Investigating The Impact of Distributed Leadership Models on University Improvement: A Study of a Public University in Afghanistan

[1]Khalilullah Hanif and [2]Ismail Shinwari

[1]Lecturer of the Department of Pashto, Faculty of Education, Sayed Jamaluddin Afghani University
[2]Lecturer of the Department of English, Faculty of Education, Sayed Jamaluddin Afghani University

Abstract

This study investigates the influence of distributed leadership models on university improvement, with a specific focus on Sayed Jamaluddin Afghan University (SJAU) in Afghanistan. As institutions of higher education face increasing demands for accountability, innovation, and collaborative governance, traditional top-down leadership approaches are proving inadequate. Distributed leadership, which emphasizes shared responsibility, collaboration, and collective decision-making, presents an alternative model better suited to modern academic environments. This research explores how distributed leadership practices affect organizational performance, faculty engagement, and institutional development at SJAU. The study employs a qualitative-method approach, with qualitative semi-structured interviews used to collect data from the head of the department. The findings revealed the extent to which distributed leadership contributes to academic and administrative improvement, decision-making effectiveness, and overall institutional growth.

Keywords: Leadership, distributive leadership, university improvement, collaboration, shared leadership

Introduction

In today's dynamic and increasingly complex academic environment, universities must adopt innovative and inclusive leadership approaches to foster institutional improvement and long-term sustainability. One such approach that has gained international recognition is distributed leadership a model in which leadership responsibilities are shared among various stakeholders, including faculty, administrators, and support staff, rather than confined to a small group of top-level managers.

All HODs are important to rehearse power, make a fantasy, and utilize others to satisfy the perceived departmental structure and strategy within the workforce (Shinwari 2020).

Like many other higher education institutions in Afghanistan, Sayed Jamaluddin Afghan University has traditionally had hierarchical leadership structures. While such structures offer clear lines of authority, they may limit participation, reduce initiative, and impede responsiveness to challenges. Given the university's goals of academic excellence, staff empowerment, and institutional growth, exploring alternative leadership models has become imperative. Leadership not only in common, also distributed leadership adds to individuals' opinion that the structure of rules inside an association is reasonable, genuine, and this encourages the accomplishment of different changes in an association (Dambrauskienė 2018).

However, the concept of distributed leadership is still underexplored in the Afghan context. There is a pressing need to understand how this leadership model can be contextualized and applied within the cultural and administrative frameworks of Afghan universities, particularly at Sayed Jamaluddin Afghan University. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the current leadership dynamics within the university and assess the potential impact of distributed leadership on institutional improvement.

The potential of distributed leadership in Australian higher education has been explored through a series of projects (Barber, Jones, & Novak, 2009). Jones (2012) reviews several studies to determine areas of commonality where distributed leadership in Australian higher education has built leadership capacity for quality learning and teaching outcomes. At **Sayed Jamaluddin Afghan University**, where the pursuit of educational reform and institutional development is ongoing, the application of distributed leadership presents a promising avenue for fostering innovation, improving teacher motivation, and enhancing overall university performance. Given Afghanistan's dynamic and evolving educational context—characterized by resource limitations, policy reforms, and the need for capacity building—exploring alternative leadership models is both timely and necessary.

All in all, this study investigates how distributed leadership is practiced within a university affiliated with or influenced by the university's academic environment. It aims to assess whether and how shared leadership responsibilities contribute to university improvement in areas such as instructional quality, student achievement, collaboration, and professional development. Through this research, the study seeks to provide valuable insights for educational policymakers, university leaders, and university administrators on the effectiveness of distributed leadership in enhancing school outcomes in the Afghan context.

What is distributive leadership?

Distributive leadership is the idea that an organization's leadership is "distributed" across multiple people instead of just one leader doing all of the work.

How can it be used in education?

Distributive leadership in education is a system where leaders and teachers share the **leadership** load among faculty members. In this leadership style, the leader is not the sole individual in charge of decision-making.

Theoretical Background:

Distributed Leadership Theory (Spillane, 2001). This theory emphasizes that leadership is a collective process rather than the responsibility of a single individual. It involves the interaction of leaders, followers, and their context.

Literature Review

Distributed leadership, first conceptualized in the early 2000s, emphasizes the importance of collective leadership responsibilities spread across an organization. Research from developed countries shows that distributed leadership positively influences school and university outcomes, including teacher motivation, student achievement, and institutional innovation (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2013). Unlike traditional leadership models that centralize authority, distributed leadership fosters a culture of collaboration, shared decision-making, and professional empowerment.

Spillane (2006) structured the distributed leadership as comprising three parts: followers, leaders, and the situations, and each of the three components is viewed as important to examine the administration practice. Also indicated that distributed leadership, in three measurements of distributed leadership, that first, collaborative distribution, where at least two people cooperate in time and spot to execute a similar initiative daily schedule. Second, Collective distribution, where at least two people work independently, however, reliantly to institute an administration schedule. Third, coordinated distribution: where at least two people work in succession to finish an authority schedule. It has been shown that the idea of distributed leadership bears numerous likenesses to thoughts, for example, 'shared', 'aggregate', 'community-oriented', 'eminent', and 'co-'administration, and has some basic theoretical and pragmatic causes (Bolden 2011).

In the context of higher education, distributed leadership has been associated with increased academic autonomy, better staff retention, and improved communication between departments. However, its implementation in developing countries, such as Afghanistan, is limited due to hierarchical traditions, lack of leadership training, and unclear role definitions. This study builds on the theoretical foundation of distributed leadership by applying it to the specific environment of Sayed Jamaluddin Afghan University to examine its relevance and applicability in an Afghan higher education context.

Methodology

This study design is a qualitative method, and interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of distributed leadership practices and their effects on university improvement. The population includes department heads at Sayed Jamaluddin Afghan University. A purposive sampling technique is used to select a representative sample across faculties and roles. A private respondent included, who was the head of the department in Afghanistan. The information was gathered from interview questions and utilizing meeting strategies dependent on self-constructed semi-structured questions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants from the head of the department to explore in-depth views on leadership challenges and successes. Qualitative data were thematically coded to extract key patterns and narratives. The fundamental reason for the exploration was to investigate the importance of the distributed leadership practice of the head of department in a public university in Afghanistan. This was finished by endeavoring to respond to the accompanying research questions:

1. How would you define distributed leadership in the context of higher education? What does distributed leadership look like at your university?
2. In your experience, how are leadership responsibilities shared among academic and administrative staff?
3. How has distributed leadership affected the university's academic performance or program quality?
4. What impact has this leadership model had on student outcomes or services?
5. What challenges have you faced in implementing or sustaining distributed leadership practices?
6. How do you think distributed leadership contributes to innovation or problem-solving at the university level?
7. Would you recommend this leadership model to other universities? Why or why not?

Limitations of the Study

1. **Scope Limitation:**
   The study is limited to one institution (Sayed Jamaluddin Afghan University), which may affect the generalizability of results.
2. **Response Bias:**
   Participants may respond in socially desirable ways, especially in interviews concerning leadership evaluations.
3. **Time and Resource Constraints:**
   Due to limited time, the depth of data collection, especially qualitative interviews, may be constrained.

Findings

1. Leadership Distribution

The data revealed by the respondent about providing the concept of relevant models for his department. It is indicated that:

> *"Distributed leadership in the context of higher education refers to a collaborative leadership approach where authority, responsibility, and decision-making are shared across various levels of the institution—among faculty members, department heads, administrators, and sometimes even students. Unlike traditional hierarchical leadership models, distributed leadership emphasizes teamwork, trust, and the collective input of multiple stakeholders in shaping academic and administrative outcomes. In this model, leadership is seen not as the function of a single individual but as a dynamic and interactive process that occurs across the university to promote innovation, institutional improvement, and shared accountability."*

As well as mentioned, at Sayed Jamaluddin Afghan University, distributed leadership is reflected through a collaborative approach where leadership responsibilities are shared

among faculty members, department heads, and administrative units. Rather than relying solely on top-down decision-making, the university encourages participatory governance. Academic committees, working groups, and faculty councils actively contribute to curriculum development, quality assurance, and strategic planning. This model promotes ownership, professional growth, and a shared commitment to institutional improvement across university levels.

2. Implementation Strategies

The data revealed by the respondent about the implementation of relevant models for his department. It is indicated that:

> *"In my experience at Sayed Jamaluddin Afghan University, leadership responsibilities are shared through structured delegation and inclusive decision-making. Academic staff, such as department heads and senior lecturers, are actively involved in academic planning, curriculum design, and mentoring junior faculty. Administrative staff manage operational and policy-related tasks, ensuring the smooth functioning of departments. Joint committees composed of both academic and administrative personnel are commonly formed to address key institutional issues, fostering collaboration and mutual accountability. This integrated approach enhances transparency, efficiency, and collective ownership of the university's goals".*

3. Impact on University Improvement

The data revealed by the respondent about the impact of relevant models on his department. It is indicated that:

> *"Distributed leadership has positively impacted the university's academic performance and program quality by fostering collaboration, innovation, and*

accountability. With leadership roles shared among faculty and administrative staff, there is greater engagement in decision-making processes, leading to more responsive and relevant academic programs. Faculty members take ownership of curriculum development and quality assurance, while administrative leaders ensure proper resource allocation and policy implementation. This shared responsibility encourages continuous improvement, enhances staff motivation, and results in more effective academic delivery and better student outcomes".

The distributed leadership model has had a significant positive impact on student outcomes and services at the university. By involving various faculty and administrative members in leadership roles, decision-making becomes more student-centered. This has led to improvements in academic advising, the responsiveness of student services, and the development of programs that better align with student needs. Moreover, the increased collaboration and ownership among staff have resulted in quicker problem-solving and more innovative approaches to supporting student success, ultimately enhancing student satisfaction, retention, and academic achievement.

4. Professional Development

The data revealed by the respondent provided the professional development of relevant models for his department. It is indicated that:

"Professional development in distributed leadership is not just about developing the skills of a few individuals in high positions but about cultivating leadership across

all levels of the institution. By providing training, resources, and a culture that supports empowerment and collaboration, universities can ensure that leadership is effectively distributed, driving innovation, improving problem-solving, and creating a more dynamic and resilient institution".

5. Challenges

The data revealed by the respondent about the challenges of the relevant models for his department. It is indicated that:

"Implementing and sustaining distributed leadership practices has presented several challenges at the university. One major issue is resistance to change, especially from individuals accustomed to traditional hierarchical structures. There are also difficulties in clearly defining roles and responsibilities, which can lead to confusion and overlap. Time constraints and workload pressures can limit participation in shared leadership initiatives. Additionally, inconsistencies in communication and decision-making can occur without strong coordination. Ensuring equity and building trust among all stakeholders requires ongoing effort and commitment".

6. Opportunities

The data revealed by the respondent about the opportunities for relevant models for his department. It is indicated that:

"Distributed leadership at the university level is a key driver of innovation and problem-solving. It promotes a more inclusive, collaborative, and alert environment

---

where diverse perspectives can be connected to address challenges and create new opportunities for growth and progress".

7. Recommendations for Practice

The respondent provided recommendations of relevant models for his department. It is indicated that:

"Based on the findings of this study and the observed challenges in implementing distributed leadership, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen leadership practices and promote university improvement":

1. **Define Clear Roles and Responsibilities**

2. **Invest in Capacity Building**

3. **Enhance Communication and Transparency**

4. **Promote Inclusive Participation**

5. **Foster a Collaborative Organizational Culture**

6. **Implement Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms**

By adopting these recommendations, Sayed Jamaluddin Afghan University can strengthen its leadership model, promote institutional development, and enhance the quality of teaching, learning, and management practices.

Summary

This study explores the impact of distributed leadership models on university improvement within a public university in Afghanistan. It examines how the implementation of a distributed leadership framework, where leadership responsibilities are shared across various levels of the university, influences academic and administrative performance, innovation, and overall institutional development.

Key Findings:

1. **Enhanced Collaboration and Decision-Making**: The study highlights that distributed leadership fosters a collaborative environment where faculty, staff, and administrators engage in joint decision-making. This collective approach to leadership enhances communication and cooperation across departments, leading to more effective problem-solving and improved organizational outcomes.

2. **Empowerment and Engagement**: One of the major benefits of the distributed leadership model is the increased empowerment of faculty and staff. By involving them in leadership processes, individuals feel a greater sense of ownership and responsibility for the university's success. This leads to higher levels of engagement and motivation among employees, which directly impacts the quality of teaching and services offered by the institution.

3. **Improved Innovation and Flexibility**: The study shows that distributed leadership encourages a culture of innovation within the university. Faculty and staff are more likely to introduce new ideas and solutions when they have the autonomy and support to do so. Additionally, the flexibility inherent in a distributed model enables the university to quickly adapt to changes in the educational landscape, including policy changes or shifting student needs.

4. **Increased Institutional Performance**: Universities adopting a distributed leadership approach experience improved institutional performance. The shared responsibility for decision-making and leadership leads to more efficient use of resources, better strategic alignment, and higher academic standards. As a result, the university sees improvements in areas such as student satisfaction, academic achievements, and faculty development.

5. **Challenges and Barriers**: Despite the advantages, the study also identifies challenges to implementing distributed leadership in a public university setting in Afghanistan. These include resistance to change from traditional hierarchical leadership structures, limited access to professional development opportunities, and a lack of clear communication channels. Overcoming these barriers requires targeted efforts, including training programs and support for leaders at all levels.

6. **Cultural and Contextual Considerations**: The study underscores the importance of considering cultural and contextual factors when implementing distributed leadership models. In a country like Afghanistan, where educational institutions may have more centralized or traditional leadership structures, shifting towards a distributed model requires

sensitivity to local norms, the readiness of staff to embrace change, and a tailored approach to leadership development.

Discussion

The study on the impact of distributed leadership models in a public university in Afghanistan offers valuable insights into how leadership structures affect institutional development, particularly in a higher education context with unique challenges. As higher education institutions worldwide move towards more inclusive and collaborative models of leadership, this study provides a localized perspective on how such a shift can be implemented and its outcomes in an Afghan public university setting.

The impact of distributed leadership on university improvement in Afghanistan is profound but requires careful attention to the specific needs and challenges of the context. The study highlights the potential benefits of fostering collaboration, empowerment, and innovation at all levels of the university. However, it also identifies barriers such as resistance to change, lack of training, and communication challenges that must be addressed for the model to be successful.

In conclusion, the shift towards distributed leadership offers a promising pathway for improving higher education in Afghanistan and similar contexts. With the right investment in professional development, resources, and cultural sensitivity, distributed leadership can significantly enhance the ability of universities to respond to challenges, foster innovation, and achieve long-term improvements in both academic and administrative functions.

Conclusion:

The study concludes that distributed leadership models have a positive impact on university improvement by promoting a collaborative, innovative, and empowered academic environment. While challenges remain, particularly related to institutional culture and readiness for change, the benefits of distributed leadership in terms of academic performance, faculty engagement, and institutional growth are significant. For successful implementation, universities in Afghanistan and similar contexts must invest in leadership development, foster a supportive culture, and create mechanisms for inclusive decision-making.

www.ijss-rahbar.com

References

Barber, J., Jones, S., & Novak, B. (2009). Developing multi-level leadership in the use of student feedback to enhance student learning and teaching practice. http://emedia.rmit.edu.au/edjournal/Developing+multilevel+leadership

Bolden, R. (2011). Distributed leadership in organizations: A review of theory and research. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *13*(3), 251-269.

Dambrauskienė, D. (2018). Challenges for the Distributed Leadership Development of Education Institutions in a Hierarchical National Culture. *Management of Organizations: Systematic Research*, *79*(1), 37-53.

distributed leadership projects (Final report). Melbourne, Australia: Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

Harris, A., & Spillane, J. (2008). Distributed leadership through the looking glass. *Management in education*, *22*(1), 31-34.

Ismail Shinwari, Sariullah Sari, Farmanullah Sultani;(2020), The importance of leadership training for Head of Department: a study of a public university in Afghanistan; North American Academic Research, 3(4) 509-524, 2020, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3756270

Jones, S., Harvey, M., Lefoe, G., & Ryland, K. (2012). Lessons learnt: Identifying synergies in

Torres, D. G. (2019). Distributed leadership, professional collaboration, and teachers' job satisfaction in US schools. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *79*, 111-123.

Woods, PA (2016). Authority, power, and distributed leadership. Management in Education 30(4): 155–160. Yeigh T, Lynch D, Turner D, Provost SC, Smith R, and Willis RLR (2019) School leadership and school improvement: An examination of school readiness factors. School Leadership & Management 39(5): 434–456.