

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF BEING A UNIVERSITY HEAD OF DEPARTMENT: A COMPARATIVE MULTIPLE-CASE STUDY

Lubna Farhan Ali^{*1}, Rahima Usmani², Ayesha Naeem³, Marium Asad⁴

^{*1}Institute of Business Management
^{2,3,4}Bahria University

^{*1}lubnafarhanali2@gmail.com

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Corresponding Author: *

Lubna Farhan Ali

Abstract

Although academic middle managers have received considerable scholarly attention, little is known about the personal and identity-based dimensions of the university Head of Department (HOD) role. This position is characterised by extensive responsibility but constrained authority and situated at the intersection of institutional expectations and departmental realities. The study explores how Heads of Department experience and negotiate the tension between responsibility, authority, and leadership identity. This comparative multiple-case study involved semi-structured interviews with two Heads of Department and non-participant observations. Data analysis was conducted by using the six-phase framework of thematic analysis. Six themes emerged including the responsibility-authority paradox, collaborative leadership, identity construction, emotional labour, communication, and leadership as coordination and service. Results indicate that academic middle management is a liminal zone that is located between institutional authority and structural powerlessness, and between administrative demands and collegial expectations. While both were rejecting authoritarians, they faced a shared paradox, and their ways of relating and collaborating differed in ways that may reflect possible sociocultural influence; as this pattern is drawn from a single pair of cases, it is offered as a tentative observation rather than a generalizable gender difference. The male participant used tactics of influence and emotional detachment, and the female participant used tactics of relational coordination, emotional openness and transformational communication. The findings extend the literature on academic middle leadership by providing a comparative case-based account of how leadership identity, responsibility, and authority are experienced and negotiated in practice, highlighting the need for clearer role expectations and stronger institutional support for Heads of Department.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Head of Department (HOD) is the one who occupies an important middle management position between the senior management and

academic staff and also has the responsibility of guiding the teaching, research, administration, and performance of the department (Ngare, 2024; Nguyen, 2013). Studies have shown that the departmental leadership acts as a bridge between

the strategic and operational aspects in the university systems (Alrayes, 2025). Departments are significant academic areas of a university and the quality of their leadership directly affects the quality of education, engagement of staff and students and student outcomes.

Higher education institutions have grown and accountability and performance evaluation systems have become more conspicuous. In this context, the role of the Heads of Department is to ensure adherence to institutional policies, achieve performance benchmarks, operate resources effectively, and be responsive to the expectations of stakeholders. The allocation of budgets, staffing approvals, and other significant policy direction, however, are still centrally controlled at the top (Nguyen, 2013; Munene, 2021). Research shows that departmental leaders often have responsibility with little decision-making power (Dimici et al., 2016). Thus, Heads of Department are accountable for how well their departments perform within the constraints of the structures they have. Meanwhile, academic staff demand fairness and advocacy, while students demand effective and responsive management (Salifu, 2023).

The position also has job development and job structure challenges. Many Heads of Department take on leadership positions without undergoing proper training and have to manage administrative tasks, teaching and research responsibilities at the same time (Malik & Amin, 2023; Dimici et al., 2016). Alrayes (2025) highlighted the importance of defining roles and developing leadership skills based on competency. Additionally, the job involves continuous coordination, negotiation and mediation in complex institutional frameworks (Ngare, 2024; Sathiyaseelan, 2024). Existing scholarship thus suggests that middle academic leadership is constrained by governance, lacks in professional development, and is constrained by structural pressures. However, most of this literature focuses on the structural arrangements and managerial duties (Malik & Amin, 2023; Nguyen, 2013; Dimici et al., 2016), rather than on the personal experience of these conditions.

The main problem in this study is the lack of understanding of how the formal responsibility of the Heads of Department for departmental outcomes is experienced in situations of limited authority. Without this, institutional change and leadership development programmes may fail to take into account the lived experience of the middle academic leader. This space is significant not only as an organizational role but as a lived experience which influences identity and daily practice, as seen in related work on how sociocultural and institutional barriers mediate professional experience in academic settings (Ali & Habib, 2025; Ali, & Ali, 2026). This imbalance can have consequences for leadership confidence, perceived leadership legitimacy and for routine decision making behaviour, when accountability is greater than authority.

In response to this problem, the aim of the study is to explore and describe the lived experience of the Heads of Department in the university in which they work, who are responsible for a wide range of responsibilities and have limited decision making authority. Through a descriptive and comparative multiple-case study approach, the study seeks to provide a case-based account of this leadership experience as understood within the role. The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. How do university Heads of Department describe and make sense of their lived experiences in the role?

RQ2. How is the tension between responsibility and authority experienced and understood within the role?

RQ3. In what ways does this responsibility-authority imbalance shape leadership identity and everyday leadership practice?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Evolution of Higher Education and Middle Management

To fully understand the challenges of modern university management, it is important to examine how the structure of higher education has changed over time. In the past, higher education institutions operated with very few levels of administration, with top leaders holding

centralized control over teaching and governance (Thelin, 2004). As populations grew and universities expanded, new and specialised educational models began to appear, forming the foundation for the complex administrative networks we see today. Modern educational institutions, ranging from smaller community colleges to large research universities, have adopted elements of New Public Management (NPM): a management style that brings business-like accountability and strict performance checks into the world of education (Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016; Whitchurch, 2008).

Within this large and complex network, academic managers such as the Head of Department hold a very critical position. Clegg and McAuley (2005) define the middle manager as "the pivot between the more strategic interests of senior management" (p. 21), and the practical, daily running of the organisation. Because there are so many of them, outnumbering all other types of administrators combined (Filan & Seagren, 2003), their work is absolutely essential to the structure of the university. They act as an important bridge that links the bigger, visionary ideas of top executives with the daily reality of the academic teaching staff (Balogun & Johnson, 2004).

2.2 Conceptualising Leadership and Management

To successfully navigate the Head of Department role, a clear distinction must be drawn between management and leadership. Managing is mostly about structure and daily operation, planning, organisation, staffing, directing, controlling, and coordinating (Mahmood et al., 2012, p. 513). Leadership, by contrast, is generally defined as "the capacity to influence others" (Cooper & Pagotto, 2003, p. 28). True leadership requires a person to act as an energizer and a visionary, with a high level of emotional intelligence to connect with staff (Bolden & Gosling, 2006). In higher education, good leaders must have strong ethics and what Sergiovanni (1992) calls the leadership heart, an interior moral compass that drives all decision-making.

Research identifies several leadership styles that are particularly relevant to university Heads of

Department. Transformational leadership focuses on inspiring and motivating others (Burns, 1978; Ong, 2012), while distributed leadership views leadership as a shared responsibility rather than the role of a single individual (Gronn, 2002; Camburn et al., 2003). In higher education, interactional leadership emphasizes trust, collaboration, and strong relationships over formal authority (Knight & Trowler, 2001; Jonsdottir, 2025), meaning effective Heads of Department must balance both leadership and management responsibilities (Boyatzis, 1982; Eddy, 2010).

2.3 The Expanding Competencies and Role Overload

As universities focus more and more on accountability and performance evaluation, the daily duties of the Head of Department have multiplied rapidly. Tucker's (1993) groundbreaking work listed the exhausting number of daily tasks required for the job, managing department governance, handling student affairs, budget allocations, and overseeing teaching instructions. This massive workload puts an immense strain on academic middle managers (Seagren et al., 1993). Recent research shows exactly how overwhelming this expansion has become: Alrayes (2025) found that modern academic department heads are expected to master 35 distinct key competencies covering professional ability, visionary leadership, administrative management, and alignment of academic programmes with the global job market. Because department chairs are usually chosen directly from their teaching faculty, they are forced to balance heavy administrative duties while continuing their own academic teaching and research, a situation highly prone to intense stress and burnout (Gmelch & Miskin, 2011).

2.4 The Structural Paradox of Powerless Responsibility

The central crisis that defines the Head of Department experience is the systematic imbalance between the enormous expectations placed on them and the actual administrative power they hold (Gabel, 2002). Gallos (2002)

perfectly described this paradox, noting that academic chairs are "classic middle managers: they have enormous responsibilities, little positional power, insufficient resources, and limited authority. They navigate daily the circular rhythms of life in the organisational middle, pleasing up to secure the resources needed to please those below" (p. 174).

As universities grow their bureaucratic structures, executive management retains all crucial decision-making power. Decisions about budget allocations, staffing approvals, and major policy directions usually remain centralised at the top (Nguyen, 2013; Munene, 2021). Yet, despite having no control over these areas, HODs remain completely accountable for how well their departments perform (Lloyd & Wolstencroft, 2019; Bush, 2016). They carry the heavy burden of responsibility while working inside a framework that leaves them structurally powerless.

The daily experience of this lack of structural power is made worse by the peer-to-peer working relationships found in higher education. Because university faculty members are highly educated and fiercely protective of their professional independence, trying to lead them is a very draining task, famously compared in academic literature to herding academic cats (Deem, 2010). Heads of Department are caught in the middle between the strict, top-down management style of university executives and the professional freedom expected by their teaching peers (Eriksson, 1999), a position Gmelch and Miskin (2011) describe as the role of Janus, the Roman god with two faces looking in different directions. Because HODs lack strong structural power to enforce compliance, they frequently encounter resistance when implementing top-down policies (Mardhatillah & Abdul Rahman, 2020), placing them in a structurally conflicted middle-management position (Bryman, 2007; Jonsdottir, 2025).

2.5 Behavioral Integrity and the Crisis of Leading Without Followers

This structural paradox also creates a deep crisis of behavioral integrity, defined as the alignment of a leader's promises with their actual actions (Simons

et al., 2015). Salifu (2023), in a study of Ghanaian higher education, found a painful contradiction: while teaching staff expected a highly supportive work environment and students demanded a better learning environment, HODs were "constrained to do much because of the ethos of the Ghanaian HE sector" (p. 349). This is not a failure of intent; it happens because institutional bureaucracy removes autonomy and power to make the changes they promised. When leaders are placed in high-pressure environments without proper structural support, it can accidentally cause destructive leadership behaviours and destroy the trust of staff (Salifu & Odame, 2026).

2.6 Global and Local Perspectives on Academic Leadership

The experiential reality of this paradox is a global issue, though it shows up in unique ways across different cultural and economic contexts. In Iceland, Jonsdottir (2025) found that faculty deans universally suffered from deep emotional strain and a total lack of relational support from top management. In New Zealand, Wald and Golding (2020) noticed that despite these severe challenges, HODs frequently accept the role out of a strong sense of internal duty to their colleagues. In developing contexts, the paradox is much more extreme: Hibaya et al. (2025) and Panibon (2023), studying public education in the Philippines, identified a condition of extreme role overload where leaders function simultaneously as full-time teachers and full-time managers. In Sub-Saharan Africa, Munene (2021) highlighted that the rapid massification of education has completely overwhelmed HODs, leaving them structurally unprepared for such complex management tasks. Naqvi et al. (2024) conducted a qualitative study on the lived experiences of female faculty deans in the context of Pakistani higher education to understand the challenges faced by them, identifying them as "the selection process, gender stereotypes, lack of support, networking opportunities, and mentors" (p. 360). A double bind is set up: female deans face the same high expectations of accountability as male deans, and there are no informal networks in place that can be used to carry out this accountability effectively.

(Zaidi, 2022) Gender, authority, and institutional constraint in academic professional settings is an ongoing issue in various learning environments.

2.7 Leadership Identity, Cultural Capital, and Impression Management

A common theme across the literature is the systematic failure of universities to prepare academic staff for the imbalance of power they will face. Appointments into leadership roles are typically based on scholarly research achievements rather than actual leadership skills (Gmelch & Miskin, 2011). Consequently, HODs frequently learn their roles through informal professional socialization, a highly stressful trial-and-error process (Bush, 2016) that leaves them with critical skill gaps and blind spots (Creaton & Heard-Laureote, 2021). Without formal authority or training, HODs must rely heavily on their core selves to lead. According to Identity Theory (Burke & Stets, 2009), a leader's foundational inner values dictate how they will perform their role. Because HODs are held accountable but lack power, they frequently experience identity verification failure, a stressful state that occurs when the demands of the situation contradict their core personal values. To meet institutional expectations, Heads of Department often manage how they present themselves, sometimes suppressing their authentic identities (Goffman, 1971). Without strong formal authority, they rely on experience, credibility, and relationships to lead effectively (Perez et al., 2024). Their leadership identities are therefore shaped not only by institutional constraints but also by the sociocultural context in which they work.

2.8 The Professional Support Gap and Institutional Rhetoric

The gap between the rhetoric of the university and the reality of the job is a critical dimension of the paradox. Creaton and Heard-Laureote (2021) state that "there is a dissonance between the formal role of head of academic department, represented in institutional discourses, and the reality of heads' working practices" (p. 1). Institutional rhetoric portrays middle managers as highly empowered strategic leaders, yet the reality is that centralised

institutional missions mean the scope for strategic initiatives at departmental level is severely circumscribed. HODs are overwhelmingly consumed by competing daily demands and micromanagement tasks, leaving them virtually no time for higher-level strategic leadership (Tight, 2012; Ong, 2012). The problem is worsened by the professional development void. Malik and Amin (2023) found that higher education institutions have consistently failed to provide structured training for their leaders. HODs require urgent training in management, negotiation, problem-solving, and communication just to survive their mandates (Cooper & Pagotto, 2003). Without customised professional development, academic chairs suffer from profound role conflict and ambiguity (Sarros et al., 1999). As Floyd and Dimmock (2011) categorised them, academic middle managers often find themselves operating as mere copers or strugglers rather than empowered jugglers of their duties. Until universities treat the HOD role as a distinct, professionalized administrative career requiring rigorous selection and training, leaders will continue to suffer from extreme stress (Dimici et al., 2016). The absence of structured professional development for academic leaders mirrors analogous gaps in language and communication education, where the lack of systematic preparation similarly produces role confusion and eroded professional confidence.

2.9 Accountability, Systemic Reform, and Innovation

While structural constraints are considerable, the ultimate goal of the Head of Department is to guarantee educational quality and academic success. Successful HODs must strike a careful balance between basic administrative duties and the higher-order task of faculty development (Ngare, 2024). This paradox is vividly exposed during periods of systematic educational reform: when executive bodies demand big changes, it is the middle manager who must implement them (Duray, 2025). Because they lack absolute power, they cannot force compliance and must absorb the friction. Quantitative research provides evidence for how leaders overcome this powerlessness:

Sarwar et al. (2022) found that transformational leadership acts as a powerful catalyst, effectively bypassing structural powerlessness by relying on intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration to foster organisational innovation (Ng, 2017).

2.10 Rationale for the Case Study

As shown throughout this literature review, existing scholarship clearly explains the governance constraints, professional development gaps, and structural pressures that shape middle academic leadership. However, much of the existing literature concentrates on structural arrangements and managerial tasks, providing less understanding of how these conditions are personally experienced (Malik & Amin, 2023; Nguyen, 2013; Dimici et al., 2016). Research acknowledges the mediating function of Heads of Department (Ngare, 2024) and the expectations placed upon them (Salifu, 2023), yet the lived meaning of carrying responsibility without corresponding authority remains insufficiently explored. To capture the subjective realities of educational middle managers, this study draws on established qualitative case study traditions that prioritise depth, context, and participant meaning-making (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The central problem addressed in this study is that although Heads of Department are formally responsible for departmental outcomes, there is limited understanding of how this responsibility is experienced under conditions of restricted authority. Without such understanding, institutional reforms and leadership development initiatives risk overlooking the lived realities of middle academic leadership.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A multiple-case study approach, which included two cases (one male and one female Head of Department) was used to answer the research questions established in this study. These experiences were explored using a case study approach, which allowed in-depth analysis of the case studies in the context of their real-life settings yet also enabled comparison between the two

cases. The use of a qualitative case study design assisted in exploring the true nature of this leadership dynamics and the paradox of powerless responsibility in a rigorous detail that allowed for a conscious focus on the subjective meaning, personal experience, and daily leadership practice.

3.2 Research Setting

The research was conducted within a university setting, specifically focusing on operational efforts within two distinct academic departments. As discussed in the literature, modern higher education institutions operate within highly structured, hierarchical, and significantly resource-constrained systems. It is precisely this complex, bureaucratic environment that fundamentally shapes the departmental leadership role and generates the structural constraints these managers must face. Conducting the study directly within academic departments allowed highly contextualised insights into the daily institutional realities these leaders navigated.

3.3 Sampling Strategy and Participants

A purposive sampling technique was used to carefully select participants for this study. This non-random sampling method was appropriate because it allowed for a deliberate choice of individuals who possessed direct, first-hand experience with the specific issue being studied. The final sample consisted of two Heads of Department (HODs). To ensure the relevance, depth, and quality of the data collected, the selection of these participants followed strict inclusion criteria: participants had to be currently serving as a Head of Department; they needed established tenure in the role, ensuring they had already faced the organisational conflicts and management limitations being examined; and voluntary consent was required. Beyond gender, further demographic detail (e.g., discipline, exact years of service, institution) is not reported here, in order to protect the anonymity of these two individually identifiable participants.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

The researchers applied two main qualitative data collection methods to guarantee a high level of

depth and richness of information: semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation.

Semi-Structured Interviews. Each participating department head took part in an in-depth, semi-structured interview guided by specially designed open-ended questions. This format maintained a clear thematic focus while allowing participants the freedom to expand on their personal experiences (Ali & Nauman, 2026). The interviews focused on four critical areas: the tension between carrying great responsibility versus having limited administrative authority; everyday leadership practices and specific structural problems encountered when making decisions; the emotional and professional effects of the leadership role on personal and academic identity; and the adaptive strategies and coping methods used to manage institutional constraints.

Non-Participant Observation: The main data source for this study was an interview. The non-participant observation data was used in an ancillary fashion as a way to provide background contextual information to help make sense of the participants' accounts, but was not reported as an independent data set. The researcher was an unobtrusive observer in participants' natural departmental context, taking notes on what was happening, but not engaging in or attempting to interfere with the work environment. Observational notes are made of interactions with academic staff and students, decision making during meetings and administrative activities, communication styles and everyday leadership behaviours; these are not reported as excerpts but were used to interpret the interviews in the Findings.

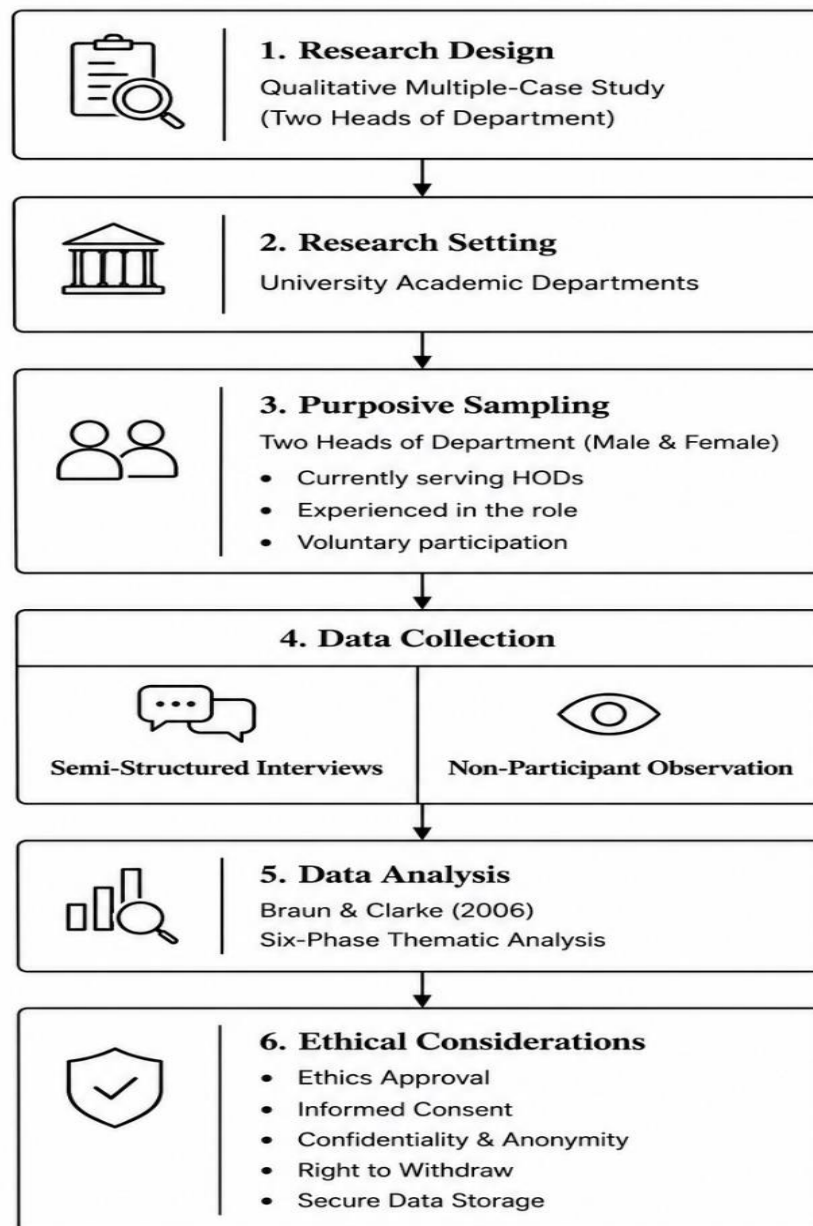
3.5 Data Analysis Procedure

Thematic analysis was used as a method of critical analysis of the qualitative data, following the six phase analysis of thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2020,2021). The process also included fully transcribing all recordings, repeated reading of transcripts for familiarisation, systematic coding of main ideas and recurring concepts, development of primary themes and interpretation of the themes directly to the research questions and existing theoretical frameworks.

3.6 Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

Ethical consideration was observed in the research process. This study was approved [preferably by an institutional ethics/review committee] before data collection (reference number to be inserted by the author). All participants gave informed consent prior to data collection, their identity was fully respected and kept confidential and anonymous throughout the process of reporting, all data collected was kept securely and only used for academic purposes and participants were assured of their complete right to withdraw at any time. Two data sources (interviews and observation) and a close linkage of themes with participants' own words were used to support credibility, while detailed record of the interviews and coding process for the interview data as well as the detailed description of the specific university context for the observation data, was used to support dependability, and developing themes directly from participant transcripts was used to support confirmability, and the detailed description of the specific university context was used to support transferability. The study also used formal member-checking with the participants.

Figure 1. Methodological Framework of the study



4. Findings

4.1 Introduction

The analysis of the interviews of Participant One and Participant Two revealed shared structural struggles alongside distinctions in leadership enactment, emotional expression, coping mechanisms, and professional identity formation that may reflect possible sociocultural influence; as a comparison of one man and one woman, these distinctions are treated here as tentative,

case-specific patterns rather than established gender differences. The role of Head of Department was identified as one that was characterised by restricted power, increased responsibility, emotional work and the need to rely on personal relationships to influence rather than formal power for both participants. There were, however, marked differences between the two participants in terms of leadership style,

emotional negotiation, and relational expectations, which this study interprets cautiously as possibly, though not conclusively, related to sociocultural positioning.

4.2 Theme 1: The Responsibility-Authority Paradox in Academic Leadership

Both participants defined leadership as a position with a lot of responsibility but not commensurate authority. They would be required to facilitate the functioning of the department and institutional outcomes with the expectation that they would be subject to the decisions and approvals of the upper administration. Participant One shared this imbalance as a "daily basis" challenge, where the progress of a department was hindered as "every action needs higher level approval." Likewise, Participant Two said, "In some cases, I had to ensure smooth coordination and outcomes but the decision-making was done at a higher administrative level. Both had institutional delays and lack of practical solutions." Participant Two spoke in particular about how being "empowered and constrained" was a middle leader's experience. There were differences in the interpretations and responses among participants to the institutional constraints, and those differences were attributed to the influence of the participants' sociocultural backgrounds. Participant One took a tactical and persistence-based approach, using escalation and administrative maneuvering via "proper channels." His answers indicated a fairly confrontational attitude towards institutional structures. Participant Two, by contrast, viewed constraints as a matter of adaptability, patience and collaborative negotiation, and emphasized communication and coordination as tools for negotiating one's way through the institutional hierarchy. This distinction may possibly reflect wider sociocultural norms around gender in educational settings in South Asia, which in some accounts allow male leaders to be more direct and confrontational while expecting female leaders to be more diplomatic; however, with only one male and one female participant in this study, this remains a tentative interpretation of a single pair rather than a demonstrated gender pattern.

4.3 Theme 2: Leadership Through Collaboration Rather Than Command

A dominant finding across both interviews was the rejection of authoritarian leadership in favour of collaborative and relationship-centred leadership practices. Participant One openly rejected what he called the "professional HOD," describing such figures as "rude person[s] who always order someone." Instead, he emphasised requests, collegiality, and service-oriented leadership. Likewise, Participant Two stated: "I managed to lead through mutual respect, collaboration and open communication rather than authority alone." Both participants viewed colleagues as professional equals rather than subordinates, making relational leadership essential. Collaboration functioned not merely as a preference but as a necessity in collegial academic environments where coercive authority is limited. Participant One adopted what may be described as a "soft power through strategic influence" model. His "tea and questions" method demonstrated indirect persuasion, where faculty members were guided toward conclusions while maintaining the illusion of autonomy, a highly calculated form of relational management combined with subtle institutional control. Participant Two's collaborative leadership, however, appeared more care-oriented and emotionally relational. Her emphasis on "understanding concerns," "supportive environments," and "cooperation" reflected a nurturing leadership orientation that, in this single case, may possibly align with broader sociocultural expectations placed upon women leaders in collectivist societies, though this association cannot be established from one participant.

4.4 Theme 3: Experiential Learning and the Construction of Leadership Identity

Both participants entered leadership roles with limited formal preparation and developed leadership competence primarily through experience. Participant Two stated: "There was no formal guidance provided initially, I learned most of the responsibilities and expectations on my own through practical experience." Similarly, Participant One described learning leadership

through continuous struggle, describing leadership experiences as "blocks" that collectively formed an "experienced house." Both participants therefore constructed leadership identity experientially rather than through institutional mentoring or systematic training.

However, the emotional construction of identity development was quite varied. Participant One talked about the development of leadership through endurance, adversity, and tactical resilience, highlighting qualities of toughness, responsibility, and analytical independence. Participant Two's idea of identity development was more reflective and relational, where her sense of identity is as a person who is now "more confident, responsible and reflective" and that she now feels she is a "coordinator who contributes actively towards institutional growth. This contrast may be a reflection of gendered components of professional identity development, as competence, autonomy and strategic strength are the components of the male participant's pattern, while contribution, coordination and relational effectiveness are the components of the female participant's pattern, but each pattern is drawn from a single participant; therefore, the pattern should be interpreted as a difference between these two participants and not as an overall pattern for males versus females.

4.5 Theme 4: Emotional Labour and Coping Mechanisms

Both participants recognized that there is a lot of emotional/psychological stress in academic leadership. Stress arose out of administrative expectations, time constraints, interpersonal tensions and institutional inefficiencies. The emotional management strategies were very different, however, in spite of these shared pressures. Participant One built an identity of emotional detachment and described himself over and over again as "emotionless" in professional contexts. Emotional neutrality was a protective coping strategy that allowed him to cope with the hostility and conflict he faced in institutions. He made workplace problems into "ethical exams," which was an intellectual approach to stress; he did not let his emotions carry him away.

Participant Two, however, stated that it was a difficult relationship at times and emotionally stressful: "It can be emotionally challenging at times, but also a difficult relationship in terms of high expectations, limited authority and having problems and issues." She normalised emotional exhaustion and highlighted adaptability and organisation as coping mechanisms rather than suppressing emotion. These differences may possibly be related to broader sociocultural understandings of masculinity and femininity in professional settings, in which emotional stoicism and rational control are often socially valued in men's leadership while emotional awareness, patience and relational sensitivity are expected of female leaders; with a single participant representing each gender, this remains a tentative interpretation rather than an established pattern.

4.6 Theme 5: Communication as Institutional Survival

The lack of formal authority resulted in communication becoming the participants' most important leadership instrument. Participant One said, "I persuade them and talk to them" and Participant Two emphasized, "Clear and open communication helps to foster trust and eliminate resistance and collaboration." Their styles of communicating were different, with Participant One mostly communicating strategically in order to gain influence, and Participant Two communicating with a sense of openness and emotional understanding, typical of the relational labour often attributed to female leaders.

4.7 Theme 6: Leadership as Coordination, Service, and Survival

Traditional leadership models of authority and power were rejected by both participants. Participant One highlighted that it is "serving the people" and Participant Two that "balancing leadership and coordination." In terms of vision, these leaders to the middle of the academic world focus on facilitating, coordinating and supporting others, with Participant One focusing specifically on strategic service, while Participant Two would focus on the need for balance and collaboration.

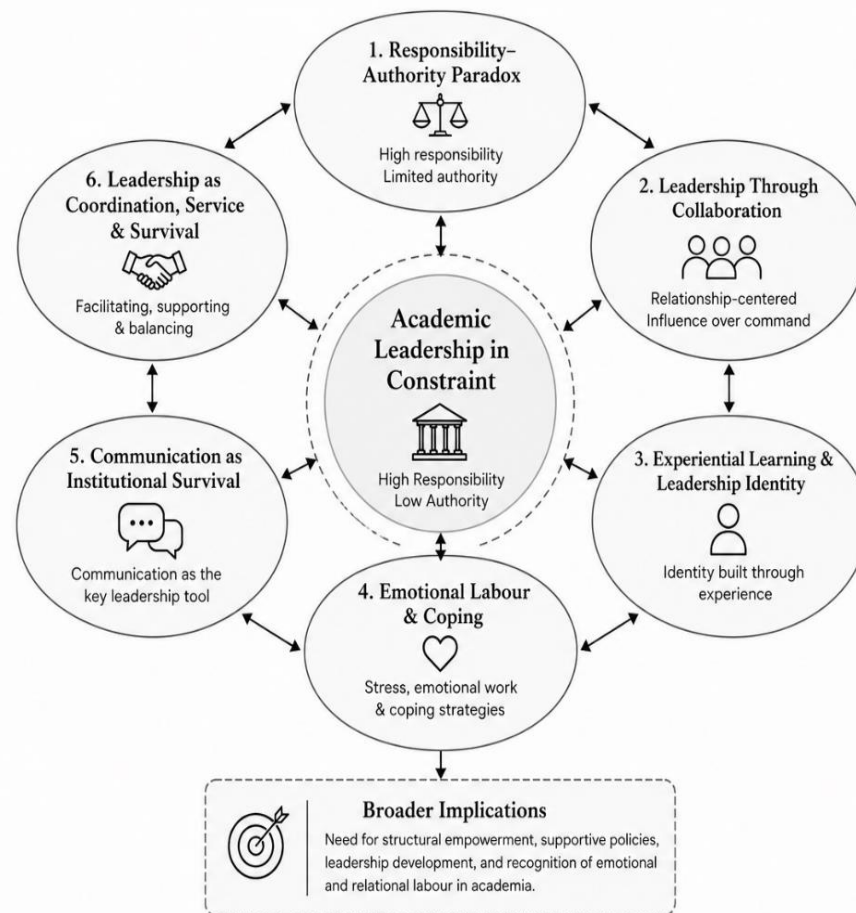


Figure 2. Thematic Network Illustrating the Interrelationships Among the Six Emergent Themes

5. Discussion

The overall aim of this descriptive case study was to gain a profound understanding of the lived experiences of university Heads of Department and to analyse structurally the way in which they cope with the great tension between their high institutional accountability and their limited administrative authority. The thematic analysis shows that the academic middle management in Higher Education is highly paradoxical, emotionally challenging and constrained by the bureaucratic system. The qualitative results suggest that there is a fundamental space of

leadership that is both between authority and powerlessness, autonomy and accountability, and institutional demands and relational expectations

for both the men and women participants. The chapter brings together these empirical results and compares them to the theoretical framework developed in the literature review, and looks at how their lived realities complement, contradict, and advance the global academic field.

The most salient structural pattern that has been identified from the empirical evidence is the common occurrence of high levels of academic accountability with less than corresponding authority to make decisions. Both participants explicitly highlighted a daily administrative challenge in which they were expected to get things done and to make their departments function, but at the same time were completely reliant on the final say of the upper administration. Participant One expressed this as, "Progress in the department

is often hindered on a daily basis as every action requires higher level approval." In turn, this systematic constraint was captured by Participant Two who reported that she was told to make things happen, but that "final decisions" were taken at "higher administrative levels," which made her feel "empowered and constrained."

The reality for both participants confirms Gallos' (2002) depiction of the academic chair as "classic middle manager with tremendous responsibilities, inadequate resources, and little authority." Moreover, the frustration of participants about institutional bottlenecks reinforces the structural claims of Nguyen (2013) and Munene (2021) that, in the context of growing up bureaucracy in the university, the power of decision-making is increasingly concentrated in the hands of executive management, thus gradually depriving HODs of their functional autonomy. Although both participants admitted that they did not have unilateral control of budgets, hiring or policy approvals, they both acknowledged that they were held accountable for the success or failure of their respective departments demonstrating the unconditional burden of accountability set on academic HODs as noted by Ngare (2024) and Wolstencroft and Lloyd (2019).

The results show that there is a significant and systemic deficiency in the education of leaders in higher education institutions. Both were given little formal leadership training, so had to develop their management skills through trial and error. Participant Two specifically commented that there was no guidance given to her at first and that she had to learn by doing. Participant One said that his leadership experience was like constructing a house from the rocks of constant struggle and hardship. The empirical findings strongly corroborate previous studies on the professionalisation gap in higher education (Dimici et al., 2016; Malik & Amin, 2023). Heads of Department may need to cope with the demands of their roles without a formal professional development process, which often results in significant role conflict and confusion (Bush, 2016; Sarros et al., 1999).

The findings build on existing literature and connect to Identity Theory (Burke & Stets, 2009),

which discusses how identity development can differ across individuals; the contrast observed here between the male and female participant may possibly reflect gender-related patterns, though with only one participant per gender this should be read as an individual difference rather than a demonstrated gender effect. The man involved in the growth perspective constructed his development around endurance, toughness and independent analysis, and sees leadership primarily as a means of coping with stress. The female participant had a reflective and relational sense of self, as a coordinator who is actively involved in the growth of the institution. This contrast suggests that when universities are not formal sites of training, leaders' roles and identities may become self-justified and self-legitimated by socially shared conceptions of professionalism that are possibly, though not conclusively, shaped by gender. Likewise, the lack of systematic professional preparation leads to the same erosion of role clarity and confidence that has been shown in other contexts of professional development in which institutional support is removed.

The context where both parties functioned was one with little absolute structural power, and both parties were generally in opposition to the authoritarian management style. Participant One was definitely critical of the "Professional Head of Department" who is a "rude person who always orders somebody", and believed in service-oriented leadership. Participant Two reiterated this, highlighting her wish to lead with "mutual respect, collaboration, and open communication. Both HODs adopted an interactional leadership style (Knight & Trowler, 2001), and they relied very heavily on relational communication to survive as university faculty members, since the latter are very sensitive to their professional independence (famously compared to 'herding academic cats' by Deem, 2010).

Data, however, shows a dramatic difference in the use of this interactional leadership, which seems to be related to the sociocultural positioning. The male used a soft power approach through the use of a strategic influence model, influencing faculty members toward the desired conclusion, but with great care to ensure the appearance of autonomy.

The female participant used a very transparent, caring and communicative approach that aimed at maintaining the balance of interpersonal relationships. This further supports Salifu's (2023) idea of crisis of behavioural integrity where the male leader used informal strategic influence to earn the trust and cooperation of staff under the shadow of limited authority, while the female leader used emotional connection and transparency to gain staff cooperation and trust in the face of limited authority.

The thematic analysis reveals the high level of emotional labour in academic leadership, and how it appeared to vary between these two participants, a difference this study treats as a possible reflection of sociocultural influence rather than a confirmed gender effect. Both parties recognized stress as a constant that arose from administrative requirements, unexpected data needs, and interpersonal conflicts. Their coping mechanisms are practical examples of impression management (Goffman, 1971; Armstrong & Mitchell, 2017): HODs are subject to a strict regime of monitoring by top executives who require them to develop a professional public image and often to stifle their authentic responses to the situation to suit the needs of the bureaucracy.

The male participant coped with this stress by becoming very detached, stating in professional situations that he was "emotionless," and viewing job hostility as "intellectual ethical exams." The female participant admitted to being emotionally affected, stating that the role was "emotionally challenging at times, particularly with high expectations and limited authority." She did not deny her emotions, instead she balanced relationships and normalised the exhaustion of emotions. This separation provides strong support to the intersectional research Naqvi et al. (2024) present, as well as the broader research on the interplay of gender, culture, and institutional context in enacting and defending professional identity in high accountability positions (Ali & Habib, 2025). The female participant in this study did not possess much transactional power so she used a transformational, relational leadership style, using the power that only a degree can provide.

Finally, the results of this case study address an important gap in the literature relating to lived experience. The previous studies were able to mention administrative tasks and formal restrictions of department heads (Dimici et al., 2016; Malik & Amin, 2023), but this qualitative case analysis was able to capture how those restrictions are felt and experienced daily. Clegg and McAuley (2005) theorised that middle managers are the pivot point of the university, and this is indeed the case, as the findings indicate. However, the findings also suggest that the middle managers' pivot point is best understood as a liminal space. Both participants reflect on what leadership means to them, and both explicitly reject the traditional idea of power: the male sees leadership as "serving the people," and the female sees leadership as "balancing leadership and coordination." The data shows that this is not a uniform space to navigate, but rather a space that, in this pair of cases, appeared shaped by gender-related expectations, sociocultural norms, and considerable emotional labour needed to lead without the absolute structural power to call the shots.

Limitations

This study has a few limitations which need to be taken into account for the results obtained. As only two Heads of Department (one male and one female) were included in the sample and it is not possible to separate gender from individual personality, discipline or departmental context and the patterns discussed above are to be interpreted as tentative reflections on the sample as a whole, not as a generalisation to the wider population of male and female Heads of Department. Second, results from two cases in one university context cannot claim to be statistically generalizable but should be regarded as providing an intensive and context-specific description, not a representative description. Lastly, non-participant observation was used in this study, but this was not reported as a separate data source and therefore, the degree of triangulation between interview and observation data is restricted. Research is necessary with larger and more diverse

sample sizes to determine if the patterns found here are more generalizable.

6. Conclusion

Heads of Department are expected to ensure the smooth running of the department, ensure compliance to the institution and to drive academic outcomes. They are however, structurally tied to the upper administration for final decision making, allocation of resources and policy approvals (Munene, 2021; Nguyen, 2013). Given their lack of formal coercive authority they have to give up the traditional authoritarian modes of management, and they must use collaborative negotiation, constant communication and their own personal capital to survive and exert influence over their peers. Importantly, this study builds on the literature by showing that the process of navigating powerless responsibility was not identical for the two participants, and appeared, in this pair of cases, to be shaped by gendered and sociocultural expectations; given the small sample, this pattern should be treated as a hypothesis for future research rather than an established finding. They built their coping strategies and professional identities, however, in different ways depending on their sociocultural positioning. The male participant manipulated institutional obstacles via strategic influence, tactical negotiation and emotional detachment, as he survived analytically and through endurance. The female participant dealt with the same structural constraints by employing relational coordination, emotional openness, and collaborative adaptation to effectively use a communication centered approach, acting as a kind of emotional shock absorber in order to keep the department in harmony. In the end, the nature of the Head of Department role is a perpetual business of emotional labour, negotiating identity and enduring systems, one in which they are active and integral institutional mediators. This study provides valuable practical advice for higher education institutions. Senior university management should be mindful of the immediate conflict that accountability without full authority brings (Ngare, 2024). Institutions should

decentralise operational authority to increase middle managers' autonomy. Leadership development programmes should prioritise conflict resolution, emotional labour, and relational leadership. Universities also need to officially recognize the inequitable emotional workload of women leaders and create more robust and equal support systems. Further studies should include quantitative, larger, or longitudinal research with more participants to assess whether the possible gender-related coping patterns observed in this pair of cases recur across larger and more diverse samples of Heads of Department in various educational systems and management levels.

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