



## Research Article

### EXPLORING THE RELEVANCE OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN ODL IN ZIMBABWE. A CASE OF THE ZOU MASHONALAND CENTRAL REGION

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#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article History:

Received 17<sup>th</sup> October, 2015  
Received in revised form  
29<sup>th</sup> November, 2015  
Accepted 15<sup>th</sup> December, 2015  
Published online 31<sup>st</sup> January 2016

##### Keywords:

Distributed leadership,  
Open and Distance Learning.

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#### ABSTRACT

This research sought to find out the relevance of distributed leadership in open and distance learning (ODL). The case study was ZOU Mashonaland Central Region. Thirty staff members participated in this research study. An open-ended questionnaire was used to collect data. Data were qualitatively analysed. The study found out that distributed leadership was useful in ODL. The study recommends the use of distributed model of leadership in which there is knowledge sharing among staff and students

## INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is the only university mandated to offer university education wholly through open and distance learning (ODL) in Zimbabwe. ZOU has a national centre in Harare where deans of faculties and chairperson and programme leaders operate from. The University senior management is also in Harare. ZOU has ten regional centres throughout Zimbabwe where students are. The Regional centres have academic staff and administrative staff under a Regional Director and in these Regional centres part-time tutors are engaged to teach students. The part-time tutors are full -time employees of other organizations which include government and non-governmental organizations. This paper explores the relevance of distributive leadership in an ODL set up drawing examples from the experiences at the Zimbabwe Open University.

### Literature Review

Leadership plays an important role in ensuring organizational effectiveness and is the most important element in the success of an organization (Dinham 2005, Hopkins 2001, Boateng 2012). The concept of leadership carries many different connotations such as power authority, management, administration and supervision (Boateng, 2012).

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Leadership is the use of power to influence thought and action of other people. Here leaders are able to direct people, guide, influence control, the thoughts, feelings, actions and behaviour of subordinates to achieve organizational goals. Hence leadership is a process in which leaders influence individuals to achieve set organisational goals (Northhouse 2001). The focus in these definitions of leadership is centred on individuals as leaders. The concept of leadership has undergone a paradigm shift from the traditional view of leadership as centred as one individual to a focus of leadership as centred on a number of individuals (Harris 2005, Sergiovanni 2001). This new paradigm shift emphasises that leadership is not a domain of one person but involves many people. This type of leadership is referred to as distributed leadership.

### What is distributed leadership?

According to Gibbs (1954) the concept of distributive leadership rejects the monopoly of the individual as a “super hero” leader standing atop an organisation but that leadership as a shared function among individuals (Lamburn et al. 2003) Distributed leadership involves thinking of leadership in terms of activities and interactive that are distributed across a number of people and situations (Copland, 2003, Spilline et al. 2004) the complementation and network patterns of control. Distributive leadership focuses on the social dynamics that emerge from combined effort of people talking and sharing and responding to and building these proactively as a team.

Various essential elements constitute distributed leadership. According to Hopkins and Jackson, (2003) leadership is at the intellectual capital of an organisation resident in its members. This element is one of the features of distributed leadership where all employees can and have an opportunity to lead (Bath, 2001). Here leadership is an exclusive domain of one individual. Distributed leadership is characterised duly allowing for change and uncertainty. According to Woods (2008) this is referred to as “free space” where creative interaction and deliberative exchange of ideas are encouraged and there is rearrangement of power and authority. Distributed leadership can be implemented well in a democratic environment. In this environment, all individuals participate in decision making and provide opportunities to challenge the notion that those in the leadership structures are the only ones that are relevant and useful to the organization. Subordinates become generators of knowledge not just recipients and implementers of revealed knowledge. Subordinates can even challenge the existing knowledge, share experiences and expertise within the network of application. Distributed leadership promotes collegiality among employees and ultimately to achievement of organisational goals. It is a source of empowerment for employees and a source of authority (Harris 2005).

Distributive leadership represents a major paradigm shift in the theory and practice of leadership. Three aspects are important for the successful implementation of distributed leadership. There are context, people and practice (Wood 2005). The context should be conducive to use democratic leadership within the institution. The people should have a common purpose not pursuing self-interest, without resistance and negative attitude towards achievement of common objectives. The practices of ineffective democracy, limited resources and lack of opportunities affect implementation of distributed leadership. The major limitations of distributed leadership have been lack of a common definition of what is distributed leadership. Three areas of focus by various authors defining distributed leadership are linked to improving organizational efficiency and effectiveness using multiple sources of knowledge and expertise to promote of democratic ideals within a social setting. Distributed leadership has been linked to bossless self managed groups; others refer to task distribution as well as distributed influences. (Robinson 2008, Harris et al 2007). Differences a definition will result in differences in its operationalisation and determination of outcomes. The studies compare variables and different definitions will bring about different variables hence studies will yield different results. Distributed leadership assumes that all people are good and capable leaders; this is not always the case. The limitations discussed have implications on the use of distributed leadership in an organization.

### Research Problem

Leadership has recently undergone a major paradigm shift from the traditional view of leadership as centred on an individual to alternative leadership theories centred on multiple sources of leadership. One of the new forms of leadership in the distributed leadership which claims that leadership resides in many individuals within an organization. This research study sought to find out the relevance and use of distributed leadership in open and distance learning.

### Research Question

- Is distributed leadership relevant in open and distance learning?
- To what extent and distributed leadership being applied in Open and Distance Learning institutions?

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a case study design. The case study is of Mashonaland Central Regional Centre of this Zimbabwe Open University. To generate data open-ended questionnaires were used in which (10) academic and administrative staff responded in the question presented. Data were qualitatively analysed.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study found the following areas given as areas ZOU staff exercise leadership roles namely, programme management, participation in committees, marketing, resource mobilization and fundraising, management of student affairs, management of examination and social welfare activities

#### Programme Management

Programme Coordinators identified the activities they carry out in programme management as areas they exercise leadership. These include recruitment of part-time lecturers supervision of part-time lecturers, evaluation of part-time lecturers, organizing departmental meetings, organizing tutorials managing marking of examinations. In these areas there is sharing of knowledge with other full-time lecturers and part-time lecturers. There was full-realisation that full-time lecturers relied on expertise from other part-time lecturers and certain subject areas where they were not knowledgeable. Thus leadership is shared between lecturers both full-time and part-time from time to time.

#### Participation and Sub-committees

All staff members belong to sub-committees organized on the basis of the key constitution strategic goals and other criteria areas of the Regional key result areas. Both academic and administrative staff participate on equal terms in these sub-committees. They can chair the sub-committee and lead in the planning and implementation of the sub-committee activities. This allows the sub-committees to tap on the experience and expertise of staff in the sub-committees. The participation of staff empowers them and they develop a sense of ownership.

#### Marketing activities

Staff participates in programme marketing activities in this Region. They are able to mobilize the marketing materials as teams and make presentations at various forums for any relevance of programmes on offer. The outreach activities include all staff and all are leaders in their own way since they carry out various functions such as transport arrangement, displaying and presenting.

#### Resource Mobilization and Fundraising

For key university activities such as sourcing donations for university activities such as graduation and sports tournaments, all staff link up with other organisations based on their social and professional links.

Even low level staff is able to connect to political and business people who are influential in the practice. Resource mobilization and fundraising is the responsibility of staff members who share responsibilities sourcing goods selling them and accounting for the money and then they are used.

### Management of District Centres

District Centres are located in the district of the province. The district administrations are expected to plan and complement district activities which include outreach visitors and marketing activities. The planning and implementation of various activities in the responsibility of personnel at the district centre. They need to negotiate for all services from local authorities including office space and rentals. They need to mobilize alumni to support their activities. Hence it is an area where distributed leadership is exercised.

### Management Student Affairs

The student representative council (SRC) has to manage its own affairs. They need to budget and plan for the student activities. These require them to set up their committee and complement their plan. They are guided by the personnel as the student affairs department. However, various activities and meetings of the students and the Sub-committees of SRC allow use of distributed leadership. Students are able to exercise their leadership skills at Regional, National or even international levels as they participate in student centred activities.

### Management of Examination

The Regional Centre has a sub-committee responsible for management of examination. This involves recruiting and training invigilators. The other activities include participation of all staff in mobilizing resources and materials for the successful implementation of the examination process. These shared leadership since all staff lead in deriving the implementation of this programme.

### Social welfare Activities

Staff participates in social welfare activities. These include collecting subscription, disbursing payments visiting the sick organizing weddings and congratulatory those who will have succeeded in their studies or hence newborn babies. This set up on includes all staff to participate and contribute financially and physically on the organized activities and plan of the sub-committee. The staff roles change from time to time according to the event and those with one tasked to lead.

Thus they are democratic platform where all staff hence a say in what will be going on in the sub-committee. All staff operates and exercises their rights on equal terms. Your hierarchical status does not const in the affairs of this committee. Hence distributed leadership is fully exercised.

### Conclusion

Distributed leadership is quite relevance useful in ODL institutions since staff is not necessarily housed in one location but in various districts and they need to exercise their leadership skills and responsibilities.

### Recommendations

This study recommends the use of distrusted leadership in regional centres to promote staff participation in taking leadership roles. ODL institutions need to have a common understanding of distributed open and distance learning especially in Regional Centres. The ODL institutions need to design a model of leadership for ODL institutions.

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