and participatory spaces that can promote openness and meaningful engagement. Power imbalances can be addressed through the establishment of mechanisms to address the imbalance, including but not limited to participatory committees, consultative forums, anonymous feedback systems, etc. Notably, the promotion of psychological safety, when people feel safe enough to express their opinion without the fear of being retaliated against is a key to effective participation (Heleta, 2018). Inclusive participation not only enhances the quality of the decisions but also boosts institutional legitimacy and cohesion.

The necessity of dealing with postcolonial institutional culture as a prerequisite measure to transformative leadership is also highlighted in the study. In most African universities, governance practices are still extremely affected by colonial practices that uphold hierarchy, control and authority. To counter these limitations, institutions need to participate actively in decolonising the structure of the governance, by integrating the

philosophies of African leadership which place emphasis on collectivism, dialogue and community-based decision-making. This includes questioning Eurocentric models of leadership and developing institutional cultures that embrace inclusivity, equity and contextual relevance (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). This cultural change is crucial to the fact that distributed leadership is not only exercised but also in keeping with local realities and values.

Moreover, it is important to minimize political interference to increase institutional autonomy and effectiveness in governance. The results show that external political pressure has a great impact on decision-making, which often negatively affects meritocracy and accountability. Policymakers should thus come up with clear regulatory provisions that indicate the role of the government in the governance of institutions whilst protecting institutional autonomy. It is important to find a balance between institutional autonomy and state oversight that will enhance good governance and academic freedom. Studies show that minimizing political interference enhances efficiency, transparency, and credibility in higher education institutions (Cloete et al., 2015; Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2024).

Lastly, the study points out the significance of using digital governance as a resource towards improving participation and transparency. Real-time communication, expansion of stakeholder involvement, and increased access to governance processes can be achieved through the adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs). The wider participation can be achieved through the use of digital platforms like online decision-making systems, virtual meetings, and portals of governance. More so, digital tools have the potential to facilitate transparency by making available records of decisions and activities within an institution. In this regard, incorporating digital governance in university systems provides a viable course of action to enhance distributed leadership and resolve the existing governance issues (Tian et al., 2016).

AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Future studies should use mixed-methods designs to offer a rich qualitative understanding and quantitative insights on the effects of distributed leadership on university outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2021). Cross-country and cross-institution research should be conducted to understand the influence of context on governance (Nabaho & Turyasingura, 2024).

Research should also explore the relationship between distributed leadership and other factors, such as teaching quality, research output and innovation (Harris, 2020). Future studies should look at the influence of informal networks, such as political and personal relationships, on governance (Cloete et al, 2015).

Prospective studies are advised to understand how leadership practices change over time, and more emphasis should be given to the perspectives of marginalised groups to enhance inclusivity (Heleta, 2018). Additionally, future studies should explore the impact of information technology on improving participation and transparency, and decolonising governance in African universities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020).

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