# The Dynamics of Formal Leadership Practice at the Departmental Level in UK universities

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## Abstract

Middle leadership in UK higher education (HE) represents a crucial locale of operations where discrete concerns relating to the academic discipline, the university as a HE institution, normative and utilitarian responsibilities, to name a few matters, converge. As such, the multifaceted and multilevel nature of leadership practice at this level constitutes an important component in the operative efficacy of the university. However, given the complexity of concerns, middle leadership is noted to entail a series of dynamic tensions between the aforementioned salient discourses that affects the leadership practice of the formal leaders to varying degrees. Thus, this thesis presents a qualitive study into the operational dynamics that characterise middle leadership practice in UK HE by exploring the experiences of formal leaders at the department / school level who belong to Russell Group and Post 92 universities. By adopting a relational perspective on leadership as the theoretical framework, the experiences and perspectives of middle leaders are delineated to inform firstly, the faceted nature of the leadership role identity as the department / school head within distinct relational nexuses of the academic unit and the institution; and secondly, the dynamics that define the interactions with hierarchy (senior leaders at the institutional level) for the department / school head. A qualitative study approach was employed to interview twelve Russell Group and ten Post 92 leaders at the department and /or school level. Analysis of the data demonstrates the varying values ascribed namely that of autonomy and equity by RG leaders versus efficacy and performance by Post 92 leaders, to the role of leading 'within' the academic unit that entails varying approaches to middle leadership in the two university types. Furthermore, developing interpersonal congruency between leadership stakeholders at the departmental and institutional level is observed to be a salient factor that can mitigate the dynamic tensions during cross level interactions with senior leaders. Additionally, analysis of experiences of leading 'without' the academic unit indicates that the degree of influence exerted by the middle leader during cross level interactions with senior leaders is contingent on the circumstances of the discipline; where the leaders of disciplines that are flourishing (computer science units) exert more influence than leaders of disciplines that are in apparent decline (ancient history and culture unit). Overall, this thesis addresses the call from leadership scholars for a closer integration of context in leadership enquiries by delineating the 'practice sites' that frames and embeds the practice of leadership for middle leaders in UK universities. In conclusion, the salient and the nuanced findings are synthesised to offer recommendations for future research.

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Dedicating all merit gained to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Om Mani Padme Hum.

## Declaration

I, Dorjee Dahdul Kazi, declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work, and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

# Chapter 1 – Introduction

## 1.1 Preface and Background

The departmental unit, which is the site where the chief purpose of the university as an institution for higher education is accomplished (Middlehurst, 1993), is subject to – amongst other factors - contextual and structural forces of the sector and the institution respectively. In the 'marketised' UK higher education sector, where competition for funds and students is consequential, commentators have noted the high stakes involved in academic departments to "perform well" (Kelly, 2016; Kok & McDonald, 2017). However, as educational institutions, universities also embody public service values in their organisational missions and core operational activities. Reflecting this fundamental dichotomy, the domain of leadership in higher education is noted to be characterised by the underlying "tensions between normative (i.e., academic concerns) and utilitarian (i.e., business concerns) objectives" (Bolden et al., 2012, p. 41). Moreover, this dichotomy is further nuanced on account of the fact that the university accommodates varied disciplinary units that imply varied leadership cultures and circumstances within discrete departmental units. As institutions seek to be better governed and more effectively managed, the experiences of departmental leaders in managing this dichotomy offers a key perspective on issues related to the overall responsiveness in university operations. Noting the importance of effectively managing the internal dynamics that prevail within the university, Bolden et al. observe, "it is from here, perhaps, that we have seen an increasing emphasis on leadership" (Bolden et al., 2012, p. 37).

Contemporary approaches to organizational leadership have acknowledged the embedded nature of leadership practice, where the influence of the structural and contextual dimensions at play - of higher education (HE) in this instance - is brought to the forefront of efforts at understanding the phenomenon of leadership (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008; Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001; Uhl-Bien, 2006). As such, a notable perspective in UK higher education posits that leadership is a relational process that is "contextually embedded and emerging from the dynamic relationship between various actors" (Bolden et al., 2008, p. 360). Bolden et al. conceptualises this approach in the HE context by presenting a five-dimensional model (detailed subsequently) that encapsulates the interrelated factors that influence HE leadership practice. This provides a framework to inform observations from scholars such as Bryman,

who notes a dearth of research into "exactly how leaders contribute to department culture, collaborative atmosphere, and department performance" (Bryman et al., 2009, p. 332). Analogously, Bolden et al. (2008) notes the need for enquiry into "how is leadership experienced by those involved as it unfolds? And how is personal agency constrained and/or enhanced through access to and control of resources" (Bolden et al., 2008, p. 362). To this end, the relational perspective on leadership offers the theoretical basis to inform these important areas of leadership in higher education. Uhl-Bien's (2006) explication of the "Relational Leadership Theory (RLT)" forms the theoretical basis of understanding leadership through which this research goes about enquiring into the aspects of middle leadership in UK HE (described in the following sections). Fundamentally, adopting the RLT perspective in a research inquiry entails the study of "both relationships (interpersonal relationships as outcomes of or as contexts for interactions) and relational dynamics (social interactions, social constructions) of leadership" (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 667). The assumptions of RLT are elaborated, in further detail, in the methodology chapter (section 4.2). In the context of UK HE, the aforementioned five-dimensional model of leadership in UK HE represents the application of the relational perspective, that understands leadership "as a social influence process through which emergent coordination - i.e., evolving social order - and change - i.e., new values, attitudes, approaches, and behaviours, ideologies – are constructed and produced" (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 668).

This research adopts the relational perspective of leadership as a theoretical framework to address the aforementioned areas that are deemed as significant to the premise of leadership in higher education. By exploring the practitioner's perspective, this research seeks to delineate the dynamics of leadership practice i.e., "the processes and conditions of being in relation to others" (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p.664), by firstly, inquiring into the "multilevel relationships" (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008; Branson et al., 2016) that constitute the leadership practice of the formal leader at the department/school level in UK HE, and secondly, enquiring into the operational dynamics that are reported to be a factor in the way that the department/school head interacts with senior leaders at the institutional level in accomplishing their roles as the 'liaison' between institutional levels. These two premises form the research questions for this thesis, which will be outlined in the subsequent sections. In order to posit the insights of this research in the context of UK universities, it is essential to describe the "five-dimensional model" of leadership practice propounded by Bolden et al. (2008) and the way it informs this research. As mentioned earlier, this model represents the application of the

relational perspective and delineates the various influences in UK HE that inform leadership practice in UK universities.

## 1.2 Conceptual Framework – Five Dimensions of HE Leadership

**Figure 1.1 –** A diagrammatic representation of the five dimensions of HE leadership (p. 362, Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008)
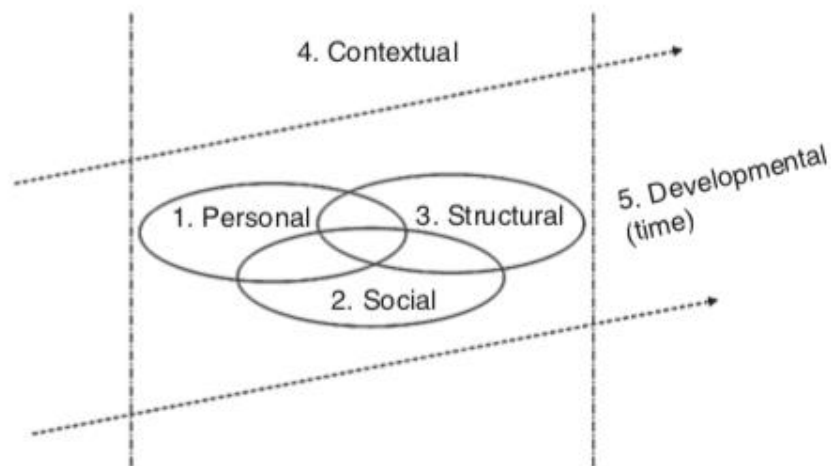


*Figure 1* Dimensions of leadership in higher education (adapted from Bolden, Petrov and Gosling, 2008, p. 60)

Contemporary perspectives on leadership in organisations recommend focusing on the processes that engender and shape leadership practice (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008; Uhl-Bien, 2006). In these approaches, the phenomenon of leadership is defined as "a social influence process through which emergent coordination and change are constructed and produced" (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 668). This has implied a re-evaluation of the leader as an autonomous agent (as implied in prior heroic approaches to leadership) to acknowledging the influence of "contextually embedded processes emerging from the dynamic relationships between various actors" (Bolden et al., 2008, p. 360) in understanding the phenomenon of leadership.

In approaching leadership from this perspective, Bolden's five-dimensional model represents "leadership as a dynamic outcome of five interrelated factors" (Bolden et al., 2008, p. 362). These factors are termed as dimensions, namely, personal, social, structural, contextual, and developmental. The summary of these dimensions as they relate to this thesis is as follows:

The personal dimension refers to the "personal qualities, experiences, and preferences of individual leaders" (Bolden et al., 2008, p. 364). The remit of this dimension in this study is prescribed to the formal leadership role of the department/school head.

The social dimension refers to the relational nature of leadership interactions that are affected by various factors that impinge on the leader's ability to facilitate influence. This capacity for influence is denoted in the concept of 'social capital', which is defined as "the goodwill available to individuals and groups [stemming from] the structure and content of the actor's social relations" (Bolden et. al., 2008, p. 366). Bolden notes that social capital - as defined here - is a vital factor in bridging 'between individual agency and organisational structure' and is explored by this study when considering the factors that affect the level of influence at the institutional level for the departmental/school head.

The structural dimension refers to "the structural context in which leadership occurs" (Bolden et al., 2008, p. 367). In UK HE, institutional type is noted as a prominent structural context, where universities are widely grouped within a dichotomy of Pre and Post 1992 universities. The differences in the "constitutional arrangements, organisational structures, and culture" (Middlehurst et al., 2009, p. 315), along with differences along the dimensions of research activity, wealth, academic success, and student demographics between Pre and Post 92 universities (Boliver, 2015), entail a consideration of this dimension and its relevance to leadership practice. Additionally, the notion of "administrative intensity," which refers to "the ratio of the total number of employees involved in administrative duties, divided by the number of academic employees" (Andrews et al., 2017, p. 120) is acknowledged as a denotation of an organisation's investment in central administration, i.e., centralisation. Given that centralisation emerged as a theme in the accounts of Russell Group leaders in this study, it was deemed beneficial to compute the administrative intensities of the Russell Group universities and consider its implications as a structural affect on the leadership practice of the RG leaders.

The contextual dimension "comprises both the external context – including social, cultural, and political environment – within which higher educational leadership is enacted, as well as the organisation's own internal content" (Bolden et al., 2008, p. 368). The market discourse that shapes the institutional level directives, rendered most notably as performance concerns at the departmental level, is explored by this study. Given that different disciplines manage varying

concerns related to unit performance by virtue of uneven availability of resources (Kekäle, 1995), the Biglan schema was utilised as a sampling tool to account for potential variations in the perspectives of discrete disciplinary leaders (Simpson, 2017). The Biglan schema and its relevance to this thesis are described in the methodology section (4.6.2).

The developmental dimension refers to the "ongoing and changing developmental needs of individuals, groups, and organisations" (Bolden et al., 2008, p. 369). This dimension is not an explicit focus of this study; however, the findings will be situated within the current literature on the topic, and its implications are explored in the discussion section.

It should be noted that it is beyond the remit of this thesis to delineate each aspect as it pertains to departmental leadership. Instead, the model is adopted as an analytic frame that contextualises the views of the participants on aspects of their leadership practice as interrelated factors that constitute their leadership practice as middle leaders on academic units. The model is applied directly in relation to answering RQ2. As such, the insights derived on the phenomenon of leadership are grounded in the understanding that leadership is contextually fluid (contingent on context) and emergent through a relational process between actors and their context.

## 1.3 Introduction to the Research Questions

In the literature, leadership in higher education is noted to be "multifaceted" (p. 362, (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008) and characterised by dynamic tensions between the discourses of "collegiality and managerialism, individual autonomy and collective engagement, leadership of the discipline and institution, academic versus administrative authority, informality and formality, inclusivity and professionalisation and stability and change" (p. 364). The formal leader at the department / school level in UK HE occupies the locale in the university apparatus where a number, if not all, of these dynamic tensions manifest and develop operationally (Deem, 2004; Jackson, 1999). As such, by applying the relational perspective of leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006), this research explores the contextual conditions and processes within which these tensions develop in the leadership practice of middle leaders. Thus, the enquiry commences with an exploration of the "multifaceted" nature of the middle leadership role, which involves navigating across distinct "relational nexuses" (Ashforth et al., 2011; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007)i.e., varied groups of stakeholders in their leadership practice. More

specifically, this research focuses on two salient nexuses namely, that of the stakeholders 'within' and 'without' the academic unit, that represents the vertical and horizontal networks and locales of middle leadership practice (Hare et al., 2010). On that account, the first research question (RQ1) is as follows:

What are the beliefs and values that are ascribed to the role identity of the unit head by the Russell Group and Post 1992 leaders in this research when:
a) leading 'within' the academic unit?
b) leading 'without' the academic unit as a mediator between institutional levels?
c) To what extent does the role of leading 'within' and 'without' the academic unit differ from each other?
d) To what extent does the leadership role identity differ for leaders of Russell Group and Post 1992 universities?

In line with the relational perspective on leadership that "assumes that any formulations of thoughts and assumptions have to be understood in the context of ongoing conversations and relations" (p. 661, Uhl-Bien, 2006), this premise and the corresponding sub questions posits the experiences of the participants within distinct relational nexuses that shape their role as leaders amongst different stakeholders – explored by sub question a) and b). Additionally, sub question c) seeks to analyse the basis of what characterises the "multifaceted - ness" that is noted to typify the leadership role at the department / school level in UK HE. Finally, the sub question d) seeks to analyse any variation in leadership experiences on the level of the institution, on account of the fact that UK HE is noted to be characterised by institutional clusters - of Oxbridge, Russell Group, Pre and Post 1992 universities - that differentiate universities along dimensions of financial strength, structure and institutional missions (Boliver, 2015). The differences in the leadership experiences of Russell Group and Post 1992- unit leaders are compared by this study. Section 4.6.1 elaborates on the rationale of this distinction employed by this research.

Furthermore, as noted earlier, leadership of the discipline versus the institution is observed to be a significant area of dynamic tension in the HE leadership. With the formal leader at the department / school level responsible for representing their units at the institutional level, exploring the locale of cross-level leadership interactions represents an integral area of enquiry in leadership research. Moreover, understanding the dynamics of this interaction - i.e., the

social processes that are at play for the department leader – provides the departmental perspective into the operational dynamics that impact the hierarchal interactions between leaders at the departmental / school and institutional level of university operations. On that account, the second research question (RQ2) is as follows:

What are the issues that are reported to affect the process of liaising between the institutional levels for the formal leaders at the department / school level when:
   a) Interacting with the hierarchy in their institutions?
   b) Exercising leadership influence in hierarchical interactions?
   c) Aspiring to accomplish departmental performance?

In addition to the sub questions outlined above, further reading on organisational behaviour indicated that the administrative intensity of an organisation as a potential affect. Thus, an additional sub question was formulated to enquire into this premise:

   d) To what extent do the administrative intensities affect the experiences of mediation?

**1.4 Contribution to the domain of HE Leadership:**

Leadership within universities is recognised as a multi-layered and multi-faceted phenomenon, giving rise to dynamic tensions. These tensions include the conflict between managerialism and collegiality, as well as the challenge of balancing discipline-specific leadership with institutional leadership (Bolden et al., 2009). Understanding the way that these tensions develop provides an insight into the areas of leadership practice that are particularly challenging and are barriers to responsive leadership in the university. By focusing on the relational aspects of middle leadership, this study sheds light on the relational concerns that are conferred on the unit leader by virtue of factors pertaining to the institutional type (RG and Post 92) and the disciplinary background. In delineating the way that the relational concerns shape middle leadership practice, the conditions and processes that engender the tensions when leading an academic unit are illuminated by this study. This provides a basis for recommending avenues to alleviate the tensions and engender responsiveness in the overall leadership of the university.

Moreover, the adoption of the relational framework also addresses the issue, noted by scholars, of the context being overlooked in leadership studies (Middlehurst et al., 2009; Burgoyne et al., 2009). The lack of context in leadership studies often leads HE practitioners to dismiss generalised solutions for specific issues (Middlehurst et al., 2009, p. 318). Therefore, analysing participants' experiences from a relational perspective provides a framework to understand how specific contextual factors shape the considerations of leaders in their specific practice sites. For example, it is observed that the "disciplinary health," which refers to the circumstances of the discipline in the HE sector, can create a tense or amiable dynamic with senior leadership stakeholders for the middle leader. This approach to studying leadership, which is focused on the aspect of practice - by way of positing the practitioner's experiences at the forefront of enquiry - allows for a stronger connection between theory and application (Schön & Argyris, 1996).

Furthermore, this research posits middle leadership practice in specific practice sites of leading 'within' and 'without' the department. As such, the specificity of the contextual factors that shape leadership practice for leaders of distinct institutional type and disciplinary backgrounds, are delineated by this research. For instance, it is observed that leading within the nexus of the academic unit can entail the emphasis of varying concerns and values in RG and Post 92 universities. This re-instates the relevance of context for leadership and demonstrates the distinctiveness of the same role within different institutional contexts. This contextualisation provides value for leadership scholars in further considering the association between relational nexuses and role identity in higher educational organisations.

## 1.5 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis commences with an introduction to the premises explored by this research, that provides an overview of the issues on the topic of middle leadership in UK HE. This is followed by chapter 2, that reviews the literature on leadership as a phenomenon in organisations and narrows down on the context of UK HE. Chapter 3 reviews the literature on role identities in organisations and contemplates the work on the relational nature of these role identities. Chapter 4 delineates the methodology employed in exploring the research questions outlined, whilst also discussing the issues of validity, reliability and ethics that were contemplated throughout the research project. The methodology describes the nature of enquiry undertaken, justifies the approach of the research design in line with the nature of enquiry and the method

used to collect and analyse the data. This chapter also discusses the limitations of the research. Thereafter, Chapter 5 presents the analysis and findings that pertain to RQ1. This is followed by chapter 6 that synthesises and discusses the observations of the preceding chapter. Subsequently, chapter 7 presents the analysis and results that pertain to RQ2; which is followed by chapter 8 that synthesises and discusses the observations of the preceding chapter in lights of 'leadership responsiveness'. Finally, Chapter 9 concludes the thesis by synthesising the insights from the research question recommends areas for further exploration and ends with reflections of the researcher.

# Chapter 2 – Literature Review I – Departmental Leadership in UK HE

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and reviews research and scholarship on departmental leadership in UK Higher Education (HE) discussing the implications of current findings that consequently provide the basis for the enquiry into middle leadership role identity (RQ1) and the dynamics of hierarchical interactions (RQ2). Moreover, prior to reviewing literature associated with the topical focus of the aforementioned research questions, literature on the basic phenomenon of leadership will be explored. In doing so, the 'relational understanding of leadership' (Uhl-Bien, 2006) is established as the pertinent framework for this enquiry into middle leadership in UK HE.

On that account, the literature review was conducted with two overarching objectives. Firstly, a topical review on the domain of departmental leadership sought to discuss the notable themes, as well as identify the suggested areas of further research in works done by scholars in the field. Secondly, further developing the first objective of illuminating the major themes of the topic, the review aims to explicate the factors that are noted to affect and constitute leadership practice in UK HE. As such, the objectives that guided the process of the literature review provide the basis to subsequently posit the findings of this research within current understanding and furthermore, discuss them in relation to the salient issues on the topic.

The process of the literature review entailed scoping several databases, starting with Google Scholar in order to keep the initial search as extensive as possible. Thereafter, a further review of specific databases like British Ed. Index and EBSCO were conducted, to follow up on the studies and the key areas that were observed to comprise the topic of departmental leadership in UK HE. The key words used in the search are attached in the index. The articles that were deemed pertinent to the research focus (on the domain of departmental leadership in UK HE), were added to a referencing software, Mendeley. Subsequently, the added materials were read, analysed and categorised thematically based on the way that it informed the aforementioned

research questions. This formed the basis of the narrative review that will be elaborated in the subsequent sections and is structured in the following sequence.

Given the premises of leadership role identity and the dynamics of leadership interaction that pertains to RQ 1 and RQ2 respectively, the literature review will be presented as two separate bases. The first base, which will be presented in the following paragraphs, will address the fundamental considerations of this thesis as a whole. As such, the literature connected to the topics of leadership, departmental leadership, UK higher education and UK universities is explored. The second base will address the literature on role identities in the organisations that contextualises the first research question. Thus, base one will commence with an overarching review of leadership as a phenomenon per se. This entailed including texts on leadership that have discussed national contexts other than the UK – predominantly the United States context – and analysed the phenomenon in organisations beyond a university. Subsequently, leadership is then contextualised within the purview of the higher educational sector and institution in the UK. Specific elements of both the external and internal contexts in HE will be examined in sections starting from 2.4 to 2.6 that explores the 'affects of university leadership'. Review of the literature on the external context of HE will discuss the marketised nature of the sector and the managerialist framework of organisation that is adopted by universities that operate within it. Likewise, the discussion on the internal context will pertain to the grouping of pre- and post-92 universities, its structural affects and the disciplinary differences that prevail within a university.

As outlined above, this research is theoretically founded on the relational understanding of leadership (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008; Uhl-Bien, 2006) and concurrently pertains to the context of UK HE, within which the participants operate as departmental / school leaders in their universities. In the reviewing the literature, the framework of leadership forwarded by (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008) is noted to comprehensively typify the relational perspective leadership in UK HE. As such, Bolden et al's (2009) model forms the conceptual framework that is utilised to understand the data in relation to RQ2, further on in the thesis. The review will then consider the literature on the premise of leadership role identity that contextualises RQ1.

**2.2 Defining Leadership as a Phenomenon**

Academic enquiry into leadership as a phenomenon acknowledges the multifarious and fluid nature of what is and can be defined as leadership (Day, 2014; Middlehurst, 1993). This lack of consensus in the literature on the definition of leadership foregrounds the function of perspective and interpretation in establishing whether leadership can or cannot be ascribed to an action, event or a circumstance (Middlehurst, 1993). Speaking to this extensive applicability of actions or instances that could potentially imply leadership, Middlehurst equates conceptualising leadership to the subjective openness inherent in "interpreting the notion of beauty" (p.7). Thus, enquiries on leadership are observed to commence from a range of disciplines such as psychology, sociology, organisational study, management, finance and evolutionary biology, that approach the phenomenon with distinct paradigms and interests based on underlying disciplinary assumptions (Bryman et al., 2011; Day, 2014; Middlehurst, 1993). As such, given the multiplicity of approaches applied to study leadership, commentators have noted the importance of "time, context and perspective", in framing the focus of inquiry to accurately understand the leadership phenomenon under study and its potential applicability in practice (Esen et al., 2020). Consequently, given the aforementioned antecedents of time, context and perspective in accurately understanding leadership, the following sections will examine these elements and the way it informs the overall premise of this research on middle leadership in UK HE.

As alluded to above, leadership as a phenomenon of enquiry is invariably understood in connection to the factors of time, context, and perspective. Thus, discussing these factors in relation to a research project on leadership is central to firstly, identifying meaningful premises of study and secondly, determining the appropriate methodology to accurately analyse the premise identified. To this point, the literature on leadership notably demonstrates the macro level change over time in the consensus on the meaning of leadership as a phenomenon. Zaccaro's historical analysis of leadership theory outlines the "memes of leadership" that have prevailed over discrete points in history - from ancient history to the 21$^{st}$ century. The analysis charts the four major memes that have predominated leadership theory which are, "the warrior, problem solver, politician and teacher" (Zaccaro, 2014). In a similar enterprise, Grint's analysis juxtaposes the predominant leadership theories alongside the Zeitgeist of the times– Table 1 – thus, emphasising the point that "leadership is necessarily related to the cultural mores that prevail at the time" (Grint, 2011, p. 13). It has to be noted that the pattern of changes seen in

leadership forms over the years include alternative explanations such as the incremental rationality of leadership systems over time, the oscillation between centralised and decentralised systems and the influence of political machinations of the wider context (Bryman et al., 2011). Although the elucidation of leadership models through history is beyond the remit of this study, the key insight of note is that the discourse on leadership is embedded within the prevailing cultural more that exerts influence on the way leadership is conceptualised.

| Political Events | | Leadership Model |
|---|---|---|
| Terrorism, Uncertainty, Fundamentalism | 2000+ | Distributed Leadership, Followership, Identity, Mission-Command |
| Rise of Bush & Blair | 1990–2000 | New Public Management, BPR (Business Process Reengineering), Competencies, Benchmarking Targets, Psychometrics |
| Globalization & Rise of Japan, post Cold War, Thatcherism | 1980–90s | Transformational Leadership, Corporate Culture, Quality Circles, Tough Love |
| US domination & Cold War | 1950–70s | Contingency Theory, Systems Analysis, Self-Actualization: Maslow & McGregor |
| Depression, Communism, Fascism | 1930–40s | Hawthorne/Human Relations, Mass + traits + charismatics |
| Global Competition, WWI | 1910–20s | Scientific Management, Taylorism & Fordism |
| Industrialization | –1900s | 1900s: Rule of thumb, Great Man |
| | TIME | |

**Figure 1.4   Political Zeitgeist.**

Figure 2.1 – A representation of the salient leadership models in juxtaposition with the salient political events. *Grint, K. A history of leadership (2011). P. 13*

In the literature, the lack of construct stability is a recurring theme (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008; Middlehurst, 1993) and is exemplified by research efforts such as "A quest for a general theory of leadership"(Goethals & Sorenson, 2007), where scholars from varied disciplines sought – amongst other central objectives - unsuccessfully to develop a consensual definition of leadership. The fluidity of the phenomenon and the multiplicity of approaches

available to understand leadership, as such, can be attributed to the fact that a substantial portion of enquiry into leadership is essentially a study of social influence, its aspects, and dynamics (Goethals & Sorenson, 2007). Speaking to the point on leadership inquiry being grounded on the social realm of human behaviour, several scholars characterise leadership as "interpersonal, multifunctional and multilevel" (Branson et al., 2016; Middlehurst, 1993, p.4; Uhl-Bien, 2006). The element of perspective, outlined as a central factor above, in leadership study refers to varying methodological stances that correspond to discrete disciplines undertaking the study. It could also denote a focus on a specific aspect of leadership – for example, traits, processes, or systems – that the research studies. Furthermore, a research may specify both of the aforementioned areas in order to clarify the perspective on leadership that is being applied and studied (Bryman et al., 2011; Day, 2014). This thesis by specifying the relational perspective of leadership as the theoretical basis and the examination of leadership dynamics as the topical focus, delineates the factor of perspective for this thesis. Thus, the gamut of perspectives available to study leadership is a notable factor in the focus and understanding of the phenomenon that is developed.

Together with the factors of time and perspective, it is important to ground the inquiry on leadership within a specific context. Given that leadership occurs across the scope of social activity, the nature of leadership, its assumptions and application vary under different contexts. For example, leadership in the context of the military will differ on a number of fundamental aspects in comparison to leadership in the context of education. The study of leadership in this thesis is posited within the overarching context of UK higher education. As a prominent commentator on leadership in UK HE, Middlehurst's work on the domain provides a comprehensive foundation in developing an understanding of the components of leadership and its pertinence to practice. Expounding on the prominent conceptions of leadership, Middlehurst identifies three dominant notions:

> *The first is that of leadership as an active process. This conception includes within its domain particular forms and styles of behaviours, relationships and interactions with others. The second perspective highlights leadership as role or function – 'the leadership' – within which a particular mantle of responsibility and authority is worn by those who are designated leaders. The third conception views leadership as symbolic, whether of intangible elements like power or excellence, or in more concrete terms of representation and public visibility. The last two leadership perspectives are*

*often associated with particular attributes or characteristics, for example charisma, technical expertise or gravitas* (Middlehurst, 1993*, 11).*

Describing these conceptions is beneficial, particularly in leadership research that pertains to organisations, as it provides a basis on which leadership can be distinguished from other concomitant concepts like management and administration. Additionally, understanding leadership and its importance as a discrete phenomenon is significant in contemporary times where the dissolution of conceptual boundaries has raised significant and pressing questions on leadership, its paradoxes (Bryman et al., 2011) and its general sense of import. Specifically, in contemporary organisations and universities where operations are characterised with a high level of task complexity(Andrews & Boyne, 2014; Sengupta & Ray, 2017), the more traditional frameworks of understanding leadership as an individual enterprise i.e., the charismatic and trait approaches to understanding leadership are deemed to be partial on their own in thinking about leadership in complex organisations (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001). As described in the methodology section, leadership is studied as a relational process in this thesis that entails the analytical focus on understanding the relational dynamics of leadership, both in role identity construction (RQ1) and cross level interactions (RQ2) for middle leaders. The following section will expound on the way that basic assumptions that underpins a study that adopts a relational approach as compared to the entities approach to studying leadership.

## 2.3 Development of Leadership Theory: Entities versus Relational approach

The theoretical framework of Relational Leadership Theory (RLT) (Uhl-Bien, 2006) as elucidated in the methodology section, is grounded on a constructionist methodology. Consequently, a central assumption in understanding the phenomenon of focus – leadership in this case – is that leadership ensues as a continual process of interaction between context and agent (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008; Samra-Fredericks, 2008). Thus, with regard to the focus of enquiry, the primary focus of the RLT framework is the "relational processes by which leadership is produced and enabled" (Uhl-Bien, 2006,p. 667). More specifically, adopting this perspective entails firstly, that leadership as a phenomenon is viewed as a continual process of construction that is embedded within the relationships of interacting agents; and consequently, that leadership enquiry (in this approach) seeks to understand the

relational dynamics i.e., "the processes and conditions of being in relation to others" (p.664) of occasions that are acknowledged to denote leadership.

Elaborating further on perspectives in leadership research, Uhl-Bien offers a characterisation of the differences in focus between a 'relational' and an 'entity' approach. She notes that a fundamental point of divergence between the two approaches pertains to the extent to which relational processes i.e., the network of relationship and contextual conditions, are given explanatory power in explaining leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006,p. 661).Approaches that inherently posit leadership within individuals are termed as "entity perspectives" and include a number of approaches to understanding leadership. It is interesting to note that the entity perspective on leadership enquiry does not refer exclusively to approaches that study traits or behaviour but can include research that study leadership relationships and stakeholder interactions. Decisively classifying research into theoretical camps can be futile exercise, however, describing the assumptions that ground the methodology is an indication of the theoretical approach adopted. In seeking to posit leadership within the practice sites, this thesis has commenced from the relational perspective even though the unit of analysis is a specific leadership role within the university. To clarify this point, illustrating the progression of viewing leadership over the years provides an indication of the differences in focus and methods of studying the phenomenon. The development of leadership research, as charted by Middlehurst (table 2.1 below), demonstrates a progression from an emphasis on traits and behaviours toward more holistic approaches that consider the interactions between context and agent to understand leadership. Thus, a brief overview of leadership theory development is useful in order to further clarify the areas that the relational leadership theory addresses in relation to the concerns of other perspectives.

It should be noted that firstly, the theories mentioned are by no means intended to be a comprehensive catalogue of leadership theories. They are utilised as points of reference to consider the constructionist basis of Relational Leadership Theory (RLT). Moreover, it should be noted that the sequential charting of these theories does not imply that the earlier theories are obsolete relative to contemporary thinking on leadership. All of the approaches are utilised in relation to research objectives and topical focus of a study. Middlehurst (1993), by reviewing the literature, identifies the development of six predominant leadership theories from the early 1940's to the 1990s. In the 1940s, the predominant theory that guided leadership research focused on the "essential qualities or traits assumed to be linked to leadership" (p, 13).

Categorised as the "Trait theories", the central idea guiding this approach was one that of "leaders are born not made" (p, 13). From the late 1940s to the late 1960s, a change in the focus from traits to the behaviours of leaders established the "behavioural theories" school of thinking on leadership. This shift has been attributed to the lack of correlation between leadership and traits and also the emergence of the "human relations" approach to the study of organisations (Bryman, 1986, p. 15). Middlehurst notes that the next major theoretical frame to emerge in the study of leadership from the late 1960s is that of "Contingency theory" that "emphasises the importance of situational factor" (p, 20). There is a notable connection that is established between the context and leadership in theories commencing from the 1960s onwards. For example, theories such as the "Power and Influence theories" furthered the development of conceptualising leadership as social influence. It is noted that this understanding of leadership founded on the link between context and agent is further enhanced from the 1970s, where there is a movement away from conceiving of leadership as separate from the context (Bensimon, 1989). Theories such as the "Cultural and symbolic theory" and the emergence of "cognitive theories" in the 1980s, fundamentally commences from the position that leadership is the "interactive process of sensemaking and creation of meaning that is continuously engaged in by organisational members" (Middlehurst, 1993, p. 36; Bensimon, 1989). In the cognitive framework of studying leadership, an increased emphasis is noted to be placed 'on the ways in which individuals construct reality' (p, 39).

**Table 2.1 –** Tabular representation of the leadership theory development from the 1940s to the 1980s

| Period | Theories / Approaches | Theme |
|---|---|---|
| Up to late 1940s | Trait theories | Leadership is linked to personal qualities |
| Late 1940s to late 1960s | Behavioural theories | Leadership is associated with behaviour and style |
| Late 1960s to present | Contingency theories | Leadership is affected by the context and situation |
| Late 1960s to present | Power and influence theories | Leadership is associated with use of power |
| 1970s to present | Cultural and symbolic theories | Leadership is the 'management of meaning' |

| 1980s to present | Cognitive theories | Leadership is a social attribution |
|---|---|---|

*"Adapted from* Bensimon, 1989; Bryman, 1992" (Middlehurst, 1993, p. 13)

To accompany the above cited table, (Southwell & Morgan, 2009) provides an updated overview of leadership conceptions that include more recent proponents of these theories – cited below.

**Figure 2.2 –** An updated overview of leadership conceptions

| Theory | Conception of leadership | Forms | Proponents |
|---|---|---|---|
| Trait theories | Leadership is found in the 'traits' or 'personal qualities' of an individual. | Charismatic theory | Stogdill, 1948<br>Méndez-Morse, 1992<br>Ackoff, 1998<br>Kellerman, 2004 |
| Behaviour theories | Leadership is found in the 'behaviour' or 'style' of an individual. | Autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire approaches to leadership | Stogdill & Coons, 1957<br>Blake & Mouton, 1964; 1978<br>McGregor, 1960<br>Ramsden, 1998 |
| Power and influence theories | Leadership is determined by the use of power by an individual to lead or influence others. | Legitimate power<br>Reward power<br>Coercive power<br>Expert power<br>Referent power | Weber, 1945<br>Heifetz,1994<br>Yukl, 1999 |
| Contingency theories | Leadership is determined by the interaction between the individual's behaviour and the context within which they lead. | Situational leadership | Fiedler, 1967<br>Vroom & Yetton, 1973<br>Hersey & Blanchard, 1988 |
| Cognitive theory | Leadership is socially constructed. Cognitive processes influence the perception of leaders and leadership by both leader and follower. | | Fiedler, 1986<br>Fiedler & Garcia, 1987 |
| Cultural/symbolic theory | Leadership is a continuous process of meaning-making for and with organisational members. | | Bolman & Deal, 2003 |
| Social exchange theories | Leadership is determined by the individual's ability to fulfil the expectations of the followers. | Path–goal theory<br>Transactional leadership<br>Transformational leadership<br>Servant leadership<br>LMX theory | House & Dessler, 1974<br>Manz & Sims, 1980<br>Kouzes & Posner, 1987<br>Greenleaf, 1996; 2003<br>Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1998 |
| Complexity and chaos theory | Leadership is laden with values and has a moral dimension. Leadership is shared. Leadership is determined by the individual's emotional intelligence, ability to be collaborative, and ability to link entrepreneurialism, accountability and globalisation to educational leadership. | Emotional intelligence<br>Moral purpose<br>Community building | Wilcox & Ebbs, 1992<br>Brown-Wright, 1996<br>Astin & Astin, 2000<br>Kezar, 2002<br>Ferren & Stanton, 2004<br>Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006<br>Goleman, 2004<br>Scott, 2007 |

The shared view on the importance of examining the interaction between agent and the context in leadership theory, is noted to be point of similarity between the predominantly cognitivist theories and RLT. However, the central point of distinction – amongst others – is situated in the way that the interaction is conceptualised. With cognitivist theories being grounded on constructivist assumptions that emphasise the role of the agent's "internal processes" in accomplishing leadership, RLT is founded on constructionist assumptions that emphasise "the

primacy of relations" (Uhl-Bien, 2006 p. 665) and thus that leadership exists in relation and inter-dependence to the context (p.665). A central implication of this for this research is that the analysis of the practitioner's experiences - in accomplishing leadership - is posited within the context of the relationship with the pertinent stakeholder and or the nexus of stakeholders, instead of the nature of the individual's cognitive processes alone. Relative to commencing from a stance that posits a predetermined direction of leadership i.e., exclusively acknowledging the movement from the leader to the follower, exploring the relational dynamics which refers to the social processes inherent in the relationship between active agents, provides a dynamic perspective on the way leadership occurs in a given context. Thus, as Uhl-Bien remarks, "a key question asked by RLT is, how do people work together to define their relationship in a way that generates leadership influence and structuring?" (p. 668).

## 2.4 Institutional and Disciplinary affects on University Leadership

Having outlined the pertinence of the context to leadership enquiry in this research, when considering leadership at the departmental level in universities, it is necessary to incorporate the aspects of the wider context namely that of the institution and the HE sector. To this point, operations of the academic unit is influenced by contextual and structural factors of the sector and the institution respectively. As such, for studies adopting the relational perspective, a focal point of interest lies in the operational dynamics that are engendered through the interaction of academic and sectoral demands for unit leaders. Moreover,  Bolden et al., (2012) notes that the domain of leadership in higher education is observed to be characterised by the underlying "tensions between normative (i.e., academic concerns) and utilitarian (i.e., business concerns) objectives" (p.39). A notable illustration of this tension is observed by commentators in the high stakes competition for funds and students that have increased pressures on academic departments to "perform well" (Kelly, 2016; Kok & McDonald, 2017). This is counterbalanced by the fact that universities embody public service values in their organisational missions and core operational activities.

Furthermore, these tensions occur within the context of an institution and a disciplinary habitat. Scholars have noted the differences in the operational structures, institutional cultures, wealth, and the level of academic success between different clusters of universities in UK HE (Boliver,

2015; Middlehurst et. al, 2009). The Russell Group universities are acknowledged to comprise the upper echelons of the institutional divide in terms of the wealth, success, and stature, relative to the institutions that are categorised as Post 92 universities. Consequently, the missions and priorities of the universities invariably vary on account of the disparity on crucial operational metrics such as resources for research, teaching and student success (Boliver, 2015). Thus, this is expected to impact the nature of leadership within each institutional type. Consequently, the prevalence of disciplinary tribes (Becher and Trowler, 2001) entails varying priorities and styles of leadership (Kekale, 1999). Thus, an enquiry into leadership of an academc unit implies a consideration of the institutional type and disciplinary background within UK HE. The following sections will expound on the contextual and structural affects pertaining to the UK HE sector and thereafter, the predominant managerialist framework acknowledged to be operative in universities will be discussed.

**2.4.1 Competition in the HE Sector and implications on Institutional Type**

On the contextual level, addressing the demands of the UK HE sector is a prominent consideration for every university operating within it. The UK HE sector is acknowledged to have espoused what Barnett terms as an "externalist conception" of higher education that emphasises economic, social and cultural values and formulates the systemic foundations of higher education in the lexicon of the aforementioned values( Gibbs & Barnett, 2013). Among them, the economic conception of higher education confers the dominant perspective and is noted as having established a "discursive regime" (p, 14) that informs the regulatory framework of the domain. The sector is noted to be operate on neo liberalist market principles and the universities structured on the basis of new managerialist principles (Deem, 1998; Dill, 1997). As such, notions such as managerialism, marketisation, new public management, new managerialism featuring frequently in the literature (Bessant et al., 2015; Hall, 2013). Mahony et al., (2017) reiterates the aforementioned analysis by identifying the prevalence of standard practices in universities such as the "pursuit for efficiency, effectiveness and economic gains" (p.561). Consequently, the systemic rationale of sectoral dynamics is accepted as one of competition, where universities and their departments compete for resources – human and monetary – under the general precepts of market forces and strategic competition (Naidoo, 2005).

In a competitive milieu, there is pressure on universities to perform. And whilst specific performance concerns can vary across institutional types and operational levels, the performance discourse persists as a consistent influence on the operations of universities in UK HE. The implications of these forces on university operations are observable in the adoption of prominent internal and external feedback mechanisms and various review systems that monitor research assessment and performance management (Mahony et al., 2017). On the level of policy, scholars observe an ideological disposition where a "premium on the efficient and disciplined use of resources, the achievement of value-for-money and increased productivity" (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p.10) is stressed. As an exemplar, policy guidelines and recommendations from bodies like the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the Office for Students emphasise themes such as, "recruitment, finance, quality and student success" (Agency, 2018). These central regulatory bodies such as the QAA are prominent agents who establish standard practices and sectoral norms. This is acknowledged to have engendered "a growing belief" that Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) should nurture a "quality culture" that includes the "formalisation and standardisation of quality management practices [of] quality monitoring and the potential to identify measure for improvement) (Bendermacher et al., 2017, p. 40).

The influence of regulatory bodies on policy formulation in UK HE has, as Shattock notes, established a process that advances 'exclusively from outside inwards', where the drivers of policy are external entities like funding and assessment bodies (Shattock, 2000).This is contrasted with the higher educational policy arena prior to the 1970s where the drivers of policy were higher educational institutions and their stakeholder (inside -out). Furthermore, Shattock points to the increased dependency of universities on these external bodies for monetary resources, ratification of research status (REF accreditation) and reputation (through the establishment of league tables), that exerts considerable influence university operations. Moreover, performance indicators are observed to operate as key indices to aid consumer choice through the composition of league tables and rankings (Naidoo, 2005). Highlighting the competitive nature of the sector, Kelly observes that UK universities are engaged in a "high stakes exercise with considerable risk in terms of losing reputation and reducing their share in the 1.6 billion pounds of QR funding" (Kelly, 2016, p.1208). With concerns pertaining to performance entailing financial consequences, commentaries on the operational practices of the sector as well as HEIs, have noted the pivotal influence of fiscal matters and the 'marketisation of higher education' (Molesworth et al., 2011). These sectoral forces exert

influence on the ideological as well as the operational level. A notable instance of confluence between the ideological and operational implications of a marketised system is the conception of the 'student as customer' (Molesworth et al., 2011) and the impact of this on universities. Barnett's remark succinctly encapsulates this confluence. He states, "it is no accident that – in the UK at least – a national student satisfaction survey has come to be highly influential in shaping institutions' internal policies and provision" (Gibbs & Barnett, 2013, p.11).

Given the prevalence of competition and the accompanying emphasis on performativity, a noteworthy characteristic of UK HE is the development of distinct institutional clusters. Scholars have observed marked differences between universities across a range of core dimensions such as research focus, teaching focus, wealth, student demographics and academic success. Boliver (2015) demonstrates the prevalence of four distinct clusters of the Oxbridge, the Russell Group, Pre 1992 and Post 1992 universities in UK HE. The differences in the universities that fall within these clusters is significant because of the sectoral affects are met by discrete universities in different ways. As Boliver notes:

> UK universities differ significantly in a number of respects, chief among them the intensity and measured quality of their research activity, the perceived quality of the teaching and measured quality of their research activity, the level of economic resources at their disposal, their degree of academic selectivity in admissions and the socioeconomic mix of their student bodies (p. 609).

The variance in these aspects is complex and multifaceted, however research activity is noted to be "undoubtedly one of the primary aspects of the status differentiation" (p. 613). As such, a general dichotomy of organisational mission along the lines of emphasis on 'research intensiveness' in pre 1992 and 'teaching intensiveness' in post 1992 universities is a salient point of distinction between the two categories (Boliver, 2015). In terms of leadership of departmental units, this dichotomy is illustrated by Smith (2002b) who observed that the predilection to a 'research culture' in Chartered universities and a 'teaching culture' in Statutory universities was a fundamental point of difference in the way that the universities were led and managed. Having said that, the acceptance of being categorised as research or teaching intensive is noted to be changing due to indicators such as the NSS that has considerably enhanced the priority on teaching since its inception (Boliver, 2015)

**2.4.2 Disciplinary Background and Biglan Schema**

It is well established that different disciplines that constitute departments and schools within a university vary along dimensions of tasks, cultures, and networks (Becher and Trowler, 2001). Furthermore, different disciplines are noted to undergo changes in disparate ways. As such, in tandem with sectoral forces, university leadership contend with the challenges of managing these developments within their specific disciplinary domains. For instance, Metzger observes the phenomenon of "subject parturition, where new fields develop from older ones and gradually gain independence" (p. 14, Becher & Trowler, 2001). The emergence of "domain-based degrees such as environmental sciences and sports sciences which require less specialist knowledge and have greater market attraction" (p. 15, Becher & Trowler, 2001) is cited as an exemplar of subject parturition. Such changes and development in knowledge organisation within disciplines is described as a 'well-muscled organisational form' that can, in many cases, operate independent of sectoral and other structural influences. Consequently, this suggests that discrete academic disciplines could be at varying circumstantial situations in terms of financial capacity and or level of interest, that is likely to impact on operations of departmental units. However, it is acknowledged that the confluence between the macro level affects of the sector, the influence of disciplinary trends and the micro level circumstances of the discrete units with institutions, is "dynamic, complex and far from tightly coupled" ( Becher & Trowler, p.16). As Becher notes, "it is important to remember the role of agency in change: the important role of reception, interpretation and implementation of new policies and responses to changing environments by academic staff themselves" (p.16).

Furthermore, the differences in the nature of discrete academic disciplines are observed to entail inherent idiosyncrasies, specifically on the issue of performativity (Roskens, 1983). Alongside schemas formulated by Smart, Fedlman, Ehtinton (Smart et al., 2000), the Biglan schema of classifying academic disciplines according to variation on the "peculiar requirements that each area has for the organisation of its research, teaching and administrative activities" (p. 195, Biglan, 1973), is acknowledged as one of the most cited classificatory schema (Simpson, 2017). Through his analysis on the patterns of disciplinary variation, Biglan formulates a classificatory schema of 'Hard', 'Soft', 'Pure', 'Applied', 'Life' and 'Non-Life' that groups academic disciplines along the following fundamental lines. Essentially, the 'Hard' and 'Soft' dimension, categorises disciplines based on the presence of a consensual paradigm where Hard subjects possess a body of theory subscribed by all members. In contrast, the

paradigms in soft subjects are varied and contentious. The 'Pure and Applied' dimension distinguishes disciplines along their concern with application to practical issues – with the Pure category representing disciplines with a lesser inclination to practical issues in comparison to applied subjects. And the 'Life and Non-Life' dimension distinguishes subjects that are concerned with human and biological systems (Life) in contrast to subjects that are concerned with abstract or inanimate subjects (Non-life). A full list of subjects that fall under each dimension is illustrated as follows, adapted from (Simpson, 2017, p.1526).

Figure 2.3 - Correspondence analysis biplot on first two dimensions, with logistic plots, of disciplines with existing classification. Cited from Simpson 2017, p. 1526.
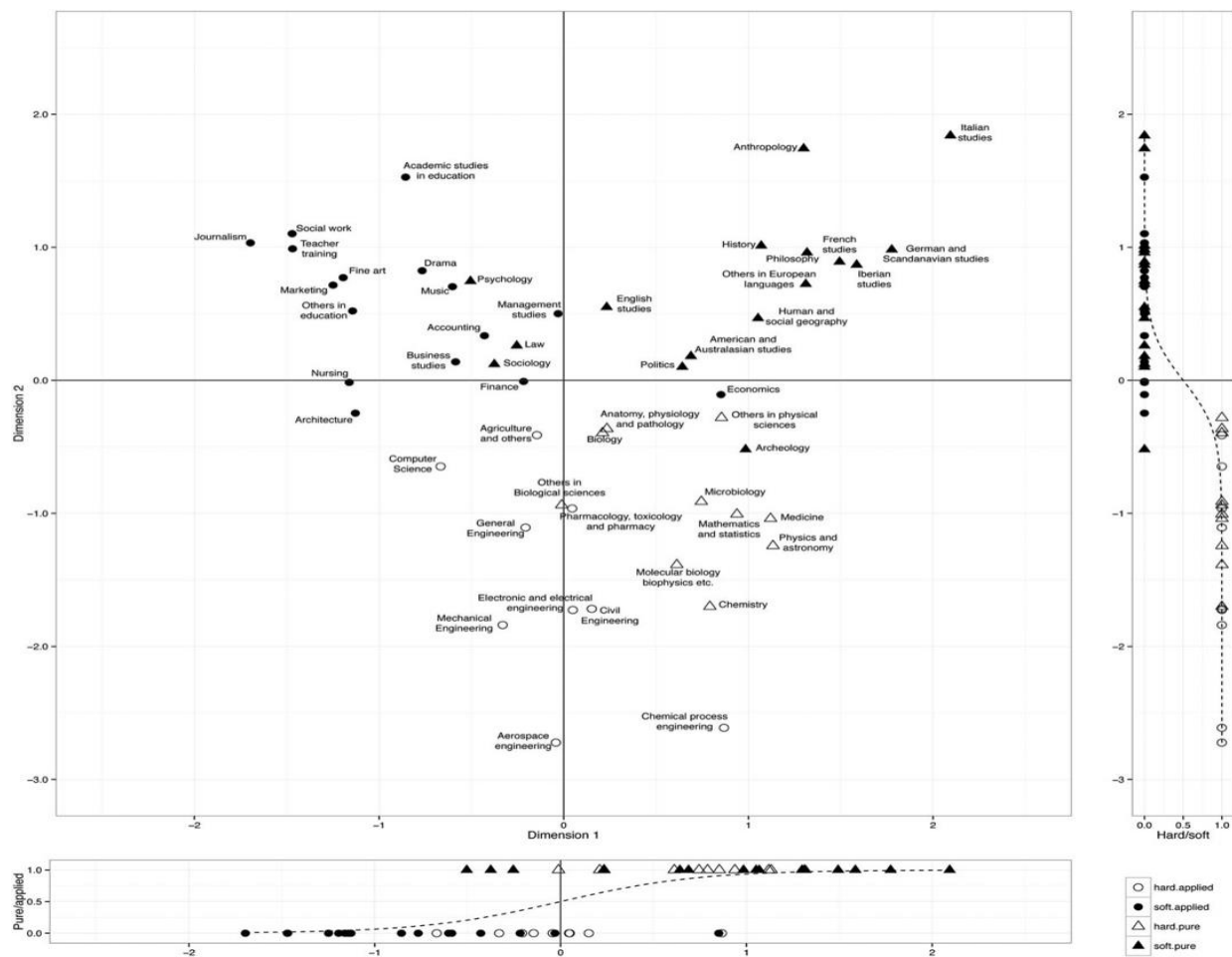


The Biglan schema has been applied to a number of ends which include areas such as informing standards of performativity for varying disciplinary faculties (Roskens, 1983), teaching practices for different disciplines (Kreber & Castleden, 2009) and also in the variation of leadership styles in different disciplinary departments (Kekäle, 1995). Although the pertinence

of the schema across contexts of various HE national sectors and even institutions within the same national sector persists as major points of debate (Smart et al., 2000), the schema indicates the presence of functional differences in academic disciplines - albeit to varying degrees and contextual applicability. Nevertheless, Simpson's (2017) study of the pertinence of the Biglan schema in the context of UK HE concludes that "there is strong support for suggesting that the Pure/Applied and Hard/Soft classifications do retain validity in the UK context and that the match between disciplines and classification is very close" (p. 1528). Additionally, the 'Life / Non-Life' dimension was observed to not hold the same validity as categories of disciplinary differentiation in the UK context (Simpson 2017). The implications of the Biglan schema provides a strong basis for inferring that the leadership dynamics for leaders of discrete disciplines could vary. Thus, disciplinary differences factors into the considerations of a study that enquires into the dynamics of leadership practice.

## 2.5 Managerialist Modus Operandi

The sectoral features of UK HE, as discussed in the preceding paragraphs, are noted to operate on neoliberalist values that emphasises – among other priorities - performativity and efficiency (Gibbs & Barnett, 2013). For universities operating within UK HE, this naturally affects the operational domains of leadership, governance and management (LGM) and the assignment at hand for stakeholders within each domain. Given the features of the sectoral context discussed, LGM stakeholders assume the responsibility to develop "more creative, adaptable, and efficient means of organising academic work" (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p.9). It is further observed that academic work itself is "treated as a 'thing' and structured to be bought and delivered in module sized chunks, with knowledge outcomes being the unit of currency" (p. 10). These attributes are systemic in the modus operandi of the university and characterise best practices in the way HEIs accomplish their academic missions. This is not to imply that the sectoral dynamics are unidimensional and that university operations are determined by economic affects alone. In fact, Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) are noted for their receptivity to a number of dynamic affects that are consistently changing. For instance, (Barnett, 2014) observes the permissibility of HEIs to various social concepts such as the integration of the value of 'openness', that have "influence[d] the shaping of our institutions" (p. 15).

Concurrently, commentators have also noted the inadequacies of HEIs to accommodate change. Manning, albeit in the US context, observes that the "the tried-and-true frames [of conceiving the university]' [have proven] inadequate to the task of [accounting for] the changes that are occurring [in higher education today]" (Manning, 2017, p. 16). Nevertheless, changes in the internal governance of UK universities are noted to have occurred in line with the increase in sectoral competition since the 1990s. Middlehurst identifies trends such as the reduction of cost per student, an encouragement to increase alternative sources of funding, and a "political emphasis on greater market responsiveness and public accountability" (p. 253, (Middlehurst & Elton, 1992). These changes observed in the governance of UK universities engendered the adoption of structures that were quintessentially managerialist that, as noted by Pollit, places "a premium on the efficient and disciplined use of resources, the achievement of value-for-money and increased productivity" (Pollitt, 1990, p.253). Becher & Trowler, (2001) add the concern toward 'market responsiveness' as an additional feature of the managerialist framework of organisation.

As discussed above, the onset of the managerialist framework of organisation in UK universities has been noted since the 1990s. While an in-depth discussion of managerialism is beyond the scope of this review - several authors such as Middlehurst, Pollitt and Shattock (see references) have done so. For the context of UK HE, this paper draws on Becher and Trowler, (2001) to highlight the principal tenets of the managerialist framework that have been observed to inform the style / culture of organisational operations in universities. Principally, the managerialist framework is "oriented to efficiency, economy and market responsiveness" (p. 10) and, in application to a university, this implies:

- *A strong orientation toward the customer and the market*
- *Emphasis on the power of the top management team to bring about corporate change and its legitimate right to change cultures, structures and processes*
- *Change seen primarily as a top-down activity, implemented at a distance through devolution of responsibility within strict paraments, careful monitoring of staff and cost centre outcomes and fostering internal competition*
- *Conceptualisation of knowledge as atomistic, mechanistic and explicit* (P. 10)

A managerialist framework of operations, in the context of a university, presents a unique set of tensions that pertain to the nature of academic work and the value systems therein. As

mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, academia comprises of normative principles and values such a rigor, ethics and academic integrity that do not readily align with the concerns of efficiency and economy as prioritised by managerialism. Thus, pertaining to the sphere of leadership, Bolden notes the prevalence of "dynamic tensions between the need for collegiality and managerialism, individual autonomy and collective engagement, leadership of the discipline and the institution, academic vs administrative authority, informality and formality, inclusivity and professionalism and stability and change" (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008). Moreover, Bolden observes that "academic leadership is far more likely to be associated with processes of acculturation than direction and / or control" (Bolden et al., 2012, p. 41). The discussion around leadership dynamics is particularly consequential to the domain of formal leadership due to the assignment of relating with managerialist as well as academic values in their roles as formal leaders. As such, the following sections will consider the way that the internal dynamics and its accompanying affects are relevant to the study of middle leadership practice in UK universities.

## 2.6 Role of the Formal Leader at the Department Level

A study into university leadership requires a discussion that establishes the predominant contextual factors of the sector, that are acknowledged to be key affects on university operations. The preceding paragraphs sought to accomplish this objective and moreover establish a foundation to discuss the topic of middle leadership and the applicability of the relational perspective. As such, the following sections will review the literature on departmental leadership in UK HE and identify areas of further research. Moreover, literature that considers the implications of the organisational structure on leadership is reviewed, in order to establish the factors that influence formal leadership practice at the departmental level in UK HE.

The literature on middle leadership acknowledges the embedded nature of leading an academic unit within the an various levels of overarching context (Bolden et al., 2012; Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2008). More specifically, operations of discrete academic units are "characterised by cultures, interactions and relationships embedded within institutional and disciplinary contexts" (Pifer et al., 2019, p.539). The domain of leadership at the departmental level, thus, entails the convergence of varied discourses – sectoral, institutional, disciplinary – where the

views of key stakeholders at various levels converge to inform key operational issues of a university. As such, articles on leadership practice of unit leaders have discerned the challenge of aligning disparate viewpoints as a central tension. For instance, Jackson's (1999) paper highlights the issue encountered by the department head in aligning views of professionalism and collegiality in their leadership practice. Moreover, he identifies a further complexity in departmental leadership that pertains to the absence of formal authority or "the levers of influence" (p. 148) available to the departmental head. As such, the question of influence in formal leadership at the department and / or school level is complex and distinctively social, as discussed subsequently.

The embedded nature of leadership entails that formal leadership roles in universities are affected by exogenous factors, such as sectoral forces, that can lead to changes in the nature and remit of these roles. Middlehurst (2004) has considered the connection between "internal governance" in relation to "the drivers of internal and external change" (p. 258).  The paper discusses the trends observed in re-structuring of university operations through the 1990s in response to the sectoral developments that are characterised as becoming increasingly "volatile, complex and increasingly demanding at all levels of the institution" (p.270). In acknowledging the various factors that can affect university operations, the understanding of leadership and thus the perspective applied to studying the phenomenon, has developed to incorporate a wider set of variables. This is discussed in the subsequent paragraph through the works of scholars namely, Bolden, Petrov and Gosling in the UK context.

The challenge of aligning disparate perspectives discussed in Jackson's paper predominantly considers this issue with respect to 'intra level' activity i.e, the challenge of aligning perspectives within the department. However, the challenge of aligning disparate viewpoints is also a major issue during 'inter'-level leadership exchanges i.e., during interactions with stakeholders outside of the department. Given the positionality of the departmental headship role in the organisational structure, leadership activity marks the point of intersection between the disciplinary and institutional levels of operation. And as noted by Branson, this is noted to be the locale where key tensions like the departmental versus institutional discourse and structural versuss informal power (Branson et al., 2016) converge. Consequently, the role of connecting the institutional levels is highlighted as a prime leadership function for unit leaders. On this, research on the headship role from additional HE contexts such as New Zealand (Branson et al., 2016; Wald & Golding, 2020) have demonstrated the "multi-faceted and multi

directional" (p. 129, Branson et al., 2016) leadership demands entailed, where the unit leader navigates "up, down and across organisational structures and networks" (p. 128). In the UK context, Paul and Lucinda Hare's account on their time as departmental head in Heriot -Watt university offers perhaps a more pertinent perspective on this. They state that "the departmental head is pivotal in mediating competing interests" and are collaboratively involved in operational undertakings such as strategic planning, innovation and "central institutional administration" (p. 37, Hare et al., 2010).

This account, whilst highlighting the operational demands of the unit leader's role, points to the evolving nature of the role in terms of the expanding remit toward encompassing added managerial responsibilities. As such, studies such as Smith (2002b) elaborates on the "increasingly managerial nature of the role" (p.295) and cites the emergence of the 'manager-academic' as an organisational role in universities. Given these developments within the university, Bolton (2000) reports a ubiquitous resistance to the concept of the manager academic in the academy. This perspective is also observed in Bolden et al.'s (2012) report that notes that leadership has "acquired somewhat of a negative reputation amongst academic faculty" (p. 38). Such reports offer an insight into the prevailing dynamics of managerialism versus collegiality that a leadership stakeholder manages in their practice. Indeed, the managerialist aspect of the unit leader's role is perhaps assimilated to a greater extent today within the academy, nevertheless, the extent to which a university accounts for the complexity of fulfilling multifaceted tasks still endures as a point of consideration. To this point, Jackson (1999) notes the un-reasonability of expecting academics who assume dual managerial positions to proficiently accomplish managerial tasks, specifically in settings where the position is rotational. The literature on the headship role acknowledges the complexity in the navigation between the identities of being an academic and a manager. The issues entailed in that navigation is explored by the first research question of this thesis.

Nevertheless, in accomplishing the role of the manager – academic, the dynamics of interaction with stakeholders 'within' and 'without' the department, is observed to be a determinant of good leadership. Deem's study into the challenges encountered by leadership and managerial personnel at universities (Deem et al., 2007) foregrounds the import of interactive dynamics in leadership. In exploring the perspectives of leadership and managerial personnel, the study demonstrates the prevalence of value systems – such as collegiality as cited in the article - in academia that are observed to impede the streamlined expectations of a managerialist modus

operandi. The complexities of navigating such working dynamics as a formal leader, is characterised as akin to 'herding cats' (p. 41, McCormack et al., 2014). Thus, suggestions for a constructive operational scenario pertains to developing productive relationships between personnel working in discrete domains namely, academics and research administrators in Deem's article (p. 42). Therefore, successfully relating to the context that embeds leadership within the different networks of stakeholders, is as much a part of leadership practice as the more concrete responsibilities listed in the job description. Relative to an approach to studying leadership that posits the individual's capacity of skills or behaviours as the fundamental unit of analysis – which is a valid focus of study for different purposes and premise – a central merit in focusing on leadership dynamics is its capacity to inform the underlying mechanisms of influence that are not conspicuously evident (Hosking et al., 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

The distributed leadership model that puts "leadership practice centre stage" (Spillane, 2005, p. 149) rather than positing leadership within concepts or roles is an example of a process-oriented approach to understanding leadership. Developed through the works of scholars such as (Gronn, 2000) and Spillane (2005), distributed leadership is acknowledged as an influential model in the UK HE context and "informs the thinking of the National College for School Leadership, Centre for Excellence in Leadership for the post – compulsory education sector and the LFHE in the higher education sector" (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008, p.360). In their analysis of distributed leadership, Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., (2008), notes that despite the explanatory deficits of prefix 'distributed' in expounding on the phenomena of leadership, as an analytic framework, it "draws attention to the broader contextual, temporal and social dimensions of leadership" (p. 274). An avenue of better explicating the obscurity observed in the distributed leadership model, as proposed by Bolden et al., (2008), is through distinguishing between the "personal and social aspects of leadership and to differentiate between the structural, contextual and temporal dimensions of the situation" (p. 362). In elucidating these proposals, Bolden et al.'s research offers a conceptual framework of applying the relational perspective of leadership in UK HE. This provides a basis for exploring leadership as a process of relations amongst varied stakeholders. The framework, described below in the context of this study, offers an analytic foundation to study the processes of formal leadership practice and address the areas identified in the literature on the topic of departmental leadership in UK HE (section 2.9).

## 2.7 Conceptual Framework – Bolden's five dimensions of HE leadership practice

**Figure 2.4** - A diagrammatic representation of the five dimensions of HE leaderships practice (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008)
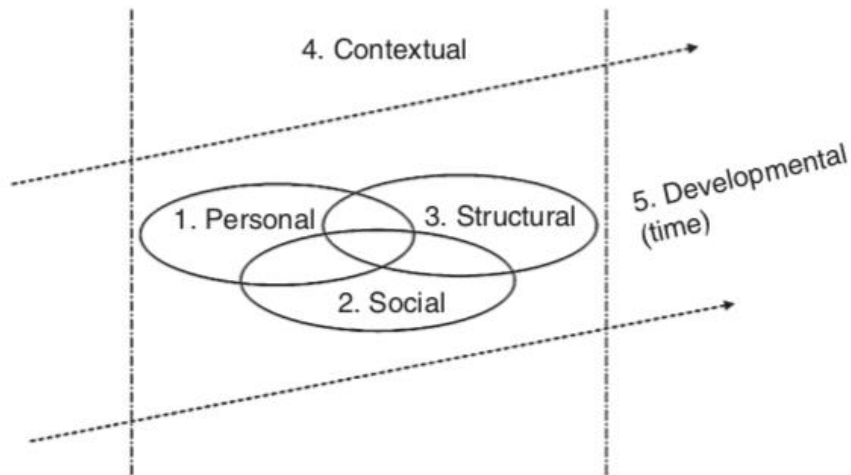


*Figure 1* Dimensions of leadership in higher education (adapted from Bolden, Petrov and Gosling, 2008, p. 60)

Contemporary perspectives on leadership in organisations are noted to be focused specifically on processes of leadership (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008; Uhl-Bien, 2006). In these approaches, the phenomenon of leadership is defined as "a social influence process through which emergent coordination and change are constructed and produced" (p. 668, Uhl-Bien, 2006). This has implied a re-evaluation of the leader as an autonomous agent (as implied in prior heroic approaches to leadership) to acknowledging the influence of "contextually embedded processes emerging from the dynamic relationships between various actors" (p. 360, Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008) in understanding leadership interactions. In approaching leadership from this perspective, Bolden's five-dimensional model, represents "leadership as a dynamic outcome of five interrelated factor" (p. 362). These factors are termed as dimensions namely, personal, social, structural, contextual and developmental. The summary of these dimensions as it relates to this paper are as follows:

The personal dimension refers to the "personal qualities, experiences and preferences of individual leaders" (p. 364). The remit of this dimension in this study is prescribed to the formal leadership role of the department head.

The social dimension refers to the relational nature of leadership interactions that are affected by various factors that impinge on an agent's ability to facilitate influence. This capacity of influence is denoted in the concept of 'social capital', which is defined as "the goodwill available to individuals and groups [stemming from] the structure and content of the actor's social relations" (p. 367). Bolden notes that social capital - as defined here - is an important factor in bridging 'between individual agency and organisational structure' and is explored in this study when considering the factors that affect the level of influence at the institutional level for the departmental head.

The structural dimension refers to "the structural context in which leadership occurs" (p.367). Given the premise of this research, the way that the departmental head relates with the hierarchical structure is analysed. Additionally, the notion of administrative intensity as a concomitant affect of structure is also considered as a potential factor that impinges on the leadership practice of the departmental head as the mediator.

The contextual dimension "comprises both the external context – including social, cultural and political environment – within which higher educational leadership is enacted, as well as the organisation's own internal content" (p.368). The market discourse that shapes the institutional level directives, exemplified notably as performance concerns at the departmental level, is analysed. Given that different disciplines entail varied concerns in terms of unit performance (Kekäle, 1995), the Biglan schema was utilised as a sampling tool to account for potential variations in perspectives of discrete disciplinary leaders (Simpson, 2017).

The developmental dimension refers to the "ongoing and changing developmental needs of individuals, groups and organisations" (p.369). This dimension is not an explicit focus of this study; however, the findings will be situated within the current literature on the topic and its implications are explored in the discussion section.

It has to be noted that it is beyond the remit of this thesis to delineate each aspect as it pertains to departmental leadership; instead, the model is adopted as an analytic frame that

contextualises the views of the participants on aspects of their leadership practice - hierarchy and performance in this case - as interrelated factors that constitutes their leadership practice as the mediator between institutional levels. As such, the insights derived on the phenomenon of leadership are grounded on the understanding that the phenomenon is contextually fluid (contingent on context) and emergent through a relational process between actors and their context.

## 2.8 Structural affects of Leadership

Barringer & Pryor (2022) study on organisational structure of universities illustrates the connection between internal dynamics and organisational behaviour. The study demonstrates that the dynamics of politics, power, finances within a university affects core processes such as resource allocation and internal competition that consequently impact the organisational behaviour of a university. By considering the operational dynamics within universities, this study posits that the internal dynamics are a function of the interaction between active agents and the structural affects of a universities. In conceptualising the relationship between the organisational structure and the internal dynamics that are prevalent, Barringer & Pryor, (2022) states that "internal dynamics shape and are fundamentally shaped by structure" (p.370).

As noted earlier, leadership practice for the departmental leader entails mediating between stakeholders, essentially, to align the perspectives between the institutional levels and contribute to effective performance overall (Branson et al., 2016). Thus, the activity of leadership interactions between stakeholders at different institutional levels, is a significant locale where internal dynamics emerge and operate. Concurrently, interactions between leadership stakeholders occur within structural and systemic remits that frame the experiences and capacity of the formal leaders in their leadership practice. As such, given the premise of navigating between institutional levels, structural factors of centralisation and administrative intensity - which are noted to be a salient structural affects in organisational operations - will be discussed below.

### 2.8.1 Centralisation

With the issue of resource allocation and management being central concerns for universities, increasing financial centralisation is noted to be a major consequence on the way universities are choosing to be structured internally (Middlehurst, 2013; Shattock, 2013). Moreover,

Bolden's study into academic leadership finds that "despite a reported desire for participative leadership, disproportionately high levels of influence were exerted by formal budget holders wherever they happened to be within the organisation" (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008, p.364). Despite the trend of increasing centralisation, it should be noted that the extant structures of discrete universities are not homogenous and fixed but rather dynamic and 'hybrid', with elements of top – down, bottom up and lateral influences (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008). As such, the way that institutional actors relate with structural processes becomes an important point of consideration. Understanding the relational dynamics is particularly emphasised in leadership activity between stakeholders at different structural levels as it involves active agents who exert agentic capacity at different levels of the university. Moreover, as discussed in preceding paragraphs, the capacity in terms of the purpose and purview of formal leadership roles can vary according to the internal structuring in discrete universities.(Middlehurst, 2004). Thus, examining the dynamics that are prevalent in the way that leaders experience their university structure is a promising area of enquiry in leadership studies. Thus, the way departmental heads relate with their institutional hierarchy and the centralising structures is explored in this study.

### 2.8.2 Administrative Intensity

A concomitant area in the domain of university structure is the notion of administrative intensity, which is "the ratio of the total number of employees involved in administrative duties, divided by the number of academic employees" (p.120, Andrews et al., 2017). Computing the administrative structure of a university, offers a reliable point of reference in understanding the level of bureaucracy and central influence on operations. Moreover, the administrative intensity is a strong indicator of a university's investment in central administration and thus offers an insight into the structural organisations of a university. Naturally, the level of administrative intensity can be reasonably surmised to impact the way that the departmental unit is led and managed. Studies have found that the level of administrative intensity is shown to positively affect performance (Andrews et al., 2017) to a certain degree and subsequently induce a set of coordination issues like the 'bureaucratic burden' in UK universities. Given that leadership is understood to exists and operate in accord with the contextual and structural factors, administrative intensity could be a factor in the way that the formal leaders relate with their leadership practice. Centralisation is observed as a prominent structural tension in the accounts of RG leaders to a degree that is not observed in the accounts of Post 92 leaders, when

mediating between institutional levels (Section 7.3.2). Thus, the administrative intensity of Russell Group universities (described in greater depth in section 2.8.2) that each of the participants belongs to is computed and explored as a potential factor in the way departmental heads have conceptualised their leadership practice in mediating between levels. Therefore, qualitative differences in the experience of leadership of the heads operating under varying administrative intensities are noted, in order to consider potential implications on the responsiveness of institutional operations.

## 2.9 Areas suggested for Research

Having discussed the pertinent research and the themes of study on the topic of departmental leadership in UK HE, the area of leadership interactions between formal stakeholders at different institutional level is identified as a major area of enquiry in the literature. Amongst other topics, (Middlehurst et al., 2009) identifies 'vertical leadership' which refers to leadership across hierarchies, as an area of further investigation. Similarly, a systematic review of middle leadership literature by Maddock, (2023) recommends a detailed exploration of "middle leading in practice sites" (p. 16). The area of leadership interactions across structural levels, whilst denoting a specific scenario, concurrently invokes broader themes and dynamics of HE leadership in general. For example, the inherent dynamic between the disciplinary and institutional perspectives that persists in cross level exchanges, addresses Bolden et al's., (2012) observation that the way "academics lead and or influence does not map neatly onto organisational boundaries and priorities" (p.37). As such, exploring the dynamics entailed in the intersection between disciplinary and institutional via leadership interactions, offers a degree of insight into the processes of influence in this scenario.

The reality of the departmental level of operations which is embedded within the overarching structural context offers insight into the structure – agency nexus. More specifically, the given focus on relational dynamics provides an avenue to deliberate the structure – agency nexus within universities, which can illuminate an important area on the role of the active agent in leadership scenarios. Towards this, "the effects of managerialist / neo-liberal influences on middle leadership roles" is also suggested as an area that would "make a significant contribution to the literature" (p. 17). The focus on the structure – agency nexus in organisational study essentially examines the dynamic between endogenous activity within organisations and the exogenous reality of the environment (Fumasoli & Stensaker, 2013)

Fumasoli and Stensaker observes that in higher education most notably, studies exploring this area have tended to impose a linear perspective of universities and colleges being affected by their environment. To this point, he states that, "scholars conceive of environmental influences as almost deterministic" (p. 489). Moreover, the dearth of perspectives on operations from the "views of practitioners such as institutional managers and administrators" (p. 479) is identified as a notable limitation in this discussion. Thus, in taking the stance that commences from the primacy of structure (environment), major questions are raised about the role of agency, specifically in studying a phenomenon like leadership - that involves relations between a host of active agents.

Furthermore, in the conclusion of their report on leadership in UK HE, Bolden et al., (2012) highlights the need for research that explores "cross-functional collaboration between staff in different professional groups and organisations" (p.46). An additional area in the general domain of university operations that corresponds with the focus on cross level exchange is that of 'structural responsiveness' i.e., the degree of congruency in cross level interactions. Whilst studies such as Barringer & Pryor, (2022) demonstrates a clear association between institutional structure and productivity – albeit in a different context of American HE – the role of stakeholders in bridging the domains is left unexamined by the premise. Having discussed the high level of task and cultural complexity (Middlehurst et al., 2009) that is implicit in university operations (in the earlier sections), exploring the role of leadership stakeholders at various levels would contribute meaningfully to the literature on higher educational leadership.

# Chapter 3 – Literature Review II – Role Identity in Organisations

## 3.1 Introduction

The sensemaking process of stakeholders within an organisation is acknowledged to be a prominent factor in organisational cognition and enactment (Eggers & Kaplan, 2013; Irwin et al., 2018; Porac et al., 1989; Weick, 1995). By drawing on the work Starbuck & Milliken, (1988), Weick explains that sensemaking "involves placing stimuli into some kind of framework [that enable organisational agents] to comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate and predict" (Weick, 1995, p.4). The process of sensemaking that entails the aforementioned activities of cognition is inextricably linked with the identity of the sense maker. On this, Weick describes identity as the "dynamic interpretive structure that meditates most significant intrapersonal and interpersonal processes" (Weick, 1995, p.20). As such, the topic of identity constitutes a central area in understanding the cognitive drivers of organisational enactment (Irwin et al., 2018; Porac et al., 1989; Weick, 1995).

This chapter reviews the literature on the area of role identity in organisations and discusses the works that explore the way that role identities operate. The works of Sluss & Ashforth, 2007 on the topic of "relational identity" serves as the predominant focus of discussion due to the 'multifaceted and multilevel' (Bolden et al., 2008; Branson et al., 2016) nature of middle leadership roles. The concepts of relational identity also serves the purpose of contextualising the analysis and discussion connected to the first research question of this thesis. In this review, the theoretical discussions around role identity in organisations are contextualised within UK higher education and middle leadership role in UK HE.

Specifically, the discussions in the literature around the way that the competing discourse of managerialism and collegiality (Barnett, 2014; Bolden et al., 2012; Deem, 1998) impact the way that the departmental heads conceive of their leadership role identity is explored. By positing the analysis and discussion of leadership role identity – that is undertaken in the following chapters - within the context of higher education, the insights derived from exploring

the beliefs and values ascribed by the practitioner to their roles provides a basis of delineating the multifaceted demands and expectations managed by the middle leader in UK universities.

Thus, this review commences from a general consideration of identities in organisations and its importance to organisational operations. This is followed by a discussion on the levels of social reality that underpin the development of "nested identities" (Irwin et al., 2018) in organisations. In further developing the realities of nested identities, the works of Sluss and Ashorth et al. (2007 and 2011) is then reviewed to discuss the formation of "relational identities' amongst stakeholders in an organisation. Finally, this chapter concludes by discussing the literature on leadership role identities in UK HE that seeks to contextualise the theoretical points derived from Ashforth et al., (2011); Sluss & Ashforth, (2007).

## 3.2 Organisational Identity and Enactment

The structural configuration of organisations such as the contemporary university, are characterised by a high degree of complexity i.e., varying tasks and cultures and layered structures that demarcate distinct domains of operations (Andrews & Boyne, 2014; Middlehurst et al., 2009). In the university, the fragmentation of operation into academic tribes and territories are well established (Becher, 1994; Becher & Trowler, 2001). As such, the schematisation of organisational action into divisions of specialty, that oversees distinct domains of activity and enactment, is a characteristic feature of contemporary organisations. On the micro level of operations, the aforementioned structural characteristics of organisational activity are, indeed, comprised of individuals fulfilling a myriad of roles and responsibilities. Identity is acknowledged as a key factor in organising individual efforts to accomplish collective action in organisations (Ashforth et al., 2011). Sluss & Ashforth, (2007) define identity as "the central, distinctive and continuous characteristics of an entity", that is applicable to either an individual – "Who am I as an individual" – or a group – "Who are we as a collective" (p.10). Expounding on the organising capacity of a shared identity, Haslam et al., (2003) draws on research in the domain of social identity to illustrate the consolidatory effect of defining an "outgroup" separate from the "ingroup", that engenders collective action on behalf of the group that one identifies with (this is illustrated with further examples subsequently).

It should be noted that the aforementioned definition of identity is specifically framed within the context of 'organisational identity'. This entails that the entity whose characteristics are examined to denote the construct of identity, in this research, refers to the role identity that the individual adopts in the organisation (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). For instance, the first research question of this thesis regards the perspectives of the individual participants (from whom the interview data has been collated) as informing the role identity of the "departmental and / or head" on account of the individuals having assumed that role identity in their universities. Thus, the role identity reflects the collective beliefs of the group and consists of "the beliefs that members share as distinctive, central and enduring" (p. 243, Dutton et al., 1994). On that account, the assumption of an a priori role identity of 'the departmental head' (Deem, Fulton, Hillyard, journal, et al., 2003) is implicit and represents a key stakeholder role in the overall operations of a university. Moreover, the role identity of the middle leader in higher education presents a complex locale where competing identity discourses are noted to converge, particularly that of being an academic and a manager (Deem et al., 2007). As such, the purpose of the first research question is to further inform the dynamics that defines the role identity of the departmental and / or school head in UK universities. This entails that the analysis conducted, will pertain strictly to their role identities as opposed to their individual identity that is distinct from the organisational role.

As suggested above, collective action in an organisation is aided when it is organised on a set of distinctive characteristics that consolidate individual efforts i.e., identity. Thus, identity features as a central variable in studies that enquire into organisational activity. Towards this, identity as a concept has been studied as the central explanatory variable in a range of organisational phenomena such as strategy formulation (Irwin et al., 2018; Porac et al., 1989), leadership enactment (Weick, 1995), motivations (Lord et al., 1999) and positive outcomes of organisational actions (Livengood & Reger, 2010). In their seminal work that demonstrates the association between identity and enactment, Porac et al., (1989) illustrates the "reciprocal influence" between the cognitive mental models of firm leaders and strategic enactment administered by the firms in the knitwear industry. In this study, it is demonstrated that the firm identity conceptualised by the leaders, in terms of the way they define their firm in relation to the competitors, functions as the primary sensemaking basis to determine the "firms' competitive strategy" (p. 406). Similarly, for roles within an organisation, the way that leadership personnel such as managers relate with identity is acknowledged to be a cognitive driver in strategy formulation that enables their organisation to compete effectively (Irwin et

al., 2018). Albert et al., (2000) categorises identity as a "root construct" in understanding organisational activity. On that account, scholars of organisational studies acknowledge that identity is the "interpretive structure that mediates how people behave and feel in a social context" (Dutton et al., 1994, p. 242).

### 3.3 Organisational Sensemaking

Karl Weick's theorisation of "sensemaking in organisations" (Weick, 1995) provides a comprehensive overview of the progression from the identity to enactment in organisations. Considering Weick's study along with studies by scholars such as Wiley (Wiley, 1988) and Ashforth (Albert et al., 2000; Ashforth et al., 2011; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007), addresses a central point on the workings of role identities in multi structured organisations such as the university. As alluded to the previous section, the university operations are multi-faceted and multi-dimensional that include a range of domains with distinct roles and purviews. However, prior to discussing the affects that influence organisational identities at various levels in the university, the processes of the sensemaking for individuals and groups at different levels in an organisation should be discussed. As such, this section discusses sensemaking in organisations and the formation of "nested identities" on account of the embedded nature of the departmental headship role in UK universities. This provides a theoretical foundation to discuss the UK context, the themes entailed and the major strands of discussion on the role identity of the departmental head.

The domain of organisational sensemaking as an area of enquiry constitutes a range of studies that, in general, characterise and informs the interpretive processes of individuals operating in an organisation. As such, the context of the organisation should be emphasised, on account of the fact that the interpretive process is framed within the structures, systems and routines of a "relatively formal nets of collective action" (Weick, 1995, p.3). To this point, Weick observes that the various "organising facilities" that coordinate action in organisations "imposes an invisible hand on sensemaking" (p. 3). This differs to interpretive processes in alternative contexts such as a community or a society that entails variations in the structures, systems and routines as affects. In the domain of organisational activity, enquiring into sensemaking entails adopting an overarching, meta perspective on the processes that inform and comprise the way organisations construct meaning. Weick describes sensemaking as enquiring into "How they construct what they construct, why and with what effects" (p. 4). Despite the fact that

sensemaking encompasses the process of interpreting stimuli, Weick notes that sensemaking examines the process of interpretation itself. A central implication of this distinction between interpretation and sensemaking, equates to including the analysis of the interpretive process itself as opposed to an exclusive focus on the meaning generated. This expands the understanding of the connection between the cognition of the active agents and enactment by including considerations beyond the immediate cues and frames that are used in interpretation. As it pertains to the premise of role identity explored by RQ1, the influence of the factors beyond the immediate nexus of the intra and inter departmental networks (that contextualises the leadership accounts) such as the context of belonging to a Russell Group and Post 92 university are considered in the analysis.

In relation to the analysis of the unit leader's role identity (RQ1), Weick's theorem on organisational sensemaking predicates the centrality of identity in organisational operations. The foremost component of organisational sensemaking, as postulated by Weick, pertains to the process of identity construction. This observation is established from studies such as (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), that demonstrates the centrality of organisational identity in the lives of employees that influenced a range of experiences and actions. Additionally, the aforementioned study by (Porac et al., 1989) illustrates an equivalent theme on the import of identity in strategy formulation. An implication of identity in sensemaking is the process of reciprocity that ensues when an active agent constructs identity. In other words, identity construction does not occur in a vacuum (Ashforth et al., 2011)and influences that are endogenous and exogenous to the organisation impinge in the process of identity construction. This process is discussed subsequently in the discussion on the formation of nested identities.

### 3.4 Levels of Social Reality

The reciprocal, relational and ongoing process of identity construction is noted to be an inherent mechanism that underlies sensemaking across all levels in an organisations(Ashforth et al., 2011). Having broadly introduced the function of identity in organising collective action (in the preceding paragraph), studying the implications on identity during cross level interactions i.e., when stakeholders at different organisational levels, corresponds to the mediatory role played by the unit head. Notably, studies indicate that the prevalent tensions during these interactions, by virtue of the differences in the identity construct at varying levels of an organisation, are key considerations to understanding the internal dynamics that pre-empt

organisational activities and enactment. (Irwin et al., 2018). Towards this, research on the formation of 'nested identities' and its implications on organisational action will be reviewed. Prior to doing so, this section will seek to establish the theoretical basis on which the dynamics of interaction between role identities operate. Wiley's, (1988) work on the "micro-macro problem in social theory" will be summarised to outline the progression from the intra, inter to the generic subjectivity that underlies the cross-level interactions of stakeholders in a layered organisation. These points will then be discussed in the context of leadership in UK HE and the affects that shape role identity in this context.

In discussing organisational identity, the presence of distinct groups, levels and tasks entails the consideration of the distinct identities that organise collectives within an organisation. Moreover, the interactions and interrelations between the different groups are crucial areas that engender internal organisational dynamics that influence action and enactment (Barringer & Pryor, 2022; Irwin et al., 2018). However, commenting on the state of theories that consider the dynamics of organisational life, Bechky (2011) notes a predilection to prioritise structure over agency. This, as noted by, "comes at an expense" and "contradicts people's experiences" (p.1157).A similar observation is noted by Hallett et al., (2009) who notes that "although much has changed in organisational sociology over the last fifty years, the tendency to treat people as inconsequential, remains" (p. 5).

Highlighting these observations do not imply the repudiation of structural affects, but instead calls for an approach that examines structure as a dynamic process. Bechky, (2011) posits that "uncovering the social mechanisms that link individual and social systems" (p. 1157) is an avenue to establish a grounded theory of organisational life. In emphasising the import of the way active agents within the organisation relate to tasks and activities, which is termed as "work and occupations" by Bechky, the perspective on structure as a dynamic process as opposed to a monolithic artefact is advanced. As Bechky notes, "people do not directly respond to social structure, but rather to the situations they face and their interpretation of them" (p.1157). Concurrently, the emphasis on "interactions" in organisational theory that focuses on the relationship between organisational agents, should be noted with caution according to Hallett et al., (2009). They note the tendency to "oversell" the import of interactions in an organisational context, while "structures and institutions – while never denied – receive secondary attention" (p.3).

A central point in Bechky's critique on organisational theory is that social order in organisations should be considered as negotiated through the interaction between active agents. And discussed above, the micro level aspects of organisational life i.e., the daily activities of individuals within an organisation, are highlighted to be instrumental in shaping organisational actions. Ashforth et al., (2011) notes that the interaction between the micro and macro levels of organisational life, foregrounded in Bechky's negotiated social order theory, offers an important perspective to understanding the implications of nested identities in a layered organisation. Based on the interactive understanding of organisational action, Ashforth et al., states that, "identities at higher levels of analysis simultaneously constrain and enable the form and enactment of identities at lower levels, which similarly constrain and enable the higher order identities" (p. 1145- 1146).

Wiley's "Level's theory" is widely cited and utilised in organisational studies when discussing the association between the micro and macro levels in organisational life (Wiley, 1988). Essentially, Wiley's theory "examines the micro-macro problem" (p. 254) in social theory. This problem, as explained by Goldspink & Kay (2004), "concerns the capacity for theory to explain the relationship between the constitutive elements of social systems (people) and the emergent phenomena that result from their interaction (i.e., organisations, societies and economies) (p. 598)". As such, drawing from a broad range of social theory, most notably from Durkheim's idea of social emergence, Wiley's theory essentially illustrates the concept of social levels and the connection between them. He notes that levels theory is "meta-theoretical" and therefore addresses the "kinds of social reality" (p. 254) in effect.

Elaborating on the "kinds" of social reality, Wiley describes four levels that characterise social reality and informs the micro macro problem cited in the preceding paragraph. Essentially, Wiley informs the problem by theorising the progression of social realty from the (first) level of the "pragmatist self" i.e., the individual through to the (fourth) level of culture i.e., "a subject-less level of symbolic reality" (p. 259), by virtue of a "continuous ontological flow" (p. 260) of "emergence and feedback" (p.260). Thus, the first level is termed as the "intra – subjective level" and denotes the individual self. Wiley specifies that the individual self in this theory is adopted from Mead and Pierce's "I – me" and "I – you" duality of the dialogical self as opposed to a "post structuralist transcendental ego" or a linguist I "that is empty of meaning in itself and decidedly not present in the person" (p. 256). This specification is noted to be a pivotal one here, as at this level of social reality, acknowledging the "sui generis" makes "the

individual less the creature of the social structure and more nearly the product of interaction" (p. 257). Given the centrality of interaction in the relationship between the micro and macro levels of social reality, the second level is termed as the "inter- subjective level". It denotes the level of social reality that emerges "upon the interchange and synthesis of two or more communicating selves" (p. 258). The progression from the level of the individual self to the level of collective is noted to involve a transformative process for the individual through interaction. Thus, the interactive process engenders a level of collective social reality that organises individual actions on a normative basis.

The third level is termed as the "generic – subjective level" and denotes the level of the social structure that is, to an extent, objectified and externalised from the realm of the active subject / individual. Wiley discusses the progression from the (first) interactive process between subjects to the (third) externalised structure by stating that "selves are left behind at the interactive level [and] social structure implies a generic self, an interchangeable part – as filler of roles and follower of rules – but not concrete individual selves" (p.258). As alluded to in the cited statement, the emergence of role identities is a notable feature in this level of social reality. And, although the individual assumes the role, the generic self is acknowledged to be an affect in influencing action and enactment. Lasty, the fourth level is termed as the "extra – subjective level" and represents the cultural level of social reality. This level entails  further abstraction to denote the realm of purely objective meaning that underlies social structure. In his paper, Wiley considers the example of capitalism as denoting this level of social reality but acknowledges that the notion of culture is broad and "can shift around a bit" (p. 259). Overall, this section sought to outline the salient points of Wiley's "Levels theory" that establishes a theoretical framework in understanding the formation and dynamics of nested identities in organisations. Thus, the subsequent paragraphs will review the studies that have studied nested identities in organisations and their implications on operations and enactment.

**Figure 3.1-** The construction of identity at each extra individual level of analysis (Ashforth et al., 2011)

## Figure 1 The Construction of Identity at Each Extra-Individual Level of Analysis



Intrasubjective "I think"   Intersubjective "We think"   Generic subjective "It is"
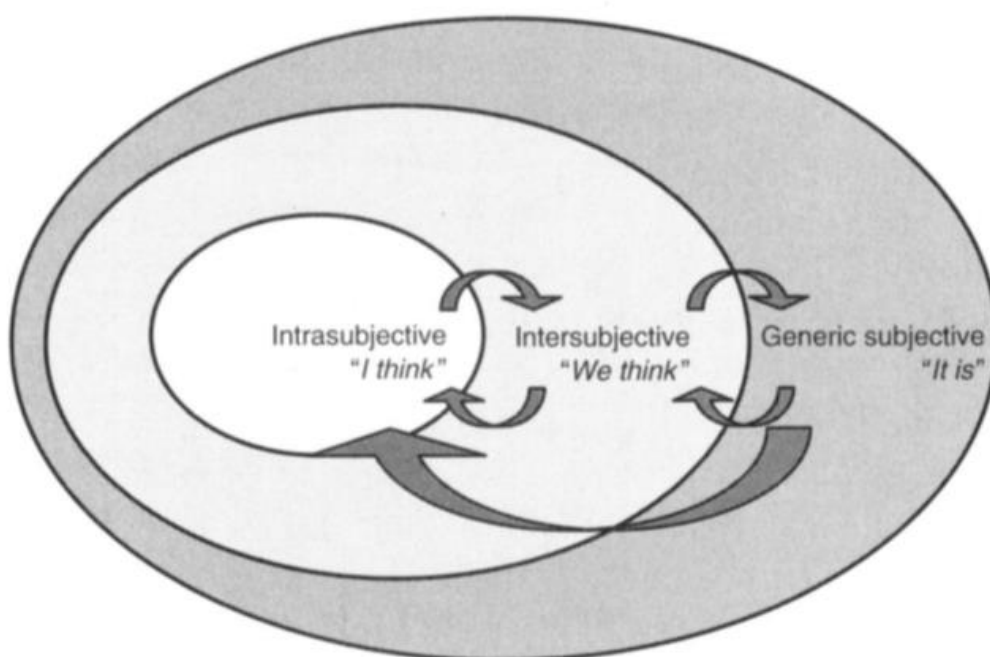
*Note.* The arrows signify the enactment of a given construction and the ensuing sensemaking.

**3.5 Nested Identities in Organisations and the Tensions of navigating multiple affects**

As elaborated in the preceding paragraphs, the intersubjective level of interactions between two or more individual selves engenders the emergence of a collective identity. Studies such as Barley 1986 (as cited in Weick, 1995) and Drori et al., (2009) illustrate the process of collective identity creation through the process of interaction and sensemaking between individuals. The sense of uncertainty aroused as a consequence of new technology is demonstrated as an occasion for interaction in Barley's study. And Drori et al (2009) demonstrates the occasion of establishing a new start up is the context of interactive sensemaking between the leader and employees. In both examples, the sense of uncertainty is noted to be a prominent factor in incepting a process of sensemaking and collective organisation. Theorising the process of identity construction, Ashforth et al., (2011) notes that the dynamics in the progression between the inter and generic levels of subjectivity is the "most important" (p. 1147) area of consideration.

This is a foundational observation, specifically in relation to "mature organisations" (Manning, 2017, p. 18) such as a university, that are characterised as "slow to change" with concrete structures and "less room for quick modifications or novel innovations" (p.18). Thus, in relation to identity formation in mature organisations, the way that the individuals relate to the aspects of the generic subjectivity such as the "interaction patterns, role relationships, common purpose and taken for granted beliefs" (Ashforth et al., 2011, p. 1146) are key considerations when studying the topic. As such, Ashforth et al. states that the interactions between individual identities form the basis of the normative elements of a collective, that are further "reified and synthesised into a social structure recognisable as a collective identity" (p. 1147, Ashforth et al., 2011). In the context of layered organisations such as the university, it should be noted that the generic subjectivity includes collective identities that reside below the organisational level. For instance, departments within a university entail identity along disciplinary lines that transcend individual identities.

Identity formation in organisations is an interactive and reciprocal process between individuals at different levels of social reality. Additionally, in the context of organisational identities, the interactive process entails contextual affects that are intrinsic to identity formation as illustrated in the section on sensemaking (3.2). Towards this, Ashforth et al., (2011) notes that "identities are not constructed in a vacuum [and] external constituents play a vital, ongoing role in negotiating and validating the organisation's identity" (p. 1147). Crossan et al's., (1999) study illustrates the influence of the sector on organisational development.. As such, the process of identity formation that entail interaction with exogenous affects is noted to be ongoing and dynamic. Thus, relational tensions are an implicit aspect of this process.

On that account, the concept of nested identity which refers to the prevalence of multiple identities within an organisational structure, denotes a locale of dynamic tension for the active agent. Irwin et al., (2018) study delineates the tensions that are engendered as a consequence of the organisation, industry and strategic group level identifies prevalent in the Recreational vehicle sector. The researchers highlight the way that these identities operate as cognitive drivers for functions such as strategy formulation and decision making. The aforementioned tension of navigating across multiple identities corresponds to the issue of stability and instability that are engendered for identity constructs in the ongoing process of interaction. This area is of interest in the context of higher education and more specifically as it pertains to the identity of the department head of a disciplinary unit. Given the embedded / nested reality of

the headship role as a middle leader, the leadership identity assumed is likewise noted to constitute a number of endogenous and exogenous affects that contribute to the role identity (discussed in due course). As such, examining the prevalence of tensions that can be engendered as a consequence of negotiating the multiple identity constructs within a university contributes to the theoretical understanding on nested identities in organisations.

The issue of stability of an identity construct is discussed in the literature according to the degree of isomorphism across the levels. Ashforth et al., (2011) describes isomorphism for nested identities as "the degree to which the constituent components of a phenomenon and the relationships among the components are similar across levels of analysis" (p. 1148). They further observe that the degree of isomorphism in identity constructs, given the influence exerted through the extra subjective onto the inter subjective levels via social structures, typically maintain consistency through the levels. The example of individuals facilitating "not only the development but the ongoing fulfilment of identities of dyads such as individuals' roles as manager and employee" (p. 1148) are cited to support this claim. It should be noted that isomorphism of identity is discussed as an overarching theoretical pattern in the way nested identities develop and operate in organisations. As such, the literature recognises that "isomorphism is not as elegant in practice as it is in theory" (p.1150). Moreover, the degree of isomorphism can have varying implications on organisational operations. For instance, Schneider & Somers, (2006) postulate that "a strong identity with a great degree of stability will lead to a frozen non adaptive system [and] a weak identity [with] a low degree of stability will lead to a chaotic non adaptive system" (p. 358). The discussion on identity isomorphism and its implications on the tensions experienced by stakeholders managing multiple identities is particularly pertinent to the discussion on leadership role identities at the departmental level in UK universities where research has demonstrated the tensions encountered by formal leaders in navigating the identity of the manger and the academic (Deem et al., 2007). As such, this presents as a productive area of exploration in the premise of leadership role identity for formal leaders in UK HE.

### 3.6 Dynamics of Differentiation and Isomorphism

In further discussing the conditions of isomorphism, it is acknowledged that organisational dynamics can prompt differentiation and impede isomorphism (Ashforth et al., 2011). Toward informing the dynamics that prompt differentiation in isomorphic identities, Ashforth et al

notes foremost, that the lower order identities will emphasise different attributes of the higher order identity. The example of varied subunits such as marketing and operations accentuating satisfaction and efficiency (respectively), exemplifies this dynamic. Additionally, the values that define a higher order identity such as the identity of being an academic, is observed to engender differences in lower order identities such as being a lecturer (which is a subset of the academic identity). The third dynamic that can prompt differentiation in isomorphic identity is observed to ensue from the process of "identity differentiation" (p. 1150). Drawing on Brewer, (1991) the idea that individual attributes that distinguish group members become salient is postulated as a dynamic that prompts differentiation. The dynamics of differentiation discussed here does not entail an evaluative judgement on them being either advantageous or disadvantages for organisations. As Ashforth et al., (2011) notes, "whether this inevitable diversity is desirable depends on the particular characteristics [of an organisation]" (p. 1151). These points serve as key insights on nested identities in organisations which will have recourse to the discussion on leadership role identities in the HE context in due course.

Furthering the discussion on the dynamics that can prompt differentiation in isomorphic identities, the literature on the dynamics that actively impeded isomorphism of identity is considered in this section. In light of the observations on the exogenous factors operative in organisational operations, an influential dynamic that can influence the degree of isomorphism is noted to be that of contextual circumstances that an organisation is operating within. More specifically, a period of 'turbulence' in the organisational or the wider context of the industry is noted to engender change and alteration in identities within the organisation (Ashforth et al., 2011). Although 'turbulence' as it pertains to UK HE is characterised as a period of 'restructuring', Middlehurst, (2004, 2013) outlines the trend in the change of leadership and managerial roles since the 1990s when the HE sector was observed to more intensely espouse managerialist tenets of governance.

In extending the implications of contextual affects on the operational aspects of UK universities, Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., (2008) notes that the UK HE is comprises of "a series of competing narratives" (p. 359) that juxtaposes tenets of "collegiality and managerialism, individual autonomy and collective engagement, leadership of the discipline and institution, academic versus administrative authority, informality and formality, inclusivity and professionalisation and stability and change" (p. 364). The competing discourses that are observed to prevail in HE does not organically coalesce and are noted to engender locales of

dynamic tension. And, through studies such as Glynn, (2000) and Corley & Gioia, (2004), it is noted that individuals tend to emphasise different discourses at distinct scenarios (Glynn) and at distinct hierarchical levels of an organisation (Corley). Thus, the presence and availability of varying identity discourses are noted to impeded isomorphism in organisations.

Furthermore, the component of management is observed to affect the degree of identity isomorphism in organisations. In exploring the role of stakeholders in the construction of organisational identity, Scott & Lane, (2000), highlight the central function of managerial personnel such as the manager in maintaining the "organisational image" (p.45). As such, Ashforth et al., (2011) observes that "in poorly managed organisations, identities may be misaligned" (p. 1151). In relation to the role of leadership personnel in aligning organisational identities Drori et al., (2009) illustrates the notion of "identity drift", which denotes the phenomenon of digressing away from the values and "scripts" – "observable recurrent activities and patterns of interaction characteristic of a particular setting" (p.716) - that established the initial identity construct. The consequence of losing "internal and external legitimacy" (p. 730) in the process is explicated. Thus, the phenomenon of identity drift is noted to impeded isomorphism and engender disillusionment amongst individuals who share the collective identity.

The discussion on the aforementioned dynamics that prompt and impede isomorphism pre-empts the relational basis of role identities through delineating the processes that can impinge on the construction of a collective identity in organisations. As will be delineated in the following paragraphs, with respect to the domain of role identities that specifically pertains to formal positions in organisations, the varying relational nexuses that define the role in question play a central part in the enactment of the responsibilities that accompany it. Consequently, the relational tensions in navigating the demands of varying constituents - in a role such as the department head in a university who interact with academic as well as managerial stakeholders - are highlighted as vital locales of study toward understanding leadership practice in niche locales such as middle leadership in universities. The next section will discuss the relational nature of role identities in organisations. This will be followed by a discussion on the leadership role identity in UK HE.

## 3.7 Relational Identity

Having discussed the process of identity formation and the dynamics that affect the degree of isomorphism in nested identities within an organisation, this section seeks to focus the discussion by reviewing the insights on the implications of relationships in shaping organisational role identities. Whilst the preceding discussion sought to establish the theoretical premise on the relationship between the levels of social reality, the discussion in this section pertains to the application of that theoretical basis by focusing on the way relationships shape the role identities that operate within organisations. The discussion, predominantly, draws on Sluss & Ashforth, (2007) who delineate a set of propositions on the nature of "relational identities" in organisations. Sluss and Ashforth define a relational identity as "the nature of one's role – relationship such as manager – subordinate and coworker -coworker" (p. 11). The conception of role identity that foregrounds the review undertaken on this topic is that "a role is fundamentally relational and is largely understood with reference to the network of interdependent roles" (p.11). As will be described in the methodology section, a constructionist epistemology was deemed pertinent to explores these areas on account of the ideas and concepts reviewed in the literature review.

In further examining the way role identities are enacted in organisations, Sluss and Ashforth argue that the individual's personal identity is a major affect in the enactment process. As such, it is postulated that the creation of a relational identity between stakeholders consists of four parts namely, "one individual's role and person-based identities as they bear on the role relationship and another individual's role and person-based identities as they bear on the role relationship" (p. 11). The diagram copied below illustrates this statement.

**Figure 3.2**: The factors in the construction of relational identities. Adapted from (p. 11, Sluss & Ashforth, 2007)

## FIGURE 1
## Relational Identity
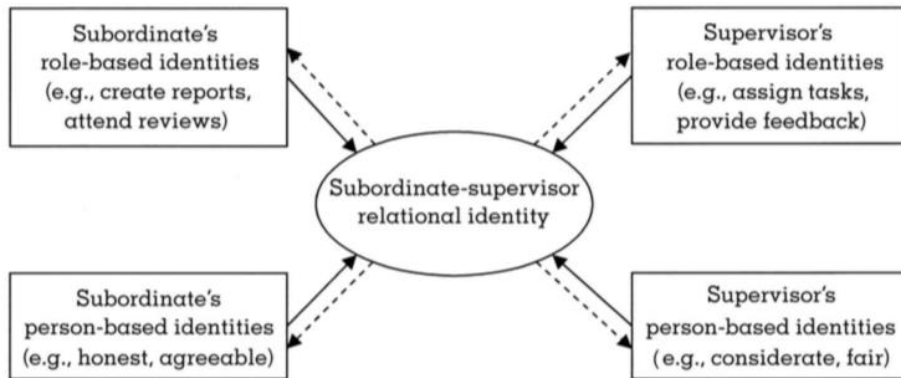


Note: The dotted lines represent feedback loops.

Accordingly, the nexus of relationship that connects to a specific role identity engenders a "particularistic identity i.e., Susan vis a vis each of her six subordinates" (p. 13) as well as a "generalised identity i.e., how Susan sees herself as a supervisor of subordinates" (p. 13). Thus, in accord with the theoretical observation on the reciprocal influence between the generic and inter subjective level discussed above, it is noted that the "generalised relational identity is both informed by and informs the particularised relational identities" (p. 13). The characterisation of the role identity as particularistic and generalised is observed to entail a further function in terms of the way that the role holder relates with the nexus of connected roles.

More specifically, the saliency of a relationship relative to other relationships that are connected to the role, is noted to enhances the quality of the particular relationship that is salient. Sluss and Ashforth elaborate the example of Susan who, "as a result of the fleshing out process [on account of the saliency of the relationship], the generalised relational identity tends to become richer and more nuanced with experience and Susan will likely approach subsequent particularised role – relationships with more skill and confidence" (p. 14). Therefore, a proposition postulated by Sluss and Ashforth is that "the more salient a specific role-relationship is to an individual, the more likely the individual will develop a particularised relational identity" (P. 15). This observation applies to the context of the departmental head's role identity in UK HE, as formal leadership is noted to entail tensions between the loyalties of possessing identities of being an academic as well as a manger. (Deem, 2004; Deem et al., 2007). And, as observed in the results section, the navigating between the demands of accomplishing both an academic (when engaging with intra-departmental matters) and a

managerialist role (when engaging with inter-departmental matters) is observed to entail a major portion of being a middle leader in UK universities.

An additional point of pertinence in connection with the discussion on relational identity is that of "relational identification" that denotes "the extent to which one defines oneself in terms of a given role – relationship" (p. 11). As such, the discussion around relational identification pertains to the degree to which the individual defines oneself according to a collective identity i.e., an occupation or a workgroup. Examining the premise of relational identification extends the discussion on role identities in organisations by considering the dynamic aspect of the way individuals relate with their role identities and the factors that influence that relationship. To outline the differences between relational identity and relational identification, Sluss and Ashforth state that the former is concerned with enquiring into questions of "what is the nature of the relationship?" and the latter seeks to explore questions of "How do I internalise that identity as a partial definition of self?" (p. 11). In considering the factors that impact the relational identification of role holders in organisations, a prominent factor – amongst others – is observed to involve the valence of the role and person-based identity.

The valence of an identity construct is defined as its "perceived attractiveness or desirability, where positive valence reflects desirability and negative valence reflects undesirability [and is a result of] an individual's evaluation of an identity" (p. 18). It is noted that a negative valence can engender a disidentification with the role identity that can have detrimental implications such as a "biased perception of the person" (p. 22) on role relationships in the organisation. Thus, Sluss and Ashforth postulate that "the greater one's role disidentification, the less empathy, understanding, and loyalty, one will tend to have regarding one's partner and the less cooperation, support and altruism one will tend to display towards one's partner" (p. 23). With respect to understanding the dynamics in the role identity of the departmental head, the area of relational identification and the factors that affect the degree of identification is a central point of discussion on account of firstly, the relational nature of leadership practice and secondly, the competing tensions that characterise the role identity. Toward studying this area, the subsequent results chapter will seek to compare the underlying values that accompany the responsibilities in operating both intra and inter departmentally as a formal leader.

### 3.8 Higher Education and Identity

Having reviewed the literature that have informed the theories on the topics of formation, dynamics and nature of identities in organisations, the discussion provides a foundation to consider the themes on the area of leadership role identities in the UK HE context. One of the points of discussion in the preceding paragraphs pertained to the relational nature of role identities in organisations. More specifically, the different relationships that comprise the nexus of connections to a role, was noted to be a fundamental factor in the way that the individual accomplished the role identity. Moreover, the degree of identification that the individual perceived was also noted to ensue from the quality of relationships. Thus, in accord with the relational perspective on role identities in organisations, this section will discuss the pertinent discourses and factors that are noted to influence formal leadership roles – with specific emphasis on the departmental headship role – in UK universities.  It should be noted that the current discussion around identity in UK HE pertains to the premise of formal leadership identity in general and that of the departmental head in particular. Therefore, the points that relate to the context of UK HE in general, although applicable to other forms of identities, will be considered foremost in the way that they affect formal leadership roles in the university.

The discussion around leadership identities in UK HE is invariably founded on the sectoral characteristics that inform the governance of the universities operating within it. At the sectoral level, a fundamental operational logic is one of competition (Naidoo, 2005; Shattock, 2013) that exerts a significant degree of influence on the leadership, governance and management of discrete universities. As such, universities are engaged in competition for resources – both monetary and human – to ensure sustainability and maintain their position in the sector. This, naturally, has influenced the internal drivers of operations in universities, most notably observed through the adoption of (new) managerialist tenets of management (Middlehurst, 2004).

In accomplishing the function of attending to the sectoral forces, several scholars have noted that the domain of formal leadership and management in universities have demonstrated a gradual erosion of collegial leadership in favour of a "more market-oriented way" (Bolden et al., 2012, p. 7) of leading universities. As such, a salient tension that is noted to prevail for formal leaders in universities pertains to relating with the managerial and the academic domains concurrently. Through a macro level perspective of systems, this dynamic is described

as a tension between "knowledge processing and business processing" (Bolden et al., 2012, p. 9). On the micro level of the individual, Deem et al., (2007) highlights the nexus of identities that impinges on the individual role holder in the university. It is noted that the activities of teaching and research, in addition to belonging to an academic discipline and identifying with a gender and ethnicity are all significant affects on an academic's sense of identity (p. 103). The formal leader in a university, thus, is observed to assume the "personal contradictions and tensions of trying to combine [the aforementioned affects] with management, leadership and administration" (p. 103).

In the specific case of the department head in UK universities, the manifestation of the identity related tensions provides an insight into the competing demands of the academic and the institutional domains. With the purview of the (department) headship role involving interactions and relationship at both the intra and inter departmental levels, the literature indicates that an enquiry into the values that underpins the role identities – assumed by the role holder in navigating leadership within and without the departmental unit – is a salient locale of study toward understanding middle leadership in UK HE. Expounding on the way that this tension is observed in the Head of Department (HoD) role, Deem et al., (2007) identifies a trend of "reluctant managers at the HoD level, especially in the pre 1992 universities" (p. 104). To expand on this, the theme of reluctance is observed on two basic fronts. Firstly, an unwillingness to embrace the identity of a manager is denoted by the aforementioned theme of reluctance. And secondly, Deem further observes that the "majority of reluctant and 'good citizen' manager academics were less likely than career managers to want to embrace New Managerialism (NM)" (p. 104). As such, together with a degree of disidentification with the identity of "the manager", a discrepancy in the underlying values of academia and managerialism is noted in departmental leadership by Deem. A similar trend is observed in the context of Further Education in (Gleeson & Knights, 2008). In light of the discussion on identity isomorphism and identity identification, the above cited observations suggest an evident incongruity, particularly in relation to the aspects of the identity of the manager. As such, the first research question is formulated to explore this premise, by comparing the distinctions in the values and responsibilities that are entailed in relating with intra (involving interactions with members of the disciplinary unit) and inter (involving interactions with senior leaders) departmental activities. The issue of tension engendered on account of the intersection between discipline and the institution is noted to be a particularly significant area in the role of the department head, relative to other senior leadership roles. As observed by Deem, (1998).,

"the discipline, background and identity of manager academics, while crucial at the HoD level […] becomes much less significant for those at PVC level who may be managing activities across a broad range of subjects" (p. 107).

**3.9 Summary**

This chapter reviewed the literature on the premise of role identity in organisations. Additionally, the context of UK higher education was explored to ground the review in the pertinent context of this research. In doing so, this chapter sought to, foremost, establish the understanding of the relevance of role identities to organisational enactment. Having foregrounded the pertinence of identity in a range of organisational activities, the review then considered the way role identities operate within the varied endogenous and exogenous affects that characterise organisational life. This entailed undertaking a theoretical discussion of the premise (role identity in organisations) and grounding the discussion of role identity within complex organisations that constitute different structural levels. Exploring the literature in this manner provided further focus in discussing the relational nature of identity constructs in organisations. Consequently, the process of negotiation between various roles was highlighted in generating "relational identities" between organisational agents that influenced the internal dynamics of the organisation (Albert et al., 2000; Ashforth et al., 2011; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Finally, the theoretical insights observed in the literature was posited within the context, themes and concerns of formal leadership roles in the higher educational context of the UK. In this process, the avenues of exploration were identified that informed the research question on the premise of leadership role identity of the department / school head (RQ1). This pertained to the values and beliefs that the practitioners ascribed to their leadership role when operating within distinct relational nexus of intra and inter departmental stakeholders. Moreover, a comparison between the intra and inter level facets of the unit leader's role identity was also noted as a fruitful avenue of enquiry in this premise.

# Chapter 4 – Methodology

## 4.1 Introduction

This section expounds on the aspects of the methodology adopted by this research. As outlined in the introduction, this research into middle leadership practice in UK HE sought to explore two salient and interconnected premises of middle leadership practice in UK HE. They are the leadership role identity and the dynamics of hierarchical interactions. The research questions pertaining to the aforementioned premises are as follows:

RQ1 - What are the beliefs and values that are ascribed to the role identity of the unit head by the Russell Group and Post 1992 leaders in this research when:

a) leading 'within' the academic unit?

b) leading 'without' the academic unit as a mediator between institutional levels?

c) To what extent does the role of leading 'within' and 'without' the academic unit differ from each other?

d) To what extent does the leadership role identity differ for leaders of Russell Group and Post 1992 universities?

And

RQ2 - What are the issues that are reported to affect the process of liaising between the institutional levels for the formal leaders at the department / school level when:

   a) Interacting with the hierarchy in their institutions
   b) Exercising leadership influence in hierarchical interactions
   c) Aspiring to accomplish departmental performance
   d) To what extent do the administrative intensities affect the experiences of mediation

Foremost, this chapter starts by expounding on the theoretical framework that underpins the understanding of the phenomenon of leadership as the basis from which this research commences. This is necessary, given the fact that there are varied conceptions of leadership that are founded on different assumptions of what it is and how it should be studied. Having reviewed the literature on leadership in UK higher education (HE), the relational perspective on leadership is identified as pertinent to the premises being studied by this research.

Thereafter, the epistemological stance of social constructionism that provides the foundation for the relational perspective is explained. Doing this further elaborates on the underlying assumptions of the research and the researcher that informs the applied aspects of the research.

Subsequently, a qualitative approach to research is delineated as the basic research design adopted in this enquiry. As such, the accompanying aspects of sampling strategy, the process of participant selection and the frames and methods of data collection is described. As is observed subsequently, the sections on sampling and data collection strategy comprises of further sub sections that elaborate on areas such as bounding the case, the process of determining sample size and the analytic frame the informed the semi structured interview as the principal data collection method. Due to the qualitative approach adopted, it was deemed necessary to expound these aspects in detail, as a means of adhering to the expectations of reliability and validity. Following this, the process of data analysis is explained. This is followed by a contemplating the limitations of this research. Thereafter, this chapter discusses the issues of reliability and validity that were contemplated throughout the research process and describes the steps taken by this research to mitigate those issues. Finally, the methodology section is concluded by describing the ethical considerations of this research.

## 4.2 Theoretical Framework – Relational Leadership Theory

Prior to describing the aspects of the research design, the theoretical framework of leadership that grounds the nature of enquiry is prefaced. Doing this also demonstrates the rationale of the decisions made on the concomitant aspects of the research design, that will be described subsequently. Conducting an empirical study inherently implies a certain theoretical orientation that functions as a contextualising factor in the research process. As Yin states, "you cannot start from a true tabula rasa as you will already have some implicit theoretical perspective about what's going on in the field and how to converse with participants" (p, 69, Yin, 2009). The theoretical framework provides the crucial link between the current research and the literature that foremost, warrants the research effort and moreover, provides a theoretical frame of reference for the potential findings and insights derived. It should be noted that the purpose of explicating the theoretical framework (in this section) is not intended as means of defining the research aims. Rather, as mentioned in the previous point, the theoretical framework operates as a point of reference that warrants and contextualises the enquiry and the

findings within an overarching and distinct understating of leadership as an organisational phenomenon.

Informed by the literature reviewed, the relational perspective on leadership was identified as an avenue of understanding the underlying social processes that constitute the phenomenon of leadership.(Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008). Moreover, the premises of leadership role identity and the dynamics of cross level interactions were identified as key areas for further research and comprises the research questions of this thesis on middle leadership in UK HE. Thus, as elucidated in the literature review, the crux of the aforementioned premises pertains to the processes of interaction and the nature of relationships between active agents, that entails using the appropriate modes of enquiry (elucidated subsequently). On that account, leadership as an organisational phenomenon is understood as a relational process by this research that informs the decisions made on the research design. More specifically, the general precepts outlined by Mary Uhl-Bien on the "Relational Leadership Theory" (RLT) (Uhl-Bien, 2006) is used as the theoretical framework to delineate the assumptions and aims that characterise the usage of the relational perspective on leadership by this research enquiry. This theory essentially builds on the works of Bradbury & Lichtenstein, (2000); Dachler, (1992); Dachler & Hosking, (1995), who sought to develop "a view of leadership and organisation as human social construction that emanate from the rich social connections and interdependencies of organisation and their members" (p. 655). The following paragraphs will expound on the assumptions and the aims of the relational leadership theory.

The relational perspective seeks to characterise leadership within "complex organisations" that are noted to comprise of adaptive systems composed of a diversity of agents who interact with one another [and ] mutually affect one another" (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001, p.390). As such, effective action or enactment in organisations are understood as a product of interaction between micro-dynamics – entailing individual interactions - and macro-dynamics – entailing larger systems like industry (p. 392). Acknowledging the complex nature of the contemporary university provides a basis for understanding operational aspects such as leadership on account of the various dimensions of complexity – social, cultural and structural - that characterise university operations (Middlehurst et al., 2009). As such, scholars have observed the dynamic tensions that ensue by virtue of the various discourses such as institutional, disciplinary, academic and managerial that inform leadership practice for key stakeholders at different institutional levels in a university (Bolden et al., 2012; Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008;

Deem et al., 2007). Within the university, leadership functions as the pivotal component of agentic activity that resolves, synthesises, and consolidates these perspectives. This is particularly significant in a case like academic middle leadership where, as seen in the literature review, a primary function of the role consists of connecting the departmental with the executive level of operations.

Utilising the relational leadership theory, therefore, posits the activities of the leadership stakeholder as an active agent within the larger context of organisational systems that are in operation. Synthesising the insights of work on the relational perspective of leadership, Uhl Bien describes the aims of RLT by stating that "a relational orientation does not focus on identifying attributes of individuals involved in leadership behaviours or exchanges, but rather on the social construction processes by which certain understandings of leadership come about and are given privileged ontology" (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p.655). As such, RLT is grounded on constructionist tents that examines the processes that underlie the activity of leadership. With regards to the areas explored by this research which pertain to the premises of leadership role identity and dynamics of cross level interactions, applying the relational perspective entails enquiring into the way that the beliefs and perspectives on each premise are determined and established. This is illustrated in the chapters that relate to each research question. As such, the nature of enquiry pursued by the relational perspective entails questions such as "how realities of leadership are interpreted within the network of relations; how decisions and actions are embedded in collective sensemaking and attribution processes from which structures of social interdependence emerge" (p. 662).

The nature of enquiry of the relational perspective on leadership illustrated through the questions above, posits leadership in the stakeholder's role as an active agent in the network of relations that they operate within. To this point, Uhl-Bien notes that taking a relational perspective implies that "the basic unit of analysis in leadership research is relationships" (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 662). Thus, as noted in the two research questions of this thesis, the middle leadership practice undertaken by the participants in this research are posited within the corresponding relational nexuses that embed them. Thus, the purpose of describing the assumptions and aims of the RLT in this section is to provide a warrant to the premises explored. Moreover, RLT operates as an overarching theoretical framework of leadership as opposed to a conceptual framework on a specific aspect of leadership. Thus, the analysis conducted in relation to the two research questions will incorporate concomitant concepts that

are founded on the basic assumptions of RLT namely that of "relational identity" (Ashforth et al., 2011; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007) and the five-dimensional model of leadership practice (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008) for research question 1 and 2 respectively. Therefore, describing the focus on enquiry, Uhl Bien states that "relational leadership theory is the study of both relationships – interpersonal relationships as outcomes of or as context of interactions – and relational dynamics – social interactions and social constructions – of leadership" (p. 667). An implication of focusing on relational dynamics is that it links the aspect of leadership being studied – middle leadership in this research - to wider organisational processes and discusses broader organisational implications. For instance, as will be discussed in chapter 8, the exploration of cross level dynamics provides the basis of informing the areas of leadership responsiveness when navigating across structural levels.

Given the aims of the relational framework of leadership, enquiring into the experiences of the formal middle leader in UK HE confers the departmental perspective on the processes that constitutes leadership practice in the university. The formal leader persists as a key figurehead in departmental operations and represents a key stakeholder in the operational apparatus of the university. Adopting the relational perspective on leadership goes beyond an exploration of traits or behaviours and entails a study of the processes and conditions within which leadership occurs. As such, the theoretical framework of leadership outlined informs the aspects of the methodology of this research, that will be delineated in the following sections.

### 4.3 Epistemology – Social Constructionism

Delineating the epistemological stance that informs this research provides the basis for the methodology employed on enquiring into the topic of formal leadership at the departmental level in UK HE. Cohen et al., (2018) states that the epistemology "concerns the very basis of knowledge – its nature and forms, how it can be acquired and communicated to other human beings" (p. 5). Similarly, Walter (2006) notes that epistemology is "concerned with understanding how the (mostly unwritten) rules about what is considered knowledge, who can and cannot be knowledgeable and which knowledges are valued over others" (p. 15). Thereby, decisions on aspects of the research design such as sampling have ensued from a careful consideration of the epistemological perspective that has is deemed suitable for the nature of the topic studied, the adequacy of the method to inform the premise of middle leadership

practice. Thus, this section considers the epistemological basis on which those decisions were made.

The study of leadership in organisations is a well-established domain that has seen a myriad of perspectives, associated to different research purposes, been applied to study the topic (see literature review 2.1). The epistemological stance behind these research approaches, to a large extent, warrants both the purpose of the research outlined and the theoretical frameworks that the findings are embedded in (Cohen et al., 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In commenting on the elemental influence of the epistemological stance on the research, Cohen et al., (2018) states that the "choice of the problem, the formulation of questions to be answered, the characterisation of stakeholders, methodological concerns, the kinds of data sought and their mode of treatment [in the research effort], all are influenced by the viewpoint held" (p, 7). Given the purpose and premise of this research that entails a study on role identity and the dynamics of hierarchical interaction, the epistemological stance of social constructionism founds the way that the aforementioned aspects of middle leadership in UK Higher Education (HE) is studied by this research. Therefore, as elaborated in section 4.7 – 4.11, the conceptual frameworks that guide data collection and analysis are informed by constructionist tents.

As an epistemology, it can be posited that social constructionism is geared toward understanding the interactive nature of meaning creation, that constitutes social artefacts like roles and institutions (Cohen et al., 2018; Holstein & Gubrium, 2013). Describing the constructionist perspective of adopting interviews as the primary source of data collection, Rubin & Rubin, (2011) state that "constructionists are concerned with the lenses through which people view events, the expectations and meanings that they bring to a situation [and the way that] groups of people create and then share understanding with each other" (p. 19). Although the discussion on the ontological implications of constructionism is vast and beyond the scope of this research, scholars have indicated the idiographic footing of the constructionist stance (Cohen et al., 2018). Speaking to this point on the rejection of a nomothetic premise, Weinberg (2008) observes that "one of the more ubiquitous claims in the social constructionist literature is that the quest to discover objective / or universal truths promotes the reification of things" (p.15).

Nevertheless, its epistemological implications are more distinct. Foremost, relating to this study, the epistemology of constructionism emphasises the flexible and interactional

characteristic of social reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Having said that, "strict constructionism" has been critiqued on its perceived predilection to reject "real life problems" (p. 35, (Hannigan, 1995). In this instance, it should be stressed that the implied flexibility of social reality assumed by constructionism speaks to the ongoing interpretive process undertaken by active agents rather than an observation about the ontology of social phenomena. Hence, the role of the active agent who is "generative and active rather than receptive and passive" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 23) in a given social process, is the focal point of consideration in constructionist research to understanding a social phenomenon. Finally, by virtue of its view of social reality, constructionism emphasises a critical outlook that strives to deconstruct concepts in 'the social' with the aim of understating 'how people assign meaning to their world' (Hellström, 2001, p. 15).

The constructionist foundation of this research continually directs the focus of enquiry into the fluid, socio-historically embedded nature of leadership. Prior research that have adopted a constructionist view of leadership has predominantly investigated leadership within a given context that it is embedded in (Bryman et al., 2011; Day, 2014). This research follows the same avenue of enquiry that is focused on particularly understanding the way that agent and context interact, with an added focus on understanding the dynamic tensions that shape the leadership practice of middle leaders in UK universities. As such, the tensions pertaining to identity and in instances of hierarchical interactions that are noted to characterise middle leadership in UK HE are explored by this study. Towards this, the constructionist basis of research accommodates an exploration of agentic capacity and influence – where it occurs and to what extent – in a leadership role that is embedded within structural and role purviews. Therefore, the aspect of the agent, in the agent structure nexus, comprises the central focus of this research.

## 4.4 Constructionist Interview approach to Enquiry

A study of leadership foremost is faced with tacking the question of what leadership actually is. As an area of academic enquiry, leadership within organisations generally pertains to the study of the social process of directing activity toward a preferred course or outcome (Bensimon, 1989b; James et al., 2020; Kok & McDonald, 2017). Along with the line of enquiry adopted through the research questions, considerations on the nature of the topic become important factors to consider in determining the design of a research that studies this in UK HE. An essential characteristic that becomes prominent in studying leadership, as discussed in

the literature review, is its fluid nature that firstly, emphasises the fundamentally interpersonal basis of leadership practice; and secondly, the importance of context in accurately understanding the phenomenon of leadership in a given situation. In line with these considerations on the nature of the topic and the line of enquiry, the research design should finally ensure that the data gathered addresses the questions outlined by the study (Cohen et al., 2018; Yin, 2009). A valid research design stipulates the synthesis of the three aforementioned elements in a demonstrably logical manner, that address "logical, not logistical, problems" (Yin, 2009, p.60) in the research effort. Therefore, the nature of the data collected and the implications that are derived from the findings corresponds to the approach to research adopted by this study.

As alluded to above, leadership is quintessentially an active social phenomenon that is inextricably bounded to its context (expounded in the literature review). To further warrant the purpose of this study, the distinctly interactional and relational nature of middle leadership practice is highlighted (Branson et al., 2016). As noted in the literature, leadership occurs within and amidst the relations up, down and across organisational structures and networks that the departmental head navigates as a formal leader (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008). Moreover, a notable avenue of enquiry in leadership research in organisations is to understand the way leadership practice functions within the contextual realities of the organisational framework (Andrews & Boyne, 2014; Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001; Schneider & Somers, 2006). As such, given the aforementioned characteristics of leadership in the organisational context, a constructionist interview approach was deemed best suited to inform subsequent decisions toward answering the research questions that are outlined.

In view of these considerations, the study adopted the constructionist interview as the primary approach to enquiry. This implied that the approach to enquiry, pertaining to both the data collection and analysis in this study, involved seeking to understand the way that the participant's as middle leaders operated within a certain context ('within' and 'without' the department). Describing the constructionist approach to qualitative enquiry, (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004) emphasise the need to "devote attention to finding rigorous ways of examining social context and the ways that the 'hows' and the 'whats' of interaction reflexively constitute that which can be situationally construed as consequential social context" (p. 309). It should be noted that the initial research design included plans to organise and conduct observations and face to face interviews with participants in their work premises. However, the study had to

accommodate the issues of accessibility and participant safety on account of the Covid 19 pandemic, that entailed the employment of remote semi structured interview as the principal instrument of data collection. Nevertheless, the phenomenological approach to enquiry informed the decisions on sampling and participant selection,  just the same. As such, despite the decrement of the methods, the rationale of the design remained intact.

In the context of an HE institution like a university, middle leadership is observed as a "multilevel and multi-functional" (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008; Branson et al., 2016) phenomenon, owing to the layered structure of a university. As such, leadership practice is noted to be accompanied by a set of distinctive demands and expectations at each organisational level. Moreover, as will be discussed shortly, the position of the departmental head for each individual practitioner in UK HE is principally demarcated by disciplinary divides within a single institution. To this point, any enquiry into leadership and its aspects, be it as study of the stakeholders, the systems, or the implications of leadership, will in most cases, invoke and inform the contextual realities that the leadership role is embedded in. For instance, a study of leadership priorities pertaining to the performance of the department will not only vary across structural levels i.e., the faculty versus the department versus the institution, but also vary across departments within the same institution (as argued by this research). Given this fact, an inquiry into formal leadership at the departmental level requires an approach that takes these contextual factors into account. Thus, the aforementioned aspects of the context are a significant part of enquiry in this study (detailed in section 4.6.1 and 4.6.2) that the constructionist approach enables the exploration of the context on the knowledge created (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008a)

Hammersley (2012) states that "constructionism requires researchers to focus on the processes that lead to the construction, constitution and character given to independent objects and the relationship between them" (p. 36 – 36). In studying organisational leadership, alternate research designs like an experiment or a predominantly evaluative approach such as a survey design, tend to become increasingly reductionist. Moreover, the aforementioned designs are unsuitable for the purposes of exploring the way that the participants ascribe and derive meaning of their leadership practice from relating with their contexts. Nevertheless, despite the justifications on the pertinence of the constructionist interview for this research, it is acknowledged that the various types of research designs can be adapted to address varied facets of the research questions that are outlined. For instance, Cohen et al., (2018); Creswell, (2002);

Yin, (2009), highlight the scope of methods such as the experiment to encompass the purpose of exploring, describing and explaining a topic. Nevertheless, the theoretical framework of relational leadership and its focus on relational dynamics that grounds this study meant that the constructionist approach to enquiry was the most appropriate.

## 4.5 Sampling Strategy

The considerations of epistemology and the aims of the constructionist interview approach invariably informs the applied decisions of sampling and subsequently decisions pertaining to analysis. As such, this section describes the rationale that foregrounded the decisions made on issues of sample size and its determination. Foremost, the issue of sampling varies with regards to the way it applies to a qualitative study as compared to research designs that aim for statistical generalisations (Yin, 2009). Cohen et al. (2018) notes that "there are no clear rules on the size of the sample in qualitative research" (p. 224) by reason of the inherent idiographic telos of exploring the "exclusive distinctiveness of the phenomenon, group or individuals in question" (p. 223). Moreover, the stated premise of a constructionist enquiry entails a close examination of the way that a knowing subject relates with the nuances of the context as opposed to an analysis of trends exhibited by a sampling unit. However, Yin argues that generalisations of an analytic nature where the insights derived from non-quantitative studies such as case studies and experiments can "expand and generalise theories [without] extrapolate[ing] probabilities" (p, 53). "Analytic generalisations" pertain to "shed[ding] light on some theoretical concepts or principles" (p. 38) where the unit of analysis embodies and elucidates the phenomenon of study. As such, purposive sampling is employed when a topic of investigation is accessible through "those who have in depth knowledge about particular issues, maybe by virtue of their professional role, power access to networks, expertise or experience" (p. 219, Cohen et al., 2018). Formal leadership roles at the department / school level in UK universities, is a specialised arena with experiences diverging widely even in comparison to similar roles under different contexts. Thus, purposive sampling was deemed to be the appropriate sampling strategy in accomplishing the aims of this research.

## 4.6 Contextualising Middle Leadership Practice

Accordingly, the unit of analysis in this research is the formal leadership role at the department / school level in Russell Group and Post 92 universities. It is important to note that the official roles of the participants are titled differently in different universities and include titles like,

'head of department', 'head of school' and 'associate head' (The full anonymised details of the participants are attached in the appendix). Despite the variation in nomenclature of the roles, the defining characteristic that determined inclusion in this study was the positionality of the role as the formal leader of an academic unit within the university. However, four participants in the Post 92 category are 'associate heads' who lead academic programmes as opposed to department units. As "middle leaders" in UK HE, there are a distinctive set of factors that influence formal leadership practice at the department / school level. Thus, in accord with the contextual factors that embed middle leadership practice (discussed in sections 4.4), it is important to contextualise the research efforts in order to meet the research aims that inform the topic studied. This involved specifying the aspects of the context that were noted to be influential to middle leadership in UK universities. In keeping with the factors identified in the literature review, it is observed that the dimensions of the institutional type and disciplinary background are key affects for middle leaders. Thus, the dimension of institutional type and disciplinary background, are deemed as key features to be incorporated in the research design. The following paragraphs will further elucidate this.

### 4.6.1 Context 1 - Institutional Type

As stated in the preceding paragraph, it is important to contextualise leadership by further specifying the dimensions that are observed to influence the practice of middle leaders. Moreover, when conducting a constructionist study, it is imperative for the research design to include the contextual affects at play. In this study, the overarching context of the topic pertains to the domain of UK HE. As such, the literature on leadership in UK HE postulates – amongst others - two central dimensions of contextual affects on the formal leader, namely institutional types and disciplinary background (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008). In UK HE, a widely acknowledged divide between the Russell Group, Pre and Post 1992 universities, persists as a classificatory schema that has been observed to entail varying operational circumstances. Discussing the prevalence of institutional clusters in UK HE, Boliver, (2015) observes that there is a "stark division" between the Pre and Post 1992 universities that is evident in terms of research activity (pre 92 universities having higher levels of research activity), economic resources (greater wealth in Pre 92 universities), academic selectivity (more academically successful students in Pre 92 universities). The Russell Group constitutes a subset of 'high status' UK universities within the overarching category of Pre 1992

universities (explained in section 4.7). The differences in institutional characteristics, as such, are noted to be a factor in the leadership practice of formal leaders at the department / school level in UK HE. Therefore, the cluster of the Russell Group and Post 1992 universities forms a key component of the research design that subsequently, informed decisions on data collection.

### 4.6.2 Context 2 – Disciplinary Background

In a study on formal academic leadership, it is imperative to account for the academic discipline that the departmental / school head leads. The departmental unit embodies not just the demarcation of operational domains but also the distinction between epistemic cultures (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Cetina, 1999). Studies have demonstrated the varied range of operational styles (Cetina, 1999), expectations (Kekäle, 1995), behaviours and beliefs (Biglan, 1973a) that operate across the disciplinary spectrum within a university. Therefore, to accommodate the disciplinary differences and its implications on leadership, this research adopts the Biglan scheme of categorising disciplines in higher education(Biglan, 1973b, 1973a). The Biglan classification, groups the range of disciples within higher education into three dichotomous dimensions namely, hard vs soft, pure vs applied and life vs nonlife. The first dimension distinguishes disciplines based on the strength of the disciplinary paradigm (disciplines having a strong paradigm vs disciplines lacking it); the second dimension categorises disciplines based on the concern with practical problems; and the third dimension differentiates the disciplines that tackle biological / human issues against those that tackle abstract issues. Essentially, the Biglan schema addresses the link between disciplinary characteristics and its bearing on the way academic departments are structured (Biglan 1973, (Roskens, 1983)). Therefore, this classificatory rationale holds particular pertinence to studies, like this research, that seek to illuminate key aspects of departmental operations in universities.

The Biglan schema of disciplinary categorisation is the most cited system of taxonomizing disciplines in higher education Simpson (2017) and has been applied successfully in understanding a range of educational aspects, including leadership (Favero, 2006). Moreover, the rationale in categorising disciplines in line with the Biglan classification also finds agreement with Becher's framework (Becher, 1994) of discrete disciplinary cultures. Although, the Biglan scheme was derived from studies performed in the United States, a recent study (Simpson, 2017), found "strong support for suggesting that the pure/applied and hard/soft

classification retain validity in the UK context" (p. 1528). Therefore, the Biglan schema was determined as a valid disciplinary classification schema that could meaningfully encompass the gamut of middle leadership conceptions and experiences in the Pre and Post 92 universities.

## 4.7 Data Collection Strategy

Accordant with the topic on middle leadership UK universities, the participants for this research were determined as formal leaders of academic units. Given that an academic unit can be termed as a 'department' in some universities and a 'school' in others, the participants in this study hold formal roles as both 'head of department' and 'head of school'. In order to ensure the anonymity of the participants, the information of the exact roles that they hold are withheld. It should be noted that one participant from the Post 92 category holds an associate leadership position at the faculty level and four participants in the same category are leaders of academic programmes (The accounts of programmes leaders are analysed separately in section 7.5). All other participants are formal leaders of academic units, and their leadership practice does not extend beyond the level of the department and or school. On that account, the Biglan schema provides the rationale in accounting for the anticipated disciplinary differences in the experiences of department / school heads. As such, data collection from departmental heads were organised in accordance with the Biglan schema of Hard/Soft and Pure / Applied dimensions, that begot 4 categories of Hard/ Applied; Soft/Applied; Hard/Pure and Soft/Pure. The full list of all the disciplines and their corresponding departments that fall under each of the Biglan categories mentioned above are outlined in Appendix 5 for Russell Group participants and Appendix 6 for Post 92 participants. As mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, two dimensions of contextual datum – institutional type and disciplinary category - in UK higher education formed the basis of data collection. Starting with the dichotomy of Pre and Post 1992 universities, this research sought to further integrate the Pre 1992 category by selecting participants from the Russell Group. The shared mission statement of the Russel Group added a further layer of contextual homogeneity that would be absent without it.

Having established the Russell Group and Post 92 categorises as the context for institutional types, the recruitment process then involved contacting potential participants from disciplines that fell under the aforementioned four categories of Hard/Applied, Soft/Applied, Hard/Pure and Soft/Pure. The participant population for this research constitutes personnel who occupy the role of departmental / school head for the mentioned disciplines that fall within the

aforementioned categories as illustrated in Table 4.1. below. Publicly available information about department / school heads on the University website was used as the source of initial contact through request emails. A slight variation was observed in the organisation of disciplinary clusters in Post 1992 from the Russell Group universities, principally in the way that the departments were described and labelled. Although this variation was observed in the departmental descriptions, there were no meaningful differences on disciplinary grounds. As such, it did not negate the rationale of the Biglan schema. However, incorporating departments from Post 92 universities entailed selecting the equivalent of the discipline within a specific Biglan category. For example, since computer science falls under the category of Hard/Applied, a departmental head of the corresponding informatics or informational science department in the list of post 92 universities were contacted to request participation.

## 4.8 Confidentiality, Anonymity and Ethics

In the GDPR (Appendix 10) and the consent forms (Appendix 3) sent, the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants are of central concern in this research. Toward this, all personally identifiable information such as names of the participants and names of the institution are anonymised. As mentioned in section 4.5 the exact role of that the participants hold were also deemed to be potentially distinguishable and hence are withheld from publication. Additionally, the specific names of the departments that the participants lead have been anonymised by utilising a wider disciplinary category that they fall within. For instance, if a hypothetical department that was named as "the department of clinical psychology" was deemed to be a particularly identifiable marker for the participant, the name of the department was changed to the standard category of "psychology". In the same way, all cited references to names, places, roles and systems that were deemed to be identifiable markers within the transcripts have been anonymised. The research was the sole viewer and handler of raw data i.e., the recorded audio and the transcripts through the PhD. The PhD supervisors were privy to the anonymised excerpts that comprise the results and discussion chapters.

BERA Association (4th ed), 2022, states that "researchers should do everything they can to ensure that all potential participants understand, as well as they can, what is involved in a study" (p. 9). Toward this, the initial request of participation email sent to the participants included a synopsis of the research project and the consent form that explained the terms of engagement – both for the participants and the researcher. Both of these documents are attached

in the Appendix for reference. Prior to the emails being sent, the project was subject to examination from the ethics review board at the University of York that entailed expounding on the GDPR guidelines adhered to and the aforementioned consent and participation tenets of the research. This was approved and thereafter, the request emails were forwarded.

**Table 4.1** – Unit leaders of Russell Group and Post 1992 universities in this research, their associated disciplines and the Biglan category that they fall under.

**The Russell Group Participants**

| Participants | University Code | Academic Unit | Biglan category |
|---|---|---|---|
| Richard | RG1 | Computer science unit | H/A |
| Harry | RG2 | Computer science unit | H/A |
| Gary | RG3 | Computer science unit | H/A |
| Gabe | RG4 | Education unit | S/A |
| Maria | RG5 | Education unit | S/A |
| Dan | RG6 | Education unit | S/A |
| Mike | RG7 | Physical science unit | H/P |
| Clive | RG2 | Physical science unit | H/P |
| David | RG8 | Physical science unit | H/P |
| Michelle | RG4 | Philosophy unit | S/P |
| Adam | RG9 | Ancient history and Culture unit | S/P |
| Arthur | RG10 | History unit | S/P |

**The Post 1992 Participants**

| Participants | University Code | Academic unit | Biglan category |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| Kyle | PT1 | Computer Science unit | H/A |
| Anton | PT2 | Computer Science unit | H/A |
| Lauren | PT2 | Education unit | S/A |
| James | PT3 | Information science unit | S/A |
| Amelia | PT1 | Physical science unit | H/P |
| Sue | PT4 | Physical science unit | H/P |
| Steve | PT5 | Psychology unit | S/P |
| Phil | PT6 | Psychology unit | S/P |
| Ana | PT1 | Languages unit | S/P |
| Jack | PT3 | Languages unit | S/P |

## 4.9 Participant Selection

Although the case of formal leaders at the department / school level is purposively sampled within the aforementioned schema, the process of contacting the specific participants from the gamut of available departments and institutions under these categories was performed randomly. Initially, a list of universities for both categories - Russell group and post 92 - was compiled (see Appendix) and a decision to designate a fixed department for each of the Biglan categories, across the two institutional categories, was established. It was deemed worthwhile to aim at establishing a uniform disciplinary context by affixing a department to each category beforehand. This also provided an efficient and streamlined organising rationale for contacting participants. Originally, computer science, due to the burgeoning popularity and widespread availability in both institutional types, was designated as the department under the Hard/Applied category; Education due to its familiarity and pertinence to the researcher as a discipline, as the department under the Soft/Applied category; Chemistry was selected as the department under the Hard/Pure category, based on the fact that the piloting phase included data on this discipline; and Psychology was selected as the department under the Soft/Pure category due to its pervasiveness as a disciplinary perspective and extensive influence over the social sciences. A matrix of 4 x 3 where, a total of 3 participants for each of the 4 Biglan categories, totalling to 12 participants for an institutional type was determined. As such, the total number of cases for this research was estimated to be 24 participants. The considerations around sample size will be discussed in section 4.9.

The aforementioned guidelines provided an initial plan for data collection, however, the distinctive situation of "researching up" i.e. researching those with more power than the researcher, entailed adapting to certain circumstantial realities without entirely deviating away from the aforementioned framework that rationalised the data collection (Walford, 2013, p.2). Firstly, the plan of having predetermined departments for each Biglan category was altered to allow for more flexibility, by choosing other disciplines within the same Biglan category in cases where access proved to be an issue. The full list of departments that constitutes the cases for this research is attached in the Appendix 5 and 6. Access, in terms of scheduling, proved to be a major factor that directly influenced the final makeup of the disciplinary backgrounds in this research. Given the exceedingly busy schedules of departmental heads, managing the issue of access emerged as the foremost consideration during the participant recruitment phase. Ultimately, participant inclusion was determined by the response to the initial email and the successful scheduling of the hour-long interview with the departmental head. As alluded to above, the consistency of the Biglan schema was successfully maintained for both institutional types, however, the homogeneity of disciplines varied, depending on access. A major implication of these circumstances during participant recruitment implied that the researcher was unable to balance the gender proportion of the participants in the study. There are a total of 6 female leaders, 4 in the Post 92 category (2 Associate heads) and 2 in the Russell Group category in this study. Although gender was not an area of focus in the research design, it constitutes an important area in leadership research. In consequence, this study is unable to make substantive comparisons between the experiences of male and female middle leaders. It should be noted that in the context of this study and given the themes discussed, there were no substantive gender differences observed.

**Table 4.2 –** List of the academic disciplines as classified according to the Biglan Category in the Russell Group and Post 92 university categories

**Russell Group Universities**

*N = 12* (3+3+3+3)

| Biglan Category | Number of Interviews | Discipline |
|---|---|---|
| Hard Applied | 3 | Computer Science x 3 |
| Soft Applied | 3 | Education x 3 |
| Hard Pure | 3 | Physical Science units x 3 |
| Soft Pure | 3 | Ancient History & Culture x 1; Psychology x 1; History x 1 |

**Post 1992 Universities**

*N = 10* (2+2+2+4)

| Biglan Category | Number of Interviews | Discipline |
|---|---|---|
| Hard Applied | 2 | Computer Science x 2 |
| Soft Applied | 2 | Information science x 1; Education x 1 |
| Hard Pure | 2 | Physical science units x 2 |
| Soft Pure | 4 | Psychology x 2; Languages unit x 2; |

## 4.10 Sample size - Determining the number of Participants

The issue of determining the optimal number of participants to be included in a qualitative study often engenders what seems like equivocal advice that, on the surface, relies on the researcher's discretion. Due to the nature of enquiry and the exploratory aims of the study, the sampling logic of using power analysis to determine sample size is deemed to be inappropriate (Yin, 2009).As elaborated earlier, a qualitative study is not designed to accomplish the purposes of a probability research that strives at prediction. Whereas a predictive capacity of a statistical research design can be tested, the nature of enquiry that employs a qualitative study is not conducive to being ascertained through consensual paradigms (Cohen et al., 2018; Yin,

2009). Therefore, the process of determining the optimal number of participants for qualitative research does not follow the protocols of sampling logic. Instead, guidelines in the literature include suggestions such as, having the "number of case replications – both literal and theoretical – determine the number of cases to be included in the study" (Yin, 2009, p.94). Given the fundamental dichotomy of Russell Group and Post 92 universities in this research, the issue of replication was certainly a core consideration. 12 participants in each category were initially set as a working target, with the choice of recruiting more participants if required. As a consequence of gradual saturation and diminishing success rate of participant confirmation, the initial total was deemed sufficient for the purposes of this research. It should be noted that the total number of participants in the post 92 category ultimately amounted to 10 participants. Moreover, another major consideration in determining the number of participants in a qualitative study is resolving the balance between the depth of investigation and the number of participants (Cohen et al., 2018). A qualitative study, as Teddlie and Yu observes, entails a fundamental "trade-off between provided greater depth and the number of cases" (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Moreover, the semi structured nature of the interview as a research method (detailed later) – that allows participants the latitude of detail explanation - is a crucial aspect of this study into leadership sensemaking. Therefore, including more than 24 participants in total was deemed to limit the capacity of "in depth" analysis in the time available for this research.

As mentioned above, the 4 x 3 matrix for each institutional category, resulting in a total of 24 participants was determined as the intended target of participant recruitment. The process of contacting, scheduling and conducting the interviews with the participants occurred over the period of 5 months from September 2021 to January 2022. For the Russell group category, the successful response rate in the Hard/Applied category was 20 % (3 out of 15); 100% (3 out of 3) for Soft/Applied; 15.7% (3 out of 19) for the Hard/Pure; and 27.2% (3 out of 11) for the Soft/Pure category. In the post 92 category, the successful response rather in the Hard/Applied category was 16% (2 out of 12); 13% (2 out of 15) for Soft/Applied; 22.2% (2 out of 9) for Hard/Pure; and 50% (4 out of 8) for Soft/Pure category. A total of 9 discrete disciplines were covered, across a range of 10 discrete Russell group universities and 6 discrete post 92 universities. No concrete pattern of refusals or acceptances to interview requests were discernible in this process. Additionally, the disciplines included as replacements for the originally planned targets which were, Computer Science, Education, Chemistry and Psychology, have added a wider scope of perspective to this study and illuminated the influence of disciplinary circumstances in RQ2. However, it would have been interesting to analyse the

accounts of leaders of the physical science units i.e., Chemistry, Physics and Biology, given the long- established stature of these disciplines in higher education. Potential participants were contacted directly through email and the interview was conducted online over zoom. Given the Covid 19 restrictions in place at the time, all data collection for researchers at the University of York (Education department) was mandated to be conducted online. All permission of intended in - person data collection was advised to be altered. The audio of the interview was recorded – with informed consent from the participants – which were transcribed subsequently. Consent forms detailing the protocols in place for the interview is attached as appendix 3.

**4.11 Analytic frame for Data Collection**

Prior to elucidating the method of data collection used, it is useful to preface it with the analytic frame that informed the formulation of the interview protocol. An analytic framework is required to substantiate the rationale of the researcher's approach to the topic and expound on "the driving force" behind line of inquiry (Chataigner, 2017, p.6). The analytic frame is a synthesis of knowledge from the literature review, utilised to ensure that the interview discusses pertinent themes and aligns with the purpose of the research. Whilst incorporating the salient themes influenced the content of the protocol, aligning the interview with the research purpose influenced the way that the questions were formulated. As such, the interview protocol, which is designed around the themes of leadership conception, the headship role, structural influence, disciplinary influence and unit performance, constitutes the elemental affects of the formal leadership role at the department level that have been identified in the literature.

These themes direct the focus of the study, primarily to the relational function – negotiating up, down and across organisational structures and networks - of the department/ school headship role and therefore enables this research to explore the premise of role identity and cross level interactions from the practitioner's perspective. The focus on the relational function ensues from the theoretical framework on leadership that quintessentially informs the way that this research approaches and understands leadership in UK universities. As such, a primary consideration during the interviews was to explore the participant's experiences of managing the multilevel and multifaceted nature of their leadership role (Bolden et al., 2012; Branson et al., 2016). Concurrently, the principle of inductive inquiry is also a key aspect of an exploratory

research design and was applied by starting the interviews with the normative themes of leadership and the headship role. Charting the protocol in this order allowed ideas on leadership to emerge organically – which were pursued – whilst also ensuring that the themes derived from the literature were covered.

Along with thematic considerations on the topic, it was essential to ensure that the interview was administered in a manner that allowed the data collected to viably answer the research questions outlined. The relational perspective on leadership (given its constructionist basis) necessitates the elicitation of the participants "sensemaking" process. Therefore, the decision to assume a semi structured approach to interviewing was deemed appropriate, where the questions sought to probe into the underpinnings of the participant's response to the base question. In congruence with the theoretical framework on leadership outlined, sensemaking as a system of enquiry studies the dialectical processes of an active agent within a specific context. Weick, (1995) states that sensemaking is the study on "how they (active agents) construct what they construct, why and with what effects" (p, 4). As such, being mindful of the sensemaking process during the interviews enabled the usage of probing questions that allowed the development of concepts and ideas that were broached. The probing questions sought to allow the participants to expound on the dialectical processes that informed their views.

**Table 4.2:** Interview protocol that demonstrates the research questions that the questions correspond to

| Questions | Research Question Answered |
|---|---|
| **Theme 1: Leadership Conceptualisation**<br><br>• Could you describe what this notion of leadership means to you?<br><br>• What were the major influences for you in seeing leadership the way you do? | RQ1 |

| | |
|---|---|
| • Why do you think that these values / activities are important for leadership practice ?<br><br>• Could you describe an instance where that value was useful to you in a daily situation? (**How)** | |
| **Theme 2: The Formal Leadership Role**<br><br>• Drawing on your experience, how would you describe the purpose of the HoD role?<br><br>• [**Probe]** Could you describe an instance of how accomplishing (concept / theme mentioned) looks like for you?<br><br>• Reflecting on your role generally, how would you describe the experience of leading your department as the HoD? Are there any feelings, ideas or anything that jump out when you reflect on your role as the leader?<br><br>• [**Probe]** You mention (concept / theme), could you describe an instance of how you go about handling it (if a challenge is mentioned) or realising it (if enjoyment is mentioned)<br><br>• What do you enjoy most about the HoD role? (why)<br><br>• In your experience, what does autonomy mean or look like for you as the HoD?<br><br>• How has the pandemic affected your role in leading, if at all? | RQ1 |
| **Theme 3 – Influence of Institutional Structure** | RQ 1 and RQ2 |

| | |
|---|---|
| • How would you describe the influence of the faculty on your school?<br><br>• What are some of the challenges that you have faced in leading your department under those influences?<br><br>• Why is that [challenge / merit mentioned] particularly significant to your leadership role and your department?<br><br>• Could you describe an instance of how that [challenge / merit] manifested in practice for you?<br><br>• I imagine the nature of leadership and what it entails changes as you deal with different stakeholders, are there any themes that jump out when you think about the differences in your interactions within and without the school / department? | |
| **Theme 4 – Influence of the Discipline**<br><br>• How do you see your discipline in the grand scheme of higher education?<br><br>• Could you describe some of the ways that this has affected the way you lead your department?<br><br>• Over the last few years, what would you say are some of the most prevalent discipline related - issues that you had to deal with?<br><br>• Could you describe some of these discipline related challenges? and the way it impacts your leadership? How do you go about dealing with them on the ground level? | RQ 2 |

| | |
|---|---|
| • How do you see your discipline in the near future and its effects on universities? | |
| **Theme 5 – Thoughts on Departmental Performance** | RQ 2 |
| • What are some considerations that come to mind when you think of dept performance? | |
| • If you were to rank these indicators in terms of its importance to your department, how you rank in order and why? | |
| • How do you go about preparing your department to perform in them? | |
| • What are some of the challenges that you particularly face in ensuring 'good performance'? | |

## 4.12 Data Collection Method – Semi structured interviews

Using the semi structured interview as the primary method of data collection was determined, foremost due to the constructionist approach of inquiry into the topic and furthermore, owing to the pertinence of the interview as a method (over others) to accomplish the aims of research. These two primary considerations also influenced the principles of interviewing that guided the way the semi structured interview was administered. Fundamentally, a constructionist enquiry entails using the interview as a site of knowledge construction by "knowing subjects" (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008, p.430). A major implication of deploying the semi structured interview as the principal data collection method is the emphasis on the practitioner's perspective that underlies the relational understanding of leadership. As such, social constructionism involves the consistent process of interaction between agent and structure in the creation of meaning. Crotty (1998), in addressing the active agent in the interview, highlights the impact of the individual's "cultural milieu and group affiliations" in the perception of their experiences. As mentioned earlier, constructionism does not imply or address the issue of ontological relativism but rather provides the methodological lens to examine the interactive aspect of social reality. Thus, Koro-Ljungberg (2008) recommends that

the constructionist interview "should shift the focus from mining individual minds to the construction of shared discourses" (p.431).

Utilising the interview in line with constructionist tenets has implications on the questions asked as well as the analysis conducted. Therefore, with regards to the purpose of the questions, the interview in this research sought to understand "social phenomena from the actors own perspective and describing the world as experienced by the subjects, with the assumption that the important reality is what the people perceive it to be" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.30). Elaborating on the basis of this approach, Berger and Luckman in their seminal treatise on social constructionism states that an "analysis of everyday life […] refrains from any causal or genetic hypothesis, as well as from assertions about the ontological status of phenomena analysed […] [and enables examination] of the innumerable pre and quasi scientific interpretations about everyday reality" (Berger et al., 1966, p.34). Moreover, Rubin & Rubin, (2011) state that the interview should be used when "one wants to know about how people experience something, reason about something, or act in relation to something" (p. 49). Accordingly, with regard to the style of questioning, the questions are formulated to elicit descriptions of experiences and allow the participants to demonstrate the dialogic process behind the statements. This is illustrated by the interview schedule through the extensive use of 'how' and 'why' questions that probe into topical question posed (a sample of the interview schedule attached in the appendix). This pattern of probing into the dialectical process was maintained throughout the interview process for all participants.

The design of an interview also necessitates considerations about the level of prior knowledge on the topic and the way that the interview of a project addresses this issue. Kvale & Brinkmann, (2009) outlines three fundamental design models of interviewing, namely inductive, deductive and abductive, depending on the objective of data collection in light of the extent of prior knowledge. To expand, an inductive design seeks to explore a novel phenomenon; a deductive design seeks to test established hypothesis and an abductive design allows for dialogue in a situation of evolving reality (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.58). In this research, aspects of all three models were incorporated, owing to the fact that this research is founded on prior theoretical and conceptual models that posits different dimensions that constitute leadership practice in UK HE (Bolden et al., 2008). However, this research also explores locales of middle leadership practice that do not feature in the literature. As observed in the interview schedule, there are 5 predefined themes namely, leadership conception, the

headship role, structural influence, disciplinary influence and departmental performance that forms the basis of the interview. Fundamentally, these themes form the crux of departmental headship in academia and possess significant bearing on leadership practice in the domain of academic middle leadership (the rationale for this will be detailed in the analytical framework section). Despite commencing from a structured basis of predetermined themes, the questions under each thematic category were formulated with the research aim of exploring the individual experiences of the practitioners. As such, the questions under each thematic category are designed to allow the participant to define the thematic domain in light of their personal understanding.

An additional point of consideration in utilising the interview as a data collection method is that it possesses a "socio – cultural and socio-political' dimension" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2013, p.442). Acknowledging this is crucial as it presents points of deliberation during the collection and analysis of data (Holstein & Gubrium, 2013; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In the data collection phase, this implies recognising that the dynamic between the interviewer and the interviewee is essentially a power dynamic. Kvale & Brinkmann, (2009) note that it is pivotal to correct the "misunderstanding of research interviews as a dominance free zone" (p. 37). As observed in studies on formal leaders in education, where the power dynamic favours the interviewee, a foremost consideration entails recognising the capacity of the interviewee to "control the interview situation" (Walford, 2013, p.5). A salinet implication, therefore, is one of reliability and the steps taken by the research to minimise errors and biases on this account. This will be addressed in the validity and reliability section. During the interviews, this aspect of power discrepancy was not observed to particularly impinge on the responses to the question posed. The majority of the interviewees addressed the questions as candidly as possible and explicitly notified the researcher on areas where the conversation had to be curtailed.

Nevertheless, the power discrepancy – where the interviewee possessed more power - was implicitly prevalent in the decorum of the interview, as probes into certain areas had to be moderated in order to maintain rapport and openness of communication. For instance, there was discernible disinterest in discussing interpersonal relations when exploring the structural realities of the headship role with a couple of interviewees and therefore, any probes into that particular theme had to be constricted. Toward this issue, this research firmly internalised the principles of the "responsive interview" as elaborated by Rubin & Rubin, (2011), where reflexivity, empathy, active listening and flexibility (p. 36) are recommended to minimise

issues of rapport and open communication. Moreover, the power discrepancy was anticipated and acknowledged in the way that the protocol is designed to be open ended and flexible. A semi structured allows relative flexibility in exploring topics that are introduced organically during the conversation (Brinkmann, 2014; Wengraf, 2001).

**4.13 Data Analysis – Thematic Analysis**

This section describes the process of data analysis that was undertaken to answer the research questions outlined. Analysing qualitative data entails the process of "moving from the data to understanding, explaining and interpreting the phenomena in question (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 643). Having said that, the aforementioned movement from data to interpretation is generally acknowledged to be iterative and far from straightforward (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). As such, although the treatise on qualitative data analysis offers guidelines to observe, it is never prescriptive and "there is no simple formula or recipe for it" (Patton, 2002, p.432). An implication of this is that the analytical process should "abide by fitness of purpose" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 643). Abiding by fitness of purpose does not imply an unimpeded licence for the researcher to impose their viewpoints on the data. Rather, it refers to the close alignment of the interpretive process to the assumptions and aims of the research outlined.

Given the constructionist epistemology of the research that sought to understand the sensemaking processes of formal leaders, the nature of the data collected were distinctly subjective and pertained to the individual perspectives of the participants. As such, the following research questions guided the analysis of the transcripts:

RQ 1- What are the beliefs and values that are ascribed to the role identity of the department head by the Pre and Post 92 leaders in this research when:
a) leading within the department?
b) leading without the department as a mediator between institutional levels?
c) To what extent does the role of leading 'within' and 'without' the department differ from each other?
d) To what extent does the leadership role identity differ for leaders of Pre and Post 92 universities?

And

RQ2 - What are the issues that are reported to affect the process of liaising between the institutional levels for the formal leaders at the department / school level when:

a) Interacting with the hierarchy in their institutions
b) Exercising leadership influence in hierarchical interactions
c) Aspiring to accomplish departmental performance
d) To what extent do the administrative intensities affect the experiences of mediation

Analysis of the interview data collected, thus, pertained to delineating the departmental perspective on the premise of role identity and the dynamics of hierarchical interactions. The analytical process entailed two fundamental stages of firstly, inductive coding the transcript to generate themes and categories; secondly, comparing the resultant categories across the data to discern patterns. In stage one, for each research question, the coding process entailed identifying ideas and concepts that are evident in the transcript and the contextualising cue(s) that induce meaning to that idea or concept. In the terminology of sensemaking, this essentially involves identifying what the participants construct and how they construct it. The ensuing codes represented the distinct themes invoked and the meaning attributed to them, by each individual participant. An example of the codes generated for RQ2 in this stage is attached as Appendix 4. This stage considered the steps recommended by Rubin & Rubin (2011), which is summarised as follows:

**Stage 1 – Identification of concepts, themes and topical markers (TP)**

**Step 1 -** Identification of concepts, themes, TP, events and numbers and breaking up the transcript into data units i.e., blocks of information that correspond to the concept, theme, etc. identified.

Identification can involve pulling concepts from the literature or those that emerge inductively from scouring and understanding the transcript

**Step 2 –** Creating consistent definitions of the concepts by including the nuances that emerge out of the transcripts.

**Step 3 –** Creating data units from the transcript and labelling them according to the concept that corresponds it as illustrations of that concept.

Having completed stage one, the next stage entailed the process of synthesising the data units that were created, which essentially entails the process of combining related ideas and concepts. When working with qualitative data, synthesis involves implementing techniques of "sorting and summarising, sorting and ranking, sorting and comparing", in order to comprehend the "broader implications of the coded data" (Rubin & Rubin, 2011, p. 224). For each of the research premises outlined above, the codes that were generated in stage one provided an empirical basis of answering the corresponding research questions. The nature of the research questions posed are essentially descriptive in nature. This implies that the research sought to expound on the experiences of the participants in as much detail as possible whilst noting the variances in them according to institutional types and disciplinary domains. A central merit and purpose of a qualitative enquiry is to provide what (Geertz, 1973) terms as "thick descriptions" that adds "bulk, density and complexity" (Gibbs, 2007, p.4). Having said that, the descriptions are guided by the research questions, that were derived from the literature. Thus, this phase entailed a deductive component to analysis whereby the indicative codes generated were viewed through the perceptive of the research questions. Therefore, the concepts and conceptual frameworks that pertained to each research question featured as prominent lenses through which the indicative codes were understood. For instance, the codes that pertained to the question on leadership role identity (RQ1) were synthesised and analysed through the concept of "relational identity" (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007) at this stage. Similarly, the codes that informed the question on the dynamics of hierarchical interactions (RQ2) were synthesised in consideration of the five-dimensional model of leadership practice (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008). This is the focus of the results chapter for each research question (Chapter 5 & 7). Additionally, patterns of variation across institutional and disciplinary domains were also analysed. It should be noted Nvivo 21' was utilised in the process of coding.

## 4.14 Limitations

There are several limitations to note. Firstly, the focus on the broader issues that comprise the discussion chapter specifically of RQ2 namely, the issues of institutional responsiveness is exclusively from the perspective of the departmental / school leader. As such, a holistic discussion of this issues that takes accounts of leadership stakeholders at different levels are

notably absent. Moreover, in defining the two relational nexuses of the department and the institution as the focus of enquiry predominantly informs "the top down" (p. 364, Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008) leadership dynamics. As such, this does not include a host of relational nexuses that pertain to horizontal dynamics with institutional bodies such as the HR, finance and other aspects of organisational operations in UK universities that play an influential role in the leadership practice of formal leaders at the department / school level. This leaves an avenue for future research to explore the influence of horizontal dynamics and the role the corresponding stakeholders in leadership process of department and schools.

Furthermore, the size of the sample, which constitutes 12 discrete Russell Group participants, 10 Post 92 participants, and nine discrete disciplinary domains, also poses limitations to the scope of broadening the insights to the wider populations of middle leaders in UK HE. Whist the accounts in this research provides an important perspective on a spectrum middle leadership experiences, a bigger sample size would inform this topic more comprehensively. Moreover, with the insight derived from this exploratory research effort, a more expedient method like a survey study could be implemented to further develop the insights. More specifically, the theme of emotional labour and the implications of that on the wellbeing of role holder could be explored more extensively. Additionally, the comparative aspect of the research effort is a notable weakness of this project. While the analysis sought to incorporate "thick descriptions" (see methodology), the complexity of themes that emerged as a consequence of this, made the comparative effort schematic to an extent. A survey study could further develop the areas of differences observed along institutional lines in further depth.

Lastly, the observations made on the variations of experiences according to administrative intensity is based on three participants and thus cannot be stated as representing the standardised experiences for all departmental heads operating in below average administrative intensity institutions. This is noted as a promising area of further enquiry as it suggests a variation in the level of autonomy experienced by role holders under different structural frameworks. Since the degree of autonomy is reported to affect the level of influence exerted by department / school leaders at the institutional level, a study that links the productivity of a departmental unit to the administrative intensity of the university would be a productive area of enquiry. Moreover, further research on the variation of autonomy across disciplinary lines also represents an area of study for future research.

**4.15 Reliability and Validity**

The qualitative approach adopted by the research raises a unique set of issues regarding the validity and reliability of the insights garnered in comparison to the systematic guideline available to quantitative research that extrapolate probabilities. Cohen et al., (2018) observes that "reliability is a necessary but insufficient condition for validity in research; it is a necessary precondition of validity" (p. 245). However, the meaning and elements of what constitutes a reliable and valid research differs for approaches that are quantitative and qualitative (Cohen et al., 2018). When contemplating the issue of reliability, the standard understanding that pertains predominantly to quantitative approaches, involves the "degree to which the findings of a study are independent of accidental circumstances of their production" (Kirk et al., 1986, p.26). As such, the questions of whether a research design is precise and replicable are central concerns with the issues of reliability. For qualitative designs, the replicability of findings and the issue of generalisability are typical reservation expressed about the reliability of the findings.

Whilst the findings of a qualitative study are unsuitable for making attestations about a wider population, conflating this detail to question the efficacy of qualitative research overlooks the utility of the approach. LeCompte et al., (1993) suggest that imposing the quantitative standards of determining reliability on qualitative research is problematic. A qualitative study does not strive to make statistical generalisations due to its appropriateness to topics that examine interactions and relationships. Therefore, a qualitative study does not gather data from "sampling units" that should reflect the characteristics of the wider population. Rather, the unit of analysis, as the empirical units for the study are picked to "shed empirical light on some theoretical concepts or principles" (Yin, 2009, p.73). As such, thoroughly explicating the theoretical framework(s) that informs the topic studied, is a vital step in ensuing reliability in qualitative research. Based on these theories, findings from a qualitative study can be generalised to either "corroborate, modify, reject or otherwise advance theoretical concepts referenced" (p. 73). This research has sought to thoroughly define the theoretical framework that grounds the understanding of leadership and further specify the analytic frames that informed the data collection. Moreover, chapters that address the results for each research question are prefaced with the conceptual frames that are inform the deductive analysis.

Yin's suggestion that the nature of generalisation is analytic i.e., pertaining to a particular theory or set of theories engaged by the study, rather than statistical which is aimed at deducing an inference about a population, implies that there is a logical rather than statistical connection between the case and the wider theory (Cohen et al., 2018; Yin, 2009). This is an important point as it highlights the distinctive aspects of the research design that may be overlooked in the imposition of quantitative canons of reliability. For instance, the theorical framework that foregrounds this study emphasises the centrality of the active agent's perceptions and individual understanding. As such, the issue of reliability in research that incorporates multiple interpretations and meanings can, as Brock-Utne, (1996) argues be along the lines of "dependability". "Dependability involves member checks, debriefing by peers, triangulation, prolonged engagement in the field, persistent observation in the field, reflexive journals, negative case analysis and independent audits" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 271). The multiplicity of perspectives included in this study by incorporating diverse disciplinary leaders within two salient university clusters, to inform the premise of middle leadership seeks to bolster the dependability of this study. The views of the participants are triangulated with each other to study the homogeneity or heterogeneity of experience, which are noted and analysed in the results chapters. Moreover, a reflexive diary was maintained throughout the data collection and analysis phase that prompted additions to the research. The inclusion of administrative intensity as a comparative dimension was a result of the reflexive process.

## 4.16 Validity

As mentioned earlier, the validity of a research effort is connected to the degree of reliability of the process. Thus, Hammersley, (1992) describes validity as "the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers" (p. 57). In discussion around the validity of the research, Shadish, (2002) identifies four aspects of validity namely, construct, statistical, internal and external validity. However, as Cohen et al., (2018) notes, "much qualitive research abides by principles of validity which differ in many respects from those of quantitative methods" (p. 247). On account of the discussion on the issue of reliability, the purpose and assumptions that grounds a qualitative enquiry is noted to influence what is regarded as valid. To this point, Agar, 1993 argues that "the intensive personal involvement and in-depth responses of individuals secure a sufficient level of validity and reliability" (p. 247, (Cohen et al., 2018). However, this is contested by Hammersley, (1992) and Silverman, (2011). As such, scholars have recommended a set of guidelines for qualitative research to

ensure validity of findings. The table that lists and compares these guidelines to quantitative research is attached below.

**Figure 4.1:** A comparison of validity canon in quantitative and qualitative research. (Cohen et al., 2018)

**TABLE 14.1   COMPARING VALIDITY IN QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

| Bases of validity in quantitative research | | Bases of validity in qualitative research |
|---|---|---|
| Controllability | ⟷ | Natural |
| Isolation, control and manipulation of required variables | ⟷ | Thick description and high detail on required or important aspects |
| Replicability | ⟷ | Uniqueness |
| Predictability | ⟷ | Emergence, unpredictability |
| Generalizability | ⟷ | Uniqueness |
| Context-freedom | ⟷ | Context-boundedness |
| Fragmentation and atomization of research | ⟷ | Holism |
| Randomization of samples | ⟷ | Purposive sample/no sampling |
| Neutrality | ⟷ | Value-ladenness of observations/double hermeneutic |
| Objectivity | ⟷ | Confirmability |
| Observability | ⟷ | Observability and non-observable meanings and intentions |
| Inference | ⟷ | Description, inference and explanation |
| 'Etic' research | ⟷ | 'Emic' research |
| Internal validity | ⟷ | Credibility |
| External validity | ⟷ | Transferability |
| Reliability | ⟷ | Dependability |
| Observations | ⟷ | Meanings |

As it pertains to interviews as the source of data, Cohen et al., (2018) suggests that a "practical way of achieving greater validity in interviews is to minimise bias as much as possible" (p. 271). And while neutrality in qualitative methods like the interview is acknowledged to be a chimera (Denscombe, 1995), several suggestions are propounded to minimise bias. Cohen et al., (2018) provides a working list of steps that can be taken to do this. They state that reducing bias in interviews requires: "a) careful formulation of questions so that the meaning is crystal clear; b) thorough training procedures so that the interviewer is more aware of possible problems c) probability sampling of respondents and d) matching interviewer characteristics with those of the sample being interviewed (where appropriate)" (p. 273 – 274). This research sought to minimise bias by adhering to the aforementioned steps as closely as possible. The nature of the questions that were formulated in the interview protocol has been discussed at length in the preceding sections, where the principle of allowing the participants to construct their views on the theme was a central working tenet. Moreover, the interview protocol was piloted in the researcher's university with 4 departmental leaders provided valuable insight into

the content as well as the process of interviewing formal leaders at the department level. Due to a conflict of interest, the pilot data has not been used in this research. The sampling procedure and strategy have also been elaborated earlier, where the principle of purposive sampling informs the overarching strategy however, the individual participants were selected randomly. The last suggestion on matching the characteristics of the interviewer and the interviewees was not applicable to this research enterprise. Overall, it is generally acknowledged that "threats to validity and reliability can never be erased completely but rather the effects of these threats can be attenuated by attention to validity and reliability throughout the research" (Cohen et al., 2018, p.245).

# Chapter 5 – RQ1: Data Presentation and Analysis

**5.1 Preface – Leadership Role Identity in UK HE**

The relational nature of organisational identities (as discussed in the literature review) entails the activation of distinct facets of the role identity, depending on the saliency of the relations that the constitutes the role holder's network (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). In the context of the departmental headship role in UK universities, in occupying the locale between the departmental and institutional levels, the positionality of the role in the organisational structure entails engaging with – at the minimum - two relational networks. As explored by this research, they are the network of stakeholders within the department and the network of stakeholders without the department, at the institutional level. Thus, either facet of the headship role identity, pertaining to both of the relational nexuses, relate to varying leadership responsibilities assumed by the role holder - both as a leader within the department and as the liaison between institutional levels.

As such, this research question explores the values and attributes ascribed to the leadership role identity as it pertains to both of the relational nexuses namely, the leadership role within the department and the leadership role when mediating between institutional levels. In doing so, this research sees to illuminate the complexities relating to cognition and culture, owing to the differences in the relational networks, that characterise middle leadership practice and role identities in UK universities. On that account, this chapter presents the results of the thematic analysis conducted on the transcripts of the participants (n= 22) that were guided by the following research questions:

What are the beliefs and values that are ascribed to the role identity of the unit head by the Russell Group and Post 1992 leaders in this research when:
a) leading 'within' the academic unit?
b) leading 'without' the academic unit as a mediator between institutional levels?
c) To what extent does the role of leading 'within' and 'without' the academic unit differ from each other?
d) To what extent does the leadership role identity differ for leaders of Russell Group and Post 1992 universities?

**5.2 Introduction**

As discussed in the literature review, sensemaking in organisations entails that individuals are in an ongoing process of interpreting cues from the environment that prompts the construction of identities at various levels of the organisation (Degn, 2018; Weick, 1995). With regards to nested identities i.e., identities that operate within wider structural frameworks (Irwin et al., 2018), the relational nexuses that contextualises a nested identity, provides the cognitive cues that informs the identity that is constructed. As such, the accounts provided by the participants on their leadership role 'within' the department illustrates the way that department leaders interpret the cues – derived from the nexus of the academic department and / or school - that influences the construction of the role identity of the department and / or school leader in UK HE. Given the premise of formal leadership at the department and / or school level being studied, the aforementioned cues are predominantly articulated as foundational values and priorities of leadership that consequently shape the role identity of the department head. Thus, this section will analyse the cues that shape the beliefs of the participants, on the leadership that they provide within the department. This will be followed by the analysis of the beliefs on the leadership that is entailed in the role as a "liaison" (Arthur, RG10) between the levels. Analysing leadership 'within' and 'without' the department provides a foundation to then discuss the characteristics of middle leadership in UK universities. The aspect of leadership 'without' the department – at the institutional level – will be developed further when analysing the dynamics in hierarchical interactions by the second research question (RQ2).

As a formal leader, foremost, the unit leader assumes the responsibility of overseeing operations and activities within the departmental / school unit. Bolden et al's., (2012) enquiry into leadership, demonstrates that a majority of the academic stakeholders make a distinction between academic leadership and academic management. While academic leadership was reported to be provided by non-managerial stakeholders and involved activities that pertained to "acculturation" into academic work and life; academic management encompassed the administrative details that structure academic work such as, "workload, performance monitoring and assessment and provision and distribution of resources" (p.35). The aforementioned classification between academic leadership and management stems from an exploration of leadership that pertains predominantly to academic work such as, research and

teaching. Naturally, leadership in that context relates to the work pursued with non-formal leaders such as supervisors and research leads.

However, the role of the formal leader is observed to encompass both the domains of leadership and management, which can obscure the boundary between the aforementioned domains. On this, Middlehurst, (1993) observes that "at the institutional level, the leadership and management functions are often sharply delineated while at the departmental level, the two functions are typically closely integrated (p. 129). Moreover, relative to the concrete and definitive nature of the managerial responsibilities outlined, the aspect of leadership is widely acknowledged to be particularly nebulous and complicated to study (see literature review). For the formal leader at the department and / or school level in UK universities, attributing leadership to the role is further complicated by the fact that the role is generally characterised as a "managerial role" (Deem et al., 2003). Nevertheless, formal leaders are key stakeholders who exert a significant degree of influence by virtue of their position as well as their social capital as senior professors of their disciplines (Bolden et al., 2012). Thus, by exploring the perspectives of the heads of department and / or school regarding the beliefs that are attributed to their roles as formal leaders, this research seeks to understand the way that leadership is experienced in the context of definite relational nexuses i.e., leadership 'within' and 'without' the department. Doing this offers an understanding of middle leadership in UK universities that is grounded on the locales of practice i.e., practice sites and that possesses a definite context to the idea of leadership being propounded.

**5.3 A. Role Identity Within the Academic Unit: Facilitator of Culture**

The cues that inform the conceptualisation of the role identity of the formal leader within the departmental nexus, pertain primarily to the values that are significant to the academic stakeholders within the department. In Bolden et al's., (2012) research into leadership at both pre- and post-92 universities, it is observed that the values of autonomy and academic freedom are salient drivers of identity and, factors into the nature of leadership preferred and utilised in academia. Thus, in light of the relational process of role identity construction(Sluss & Ashforth, 2007), the values and beliefs that underpin the academic community, is observed to instil a certain framework on the role of the formal leader within the department. Consequently, a unifying theme that is observed in the accounts of participants in the Russell Group category, is the perspective of the leader as the facilitator of community and culture within the

department. As will be elaborated shortly, the trope of the facilitator is observed to entail responsibilities of upholding and promoting various values such as autonomy, transparency, and equity. This reflects Bolden et al's., (2012) observation that formal leaders are "pivotal in setting the tone and providing a facilitative and constructive working environment" (p. 2).

In comparison, it is interesting to note that the cues that are emphasised in the conceptualisation of leadership and the leadership role in the post 92' category, largely pertain to the domain of strategic direction. Having said that, it should be noted that the observation of this apparent variance does not imply that the values emphasised in the Russel Group sample are absent in the leadership consideration of post 92' unit leaders or vice versa. Rather, that the point of emphasis provides an indication of the affects and cues that are salient in the way that the leadership identity is perceived and experienced by the practitioner within their distinct institutional contexts. As Daft & Weick, (1984) notes, "Managers literally must wade into the ocean of events that surround the organisation and actively try to make sense of them" (p. 6). Similarly, Starbuck and Milliken in their study on "Executives' perceptual filters", note that "sensemaking frameworks […] reflect habits, beliefs about what is and what ought to be" (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988).

Moreover, Bolman & Deal's, (2017) study into organisational behaviour demonstrates that cognitive frames i.e., the frame that predominates an active agent's perception of the organisation, are key avenues of understanding leadership. Essentially, four foundational cognitive frames that affect individual / leader perceptions on identifying, interpreting and ultimately enacting decision in an organisational context have been postulated. To summarise, they are, the structural frame through which operational cohesivity is prioritised as the guiding tenet; the human resource frame that prioritises collective action as the guiding principle; the political frame, discerned through which competition for organisational resources take precedence; and the symbolic frame where the adherence to established values are seen as important. The significance of these four frames in leadership studies pertains to the nature of cognitive processing that has demonstrated the prevalence of frames that "function as cognitive blinders" (Bensimon, 1989b). As such, the aforementioned study on cognitive frames highlights the variance in the emphasis of perceptual cues and frames by organisational agents in different contexts. However, it is important to note that the motive of analysis conducted in this section does not pertain to classifying the participants according to the frames.

Thus, recognising the cues that feature prominently and are emphasised in the way that the practitioners construct their leadership roles, provides an indication of the leadership considerations that are contextually prevalent for the practitioner in question. An implication of this pertains to the area of developmental initiatives on leadership and the ways that leadership training could be enhanced, specifically for academic leaders in connection to the requirements of the Russell Group and Post-92' contexts. Moreover, departmental level leadership roles in post 92 universities are "often permanent" in contrast to the rotational system of the pre 1992 universities (Floyd et al., 2011 p. 388). Although, it should be noted that the permanency of the role is not ubiquitous to all post 92 universities and is contingent on the systemic principles that are incumbent at discrete universities. Nevertheless, the variance in the cues that inform the construction of the leadership role identities in the two contexts, suggests the prevalence of some differences pertaining to the expectations and requirements of being a departmental leader within them.

### 5.3.1 Academic Autonomy in Russell Group Accounts

Thus, on enquiring into the way that the department heads conceptualise their identity as leaders within the department, the aforementioned tenets of academia – with an emphasis on autonomy and academic freedom – are foremost observed to constitute the basis on which the role identity is conceptualised by the participants of the RG category. In their accounts, fundamentally, the leadership role is conceptualised akin to a facilitator, as opposed to other popular tropes of leadership. Toward this, Dan who heads the education unit at RG6 remarks:

> *I'm not a big fan of leadership discourses, leadership training. You know, I've been sent on all those leadership courses and most of them are awful. Most of them I find quite soul destroying because they have a vision of leadership that's insensitive to the sector in which we operate I think. So I don't think that being a leader within higher education has much in common with being a leader in a private enterprise where you can measure productivity very clearly, where you've got goals, KPIs, stakeholders to satisfy. I think what happens in higher education is more nuanced.*

As discussed in the literature review, nested identities in organisations are relational and in the case of the department head, a major relational affect – amongst other affects discussed in due course - is the group of academics that comprises the disciplinary unit that the department head

leads. The excerpt from Dan's account cited above, along with highlighting the tension between the discourses on leadership that are alluded to be borrowed from the context of the private sector, also establishes a further tension namely, the multiplicity of relational affects that could entail contrasting values to be exercised by the department head in their leadership practice (delineated in due course). More specifically, the separate facets entailed in the headship role such as, 'the role of the leader within the department' is observed to entail a set of disparate values in comparison to 'the role of the mediator' that is assumed when relating with institutional level stakeholders. Thus, the allusion to the "nuanced" nature of the leadership role is particularly significant in considerations of developmental pathways such as leadership training for academic leaders in HE.

In establishing the context of HE as requiring a distinct set of operational tenets relative to an alternative organisational context, Dan – as alluded to above – proceeds to frame his leadership role identity as an administrator by negating the connotations of the charismatic trope that generally accompanies the notion of being a leader. Elaborating on the nature of the leader that is pertinent in the context of a Russell Group university, Dan observes that in academia, "people tend not to be motivated by money. They tend to be motivated by wanting to find things out; to share things that they know and therefore to get the best out of those kinds of people, I think that you need to have a different approach to leadership. So, I don't really see myself in a leadership role. I see myself in an admin role and I'm quite happy with that". This perspective of negating the notion of leadership, is in accord with studies that have reported that academics demonstrate a "deep seated resistance to the language of leadership" (Bolden et al., 2012; Oakley & Selwood, 2010) and consequently that leadership "has acquired somewhat of a negative reputation amongst academic faculty" (p. 38). Dan's conception of his role identity within the department, given the relational nature of nested identities, demonstrates the adoption of leadership attributes that de-emphasises traits of control and command. As will be observed subsequently, there are indications to suggest that the attributes entailed in accomplishing 'the role of the mediator' – which can prompt the utilisation of a more streamlined process - can potentially engender tensions for the department head in navigating between the distinct groups of stakeholders.

As such, in characterising his role as that of an administrator – leader, Dan remarks,

*Administratively, I try and make sure that all my students have got staff that can teach*

*them and all of my staff feel like they contribute in a way that they want to contribute; [and that they feel like they have] got the space to do the things that excite them, whether it's research or scholarship or writing or media work, social responsibility. And protect that space for them, without it being a kind of a model of charismatic leadership*

In Dan's description of the leadership role, academic autonomy features as a prominent cue which is, in turn, interpreted as a central value that underpins his understating of his leadership role within the academic unit.

Likewise, the value of academic autonomy is observed to also be a central affect in the way David conceptualises his leadership role. In describing leadership as a head of a physical science unit at RG8, David foremost contextualises his responsibility as a leader by saying, "the really important thing is that, academics, would like to believe that they are autonomous". On that account, he remarks that, "what I'm trying to do […] is to create a culture in which people see themselves as having autonomy, so that they feel like they're contributing [to decisions taken in the department]. Because if the academics, individually, don't have the field that they can own and if they don't feel in general that they have autonomy and can contribute. [Then] they feel very restricted".

Analogous to Dan's process of conceptualisation where his leadership practice is distinctly contextualised within his understanding of the academic community, David's role identity as the unit leader (within the department) is based on his understanding of what motivates his academic staff. On this, he remarks:

*Research staff as well as teaching staff, they tend to push themselves. And a lot of academics' work weekends. Generally, academics don't restrict themselves, they don't work nine to five. They tend to put in the hours that they feel they need. We're not paying academics a huge amount of money. So you have to have a culture where there is respect for that. And what we are trying to evoke is that the academics feel that they have the autonomy. By doing that it evokes a culture where they are motivated by doing the best thing for the students; doing the best research they can. So when it comes down to the academic, individually, they are trying to do that rather than, as a line manager, me going, 'right okay, your duties, your activities today are this; this is your list; can*

*you get to those please'. And that might be a management style of work in some areas. I mean if you are working in like a call centre or something – very much directed. Whereas in academia, the leadership part of it is, trying to evoke that culture, where they feel that they are choosing.*

In Bolden et al., (2012), as cited earlier, the role of formal leadership is attributed to the development of the work environment in UK HE. However, in discussing the development of work environment, there are variations in the leadership considerations - be it perspective, activity and approach - at different operational levels of the university. David's account highlights a key element in the overall leadership consideration at the departmental / school level, namely that of sustaining an autonomous departmental culture. This is illustrated in describing the protection of "that space" in Dan's account and the description of autonomy in David's account. Moreover, there are instances where the leadership role identity is directly contrasted with the charismatic and directional tropes of leadership identities. Thus, from the two accounts cited so far, the leadership identity of the department head (when relating with their units) is closely defined in accord with academic values that are deemed to be crucial in the academic work environment. The facilitative nature that are associated with leadership roles in UK universities likewise can be attributed to structural factors in the vein of Middlehurst & Kennie, (1995) who note that "in many 'old' universities in the UK, devolution is already well established" (p.122). Nevertheless, the identity trope of the leader at the departmental level is observed to be founded on values that are distinctly academic and de-emphasise discourses of power and control that are typically associated with being a leader.

As such, Gary who leads the computer science department at RG3 frames his perspective on leadership as being primarily about ensuing that the academics within the department "feel valued". In expanding on this perspective, Gary akin to the other accounts of the RG sample, bases the conceptualisation of his leadership on his understanding of what motivates the academics within the department. In talking about his role as the leader, Gary foremost remarks,

*I'm the servant of everybody else in the [academic unit], so I'm here to serve and support, help them grow to be the best and to help them deliver to the best of their abilities. I'm not the boss and I know that that's, kind of, something that people confuse. That when they see the boss or hear about power, authority, they immediately say 'oh,*

*you can do things'. From the spiderman movie – with great control comes great responsibility. And the responsibility is the trickiest bit because anything you do, has a consequence on somebody. And you better think twice before you take any action, like, especially if [it is] disciplinary [in nature].*

As observed in the excerpt cited shortly, Gary's perspective on his leadership role, conceptualised as a predominantly through the function of offering support is noted to be grounded on his understanding of the academic community. Towards this, Gary remarks,

*The first thing is, what can I do to help people feel valued. Typically, people have to be self-motivated, you don't motivate them with carrots, not in academia – rarely. [...] Basically, the main issue with leadership, the main thing you need to deal with as a leader is human management. Mostly, I mean. Processes and paperwork or the environment, yes, they play a role. But at the end of the day, people's happiness depends very much on how they feel and how they feel depends very much on how you feel respected, valued, handled on an everyday basis. So, it's [leadership] not about business and delivery numbers in KPIs, which is something for senior management.*

Analogues to the accounts that precede it, cues that foreground the agency of academics within the department is noted to be significant in the way Gary frames his leadership role within the department. Likewise, Gary's account on leadership, de-emphasises discourses of command and control that corresponds to the way leadership is generally conceptualised by the participants in the Russel Group category.

The discussion on autonomy as a cue within the academic community that influences the nature of leadership, thus far, has engaged with the concept on a predominantly theoretical basis as a central affect in the way departmental heads define their role identities. And, despite the emphasis on autonomy that varies with popular tropes of leadership, the unit leader's role nevertheless exerts a degree of leadership influence on the department. This implies that the aforementioned themes of autonomy and a devolved nature of leadership, does not entail the absence of influence altogether. In the level of practice, sustaining the value of autonomy operates in concert with a sense of direction that the formal leader plays a part in setting. Mike who heads a physical science unit at RG7 elucidates this point. He remarks, "I am very much a believer in autonomy. [However] no one has such a degree of autonomy that they can just do

whatever the hell they want. If I asked someone to teach a unit, I'm very keen that they have a great deal of autonomy on how they deliver it, the structure, and so forth". In further reflecting on the value of academic autonomy and its influence on his leadership role, Mike notes that:

> *I think the idea is whenever someone has to take on a job, you give them as clear of a parameter as you possibly can, about the expectations. And then, within that, you can give them absolutely as much autonomy and freedom and control as you possible can.*

However, Mike's account provides an insight into the challenges that can be encountered in consolidating the domains that are essentially academic, with his role as a formal leader. He notes that this process of consolidation has been particularly challenging by remarking:

> *If I were to be really critical of myself in the past, I think there's elements where either, that wasn't clear because I thought like 'Oh well, you know, be creative; bring what you want to add'. Whereas actually if I'd been a little bit more clear on expectations, it might've helped. Or there were times where I just assumed that the expectations were clear and it was not.*

With the headship role undertaken by tenured academics at the professorial level, incorporating a managerial approach to values that are essential to the academic community is observed to be a particularly significant challenge encountered by formal leaders in their practice. More specifically, this process of alternating between the role identity of an academic to that of the "manager academic" engenders notable tensions for the role holder. In the accounts provided by the Russell Group participants, the challenges encountered in the process of alternating between the separate facets of the leadership role, features prominently in seven of the ten accounts in the sample. As such, the challenges that are mentioned in the process of alternating between the separate facets of the formal leadership role will be illustrated in the section 5.4.

### 5.3.2 Efficacy, Attainment and Performance in Post 1992 Accounts

The theme of facilitating a community culture, analogous to the RG accounts, features prominently in the way that the leadership role is conceptualised by the post 92 departmental heads. All six participants who undertake leadership responsibilities of an academic unit remark on the importance of creating a culture and or community as a leadership responsibility

in their roles. As such, a central responsibility of the leadership role is ascribed to the creation of a work culture and or community for the departmental stakeholders. However, as noted above, the accounts provided by the participants indicate differences in the values that underpin the aforementioned culture, in juxtaposition to the RG accounts. The values that are highlighted, which operate as cues that pertain to the relational nexus of the department, is indicative of the distinctive work environment of the units in the two university types and, consequently, denote the concomitant requirements expected of the formal leader.

In the accounts delineated subsequently, the work culture that the formal leader seeks to create, principally emphasise the values of competency, attainment of objectives and performance. As such, the conceptualisation of the leadership role does not feature the de-emphasised leadership tope as observed in the accounts of the RG leaders. In connection to this point, Middlehurst & Elton (1992), provide a historical perspective of the structure in polytechnics by stating that "polytechnics have developed a different structure [in comparison to 'old universities'], more akin to that of traditional business structures, in which there is no clear distinction between leadership and management. The directorate comprises full time managers with discrete areas of responsibility and accountability" (p. 257).

The observation from Middlehurst and Elton (1992), offers a perspective into the historical roots of the structural configurations of post 1992 universities that is, over time, observed to confer a structural "inheritance" that "adopted management structures that were closer to the corporate sector" (Middlehurst, 2013, p. 265).Having said that, managerialism as an operational ideology and framework is pervasive in contemporary UK HE, irrespective of university type (see literature review). However, as it pertains to organisational identity, individual agents and discrete institutions possess a degree of agency in either emphasising or de-emphasising historical images of identity (Middlehurst, 1993). As such, the accounts delineated in the following section provides an insight into the way that the role identity of the unit leader is conceptualised by the leaders in the sample of this research. This establishes an avenue to further discuss leadership identities within the managerialist framework of UK HE, which will be addressed in the discussion chapter.

In the account provided by Phil who oversees the operations of a psychology unit at PT6, working "toward a common goal" is observed to be a foundational tenet of the way leadership is conceptualised by him. As such, an aspect of the leadership role is described in terms of the

responsibility of ensuing the availability of "resources" and "structures" that can enable "useful contribution". Phil remarks,

> *I think leadership is about providing direction for people and providing direction for the activities that an organisation is undertaking. It's about providing a framework for people to work in, so that they feel that they're making a valid and useful contribution. [For the leader, this entails] providing the resources, the structures that they [the academics within the unit] need to be able to do the best possible job that they can do. So, for me personally, leadership is about working with people to help everybody work toward a common goal.*

Fundamentally, analogous to the RG sample, the function of leadership is associated with the responsibility of creating a certain culture and or community within the department in the accounts of the post 92 leaders. As is noted in the accounts that will be cited subsequently, the role of the leader is observed to be conceptualised as a creator of an efficacious work environment. However, relative to the values cited by the RG leaders, differences are observed in the values that are cited as underpinning the notion of an efficacious work environment. For instance, Phil in elaborating on the values that underpins his leadership practice, highlights the value of ambition. He remarks,

> *I think ambitious[ness]; but not in terms of just my own personal success but it's ambitious[ness] for the people as well. So ambitious[ness] to try and support people to achieve the next thing for them and making sure that we can put in place the infrastructure and the support that they need to be able to see that next success in the areas that they are passionate about. And to provide them with the help [needed] to lay out the plans that they need to achieve those ambitions.*

In the cited excerpts from Phil's account, the topic of providing resources and establishing infrastructure is noted as an affect in the reflections on his role as a leader. Comparable descriptions that pertain to the corresponding issue of resources can also be noted in the accounts of other post 92 leaders, which will be highlighted in due course. Given the contextual comparison being undertaken between leaders in the Russell group and post 92' universities in this research, a notable study by Boliver, (2015) that compares the apparent clusters of universities in UK HE finds that "a stark division is evident between Old pre 1992 universities

on the one hand and the New post- 1992 universities on the other hand, with large differences evident in terms of research activity, economic resources, academic selectivity and social mix" (p. 623). The cluster analysis conducted by Boliver based on the institutional types in UK HE suggests that the divisions between pre- and post-1992 universities entail varying implications on the way that the universities are led. With regards to leadership roles, the attributes ascribed to the role identities provide an insight to the varying demands encountered in the two contexts.

Continuing with the attributes ascribed to the unit leader's role identity within the department, Anton who leads a computer science unit at PT2 provides a markedly systematic conceptualisation of leadership in his account. It should be noted that Anton specifically mentioned that his experiences in industry, where the idea of leadership predominantly pertains to achieving targets, were a prominent part of his personal development. As such, Anton begins by providing a conceptual description of his perspective on leadership. He remarks,

> *I'm a big fan of maturity models. I don't know if you've run across them. I started off with maturity models in software engineering [industry experience], when you looked at the capabilities of an organisation and there are five levels in a capability maturity matrix and what you're trying to do is to get up to level 5. Most organisations at level 0 [are] chaotic. Things get done and they can even succeed but they're not sustainable because you rely on heroes to make things work. There aren't any repeatable processes; you end up having to reinvent the wheel every time. When you go up the steps of the capability matrix, the first thing you do is you put processes in place and you sort of constrain things. But in doing that you start to create a culture around quality and the excellence that you want to deliver.*

As noted in the cited excerpt above, Anton's conceptualisation of leadership emphasises the aspect of enhancing the capacity of the organisation to work efficiently. Consequently, in offering the context of his headship role to the conception of leadership described above, a corresponding emphasis on structure and developing capacity is noted. Towards this, Anton remarks,

> *As [a unit leader], my responsibility is to deliver on the business. Which is, I can best describe as aligning and delivering everybody's goals to school, faculty and organisational goals and strategy. And the second is organisational development and*

*individual staff development. So my job is to develop and improve the capability of the organisation in the academic sense. So that means better learning and teaching, student experience and student attainment and most importantly, these days, student employability. So being able to develop the organisation to be able to be more capable of doing these things better. [...] On the micro level, I've got to make sure that I am either personally developing all my line management structure or developing individuals within that so that they become more capable, more able to deliver better quality for the faculty. But also the great side effect of that is, it also helps them advance their careers because they are gathering skills and of course, the perfect thing is when they develop those skills and those capabilities and they stay with us.*

In the accounts of the leaders in the post 92 sample, the leadership role within the department is noted to be grounded on cues of enhancing the capacity of the unit. There are indications to suggest that this could, in part, be ascribed to the contextual differences that entails a host of operational realities as demonstrated by Boliver's cluster analysis of institutional types in UK HE (cited in preceding paragraphs). To this point, Jack who leads a languages unit in PT3, mentions that "survivalism" that features as a consideration in his leadership practice. As such, the aspect of entrepreneurialism is noted as a cue in the way that he conceptualises his leadership role. He remarks,

*I think my leadership has coincided with a period of very proactive senior leadership at the university, which has been very supportive to me and very entrepreneurial. I think that's the main thing - an entrepreneurial Vice Chancellor. And I'm quite an entrepreneurial head. So, I've had a lot of things backed, which have required quite a lot of investment, which perhaps wouldn't have happened in other circumstances.*

Along with the emphasis on entrepreneurship as an attribute to his leadership, the allusion to the working relationship with "senior leadership" is a notable point in the discussion on leadership at the departmental level in UK HE. This is focused in the subsequent research question (RQ2) on the dynamics of hierarchical interactions. In further elaborating on the entrepreneurial aspect of his leadership role, Jack remarks,

*You know, I need to be doing [as a leader of the department] something which is a little bit less operationally hand to mouth. Because, there's always a lot of survivalism in*

*doing a job like this and a lot of reactiveness, particularly in a period like the one we've been through [Covid 19 pandemic]. So I would like a period of work which is a little more about long term projects and a little less about just keeping the show on the road.*

The focus on enhancing the capacity of the department, albeit framed in slightly different ways, is observed to be a leadership consideration for leaders in the post 92 sample. Jack's account highlights the focus on entrepreneurship that is noted as a leadership concern as the formal department leader. In a similar vein, the theme of developing the department's capacity is observed as a cue in the way that James frames his leadership role of an information science unit at PT3. Towards this, James remarks,

*How I understand the notion of leadership is that I like to lead by example, lead by consensus and lead from the front. And ensure that my staff understands that I am here to serve them, not in terms of putting myself in a subordinate hierarchy but I'm here to serve them, which means that I am here to guide, nurture and protect their subject area and give them the opportunity in which they and their subject area can thrive.*

In James' account, the leadership role is conceptualised with an emphasised element of proactivity and being 'hands on'. The observation in James' account of his role as proactive, pertains specifically to the way that the leadership role is conceptualised. As such, this is not to circuitously imply that the phenomenon of leadership in the RG sample and in general, is not proactive. Rather, the implication is that a divergent emphasis on devolution and a de-emphasis on 'leading' is observed in the way that the Russel Group participants have conceptualised their leadership roles. Moreover, the overarching theme of 'enhancing the capacity of the department' that is attributed as a central purpose of leadership by participants of the post 92 sample, indicates an underlying distinction in the expectations and requirements of departmental leaders in either context (Russel Group and Post 1992). Consequently, taking note of the distinctions in the experiences of leadership practice in each institutional context provides a set of considerations for what effective leadership entails for individual's incumbent or expected to occupy the role of the unit leader. The implications of the observed variance in the emphasis on cues will be considered in greater depth in the discussion chapter that follows.

### 5.3.3 Inclusivity and Equity in Russell Group Accounts

Continuing the analysis on the considerations that shape the beliefs of the participants on their leadership role identity within the department, the values of equity and inclusivity are observed to feature prominently in the definition of being a departmental leader in the Russell Group sample. In highlighting these values as central to leadership, the role of the department head – as stated at the start of this chapter – is framed principally as a facilitator of the aforementioned cultural values within the department. As such, departmental culture is highlighted as the predominant focus of leadership activity in the RG sample and accomplishing the role of the formal leader is, to a large extent, described in relation to the importance of these values within the unit.

The value of inclusivity, specifically as it pertains to decision making, is observed to as an affect within the department in the Russell Group. Five out of twelve participants emphasise the importance of including non leadership stakeholders within the academic unit in the decision-making process. Concurrently, the processes of ensuring inclusivity is complex and the participants provide an insight into the aspect of leadership required to facilitate inclusivity, that is distinct from the managerial aspect of their role. As such, Clive who leads a physical science unit in RG2 frames the leadership context by stating that "everybody has a voice within the organisation". In elaborating on the implication for his leadership practice, Clive notes that it is important "to consult, even though sometimes, you've got to make decisions that go against what people want". Further sharing his experiences as a department head, Clive's remarks (cited shortly) provide an insight into the dynamics within an academic unit that indicates the importance of sustaining particular values for the working culture of the unit. He remarks, "inevitably, just to ensure that people have a chance to talk things through. […] it became very clear to me early on that the hierarchies within the organisation actually impacts upon performance. So you know, there was division between academics, technicians, administrators and there were some quite negative behaviour around".

In Clive's account, emphasis is made on the value of equality. In providing his perspective on an "effective community", Clive highlights the value of equality as the central driver that has aided his leadership over a large unit. Moreover, echoing the fundamental premise of leadership impacting and being impacted by the relational nexus of the stakeholders within the department, Clive assigns the domain of leadership as pertaining to "the people side of things". As such, in responding to question on the meaning of leadership, he remarks,

*I've always seen leadership primarily as being about the people. So, sciences is a large [unit], you know, we have [over] 330 staff and [over] 1500 students. And for me [as the formal leader], the real driver was creating a community that worked effectively together, which recognised the achievements of everybody and really gave equality of opportunity. For me, that was the number one driver. And yes, you are bombarded with university policy and performance drivers and stuff like that, but I always try and keep my focus on the people side of things.*

The accounts provided by the participants indicates that the aspect of leadership – in contrast with the managerial aspects that are entailed in a formal leadership role – revolve around sustaining values (some of which are highlighted in this research) that are implicit to an academic context / work environment. Thus, relative to the managerial duties that are grounded on various processes and systems, the way that leadership is conceptualised by the participants indicates the propagation of values by the formal leader that are implicit in the academic community. Accomplishing leadership entails an informed sense of the unit's culture, the academic work environment, and the stakeholders within the department. Nevertheless, Clive shares his experiences of striving to mitigate the aforementioned "negative behaviour" on account of the established hierarchies in his unit. He remarks:

*You know, before unconscious bias was a big thing, we were doing unconscious bias sessions within the [unit]. And we created some scenarios where we brought together the staff who wouldn't normally talk to each other as people. So let's get the secretaries to sit down with Professor X. [...] And that made a big difference to the culture of the [unit]. And we did that quite early on.. And it meant that everybody felt more recognised for what they were doing, that made them feel more motivated to do things and it just broke down the barriers. And we tried to do that as much as possible and in the same way in the academic job faculty.*

In a similar vein, Adam who leads a unit of ancient history and culture at RG9 foregrounds the importance of inclusivity in decision making. Adam's except (cited shortly) that expounds on the centrality of participative decision making, assumes an additional degree of significance when discussing the importance of transparency and inclusivity in cross level leadership

interactions (subsequent chapter on RQ2). As such, Adam highlights the significance of participation of the varied stakeholders within the unit. He remarks,

> *One value would be that, as far as possible, colleagues [and] students, participate in decision making and are informed about what is going on. What to say at all times. I don't quite mean it like that but I think that the decision making needs the participation [of the stakeholders] and there needs to be a sense of ownership. That [should be the] way that the [unit] and the university works, from IT staff and students. And I think that it's an important value to hold because its, what would seem to me, inherent in the idea of the university in its traditional sense I suppose. And the idea of academic openness and inquiry. And that value should operate in a management sense as well.*

Sluss & Ashforth, (2007)note that "a relational identity, focuses on that portion of the role-based identity that is more or less directly relevant to one's role – relationships" (p. 12). Considering the unit leader's role as it pertains to the relational nexus of the department i.e., stakeholders within the department, the beliefs on leadership that are attributed by the leaders provide an indication on the nature of enactment that are most appropriate and effective for the specific relational nexus in question. For instance, Sluss and Ashforth draw on Witt et al., (2002) study to highlight the observation that "conscientiousness coupled with agreeableness, predicted higher job performance in jobs requiring cooperative interactions than jobs requiring little to no cooperation" (p. 12). In addition to providing insights in into the nature of departmental leadership that is most appropriate in different institutional context (RG and post 92 in this study), the dimension of the discipline is noted to be a further determining factor in the approach to leadership required. To this point, Kekäle's (1999) study into leadership styles of different disciplines hypotheses that academics of different disciplines prefer different leadership styles. The influence of the discipline is observed to become a larger factor in the unit leader's leadership practice when leading 'without' the department (as observed in the analysis of RQ2). Although there were some indications of disciplinary variations in the conceptualisation of the unit leader's role 'within' the department, they were sporadic to make any substantive claims. Moreover, the institutional type is observed to play a bigger role on the leadership approach when leading 'within' the department.

As observed in the accounts cited above, within the relational nexus of the academic unit – department and or school -  ensuring that the decision making is an inclusive process is an

important aspect of for RG leaders. Accordingly, Michelle who leads a multidisciplinary psychology unit in RG4 acknowledges the importance as well as the challenges that accompany adopting an inclusive approach to decision making. She remarks that it is important to,

*Aspire towards being as transparent as possible, while recognising that sometimes you can't be fully transparent. And simply, with consultation, there comes a point where you have to make decisions. And some people will not be happy with those decisions but at least, leading up to those [decisions]; trying to be transparent and consultative; tyring to be inclusive because that is something again, you know, being a woman [...] I am aware that people can be left out of decision making. Not deliberately but by oversight; or it can be hard for them to be involved. So trying to make sure that you are able to acknowledge and listen to as wide a range of voices as possible and trying to think about what is best for the school as a whole.*

By addressing the importance of being transparent and inclusive, Michelle's account foregrounds the significance of the formal leader in substantiating the cultural arena of the unit in keeping with tenets of the academic workplace. As such, in keeping with the discussion on the beliefs that shape the leadership identity of the unit leader, the relational nexus of the academic unit and the values that are central to it are observed to be a factor that shapes the role identity of the formal leader. To this point, Kekäle, (1995) observes that "the issues of academic leadership and culture are intertwined in a circular process: leaders may contribute to the formation of the culture in their department, and the established culture, in turn, may start to limit and direct also their own action" (p. 220). Moreover, in Michelle's case, her identity as a woman is raised as a key affect that further consolidates the value of inclusivity in her role as the formal leader of the school. As noted by Sluss & Ashforth, (2007), relational identities such as role identities in organisations are affected by "person-based identities" that influences the way that the role holder experiences and accomplishes their organisational roles. In the HE context of unit leaders in post 1992 universities, Floyd et al., (2011) observed that "multiple identities" existed within the role such as "being a mother and an academic" (p.391) and that "individuals experiences and cope with these multiple identities in different ways" (p. 391). Thus, the realm of "personal identity" is noted to be a factor in the way that the role holder experiences and shapes their leadership role and is identified as an area to be explored in greater detail.

Likewise, Mike who leads a physical science unit in RG7 highlights the value of inclusivity as one that has been a central focus of his tenure as unit leader. Analogous to the facilitator trope of leadership that is observed, Mike's account of his leadership practice centres around creating a community and in the excerpt cited, identifying issues and the corresponding avenues to enhance the community in his unit. As such, the distinctive aspect of leadership relative to the managerial or administrative aspects, is noted to encompass an active consideration of the unit culture. Responding to the question about the values that have been central in his leadership, Mike remarks,

> *From my point of view, I start out with the EDI values and principles. As the head of [the academic unit], I'm very keen on diversifying our discipline. Our [unit] has a pretty good gender balance but it's very very white. We have almost no BME staff and not that many students. So diversity I think has been a long standing challenge and to me [...] but that's more of a strategy – how do we become more diverse. The values that comes from this [considerations of issues such as diversity] are the values of equity and inclusion and actually that plays out, no matter what the demographic of your [unit] is. Obviously for me, it's very much around ensuring that when we do recruit minoritised students and minoritised staff, we recognise principles of equity [in the support provided].*

Foremost, Mike's account is illustrative of the variation in the leadership tasks that are pertinent for distinct role holder in different institutions. As observed in the excerpt cited, the issue of diversity is identified as an area of enhancement in Mike's tenure as the unit leader. However, akin to other RG accounts, there is a degree of similarity in positing the role of the formal leader, predominantly, as a facilitator of cultural values within the school and or department. As such, Mike further expounds on the competing considerations that could prove "tricky" for the formal leader in seeking to implement various values in the unit's culture. He observes,

> *I make a big deal about equity rather than equality because I recognise that everybody will be in a different situation. This is a tricky one because, you know, as a head of [the academic unit] it is easy to adopt a principle of like 'im just going to treat everybody the same'. I was very lucky in coming to a school that had already establishes that principle. We have [research] fellows of xx who teach, they have the exact same teaching load as senior lecturers, as early career staff, so we already have principles*

*of equality. And all I needed to do was to introduce this idea of equity, which is, that certain people at certain times in their lives will need maybe more or different support.*

The values of equality and equity, as noted by Mike, can be 'tricky' to navigate and is observed to coalesce in the way that it features in the leadership practice of the department heads. Adam who leads the ancient history and culture unit at RG9 speaks to this when expounding on the values that are central to this leadership. He remarks,

*Another value [which is important to leadership] is fairness to staff and students throughout, you know, to do the best by them – everyone at all levels within the department. And not prioritise, you know, professors over junior lecturers or whatever else; in fact, if anything [the priority should be] the other way around. You know, it's about giving everyone, as much as possible, a sort of fair workload and a voice. Those sort of principles of justice seem to be really important to keep in mind at all times.*

The notion of fairness in Adam's account corresponds closely to the notion of equity. Furthermore, Adam addresses the varying discourses that can conflict on account of the varying relational nexuses that a formal navigates in their leadership role. More specifically, the cultural values that are regarded as integral within the unit is indicated to potentially conflict with values that are pertinent to the wider operations of the university as an institution. And, analogous to the earlier subsection on the role identities that the unit leader navigates, Adam frames his leadership role within the academic unit as a figure to safeguard those values. Toward this, he remarks,

*It's important to, kind of, remind ourselves and hold as a value, what we consider a university being for. And for me universities are about education and about changing the world around us for the better. We're not about making money but it can be hard at times to remember those sorts of values for the institution, when so much of the language and so much of the communication is around markets and finance and everything else in it. So, I think, holding on to some of those values I think [that inspires] the reason to work in higher education in the first place [are important]. [this entails] being fair to colleagues and having a kind of participative approach to leadership, are core values that I try and hold on to. Not always easy, of course, but yeah.*

In the above cited excerpt, Adam alludes to the distinct discourses and their concomitant considerations that engages the formal leader at the level of the academic unit. The variance in the role identity of the unit leader when navigating between distinct relational nexuses namely, the nexus 'within' the department and the nexus of the institution in the process of mediating, will be subsequently delineated when describing the values that are ascribed to their role as the mediator between structural levels. Moreover, the process of switching between identity constructs that entail distinct value systems is observed to engender conflicts in the leadership experiences of formal leaders at the departmental level. As such, the subsequent sections (section 5.4) will delineate this aforementioned conflict that is observed in the account of the participants of the RG sample.

An emphasis on citizenship values within the academic unit are noted to characterise the conceptualisation of leadership in the above cited accounts. And as noted earlier, establishing the departmental culture is equated with the role of the formal leader when leading 'within' the academic unit. As such, in expressing his experience of leadership practice, Richard who leads the computer science unit at RG1 encapsulates the academic context that the requires the aforementioned approach to leadership. On this, he remarks

> *There's quite a difference between an abstract concept of leadership in organisations and the realities of academic leadership. You find this when you look at leadership development materials and so forth, which are often conceived for business environments that are very different from an academic environment. So I think, one of the first things one has to recognise about leadership in an academic world is that sensors and the actuators, the knobs that you can turn, are very different in an academic environment from a more conventional command and control structure of the kind that you might find in a well run business. So, people often assume that the [unit leader] as the leader, can just sort of, turn the wheel and the ship will go in another direction. It's not that simple. If you're the head of the academic school, you have to go dine below decks and persuade the engineers, the people pulling the oars, to start going in a different direction. And they don't have to if they don't want to. So, the amount of control that one has is actually limited to one's persuasiveness probably. And so, a major part of academic leadership is reconciling the needs of the institution as a whole with the priorities of the individuals in it. And that to a much greater degree than might be the case in other settings.*

Richard's account on his leadership practice reflects the accounts cited in section 5.3.1 that have similarly highlighted the distinctive nature of the academic nexus, within which the role of the formal leader operates. As such, the question of leadership at the level of the academic unit centres around the values and principles of the unit as the primary relational nexus. In the case of the Russell Group universities, academic autonomy is observed to be a foundational value in the way that the nexus of the academic unit is perceived and defined by the formal leaders. Furthermore, the role of the formal leader in accomplishing leadership- on that basis - is ascribed to facilitating a culture that upholds the values that are elementary to the relational nexus of the academic unit.

### 5.3.4 Teaching and Proactivity in Post 1992 Accounts

As established, an organisational role identity operates within relational nexuses. And in the case of the formal leader in this study, the academic unit represents a salient relational nexus that shapes and is shaped by the leadership practice of the formal leader. Having identified the cues that the unit leaders have used to describe their role and practice, notions of efficacy and performance (as delineated in prior sections) are noted to be emphasised in the accounts of post 92 leaders in the description of their leadership roles. And as observed in the excerpts cited subsequently, the emphasis on proactivity in the leadership role is further described as a key consideration in the excerpts cited subsequently. More specifically, the focus on teaching is highlighted as an activity that require an engaged approach to leadership by the unit head. Research demonstrates (Smith, 2002) that post 92 universities are traditionally considered to be "teaching intensive", denoting the precedence that the activity of teaching takes over research in comparison to pre 1992 universities. The accounts cited subsequently indicate that the activity of teaching features as a consideration that influence the approach to leadership required of the unit leader within the academic unit.

Steve who leads a psychology unit at PT5 elaborates on his perspective of "good leadership". As will be observed in Steve's except, engaging proactively with the departmental mandates are described as central to his leadership practice. Toward this, he remarks,

*[The] trick to good leadership [is that] you have to embody the principles. You have to be the thing that you want others to be. [...] there is a policy in this school that everyone teaches, regardless of whether you are a superstar professor [or not]. [Granted] they don't all teach the same amount but everybody gets in front of the students, including the head of school. And so, you know, I made sure that I teach on the first module in the first year and I do workshops with the students as well. So at least I can turn around to my colleague and say that we're going to have to do more teaching. I'm part of that. And no, its not me imposing something. I'm not Lord Melchett from Black Adder, sitting on my comfortable ... you know. I might not be the first over the barricades but I am, at least, in the trenches.*

In a similar way, James who leads an information science unit at PT3 emphasises the proactivity of the leader in what is termed as "lead[ing] by example" in his account of his leadership practice. Analogous to Steve's conceptualisation of leadership, James highlights the importance of taking an active part in his approach to leadership. He remarks,

*Like I mentioned, one of the most important values [of leadership] is that you've got to be willing to be seen to lead by example. You can't ask your colleagues or encourage your colleagues to do anything that you're not prepared to do yourself and to do well. So, on that score, whilst not every head of school or head of department in every university still teaches or still does research, I insist on still doing both. It's because I want to lead by example. If I'm asking my colleague to teach and to teach excellently, then I have to come prepared to do that and also be measured by the same yardstick that they are measured by in terms of the health and metrics of the modules or the units we run. Likewise, if I'm expecting and encouraging colleagues to do research and three- and four-star research, in research excellence framework terms, I've got to do that research too.*

With regards to the description of leadership practice in Steve and James' account, the values of proactivity and active engagement, in isolation, could be said to illustrate standard leadership behaviour. However, in positing the formal leaders' experiences within a relational nexus, the context of leading an academic unit in a post 92' university assumes a greater degree of significance in informing the aforementioned perspective of leadership propounded by the participants. As noted earlier, the academic units in Pre and Post 92 universities are noted to

entail varying degrees of emphasis along the teaching and research dimension of academic activity. With Post 92 universities acknowledged to be more teaching centric, the above cited accounts allude to a relatively engaged style of leadership as being more pertinent within the departmental nexus.

**5.4 Navigating between Role Identities – Academic to Academic Manager**

The leadership role 'within' the academic unit, as relayed by the RG leaders, is constructed (by the participants) on the basis of core values of academia (such as academic autonomy) that underpins the meaning of leadership at the departmental level. As discussed in the literature review, there is an apparent resistance to the notion of leadership in academia that pertains, to an extent, to the managerialist connotations and the power dynamics that accompany it. Nevertheless, the unit leader's role invariably entails attending to decision and responsibilities that are markedly managerial and administrative. As such, the process of navigating between value systems that can be incongruous is observed to as a point of tension in the leadership practice of middle leaders. Arthur who leads the History unit at RG10, highlights the "emotional labour" that accompanies the more managerialist aspect of his leadership role. Performance management is mentioned as the specific area of tension in Arthur's account. He remarks:

> *There's also the emotional labour of dealing with, you know, colleagues whose performance may need to be enhanced or maybe called out. I mean, fortunately, I am part of a really good [unit] but my first year in the job, there were times when I felt like I was the line manager for one particular individual. And that would impose quite a lot of strain. It was probably the most stressed I've been in my academic career. Not to any debilitating extent but, it was you know, it was one of those things that occupied your thoughts on mornings. That's something that I expected possibly, you know, but it's not something to welcome.*

The context of pre 1992 universities impacts the considerations in discussing the process of manoeuvring between role identities for the unit head. Jackson (1992) indicates that the "tensions and ambiguities" that are inherent in the headship role are exacerbated in pre 1992 universities where the role is "temporary and a career route is likely to be one seen as best pursued through research" (p. 148). The experiences of practitioners of navigating between the

discrete aspects of the formal leadership role provides an insight into the added pressures that accompany that ongoing process. Further expounding on stresses that accompany the role identity of the department head, Gabe (Education, RG4) and Michelle's (Psychology, RG4) accounts calls attention to the isolating and solitary position that the role holder comes to inhabit.

In both accounts, Gabe and Michelle's, the process of decision making on behalf of his department and the solitary position that the formal leader finds themselves in is raised. On this Gabe remarks, "I mean, I do depend on colleagues and I get a lot of support as well to help solve those problems. But I think, ultimately, you stand alone as a leader, despite all the support you get. [And] sometimes, you are the last person that has to make a decision on something and you've got to take responsibility for it". Correspondingly, Michelle elaborates on the duress that is entailed in making a decision in the academic unit as a formal leader. Prior to elaborating on the pressures, she refers to the discrete relational nexuses that influences her leadership role. She states, "So one thing about being the Head of [an academic unit] is that you are caught in the middle, it's quite a lonely role. Because you are trying to protect the people below you from the demands coming from above. But you can't necessarily tell everybody everything". Thus, in navigating the varying demands, Michelle expands on the pressures that she encounters in her leadership practice. She remarks that, on occasions, it's like "having a target painted on you. You become the person who the anger or frustration is directed and at the same time you are representing your school above. So you [also] become the target for 'why is your [unit] not doing x, y and z'. And it's a lonely road because you can't really confide in anybody. And that's the one thing that I found hardest about taking the role on".

Given the influence of discrete relational nexuses that entail the interests on departmental stakeholders as academic peers on one hand and the interests of department as a unit within the institution on the other, the responsibility of the formal leader to partake in key decisions on departmental matters presents as being a key area in the way that the leadership role is experienced by the role holder. Although the evaluation of sentiment of the leadership experience has been beyond the remit of this research, a cursory reading of the themes is suggestive of an overall arduous feeling attached to this process of navigating between facets of the role identity as the unit head. Likewise, the accounts of David (Physical science, RG8) and Harry (Computer Science, RG2) further discusses the challenges of balancing the discrete

value systems in making decisions as an academic manager, on account of the proximity between the two facets of the role identity.

In elaborating on his experiences of making hard decisions, David highlights the importance of prioritising the culture of the unti as the focal point that informs the decisions being made. He starts by remarking on the consequences that accompanied those decision by saying, "Now I got kicked back and all sorts of other things [but] I'm giving you [the researcher] my rose-tinted glasses. But it's doing some of the things that weren't popular with everybody. […] Well in the end, I did get involved in making redundancies in one area of the [unit]. So yeah, that were the challenges but part of the challenge is, 'what is the culture you're trying to evoke'". Providing his perspective on the topic, Harry reflects on a conversation with the previous role holder on the most challenging aspects of the role. He remarks, "he said, one of the hardest thing about being head of [the academic unit] is that you're deflecting stuff from 'on high', but you're the only person who knows that you're deflecting stuff from on high. Because if you successfully deflect it then the school doesn't know about it. And it's one of these things where you can't tell anybody 'by the way I told them to do this and I told them not to do that. So you sort of have an interesting dynamic of, you seem to sometimes feel like your battling things from up high and sometimes you're battling lower down as well".

For academics who assume the role of the formal leader, the above cited accounts in articulating the challenge of alternating between discrete facets of the role, highlights the complexities of defining a shared social identity in formal leadership practice. Research on leadership identities such as Haslam et al (2003) note the importance of articulating and identifying with a shared social identity for leadership to be occur. They state that "for true leadership to emerge – that is for leaders to motivate followers to contribute to the achievement of group goals – leaders and followers must define themselves in terms of a shared social identity" (Bolden et al., 2012, p. 10). In exploring the aspects of the role identity, the accounts provided by the participants suggests that formal leadership role at the level of the academic unit is characterised by a tension between the academic and the managerialist facets of the role. Leadership at different levels of the organisational structure in a university entails varying pressures and demands on the leader that could have implications in instances of cross – level leadership interactions. This will be explored in the discussion chapter (chapter 6). In offering her experiences of this challenge, Maria (Education, RG5) reflects that in instances such as "working with unions and working in challenging situations where there have been difficulties

and grievances […] were the things that I found most difficult". In further reflecting on the solutions in mitigating the challenges, she states that "using people to support me in the right way. I've learnt quickly that asking for support in those ways [is very useful] to turn everything around".

The experiences of the Russell Group participants highlight the tensions that are prevalent when the unit leader navigates the various relational nexuses in their leadership practice. As a broader point that features in the literature, Deem and Johnson (2003) note a predisposition, in academics who take on managerial roles such as the Head of Department or Dean, to foreground their identity as academics over their managerial role identity. And despite a firmer entrenchment of managerialism in informing operations in universities since the early 2000s (Gibbs & Barnett, 2013), the question of identity alliance is noted to be a significant factor with regards to leadership. On this Bolden et al., (2012) observes that "affirming social identity is not just a case of articulating who 'we' are but also positioning 'us' vis a vis other social groups and is considered an essential component of effective leadership practice" (p. 10). Given the experience of the department heads (cited above), the varied dimensions of complexities including structural, social and cultural (Middlehurst et al., 2009) is noted to be a factor in the way middle leaders perceive, experience and potentially enact their leadership roles. More specifically, the tensions observed when navigating between relational nexuses that comprise of distinct values systems such as, entailed in accomplishing formal academic leadership on the one hand and managerialist responsibilities on the other, provides some direction in developing pertinent methods that can add to the areas of professional development for middle leaders in HE. This will be contemplated further in chapter 6 when discussing the findings.

In the post 92 cateogry, three out of the six formal leaders who lead a unit (department and or a school) have directly mentioned the challenges of navigating between relational nexuses. Similar themes – to the RG sample - of challenges encountered in navigating across relational nexuses are observed in the accounts of post 92 leaders. In the accounts cited subsequently, themes of isolation, the need to effectively juggle different value systems and maintaining the nuances of the discipline that are entailed in leading academics, are observed. Given that the leadership positions at the level of the academic unit are, in most cases, a permanent position in post 92 universities relative to the rotational system of pre 92 universities, the level and nature of conflict experienced by role holders in navigating the two facets – academic and manager – of identity presents as an interesting avenue of further exploration. Having said that,

it has to be noted that a number of post 92 universities have employed a rotational system in the appointment process of department heads (Jack at PT3). As such, Steve who leads a psychology unit at PT5 elaborates on the challenges of maintaining a "nurturing" ethos in his leadership practice within his school, under conditions of financial duress. He remarks,

> *The wish to be supportive, nurturing leader to the staff in the [academic unit], to give the junior colleagues the sense that their jobs are secure, that their careers are going to go well. That we are fair and decent and all the things that you would want to be. And then you go to a finance meeting where someone says that the university has lost 3 million pounds because they done their spree ... a financial hole ... you need to cut your budget by this. And you think geez. […] it's almost like being a parent for the first time. You know, you want your children to have a nurturing environment and the shit that's going on around, you [try to] keep [them away] from [it]. But once you've seen all that stuff, you can't un-see it. And it's not all about the money, it's sometimes about incompetence as well. And you try to do the right thing and you realise that you're bounded.*

Steve's account calls attention to the interdependency of his capacity as a leader within the academic unit, within his interactions with stakeholders at the institutional level. As observed, the instances of difficulty encountered within the relational nexuses beyond the academic unit are reported to disrupt and "bound" the capacity for leadership within the nexus of the unit. The specific nature and dynamics of difficulties reported by the unit leaders when mediating between institutional levels in their leadership practice is explored by the next research question. Nevertheless, in highlighting the inter-dependence of the two facets of the leadership identity, Steve's account illustrates the considerations entailed in navigating across dimensions of social complexity as a central function of the leadership role. Middlehurst et al., (2009) states that leadership practice entails "the need to recognise that higher education institutions contain multiple structures and cultures and that individuals within the different cultures are unlikely to conceptualise the organisation in identical ways, they may also have different expectations about how leadership and management is exercised" (p. 318). As observed in exploring the experiences of mediation with the next research question, the experiences of Steve exemplifies a contrast with that of Jack and James in the process of mediation, where the importance of a congruent interpersonal relationship with hierarchy is noted to be a factor in the capacity of the

unit leader. In talking about consequences of this aforementioned incongruence with hierarchy on his leadership within the academic unit, Steve explains,

> *So we have a planning round where a round of people come up with 'round' plans for the future. And you know that as soon as next year's student numbers come in and we haven't made our targets, those plans will be ripped up and you start again. And you think, why do we spend four months making this plan; you know, it's like we're going to sail off in that direction and two minutes late … oh no, we're going somewhere else now. And it's pretty de-spiriting. So you learn, like being a parent, you learn that you have to dissociate these two worldviews or these incompatible views and try and present the positive. You don't want to be [the unit leader] and say, 'this university is shit and you should leave'. That's a disaster! But you do see things and think 'really, are we doing that?' Like when we had that mad [senior leader], I mean some of things that [they] was doing was appalling. Financial things. You know, do you think that the people who really knew what Donald Trump was like, really thought that he was a great president? I don't think they probably did but they had to tell their followers how everything was wonderful. And once you've seen behind the curtain, I think it changes things.*

In illustrating the confluence of the "incompatible viewpoints" that refers to the contrasting nature of the leadership expectations across relational nexuses (within and without the academic unit), Steve's account highlights the concurrence of these demands in the leadership practice of the unit head. As such, further understanding the circumstances that allow for an effective transition between viewpoints for the practitioner, presents as a useful premise to explore. An analogous point of acknowledging the dual facets of the headship role is observed in James' (information science, PT3) account. As will be observed when addressing the next research question, a fundamental difference exists in Steve's and James's circumstances with regards to the favourability of the relationship with hierarchy. James, in comparison to Steve, reports a better relationship with his line manager. Thus, James' account lacks an emphasised description of tensions when navigating between role identities. Nevertheless, he remarks,

> *You've got to be both, a kind of leader in a managerial sense but also a leader in a service sense. And what that basically means is that, you are the champion and guarantor of everything that your department and your colleagues do. And you are the*

*one that creates the vision whilst also simultaneously encouraging and allowing colleagues to have their own licence to innovate within the confines of the vision. [...] You're a leader by consensus mostly and there are times when you have to be for the good of the individual colleague [and also] a leader by dictate on very rare occasions. But you always have to have the willingness to do that.*

Finally, Anton's account (Computer science at PT2) offers a broader comparative lens to the role of the leader by expanding on the expectations of the leader in industry and academia. As mentioned earlier, Anton draws on his experience in industry where he held a leadership position in a leading technology firm. In doing so, the analysis conducted in the prior sections that notes the role of the formal leader (in academia) as a facilitator of culture is reiterated. As such, the aspect of the leadership role that is alluded to by Steve as the "nurturing leader" and by James as "leader in a service sense" is described in terms of the emphasis on "empowerment" of the departmental stakeholders in Anton's account. The excerpt cited offers a perspective that discerns the nature of leadership that prevails when leading within the nexus of the academic unit. He remarks,

*I think that in industry there is a real understanding on the delivery side. That it's about delivering about what is promised. It's [about] a product on time, a profitable product, product revenue and profit at the end of the day. In theory, if I can deliver my revenue and profit targets or exceed them, I can spend three days on a golf course and it's all power to me – not that anyone would ever or has ever let me get away with that and I don't play golf by the way. I think when I contrast that with academia, it's a little bit more around, 'I did A,B,C,D,E, and it's not my fault that the results didn't come up, you know what I mean. But on the flipside, it gives you a certain amount of freedom and empowerment to innovate. [...]So, I've described it [industry leadership] as the responsibility to deliver results and holding people responsible – that's what [industry] leadership is about. I think the contrast is that, not that [responsibility] does not exist in academia, but the traditional balance in academia is having the empowerment and not so much responsibility to deliver. In industry, it tends to be that the responsibility to deliver is paramount [and that] sometimes negates the empowerment people get. You know, leaders in industry will get deeply involved in making sure that things run right because they can't afford them not to.*

**5.5 B. Role Identity 'Without' the Academic unit: Liaison between Institutional Levels**

The unit head, as prefaced in the prior sections, navigates a number of relational nexuses in their leadership practice. This research focused on two salient locales of leadership practice namely, of practice relating to the academic unit and its nexus of stakeholders and of practice relating to hierarchy and its nexus of stakeholders. As such, the expectations and requirements of the leadership role in each relational nexus entails addressing and acting on a distinct set of demands that vary across dimensions of cultural and social complexity for the unit head. While, as observed in the accounts and the themes identified in the preceding sections, the leadership role is predominantly conceptualised as a facilitator of departmental and or school culture, this section analyses the corresponding values that are attributed to accomplishing the role of linking institutional levels in the leadership practice of unit leaders.

As is observed in the following sections, the participants highlight the process of "mediation" (Arthur, History - RG10) as a central function of their leadership role. In elaborating on their experiences of accomplishing the function of mediation, the role of the formal leader is framed predominantly as an advocate, representing and upholding the unit's interest at the institutional level by the RG leaders. The accounts of post 92 leaders demonstrate an analogous conceptualisation of the mediatory role as the representative of the academic unit at the institutional level. On the basis of the participant's accounts of representing the department, the mutual construction of a role relationship (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007) between the unit head and the leadership stakeholder at the institutional level is observed as a notable process that foregrounds leadership practice and identity in the scenario of interaction between stakeholders at different institutional levels. The works of Sluss & Ashforth, (2007) is utilised in analysing excerpts from participant account to develop the preceding point in the following sections.

In comparison to the values that constitute the leadership role when leading 'within' the academic unit (elaborated in the prior sections), the accounts on performing the mediatory function of linking institutional levels illustrates the necessity of engaging with demands and values that, to an extent, may be incongruous with the ones encountered within the academic unit. Indeed, the role of the mediator as a central function of the formal leadership role (at the departmental level) operates amidst a distinct relational nexus, where the priorities of the university as a whole become active to a greater extent in the leadership practice of unit leaders. Thus, the accounts of the leaders in this study indicates the centrality of a congruent working relationship and the merits of constructive conversations with hierarchy, for effective cross

level leadership interactions. The themes in this section provide a basis to further explore the dynamics of cross level leadership interactions, which will be explored by RQ2.

**5.5.1 Representative of the Department (RG) and Aligning Missions (Post 92')**

In elaborating on the headship role, every participant in the sample points to the multifaceted nature of the leadership demands in their practice. Having said that, the activity of liaising between institutional levels is noted as a salient aspect of the headship role. Mike who leads a physical science unit in RG7 highlights the prevalence of departmental and institutional affects that informs middle leadership practice, on account of occupying the "junction" between two relational nexuses. He remarks,

> *At almost every university in the world, the [unit leader] sits at a junction between the senior team or the faculty and the academics actually doing the teaching and the research. And depending upon your point of view, you know, do you lean more towards: that your job is to get your school to deliver what the university wants you to or, is your job to advocate for your [unit] to be empowered to do the things that you want to do. [This] is a very interesting tension. Now at RG7, and certainly in my [unit], I'm very much in the latter category. I view my job as understanding how to communicate to the senior team and understanding their needs and understanding their strategy and understanding our obligations in terms of finances and such. But I view my job as advocating for my [unit]. Working with my [unit] to identify what they need to succeed and their priorities and then working with them to achieve those or push upwards to achieve those if there are barriers.*

The institutional versus department / school dynamic, alluded to in Mike's account, is explored further by the next research question. However, as it pertains to the current focus on the role of the unit head as the liaison between institutional levels, Mike frames this aspect of his leadership roles as an advocate for unit concerns at the institutional level. This is observed in the large majority of the RG leaders who have addressed this aspect of the role directly in the interview. Likewise, Adam who leads the ancient history and culture unit at RG9 foregrounds his account of liaising between institutional levels on representing the stakeholders and activities within his unit in an effective and competent manner. He observes,

*One of the critical things that it [being the unit leader] involves is being the voice for the subject in the university, for the [unit], the programmes, the students, the staff at the faculty level and the university level. So, it's taking on that role, to represent in some form, the [unit] at those higher levels in the institution. And in order for you to represent the [unit] in that level, you have to be in a position to know what the [unit] does and be able to speak for your colleagues and your programmes and your students knowledgably and eloquently at times.*

James who leads an information science unit at PT3 alludes to a similar premise of working with distinct viewpoints pertaining to the relational nexus of the academic unit on one side and the institution on the other, in his role of the mediator. In his account, the mediatory role is categorised as "the leadership challenge". Moreover, as noted earlier, the leadership practice of the unit leaders occurs concurrently between the aforementioned relational nexuses; therefore, James describes leadership as the ability to align priorities at both levels whilst maintaining the values that are ascribed as central to stakeholders within the department (see prior section). He remarks,

*It's the leadership challenge. Marrying the way in which the university centres itself and the faculty thinks about its academic [units], with what the colleagues at the chalkface actually feel. […] Somebody once said, the problem with universities in the UK is that at the top, they feel that they are a 21$^{st}$ century global corporation; but at the chalkface, everybody feels that they are a part of medieval guild and it's tricky marrying those two views together so that everybody gets what they want and need.*

As alluded to in the cited excerpt, the values and beliefs that prevail within the nexus of the academic unit remains as a core consideration in the process of aligning the viewpoints. In elaborating further on the process of aligning viewpoints, the frame of 'servant leadership' utilised by James that included values of guiding and nurturing the development of staff in his account on leading 'within' the academic department, is noted to be a central consideration. He remarks,

*You know, the rule of thumb is that if the university asks you to do something, you either do it or you demonstrate that you have a plan [to do otherwise]. Then the fun work begins because you then need to sell this to your colleagues at the chalkface. […] So I*

*often come back to the phrase that Harry S Truman said, which he said that, 'it's amazing what you can get done if you don't mind who takes credit for it'. And so, one of the perspectives for enacting leadership is seeding ideas to individuals. Letting them flourish with the idea and letting them take credit for doing what needed to be done in the first place. And then everybody wins because the [unit] is them seen to have developed good performance. The individual colleague has actually innovated and has grown as an individual and now got a set of materials that they can refer to for progression.*

Sluss & Ashforth, (2007) define relational identity as "the nature of one's role relationships, such as manager-subordinate and coworker – coworker. It is how role occupants enact their respective roles vis-à-vis each other. […] Indeed, it is relational identities that knit the network of roles and role incumbents together into a social system" (p. 11). As such, given the various role identities – with distinct values, beliefs and priorities - working together within the university structure, a locale of interchange between the role identities are crucial areas that establish the relational identity between two roles. As it pertains to the locale of interaction between the academic unit and institutional level leaders, the above cited and subsequent accounts provide a strong indication on the perspective through which a unit head approaches cross level interactions i.e., the welfare of their academic unit. Moreover, having outlined the values and beliefs that found the role identity of the unit head (within the academic unit) in the preceding sections, instances of tensions during cross level interactions could perhaps – to a certain extent – be alleviated by understanding the foundations of the viewpoints of relevant actors. To this point on tensions and strained relations between stakeholders, Sluss and Ashforth point to the potential of malleability of relational identities. In citing work from the theory of "symbolic interactionism", they state that "the meaning(s) of roles and therefore the role relationships and how they are enacted are socially constructed through interaction, observation, negotiation, feedback and other well-known social processes" (p. 12).

The concerns around which the relational identity is constructed between the various role holders in a university are diverse and can depend on the discipline of the unit head in question. Illustrating this point, Arthur who leads a History unit in RG10 mentions the challenges of leading a humanities-based unit in a university that is STEM focused. This is elaborated in further detail in the next chapter. Nevertheless, as it pertains to his role as the mediator between

institutional levels, Arthur describes his perspective on representing his unit at the institutional level. He remarks,

*So one of the issues for any [unit head] is, how much interest do the broader structures have in your [unit]. How much concerns do they have about your [academic unit]? What stereotypes might exist. And you won't necessarily know and it might be different from different people in different parts of the apparatus, so you have to be aware that everything that you communicate is partly about communicating on individual issues and your own perspective but it's also about selling a view of your [unit] because you know you're representing the [unit] and trying to communicate both the good things that it's doing but also any assistance that you require. So, I think that managing upwards is partly about being clear on what you need but also, its managing the understanding [and] expectations of the [academic unit].*

Arthur's excerpt reflects a few of the challenges that prefaces the aforementioned circumstances of his leadership role at RG10. Concurrently, Arthur's excerpt illustrates the significance of the locale where leadership stakeholders at different levels interact. In elaborating on the challenges of managing "stereotypes", Arthur's account highlights the importance of congruence in communications and the role that the formal leader plays in ensuing that congruence on behalf of the disciplinary unit. As noted above, relational identities in organisations are mutually constructed by actors occupying role identities that are founded on distinct values, beliefs and priorities. Thus, the nature and process of cross level leadership dialogue presents as a key area in the consideration of responsive leadership in the institution as a whole.

In the excerpts cited so far, the aspect of representing the department as the formal leader at the institutional level is noted to entail an element of constructing a relational identity through the interactions with stakeholders occupying distinct role identities. The aspect of leading within the department – as noted in the prior sections – is largely founded on the homogeneity of a disciplinary context and thus is observed to operate on a value system that is shared by the stakeholders within the unit. However, relative to the aforementioned aspect, the construction of a relation identity with the institutional stakeholder (in the activity of leading beyond the department) is noted to entail engagement with values that could be incongruent with the unit's

priorities. As such, representing the academic unit is reported to involve a process of constructive feedback as explained by David (Physical science unit at RG8). He remarks,

> *University imperatives tend to be the finance ones, at the moment [2020]. Probably this is the same in every university. The finance ones stands out. And you have to be prepared to push in some areas as well. So, part of the [unit leader's] role [involves] dealing with the higher levels of university, well faculty and Deputy Vice Chancellor level. [This] is to be able to have that open discussion as well; you have to have the competence to be able to push … not push back.. I don't want to use that [phrase]. I want to say, to develop a working relationship, where the people in the faculty – the Dean, the Deputy Vice Chancellor – know that you are trying to do the best you can. Rather than, some [unit leader's] approach is to challenge. Challenge, challenge, challenge and do the best for their [unit] by doing that [challenging].*

The development of a working relationship, as remarked by David, denotes the process of constructing a relational identity (defined above) that establishes the foundations for leadership engagement during cross level interactions. In the RG sample, the participants have alluded to the importance finding the balance between representing the unit's concerns and aligning the unit with institutional imperatives. Attaining that balance presents as being a distinct leadership competence that discerns the locale of leadership from concomitant areas of management or administration. However, the pressures that impinge on the role holder in trying to find and maintain the balance - that ensures an effective working relationship with stakeholders within different relational nexuses - is noted to be particularly challenging on the practitioner themselves as individuals. As is observed in section 5.4, the leadership practice of middle leaders is reported to – at times – engender a scenario of isolation for the role holder. Harry, who leads the computer science school at RG2, alludes to the interpersonal challenges that a formal leader can encounter in representing the academic unit. He remarks,

> *I'm one of those people that if staff complain to me and ask me to complain to the [senior leader], I feel that its my responsibility to do that. So if the University does something and the staff aren't happy with it, I would put that up to the [senior leader] and say, 'I believe that this is wrong'. And I think, originally, sometimes, [the senior leader] thought that that was me personally [laughs]. So, there were a number of times where I had to say – Look, I'm actually not projecting a personal view on this. What*

*I'm projecting is the view of the staff at computer science because it's my position to do that. So, I'm caught in the middle where I'm saying stuff to the [senior leader] that I really don't quite believe myself, in one sense. It's not my personal representation, I'm representing the views of the staff because I feel it's important to do that. So leadership isn't ... if I was sitting in a leadership position just doing what I wanted to do all the time, you know, you lose the staff. So sometimes, it involves challenging higher up, even when you make yourself unpopular higher up because that's what the staff below are expecting you to do.*

The aforementioned issue of 'finding the balance', is further highlighted by Steve (Psychology, PT5). In elaborating on his experiences of accomplishing the function of linking institutional levels, Steve discusses the formal leader's role in "filtering" the pressures and demands on the department that can be exerted from the institution. On this, he notes, "a lot of the head's role is to filter out what is coming down from above, rather than just being a mouthpiece for the university. You've got to try and keep the school within the broad ambitions of the university, without having to jump every time someone says 'jump'.

Providing a slightly different permutation on finding the balance, Jack (Languages, PT3) elaborates on the importance of aligning the unit's perspective with the wider mission of the university. As noted earlier in the section on leading 'within' the nexus of the academic unit, Jack espouses an entrepreneurial frame to his leadership practice that involves a congruent collaboration with the institutional stakeholders. Thus, he remarks,

*So the managing up and managing down [entails] making it very clear to colleagues that I am supporting them and listening to them and representing their issues. Whilst at the same time, not allowing the voice within the [unit] to become the dominant one, which seriously alienates us from the university's direction of travel. So that is difficult. But, the difficult conversations are a part of that [the leadership role] because it will often be about making sure that I treat my colleagues as any other colleagues – you know, that I support them individually as colleagues and don't treat them as an enemy.*

In his account, Jack alludes to the issue of potentially developing an institutional versus departmental dynamic, which as will be explored in greater depth by RQ2 is reported to have been an issue with the preceding leadership at his unit. As such, a potential implication of the

inability to find that balance as a leader is illustrated – via Jack and Steve's accounts – to culminate in falling at either side of the departmental versus institutional dynamic. This dynamic features as a major theme when analysing the area of cross level leadership interaction with the next research question.

Middlehurst et al (2007) describes universities as possessing "different dimensions of complexity" (p. 317) that is associated with varied priorities according to the range of functions (structural complexity) and disciplinary cultures (cultural complexity). The activity of mediating between levels encompasses both the aforementioned dimensions of complexity for the unit leader. As such, in conveying his experiences of representing the unit, Harry's account illustrates the interactive and contested arena of establishing a role relationship with stakeholders at the institutional level. Specifically, the interpersonal dynamics of managing "upwards" (Quote from Arthur) - which is also alluded to in other accounts – is highlighted as an area of tension in middle leadership. As such, the accounts of the participants in this study indicates that the capacity to effectively navigate the aforementioned dimensions of complexity in conveying the unit's perspective at the institutional level and vice versa, constitutes a significant aspect of the formal leader's leadership role.

Akin to accounts cited earlier, Michelle who leads a psychology unit at RG4, emphasises the mediatory function of her formal role as falling distinctly within the domain of leadership as opposed to management or administration. Toward this she remarks, "In terms of representing the [the academic unit] at the kind of college and university level and [having a say] in the direction that we are moving in there [university level interactions] and standing up for the best interests of the [uni] – that is definitely a leadership thing […] [but] that is quite stressful and difficult". In elaborating further on representing the [unit] at the institutional level, Michelle elaborates on the risks of omission from the decision-making process without the initiative from the formal leader. She remarks,

> *We can be bystanders and then, we just have to live with whatever decisions are made.*
> *Or we can be in the room and try to influence the decisions that are made. It's better*
> *to be in the room. […] it's been one of my priorities as the [unit leader]. I think that as*
> *a [unit], we were standing [still]. We were just not getting involved at the college and*
> *university [level]. We were standing too much back. And one of the things that I've*

*been pushing [for] is that, we have to be in the room. We have to be in the conversations where those decisions are made, because the decisions are going to be made anyway.*

**Figure 5.1 –** A diagrammatic representation of the leadership role as conceptualised by Russell Group participants.



Conceptualisation of the Leadership Role by Russell Group Leaders
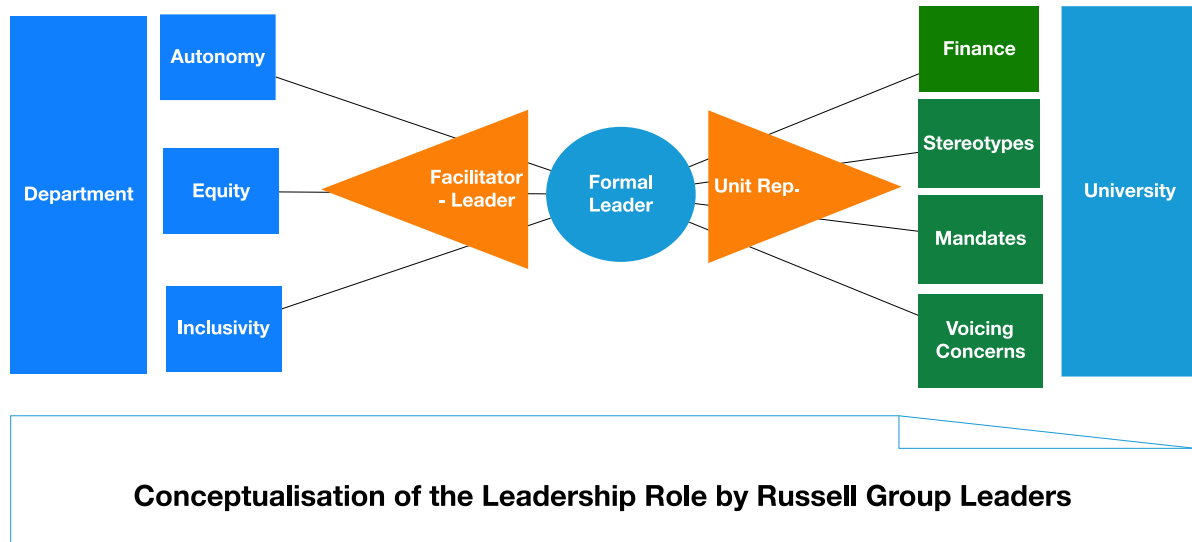
The figure attached illustrates the themes identified in the accounts of RG participants. The left side of the diagram represents the values that inform the leadership role within relational nexus of the department i.e, the academic unit namely, academic autonomy, equity and inclusivity. On that basis, the conceptualisation of the leadership role is notably de-emphasised and framed as that of a 'facilitator of culture' (left sided orange triangle). Concurrently, the right side of the diagram represents the values and concerns associated with the mediatory role that include concerns such as, finance, institutional mandates, managing departmental stereotypes and voicing departmental concerns. On that basis, the leadership role within the relational nexus of the institution is conceptualised as that of a 'representative of the academic unit' that is markedly different relative to the role 'within' the academic unit.

**Figure 5.2 -** A diagrammatic representation of the leadership role as conceptualised by Post 92 participants.



**Conceptualisation of the Leadership Role by Post 92' Leaders**
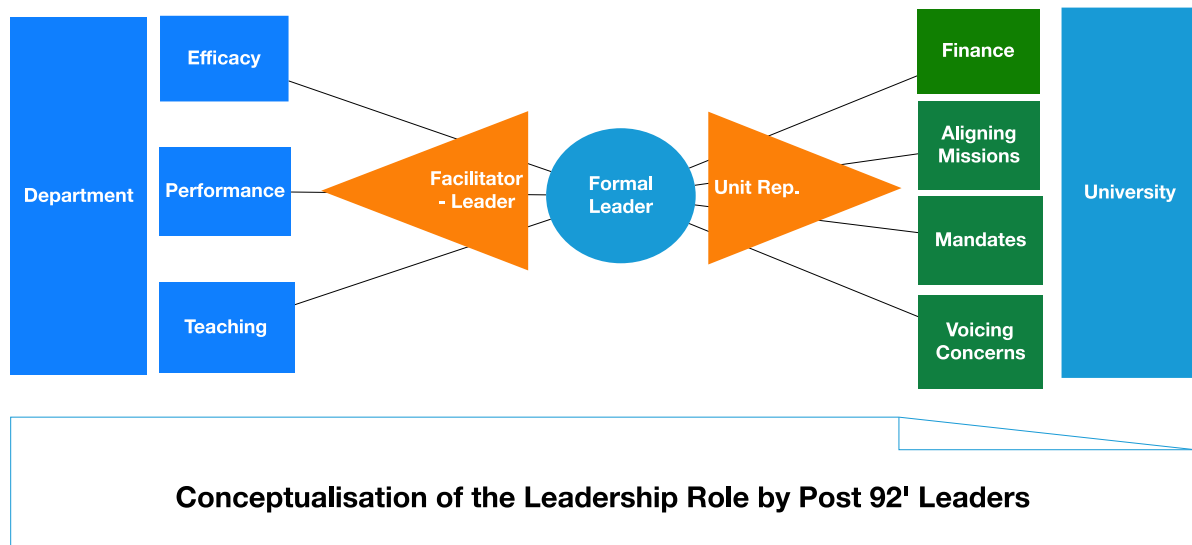
The figure above illustrates the themes identified in the accounts of Post 92' participants. As observed, the values that inform the role identity 'within' the academic unit vary from the RG category. The values of competence, performance and orientation to teaching is reported to engender a more proactive conceptualisation of the leadership role where the de-emphasis on leadership noted in the accounts of RG participants are not observed. There were no meaningful differences noted in the way that the mediatory role was conceptualised.

## 5.6  Summary

This chapter analysed and presented the themes that constitute the leadership role for formal leaders at the departmental and or school level in a) leading 'within' the relational nexus of the academic unit and b) leading 'without' the relational nexus of academic unit as a mediator between institutional levels. Additionally, the differences in the aspects of the leadership role in the two distinct relational nexuses were identified. Moreover, instances of variation in the leadership role on account of the differences in the institutional types – Russell Group and Post 92 in this study – were analysed. As discussed in the methodology chapter, that the themes identified represent a portion in the spectrum of experiences of formal academic unit level leaders in UK HE and, in accord with the telos of an exploratory qualitative study, are not intended as an epitome of the general leadership experiences of middle leaders in UK universities. Nevertheless, the insights garnered from the accounts provided by the participants

confers what Yin terms as "analytic generalisation", where a niche phenomenon of study i.e., middle leadership in UK HE, is illuminated (Yin, 2009).

As elaborated in the prior sections, the role of the middle leader is conceptualised predominantly as a facilitator of culture within the academic unit by the participants in both institutional contexts. However, the emphasis on the values that underpin the aforementioned trope of the 'facilitator of culture' is noted to vary for leaders within the Russell Group and the Post 92 contexts. For the Russell Group participants, a trend in conceptualising the role of the formal leader within the relational nexus of the academic unit is noted to be founded on the value of academic autonomy, equity and inclusivity. Thus, the majority of the RG participants deem these values as central to the ethos of their leadership practice. As such, the leadership role is conceptualised in relation to the values that are considered to predominate within the nexus of the unit and its stakeholders. In the same relational nexus of the unit, an emphasis on values of competence, attainment and performance is noted in the way post 92 leaders conceptualise their leadership role. As mentioned earlier, this does not imply the absence of the values that are noted to be emphasised in either category. Rather, in line with studies such as Bolman & Deal (2017), the implication pertains to the variation in the "cognitive frames" that are pertinent for leadership actors operating under distinct circumstances and contexts.

An additional set of values that comprise the established leadership trope of 'the facilitator' within the unit, pertains to the emphasis on values of inclusivity and equity emphasised in the RG sample and that of proactivity that is emphasised in the post 92 sample. The RG leaders have foregrounded the importance of an inclusive decision-making process in their units and highlighted the issue of having an equitable approach in their leadership practice. In doing so, the distinct nature of considerations that are reported to affect the role of the formal leader are illustrated. This is further emphasised in accounts of the participants that reinstate the inadequacy of standard leadership discourse that are encountered in developmental initiatives such as training (contemplated further in the discussion chapter). In the accounts of post 92 leaders, the theme of proactivity and leading by example is an additional value that is observed in the way that the participants have conceptualised their formal roles. Specifically, teaching is highlighted as an activity that necessitates proactivity from the leaders by engaging with it themselves. As noted in the analysis above, post 92' universities are customarily characterised as 'teaching intensive', which provide an indication to the varying demands on the leadership in institutions that prioritise different aspects of higher education.

In analysing the accounts of the participants when leading 'without' the academic unit, the mediatory function in terms of providing a link between institutional levels is noted to be an aspect of the leadership role across both institutional contexts. The themes that are observed across both institutional categories, pertain to representing the unit at the institutional level and seeking to align the perspectives both at the unit and the institutional levels. A salient insight that is observed in analysing the way that the mediatory role is experienced by the participants relates to the contested nature of cross level interactions. While the role of being a mediator is predominantly characterised as a 'representative of the unit' at the institutional level, the accounts provide an insight into the process that is entailed in doing so and its implications on the dynamics of role identity for the practitioners. In comparison to the aspect of the role pertaining to leadership within the department, operating as a formal leader in the institutional nexus is observed to entail a distinct process of managing values and beliefs that may not be congruent to those that are encountered within the nexus of their academic units. As such, dynamic tensions such as the department versus institutional, ingroup vs outgroup, demands of the academic unit versus the institution, are noted to characterise the mediatory aspect of the headship role identity. This specific area pertaining to cross level leadership interactions will be further analysed and discussed as a separate research question in the subsequent chapters. This section sought to summarise the themes that were observed in the accounts of the participants, in answering the first research question namely,

What are the beliefs and values that are ascribed to the role identity of the department and / or school head when:
a) leading within the academic unit
b) leading without the academic unit as a mediator between institutional levels
c) To what extent does the role of leading 'within' and 'without' the academic unit differ from each other?
d) To what extent does the leadership role identity differ for leaders of Russell Group and Post 1992 universities?

# Chapter 6 – RQ1: Discussion and Synthesis

## 6.1 Discussion

The preceding chapter presented the results of the analysis conducted on the interview transcripts of the participants, with a focus on answering the following research questions:

What are the beliefs and values that are ascribed to the role identity of the unit head by the Russell Group and Post 1992 leaders in this research when:

a) leading 'within' the academic unit?

b) leading 'without' the academic unit as a mediator between institutional levels?

c) To what extent does the role of leading 'within' and 'without' the academic unit differ from each other?

d) To what extent does the leadership role identity differ for leaders of Russell Group and Post 1992 universities?

This chapter discusses the insights garnered in the previous chapter and connects it to the wider literature and concepts on role identity in higher education. The basic premise of enquiry that RQ1 explores, is that of middle leadership role identity as conceptualised by the practitioners. As indicated by the sub questions outlined above, the study on the role identity specifically pertains to leadership practice within the relational nexus of a) the academic unit and its stakeholders and b) the institution and its stakeholders. The additional sub questions namely, c) and d), address the multi-faceted nature of the leadership role and allows the study to further understand the varying demands that formal leaders at the department and /or school level contend with in their leadership practice within the two nexuses. Moreover, with sub question d) variation is contemplated on the larger level of institutional types i.e., Russell Group and post 1992 university.

With regards to the significance of identity in organisational activity, a number of studies such as Irwin et al. ( 2018) and Porac et al., (1989) reviewed in this thesis, demonstrates the influence of identity on the sensemaking process of key actors, that influence activities of strategy formulation and enactment in organisations. Additionally, in the academic context, the identity

of a prominent academic is acknowledged to bolster an individual's capacity to influence both in formal and informal settings (Bolden et al., 2012). Research by Bolden et al. (2008, 2012) seeks to expand the notion of leadership to encompass areas beyond the domain of formal leadership roles to include the leadership exercised by non-leadership stakeholders. Even beyond the remit of formal roles, identity of the stakeholders is observed to be a central factor in exerting "influence by virtue of their research profile, networks, and collaborations, funding, teaching activities, membership of professional and policy groups" (p. 10).

Alternatively, the formal role identity of the leadership stakeholder with the university, posits the practitioner as the de facto leader of the academic unit in this study. As such, the normative aspect of the role that entails assuming formal responsibilities on behalf of the unit (department and or school) encompasses the domain of formal influence processes that implies distinct considerations for the formal leader. Accordingly, the premise explored by the research questions pertains to the domain of formal leadership and in answering them, allows the study to explore the nature and nuances of middle leadership practice in UK universities. In doing so, this research offers the practitioner's perspective into the issues that are encountered by middle leaders in varying disciplinary and institutional circumstances. Discussing the import of positing the practitioner as the unit of analysis, Schön & Argyris, (1996) state that this enables a study to explain "the processes within an organisation that gives rise to patterns of activity seen, in the aggregate, as the organisation's knowing, thinking, remembering or learning" (P. 6). They go on to add that, "if theorists of organisational learning seek to be of use to practitioners, they must link organisational learning to the practitioner's thought and action" (P.6). With the normative aspect of the role implicit in formal leadership practice, exploring the beliefs and values that underpin the practitioner's understanding of their role as infuses the applied vantage point on middle leadership practice.

Sluss & Ashforth, (2007) define "role identity" as "the goals, values, beliefs, norms interaction styles and time horizons typically associated with a role – independent of who (what kind of person) may be enacting a role" (p. 11). Concurrently, leadership in UK higher education is characterised as 'multifaceted', that requires a 'relational' understanding to account for the various dimensions at play in leadership practice. As it pertains to formal roles in organisations, the relational understanding of the way organisational roles operate is well established. In referring to research on this premise, Sluss & Ashforth, (2007) state that "roles are a basic building block of organisations and the purpose and meaning of a given role depends on the

network of complementary roles within which it is embedded" (p.10). As such, by positing the practitioner's leadership practice within the two relational nexuses that are acknowledged as key domains of operation for the middle leader (Inman, 2009; Jackson, 1999) , the first two sub questions are geared toward understanding the two facets of the middle leadership role. The next two sub questions then seek to compare firstly, the differences in the two facets of leadership practice – pertaining to practice within the department and beyond the department as a mediator- secondly, the differences between the leadership role across institutional types – RG and Post 92.

In doing so, the analysis conducted in the results chapter provide a number of insights that inform the applied context of leadership practice for the department / school leader. Accordant with the order of the research questions outlined above, the discussion will commence with considering the results on the two facets of the leadership role identity (a, b and c); followed by the points of comparison in the two institutional types (d). On the facets of the role identity, the accounts of the participants illustrate the predominant values that underpins each facet of the leadership role and the way they differ. Thus, these accounts offer further understanding on the nuances in formal middle leadership practice and elucidates the points of tension in navigating distinct relational nexuses. Moreover, the accounts of the participants indicate differences in the "cognitive frames" (Bolman & Deal, 2017) utilised by leaders of RG and Post 92 universities. Having discussed the 'university clusters' observed in UK HE according to institutional types (Boliver, 2015), the differences noted in the accounts of the formal leaders of each institutional type indicates the distinctiveness of the leadership practice entailed in the nexus of the academic unit in Russell Group and Post 1992 universities.

**6.2 Facet one: Facilitator of Departmental Culture**

**6.2.1 Salient values in the Russell Group category – Autonomy, Equity and Fairness**

Delineating the values that underpin the role identity of the formal leader within the academic unit provides an insight into the considerations of the academic unit that influences the approach to leadership taken by the formal heads. These considerations are noted to vary across the relational nexuses, 'within' and 'without' the academic unit, that the formal leader navigates in their leadership practice. This section will discuss the implications of the way the

leadership role is conceptualised for practice 'within' the relational nexus of the academic unit by the Russell Group participants.

Accordant with the thesis on the relational nature of role identities (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007), the RG participants premise their leadership practice in line with the considerations that are regarded to be central within their nexus of the academic unit. As such, autonomy is noted as a prominent value 'within' the academic unit in the accounts of the RG participants. More specifically, the value of autonomy is ascribed as being central to the nature of academic work conducted by the academics within the unit. This informs the conceptualisation of the formal leader as a facilitator of the work culture within the academic unit. Moreover, the centrality of autonomy in the ethos of leadership is observed to be a salient influence on the trope of the 'leader – facilitator' propounded by the RG participants. Additionally, values of inclusivity and equity are also observed as recurrent themes in the accounts of RG leaders.

In the accounts of Dan (Education; RG6), David (Physical science, RG8) and Mike (Physical science unit , RG7), the purpose of the formal leadership role is described in tandem with the value of autonomy as an essential ethos to the nature of work and motivation for academics within the department. The understanding of the non-leadership stakeholders in the department as, in Dan's account, "of people [who] tend not to be motivated by money [but be motivated by] wanting to find things out, to share things that they know"; and in David's account as individuals who "if they don't have the field that they can own and if they don't feel in general that they have autonomy, then they can feel very restricted" is noted to shape the leadership role that is conceptualised subsequently. Mike's account, in referencing the activities undertaken by academics within the academic unit, highlights the significance of autonomy within the department. However, the necessity to have parameters is also noted as a point of reflection in Mike's account. As such, these accounts highlight the relational nature of leadership practice (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008) whereupon the understanding of the role ensues from the nexuses being led. The import of 'autonomy of work' within the academic unit that is highlighted in the accounts, reflects Middlehurst & Kennie, (1995) observation that professionals "whether academics in universities or surveyors in private practices, expect individual autonomy […] for their intrinsic motivation in the direction of self-actualisation through worthwhile work" (p. 126).

With the value of autonomy reported as central to the leadership practice within the nexus of the academic unit, the de-emphasis on the stature of 'the leader' is noted to be characteristic of the way that the leadership role is conceptualised by the RG participants. Dan (Education, RG6), in describing his leadership role, characterises it as an "administrative role" in order to emphasise the value of autonomy as central. Similarly, Gary (Computer Science, RG3) frames his leadership role as the "servant of everybody else in the school". As cited in the results section, he further stresses that "I am not the boss" and that his leadership role is bound up within the nexus of departmental stakeholders that requires him to "think twice before you take any action, especially if [it is along the lines of the] disincline". The rotational nature of formal leadership roles at the departmental / school level in pre 1992 universities – where a professor generally assumes the role for a tenure of five years - can be argued to play a part in engendering a de-emphasised conceptualisation of the leadership role. Indeed, the structural configuration of organisations are acknowledged to influence operational dynamics in organisations (Andrews & Boyne, 2014). Concurrently, the distinctive nature of the departmental / school nexus that exerts specific demands and expectations on the appropriate approach to leadership in RG universities is highlighted. Positing middle leadership practice within the nexuses of the academic unit indicates the influence of the structural differences between university clusters (Boliver, 2015).

Further developing the way that the role of the leader is conceptualised, the accounts of the RG participants also highlight the influence of egalitarian values within the department. The role of the formal leader is described predominantly in relation to the sustenance of culture within the department. And the values of egalitarianism is noted to feature prominently in the description of the culture being sustained. With respect to specific values, the value of inclusivity – in different permutations – is described as an important consideration for the department / school leaders. As noted in a range of accounts such as that of Clive (Physical science unit, RG2) and Michelle (Psychology, RG4), an inclusive decision-making process is reported to be a major consideration in their leadership practice. Indeed, inclusivity in the decision-making process within an academic department can be (and is usually) a systemic feature of operations that perhaps pertains more toward managing the process. Nevertheless, accounts such as Clive's (Physical science unit, RG2) illustrates the leadership entailed in applying the process within the community of individuals. He notes the import of prioritising "the people side of things" as a leader - a central consideration in effectuating an inclusive process - when the school is "bombarded with university policy and performance drivers".

Similarly, Michelle (Psychology, RG4) elaborates on the substantive possibility of "being left out [by] oversight", particularly for individuals of minoritised groups (along gender lines as reported in her account). This requires the formal leader to be receptive to those issues and "listen to as wide a range of voices as possible". An additional permutation of inclusivity as a consideration for the formal leader is noted in Mike's (Physical science, RG7) account, where the issues of demographic inclusivity in the school is broached. Likewise, equity and fairness are cited as values that inform the formal leadership role in the accounts of other RG participants (section 5.3.3). For instance,, Adam (Ancient history & Culture, RG9) reflects on the importance of fairness as a value to be sustained in the academic unit given that it is central to academic life. He notes that values of social justice such as fairness are a major "reason [that individuals choose] to work in higher education in the first place".

The values that are reported to underpin the leadership role of the formal leaders within the department and / or school illustrates the foundational beliefs and underlying assumptions that pervades the nexus of the academic unit. In summary, the role of the formal leader is observed to be understood by the participants, predominantly as a facilitator of culture within the academic unit that is autonomous, inclusive, and fair. These values are derived exclusively from the accounts of the participants in this research and as such, are not exhaustive to the experiences of formal department / school leaders in all RG universities. Nevertheless, the accounts of the participants represent a meaningful segment of the middle leadership experience in Russell Group universities and elucidate the case of "relational leadership" (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008) at the departmental / school level in RG universities. Positing the leadership experiences of the participants within a relational nexus – the academic unit in this section – provides a comparative reference to firstly, better understand the differing demands on the formal leader in distinct relaxational nexuses; and secondly, to contemplate the points of distinction observed in description of the leadership role along institutional types. Both discussion points will be elaborated subsequently.

### 6.2.2 Salient values in Post 1992 accounts - Efficacy and Performance

In analysing the accounts, differences in the values emphasised and consequently the conceptualisation of the formal role within the academic unit were observed for participants belonging to RG and Post 92' universities. As such, this section will discuss the values and descriptions of the leadership role by the leaders in Post 92' universities, in relation to the

factors of context (acknowledged in the literature) that informs the nature of middle leadership in Post 92 universities. Altogether, the points of discussion from both the Russell Group and Post 92 leaders in this section, provides a representation of the middle leadership role when leading 'within' the nexus of the academic unit. Prior to elaborating on the values that are reported to underpin the leadership role for Post 92 leaders, it should be noted that the differences observed in relation to the accounts of the Russell Group accounts does not imply the absence of the values in the leadership practice of participants in either category. Rather, in accord with the relational nature of role identities (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007) and concurrently the relational understanding of leadership (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008) that the analysis is founded on, the differences indicate the variation in the nature of demands and considerations that occur by virtue of differences in institutional types. As observed earlier, Boliver (2015) elaborates on the variation observed along dimensions of "research activity, economic resources, academic selectivity and social mix" (p. 623) in the clusters of institutional types – such as Pre 1992, Post 1992, Russell Group and Oxbridge – that characterise the UK higher educational domain.

The values that are reported to underpin the formal leadership role in the accounts of the Post 92 leaders pertain to the facilitation of an efficacious ethos within the academic unit. Therefore, the nexus of the academic unit that informs the leadership practice for formal leaders is predominantly understood as a space to "achieve ambitions" (Phil, Psychology PT6) and deliver "quality and excellence" (Anton, Computer Science PT2). In elaborating on value that informs his leadership practice, Phil notes that "ambitiousness" is an important value that allows him to "support people to achieve the next thing for them and [ensures] that we can put the right infrastructure […] to be able to see the next success". Further developing the ethos of efficacy that is observed to inform the understanding of the departmental nexus, Anton (Computer Science, PT2) highlights his responsibility as the formal leader in "developing structure and individuals within that so that they become more capable, more able to deliver quality for the faculty […] which also helps in advancing careers".

The aforementioned values that inform leadership, all things considered, are pervasive in any contemporary organisation, regardless of institutional types. Nevertheless, the variation in the emphasis of the values observed indicates the different considerations, demands and expectations that prevail within the academic unit in RG and Post 92' universities. This point is alluded to in Jack's (Languages, PT3) account where he notes a high degree of "survivalism

in doing a job like this". Elaborating on this, he observes that there also "a lot of reactiveness particularly in a period like one we've been through [Covid 19 pandemic]" and that his leadership role is about ensuring "work which is a little more about long term projects and a little less about just keeping the show on the road". Reiterating the point of varying expectations in different institutional contexts, Barringer & Pryor, (2022) note an association between the structural components and the internal dynamics in Higher Educational Organisations.

Consequently, in accord with the aforementioned values that constitute the understanding of the departmental/ school nexus, the description of the leadership role is characterised by a degree of prominence relative to the de-emphasis observed in the Russell Group accounts. As noted in Phil's (Psychology, PT6) account, he characterises leadership as "about providing direction for people and providing direction for the activities […] [and] working with people to help everybody work toward a common goal". Positing the description of the leadership role within a specific nexus provides a contextual framework to better understand the considerations that influences the applied aspect of leadership practice. Accordingly, the contractual terms of the leadership role in Post 92 universities are, in most cases, permanent appointments. Although, it should be noted that the contractual terms of the role were not discussed with the participants in the interviews conducted. As such, the relatively emphasised nature of the leadership role can ostensibly be a function of the practitioner holding a permanent role within the university.

Discussing further considerations that inform the leadership role, Anton (Computer Science, PT2) notes that "as a head of school, my responsibility is to deliver on the business, which is, I can best describe as aligning and delivering everybody's goals to school, faculty and organisational goals and strategy". Given the association between operational dynamics and institutional structure noted above, the overarching theme of performance that is highlighted in the post 92 accounts, calls attention to Middlehurst's observation that the Post 92 universities have "adopted structures that were closer to the corporate sector" (Middlehurst, 2004, p. 265). Indeed, the structure of discrete universities vary and are not subject to a homogenous categorisation. Nevertheless, as it pertains to the dynamics of leading within the departmental / school nexus, the values that underpin the understanding of the leadership role indicate a more prominent performance concern in the expectation of the formal leader when leading 'within' the academic unit in Post 92' universities, relative to the Russell Group.

Moreover, the activity of teaching is noted to be an additional dimension of divergence in the considerations and the consequent conceptualisation of the leadership role between the two groups. Participants of the Post 92' universities have elaborated on the centrality of teaching in their institutions that, accordingly, engenders a proactive and involved approach to leadership on the leader's behalf. Steve (Psychology, PT5) and James (Information science, PT3) highlight the importance of "embodying the principles" (Steve) and "leading by example" (James). Both of these characterisations of the leadership role pertain to the activity of teaching. As Steve states, "you have to embody the principle […] [thus] everybody gets in front of the students, including the [unit leader]". Elaborating on the proactivity in his leadership practice, Steve notes that it is important to communicate the idea that "it is not me imposing something […] [that even if] I might not be the first over the barricades, but I am at least, in the trenches". Echoing a similar point, James (Information Science, PT3) states that "if I'm asking my colleagues to teach and to teach excellently, then I have to come prepared to do that and also be measured by the same yardstick that they are measured by". Comparatively, teaching as an activity undertaken by the formal leader, does not feature in the accounts of the RG participants. As such, the accounts of the participants demonstrate variation in the approach to leadership required on account of the varying demands within the departmental / school nexus. This is indicative of the varying demands and considerations relevant to each context and entails implications for the discourse of middle leadership in UK HE to better incorporate these variations.

## 6.3 Facet two: The Role of the Mediator between Institutional Levels

This research, as prefaced earlier, has explored the role of department and / or school heads and their experiences of leadership practice in two relational nexuses. The preceding paragraphs discuss the understanding of leadership (and their roles as formal leader) within the departmental / school nexus. This section discusses the considerations that informs formal leadership practice when relating to the nexus of institutional stakeholders. Equivalent to the previous section on the departmental nexus, this section posits the understanding of the leadership role (as related by the participants) on the considerations that are noted to inform leadership practice when leading 'without' the academic unit. Leading 'without' the academic unit pertains to engagement with stakeholders at a hierarchically senior position to the department / school leader. Additionally, a comparative discussion on the differences of

leadership considerations that inform practice in the two nexuses will be undertaken to illustrate the faceted-ness of the middle leadership role in UK HE.

En masse, the account of all the participants in this research, highlight the activity of liaising between the departmental and institutional levels as a major facet of their leadership roles. As the liaison between the institutional levels in a university, the formal leader's role is informed and influenced by the considerations of both nexuses. Deem et al., (2007), characterises the role identity of formal leaders (at the departmental / school level) as "manager academics" to indicate the two domains of identity invoked for the middle leader in UK universities. The implications of acquiring a dual identity by virtue of the formal role, is noted to engender tensions in the process of liaising between levels and synthesising disparate perspectives. James (Information science, PT3) describes the role of aligning perspectives between the two nexuses as "the leadership challenge". However, prior to discussing the tensions that are described in navigating between two relational nexuses, discussing the values and considerations that are attributed to leading 'without' the academic unit provides the foundation to contemplate the complex nature of middle leadership practice in UK HE.

The description of leadership activity in relation to the nexus of institutional stakeholders is observed to entail the considerations of finances and performance in the accounts of all the participants. As such, the considerations that are ascribed to characterise interactions with the institutional nexus are noted to be relatively uniform across institutional types on that front. In sharing his perspective on occupying the "junction" between "the senior team and the academics", Mike (Physical science, RG7) states that he views his role as "communicating to the senior team and understanding their needs, […] strategy, […] and our obligations in terms of finances and such". Similarly, referring to the saliency of finances in the institutional nexus, David (Physical science unit, RG8) notes the "university imperatives tend to be the finance ones, at the moment [2020]". The cited remark from David's account, in noting the specific circumstances of Covid – 19, provides an indication on the wider contextual factors such as sectoral and societal forces that impinge on imperatives at the institutional level. Such influences invariably percolate through to the departmental / school levels, to influence the various aspects of operations. This highlights the embedded nature of the formal role at the departmental level, where the leadership practice as the liaison between institutional levels, entails mediating between two constituents with distinct values, considerations, and priorities (elaborated subsequently).

Additionally, departmental performance is noted to feature as a central consideration when leading 'without' the academic unit. In describing his role of "marrying the way in which the university centres itself and the faculty thinks about its academic departments", James (Information science, PT3) expounds on his leadership approach to do so. James' approach as the formal leader in aligning the constituents is observed to entail the process of developing staff within the academic unit, which consequently, delivers on the performance imperative that is noted to be a central consideration in his interaction with institutional stakeholders. Indeed, performance management via systems such as the league tables, assessment metrics and surveys are acknowledged as a discursive force in UK HE (Gibbs & Barnett, 2013). These measures are highly influential in determining the competitive capacity and stature of an academic unit, that in turn, affects the university's capacity to compete for resources – staff, students and funding (Kok & McDonald, 2017; Naidoo, 2005). James' account illustrates that the leadership activity of the department / school leader - in liaising between the institutional levels - entails the function of aligning perspectives on a number of key issues. As noted in the accounts above, the considerations ascribed to nexus of the institution include, amongst others, issues pertaining to finance and performance (see section 5.5).

Accordingly, the considerations of the departmental / school nexus represent the other constituent and informs the way that the formal leader approaches their mediatory role. As such, the process of liaising between institutional levels is reported to involve managing the considerations of both constituents, which can engender tensions. Harry (Computer Science, RG2) illustrates this point by expounding on the pressures of "being caught in the middle" that "sometimes involves challenging higher up, even when you make yourself unpopular higher up because that's what the staff below are expecting you to do". This facet of the leadership role requires the formal leader to navigate across dimension of cultural complexity where discrete values and considerations are addressed as a part of leadership practice. Arthur's (History, RG10) account illustrates this point by describing the challenges of leading a history unit in a STEM focused university. He notes that his role as the formal leader involves "representing the department and communicating the good things […] [as well as] managing the understanding and expectations of the [unit]". His case is further analysed by RQ2 where the issue of a uniform understanding of performance is observed to be a hinderance to the efforts of academic units that may not fluidly align with the standard norms suited to other units within the university.

The discussion on the considerations that underpin the leadership practice of department / school leaders when relating with the institutional nexus, illustrates the way that institutional priorities on issues such as finances and performance impinge on the understanding of middle leadership. In comparison with the largely collegial approach to leadership when leading 'within' the academic unit, the concerns when relating with the institutional nexus are distinctly managerialist. It should be noted that this observation applies more readily to the experiences of RG participants. On this, the study conducted by Deem et al. (2007) found that academic – managers of pre 1992 universities were "reluctant managers" who "were less likely than career managers to want to embrace New Managerialist [tenets]" (p. 104).

As it pertains to the discussion on leadership when relating with the institutional nexus, the role identity of the leader is predominantly characterised as the representative of the department. For instance, Mike (Physical Science, RG7) while acknowledging the necessity of balancing both perspectives, emphasises his affinity to his academic unit in this role. He states that "he views his job as advocating for [his] unit and […] push[ing] upwards to achieve […] if there are barriers". Similarly, the accounts of the other participants cite representing the academic unit as the central responsibility in their role as the "mediator" (Arthur) between institutional levels. Likewise, Steve (Psychology, PT6) highlights the need to "find the balance". No meaningful variance along institutional types can be surmised in the description of this facet of the leadership role. As noted above, in accomplishing the mediatory role, the formal leader engages with the considerations of the institutional nexus that may conflict with the values that prevail within the academic unit. The account of the participants illustrates the interactional and mutual construction of a "relational identity" (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007) that establishes the dynamics of cross level interaction between the department / school and institutional level leaders. An analysis of this dynamic is the focus of the next research question. Nevertheless, the facet of operating as a mediator between levels is observed to entail a process of negotiation, contestation, and feedback in the leadership practice of formal leaders at the departmental / school level (illustrated in section 5.5 – 5.5.1).

**6.4 Implications on Middle Leadership in UK HE**

The research questions that guided this analysis on the headship role identity posited the experiences of leadership practice 'within' and 'without' the academic unit. In doing so, this exploration of middle leadership role identity illustrates the relational conditions and factors that shape leadership for the middle leader in UK universities. Indeed, as noted in the analysis conducted, leadership practice for the formal middle leader is observed to encompass both structural – pertaining to the varied tasks such as teaching, research and administration - and cultural – pertaining to distinct values systems such as disciplinary and institutional ethos - dimensions of complexity (Middlehurst et al., 2009). On the issue of navigating these dimensions of complexity, the academic and managerialist identities that are invoked by the formal role is noted to engender conflicting dynamics that are intrinsic to leadership at the department and / or school level. Expanding further, the nature of leadership activity 'within' the relational nexus of the academic unit is noted to demand a collegial approach to leadership. Conversely, the considerations that prevail in the activity as a mediator can be characterised as managerialist. In outlining the perspectives on university organisation, Dearlove, (1995) observed the prevalence of four major perspectives that identify English universities essentially as collegial, managerialist, political (Balridge, 1971) and as organised anarchies (Cohen and March 1974). Although this research does not seek to extensively comment on the structural configuration of universities, the structural aspect is acknowledged as an influential affect to the internal dynamics of operations. And, through the accounts of the participants, the features of collegiality and managerialism are noted to be salient operational cues for leadership practice 'within' and 'without' the academic unit respectively.

Given these observations, an implication that is broached by the leaders in their accounts is one of the inefficacies of standard leadership discourse to address the leadership demands in universities. On this, Dan (Education, RG6) states:

> *I'm not a big fan of leadership discourses, leadership training. You know, I've been sent on all those leadership courses and most of them are awful. Most of them I find quite soul destroying because they have a vision of leadership that's insensitive to the sector in which we operate I think. So I don't think that being a leader within higher education has much in common with being a leader in a private enterprise where you can measure productivity very clearly, where you've got goals, KPIs, stakeholders to satisfy. I think what happens in higher education is more nuanced.*

Echoing a similar sentiment, Richard (Computer Science at RG1) remarks:

> *There's quite a difference between an abstract concept of leadership in organisations and the realities of academic leadership. You find this when you look at leadership development materials and so forth, which are often conceived for business environments that are very different from an academic environment. So I think, one of the first things one has to recognise about leadership in an academic world is that sensors and the actuators, the knobs that you can turn, are very different in an academic environment from a more conventional command and control structure of the kind that you might find in a well run business*

By illustrating the values that underpin the leadership role in each nexus, this study calls attention to the significant differences in the nature and purpose of leadership in universities, relative to other organisational contexts. Particularly, leadership at the level of the academic unit operates on unique assumptions where both the collegial and managerialist tents comprise the leadership practice for middle leaders. Moreover, the customary distinctions between the domain of leadership and management offered by the works of Kotter, (1999) and Toor & Ofori, (2008) are foremost distinctly geared toward the corporate context and consequently does not account for the nuances of middle leadership in universities. To this point, Middlehurst (1993) has observed that the domains of leadership and management are tightly coupled at the departmental level in universities. Thus, extrapolating the definitions of leadership from other contexts poses the danger of negating the experiences of leaders on the ground level. As such, on account of the insights garnered on the factors that inform middle leadership practice, the leadership discourse for middle leaders in universities would be bolstered in its level of applicability by considering the distinct facets of the role identity invoked in leadership practice. For instance, Dan and Richard's account cited above, calls attention to the faciliatory nature of the role, where influence on stakeholders within the academic unit entails persuasion as opposed to a more authoritative regulation (in the RG context). At the same time, the institutional type is also observed to be a factor in the varying leadership expectation within the academic unit for RG and Post 92' leaders. Thus, the applicability of the leadership discourse appropriate in the RG context may not suit the Post 92 context. The values emphasised by the Post 92 leaders are observed to indicate a different set of considerations for the stakeholders within the departmental / school nexus. Moreover, the organisational

configuration in acknowledge to differ in either context, with RG universities demonstrating a greater degree of devolution in comparison to Post 92 universities (Floyd et al., 2011b; Middlehurst & Kennie, 1995).

An additional implication of the findings on the applied context of middle leadership practice pertains to the challenges that are outlined in navigating across relational nexuses. As explored in the results chapter (section 5.4), a consequential issue noted is one of isolation in the formal leadership role. Accounts of Arthur (History, RG10), Gabe and Michelle in the RG sample allude to the "emotional labour" (Arthur) entailed in being "caught in the middle" (Michelle). More specifically, "standing alone as a leader" in the formal role (Gabe) and the characterisation of the formal role as "lonely" (Michelle) indicates the need to re-evaluate structural mechanisms of support for the formal leader. Given the niche domain of middle leadership in a university that is further stratified by disciplinary "tribes and territories" (Becher & Trowler, 2001), the issues cited above indicate the deficiency of a community for the practitioners. An analogous issue was broached by a participant in the pilot stage of this research that prompted a creation of a community of middle leaders. Due to a conflict of interest, the transcripts of the pilot study have not been utilised in this research. Nevertheless, issues pertaining to the isolating nature of the role, calls for better knowledge exchange and community for middle leaders. Analogously, an excerpt from Steve's (Psychology, PT5) account illustrates the de-spiriting consequences of can accompany the role of mediating. He states,

> *So we have a planning round where a round of people come up with 'round' plans for the future. And you know that as soon as next year's student numbers come in and we haven't made our targets, those plans will be ripped up and you start again. And you think, why do we spend four months making this plan; you know, it's like we're going to sail off in that direction and two minutes late ... oh no, we're going somewhere else now. And it's pretty de-spiriting. So you learn, like being a parent, you learn that you have to dissociate these two worldviews or these incompatible views and try and present the positive.*

As such, establishing a constructive working dynamic through feedback and close communication when interacting with hierarchy is central to responsive leadership in the university. Thus, further embedding the interpersonal and relational processes entailed in

leadership practice within the discourse of HE leadership would bolster the connection between theory and practice. Additionally, incorporating the collegial and managerialist considerations that prevail in the different nexuses addresses the issue more precisely and illustrates the tensions that are operative in building a constructive working dynamic between stakeholders at different levels in the hierarchy.

# Chapter 7 – RQ2: Data Presentation and Analysis

## 7.1 Preface – Dynamics of Interaction with Hierarchy

This chapter presents the analysis conducted on the data that pertains to the premise of interactions with hierarchy, which refers to the leadership activity of mediating between the academic unit and institutional level of operations in the university. In the context of this research on middle leadership in UK HE, the analysis of this premise extends from the observations of the preceding chapter of leadership role identity that established the mediatory role as an inherent facet of the role and leadership practice of departmental / school heads. It should be noted that the subsequent references to either the institutional level or institutional stakeholders refer to the formal leadership roles that are positioned at a higher level on the structural hierarchy of the university that that of the unit head. The variation of the official roles in the Post 92 and the Russell Group categories are as follows. Out of the 10 interviews conducted with Post 92 leaders, the variation in the leadership roles encompasses that of the associate head (4) who oversee the leadership of a particular program; the head of department and /or school (5) who oversees an academic unit; and an associate dean who sits on the faculty level leadership team and oversees the operations of a disciplinary unit at the faculty level (1). In the Russell Group category, out of the 12 interviews conducted, 7 participants occupied the role of 'Head of School' and 5 occupied the role of 'Head of Department'.

As outlined subsequently, the focus of the analysis conducted pertains to understanding the dynamics of interaction, as opposed to the purview of the roles. And although the roles outlined above, may vary in the scope of responsibilities and other concomitant attributes, a broader range of insights on the dynamics that prevail in hierarchical interactions are gained consequently. Given the design parameters that establishes the formal leader at the department and or school level as the unit of analysis, the observations on hierarchical interactions (between formal leadership stakeholders at the department and institutional levels) solely illuminate the departmental perceptive on the topic. As such, the findings of this chapter analyses the dynamics of hierarchical interactions i.e., "the processes and conditions of being in relation to others" (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p.664) from the perspective of middle leaders in this study. On that account, the analysis was conducted in line with the following research questions.

What are the issues that are reported to affect the process of liaising between the institutional levels for the formal leaders at the department / school level when:

    a) Interacting with the hierarchy in their institutions

    b) Exercising leadership influence in hierarchical interactions

    c) Aspiring to accomplish departmental performance

    d) To what extent do the administrative intensities affect the experiences of mediation


## 7.2 Introduction:

In the process of liaising between institutional levels, "an inevitable dualism" (Dearlove 1995, p. 165) of perspectives between leadership stakeholder at the unit and the institutional level is observed in universities. A large part of liaising between levels for the unit leader entails mediating within institutional level stakeholders, essentially, to align the perspectives towards achieving effective performance overall (Branson et al., 2016). Thus, the sphere of cross level interactions represents a significant locale that has a bearing on operations at the unit, as well as the concerns at senior levels of leadership of the university. Barringer & Pryor, (2022) study on organisational structure of universities indicates the interconnection between the internal dynamics of politics, power, finances, and the structural artefacts of hierarchies, resource allocation processes. In articulating the relationship between the organisational structure and the internal dynamics prevalent, they observes that "internal dynamics shape and are fundamentally shaped by structure" (p.370).

The subsequent sections seek to illuminate the dynamics of interactions with hierarchy from the departmental / school leader's perspective, with an added focus on the nature of influence exercised by the formal leader at the academic unit level. Towards this, accounts of the participants are analysed to understand the departmental perspective on the areas of tension that occur in the process of navigating between the institutional levels. As mentioned above, the nature of influence exerted by the unit head is also explored in relation to the interactions with hierarchy. Lastly, the considerations that constitute the issue of unit performance is analysed, in order to present the departmental perspective on balancing the central dynamic of disciplinary and institutional demands that are prevalent for middle leaders in UK universities. By analysing the dynamics prevalent in leadership exchanges with hierarchy, this research contemplates its implications on the issue structural responsiveness, particularly in relation to

the normative versus utilitarian dichotomy that persist in the leadership concerns of HEIs (Bolden et al., 2012).

It is useful to note at this point that the relational perspective on leadership that informs the conceptual framework of this research, views knowledge as "socially constructed and [existing] in interdependent relationships and intersubjective meaning" (Uhl-Bien, 2006). This implies that analysis of leadership "does not focus on identifying the attributes of individuals involved in leadership behaviours or exchanges, but rather on the social construction processes by which certain understandings of leadership come about and are given privileged ontology" (p. 655). In the subsequent analysis and discussion sections, describing the prevalent understanding of structural relationships in the sample, entailed inductively discerning the themes from the accounts of the participants and thereupon connecting them to discourses of leadership that are pertinent in domain of UK HE, particularly the five dimensional model of leadership practice in UK HE (see section 1.2) .

Thus, toward informing the hierarchical dynamics, this results chapter commences by presenting the themes that are noted as tensions entailed in the interactions with hierarchy (RQ2, a). This is followed by the themes that address the nature of influence exerted in these interactions by the department / school leaders (b). Then, the themes that are observed as considerations in aligning the departmental and institutional perspectives on the issue of performance is presented (c). Finally, the variation in the degree of autonomy that is observed in the Russell Group sample, is considered in relation to the "administrative intensities"(Andrews & Boyne, 2014)  of the universities (d). The discussion section that follows this chapter, syntheses the understanding that emerges from the analysis in this chapter and inform broader issues of responsive leadership and effective leadership collaboration in universities.

### 7.3 A. Experiences of Interacting with Hierarchy: Issues Reported

The interaction between leadership stakeholders at the unit and the institutional levels represents a locale of operations that has bearing on core activities at either level of the institution. In addition to the agendas – strategic and administrative - that comprises the exchange, the leadership dynamic which refers to the conditions and processes of interaction, is an area of concern for effective and responsive leadership in the university. Thus, exploring

the way that the stakeholders at the level of the academic unit experience their relationship with hierarchy provides an avenue to elucidate leadership in a way that extends beyond the systemic concerns of activities such as strategy formulation, administration, and management.

Thus, this section reports the perspective of the departmental / school leaders on the areas of tension experienced in relating with the structural hierarchy of their institutions. This section is structured according to the themes the represent the overarching nature of the tensions reported by the participants. They commence with a delineation of the tensions that were reported to occur on account of issues in the interpersonal dynamic with senior leaders. Following this, the tensions that are engendered due to the structural factors in Russell Group and Post 92 universities are delineated (sections 7.3.2 and 7.3.3 respectively). The accounts provided pertain largely to the immediate structural apparatus in the institutional hierarchy - most frequently that of the faculty or analogues structure - nevertheless, this was expanded to reflect on the wider 'institution' more generally.

### 7.3.1 Interpersonal Tensions: Incongruity in approach to Leadership

A notable point of tension observed in the accounts of Post 92 illustrated here by Jack (Languages, PT3) and James (Information science, PT3) accounts (and in sections 7.3.2 by Phil and Steve) pertains to the development of interpersonal tension in the working relationship, that arises as a function of the discrepancy in the approach to leadership between the leadership stakeholders. Given the context of a university, the aforementioned discrepancy in leadership approach relates to – from the department leader's perspective – a lack of consideration about the nuance of the discipline (subject area) at senior levels of leadership. Conveying his experiences of tackling this issue of approach discrepancy, James (Information science, PT3) remarks that he has encountered:

> *Terrible leaders in terms of their ability or willingness to think outside of their own particular subject areas that they are coming from. People who've attempted to lead larger organisational units like mine with multiple subjects, but coming at it from the perspective of their own subject and then requiring and forcing other subjects to fit. And so it's like trying to put a square peg in a round hole. It doesn't work. And you know, you can force it but it's just not going to be comfortable in many respects and it just ends up with a dispirited team; which means that you've got substandard teaching;*

*which means that you've got upset students; which means you've got an upset university.*

James' account highlights the aspect of the discipline and the varying operational demands entailed in overseeing an interdisciplinary unit. The issues that can arise on account of the high degree of task complexity that characterises operations at a university, raises questions around ways to better accommodate disciplinary concerns at the institutional level. Indeed, a number of distinct concerns characterise each structural level of operations. However, a reconsideration of cross level leadership dialogue that seeks to align the approaches to leadership at the two levels could prove useful in enhancing leadership responsiveness.

In echoing a similar point on the implications of a discrepancy in modus operandi, Jack who is the head of a languages unit at PT3 remarks: "We had a VC who was a scientist. [And] you know, there was that sort of atmosphere that we were not well understood by the university and the sciences. The science model as people will call it was being used to measure everything that we did". In Jack's remarks, along with highlighting the difficulties caused by neglecting the disciplinary aspect, the issue on quantifying the humanities (Finkenstaedt, 1990) broached in the excerpt points to the saliency of the subject area in cross level interactions. Moreover, Jack contemplates the creation of a "bunker mentality" that can be engendered as a consequence of the aforementioned discrepancy. He states:

*I don't like the bunker mentality. I don't like that sort of [mentality], which I see in some of the departments. When I first arrived, we had regarded ourselves as a sort of island of quality in a sea of idiocy. And the university was very much a sort of maligned force. You know that we had to, kind of, survive. I never wanted our [unit] to function that way. And there was once a time, when the faculty itself as an arts and humanities faculty, as it was then, had a bunker mentality as well.*

In the accounts cited above, the unit leaders have shared their experiences of encountering the issues that commences from a discrepancy in leadership approach, essentially along disciplinary lines. At the level of the academic unit, the issue of incongruency between the departmental and senior leaders in the approach to leadership, is reported to engender an inimical working dynamic that inhibits the capacity to a unit to operate effectively. In addition to the disciplinary basis of the tensions that have been cited, participants have additionally

highlighted the structural basis in relation to faculty groupings that can engender an incongruity of leadership approach. As such, the following accounts elaborate on the experiences of unit leaders who have encountered issues due to unfavourable faculty groupings.

### 7.3.2 Structural Tensions: Unfavorability of Faculty Grouping

Prior to elaborating on the issue, Phil (psychology unit, PT6) offers the perspective of a congruous working relationship. He remarks that "we are very much at the heart of setting the [unit's] direction and setting the [unit's] strategy [and that] these are constructively aligned with each other". As a leader at the faculty level, Phil is a part of the leadership team that incorporates other disciplinary units within it. This does not imply that participants who are department / school leaders do not occupy analogous positions in committees at the faculty level of operations - this was not explored during the interviews. Nevertheless, Phil's account reinstates the importance of congruency in the working relationships between formal leaders at different structural levels in the university. On this, he notes that

> *Often its (the issues in coordinating between levels) driven by, where you have different kinds of departments that maybe aren't similar in their backgrounds. So, when you might have psychology sitting in a school that includes humanities and languages, for example, where they are fundamentally different disciplines; they have different epistemologies; they have different ways of doing research, they have different ways of teaching. And so you have this fundamental disagreement and how to do the work or to undertake the types of roles that we need to do.*

Phil's account, whilst articulating the issues of incongruous unit grouping within a faculty, also alludes to the consequences of this on roles within the department. Middlehurst, (2004) elucidates the close association between the structural configuration and the formal roles within the university by citing the evolution of managerial roles with the adoption of managerialist frameworks of organisation in UK HE. As such, this indicates that the micro level issues encountered in various within-unit roles, may have its source in the structural processes and systems as noted in Phil's account. To some extent, Phil's account pre-empts Steve's experiences of leading a psychology unit that sits in a faculty with units of hard sciences.

Elaborating on the challenges of faulty grouping, Steve (psychology unit, PT5) remarks: "The local context of the faculty is another set of challenges because we've moved several times and we're now in the faculty of [with units of hard sciences]". Although ostensibly, psychology can plausibly be categorised as accomplishing aims of certain hard sciences, Steve's account demonstrates the significance of considering nuances in appraising the process of disciplinary categorisation. In particular, Steve highlights the discrepancy between the faculty and the departmental mission as a point of deviation in his case. He remarks:

> *The [hard science] faculty is [subject area – anonymised] [and] that's your [industry role – anonymised] [and] they are all [organisation name – anonymised] affiliated. But they are a small part of what we do and that's a particular challenge. So our faculty plan is to [achieve a hard science target – anonymised]. Well, that's not what we do. We don't do that. So the whole state and ambition of the faculty is to improve the [mission of the affiliated organisation – anonymised]. So how do we fit in? [The VC] he's a smart guy and he understands when reminded of it, that we do not do that. But of course, what he does is for the [affiliated organisation]. He spends his time negotiating with [the affiliated organisation] and negotiating the [industry role] contracts as well. And we are in the corner saying hang on, we're different like geography.*

Steve further goes on to explain the operational consequences, particularly in terms of the challenges encountered in acquiring shares of the faculty funding pool. He remarks:

> *So, it makes it tough now. So, when things like faculty funding become available, studentships (become available), it's always cross disciplinary (for the psychology unit) to do something with the [hard science units]. It doesn't fit. We used to be with the [another faculty – anonymised], that was fun. But now, we're with [this faculty – anonymised] and that creates other steps (to go through). So, I find that with (the psychology unit now), whether from the top or even in the faculty sometimes, it's hard to align what I see the strategy from the [unit] with the stated strategy of the university.*

Steve highlights an operational issue relating to resource allocation as a consequence of being grouped unfavourably. The challenges encountered in relation to the areas of strategy formulation, resources, and the overall mission, are mentioned as hinderances that distinctly

affects the capacity of his unit to perform. Moreover, in mentioning the reduced focus of senior leaders on his unit's objectives, Steve's account prefaces the systemic prioritisation of business concerns over disciplinary concerns when it comes to the issue of performance at the institutional level. This issue of the utilitarian versus normative dynamic that is observed to prevail in the differing considerations on unit performance is examined in depth in section 7.7.

### 7.3.3 Structural Tension: Constrictions of a Centralised System

In conveying their experiences of hierarchical interactions, unit leaders in the Russel Group (RG) have predominantly cited the impact of centralisation as a concern on their leadership capacity. Notably, a diminished sense of agency (in their leadership role) is observed to be a unifying theme that is reported to influence the interactional dynamic in interactions with hierarchy. Moreover, qualitative differences in the way that agency is attributed to the leadership role is also observed in the RG category (elaborated in section 7.4). Thus, with the theme of centralisation featuring as a notable affect, the variation in the structural configurations of discrete universities is contemplated as a viable factor that impacts the sense of agency (or lack thereof) reported by the RG leaders in section 7.4. This is done by computing the administrative intensities of the universities in the RG sample and categorising the participants in accordance with institutions possessing administrative intensity either above (AA) or below (BA) the Russell Group (RG) average (0.88). The classification of the participants as falling within the AA or BA categories is adopted to anonymise the participants and their universities. The administrative intensity for each university in the dataset has been outlined in section 7.4, that includes an explanation of the computational process.

Describing the structural framework that envelops his department, Dan, who leads the unit of education at RG6 (AA), remarks:

> *We're in a system with a regulator that's quite intrusive. Management that's quite interventionist as well, so I think discourses of autonomy are a bit disingenuous.*

The basis of Dan's description of management as interventionist, stems from the institutional dictates impinging on academic matters in his unit. Dan elaborates:

*We get a lot of dictates around how to do assessments, how to assess students. Those caused controversy earlier this year because it was quite heavy handed. It was about the moderation of grades and said they wanted to turn that grade of 60 to 65 and a lot of academics pushed back. So I think when it comes to areas where traditionally academics have a lot of control over their curriculum, their syllabus, our assessments. I think there are tensions when that control is perceived to be taken away.*

In a similar vein, Clive, who leads a physical science unit at RG2 (AA) points to the "creeping centralisation" where "the executives are less interested in what's coming up from the ground". He notes that this was exacerbated during the Covid 19 pandemic where "they seemed to shut off and become quite disconnected from what's on the ground". Reflecting on the effects of this on his experience of agency and his leadership role in general, Clive states:

*I'm passing on the orders rather than acting as a focus for discussion. So, whereas before, it (the faculty) was a loose affiliation, now it's a really tight organisation itself. They just pulled jobs out of my role and added more into the Dean's role.*

As mentioned, it should be noted that a segment of Clive's account includes a reflection of his experiences in the pandemic, during which, operations of universities across the sector involved operating in a time of exceptional circumstances. Having said that, the theme of diminished agency is a persistent motif in his overall reflection on his role. With regards to the theme of diminished agency affecting the dynamics of hierarchical interactions for the department / school leader in the RG category, the potential of a "bunker mentality" (as noted earlier by James, PT3) that refers to an interactional stance of experiencing detachment from the institution is described in the subsequent accounts.

For instance, the following account provided by Richard (Computer Science, RG1) is less about the systemic issues implicit within a bureaucratic process but rather highlights the reduced sense of agency in initiating a dialogue on issues that he considers important for his unit. He remarks:

*So when it can get frustrating is when you have a really good reason for wanting to do something but somebody entirely separate from the unit and entirely separate from the school has some reason of convenience that prevents them from actually executing it.*

Consequently, the aforementioned potential of a 'bunker mentality' developing, is raised in relation to the working relationship between the academic unit and the institution. In Richard's (Computer Science, RG1) excerpt, the association between the reduced sense of agency and the development of an institutional versus departmental working dynamic is noted. He remarks:

> *Sometimes you get a hint of, you know, we're the naughty kids in the corner doing what we want and the [unit leader] is just the one who gets sort of shoved out in front […] to sort of deal with it. I think that tension can sometimes be a little bit like that [where] they're just here to get in the way of us achieving our goals and we know best. And that's the balance to get right.*

In relation to the formal leader's role in leading hierarchical interactions on behalf of the unit, the theme of reduced agency in exerting meaningful influence at the institutional level, raises key questions on the de facto role of the department / school head in that interaction. Moreover, an additional question on the mechanisms available in the systemic framework of the institution to support the unit head to adequately "represent the department" (section 5.5) is highlighted. Middlehurst et al., (2009) notes the uneven access to "forms of legitimate and resource power" (p. 320) for different leadership roles in universities. Formal leadership roles at the level of the academic unit is noted to entail a reduced degree of executive authority (Jackson, 1999; Middlehurst, 1993) in UK HE. Additional reduction of agency through structural processes, as reported in this study, is noted to precipitate the deterioration of working relationships between stakeholders at different levels (as observed in Dan's and Clive's comment above).

The accounts of the participants in this study indicates varying experience of agency in their roles in relation to different structural configurations. David, who leads a physical science unit at RG8 (AA) is seven months into his new role as the unit head. Having had leadership experiences in other universities, one of which is featured as RG4 (BA) in this study, David reflects comparatively on the structures of the different universities and notes the variance in the degree of agency.

> *RG8 is quite a centralised set of systems. You're not leading a school which includes HR, finance, teaching office, staffing. [Compared to] RG4 where the [unit leader] [oversaw]l […] 150 academics, plus finance staff, HR staff and teaching office. They*

*say that in RG4, it's a really powerful position because you have all the responsibilities beating through that [unit]. They're trying quite hard to change that at the moment so that it is more centrally managed, because its less efficient, although people feel that they are more part of a cohort, a group, where there is a community.*

Although the research design is delineated along lines of disciplinary and institutional types (RG and post 92' universities), Maria's account imparts an added degree of comparative insight due to her very recent change from a leadership position in a Post 92' university to her current role as unit leader of education at RG5. She is a few months into her unit leader's role at RG5 (BA), having occupied an analogous leadership position at a post 92' university prior to commencing her current role. She comments on the differences in the structural framework in relation to the level of structural oversight on her leadership role in both contexts. It is of note that her current university possesses an administrative intensity that is below the Russell Group average. The potential link (and the corresponding caveats to the observations) between the level of autonomy experienced and the administrative intensity of the institution is analysed in section 7.4. However, the role is relatively new to Maria which is acknowledged by her. Thus, she advises that she may not have a comprehensive perspective on her role currently. Nevertheless, reflecting on the degree of embeddedness and the streamlined nature of the structure in both roles, Maria remarks:

*So that one [the previous role] was very structured. I had my deputies, and the school leadership team was a number of deputies and the professors and a couple of partnership leads, and then each of those people line managed everybody else so I had a team of say 10 people and each of those, between us, we line managed the whole school. Whereas now, there is what's called a senior leadership team but that's very different in every [unit] so it's not standard. I think there are lots of rotational roles and they don't line manage, so I have a number of people on very small fraction of leadership roles.*

Having experienced a relatively more streamlined structural framework in her previous leadership role, Maria's account provides her perspective on the complexities of operating within a more devolved framework (RG5, BA). Elaborating on these complexities, she remarks:

*So, there is a really strange relationship between myself and my whole [unit], whereby, there isn't a sort of clear designation of line management authority. I'm everybody's line manager; [number – anonymised] people. But also in terms of lines of communication. So what I'm used to is, if I sort of wanted to know what was going on, I could obviously meet 60 people more easily. But there were clear line managers who I could talk to. Whereas, where I am, everything's a lot more opaque, because that's not that clear. Like, I don't know what people are doing.*

She goes on to add, "of course, I'm relatively new so I'm not going to [know everything right now] but it's a lot harder to find out where people are, what they're doing. I can't, then, give people opportunities because I don't know what opportunities would be a best fit for them".

On a macro level, Maria's observation on the greater degree of streamlined operations in a post 92' university corresponds to (Deem, 1998) analysis that "former polytechnics and colleges of higher education emerged from a rather more bureaucratic and hence more hierarchical and rule bound local authority tradition" (p. 104). This observation is echoed by Smith, (2002a) who observes that post 92' universities have "always been more managerialist in their structure and less collegial in their systems of governance and administration". Given the elapsed time since the cited studies, perspectives attesting to the enhancement of managerialist tents across the HE sector are indeed tenable (Kok et al., 2010). However, institutional culture and history are observed to be central factors that shape the modus operandi of universities (Barringer & Pryor, 2022). Thus, variation in the institutional types is deemed to affect structural frameworks and the leadership roles operating within it.

### 7.3.4 Delimitation of Financial Control

In the accounts of the Russel Group leaders, the experience of diminished agency is reported in close connection to the dissipation of authority over finances. Moreover, the purview over financial or budgetary control is observed to be a principal area that conditions the level of influence in hierarchal interactions. With the theme of reduced agency indicating the displacement of authority away from the academic unit, questions regarding the balance of influence - between unit and the institutional leadership - in the structural framework is significant, specifically in relation to the issues of responsive leadership in a university. It has to be noted that the following accounts, whilst describing the purview of the headship role,

which by designation is embedded within the bureaucratic structure and its purview, are illustrative of a wider theme of imbalance in leadership capacity. An implication of this imbalance pertains to degree of influence that the formal leader possesses in shaping the decisions on their academic units, specifically when it is disciplinary in nature and not extensively comprehended by senior leaders who do not possess the same familiarity on a particular disciplinary field.

Speaking on the issue of control over finances, Clive (Physical science unit, RG2) shares his experience of a gradual delimitation of financial authority in his role over the course of his term as the unit head. He notes that his authority gradually 'eroded over a five-year period' –

> *So by the time I got to the end, you know, I had to get permission for everything and the faculty had taken over all the finance functions. And actually by the end, I was thinking, well what is my role here because autonomy has been stripped away. You know almost every decision we're making has to be run through faculty. Whereas initially, I could decide, you know, let's develop a whole new [unit] strategy. Let's employ staff in this area. And that just got stripped away and that's what made the job deeply unsatisfying. In the end, I did have conversations with my boss to say, you know, what exactly is my role now because you're now making all the decisions*

Similarly, Arthur who leads a history unit in RG10 notes that "his power is circumscribed by the financial' as he is 'autonomous to the extent that it doesn't involve money". He highlights the same financial constraint over appointments by stating that "if I need another member of staff to teach something, I need to make the case to the people who actually have the money, which is at the school and the faculty level, and they can say no".

Likewise, as alluded to in their reflections on the institutional structure, David (Physical science unit, RG8) and Dan(Education, RG6), reinforce the loss of authority at the institutional level in their reflections on role autonomy. David states – "I've got no autonomy' and Dan observes that 'a lot of rules cascade down on us that I don't really have much control over'".

## 7.4 Variation in Agency according to Administrative Intensity

The data indicates an interesting variance in the level of agency attributed to their roles, by the Russell Group leaders. Thus, in light of centralisation identified as a salient process, the administrative intensities of the universities were considered as a reasonable affect for the variance. However, it has to be noted that the variation could feasible be a function of the differences in the purview of the role and other systemic features at discrete universities. As mentioned in the introductory paragraph, it is noted that the role titled 'head of department' and 'head of school' entail varying role remits, despite their operation within the level of the academic unit. Moreover, as acknowledged, the structural framework of universities is not homogenous and include features that are distinctive to the university in question. This structural variation was further observed to persist when examining the university during data collection, with some have added levels of structures between the level of the academic unit and the institution. Given the premise and nature of this research, an analysis of role remits in relation to the structural framework of the university falls beyond the ethical permit of this study. Nevertheless, having analysed the accounts of agency in light of varying administrative intensities, it is observed that unit leaders operating in institutions of in Below Average (BA) administrative intensities have attributed a higher sense of agency in their roles. The distribution of the RG participants according to the administrative intensities relative to the Russell Group mean is presented below (Table 7.1).

**Table 7.1 –** The tabular representation of the administrative intensities of the participants relative to the Russell Group average.

<div align="center">Russell Group Mean- . 885</div>

| Above Average | | Below Average | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Richard: Computer Science | RG1 | Gary: Computer Science | RG3 |
| Harry: Computer Science | RG2 | Gabe: Education; Michelle: Philos. | RG4 |
| Gabe: Education | RG4 | Maria: Education | RG5 |
| Dan: Education | RG6 | | |
| Mike: Physical science | RG7 | | |
| Clive: Physical science | RG2 | | |
| David: Physical science | RG8 | | |
| Adam: Ancient history & culture | RG9 | | |
| Arthur: History | RG10 | | |

Administrative intensity is derived by computing "the ratio of the total number of employees involved in administrative duties within each university, divided by the number of academic employees" (Andrews et. al, 2017). Given the confidentiality protocol in place, a detail

presentation of the computation process for the Russell Group cannot be illustrated. However, this section will delineate the rationale behind the computation of the mean administrative intensity for the Russell Group. Accordingly, this study used HESA (HESA, 2022) to extract the data on the total number of employees in administrative duties and the number of strictly academic employees. Metrics for both variables were taken for the 2020/21 academic year on account of data collection occurring between September 2021 and January 2022. The total number of administrative employees in each Russell Group University was derived by adding the number of employees within 1,2,3 and 4 SOC category. As stated on the HESA website (2022), SOC 1 employees include "managers, directors and senior officials"; SOC 2 includes "professional occupations"; SOC 3 includes "associate professionals and technical occupations", and SOC 4 includes "administrative and secretarial occupations". Similarly, HESA provides a metric for the total number of academic employees for each academic year for every university. The metrics for both categories were derived for every Russell Group university to derive the mean, which was computed to be .885 (rounded at the third decimal point). To illustrate this computation by example, a certain university has a total of 3240 number of administrative staff as defined in this study and a total number of 3380 academic employees. Therefore, the administrative intensity of this university equals 3240 ÷ 3380 which is .958 and hence above the RG mean (AA).

The accounts of Gabe (RG4), Michelle (RG4) and Gary (RG3) illustrate this. Foremost, the accounts of Gabe (Education) and Michelle (Psychology), who are heads of schools in RG4 (BA), indicates a level of congruity in the institutional and unit dynamic and a favourable view of the hierarchical structure in their universities. Gabe states that although his institution is "quite hierarchical", he "quite likes that in many ways"; Michelle has come to see that "you need that structure to advocate for you centrally". Furthermore, Michelle reports that:

> *In my institution, [academic units] are pretty autonomous. So historically, it's been very much a devolved system. [Academic units] can pretty much make their own decisions with certain limits. We hold our own budget, which is great*

Similarly, Gary, who leads a computer science unit in RG3 (BA), expresses a greater degree of autonomy relative to other participants in the study. Examining his contextual and structural circumstances, it is noted that he leads a burgeoning discipline and operates in an institution with a below average administrative intensity. Reflecting on his role, Gary remarks that "it's

like a business unit. And I'm basically operating like the CEO of a business unit in terms of enterprise". He compares this to other leadership roles in his past and notes that "in terms of power, strangely enough, it is very different from other places, whether that's Europe or the US. In the UK, the [unit head] has basically unlimited executive power so it's really like your CEO". Expanding on the areas of oversight, Gary notes that it's "absolutely everything. That's finance, staff management, you know, satisfaction. Every aspect of the business is my problem. But that comes with the ability to, let's say, decide on a lot of things. Unless it would be against regulations or senior management disagrees with me. The [vice * - anonymised] and the [senior leader – anonymised], that's my only two superiors at University. Other than that, it's basically all up to me".

Bolden's model argues that each of the five dimensions "contributes toward the perceptions, practice and experience of leadership in higher education' (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008). In mediating between the structural hierarchy, the points of tension for the unit leaders (across the dataset) largely pertain to the working dynamic that is engendered as a function of the structural disparity implicit in occasions of cross level exchange. As such, the accounts indicate that the implicit disparity in leadership approach can potentially engender interpersonal incongruencies. With the imbalance on the level of influence exerted (by the stakeholders at different levels) observed to be structurally embedded, the question on the extent to which the institutional structure is responsive to concerns that are distinctively academic and furthermore disciplinary, emerges as a central issue of institutional responsiveness. This is illustrated by accounts that demonstrate that the degree to which disciplinary concerns are recognised at the institutional level is a significant condition in determining the nature of the working dynamic between stakeholders. Acknowledging the significance of the working dynamic between formal stakeholders is important in the context of this research on two primary fronts. Firstly, it illustrates the import of relational dynamics in the leadership practice of unit leaders as observed in the emphasis place on the quality of interpersonal relationship and secondly, it highlights the areas of note that may enhance responsiveness on account of recognising the tensions that are operative in hierarchical interactions.

**Figure 7.1** – A synthesised illustration of the tensions reported in the process of interacting with hierarchy
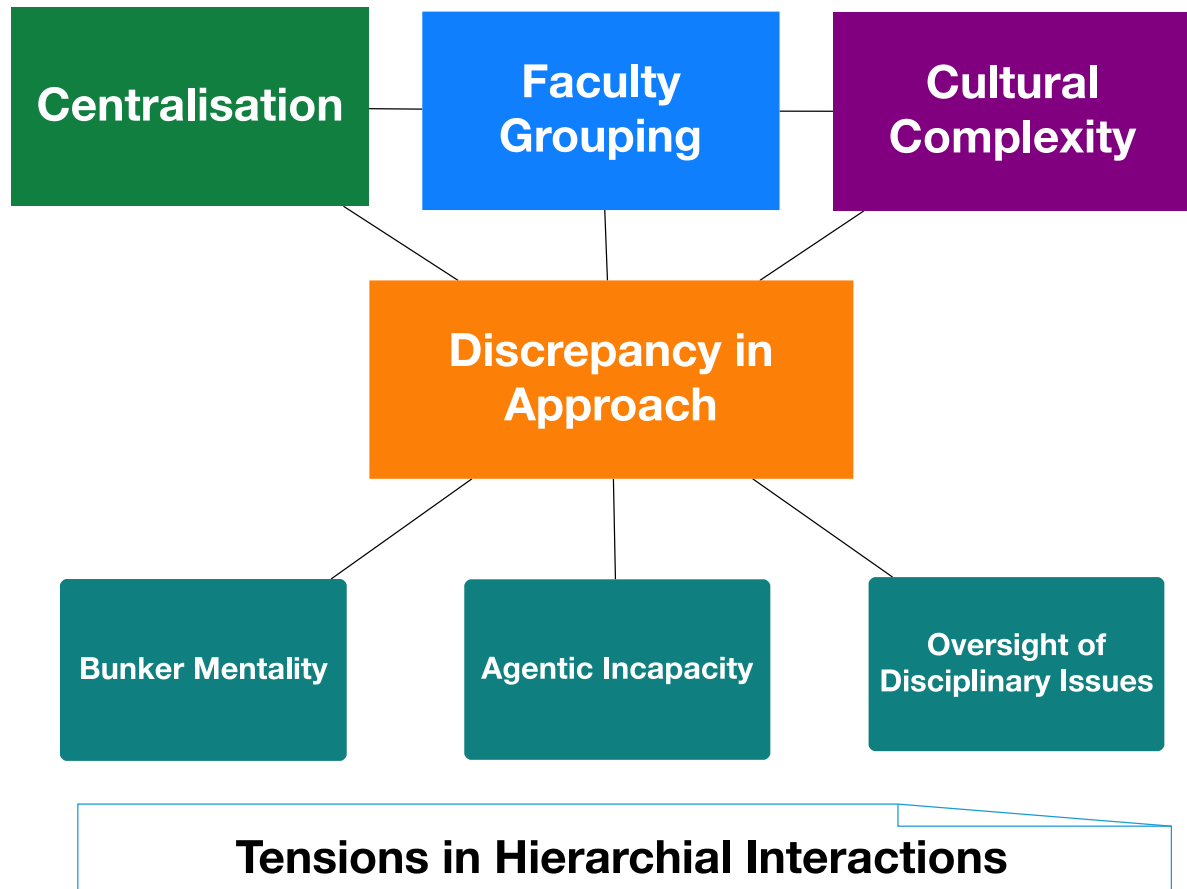


The diagram above represents the themes reported as issues that can engender an unfavourable dynamic when liaising between institutional levels. As the diagram illustrates, tensions reported pertain to the increasing centralisation of processes, being grouped unfavourably in a faculty and the insensitivity to the disciplinary issues by hierarchy. These tensions generate a fundamental discrepancy in approach to leadership between institutional levels. This becomes more evident further on in section 7.6 where the social nature of influence is analysed. Consequently, some of the implications of these tensions are reported to induce a 'bunker mentality' where the collaboration between departmental / school and institutional constituents are strained. Additionally, participants have expressed the loss of agency in their role as unit leaders on account of primarily the tension of centralisation. Moreover, the issues of being overlooked as a departmental unit is reported to incapacitate the department's capacity to develop.

**7.5 Experiences of Associate Heads**

As mentioned earlier, together with leadership roles responsible for overseeing discrete units, the sample of post 92' departmental leaders include roles whose remit pertains to leading discrete programs (n= 4). During analysis, it became evident that the experiences, expectations, and approach to leadership of associate heads were distinct to that of the unit leaders. Thus, fully incorporating the accounts of associate heads into the analysis on middle leadership was deemed to be incongruous to the aims of the research. However, their accounts of liaising with the unit leaders on concerns pertaining to their programmes were considered to offer useful insights into the relational dynamics within the academic unit. As such, this section delineates the issues encountered by associate heads when liaising with their unt leaders. The process of mediation in these roles, thus, entails distinct demands and provides valuable insight into the intra unit dynamics that are operative within the unit structure. In keeping with the study into tensions of navigating structural hierarchies that are reported, the nature of concerns expressed are observed to be predominantly procedural - relating to the systemic process of enactment-with concerns expressed around the logistical aspects of implementation. It has to be noted that the focus here is on reporting the tensions expressed specifically in the mediatory process and thus, the classification of the tensions as procedural does not imply the absence of strategic responsibilities. Moreover, the strategic and operational domains are interlinked and therefore, the strategic requirements of leading a programme, in the cases included here, inform the operational issues that are expressed.

Amelia, who leads a physical science programme at PT 1, describes an instance of bureaucratic burden that is experienced in her leadership role. In talking about some of the challenges experienced in her leadership role, Amelia remarks:

> *I think partly, getting people to understand why I'm asking for things, what is it that I need and why I need that. Because it's so different to the other things; that I do get frustrated with my line management, with my [unit leader]. So, there's risk averseness and that means that sometimes decisions don't get made and things don't get done. And I would say that's one of my frustrations.*

The nature and mission of Amelia's programme, which is classified under the Hard / Pure Biglan category, entails the requirement of instruments that feasibly require a relatively substantial financial investment by the institution. As such, the issue of bureaucratic burden

expressed could potentially be a function of the institutional capacity for investment at a given period. Nevertheless, the aspect of the discipline as a key factor in leadership concerns is foregrounded in this account. Speaking further on the procedural limitations experienced, Amelia notes –

> *It's not so hierarchal that I can't go around my [unit leader] to get things done. But I don't think that I should need to. So I think that we could have a grown up conversation where I explain what it is that I need and why we need to do it. But what tends to happen is that we get into a ping pong go – Can you do that ? No. What can't you do it ? Because I can. Why? Because we've never done it before. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't. I feel like I've been banging my head against the wall sometimes.*

In Amelia's account, the process of resource allocation is adduced as a point of tension that is indicative of the demands relating to the disciplinary nature of the programme she leads. The tensions that accompany the issue of resource allocation is observed to be prevalent across the sample (as observed in Steve's PT5 account) and is indicative of representing a major affect in the leadership practice of departmental level leaders. In line with observations from accounts of unit leaders, a noteworthy insight from the accounts of associate heads pertains to the interpersonal dissonance between formal leaders at different structural positions that firstly, is engendered and secondly, remains ostensibly un-attended to a satisfactory degree.

Elaborating further on the tensions expressed in the process of mediating between structural levels, Lauren's account of leading a programme on an education unit in PT2, illustrates the issues that can arise in a scenario of discrepancy between strategy and implementation. Commenting on the structured nature of organisational activity, Lauren remarks, 'There are loads of different habitus that we sit in and so from higher up, there are lots of strategies based on data'. She acknowledges that although, on the level of strategy formulation beyond the programme, 'there's no way that they know individual staff or students'; her role in implementing the strategic decisions means that -

> *You really do feel that kind of human impact of decisions and I think that sometimes it can be a real conflict, you know. I find that this is a conflict; that relationship of balancing the expectations of the university ethos and strategic thinking and then brining the ideas down and then seeing how that can be created into a real format.*

The accounts provided by Amelia and Lauren as programme leaders, when analysed in relation to the accounts of the unit leaders, provides a point of reference to the concerns of unit leaders within the academic unit. As discrete programmes, the pressing concerns encountered by the programme leaders pertain to the functional issues of administering a course. These concerns, as noted in the cited accounts, cumulatively inform the concerns of the unit as a whole.

**7.6 B. The Social Dimension of Leadership Influence: Factors of influence**

In analysing the tensions reported by the unit leaders, an understanding of the factors that affect responsiveness in the mediatory process – from the unit leaders perspective – are illustrated. Specifically, the accounts of the participants have highlighted the import of relational dynamics in leadership practice, where the combination of interpersonal and structural factors are observed to generate operative tensions that can constrict the degree of responsive leadership in universities. These factors are noted to affect the capacity of a unit – under varying circumstances – to perform and be operationally viable. Thus, having explored the tensions encountered in hierarchical interactions, the accounts provided by the unit leaders also offer their perspective on conditions that propel effective coordination. In conjunction with the tensions reported, considering the factors that facilitate effective coordination offers a fuller understanding of the mediatory process during hierarchal interactions. Consequently, the social dimension of leadership practice in terms of the nature of influence exerted by the unit leader is delineated in the process.

**7.6.1 Constructive Working Dynamic with Senior Leaders**

Out of the 6 post 92' leaders, 5 participants cite the direct influence of leadership personnel at the institutional leaders as crucial to their effectively realising their capacity as unit leaders. Phil (psychology, PT6), in reflecting on the prominent influences on his leadership role, remarks:

> *For me, having a strong line manager is really important. Having somebody who you feel that you are able to work collaboratively and effectively with. I've had experiences of having incredibly supportive and committed line managers who are very clearly invested in providing me with the space to grow and develop into the leadership role; and I've had other line managers who are less engaged. And the difference between*

*those can be quite significant in terms of the extent to which I feel that I am able to engage with the roles that I'm taking on. If you don't have a good working relationship with them and you don't feel that you're all working to the same kind of principles or working for the same mission, then it's kind of, the effort is futile.*

Collaboration and support are cited as central principles for effective coordination in Phil's account. In light of the tensions pertaining to the issue of discrepancy in leadership approach explored earlier, a wider point on the social and cultural complexity (Middlehurst et al., 2009) in university operations and the structures in place to address them is reiterated. More specifically, Phil's account illustrates the significance of cultivating a congruent working dynamic with the line manager to his capacity as a middle leader. The section on unit performance (section 7.7) sheds further light on the diverging considerations on the issue that can hinder congruency in the working dynamic between leaders at the unit and institutional level. In conjunction with the social nature of leadership influence that is elucidated in this section, the issues of enabling congruency of perspectives on key issues (such as performance) between leadership stakeholders is noted to be a central component of responsive leadership.

Similarly, Anton (Computer Science, PT2) alludes to the collaborative principle with the line manager that enhances his leadership role. He observes:

*Its less about the faculty as an organisation and more about the people involved in the faculty level. I'm hugely influenced by my executive Dean at the faculty level but in a very positive way. And you know as this is anonymised, I'm not brown nosing here. I really mean it, [the Dean] helps clarify what the goals in the strategy are and helps give that overall framework of direction of strategy. [The Dean] really helps in terms of mentoring, you know, how to be successful at the school and the faculty level that's really encouraging to set the direction of the whole faculty as a team rather than it coming down. And then, also in the way that you would hope from a good leader, they do the work at the central university level that clears the barriers for us to be able to do our work.*

By alluding to the operational chain of command that is in effect, the centrality of a collaborative working dynamic in the coordination between levels is further emphasised in Anton's account. While the discussion on the support mechanisms to account for social and

cultural complexity persists as a significant point of consideration, the saliency of a congruent working dynamic in leadership practice suggests that this issue can be addressed at its inception. An added implication of the centrality of the social dimension i.e, interpersonal dynamic, as indicated in Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., (2008), is the impact of "social capital" – that denotes the level of influence exerted by an actor, which is contingent on the structure and content of the actor's social relations – in cross level interactions. As such, the consideration of what increases or decreases social capital for the unit leader emerges as a central factor in university leadership. This will be explored in the subsequent accounts and the implications discussed in the discussion section.

Thus, reiterating the import of social capital during hierarchical interactions, Arthur (History, RG10) provides an analogous account to the post 92' leaders, on the influence of the line manager. In reflecting on his leadership role, the capacity to effectively accomplish unit priorities is attributed to a positive working dynamic with senior leadership. He observes that the leadership capacity in his role is:

> *Not inherent. It depends on your relationship with the person above you. I fortunately have a good relationship with my head of school [who has] been very reasonable in trusting me to do what I think is best for the unit.. So I think that's very much dependent upon the interpersonal relationship. I know of friends in other institutions who've been [unit leaders] and have found that they have a much more prescriptive relationship with their immediate line managers and find that they get very frustrated because they don't feel like they have the autonomy to do what they think is best for their [units].*

Steve's (Psychology, PT5) account, in describing his experiences of working with different line managers, further informs the import of a constructive working dynamic when liaising between levels. Having had multiple terms as the unit leader, Steve's account reflects Phil's observation that the working relationship with the line manager can entail significant repercussions. Reflecting on his first term as a unit leader, Steve remarks – "we had an excellent Vice chancellor at the time who was truly excellent and he [moved on]". He adds- "Then they appointed an absolute nightmare of a Vice chancellor […] it was awful. [The VC] was unfit for office. It was like being a major civil servant and Donald Trump comes in power and you think, oh god, I can't stay with this. And so I left". The account does not include details of specific areas that were affected in relation to either experience, however, it can be plausibly

surmised that the basis of a working relationship was evidently severed with the second VC. Moreover, the relationship as described in the account, was not rectified, and led to Steve leaving the institution at the time. A salient observation in this instance, given the limitation of details, reintroduces the question of the mechanisms in place to effectively manage interpersonal tension between leadership stakeholders.

In their experience as unit leaders at PT3, James (information science) and Jack(languages), attribute a significant portion of their leadership capacity to the relationship with their line manager. Their accounts highlight the influence of the line manager in engendering an entrepreneurial approach to leadership that is conveyed as a positive. Prior to talking about the influence of the line manager, James establishes the primacy of agency and interpersonal dynamics by commenting on the structural processes of his university. He remarks:

> *It's not that the structure wasn't there, it's just that there was a less of a cultural appetite for expanding and seizing opportunities and the one thing about PT3 is that it is more open minded and is more keen to explore the opportunities that the previous institution I worked at.*

As such, the aforementioned "cultural appetite" is attributed to the working dynamic established with the line manager. This is highlighted as central to James' role as a unit leader at PT3. He states,

> *I'm going to go straight out the bat and just really be clear that my current line manager is singularly the best, most inspiring role model that I've ever worked for in my entire career. [The line manager] is a continuing inspiration and instils loyalty not just in me but in others as well. I've had a number of opportunities to leave the institution and go to different universities in different types of roles but one of the things that keeps me here is that I have an incredibly effective, supportive and challenging in the right way, boss. That makes for a very positive environment in which to work and be led.*

Likewise, Jack's (Languages, PT3) account foregrounds the significance of a congruent working dynamic with "senior leadership". He remarks,

*I think that my leadership has coincided with a period of very proactive senior leadership at the university, which has been very supportive and very entrepreneurial. I think that's the main thing. I think that the VC has quite an entrepreneurial head. So, I've had a lot of things backed which have required a lot of investment which perhaps wouldn't have happened in other circumstances. So yeah, it's been a good period.*

With regards to the accounts of the RG participants, Harry (Computer Science, RG2) observes that an essential component of his motivation to continue as the unit leader has been the "support from the PVC". Continuing the overarching observation on the quintessentially social nature of leadership practice, Harry's account reiterates the centrality of a positive working dynamic between leaders at different levels. He continues, "for me personally, if I found that there wasn't a good relationship there, I would question whether I want to be [the unit leader]".

As observed in the accounts of the participants cited above, the working / interpersonal dynamic with the line manager is emphasised as a central component that significantly affects the leadership practice of department / school leaders. These observations further enhance the call for a "relational understanding of leadership" in UK HE (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008) and the observation from studies such as (Middlehurst et al., 1992) that establish the distinctly social nature of leadership influence in HE that are based on networks and relationships. The significance of the social dimension in leadership practice, is perhaps accentuated in scenarios of cross level interactions, due to the convergence of distinct priorities that could vary along disciplinary and institutional lines. In this regard, Clive's (Physical science unit , RG2) account illuminates the complexities in the mediatory processes for the unit leader. He remarks:

*It's the job from hell and you are caught in the middle of two groups of people. So the people in the executive level will have this wonderful idea that we're going to do X. They, as a group, seem completely incapable of translating that into something that is acceptable or understandable to the staff. And so my job is to take it back from the executive and take it down and sell it to the people below. And then deal with the cries of outrage that come from below.*

Elaborating further on his experiences, Clive offers the antithetical perspective in relation to the accounts cited above, that illustrates a relatively unfavourable working dynamic.

Specifically, the illustration of a discrepancy in approach to leadership and the lack of communication reported in Clive's account (cited shortly), highlights the resultant development of a detached working dynamic. Firstly, Clive observes, "'I just never felt my Dean was that authentic". Thereupon, he highlights the drastic variation in approach to leadership between the last Dean and the current one. He mentions the "hands off" approach that was initially taken by the former Dean, which changed into a more "tightly governed" approach under the incumbent one. In stating this, he notes that "we've gone to the other extent. [And] the relationship becomes difficult because I feel that the new Dean is too controlling". As alluded to, the discrepancy between the unit and the hierarchy is a noteworthy issue that is evident in Clive's account. More to the point, having to adapt to contrary approaches, markedly highlights a degree of indifference to establishing sound social dynamics in the domain of interlevel collaboration. From the unit leader's perspective (Clive's), the lack of congruency in approaches has induced uncertainty. He observes that with the former Dean, he felt that "he didn't really care what I was doing" and under the incumbent Dean, he works with "someone who says: well, no, I don't want to do that, can you do it my way".

### 7.6.2 9The Implications of Social Capital

The accounts cited above foregrounds the social dimension of leadership practice, that implies the centrality of a responsive working dynamic between leaders at different levels for effective leadership practice. Furthermore, the import of the working dynamic between stakeholders implies the notion of "social capital", described as the level of influence exerted by an actor and contingent on the structure and content of the actor's social relations (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008). Bolden et al., (2008) finds that the respondents of their study on leadership ascribed the "significance of social networks and relationship" (p. 366) to the accomplishment of leadership. In this study, the prevalence of social capital is alluded to in comments such as, "I have an incredibly effective, supportive and challenging boss" (James), "I fortunately have a good working relationship with my head of school" (Steve) and other such instances. In accord with the definition of social capital delineated, the content of the actor's social relations in the remarks of James and Steve, can be surmised to be relatively unproblematic. Therefore, the following account illustrates a case where the unit leader's social relations are distinctly problematic. This example entails a specific case of a unit that is struggling financially. Adam's (Ancient history & Culture, RG9) account elucidates the significant implications of a failure in creating a constructive working dynamic between

institutional levels. Moreover, with complex and crucial issues of financial sustenance for a struggling discipline at hand (as noted in Adam's account), the import of evaluating the mechanisms of decision making in cross level leadership interactions are highlighted.

Adam's experiences of leading a struggling ancient history and culture unit that is reported to be on the brink of closure, offers a perspective foremost, into a scenario where the circumstances of a discipline have diminished a unit leader's social capital and thus the capacity to exert meaningful influence in leadership interactions with hierarchy. On this, Adam notes that he was "struggling to establish any kind of open relationship with the faculty". Furthermore, he observes that "this can be a pretty damaging place to be". And that there is "pretty much no way around it". The cited remarks from Adam's account provides an insight into the deterioration of a responsive working dynamic that has created a rigid social dimension for Adam as the unit leader of Ancient history & Culture . Adam elaborates on a scenario where the concerns and issues of his discipline, that were mounting over the years, were only handled by the university at the critical point. On this Adam remarks:

> *I think that the other sort of important point here is that the faculty and the university did not take ownership of the problem sufficiently. And only in the last sort of year, well less than a year – seven, eight months – has the university taken ownership. And it's done so on a relatively ill-informed way because they've not paid much attention to it until recently. So they haven't had sufficient knowledge to make an informed decision. But I think that a lack of - and I would probably say – lack of leadership and ownership at the institutional level and the faculty level has really helped create some of the problems that we're in.*

The excerpt is demonstrative of communication failures that indicates the collapse of a working dynamic between the unit and institutional levels. Given the convergence of concerns that relate to a disciplinary and institutional domain in cross level leadership interactions, Adam's account offers a point of reflection on the decision-making mechanisms that govern these interactions at universities. As explored subsequently, the aspect of finances is noted to be an issue with regards to the decision-making process on the academic department. Thus, the extent to which issues of a disciplinary nature are considered and inform this process may represent an important point of consideration in cross level interactions.  Alluding to the imbalance of

influence and leverage on decision making in hierarchical leadership interactions, Adam notes that,

> *Decisions had been taken at a higher level on whether or not to progress with programs or whether or not to support appointments. But then no responsibility has been taken for the implications of these decisions. Now the responsibility has been left to the [unit] saying this is the decision and you guys deal with it. The institution has also got to take responsibility when things aren't going well instead of constantly harassing the [unit] for not doing well enough*

Conversely, the following paragraphs are illustrative of cases where the circumstances of a discipline are reported to add to the social capital of the unit leader, that is observed to enhance their level of influence during hierarchical interactions. Units that perform well – the understanding of which are explored in the subsequent sections – are seen as assets to the university, thus, enhancing the leverage available to unit leader. In Dan's case (Education, RG6), his educational department is a big recruiter of postgraduate international students that, as reported, bolsters his leadership capacity. He remarks:

> *We're bringing in probably more money than any other department within the whole university so basically I get stuff that I want and I'm in a strong negotiating position. When it comes to spending money, because for high contribution high value kind of [unit], that's a nice position to be in.*

Similarly, David (Physical science unit, RG8) notes that although areas like "[certain areas of his discipline - anonymised] are completely tanking at the moment [And] the student numbers are going down [along with] research interest"; other areas of the same discipline are "exploding areas and really popular with students and lots of funding". He attributes this to the increasing interest in the "[certain] debates" and being involved as actors in that debate as an academic unit. Research is identified as a strong area in David's unit, that adds value to his university, and he attributes a certain level of agency in his role to that. Speaking to this, David observes:

> *I'm lucky to be a [leader of a big academic unit] which is very research intensive and so is seen as an asset in the university. I have to balance the fact that we don't give as*

*big of monetary contribution to the university as others do. But what we do is we win awards; we win grants; we do stuff that the university wants to be able to be seen to do. So I'm always, rather than just pushing back, trying to use the different things that we are able to offer, as bargaining so that they see the [academic unit]. What gives me power, if you like to use the word, is that I know that we are an asset to the university and the things that we do are important. In my [unit], that's mostly on the research side.*

The accounts cited above illustrate the way leadership operates in practice. Demonstrating the distinctly social nature of influence, the accounts of the participants illustrate the factors that can condition the relational dynamics in leadership practice. The dimensions of leadership practice outlined by Bolden et al 2008 are invoked to varying degrees as noted in the allusion to disciplinary circumstances (contextual), faculty groupings and administrative intensity (structural), social capital and working dynamics (social). On the whole, the centrality of a constructive working is emphasised in the experiences of unit leaders in this research, that is observed to affect the other dimensions of leadership for the middle leader in UK HE.

### 7.6.3 "Soft Power"

In the accounts cited above, an understanding of leadership practice - when liaising between levels - as founded on distinctly social aspects such, as a responsive working dynamic and social capital emerges. Nevertheless, with leadership practice occurring within frameworks of structure and role remits, participants in this research have highlighted the embedded nature of middle leadership that constitutes a fundamental reality for formal leaders. In commenting on the structural framework that establishes the remit of his leadership role when interacting with hierarchy, Jack (Languages, PT3) describes the implications of operating with a streamlined structure and shares his experience of leadership agency within it. He observes:

*So, I think that in post 92s, there is less infrastructure between you and the (executive) leadership – there are strengths to that. So, my friends down the road at [pre 92 University X] often complain that there is no way their voice would ever be heard by their VC, because there are all these layers of power and management in between. I think that we have less of an infrastructure and therefore the ability to go up and down*

*the institution more. Umm, it means that we have less independence but I don't think*
*that I regret that because I think I value openness to other [units]. And in fact, if*
*anything, I would like more of it. So, you know, the things that stand in the way of*
*interdisciplinary collaboration, which are things like departmental budgets that make*
*it almost a disincentive to have shared programs.*

Jack's account of the structural framework and the way it operates, whilst imparting his individual experience, conveys insights into firstly the degree of accessibility to senior leaders as a function of the streamlined nature of the structure and secondly, the implication on role autonomy that is effectuated as a consequence. Considering his account on the import of the relationship with his line manager, Jack's account illuminates the nuanced dynamic of formal and informal avenues of influence that characterise hierarchical interactions. More specifically, Jack's comment about the "ability to go up and down the institution more" despite having "less independence" indicates the positives derived for Jack's leadership – on account of a constructive working dynamic with the line manager – within an ostensibly streamlined and structured framework. Jack notes, "I would like more of it". This reiterates the import of social relations and the working dynamics in middle leadership practice.

Elaborating on a similar premise that illustrates the dynamics of formal and informal influence in the middle leadership role, Steve (Psychology, PT5) acknowledges the formal avenues as established modus operandi of a university, however he observes that "a quiet word in the right ear at the right time can bring benefits in a way that you can't do through the official channel". He remarks,

*For example, one of the advantages that I've got is that I've been at this university now*
*for [multiple number of] years and so senior managers, I know them all. [..] And so I*
*had a particular challenge about getting some posts approved [...] so I made sure that*
*I just had a chat with the PVC. It's those little things [that you can do as a leader]*

His example, it has to be noted, seeks to exemplify the aspect of informal influence in an accessible narrative in context of an interview. Hence, the example is conveyed with an understanding of the various accompanying contextual facts of the situation such as appropriateness of the issue in terms of institutional plan and the implied modes of formal approval. As such, to contextualise his point, Steve states,

*I have soft power. So, a part of my role is to negotiate that relationship with my line manager. There's always a power imbalance, he's got power over me. But I can meet with him monthly – I go to faculty executive meetings – and I can speak there and drop in certain ideas or bits of information*

Whilst Jack's account provided an advantageous perspective on the embedded nature of the role, Phil (Psychology, PT6) elaborates on the realities of executive authority or lack thereof in middle leadership. He notes,

*Different universities operate in different ways but fundamentally, heads of departments, associate deans and those kinds of various other roles – they are not all about autonomy. A lot of the decision-making power doesn't actually rest with those role holders. Depending on how universities are organised, power tends to be held at the faculty or at the executive levels. And then, everything else in between is about implementation.*

Expanding on a comparable motif of "less independence" noted in Jack's account, Phil explains the remit of his role and the degree of executive authority attributed to his role. He remarks that,

*the dean (of faculty) can pretty much veto anything that I want to do, and I have to kind of recognise that. And similarly, if you decide that you want to go and do something and the Vice Chancellor doesn't want you to do it, you're not going to do it ".*

Phil's account conveys the structural remits that demarcate operations for middle leaders and conveys the operational realties where a bifurcation of the executive and managerial levels in relation to executive authority exists. Phil's account, in demarcating the domains of "power" attributed to "the executive levels" and "everything else in between being about implementation", invokes Kotter's distinction between leadership and management as cited in (Middlehurst & Kennie, 1995), where leadership is attributed to coping with change and management to coping with internal complexities. More to the point, Phil's account indicative of the emphasis on the managerialist aspect in the role identity of the "academic – manager" (explored by RQ1) in accomplishing the role of mediating between levels.

An analogues instance of this perspective is also observed in Anton's account (computer science at PT2). Reflecting on the nature of autonomy in his role, Anton observes that "autonomy is not about doing what the heck you like. It's about being given that word we used right at the very start, empowerment, to achieve the strategies and the goals of the organisation in the way that you are going to be most effective". This statement is made in reference to Anton's interactions with the faculty and this does not imply that this demarcation persists in other domains of leadership practice. Similar to Phil, the theme of demarcation between the strategic domain and the domain of implementation is implied in reflecting on the process of interlevel coordination is highlighted by Anton.

The accounts cited in this section considers leadership influence in the context of the structural remits in place for middle leaders. As such, whilst the role is notably embedded, dynamics of formal and informal influence are reported to be at play. In accord with the literature on middle leadership, the absence of executive authority in the role is a reality for middle leaders. Nevertheless, given the positionality of the role in the institutional apparatus, the themes such as the nature of the working dynamic with the line manager and the social dynamics of influence at paly, a nuanced picture of leadership practice is portrayed by the accounts. Thus, having considered the nature of influence in interaction with hierarchy, exploring the way that the unit leaders understand unit performance and its associated demands offers further insights on cross level interactions. Moreover, the intersection of the domains of leadership and performance is acknowledged to comprise the dynamic of normative versus utilitarian values that persists in higher education (Middlehurst et al., 2009).

## 7.7 C. Salient considerations of Departmental Performance

Performance is one of the central areas of concern around which leadership stakeholders at the departmental / school and the institutional levels convene. This section seeks to inform the way that academic and utilitarian concerns intersect on the issue of department / school performance and its impact on cross level leadership interactions. Towards this, the considerations of unit performance as relayed by the participants are analysed and thereupon, the challenges encountered in fulfilling them are discussed. In doing so, the role played by the formal middle leader in ensuring performance is contemplated in relation to the observations on the leadership role that has been explicated thus far.

The notion of performance is inextricably linked to sector-based indicators that evaluate the quality of academic services such as teaching and research – amongst others - in UK HE. Indicators such as the National student survey (NSS), Research Excellence framework (REF) and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) are central instruments that determine the capacity of a university to secure resources – human and financial. Thus, these indicators largely dominate the performance concerns of a university. Naturally, the accounts of the participants demonstrate a predominant aspect of conceptualising 'performance' in terms of achieving on Key Performance indicators – such as the REF and NSS – along with being competitive in student recruitment. At the same time, there are variation in the way that the leaders in this study relate with the aforementioned conceptualisation of departmental performance. These variation – elaborated shortly – provide an insight into issues that are observed to be pertinent for specific disciplines in ensuring performance.

### 7.7.1 Financial Viability and Performance Metrics

Starting with the accounts of the post 92-unit leaders (n = 6), the theme of financial viability as a prominent focus in cross level leadership dialogue, is consistently observable across the accounts. Having said that, it is evident that the performance concerns are multi-faceted and encompass the domains of student experiences, teaching quality, research and unit reputation. However, in relation to interactions with the hierarchy, the perspective of performance and its various facets coalescing on the issue of financial viability is notable. Illustrating this point on the prominence of financial viability as a performance concern, Anton (Computer Science, PT2) compares the outlook on the issue of performance in academia and industry - where he occupied a managerial role in a prominent technological company before moving into academia. Fundamentally, financial viability as the bottom line is emphasised, despite the prevalence of other priorities. He remarks:

> *In industry, the thing that is in everybody's mind is revenue and profit. If you've ever done work on balanced scorecards, that what everything drives towards – revenue and profit. In academia, the money isn't the most important thing or they wouldn't believe it when you talk to a lot of people. [There is the outlook that] success in your business will drive the money, you know, if you have a great research reputation, students will*

*come and you'll get lost of money. But ultimately, that's an enabler when we talk about*
*performance in the [academic unit].*

In Anton's account, financial viability is posited as the foundational basis on which the associated aspects of performance namely research in this case, are developed. Similarly, as observed in subsequent comments made by Anton, the sphere of teaching is associated with revenue generation. In emphasising the precedence of financial viability as a central facet of performance, Anton's perspective alludes to a potential point of tension in relation to balancing additional facets of performance such as research and teaching (observed in other accounts). More specifically, the significance of research and its implicit connection to strengthening the financial capacity of a unit – partly in terms of reputation – is referenced in subsequent accounts as adding additional workload pressures on academics in institutions that are traditionally considered to be teaching intensive.  This issue of striving to incorporate both teaching and research in post 92' universities will be expanded on subsequently in this section. Elaborating further on the various facets of unit performance, Anton provides an overview of the primary concerns as a unit leader. He remarks:

> *Four things in two groups of two which are the be all and end all of [unit]performance.*
> *On the teaching and learning side, its student experience and employability. Everything*
> *that we do on the teaching and learning side should be driving towards student having*
> *a good learning experience. I don't mean having a dosey time and drinking a lot but*
> *having a good experience learning. They pay the money these days. And employability*
> *is more important than student experience although they are both really important. So*
> *that's like my revenue profit side. And on the knowledge creation side, its quality*
> *outputs and impact of those outputs from a REF perspective. So that's what [unit]*
> *performance is about and everything we do should be driven towards those four things*
> *of two groups.*

Continuing with the financial aspect of performance that is noted to be central in hierarchical interactions, Jack (Languages, PT3) mentions the added emphasis on finances that has occurred over the last year (2020). He observes:

> *In the last year, finance data has gotten much sharper, so the level of contribution from*
> *[academic units] has become a KPI (Key Performance Indicator) in a way probably*

*only looked at for faculties (in previous years). And then, you know the PVCs would then put pressure under partners or not or decide to prioritise [certain areas] now that data is coming through, for development in this part of our performance. But we are a very research-intensive [unit], so our contribution is relatively low. Although I get harangued about that quite a lot. But I know that I can ignore it to a degree, as long as we're delivering strong research performance.*

### 7.7.2 Issues of performing on multiple metrics

Whilst noting the importance of finances, Jack's account (languages, PT3) pre-empts the pressures to perform on multiple metrics. It is speculative to infer the connection between research reputation as an enabler for better finances through Jack's account, however, research performance features as a performance consideration nevertheless. Although Jack's account does not feature a detailed reflection on the implications of this, Steve's (Psychology, PT5) account expounds on the tensions entailed in the demand to perform on a varied range of metrics. This links to an earlier point (on the tension engendered by the discrepancy in leadership approach reported by Steve) related to misalignment of the missions between the faculty and his unit. Concurrently, the aforementioned issues related to the demands on Post 92' universities, to perform on both teaching and research metrics is broached by Steve. He remarks,

*This is our problem as a university, we have a different [leadership personnel] for research and a different one for education and let's say the NSS is bad one day. They'll come in and say well what's your action plan, we want you to do this this and this. They don't think, well what's that going to do to our research strategy, that we're making all our researches spend twice as long on teaching now and we go up five points on the NSS and our [research] record tanks. And what will happen then is that we get our other [leadership personnel] who says well you need to do this this and this for research. Hang on, we've only got so many staff, so could be have a joined-up plan for this.*

In conjunction with the aforementioned tension of mission misalignment encountered in his leadership practice, Steve's account illuminates the issues for the unit leader in ensuring performance on multiple indicators. Specifically, concerns around the support provided to the

unit in possessing the resources to accomplish the performance objectives are highlighted. Moreover, a broader theme of financial imperative eclipsing the operational issues of the unit such as the lack of staff and manpower, is also highlighted. Towards this, Steve notes that although another prominent unit in his faculty "does not make as much money as us", his unit has approximately a "staff student ratio of 20 to one" whereas the other unit has a "6 to 1" ratio and thus "tops the NSS". Remarking on this, he states:

> *It doesn't take a genius to work out that if you've got three times the staff per student you can do better but, does that mean that they are therefore going to say psychology you can have more staff because we're worried about the NSS? No, they're not going to say that because ultimately what drives everything is the money. There, that's a very cynical answer.*

The points raised in Steve's account alludes to the core dynamic of utilitarian versus normative values that is operative, particularly in relation to performance concerns in cross level leadership exchanges. In noting the additional demands placed on his staff in achieving performance metrics, Steve's account highlights the issues that are engendered at the unit level when there is an imbalance in the aforementioned dynamic of utilitarian and normative concerns. Nevertheless, financial concerns constitute an inherent sectoral reality in UK HE. As such, in pointing to a broader issue of imbalance in priorities, Steve highlights the issue of the support provided by the institution to the unit leaders in tenably ensuring performance on a number of metrics. Moreover, considering the circumstances impinging on responsive cross level exchange, the issue on the mechanisms of support available (to unit leaders) and furthermore, the extent to which disciplinary considerations inform leadership dialogue relative to financial concerns, emerges as a major point of discussion for HE leadership.

### 7.7.3 A Mismatch in Perspectives: "Ground Level Realities"

Analogously, in the accounts provided by the unit leaders of the Russell Group, the issue of unit performance is conceptualised predominantly in terms of being able to achieve on indices - such as the REF and NSS - and being competitive in student recruitment. However, along with acknowledging the importance of metrical indicators for the academic unit, the participants elaborate on the various factors that a department / school leader must consider, that extend beyond the metrics. This is not to imply that the participants in the post 92' sample

do not contend with comparable circumstances. Rather, in this instance, comparative inference with regards to substantively stating similarities or differences between institutional types cannot be made; and thus, the collation of accounts is intended to offer the gamut of perspectives garnered in middle leadership on the issue of unit performance.

Elaborating on the complexities of performance concerns, Richard (Computer Science, RG1) remarks:

> *First thing is that performance is quite complex for an academic unit. There is no straightforward bottomline. We sometimes get a bit over enthusiastic about the aspects of academic performance that can be summed up in a bottom line. So we often have big discussions about financial performance, just because it's a number we can see on graphs and its very straightforward. It's very hard to have discussions on research culture or environment because they're harder to articulate. The goals are harder to articulate and the methods for achieving those goals are harder to get across.*

In Richard's account, the elements of culture and environment – central concerns for the unit leader - are cited as considerations at the departmental / school level that are likely to be secondary concerns in a  metrical conceptualisation of performance. Given that performance on indices is an influential aspect of decision making on unit affairs, Richard's account and the ones cited subsequently indicates to the potential constrictions imposed on key leadership issues, in the way that performance is predominantly understood in financial terms.

Additionally, a number of participants have further developed this theme by observing a "mismatch" (Clive – physical science unit, RG2  and Gary, computer science, RG3) between the "ground level" reality of performance and the significance of metrical indices. Towards this, Gary states that "the big drivers in higher education, as far as the executive concerns like league tables and quality indicators, actually mean nothing down on the ground. There is a real mismatch there". Gary's account offers a more detailed perspective on the aforementioned mismatch. However, it has to be noted that circumstances vary for discrete institutions and Gary's perspective illuminates a particular set of circumstances that delineates a specific disconnect. Nevertheless, in commenting on the disconnect encountered during interactions with hierarchy, Gary's account highlights the issues that can ensue when the multifaceted components of performance are blanketed under metrical indices. He observes:

*My problem as the [unit leader] is to align or find a way to reduce the gap in misalignment between what senior management believes or hopes to achieve and what I know we can actually do without compromising quality and wellbeing of my staff and what I want the culture to be in my [unit].*

In explaining further, Gary mentions the issue of miscommunication and the (negative) implications on staff that can occur, when the expectations of KPIs at different institutional levels are imposed on the departmental unit without consideration of the aforementioned intra level factors like culture and wellbeing. He remarks:

*Very often, especially with faculty, they try to give different expectations and messages. Because, you see, pressure comes from different places, so it's also a matter of clarity and making sure that you've got synchronised communication within the whole management to make sure that there is no bad interaction. In a lot of places, they don't do that well enough, so they let miscommunication or wrong expectations propagate and then the staff become negative, saying: oh you see, the management is putting that [in place].*

He adds that the role of the unit leader is to act as a "disconnect" between "the local culture [of the unit] and the [expectations set my senior management through] the KPIs". The accounts cited offers a perspective of performance concerns as multifaceted from the unit leader's perspective and the potential issues that may arise in cross level dialogue where the concerns of performance are predominantly dictated by metrics. In corresponding instances where the participants have highlighted the issues that could ensue in prioritising metrical performance, Dan (Education) foreground the aspects of wellbeing and quality respectively. Dan states, "I'm not a big fan of metrics and the danger is that the institutions spend the budget trying to gain the system and do well on the metrics, rather than actually doing what's right for their staff and students".

**7.7.4 Implications of disciplinary health on departmental performance**

Having reported the intra departmental considerations of culture and wellbeing that have a bearing on the issue of performance for the unit leader, the following accounts describe structural and contextual circumstances that affect performance on indices for different academic units. As such, Arthur's (History) account calls attention to the way that the disciplinary background of an academic unit can affect the performance. He leads a history unit in a university that is known for its STEM areas and recalls his first executive meeting as the unit leader:

> *They went around the table [for introductions] and I said that I was the head of the history [unit] and the first question and the only question I had was, your numbers are down, aren't they?*

Elaborating further on meeting performance imperatives, Arthur notes that leading a history unit in a STEM focused university can be "quite hard" and presents challenges of bridging "the gap between where the institution thinks you should be, because it's where the engineering department is, and where you actually are". Additionally, as a middle leader, he has significantly "less levers to pull [compared to heads of STEM subjects in the university]" in improving metrics and that performing in some of the indices "feels a bit like you're banging your head against the wall". Arthur's account points to an instance where the ethos of efficiency and economy – central managerialist tenets – can conflict with academic systems of disciplines like the humanities, where the work being done does not readily translate metrically (Finkenstaedt, 1990).

As discussed earlier, recruitment is noted to be an additional concern in the way unit performance is generally understood. Moreover, it equates to the financial viability of an academic unit and entails consequential implications on key decisions made 'within' and 'without' the academic unit. Speaking to this, Clive (Physical science, RG2) notes that "all universities are under pressure financially". In prefacing the subsequent accounts, it should be noted that as leaders of different disciplinary domain, the unit heads who participated in this research were overseeing their units under varying circumstances. Adam's (Ancient history & Culture, RG9) account offers the most drastic case of disciplinary decline as he was overseeing a period of potential closure of the ancient history and culture unit. He outlines the scenario by stating that "the biggest challenge for us, has been that [ancient history and culture] as an

undergraduate program has become less attractive to young people. It's not a dramatic drop but there has been a steady decline". Speaking on the financial implications, he states:

> *It has been pretty catastrophic in terms of recruitment. We've gone from undergraduate numbers in the 50s and 60s to dive into the 20s. And if you think about the financial implications for that in terms of sustaining the [unit], they're really serious. And from the university's perspective, we go from being a small recruiting subject to the lowest recruiting subject in the whole institution. And that's not a good place to be, you know, it's not really a good place to be.*

And alluding to his capacity as the unit leader to influence interlevel dialogue, Adam notes that even with the discipline offering 'very strong transferable skills', he notes that, "we're losing the argument and department after department across the country has struggled".

In comparison, Harry (RG2) and Richard (RG1) are overseeing computer science units that are reportedly burgeoning in terms of student interest in the area (HESA 2021). The issues highlighted in their accounts are distinctly operational in nature, which translate more readily to managerialist solutions, and pertain to the ability of the unit to cope with the added workload. As Harry observes:

> *So my problem at the moment is far too many students. I'm trying to dump the demand from students. We're trying to recruit staff now and the question for us is trying to live it and our limits of growth, which is a really nice problem to have.*

The accounts above exemplifies the exogenous factor of disciplinary circumstances that are at play as a significant leadership issue at all levels. The case of ancient history and culture in this study (Adam) that illustrates the scenario of a discipline in decline. Consequently, the propensity to 'lose the argument' in discussions pertaining to viability highlights the significance of ensuring balance between normative and utilitarian concerns. The issue of finding the balance on this dynamic is further underscored by the fact that the leadership influence exerted by middle leaders in hierarchal interactions are distinctly social (as elaborated in section 7.6).

An additional perspective that is observed on performance is the acknowledgment of the longitudinal nature of the impacts procured by efforts on performance concerns. Given the varying factors that can impinge on the way that a unit performs metrically – as discussed above – unit leaders are cognizant of the fact that performance on a particular cycle of measurement are a function of accumulated efforts over time. Offering his perspective on the long-term nature of performance concerns, Clive (physical science, RG2)remarks:

> *After a few years [of being the unit leader] I realised, actually, there is nothing I can do about any of those things [in reference to NSS performance]. So yes, the university can give me a target to increase my NSS performance. But I can't actually do anything about it. And if I don't there are no consequences. So I kind of shut down from the metrics completely, which probably isn't the answer that my Dean wanted to hear.*

In elaborating further, Clive points to aspects of the university that exert influence over performance indices which fall beyond the unit's remit. He notes:

> *It's all very well to say, improve your performance, but actually, it is what it is. We are doing the best we can and the things that drag us down are the things that are beyond our control – like the library's not good enough or the student unions not good enough and stuff like that. That's what's dragging us down so I just felt, we're doing the best we can on everything; we're trying to deliver the best courses we can so I'm no longer going to worry about this.*

In the cited excerpt, Clive expresses his disagreement and discontent with student satisfaction surveys – specifically the NSS. As a tool for performance measurement, indifference bias and the unidirectional flow of information are cited as methodological weaknesses of the survey(Robinson & Sykes, 2014). For the unit leader – as in the case of Clive – seeking to account for variables beyond his purview is evidently a source of frustration. In comparison, the intra level aspects of culture and wellbeing, emphasised as performance concerns are areas that are under the purview of the unit leader to a greater extent than an indicator such as the NSS. In elaborating on the nature of the way performance indices operate, Phil (psychology, PT6) remarks:

*I think the key challenge that I've often faced is the pressure for a quick fix and a quick turnaround. And so many of the ways that we are assessed and measured have quite a long lead time in order to be able to influence and change them. So sometimes, changing a module, if a module goes bad, this time this year; we won't know that it will be improved until 12 months later. Because modules don't need to run once a year. But for other issues such as student satisfaction, the influence about whether somebody had a bad experience in their first year – that is going to carry through for a number of years.*

Phil (Psychology, PT3) states that a central concern is:

*Managing expectations about what is achievable – in the short term – and then trying to hold firm in terms of some of the initiatives that we've introduced that have not come to maturation. And not abandoning something, a strategy or a plan, that we're working on just because the latest set of data hasn't shown that its effective.*

As observed in the accounts cited, factors of disciplinary circumstances can significantly affect the unit's capacity to perform on metrics and achieve targets. Additionally, in the leadership practice of the middle leaders, considerations of the more intangible aspects such as the culture and environment within the unit are concerns that comprise the issue of performance.

**Figure 7.2 –** A synthesised illustration of the factors that are reported to the dynamics of hierarchical interactions on the matter of departmental performance
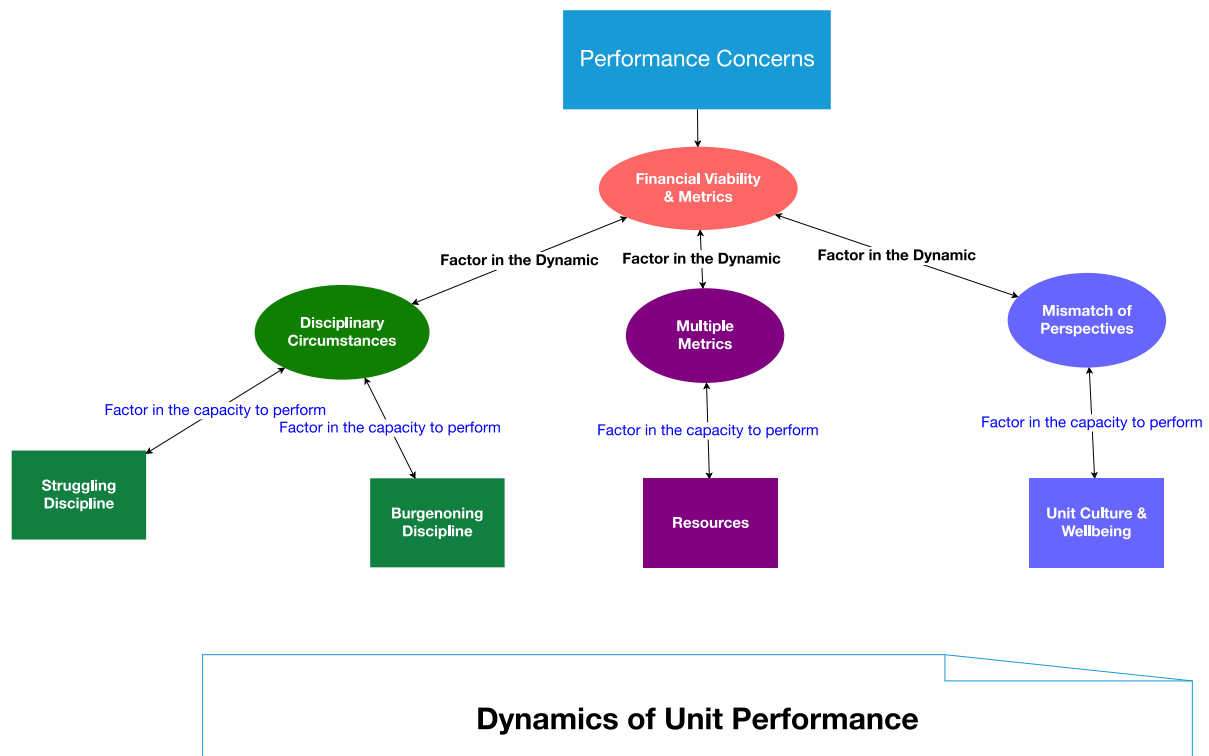


The diagram above illustrates the factors that are reported to impact the dynamics of interactions in the matter of unit performance. As observed, there are three salient factors namely, disciplinary circumstances, the ability to perform on multiple metrics and a mismatch in performance that are reported to be key drivers of the dynamic engendered with the institutional stakeholder. This implies that in scenarios where the aforementioned factors are noted to be unfavourable, the department / school heads have reported issues and tensions in their relationship with senior leaders on the issue of performance. Moreover, the participant accounts provide an insight into the operational "ground level" hurdles that the aforementioned factors pose in accomplishing performance. As it pertains to the factor of disciplinary circumstances, the accounts cited above illustrate the cases of leading struggling and burgeoning discipline and the implication of that on the capacity to perform. Similarly, the availability (or lack thereof) of resources is reported to a major operational issue for the unit head and his capacity to lead his unit toward 'good performance'. Finally, the issues of wellbeing and culture of the unit are reported to be operational issues that the unit head

manages on the ground level, which when ignored, can lead to tensions in the relationship with senior stakeholders.

## 7.8 Conclusion

In focusing on the role of liaising between institutional levels, leadership practice of the department / school head is observed to be conditioned by factors that are structural, contextual, and social. As such, the leadership experiences of different leaders are noted to entail varying demands and issues that they encounter in their leadership practice. An exemplar of this is observed in the way that a largely uniform demand of performance can engender different operational pressures on the ground and consequently varying working dynamics within the structural apparatus of the university. Moreover, the accounts provided by the participants illustrate the way that varying dimensions of structure (Administrative intensities) and context (disciplinary circumstances) influence the capacity of the formal leader to influence proceedings. This provides the context in the discussion on leadership responsiveness in a university, moving forward.

As formal leaders of disciplinary domains, this exploration on the interactions with hierarchy sought to illuminate the issues as well as the degree of leadership capacity available to middle leaders in meaningfully informing discourse at the institutional level. Structurally, agency for the middle leader in cross level interactions is observed to be largely constrained and demarcated through a centralised system. There is indication that this varies according to the administrative intensities of discrete universities. As noted, leaders who operate under administratively less intense structures are observed to attribute more autonomy in their leadership roles. However, the implications of this, in terms of the actual degree of executive influence, was not explored and presents an interesting area for future research. Given the constrained agency for disciplinary leaders, a larger debate around the voice of the discipline, specifically the disciplines that are going through a diminished phase, in a marketised sector is highlighted.

Bolden states that the different dimensions of leadership occur simultaneously in leadership practice (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008). The competitive drive engendered by the performance imperative foregrounds a salient agenda in the discourse of 'unit performance'. In their roles as mediators between the academic unit and institutional levels, the unit heads

contend with rendering distinct disciplinary value systems to the homogenous valuation of metrical indices. Therefore, in the accounts given, the homogeneity of the metrical indices is generally challenged (predominantly by the RG participants) due to the complexities of the "ground level" that entails concerns such as culture and wellbeing. As such, the discrepancy between the academic and the market imperatives are observed to raise questions about the balance of these concerns in leadership dialogue and enactment. Moreover, agency for the formal leader in hierarchical interactions is largely attributed to the accruement of social capital. Particularly, the importance of a favourable working relationship with the institutional level and the circumstance of the discipline is observed to impinge on the social capital in the headship roles. This reflects Bolden's observations that social capital, along with social identity is the primary mode of leadership influence in higher educational institutions.

# Chapter 8 - RQ2: Discussion and Synthesis

## 8.1 Preface

This chapter discusses the key themes to emerge from the analysis of the interview data (results chapter), that were guided by the following research questions:

What are the issues that are reported to affect the process of liaising between institutional levels for the formal leaders at the department / school level when:

a) Interacting with the hierarchy in their institutions
b) Exercising leadership influence in hierarchical interactions
c) Aspiring to accomplish departmental performance
d) To what extent do the administrative intensities affect the experiences of mediation

As prefaced prior to the analysis conducted, the sub questions outlined above are designed to explore the dynamics of interaction with hierarchy from the department / school leader's perspective. This premise of interaction with hierarchy (also termed as 'hierarchical interactions' in the preceding sections) represents a central locale of leadership in the university, where the perspectives of the department / school and the institution convene on a range of key issues. And based on the analysis conducted (chapter 7) in line with the research questions outlined, factors pertaining to the structural, social, and contextual dimensions of the middle leader's leadership practice are observed to influence the nature of dynamics engendered in cross level interactions with hierarchy. Explicating the way that these factors affect the dynamics of hierarchal interaction from the departmental / school perspective offers insights into the areas that may enhance leadership responsiveness in the university.

The focus on dynamics of interaction, as explained in the methodology section, is grounded on the understanding of leadership as a relational process (Uhl-Bien, 2006) in this research. As such, the analytical focus centres on the processes that compose leadership interactions and relationships. Uhl-Bien offers a general definition of relational leadership as "a social influence process through which emergent coordination (i.e., evolving social order) and change (i.e., values, attitudes, approaches, behaviours, ideologies) are constructed and produced" (p.668). Although this definition encompasses perspectives that emphasise the centrality of traits and behaviours in leadership (see literature review), a key point of divergence of the relational

perspective is through the emphasis on understanding the conditions and processes that enable leadership to occur (Hosking et al., 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2006) i.e., an understanding of the dynamics of leadership practice.

In the context of UK HE, Bolden et al., (2008) offers a relational framework of understanding leadership practice. As outlined in the literature review, Bolden's framework represents "leadership as a dynamic outcome of five interrelated factors" (p.362) to "indicate the multifaceted nature of leadership in higher education and the tensions that may be experienced" (p.362). Illustrated in figure 2.4, each of the dimensions of leadership is argued to influence "the perceptions, practice and experience of leadership in higher education" (p. 370). Bolden et al's five-dimensional framework operates as a conceptual model that encompasses the domain of HE leadership in the UK. This implies that the specific constituent of these dimensions that influence leadership practice, will vary for leaders at different structural levels of the university on account of the varying demands and expectations. The themes identified by RQ2 (and discussed here) represent the constituent factors of the structural, social and contextual dimensions that are noted to influence leadership practice of middle leaders in this study, when liaising with hierarchy. Thus, discussing these themes provide a basis for contemplating the issues and opportunities for leadership responsiveness in a key locale of operations where leadership stakeholders at the departmental / school and the institutional level convene.

The following paragraphs will discuss the findings elaborated in chapter 7, in light of the aforementioned five dimensions that influence "the perceptions, practice and experiences" (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008) of leadership in UK HE. An important point of note, as stated by Bolden et al. (2008), is that "none of these dimensions is neatly delineated and in order to appreciate leadership practice in situ, they must be considered simultaneously" (p. 370). The interconnected nature of the dimensions has been a central observation in the analysis. More specifically, the interpersonal relation between leadership stakeholders is identified by this study as an important factor that links the social, structural, and contextual factors to further inform the dynamics of cross level interaction. For instance, a positive interpersonal dynamic with the senior leader is noted to alleviate structural constraints that embeds leadership role of the middle leader (James, information science at PT3). As such, the themes that pertain to sub question a) and d) offer insights predominantly, on the (inter)personal and structural dimensions that shape the dynamics of hierarchical interactions.

Likewise, the themes that pertain to sub question b) offer insights on the social and structural dimensions and, the themes that pertain to sub question c) offer insights on the contextual and social dimension. As noted above, the points of discussion within each dimension are noted to be inter-related and the distinctions within categories are made for purposes of coherence. Nevertheless, the points discussed inform the ways in which interpersonal, social, structural, and contextual factors are observed to affect the dynamics of cross level leadership interactions in the experiences of the department / school leaders in this research. Thus, discussion will commence with the section on the interpersonal dimension, followed by the social, structural, and contextual dimensions, in that order.

## 8.2 (Inter)Personal Factors :

### 8.2.1 Congruency in approach to leadership

The nature of the interpersonal dynamic between the leaders at the unit and the institutional level of operations is observed as a central factor in hierarchal interactions. More specifically, the level of 'congruity in leadership approaches' and the extent of a 'constructive working dynamic with the line manager' are noted to be key factors in nature of the interpersonal dynamic that develops between leaders at the two levels. Firstly, the participants have highlighted the centrality of establishing a level of congruency in the approach to leadership with senior stakeholders when liaising between institutional levels. This is observed most notably in the accounts offered by Jack (Languages, PT3) and James (Information science, PT3) who elaborate on the lack of rapport and consonance in leadership approach with former line managers. In their accounts, the incongruence of approach is reported to develop from the rigid systemic processes implemented on their units by the line manager. Jack and James, both belonging to branches of 'Soft' disciplines – S/A for James and S/P for Jack – cite the "unwillingness" (James) to accommodate disciplinary differences and the imposition of the "science model" (Jack), as major hinderances to a constructive working dynamic with their line manager. Consequently, the dynamic that is engendered substantively affects the way that the unit leaders relate with structural processes and wider university operations. To this point, James alludes to the "bunker mentality" that can develop within the unit, on account of the detachment felt with wider institutional processes.

Despite the emphasis on the interpersonal dimension, a further implication of note in the cited accounts is the concurrence of issues pertaining to the interpersonal and structural dimensions simultaneously. The incongruency in the approach (interpersonal dimension) to leadership is described in connection with the systemic processes (structural dimension) that embeds the academic unit. James (information science, PT3) mentions the detrimental effects on team spirit and activities of teaching as a result of rigid structures being imposed. In accord with Bolden et al., (2008) five-dimensional model of HE leadership, it can be suggested that the development of a responsive dynamic between leadership stakeholders at different levels, does not exclusively reside in the 'personal dimension' i.e., interpersonal relationship and vice versa. To expand, the systemic processes that structure the hierarchical interactions, can potentially be an area of consideration for amendment in scenarios where the perspectives of stakeholders are apparently incongruent. And, considering the cultural complexity (elaborated shortly) that characterises operations in the university, the systemic processes that are instituted on academic units could be collaboratively designed with the unit leader to incorporate the variance in styles and systems for different disciplinary domains. Along similar lines, Bolden (2008) and Middlehurst et al., (2009) note the importance of acknowledging the complexities in university management by advising that different forms of development and support are required by leaders at different levels in accomplishing their changing roles.

### 8.2.2 The Working Dynamic with the Line Manager

Analogously, the second factor that influences the interpersonal dynamics in hierarchical interactions pertains to the extent of responsiveness in the working dynamic with senior leaders. This is noted to affect key aspects of the unit leader's leadership such as the level of influence exerted at the institutional level and their capacities as leaders within their academic units. Reflecting on their capacities to effectively fulfil their leadership responsibilities, Phil (Psychology, PT6) states that "having a strong line manager is really important" and cites the values of "collaboration" and "support" with senior leaders as central factors. Similarly, James (Information science, PT3) emphasises the import of his line manager on his role as a middle leader by stating that his line manager "is a continuing inspiration and instils loyalty not just in me but others as well". In these accounts, the emphasis on the quality of the relationship is a noteworthy observation, considering the inherent structural imbalance in formal authority between the two levels. As such, processes of developing a constructive working dynamic,

perhaps with an added emphasis on cited values of support and collaboration, represents a beneficial avenue of enhancing responsiveness in cross level interactions.

Considering avenues to sustain leadership responsiveness is noteworthy, specifically in view of the embedded nature of the headship role at the department / school level. As discussed in the preceding paragraph, the leadership capacity of unit leaders is markedly relational, as exemplified in the accounts illustrating the contingency of leadership capacity (of the unit heads) on the interpersonal dynamic with senior leaders. Arthur (History, RG10) reiterates this point by remarking that leadership capacity in his role is "not inherent [and] depends on the relationship with the person above [in the hierarchy]". Similarly, the interpersonal dimension is further emphasised in import through Steve's account (Psychology, PT5) where, a detrimental dynamic with his line manager was likened to "being a major civil servant [under the leadership of] Donald Trump".

The centrality of the interpersonal dynamic in middle leadership foregrounds the import of establishing processes to establish a constructive working dynamic between leadership stakeholders, specifically in organisations with a high degree of cultural complexity. In academia, cultural complexity denotes the prevalence of a "range of academic tribes and territories" (Middlehurst et al., 2009, p. 317) that shape operations within universities. The issue of cultural complexity is implicit in the interaction between stakeholders at different structural levels. Moreover, each unit leader represents a distinctive disciplinary viewpoint in dialogue at the institutional level. With hierarchical interactions involving the convergence of leadership stakeholders at different levels and of varying disciplinary backgrounds, the accounts provided by the participants indicates that a central factor to responsiveness is the level of congruency achieved amidst the varying perspectives. Thus, taking account of the cultural and social complexity (Middlehurst et al., 2009) that characterise these interactions becomes a noteworthy consideration toward accomplishing responsiveness in cross level interactions.

## 8.3 Social Dimension: Informal Influence & Social Capital

By enquiring into the nature of influence exerted by the department / school leaders in hierarchical interactions (sub question b), the accounts of the participants provide a nuanced perspective on middle leadership practice that elucidates the factors that can expand or limit

the capacity of a unit leader to influence proceedings at the institutional level. The inter-connected nature of leadership is further reiterated, where aspects of the contextual and social dimension are noted to operate in tandem to impact the unit leader's capacity to influence at the institutional level. As discussed in the preceding section, the nature of the headship role is largely noted to entail a delimited degree of executive authority, specifically as it pertains to the institutional level of operations and decision making (Also noted in Jackson, 1999). This is also observed in middle leadership roles in the context of New Zealand HE (Branson et al., 2016; Thornton et al., 2018). Thus, in the accounts provided by the participants, aspects of the social dimension such as "informal paths and networks" (Bolden et al. 2008, p. 366) are indicated as comprising key avenues of influence in their leadership practice. Furthermore, "social capital" which is defined as the level of influence exerted by an actor and derived from the structure and content of the actor's social relations, is observed to impact a unit leader's capacity to influence at the institutional level. Specifically, contextual factors such as the 'health' of the discipline – which refers to the viability of a disciplinary unit to compete for resources –is observed as a factor in the unit leader's capacity to influence interactions with hierarchy.

### 8.3.1 Informal avenues of influence

Leadership influence is nuanced for the middle leader and encompasses both formal and informal channels. The literature notes that leadership influence is largely exerted informally in academic issues such as leadership pertaining to research and teaching (Bolden et al., 2012). Furthermore, the role of the formal leader is generally attributed to the realm of management and thus regarded as working predominantly through formal channels of influence. Concurrently, the embedded nature of middle leadership that is contained within structures and role purviews (discussed in the preceding paragraphs), add further nuances to the dynamics (i.e., "the processes and conditions of being in relation to others" (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p.664)) of influence in middle leadership practice. As such, by exploring leadership as a relational process, the unit leader is observed to accomplish essential leadership responsibilities that can go overlooked on account of the largely social nature of leadership. On this, the accounts of Jack (Languages, PT3), Phil (Psychology, PT6) and Steve (Steve, PT5) provide an insight into the nature of influence available to them as unit leader. These accounts foreground social capital as a central factor to influence during hierarchical interactions for the unit head and

extend the understanding of influence in roles that are embedded within frameworks of structure and systems.

In Jack's account (languages, PT3), the streamlined nature of the institutional structure is somewhat counterintuitively, described as a factor that strengthens the dynamic with the line manager. The social capital accrued on account of the accessibility to the line manager "despite having less independence", highlights the import social capital in Jack's leadership practice. These observations from Jack's account are in accord with the comments on the positive working dynamic he shares with the line manager. Thus, the import of the social and informal aspect of influence when operating within embedded structural processes is highlighted through the impact that a positive relational dynamic can have for the unit leader (elaborated in section 7.6.1). Concurrently, the structural framework that embeds the unit cannot be overlooked. The accounts provided by Phil (psychology, PT6) and Anton (Computer Science, PT2) reaffirm the formal channels of leadership in demarcating the purview and the capacity to influence available to the unit heads. In describing the ability of the Dean to "veto anything" (Phil) and correspondingly, with autonomy framed as the capacity of "being given empowerment" (Anton), the extent of informal influence is evidently circumscribed by structural factors. As such, although the leadership capacity of the middle leader is notably demarcated by structural frameworks and role remits (as described by Phil and Anton), the streamlined structure could provide an avenue for more involved leadership interaction as described by Jack.

The dynamic of formal versus informal influence in formal leadership practice is complex and requires further investigation. Through the observations from the accounts provided in this research, there are indications that the relatively informal aspects of formal leadership practice can enhance responsiveness and collaboration in leadership interactions across levels. To this point, Steve (Psychology PT5) states that he possesses "soft power" and that there is "always a power imbalance" with hierarchy. However, Steve highlights the informal and /or social avenues of influence that he has on account of "knowing senior managers" because he "has been at the university for a number of years". As such, the notion of social capital (defined in section 1.2) in leadership interactions is observed to be a notable factor that has a bearing on the degree of collaboration and responsiveness in hierarchal interactions. Additionally, the circumstances of the discipline is also observed to be a major factor that is noted to both enhance and diminish the social capital of unit leaders during interactions with hierarchy.

### 8.3.2 Disciplinary Circumstances as a factor of Social Capital

In discussing the nature of influence, the structure and content of the actor's social relations - i.e., social capital – is noted to impact the unit leader's capacity to exert influence at the institutional level. Moreover, given the dimensional nature of leadership practice and the interconnection between them (discussed above), the discussion so far highlights the way that aspects of the social and structural dimensions impinge on the unit leader's leadership capacity. Thus, as discussed in the following sections, the contextual dimension that pertains to the varying circumstances of the discipline is further observed as a factor that either increases or decreases the unit leader's capacity to influence hierarchal interactions. Specifically, Adam's (ancient history & culture, RG9) account illustrates a case where the contextual circumstances of a disciplinary domain are problematic. As presented in section 7.6.2, his experience as a unit leader is noted to coincide with a particularly difficult period for the discipline of ancient history and culture, which has entailed discussions around potential closure of the unit in his university. Adam's account offers a compelling case on the issue of the balance between normative and utilitarian concerns. In contrast, accounts offered by Dan (Education, RG6) and David (Physical science, RG8) posit an antithetical contextual circumstance of disciplinary health to that of Adam's, with contrasting insights on the capacity to influence.

In line with the relational understanding of leadership, the discussion of Adam's case is undertaken as an analysis of the dynamics (i.e., the conditions and processes of leadership) of influence in middle leadership practice. Thus, an investigative enquiry on the reasons that led to the current predicament are beyond the remit of this study. Foremost, Adam's experiences of leading his unit highlights the disintegration of the working dynamic with institutional level stakeholders. Adam's account mentions the "lack of leadership" at the institutional level that partly contributed to the current predicament. Furthermore, Adam acknowledges that this is "a pretty damaging place to be". Given the import of the social capital in the process of leadership influence established thus far, Adam's circumstances as a department leader evinces the disintegration of a constructive working dynamic with hierarchy. As such, on the issue of leadership influence, Adam notes that despite the academic merits of his discipline in its offering of "transferable skills" to prospective students, he is "losing the argument" to curtail discussion around unit closure. Adam mentions the dwindling student numbers and the difficulty encountered by his discipline around the UK. In comparison to other unit leaders observed shortly, Adam's remark of losing the argument is indicative of the lack of leverage in the mediatory processes on account of the diminished perception of his unit at the

institutional level. The observation of disciplinary health affecting the dynamics of influence for unit leaders is additionally noted in the accounts of Dan (Education, RG6) and David (Physical science, RG8). Their cases illustrate a circumstance of relatively favourable disciplinary health in which, both leaders highlight an enhanced sense of leadership capacity in hierarchical interactions. As noted in Dan's account, the financial contribution of his unit puts him "in a strong negotiating position". Likewise, David refers to the research contributions made by his unit that is "seen as an asset in the university". Consequently, that offers an avenue to do more "than just push back and use the different things that we are able to offer as bargaining so that they see the school" (David). Additionally, Harry (computer science, RG2) and Richard's (computer science, RG2) (delineated in section 7.7.4), who lead burgeoning computer science units further reinforces the observation on the favourable disciplinary circumstances, favourably impacting the leadership circumstances of unit leaders.

Adam's case broaches crucial questions on the issue of leadership responsiveness pertaining to on the capacity of unit leaders to influence hierarchical interactions, in light of the embedded nature of the headship role and the impact of factors within the social dimension of leadership. For instance, the parameters around decision making in instances where a discipline is struggling indicates the implicit predominance of market concerns (utilitarian values) over disciplinary concerns (normative values) in leadership decision making. Additionally, with the mismatch in perspectives between unit and institutional level leaders on the issue of performance reported (section 7.7), processes to re-consider the balance between utilitarian and normative concerns would enhance responsiveness for units that are struggling on a sectoral level. Moreover, these accounts invoke a broader point on the role of the unit head in hierarchical interactions, given that the role is embedded within structural frameworks and purviews. Thus, the issue of influence exerted by unit leaders - as formal disciplinary representatives at the institutional level - is a point of consideration on the question of balancing the normative and utilitarian concerns in decision making.

## 8.4 Structural Dimension: Faculty Groupings & Centralised Systems

Hierarchical interactions, as discussed in the preceding paragraphs, occurs within structures, processes and role remits that establishes a framework and conditions for the unit head in hierarchal interactions. Bolden et al., (2008) describes the structural dimension as encompassing the "organisational systems, processes and structures, particularly those relating

to finances, human relations, information technology, strategic planning and the physical environment" (p.367). Essentially, examining the structural factors confers insights into the way that the systemic processes encountered by the unit leaders, affect responsiveness and create operational tensions in hierarchical interactions. The themes observed on the structural dimension in this study, pertain to the favourability of the faculty grouping and the prevalence of centralised systems. Additionally, given the theme of centralised systems observed in the Russell Group category, an added factor of administrative intensity and its impact on the degree of agency experienced by unit leaders will be discussed in this section. Akin to preceding sections, an interrelation between the aspects of the structural and social dimensions of leadership practice is observed. Notably, the discussion of constricted agency on account of the centralised systems - in the accounts of the RG participants - indicate the ways in which the social and structural dimensions of leadership converge.

Analysing the issues of that ensure as a consequence of the structural dimension is significant, primarily, on account of the fact that "universities have different dimension of complexity" (Middlehurst et al., 2009, p. 317). As alluded to earlier, the dimension of complexity refers to the varied spectrum of activities and tasks such as, teaching, research, finance offered (structural complexity) and cultural distinctions encompassing the domains of discipline, nationality, and identities (cultural complexity) that characterises university life (Middlehurst et al., 2009). Consequently, leadership at different institutional levels entail distinct perspectives and "expectations about how leadership and management is exercised" (p. 318). Thus, aligning the distinct perspectives and expectations comprises the process of mediation that unit leaders of distinct domains assume the responsibility of accomplishing. And, as illustrated by the accounts in this study, structural aspects such as faculty groupings and the degree of centralisation can impact the extent to which the perspectives are aligned between the mission of the academic unit and the vision of the university.

### 8.4.1 Faculty Grouping

Disciplinary units are typically grouped within a faculty structure with other units. In general, the faculty represents the immediate hierarchical structure that discrete disciplinary units are embedded within. As observed in the accounts cited shortly, faculty groupings can present systemic hinderances for disciplinary leaders when intrinsic differences between the units in the faculty prevail. In the accounts provided by Phil (Psychology, PT6) and Steve (Psychology,

PT5), the discordance between units that are grouped within the same faculty structure is identified as a point of structural tension that affects the capacity of the unit leaders to mediate successfully on behalf of their units at the institutional level. Phil cites the challenges that can be encountered as a unit leader in reconciling differences that are implicit to different disciplines such as, the different epistemologies, teaching methods and research focuses, when grouped together.

Additionally, the way that the dissonance between a unit and the faculty can affect leadership dialogue for the unit leader, is a notable observation in Steve's account. As recounted in Steve's experiences (unit leader of Psychology at PT5), the leadership dialogue at the faculty level, can be acutely disadvantageous for the academic unit that is in disharmony with the faculty mission. Steve describes his circumstances as the formal leader of psychology department that operates within the faculty of hard sciences. As such, Steve mentions the predominant focus of the faculty leader being centred on the priorities of the other units that readily align with the faculty mission. The example of the dean's (Dean of faculty) focus being occupied with negotiating contracts for other units is cited by Steve. Consequently, being grouped with units that predominate the operational mission of the faculty is reported to entail (unfavourable) implications on key operational areas for his academic unit such as, obtaining a share of the funding within the faculty and determining strategies for research. Steve mentions the drawbacks on his unit in having to pursue research in conjunction with other units and share studentships. Thus, Steve's account illustrates a case of a detrimental dynamic engendered with the hierarchy, largely on account of the structural dimension.

Thus, given the interrelatedness of the various dimension of leadership, the unfavourable dynamic engendered as a consequence of being unfavourably grouped implies that the other dimensions of Steve's leadership practice is negatively impacted. This is evident in Steve's account that features instances of reduced social influence. Most notably, the delimitation for "the space for possible action" ((Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 181) – which is a central point of enquiry of relational leadership theory – as a unit leader is evident in Steve's case. As observed in Steve's account, the constrictions to leadership activity that are structurally engendered, for instance with regards to pursuing research areas autonomously, creates an inimical environment for Steve's psychology unit to operate within. And, in line with the five-dimensional model of relational leadership posited, the developmental dimension (i.e., the scope for progress of his academic unit) for the unit as a whole, can be surmised to potentially

be adversely impacted. Moreover, research on academic structures (Barringer & Pryor, 2022, p. 370) have established that the features of the structural dimension such as hierarchy and resource allocating processes are central in generating internal dynamics between individuals and groups (Barringer & Pryor, 2022)that can influence the overall culture and behaviour of an organisation.

### 8.4.2 Centralised Systems

The impact of centralised systems is also observed as a theme (pertaining to the structural dimension) that is reported to affect the dynamics of hierarchical interactions for the unit leader. This theme, although falling within the same structural dimensions as the previous theme, addresses a discrete factor that is observed to impact the perception of role agency in a different context. As such, centralisation as a theme, although implied in other instances, was only observed categorically in the accounts of participants belonging to the Russell Group. The experiences of unit leaders within centralised systems are described in concurrence with the locus of control being further withdrawn from the purview of the academic unit. Middlehurst & Kennie, (1995) note that 'Pre 1992 universities' traditionally have operated on a relatively devolved system where the departments have a higher degree of autonomy, relative to other types of universities. Thus, the accounts on the issues of centralisation perhaps indicates a movement away from the devolved framework. It should be noted that the interviews were conducted during the pandemic (January 2021) and represent the perspectives within that period.

Nevertheless, with a large proportion of the participants describing the university structure as centralised, a notable dynamic of leadership practice (when relating with hierarchy) is observed to be one of diminished agency for the unit leader. As observed in section 7.3.3, institutional management is described as "interventionist" by Dan (Education, RG6), noted for "creeping centralisation" in Clive's (Physical science unit s RG2) account and the working dynamic of his department with the hierarchy is described by Richard (Computer Science, RG1) as "a hint of being naught kids in the corner". In accord with the relational understanding of leadership, these accounts notably illustrate the interconnection between the structural and social dimensions that illustrates the experiences of constricted agency on account of increased centralisation.

Although a diminished sense of agency with increased centralisation depicts the tendency of all bureaucratic processes, the implication of experiencing a sense of constricted agency holds significance as an operational reality of middle leadership practice in RG universities. Specifically, on the issue of leadership responsiveness in hierarchical interactions, the relational dynamics between leaders is evidently one of tension for the unit head. This, as observed earlier, connects with the related dimensions of leadership practice and can generate an inimical working environ within the academic unit. Thus, in view of the cultural complexity that characterises university operations and the necessity to be responsive to various disciplinary perspectives, the perceived trend toward increased centralisation highlights the need to consider processes that accommodate the views of the disciplinary unit in shaping organisational systems. Moreover, imbalance in the decision-making authority that can accompany the process of centralisation raises points on the avenues in place to accommodate the perspectives on the unit leaders on the structures that embed their academic units. As observed in section 8.2 on the tensions engendered by implementing a "science model" on a humanities unit, accommodating the perspectives of various disciplinary units in the process of determining the structural frameworks represents a constructive step toward operational responsiveness.

Additionally, the delimitation of financial purview from the unit leader's role is mentioned as a factor that further contributes to the experience of diminished agency. This is noted predominantly in Clive's (Physical science unit, RG2) account where his experiences of dwindling influence as a unit leader is marked by the delimitation over finances. He reports that a key implication of this, has been on his capacity as unit leader to "develop school strategy" that "made the job deeply unsatisfying". Clive offers an account of a leadership role, seemingly in transition due to internal forces of restructuring where the amendment of structural processes – most notably the financial processes – has altered the dynamics in his interactions with hierarchy. The literature on departmental leadership largely notes the lack of substantive authority at the departmental level (Jackson, 1999; Kerry, 2005; B. Smith, 2007). At the same time, McCormack et al., (2014)suggests that autonomy at the departmental level is indicative of better performance. It should be noted that specific processes of financial oversight were not disclosed by Clive, however, he expresses the structural barriers introduced of getting permission from his line manager on every financial issue as a salient obstacle in his role. Accordingly, Clive's account is illustrative of a scenario where "autonomy has been stripped away" (Clive, section 7.3.4) from the middle leader's role. This raises the point on

constructively balancing authority purviews in middle leadership role in a way that maintains the role of the unit leader as a 'leader' of his unit as opposed to a 'manager' of the unit.

Given the emphatic acknowledgement of centralisation as a key affect in leadership practice (in the Russel Group sample), a comparative within- sample analysis conducted along the variation in the administrative intensities of the universities, indicates variance in terms of agency attributed to the headship role. It should be noted that this research does not imply that the variance is significant or infers association. Moreover, as mentioned in the preceding chapter, the sample includes a spectrum of unit level leadership roles that differ according to the idiosyncratic structural frameworks in discrete universities. Nevertheless, it is observed that the unit leaders belonging to universities that possess administered intensities below the Russel Group mean, have attributed more agency to their roles as formal leaders. Specifically, Gary's (Computer Science, RG3) account is an apparent outlier relative to the other accounts in the way role autonomy is conceptualised. The structural aspects that comprise and affect the relational dynamics with hierarchy – in Gary's case – is reported to be diffused within the academic unit and fall under the formal leader's purview. As stated, Gary reports that 'absolutely everything – finance, staff management, satisfaction' falls within his purview as the unit leader. The structural processes that are in effect, evidently engender an enhanced sense of leadership capacity in Gary's case – "I am like a CEO of a small company" (Gary). As such, a focused enquiry into the differences of leadership experiences according to administrative intensity could illuminate the issue of structural responsiveness more comprehensively. Thus, given the interrelated nature of the various dimension of leadership practice, the accounts in the previous section alluded to the convergence of the structural and the social dimensions. Most notably, the accounts cited above described the constriction of agency as unit leaders in relation to various structural processes that are operative with universities.

## 8.5 Accomplishing Departmental Performance: Contextual Factors

In the process of mediation between the levels, the issue of performance constitutes a key area – among other concerns – of collaborative activity between leadership stakeholders at different structural levels. The accounts of the participants in this study highlights the import of an aligned perspective on the issue of unit performance. Indeed, performance concerns in UK HE is notably multi-dimensional (with variables such as teaching, research, recruitment) and multi-faceted, with the departmental and institutional levels entailing discrete demands that can vary

along disciplinary and institutional lines. At the same time, the issue of performance is also markedly standardised with indices such as REF, NSS and TEF dominating performance concerns for academic units and universities alike. These metrics are influential affects that can impact the competitive capacity of universities on crucial fronts such as the ability to secure funding, effectively recruit staff and students and develop reputationally as an institution of higher education. As such, the locale of hierarchal interactions represents a crucial juncture of leadership activity where, the concerns of the academic unit and the institution on the issues of unit performance can be aligned.

Thus, collaboration and responsiveness are significant concerns as a consequence of the complexity of performance concerns i.e., varied dimensions, facets and concerns. The following section discusses the salient concerns that unit leaders manage with regards to the issue of unit performance. Additionally, the tensions of balancing the multi-faceted demands entailed in ensuring performance as reported by the participants are discussed. In doing so, the factors pertaining to performance that are reported to engender dissonance between the institutional levels are examined and the implications discussed. Having established the interconnection of the leadership dimensions, it should be noted that the themes observed in the preceding sections also feature in this discussion on performance concerns during hierarchical interactions.

### 8.5.1 Normative versus Utilitarian Concerns of Performance

In discussing the issues encountered in the process of mediation that relate to performance, a central tension of normative versus utilitarian concerns is observed in the accounts of the participants. The mechanics of this tension is observed to ensue from the difficulties in effectively reconciling the normative and utilitarian concerns of performance (detailed next). In the accounts provided, the utilitarian concerns of performance are generally equated with the academic unit's level of financial viability as a unit. Across the sample, "financial performance" (Richard, Computer science, RG1) and its associated constituents which primarily constitute issues such as student recruitment is cited as a primary concern. Indeed, the reliance on student fees to fund degree programmes (Shattock, 2013), is a crucial feature of the UK HE sector and consequently guides central governance and management tents of universities. Additionally, performance indices such as the NSS and REF are generally noted as further standard requirements of performance. Thus, against this backdrop of standardised concerns, it is observed that a number of operational factors can affect a unit's capacity to meet

the standard performance demands. As such, the question of leadership responsiveness is consequential in acknowledging and addressing these operational factors that entail issues such as, staff wellbeing, workload, and disciplinary circumstances (Richard and Gary, section 7.7.3).

As prefaced in the preceding paragraphs, it is observed that the issue for the unit leader pertains, fundamentally, to the discrepancy in the way performance is conceptualised at the two levels. More specifically, as noted in the themes that will be discussed shortly, the perceived de-emphasis of unit level concerns in hierarchical interactions on performance is noted to be a point of tension for a number of department leaders. However, the deemphasis of unit level concerns is observed to occur in different ways. Steve's (Psychology, PT5) account highlights the disregard of the resources in his unit to achieve the array of imperatives outlined for his unit by senior leadership. He notes the imbalance in the cascading set of performance demands received and the lack of resources available to meet those demands. Furthermore, the ascendancy of financial concerns that take priority over unit level issues is emphasised by Steve. In elaborating on the lack of steps taken to address staff limitations, he notes "does that mean that they are therefore going to say psychology, you can have more staff because we're worried about the NSS? No, they're not going to say that because ultimately what drives everything is the money".

### 8.5.2 Mismatch in Performance Conceptualisation

In the accounts of the Russell Group participants, the acknowledgment of the multifaceted and multidimensional demands of performance concerns is further emphasised. These accounts equally inform the aforementioned observation of the discrepancy in the way performance is conceived at different levels of leadership, although, alternate unit level concerns are cited as being overlooked. In Richard (Computer Science, RG1) and Gary's (Computer Science, RG3) accounts, the aspect of culture within their unit is noted to be a central consideration for them as unit leaders. As observed in Richard's account, he states that "we sometimes get a bit over enthusiastic about the aspects of academic performance that can be summed up in a bottom line". And alluding to the dialogue on performance at the institutional level, he notes that "we often have big discussions about financial performance just because it's a number we can see on graphs and its very straightforward". Given the core dynamic of utilitarian versus normative concerns that is operative in issues of performance, the themes observed in the accounts highlight the need to expand the scope of the discussion on performance during hierarchal interactions. Speaking to this, Richard remarks that "it's very hard to have a discussion on

research culture or environment because they're harder to articulate. The goals are harder to articulate and the methods for achieving those goals are harder to get across".

Perhaps an argument that the discussions around culture and environment should be within the purview of the department (and not a part of cross level dialogue) is tenable to an extent. Nevertheless, as a consequential locale of accountability and decision making that impacts unit level operations, cross level leadership dialogue on performance is evidently characterised by a level of dissonance between the unit and institutional perspectives. On this, Gary (computer science, RG3) notes that a "mismatch" in perspectives on performance between the unit and institutional level persists in his experience. He remarks that "executive concerns like league table and quality indicators, actually mean nothing down on the ground". Gary's excerpts call attention to the operational aspects of ensuring performance as a unit leader and, in a similar way to the preceding accounts, indicates the prevalence of a constricted understating of performance at the institutional level. Moreover, given the mismatch, Gary states that a central responsibility when liaising with institutional level stakeholders is one of finding "a way to reduce the misalignment between what the senior management believes or hopes to achieve and what I know we can actually do, without compromising quality and wellbeing of my staff and what I want the culture to be in my department". These observation on the apparent dissonance in understanding, reflects the issues that have been associated with the advent of the "quality culture" in higher education. On this, scholars have noted the issues of instating standard quality management practices in HE that have encountered problems in areas such as, connecting with institutional missions (Bendermacher et al., 2017) and the reluctance to hierarchical control from academics. Thus, it is recommended that "in order to be successful, strategies, processes and tools for quality management should act in congruence with the present organisational culture (p.40).

### 8.5.3 Disciplinary Differences in Performance Conceptualisation

Given the predominance of standardised metrics and financial capacity in performance concerns, the accounts provided by Arthur (History, RG10) and Adam (Ancient history & Culture, RG9) in particular further extends the aforementioned issue of dissonance that can occur on account of the disciplinary background of the unit leader. Whilst the accounts cited above discussed dissonance predominantly in relation to operational matters, Adam's account in particular illuminates the way contextual / sectoral circumstances of a disciplinary domain can affect the capacity of academic units to perform. Thus, discussing these accounts raises

key points on the import of the unit leader in balancing the dynamic between the utilitarian and normative concerns, as it pertains to performance.

Elaborating on the disciplinary circumstances as a source of tension, Arthur's (history, RG10) experiences of leading a humanities-based unit in a STEM focused university foregrounds the fundamental discordance in the relational dynamics between his unit and the institution. Having discussed the interrelatedness of the different dimensions in relational leadership, Arthur's account illustrates the issues related to performance that a unit leader can encounter on account of a discordant dynamic. Commenting on his capacity as a unit leader to address performance concerns, Arthur notes that he possesses "less levers to pull [compared to heads of STEM subjects in the university] in improving metrics and that working on some of the indices "feels a bit like you're banging your head against the wall". As noted earlier, relational dynamics are engendered by means of processes and "acts of organizing that contribute to the structuring of interactions and relationships" (Uhl-Bien, 2006). And although the details on specific processes in relation to the "levers" mentioned by Arthur does not feature in his account, the incumbent processes regulating his unit is highlighted as a source of discord. Arthur's experiences allude to observations made on the conflict of organising ethos that can occur for the humanities when operating under managerialist tenets of management and performance (Finkenstaedt, 1990).

As noted above, the aspect of the discipline can also operate as a contextual affect in relation to performance concerns. Notably, the circumstance of a discipline – in terms of disciplinary health – is illustrated to entail major implications on unit performance in Adam's (ancient history and culture, RG9) account. Adam's case, in highlighting the discipline as a contextual influence on performance, prompts two fundamental considerations as it applies to hierarchal interactions. Firstly, given the influence of metrical indices on the way performance is conceptualised, disciplinary units that may be struggling to perform on the indices due to sectoral trends will need additional support from institutional leaders. In Adam's case, the potential implications are reported to be dire as the discussions around unit closure are revealed. It is important to note that disciplinary circumstances such as illustrated in Adam's case, involve wider factors that operate beyond institutional bounds. Factors such as governmental policy on funding allocations for a discipline are noted to engender focus on subject areas that are prioritised by governmental policy (Middlehurst, 2004; Shattock, 2013). This is referenced in Adam's account as he notes the "steady decline" in interest "as ancient

history and culture as an undergraduate program has become less attractive to young people". Nevertheless, the ascendancy of the standardised indices that exerts considerable influence over the understanding of performance, is evidently constricted at higher levels of the institutional hierarchy as noted in this research. Notably, aspects that pertain to the disciplinary concerns of the academic unit are observed to be specifically de-emphasised. Thus, the extent to which a metrical understanding of performance informs the true extent of disciplinary value and quality can be open to reconsideration.

The second consideration of cross level leadership interaction is on the role of leadership stakeholders in accounting for disciplinary concerns when addressing issues of performance. In Adam's case, the role of leaders in his institution is reported to be fairly confined. Having stated the diminishing numbers on recruitment indices, he notes that "from the university's perspective, we go from being a small recruiting subject to the lowest recruiting subject in the whole institution. And that's not a good place to be". Indeed, the full gamut of leadership discussions between Adam and the institution remain confidential and un-reported in this research. As such, designating the financial perspective to be the only or the defining stance in Adam's case is unfounded. However, it is equitably reasonable to surmise that the financial considerations are an essential – among other essentials – element of the performance discourse. Moreover, they feature as a major point of tension in Adam's incapacity as the unit leader to affect change. Towards this, he notes that despite ancient history & culture as a higher educational programme offering "very strong transferable skills", he is still "losing the argument" to make a case for it. As discussed in the section on the dynamics of influence (section 8.3), the incapacity to influence as a unit leader in Adam's case is observed to have major repercussions for his unit. Thus, the discordance in relational dynamics noted here – although stemming from contextual affects – underscores the importance of responsiveness in interlevel leadership exchanges. And, in the matter of performance – given the saliency of issues related to the constricted understanding of performance – responsiveness could tenably include an expansion of understanding performance by incorporating factors beyond the financial bottom-line.

## 8.6 Conclusion

As observed in the exploration of leadership role identity (Chapter 5 and 6) and the review of the literature on departmental leadership in UK HE, mediating between institutional levels is

highlighted as a key responsibility of the middle leader. This role is noted to entail liaising and collaborating with leadership stakeholders occupying senior leadership roles and managing the various dimensions of complexity that accompany this process. Thus, in discussing the findings, this chapter contextualised the themes and factors that condition the dynamic in hierarchal interactions within an overarching discussion of leadership responsiveness in this key locale of leadership activity. Moreover, in utilising the relational understanding of leadership as conceptualised by Bolden et al, the themes that informed each dimension of leadership were examined separately as well as in conjunction with the other dimension by noting the evident overlaps. In doing so, it is intended that the empirical findings can inform the areas that are reported to be problematic in the mediatory process by offering the practitioner's vantage point and experiences, that is noted to be a key link between agent and structure in organisations (delineated in the literature review). The contribution to knowledge and practice, as it pertains to this premise, will be synthesised in the conclusion chapter.

# Chapter 9 – Conclusion

## 9.1 Preface

This chapter presents the conclusion by reviewing the major sections of the thesis and entails:

a) an overview of the key findings and discussion points for each research question.

b) a consideration of the way they contribute to knowledge

c) a consideration of the way they contribute to policy and practice

d) a section that outline recommendations for future research

e) the researcher's reflections on the project.

Given the qualitative nature of inquiry into middle leadership in UK HE, a comprehensive analysis of 22 discrete cases used in this research warranted an inclusion of "thick descriptions" (Geertz 1973) that illustrated the full spectrum of middle leadership experiences of the participants. As such, this thesis included separate chapters that reported the analysis conducted and subsequently discussed the insights for each research question. This allowed the discussion of the findings, pertaining to each research question, to consider the insights garnered in the analysis through a broader perspective. On that account, the following section will provide an overview of the findings discussed for each research question, with a focus on the way in which they inform the overall domain of middle leadership in UK HE. Thus, the overview will provide the basis for considering the contributions to knowledge and practice that this thesis offers. The next two sections will provide an overview of the key findings that synthesises the insights pertaining to RQ1 and RQ2 respectively. This is followed by a section that considers the contribution to knowledge made by this thesis. The last section of this chapter reflects on the recommendations for policy and future research and concludes with the researcher's reflections on the PhD journey.

## 9.2 Overview of Key Findings

This section will summarise the findings that informs the two primary research questions pertaining to the topics of, formal leadership role identity at the departmental and /or school level in UK HE (RQ1) and the dynamics of interaction with hierarchy in accomplishing the role of the mediator between institutional levels (RQ2). Each research question represents a discrete area in the overall premise of middle leadership practice in UK HE, nevertheless, the

enquiry into the interactional dynamics in the process of mediating (RQ2) develops the findings of the role identity as a mediator observed in RQ1.

As prefaced in the earlier chapters, outlining the aforementioned research questions of role identity and interactional dynamics, employs a set of sub questions that defines the nature and aim of enquiry for each area. With respect to the premise on formal leadership role identity at the department and / or school level, the research pertains to exploring the "faceted" (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008)nature and demands of leadership practice entailed in leading within two distinct relational nexuses – 'within' and 'without' the academic unit. Correspondingly, in terms of exploring the dynamics of hierarchal interactions, the participants' accounts were analysed to gain an understanding of the areas of tension, along with the factors that engender effective interaction between formal leaders at different structural levels in the university. Thus, the research questions guided the enquiry for each overarching research premises i.e., leadership role identity that pertains to RQ1 and dynamics of cross level interaction that pertain to RQ2.

### 9.3 Synthesis of RQ1 – Leadership Role Identity

What are the beliefs and values that are ascribed to the role identity of the unit head by the Russell Group and Post 1992 leaders in this research when:

a) leading 'within' the academic unit?

b) leading 'without' the academic unit as a mediator between institutional levels?

c) To what extent does the role of leading 'within' and 'without' the academic unit differ from each other?

d) To what extent does the leadership role identity differ for leaders of Russell Group and Post 1992 universities?

In answering the questions outlined above, the explication of the varying concerns and approaches entailed in leading 'within' and 'without' the academic unit provides an insight into the faceted-ness of middle leadership practice in UK universities. Delineating the distinct facets entailed understanding the influence of the context on the leadership practice of middle leaders (Middlehurst et al., 2009; Bolden et al., 2009). As such, this study illustrated the variance in the concerns and approaches to leadership where the leadership role is noted to entail a facilitatory approach to leadership 'within' the academic unit and an approach that

requires the leader to represent the concerns of the academic unit when mediating between institutional levels. In the process, this study illustrated the contextual factors at play and its influence on the leadership practice of middle leaders of different institutional and disciplinary backgrounds. More specifically, variation in the values that underpin the leadership role when leading 'within' the academic unit, with RG leaders emphasising values that pertain to autonomy and equity and Post 92 leaders emphasising values that pertain to efficacy and performance is observed. Additionally, analogous concerns that pertain to aligning the unit and institutional perspectives are noted to prevail for leaders of both institutional types when leading 'without' the academic unit. Moreover, this study illustrates the influence of factors pertaining to the structural, social, contextual, and interpersonal dimensions of leadership practice (Bolden et. al., 2008) in the unit leader's interactions with hierarchy and the dynamics that are consequently engendered.

### 9.3.1 Facet one – Facilitator of departmental culture

A noteworthy area of tension reported by the unit leaders pertains to the inefficacy and unsuitability of the standard leadership discourse to represent the realities of leadership practice in higher education. As noted in the accounts of Dan (Education, RG6) and Richard (Computer Science, RG1), the developmental aspect in terms of the training materials provided to support the practitioner are deemed as "awful" and "insensitive to the sector in which we operate" (Dan). Reviewing the analysis conducted on the values that underpin the understanding of the leadership role offers some insight into the leadership discourse for academic middle leaders in UK HE. Addressing the nexus of the academic unit first, the formal leadership role is predominantly understood as a facilitator of departmental / school culture by the participants of both the institutional categories -Russell Group and Post 92'. However, the cultural values that are emphasised as central to the academic unit are observed to differ for RG and Post 92' leaders. This is indicative of the differences in institutional missions, priorities and consequently, the activities performed by the leadership stakeholders within the academic unit in the two institutional categories.

As such, the RG leaders have emphasised values such as autonomy, equity, and fairness as being central tenets that inform their role as a facilitator of culture within the academic unit. The aforementioned values are emphasised, in relation to the participant's perception of the stakeholders and the work being done within their units. Accordingly, a characteristic of the way that the RG leaders conceptualist their leadership roles is noted to entail a de-emphasis of

the trope of the leader. Rather, the trope of the facilitator-leader and notions of servant leadership are observed. As discussed in chapter 6, the rotational system that governs the terms of formal leaders at the department / school level in most Pre 1992 universities may potentially serve as a factor in the de-emphasised trope of leadership propounded by the RG leaders. Nevertheless, the emphasis on egalitarian values as central to the stakeholders within the academic unit and the corresponding understanding of the leadership role as that of the facilitator is indicative of the requirements and expectations of the academic unit, that influences the approach to leadership undertaken by the formal leader.

In comparison, the formal leaders of Post 92' universities have emphasised values of efficacy and performance in their description of the central tenets within their departments / schools. Positing the experiences of the participants 'within' the nexus of the academic unit provides an insight into the distinct expectations and concerns of the academic unit for leaders in RG and Post 92' universities. As such, the differences in the values and concerns ascribed to the nexus of the academic unit by RG and Post 92' leaders indicate the variance in the priorities and concerns that prevail within the academic unit in these two university types. An example of difference is observed to pertain to the activity of teaching and the way that it moulds the leadership role for Post 92' leaders. As noted in the results and discussion chapters, teaching is referenced as a central activity by Post 92' leaders who elaborate on the involved, "hands on" and proactive style of leadership required as a consequence. Moreover, the de-emphasised trope of the leadership role observed in the accounts of RG leaders does not feature as a salient trope in the account of the Post 92 leaders. As discussed, the leadership positions generally but not in all cases, tend to be permanent appointments in post 92' universities that can influence the saliency of the role identity as adopted by the role holders. Thus, efficacy and performance are indicated to be central concerns for formal leaders within the nexus of the department / school in post 92' universities.

### 9.3.2 Facet two – The Role of the Liaison between Institutional Levels

Having summarised the insights on the leadership role when leading 'within' the nexus of the academic unit, the following sections will provide an overview of the way that the leadership role is described as the mediator between institutional levels. "Liaising" between the department / school and the structures such as the faculty in the hierarchical framework of the university is identified as a major facet of the middle leadership role. Substantive differences in the way that the role of liaising is described by the leaders of RG and Post 92' universities

are not observed. The role of the liaison is predominantly categorised as the representative of unit concerns at the institutional level. Concomitant dueties namely that of aligning the perspectives of the two levels are also noted as a salient leadership responsibility as the liaison. Consequently, this facet of the leadership role entails a consideration of institutional imperatives to a greater extent, by the middle leaders in their leadership practice. As such, the considerations ascribed to leading in institutional nexus are reported to involve matters of finance, ensuring departmental performance, and managing expectations.

On that account, this facet of the middle leadership role as the liaison between institutional levels is noted to induce a central tension of role identity, as a consequence of adopting the roles of both an academic as well as a manager (Deem 2007). This dynamic of navigating between role identities is reported to be a locale of tension, with feelings of "being caught in the middle" (Harry, Computer Science RG2) and isolation (Michelle, Philosophy RG4) featuring in the accounts of the participants (section 5.4). Deem el al's. (2007) study into formal leaders in Pre 1992 universities found that "academic – managers" in these universities were "reluctant managers" who "were less likely than career managers to want to embrace New Managerialist [tenets]" (p. 104). In a similar vein, the participants indicate that the process of liaising with the stakeholders at the institutional nexus, is (in many cases) a contested activity that requires congruent communication and a productive working dynamic between the stakeholders to be productive. The absence of these attributes in the process of liaising is noted to engender a complete failure of cross level leadership, with the potential for major repercussions for the academic unit (elaborated when summarising RQ2) . In exploring the role of a liaison between institutional levels, as a facet of the formal leadership role, the institutional imperatives are noted to become operative to a larger degree in the leadership practice of departmental / school heads. In describing this facet of their leadership role, the participants highlight the centrality of the interactional dynamic between the leadership stakeholders for responsive leadership. This provides the basis for further studying the aforementioned themes such as, congruent communication and the working dynamic between stakeholders, and the way it informs the dynamic in cross level leadership interactions (also termed as hierarchal interactions). Therefore, the next section will summarise the findings of RQ2, that pertains to the exploration of the dynamics of hierarchical interactions – its factors and implications.

**9.4 Synthesis of RQ2 – The Dynamics of Interaction with Hierarchy**

Having summarised the findings in relation to research question 1 (RQ1) that illuminated the distinct roles played by the formal leader in operating within the two relational nexuses (of the academic unit and of the institution), the following section will summarise the findings of the second research question (RQ2). As stated earlier, the overarching premise of interactions with hierarchy is guided by sub questions that define the nature and specify the aims of the exploration. On that account, the analysis was conducted in line with the following research questions.

What are the issues that are reported to affect the process of liaising between institutional levels for the formal leaders at the department / school level when:

   a) Interacting with the hierarchy in their institutions?
   b) Exercising leadership influence in hierarchical interactions?
   c) Aspiring to accomplish unit performance?
   d) To what extent do the administrative intensities affect the experiences of mediation?

As prefaced in the methodology section (section 4.2) Relational Leadership Theory (Uhl Bien) informs the theoretical understanding of leadership that this research develops. Hence, the object of RLT "is to enhance our understanding of the relational dynamics - i.e., the social processes that comprise leadership and organisation" (p. 688). By analysing the data in line with the sub questions outlined above, the account of the participants provides an insight into the factors that influence and engender the dynamic that prevails for the unit leader in their interactions with hierarchy. In doing so, the determinants of tensions and harmony in that dynamic and the factors that can affect the dynamic is explicated. The theme of centralisation was noted to feature prominently in the accounts of the RG leaders, and this engendered an analysis of the "administrative intensity" for the RG category (elaborated in section 4.9 and 7.4). On account of the absence of centralisation as a substantive theme in the Post 92' accounts, the corresponding analysis on the administrative intensities of the Post 92' universities were not conducted.

In analysing the dynamics of hierarchical interactions from the perspective of the unit leader, an understanding of the factors that can affect the responsiveness in cross level leadership interactions (i.e., the department / school and the wider university) is garnered. As such, for the unit head, this dynamic is noted to be affected by factors that pertain to the interpersonal,

social, structural, and contextual dimension of leadership (each will be summarised shortly). Notably, the variation in the degree of influence attributed by middle leaders of disciplines under varying circumstances of success, indicates that the disciplinary background can be a salient factor in the dynamic engendered during hierarchical interactions. This reflects Bolden et al's (2008) conceptualisation of leadership as a multidimensional phenomenon in HE, comprising of five dimensions (personal, structural, social, contextual and developmental) that affect the "perceptions, practice and experiences of leadership in higher education" (p. 370). Thus, by offering their experiences of hierarchal interactions, the unit leaders in this study illustrate the points of tensions as well as successes in working effectively with hierarchy in their universities.

### 9.4.1 Interpersonal Dimension

The nature of the interpersonal dynamic between the leadership stakeholders in noted to be a major factor in the dynamic that develops during hierarchal interactions for the unit leader. On this, the themes of a constructive working relationship with the line manager and the centrality of congruency in approach to leadership with hierarchy are observed to influence the level of responsiveness of cross level interactions. Section 7.6.1 of the results chapter reports the accounts of leaders who emphasise the importance of congruency in leadership approach between the stakeholders at different levels. Notably, the potential of a department versus institutional dynamic developing and leading to a "bunker mentality" (James, Information science, PT3) within the academic unit is reported as a major detriment to effective operations. The issue of congruency or lack thereof in leadership approach is reported to centre around instances where the perspectives of the discipline are not acknowledged by senior leaders. As such, the discipline is observed as a central area of consideration in the development of a congruous and responsive dynamic during hierarchical interactions.

Analogously, the theme of a constructive working dynamic with senior leaders features as a major theme that enhance the responsiveness and efficacy of interactions with hierarchy. Several participants across both institutional types emphasise the importance of a positive working relationship with their line manager. The accounts of participants such as James (Information science; PT3) Arthur (History, RG10) and Steve (Psychology, PT5) – amongst others - associate a large part of their leadership capacities as formal leaders to the nature of the                                          dynamic                                          with "the person above [in the hierarchy]" (Arthur). Instances of both an enhanced and diminished

leadership capacity on account of a positive dynamic are illustrated in the accounts of the participants. For instance, James (Information science, PT3) elaborates on the progress that he oversaw in his unit by virtue of "entrepreneurial" approach of his line manager, which exemplifies his enhanced capacity as a unit leader on account of a productive working dynamic with his line manager. On the contrary, Steve (Psychology, PT5) offers his account of working with a line manger that he likens to "being a major civil servant [under the leadership] of Donald Trump". Thus, the interpersonal dimension is noted to be a salient aspect in hierarchical interactions for the unit leader,  that can potentially enhance or diminish responsiveness in a key operational locale of the university.

### 9.4.2 Social Dimension

In tandem with the import of the interpersonal dimension during hierarchical interactions, enquiring into the second sub question (b) that explores the nature of influence exerted by the unit leaders, illustrates the predominantly social nature of influence exercised in hierarchical interactions. This observation overlaps with the insights (outlined in the previous section) on the centrality of the interpersonal dynamic in cross level interactions. Specifically, the association between their capacity as formal leaders to the working dynamic with hierarchy highlights the saliency of the social nature of influence exerted by the formal leaders. As a structurally embedded role that operates within role and systemic remits of the institutional apparatus, leadership practice for leaders of an academic unit is qualitatively distinct from practice at other levels that don't entail the same degree of complexity. Thus, issues of influence and authority within these roles are nuanced as it entails engagement with a wider range of relational nexuses.

As such, given the saliency of the social dimension in the matter of influence exerted by the unit leaders, the accounts of the participants offer insight into factors that can enhance or diminish the unit leader's level of influence. Thus, the degree of social capital possessed by the unit leader is noted to factor into the capacity to influence proceedings at the institutional level. Social capital is described as the level of influence exerted by an actor which is contingent on the structure and content of the actor's social relations (Bolden, Petrov, Quarterly, et al., 2008). On this, the circumstances of the discipline that the unit leader heads is indicated to impact the social capital required to influence during hierarchal interactions. The account of Adam (Ancient history & Culture, RG9) exemplifies the case of diminished influence and an inability to "establish any kind of open relationship with the faculty" on account of a decline of his

subject area over recent years. Conversely, the accounts of Dan (Education, RG6), David (Physical science, RG8), Richard (Computer Science, RG1) and Harry (Computer Science, RG2) illustrates the cases of enhanced influence and "a strong negotiating position" (Dan) by virtue of leading a burgeoning subject area and making "high contributions" toward university imperatives. Thus, the social dimension of leadership practice indicates that the experiences, priorities, and issues for unit leaders of different academic disciplines can be distinctly varied.

### 9.4.3 Structural Dimension

The structural dimension is also reported to influence the dynamic of hierarchical interactions for the unit leader in significant ways. More specifically, being grouped within a faculty that is perceived to be unfavourable to the academic unit is noted to, consequently, engender tensions with the faculty leader (Steve, psychology at PT5). Additionally, the constraints of perceived centralisation features as a theme in the account of the RG leaders. It is worth noting that the interviews with the participants were conducted during the period of the Covid 19 pandemic, at which time, the standard decision-making processes at most universities were potentially altered to address the changing educational policies. Thus, the context as it pertains to this issue, should be noted. Nevertheless, the theme of diminished autonomy as a consequence of "creeping centralisation" (Clive, Physical science unit, RG2) is a notable theme in the accounts of RG leaders. In terms of its effects on the dynamic of hierarchal interactions, the diminished autonomy that is engendered is noted as a specific hinderance on the formal leader's capacity to question the university imperatives that are seen as detrimental to operations within the academic unit. Dan (Education, RG6) notes the "quite interventionist" structure in place at his university, that imposes "dictates" on matters that are distinctly within the domain of the discipline (subject matter) such as assessments. Elaborating on further issues, Clive (Physical science unit, RG2) reflects on the de-limitation of his role where now he is "passing on orders, rather than acting as a focus of discussion". Thus, the re-configuration of the structural framework, in this case with a movement from relative devolution to a streamlined system, is noted to engender tensions in the way that an academic unit relates to the wider institution. Thus, given the prevalence of disciplinary "tribes and territories" (Becher and Trowler, 2001) as a basic organisational reality in HE, the systemic attenuation of autonomy at the level of the academic unit is reported to engender operational tensions with hierarchy.

As alluded to earlier in this section, the theme of centralisation in the RG accounts prompted a tentative analysis of leader experiences in relation to the administrative intensity of the university. Administrative intensity is "the ratio of the total number of employees involved in administrative duties, divided by the number of academic employees" (Andrews et al., 2017). Computing the administrative intensity of a university, offers a reliable point of reference in understanding the level of bureaucracy and central influence on operations. See section 4.9 for the computation of the administrative intensity of each university in the sample and the Russell Group average. As such, a tentative observation is noted in the ways that the participants operating within universities with an administrative intensity below the Russell Group mean (B.A.) have ascribed more autonomy - over issues like financial control - to their roles, relative to participants operating within universities possessing above average (A.A.) intensities. This observation is tentative at best on account of the fact that this premise of enquiry arose during the analysis of the data and was not a part of the original research design. As such, the research design did not incorporate this aspect during data collection. Nevertheless, this is suggested as a potential area for future research.

With regards to the way faculty grouping can affect the dynamic of hierarchical interactions, Steve's (Psychology, PT5) account of being grouped in the faculty of hard sciences illustrates a case of a detrimental dynamic that is engendered on account of a mismatch in the mission of his unit and the faculty. This issue is also identified by Phil (Psychology, PT6). Moreover, this fundamental incongruity ensuing from the structural dimension of operations is noted to permeate the other dimensions of leadership practice (illustrating the interconnected-ness between the dimensions of leadership). For Steve that is reported to severely affect performance in his department and the gradual deterioration of his working dynamic with hierarchy. Specifically, the access to funding, research development and overall expansion of his unit are reported to be hindered as a consequence of being grouped unfavourably in Steve's case. Thus, Steve's case illustrates the point that issues of interpersonal tensions and the lack of social influence in middle leadership roles, could potentially be alleviated through the modification in the structural dimension which is relatively more readily identifiable.

## 9.5 Issues in Accomplishing Departmental Performance

The issues in accomplishing unit performance were also been considered when exploring the dynamics of hierarchical interactions in this research. Performance represents a salient concern

around which leadership stakeholders at different levels convene. In the account of the participants in this research, a "mismatch" (Gary, Computer science, RG3) in performance concerns at the unit and institutional levels is noted to be an issue that can affect the dynamic in hierarchical interactions for the unit head. Whilst there is a predominant acknowledgment (across all participants) of the various metrics being a significant part of the performance concern at the institutional level, unit heads of RG universities highlight the importance of ancillary concerns pertaining to the academic unit in performing on metrics. For instance, Gary (Computer Science, RG3) highlights that the concerns of "quality and wellbeing" in his unit that can be overlooked due to the "mismatch" on what "senior management believes or hopes to achieve". Gary exemplifies a case where that mismatch occurs but is addressed to a relative degree of success in his leadership practice. Alternatively, in circumstances such as Adam's (Ancient history & Culture, RG9) where factors beyond the academic unit– i.e., the plight of the discipline in general – are unfavourable, the predominantly metrical understanding of performance that is prevalent is observed to pose an unassailable barrier. He notes that "from the university's perspective, we go from being a small recruiting subject to the lowest recruiting subject in the whole institution. And that's not a good place to be". As such, the divide between the perspectives on the issue of performance – in some cases – is illustrated to be rigid. Moreover, the fundamental dynamic of the utilitarian versus normative values persists as a central point of debate in the issue of performance at the level of the academic unit. Thus, the accounts of the participants is indicative of the de-emphasis on normative side of the dynamic (that pertains to issues of the discipline) and is observed as a point of hinderance to a more responsive dialogue on performance.

## 9.6 Contribution to Knowledge

### 9.6.1 Delineating the influence of context factors on middle leadership practice

In the domain of higher educational leadership, this research contributes to knowledge by illustrating the centrality of contextual factors in shaping concerns and approaches to leadership in UK universities. As discussed in the literature review (Chapter 2), the context of higher education constitutes a unique confluence of competing discourses such as utilitarian versus normative and academic versus managerialism that exerts tensions on identity and interactions, markedly at the departmental / school level of operations. Addressing the call for a closer integration of context into the study of leadership (Middlehurst et al., 2009), the observations made by scholars on the centrality of context is reiterated in this study. In addition to re-affirming the significance of context, this study identifies the aspects of the context that

influences the leadership practice of unit - department / school - leaders. Foremost, this study identifies the institutional context (i.e., the university type of Russell group and Post 92') as a factor that shapes the expectations and approaches to leadership and the leadership role respectively. The variation in leadership concerns and approaches delineated in this study adds to the observations in the literature on the differences between university clusters in UK HE. Notably, the observed variations in the emphasis of values and concerns when leading within the academic unit, illustrate the implications of belonging to a Russell Group or Post 92' university on leadership expectations and approaches. Whilst a de-emphasised conceptualisation of the role is observed in RG accounts, being a leader is reported to entail a higher degree of involvement - relative to the RG universities- through tasks such as teaching in Post 92' universities. As such, these findings indicate that leading an academic unit entails different approaches in distinct institutional contexts. This has implications on practice for different stakeholders, which will be discussed in the next section (9.7).

The faceted-ness of the leadership role is also illustrated when delineating the influence of the specific practice sites of middle leadership practice. With middle leaders leading 'within' and 'without' the academic unit, the study demonstrates the distinct contextual concerns that take precedence when leading in different relational nexuses. In examining leadership 'without' the academic unit, the considerations pertaining to the discipline are noted to take precedence in the leadership practice of the unit heads in this study. As such, the disciplinary context i.e., concerns related to the discipline of the academic unit, is observed to be a fundamental factor that shapes the dynamics of leadership practice when interacting with hierarchy. Specifically, the circumstances surrounding the discipline within the university emerges as a significant determinant in shaping a tense or amiable dynamic in cross level interactions. The experiences shared by Adam (Ancient history & Culture, RG9), Arthur (RG10, History), and Steve (PT5, Psychology) in section 5.5 exemplify a tense dynamic with senior leadership on account of issues pertaining to their disciplinary circumstances. Conversely, the accounts of Harry (RG 2, Computing) and Richard (RG1, Computing), Dan (RG 6, Education) demonstrate an amiable dynamic on account of favourable circumstances pertaining to their discipline - see section 7.6 and 7.7. These findings indicate that leaders of different disciplinary units manage varying issues that can impact the decisions made on their units at the institutional level. The implications of this on practice are discussed in section 9.7.

### 9.6.2 Developing the relational perspective of leadership in higher education middle leadership

The relational understanding of leadership entails firstly, that leadership as a phenomenon is viewed as a continual process of construction that is embedded within the relationships of interacting agents; and consequently, that enquiry into leadership seeks to understand the relational dynamics i.e., "the processes and conditions of being in relation to others" (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p.664). By analysing the dynamics of leading 'without' the academic unit as a mediator between institutional levels, this research contributes to the relational theory of leadership by delineating the factors that influence the dynamics of hierarchical interaction (i.e., interactions with stakeholders at a senior position in the institutional hierarchy) in universities. The five-dimensional model (Bolden et al., 2009) that conceptualises relational leadership practice in UK HE provides the basis to illustrate the way that structural, social, and contextual factors impact the nature of interaction with hierarchy for the middle leader. Specifically, this thesis illustrates the contingency of the interactional dynamic in hierarchical interactions on the contextual, structural, and social dimensions of leadership practice.

The study reveals that influence of the middle leader in hierarchical interactions is largely social, with formal decision-making authority resting with senior leadership role holders. However, several leaders highlight the impact of disciplinary health (i.e., the market viability of the discipline to attract resources) as a contextual factor that can increase and decrease the capacity to influence cross-level leadership dialogue. The findings extend Bolden's observation on "social capital" as a tool of influence (in HE leadership) by identifying disciplinary health as a factor that augments and /or depletes social capital. Additionally, leaders have identified aspects of the structural dimension namely, centralisation and the favourability of faculty groupings, as a factor in the generation of a tense "department versus institution" dynamic. Alongside these structural and contextual factors, the interpersonal dynamic with senior leaders is reported to be crucial in the middle leader's capacity to lead effectively. This emphasis on the interpersonal dynamic underscores the importance of fostering a constructive and congruent working dynamic among stakeholders at different levels.

As noted in the preceding paragraphs, this research identifies contextual and structural dimensions as significant influences on the dynamics engendered in hierarchical interactions for the middle leader. Additionally, the centrality of context in defining the expectations and

approaches to leadership is illustrated. For instance, comprehending the significance of the trope of 'the leader - facilitator' within a university, rests largely on the expectations of the leader within the nexus of an academic unit. As such, this study reaffirms the assumption that leadership is fundamentally a relational process and extends this perspective by identifying the factors that impact the practice of leadership at the department / school level in UK universities. By illustrating the various factors that impact the effectivity and responsiveness of leadership practice, the findings of this research add the nuances to the theoretical framework of relational middle leadership in UK HE. This study demonstrates that leadership occurs within conditions and processes of relations, that represent crucial factors to consider in developing a practice-oriented understanding of leadership in universities.

## 9.7 Contribution to policy and practice

On account of the findings and insights garnered on the domain of middle leadership practice in UK HE, this research contributes to policy and practice in the following ways.

1. The academic literature on higher educational leadership should acknowledge and incorporate an understanding of the nexuses within which leadership operates. These nexuses constitute stakeholders and modes of operations that are distinct from those within a corporate sector. For leadership discourse to inform practice in the context of higher education, it is worthwhile to assimilate the values and assumptions that underpin operations within distinct practice sites. Having outlined the values that prevail in the nexus of the academic unit and the institution, the insights of this study can be used to align the discourse of higher educational leadership with the realities of practice.

2. Participants in the study have highlighted the incongruency their leadership practice and the developmental materials on leadership used in training and professional development. Specifically, the insensitivity to the nuances that accompany the diverse nexuses they navigate is flagged. As such, it would be of beneficial to middle leaders if training materials acknowledged and incorporated guidance on accomplishing the role of the 'leader – facilitator' within the academic unit and the role of the 'representative of the department' when mediating between institutional level.  More specifically, material that advances an equitable and collaborative approach to leading

would address the requirements of the stakeholders within the academic unit. Likewise, training that would enhance the leader's capacity to foster constructive working relationships would be beneficial in materials that address cross level leadership interactions.

3. Incongruency in perspectives between departmental and institutional level on issues pertaining to performance and operations of the unit is observed as a salient leadership tension. Concurrently, the participants in this study have highlighted the merits that accompany a constructive interpersonal dynamic with their line managers. As such, opportunities to foster informal interactions through termly forums and events could offer avenues that enhances the working dynamics between the academic unit and the institutional level of operations. This would be beneficial in developing processes that foster a more responsive operations in the university.

## 9.8 Recommendations for future research

This study has explored two areas of middle leadership practice in UK HE. As such, additional areas emerged as potential topics that would further develop the premise of leadership in HE and other concomitant domains. They are:

1. The analysis of administrative intensity emerged as an interesting area that could further inform the topics of structural frameworks, autonomy in leadership roles and its relation to performance in UK HE. As such, a comparative analysis on the degree of intensity in the various institutional clusters (Bolver 2015) in UK HE would be a constructive study that could further inform the relationship between institutional structure and performance in UK HE. Performance could be operationalised along the dimensions of student recruitment and REF submissions. Additionally, this comparative research can also analyse the variation according to disciplinary background that could reveal the effects of disciplinary background on structure and performance.

2. This study explored the perspectives of the department / school heads on leading within distinct relational nexuses. It is acknowledged that this comprises the perspectives of only a single constituent on the topic leadership. As such, incorporating the perspectives

of senior leaders and non-leadership stakeholders of each relational nexus would provide a fuller picture of middle leadership in UK HE. Moreover, this would contribute to the further development of Bolden et al.'s (2008) 5 dimensions of leadership in UK HE.

3. This study employed a qualitive approach to exploring the practitioner's perspective on leadership that indicated an underlying discontent with inefficacy of standard leadership discourse to address leadership concerns related to academia. Although, some suggestions have been made on account of the findings, a survey study that accommodates a wider perspective on this issue would develop this premise more comprehensively. More specifically, the impact of the leader's disciplinary background on the dynamics of hierarchal interaction emerges as a notable observation. As such, a survey study that analyses the association between the a) the disciplinary background of the leader and b) the degree of interpersonal congruity with their line manager and c) the level of job satisfaction, would contribute to the domain of leadership psychology.

4. Given the distinctive characteristics of the university context and its influence on leadership that is delineated by this study, it would be useful to compare the contextual values and assumptions of comparable public sector organisations such as hospitals and schools in order to further develop relational leadership theory.

5. This research highlights the import and distinctiveness of the higher education context. Repeating an analogous exploratory study in a different national context offers an effective avenue in comparing the operational realities of HE leadership with the UK. Doing this could potentially yield insights that inform the wider domain of leadership and its fluidity as a phenomenon.

6. As noted in section 4.8, the issue of gender in UK HE leadership is an important area of research, given the overwhelming proportion of male identifying leaders as it stands. While this research included a small number of female unit leaders, the issue of gender and its implications on the leadership experience of the participants was not explored. Thus, exploring the experiences of female leaders will impart a vital perspective on HE leadership that is lacking in the current literature.

## 9.9 Researcher's Reflections

Embarking on this PhD research journey has truly been a transformative and fulfilling experience for me. As a researcher delving into the realm of higher educational leadership, conducting this qualitative investigation has provided me with the extraordinary opportunity to hear and convey the real-life experiences of experienced academic leaders. Through their accounts, I have come to comprehend the challenges, successes, moments of joy, and tensions that shape their roles in profound ways. In this intricate process, I have gained a deep understanding of the nuanced dynamics that govern leadership practice within the realm of higher education. Moreover, my immersion in this qualitative methodology has fostered a deep appreciation for its unique strengths, limitations, and purpose. Drawing upon the works of established scholars in the field and engaging in meticulous analysis, I have formulated my own insights into middle leadership within the UK higher educational context. Adhering to the rigorous standards and ethical considerations demanded throughout this process, I have been able to contribute to the ever-growing body of knowledge. The journey of designing and implementing this research has not only enriched my academic understanding but has also acquainted me intimately with the demands of academic enquiry. These invaluable experiences have bestowed upon me a heightened familiarity with the rigors and intricacies of academic pursuit, that I will carry with me into all my future endeavours.

My engagement with senior academic leaders who lead departments and schools in their respective universities, has also been a unique and immensely educational experience. Since the power dynamics in this research were inverted by virtue of the participants holding more power than the researcher, I had to carefully consider my role in this process. As with any learning process, I had to quickly assess my strengths and limitations as a researcher and make rapid progress in my abilities to adequately inform my topic. Consequently, I continually reflected on my responsibility as a researcher and invested a considerable amount of time in organising the appropriate approach – that worked for me - to have incisive and meaningful dialogue with the participants. As such, through the process of conducting pilot interviews as well as the main interviews, I learnt about communicating with senior leaders in a way that built rapport, trust and clearly conveyed the significance of this enterprise. Concurrently, qualitive analysis was often challenging given the vast and iterative nature of process.

However, this allowed me to master tools such as 'Nvivo' and 'MS Excel' to help me synthesise the data effectively. The feedback and support from my supervisors were crucial in this process and it enabled me to be patient and resilient in maintaining the standards of academic enquiry.

Overall, my PhD journey has been highly transformative, on a personal as well as professional level. It provided me with the stimuli to develop advanced critical thinking skills and an understanding of the norms that are central to academic enquiry. Moreover, I have grown on several fronts as an individual and developed the capacity to engage with intricate ideas and expansive theories of social science. This has instilled a belief to continue further on my academic journey with enthusiasm and I hope to contribute further to the knowledge base of higher education and leadership in the future.

# Chapter 10 <u>Appendices</u>

**10.1 Appendix 1: Sample Interview Schedule**

**10.2 Appendix 2: Sample Request for Participation Email**

**10.3 Appendix 3: Voluntary Consent Form**

**10.4 Appendix 4: Sample Code Schema**

**10.5 Appendix 5: Anonymised List of Russell Group Participants and corresponding anonymised details**

**10.6 Appendix 6: Anonymised List of Post 1992 Participants and corresponding anonymised details**

**10.7 Appendix 7: GDPR and Ethical Approval from the University of York**

**10.8 Appendix 8: Literature Review keywords and databases searches**

# Chapter 11 <u>References</u>

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