# DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY: A MULTI-STAKEHOLDER MODEL

Submitted in fulfilment of requirements of the Ph.D. Management Sciences specializing in Leadership and Complexity at the Durban University of Technology

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# ABSTRACT

Leadership has been an area of interest for millennia, but never more so than within a 21st century VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world. Globalisation, massification, rapid socio-economic changes in tandem with the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution are all challenges faced by higher education institutions internationally. South African higher education has not escaped these leadership challenges, but in addition faces its own unique issues, post-apartheid. The country's democratic dispensation required that institutional governance and leadership be shared and participative, which aligns well to a distributed leadership stance. However, more than two decades later, events such as # FeesMustFall national campaigns, the strident student discourse and the rising clamour for transformation, questions if real change has actually taken place. This study examined the issue of university transformation by assessing multi-stakeholder participation in leadership and governance at a South African University of Technology.

Taking cognisance of the multiplicity of issues facing higher education institutions it was important to utilise robust research methods, hence, the paradigm choice of a systems thinking worldview and complexity sciences. This study used multi-method research employing the Viable System Model (VSM) with the rich picture technique of the Soft System Methodology (SSM). Data was collected through qualitative interviews, respondent observation and archival data and examined using thematic analysis. Using the VSM as a diagnostic tool, enabled weaknesses and strengths of the institution to be identified, which informed the building of an institution specific model of distributed leadership.

The findings of this study demonstrated institutional viability, albeit, in a hierarchical, bureaucratic manner. It nevertheless highlighted weaknesses of 'soft' or people-centred issues. Other identified concerns was that the university was more inward focused, on the 'here and now', often ignoring the

‘outside and then’ that is, the external environment and could imply that the institution is not well placed to handle national and global stressors. The model of distributed leadership addresses this deficit.

This study established the appropriateness and applicability of using a systems thinking approach namely the VSM as a diagnostic tool to assess institutional shortcomings. In this way, it enabled appropriate recommendations and suggestions to improve the institutions viability to address the complexities facing 21st century higher educational institutions.

## PLAGIARISM STATEMENT

1. I know and understand that plagiarism is using another person's work pretending it is one's own, which is wrong.
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# DECLARATION

I, Naseem Haniff, hereby declare that this thesis is wholly my own work, and that all the references to the best of my knowledge, are accurately reported. This work has not been submitted for a degree at any other university.

_____ _____

Signature Date

# DEDICATION

To the memory of my parents, Ahmed and Mona Omarjee,
whose sacrifices and inspiration
started me on this journey.

To my husband, Abdulla and daughter, Maryam
for your patient support and care.
Thank you for helping me to achieve this dream.

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# ABBREVIATIONS

This thesis contains various abbreviations and acronyms and these are described below:

| | |
|---|---|
| CHE | Council on Higher Education |
| RO | Research Objectives |
| SRC | Student Representative Council |
| SSM | Soft System Methodology |
| VUCA | Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous |
| VSM | Viable System Model |

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# 1 CHAPTER ONE - THE INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 BACKGROUND TO STUDY

Leaders and issues of leadership have always interested the general public and is a topic guaranteed to engender debate and varying opinions. University leadership and management have not escaped this intense interest as demonstrated by the vast scholarship and industry that has developed around this topic (Floyd and Preston 2018; Hofmeyer, Sheingold, Klopper and Warland 2015; Amanchukwu, Stanley and Ololube 2015; Bolden, Petrov, Gosling and Bryman 2009; Bryman and Lilley 2009). This study, too, aims to contribute to this scholarship by looking at multi–stakeholder participation in leadership and governance at a South African University of Technology.

A distributed form of leadership is a postmodern approach in which there is a distinct move away from the individual 'heroic' leader to a more systemic, collective perspective on leadership (Bolden 2011). This research will investigate leadership, specifically distributed leadership, from the perspective that leadership is not only about what people do, but also why and how this is done. This is a viewpoint especially supported by influential researchers in distributed leadership (Floyd *et al.* 2018; Harris and DeFlaminis 2016; Diamond and Spillane 2016; Bolden and Petrov 2014; Bolden 2011) with Spillane (2005b: 143), very succinctly asserting that "understanding leadership practice is imperative if research is to generate usable knowledge".

Rapid socio-economic changes and enhanced access to higher education, have seen 21st century institutions around the world facing major challenges to their governance systems, curriculum, external relations, research and financing (Jones and Harvey 2017; Black 2015; Jones 2014; Shin and Harman 2009). These researchers further explain that this is a global phenomenon

which has been influenced by major international trends namely massification, marketisation, globalisation and challenges associated with student funding. The ever-increasing clamour for new knowledge, as well as the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution are also issues impacting higher education leadership globally (Black 2015; Jones 2014). In their seminal work on higher education leadership, Scott, Coates and Anderson (2008) point out that with all the internal and external stressors on them, universities need to consider a radical reconceptualisation of current leadership approaches if they are to survive. Studies such as these provide research based evidence that whilst the shape and form of higher education internationally has seen substantive changes in this 21st century, leadership issues are nonetheless something that universities also have to constantly engage with, if they are to remain relevant.

South African higher education institutions currently operate in turbulent and complex times with massification, insufficient funding and demands for redress in a post-apartheid era (Habib 2016; Council on Higher Education (CHE) 2016; Badat 2015a; 2009). In tandem with the global challenges identified above, these have been further exacerbated by the legacy of apartheid and demands for political redress, transformation and equal access (Habib 2016; South African Civil Society Information Services 2013). These are issues unique to the South African higher education landscape and are demonstrated in the frustrations of the country's youth, which are regularly being played out on our streets and university campuses.

During the period 2015-2016, South Africa observed the dramatic re-entry of student activism within the higher education terrain, colloquially known as the #FeesMustFall campaign (Badat 2015a; Habib 2016). It was a reaction to what students saw as the tardiness and 'foot dragging' pace of higher education transformation (Suransky and van der Merwe 2016) which found South African universities still struggling to deal with the legacy of apartheid. Despite national government initiatives to resolve these issues, at the operational level, university management still appeared to be struggling to deal with these

chronic issues of funding and accommodation. This was evidenced by violent student skirmishes on KwaZulu-Natal campuses as recently as July 2019 (Duma 2019). This led to questioning of the 2015-2016 protests as an 'organic crisis' within South African higher education which would require serious review and reformulation of higher education by key national stakeholders (Badat 2015a).

Literature supports the notion that leadership is a critical agenda for higher education change, in general (Hempsall 2014; Harper 2015; Wright 2008; Bryman 2007) and specifically within South Africa (Council on Higher Education 2016; Smit 2006; Kulati 2003). However, events such as #FeesMustFall campaign, the strident student discourse and the rising clamour for transformation, questions if real change has actually taken place. These are leadership issues that today's higher education leaders are facing and which require a 21st century response. South African higher education institutions have become a "system under fire" (Jones 2009: 3) often criticised for a lack of leadership and inability to deal with the current stressors facing them. It is anticipated that this study of a South African institution of higher education will contribute to this leadership debate.

## 1.2 CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This study is located within and specific to a South African institution of higher education, so it is important to understand the background and context within which it is placed. In the last two decades, South African higher education has had to make substantive changes in its relationship with the state and society to align itself within the democratic legislative framework (The White Paper on Higher Education, Department of Education 1997). Post 1994, it had the urgent task to change its shape and form and re-create an equal, integrated, national system of education which then resulted in the nature and context of higher

education leadership changing. In tandem with these internal demands there was also the challenges that all higher education institutions internationally were confronted with, particularly global competitiveness and massification, mentioned earlier (Mekoa 2018).

The substantive intention of the South African Constitution was to demand that all public organisations address the scourges of apartheid (Habib 2016; Badat 2015b; 2009) and this was supported by a vast array of founding documents, policies and legislation to deliberately bring about the transformation of a fractured, unequal society into a democratic nation. Encapsulated within all of these documents were the ideals of a transformed, democratic, non-racial and non-sexist system of higher education, which through legislation sought to redress the inequalities experienced under colonialism and apartheid (Moloi, Makgoba and Miruka 2016; Habib 2016; Badat 2009). The White Paper on Higher Education (Department of Education 1997), one of these transformative legislations, also introduced a new governance framework based on the credo of co-operative governance. Co-operative governance being premised on the fact that no single stakeholder, management, staff (academic or administrative) nor student can be vested with sole responsibility for the university's agenda (Kulati and Mojo 2002).

Under the mantle of the apartheid ideology, higher education institutions were reserved for different groups based on race, ethnicity and language. These discriminatory practices resulted in non-white institutions facing institutional governance and financial constraints, uneven access to universities and a stifling of academic freedom (Badat 2015b). It was a top down autocratic regime which did not allow for any consultative process over the management and governance of those institutions. Thus, these post-apartheid legislations were seen as being a particularly significant change to higher education governance, especially as under the apartheid system authority through 'White' management and administrators were forced onto 'non-white' institutions (Mekoa 2018).

Such legislative redress, post-apartheid, was particularly important as higher education has great value from both a social and political stance (Badat 2009) and it is for these reasons that South African higher education needed to be recast. This meant that the shape and form of authority in South Africa needed to be changed. These changes, aligned to the ethos of democracy, were on shared governance variously described as participative, collaborative, shared leadership with strong underpinnings of collegiality. In this participatory, co-operative governance model of management and leadership in higher education institutions, was a call for increasing stakeholder participation (Badat 2015b; *White Paper on Education* 1997). Despite the structural changes that have occurred in the governance of institutions since the implementation of this raft of legislations, it was apparent that increased empirical research still needed to be conducted especially as many of those who are stakeholders in this process are unclear about their role in these governance structures (Kulati 2000). Meanwhile, Smit (2006) argues that that this is, in part, due to stakeholders not having been given time to understand and operationalise the concepts inherent in the policies guiding higher education.

Within higher education institutions themselves there can be discerned fault lines in relation to the increasing complexity of stakeholder constituencies and the need to work collaboratively, often in partnerships (Jones and Harvey 2017). South African higher education is a highly legislated system, with clear parameters around leadership and governance, yet there appears an absence of discourse around these matters, especially participatory leadership. The situation is exacerbated by these stakeholders having competing and conflicting demands, thereby hindering decision making. Business as usual in terms of university leadership is no longer working if our institutions are to become responsive not only to our national needs but to also compete globally (Habib 2016). This is not a new argument as the discourse around university governance issues has been on the higher education agenda, almost since the dawn of the country's democracy, when it was identified that South African

higher education was facing a crisis of leadership and management (Kulati 2000).

## 1.3 DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP: THE RESEARCH MODEL

Higher education institutions today operate within a highly complex local and global environment which requires organisational leadership to become more acute (Hayward 2015). This informed the choice of distributed leadership as the theoretical lens in this research, as it allows the researcher to delve deep into leadership practice and understand its influence in transformation in an organisation (Harris and Spillane 2008). It is also viewed as the leadership theory that coalesces best with this sector (Harper 2015, Bolden, 2011; 2010) and the preferred leadership model for 21st century institutions (Bush 2013). Globally, there is an increasing preference for organisations to become more devolved and operate more collaboratively (Hayward 2015). Within South Africa, distributed leadership is also seen as the favoured leadership approach by national policy makers (Williams 2011) as it appears to be most closely associated with the democratic ethos of this country. It has been described as being the model most likely "to mobilize the space opened up by democracy to achieve educational liberation" from "the intellectual prison that was Bantu education" (Pandor 2006, quoted in Williams 2011: 196).

Bolden (2011) describes distributed leadership as not the monopoly or responsibility of just one person, but a collective and systemic understanding of leadership as a social process. This description is extended further by Jones *et al.* (2012) as one that foregrounds a community of practice and a partnership among experts where active participation of these enthusiasts can lead to organisational change. These shared activities align themselves to a distributive stance with its participative collaborations where leadership extends clearly beyond the individual leader and within the relationships and

interactions of various role players and the situations in which they find themselves (Bolden 2010; 2011). Within the distributed leadership model, leadership is practiced as an interaction between leaders and followers, is an interdependency among leaders and does not reside within one titular head. There is a growing trend to view leadership practice as essentially relational and collective in nature. In other words, the focus has shifted from being inherently about the quality or characteristics of the individual leader to a shared group process (Friedrich, Griffith and Mumford 2016; Bolden and Petrov 2014; Uhl-Bien, Marion and McKelvey 2007).

In this study the researcher has pointedly selected distributed leadership theory not only for its collaborative, dynamic, relational characteristics but also primarily because it provides an institutional wide perspective, transcending the organisations roles, hierarchy and boundaries (Bolden 2007). Such a perspective is well aligned to a systems thinking approach, in particular the Viable System Model employed in this research and discussed later in this chapter. The researcher also takes the view that within a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world, co-operative, democratic governance is best aligned to a distributed model of leadership (Rezk and Gamal 2019; Hayward 2015). It is expected that the collaborative underpinnings of the distributed leadership approach, will allow for a more concerted and pre-emptive response to any upheavals or stressors that the organisation is exposed to. Further, it was recently determined, that if distributed leadership is to not only apply to but be effective in a higher education institution, it would require “institutional commitment, support from formal institutional leaders, tailoring to the specific institutional context and culture and underpinning by an action research process” (Jones 2014: 139). There is a lack of empirical research supporting many of the popular leadership theories that abound in the literature. With the rise in popularity of distributed leadership, this research has the opportunity “to connect the multiple performance or enactment of leadership to organisational change and development” (Harris 2007: 323). This

provides further support and credence to the action research process being undertaken in this study.

Distributed leadership has, however, also earned its fair share of contention and debate (Harris 2016). There has been the submission that the absence of a clear definition (Harris 2016; Bennet, Wise, Woods and Harvey 2003) is a serious constraint and this discussion is extended in chapter two. There is also the argument put forward by Bennet *et al.* (2003: 6) that distributed leadership research, in the main has been "suggestive rather than conclusive", which according to Tian, Risku and Collin (2016) still remains relevant today, although Harris (2016) takes issue with this conclusion. In its practice, there is the danger of distributed leadership becoming a double–edged sword in that whilst credence is given to the concepts of engagement and collegiality, it could be used by those in power to obscure their own agendas (Bolden, Petrov and Gosling 2009). These competing views of distributed leadership will be further explored in chapter two.

Despite this contra view, distributed leadership remains the preferred approach in many sectors, is seen as being popular and in vogue (Floyd *et al.* 2018; Jones and Harvey 2017; Diamond and Spillane 2016; Harris 2005) and considered to be the leadership idea of the moment, particularly within educational environments (Jones 2017; Harris and DeFlaminis 2016) where the emphasis is on inclusivity and collegiality (Harris 2016). There is also the assertion that the concept of distributed leadership fits comfortably within educational environments. It has at its core, the humanistic development of students and also serves to counter centralised organisational management (Harper 2015). Also supporting the distributed model, particularly in knowledge work (which is a core tenet of university work), is the reliance on team based activities, which require a diverse group from a variety of disciplines to contribute to new knowledge (Youngs 2017; Bryman and Lilley 2009; Harris 2008).

However, despite the growing interest in distributed leadership for higher education institutions, there exists limited research into its value and practice for these organisations (Floyd and Fung 2017; Grant 2017; Ritchie and Woods 2007; Woods, Bennet, Harvey and Wise 2004). Even amongst recognised researchers (Jones 2014; Hempsall 2014; Bryman 2007) who are expected to have a broad ontological view, there is the tendency to view university leadership at the individual level and to research the role of formal leaders. This then implies that the issues of different types of leadership namely vertical, horizontal, distributed or blended leadership, at organisational or institutional level, still needs to be addressed through research (Middlehurst, Goreham and Woodfield 2009).

Thus, this researcher avers, distributed leadership should be put to an empirical and theoretical test if it is to be seen as an alternative model for a South African higher education institution. Additionally, unless theories can be applied to real life situations they really have very little relevant value and remain in the realm of academia.

## 1.4 THE AIM, RATIONALE AND MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to determine if the shape and form of a higher education institution had transformed into a more co-operative, shared form of governance and leadership, as encapsulated within post – apartheid legislation. This determination then allowed for an institution specific model of distributed leadership to be developed.

The genesis of the research question originated in the assumption that leadership usually implies senior management, dismissing the significant contributions of other important stakeholders. The development of the problem statement was grounded in a literature review of university leadership which

concluded that there was limited empirical work done in this area, particularly within South Africa. Although there is a wealth of literature on leadership in industries and business environments very little empirically tested research has been conducted within specific university settings (Vuori 2019; Hayward 2015; Scott *et al.* 2008). Additionally, studies into effective leadership for higher education have not been able to identify an approach which could be deemed successful (Jones *et al*. 2012), but does identify the need for the creation of conducive environments which supports and develops university staff to fulfil their potential and interest in their work (Vuori 2019; Bryman 2007). Additionally, there are few studies looking at leadership from a multi stakeholder perspective with Kulati *et al*. (2002) calling for more research into stakeholder contributions to leadership. This dearth of knowledge is particularly noted in studies on middle managers (Floyd 2016; Smit 2006), and to some extent, students (Luescher-Mamashela 2013) and supports the rationale for examining multi-stakeholder contribution to management and leadership within higher education. In addition, also noted was an identifiable gap for a research focus to be on larger, more complex higher education organisations (Hayward 2015).

What has been observed as a consistent theme throughout a review of the literature, however, was the tension between the needs of the entire institution and the activities of its constituent parts and this consequently underpinned the choice of leadership theory for this research namely, distributed leadership. Using a distributed leadership framework takes into account the contributions of all significant stakeholders to institutional management and leadership, thus increasing the body of knowledge of multi-stakeholder contribution to leadership practice. Within the South African education arena, and in view of its relatively recent arrival onto the leadership stage, distributed leadership has a very small empirical research base which still needs to be tested (Grant 2017) hence, proving strong support for the relevance of studies such as this. This research therefore aims to address this gap in the research literature.

## 1.5 PROBLEM STATEMENT

University leadership in the 21st century are impacted by rapidly changing global and local imperatives. In South Africa, if university management is to remain legally compliant and relevant, they need to ensure that their leadership model embraces its multiple stakeholders in a shared, participative manner. This study will explore the impact of multi-stakeholder representation in shared, participative institutional leadership at a South African higher education institution and as an outcome of this query, develop a distributed leadership framework specific to the institution.

### 1.5.1 Research objectives

These research objectives were formulated based on the problem statement.

***1.5.1.1. Research Objective 1:*** To understand leadership and its practice at a University of Technology.

The academic literature indicates that there is a paucity of empirical research around leadership in higher education (Floyd *et al.* 2018; Lumby 2012; Bryman 2007). The literature also confirms that the higher educational environment globally has become a terrain of shifting sands and increased complexity, so developing good leaders across all levels of university management has become a pressing issue (Floyd 2016; Bryman 2007). This research takes the view that the concept of leadership should encompass more than just the role of executive management and embrace the wider range of other significant stakeholders. This 'Finding Out' process then formed the initial phase of this enquiry.

***1.5.1.2. Research Objective 2:*** To determine senior managements understanding and practice of participatory, co-operative and distributed leadership.

There is the perception that leadership is the sole prerogative of senior management and/or the organisational head. There is also an assumption that leadership is based on a top down approach rather than distributed throughout all layers of the institution. Even though the role of senior leadership is well researched and documented in the literature generally, (Cannatelli, Smith, Giudici, and Jones 2017; Hempsall 2014; White, Bagilhole and Riordan 2012; Scott *et al.* 2008; Spendlove, 2007) and even within South Africa (Council for Higher Education 2016; Kulati 2003) this study will examine senior managers opinion and practice of a participative distributed leadership stance.

***1.5.1.3. Research Objective 3****:* To determine the understanding and practice of leadership among middle managers at a South African higher education institution.

A review of the literature (Harper 2015; Bryman 2007; Smit 2006) indicated that whilst leadership at the middle managers level within higher education is an under researched area, it is becoming of increasing significance (Marshall 2012; Clegg and McAuley 2005). There is however, a discernible paucity of significant studies into the leadership role of middle managers, both in South Africa (Smit 2006) and internationally (Harper 2015; Marshall 2012; Whitchurch 2007). It is hoped that this study will address this deficit.

***1.5.1.4. Research Objective 4:*** To determine the influence and role of student leadership in co-operative management and governance and understand if this is supported by the universities governance structures.

Students are a key constituency in the governance of higher education institutions and studies on the role and practice of student leadership appear

fairly well informed in South Africa (Luescher, Loader and Mugume 2017; Luescher-Mamashela 2013; Mbambo 2013; Leopold-George 2005) and elsewhere (Klemencic 2014). Their inclusion in this research study is to gain their insights, as significant university stakeholders, into a shared distributed model of leadership.

***1.5.1.5. Research Objective 5:*** To develop a model based on distributed leadership which allows for co-operative, participatory governance and leadership practice in a higher education setting.

Shared governance is central to higher education institutions, requiring key stakeholder and constituencies to contribute to management and decision making (Jones and Harvey 2017). With the current external and internal stressors facing these institutions, Jones *et al.* (2019) aver that importing models from other sectors may not be the best fit. They do make an argument, however, for a distributed leadership model being a more fitting approach for a university, based on its associated features of collaboration and collegiality. It is also a leadership approach that has concentrated its primary research within the educational schooling system rather than the higher education sector (Jones *et al.* 2019) and so testing it within a South African higher education institution will hopefully provide new insights into its applicability and usefulness within a post school environment.

Distributed leadership within higher education has been identified as not only an under-researched (Grant 2017; Williams 2011; Bolden 2010) but a more demanding terrain for empirical study compared to research focussing on leadership solo (Harris 2007). Thus, it is expected that this study will contribute to new empirical findings within this unique South African university environment. Using a distributed leadership framework, this research study will take into account the contributions of all significant role players in institutional management and governance, thereby increasing the body of knowledge of multi-stakeholder contributions to leadership within our universities.

## 1.6 RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design and research process is described in Table 1.

**Table 1: Overview of the Research Process**

| | **Phase 1: SSM Process** | **Phase 2: VSM Process** | **Phase 3: Model Creation** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **RESEARCH OBJECTIVE (RO)** | RO1. To understand leadership and its practice at a University of Technology | RO2. To determine senior managements understanding and practice of participatory, co-operative and distributed leadership<br><br>RO3. To determine the understanding and practice of leadership among middle managers at a South African higher education institution.<br><br>RO4. To determine the influence and role of student leadership in co-operative management and governance and understand if this is supported by the universities governance structures. | RO5. To develop a model based on distributed leadership which allows for co-operative, participatory governance and leadership practice in a higher education setting. |
| **SYSTEMS APPROACH** | Soft Systems Methodology | Viable System Model | Viable System Model Diagnosis +SSM Rich Picture themes |
| **DATA SAMPLE** | • 2 x Focus groups.<br><br>• N (12): 2 x 6 group participants | • Qualitative semi-structured interviews (SM)<br>• Qualitative semi-structured interviews (MM)<br>• Qualitative semi-structured interviews (SL)<br>• 1 x focus group (SL)<br>• Archival data<br>• Participant observation<br>• N: 25 participants | |
| **RESEARCH DESIGN** | Finding Out Process<br>• Rich Picture workshop. | • Thematic analysis of data. | • Consolidate findings from thematic data analysis from |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | • Group Discussion.<br>• Theme development. | • Populate VSM model with thematic analysis regarding<br><br>▪ VSM operations<br>▪ VSM Meta-System<br>▪ Environment<br><br>• Implement VSM diagnosis.<br>• Compare generated VSM to the generic model.<br>• Identify issues that could comprise viability of institution. | phase 1 and VSM diagnosis in phase 2.<br><br>• Develop a distributed leadership model, for a University of Technology, incorporating these findings. |

## 1.7 SYSTEMS THINKING AS RESEARCH METHOD

To assess the appropriateness of this distributed model, this study used a systems design perspective as its conceptual framework. As part of the Leadership and Complexity program at a University of Technology, the coursework undertaken has contributed not only to a systemic understanding of the field, but also to the use of different system lenses.

Systems thinking is the “ability to think about a system as a whole, rather than only considering the parts individually” (Behl and Ferreira 2014: 104). It is based on the assumption that the “system is greater than the sum of its parts and therefore should be studied holistically” (Behl *et al.* 2014: 105). In using a systems approach, to fix complex problems, allows for a holistic study of the problem rather than a piecemeal or reductionist approach. In situations or organisations that are immersed in messy, wicked and complex problems, using a systems thinking approach helps to ensure that there is “emphasis on recognizing the elements that constitute a system, the relationship between such elements and the environment in which these elements (and the relationship between them) are embedded” (Singh 2015: xi). The implication,

then, of using a systems approach is the development and appreciation of the problematic nature of the context in which this research is embedded.

Having this wider perspective enabled more effective solutions to be found as universities of the 21st century are multi-tiered and complex environments whose "complexity arises from the interactions and interdependency of multiple stakeholders with diverse perspectives and partially conflicting aims" (Hildbrand and Bodhanya 2014: 406). In addition, these institutions have to operate within the intricacies of a VUCA world. Taking these factors into consideration, as well as to ensure the authenticity of the research, this study required a research approach complex enough to deal with such problematic issues.

The Viable System Model was selected as it is considered a "powerful tool to describe, solve and control systems' complex problems autonomously" (Rezk and Gamal 2019: 438). Further supporting this choice was the fact that it had been utilised, in a variety of applications, to diagnose and design higher education institutions (Rezk *et al.* 2019; Hart and Paucer-Caceres 2017; Pankowska 2016; Sweeney and Sterman 2000). Of relevance to the study's South African context was Hardman's (2016) contention that in a post-apartheid, democratic state, using the VSM could assist in the transformative process, to achieve restructure and redesign. It is also important to note that the systems approaches used in this study, Viable System Model (VSM), using Soft System Methodology (SSM) rich picture techniques, have strong theoretical foundations making them credible and robust tool for researchers (Reynolds and Howell 2010).

The rich picture technique of the Soft Systems Methodology was used in the initial phase of this study to achieve research objective one which sought to understand leadership practice broadly at the institution. Therefore, in this research the Viable System Model for research objectives two to four was used to enable a diagnosis of the institution to be made. These findings then

contributed to the development of a distributed model of leadership specific to a University of Technology (research objective five). The research objectives and research process are described in Table 1.

## 1.8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

It must be highlighted that this study is analysing multi-stakeholder leadership participation at a specific University of Technology. Therefore, the findings and model generated may not necessarily be applicable to other institutions. Having disclosed this, however, it is the researcher's belief that certain generalised findings could very well be applied across the sector.

## 1.9 STRUCTURE OF THESIS

This thesis comprises of the following chapters which are broken down as follows:

Chapter one (1) presented above, is the introduction to the thesis and provides an overview describing briefly the background and context within which the study is situated. Also outlined in this chapter is the rationale for the study, the problem statement as well as the methodology used.

Chapter two (2) contextualises the research and the research questions by reviewing relevant literature. The focus of this literature review is to provide insights into the complexity of the leadership debate in educational institutions globally, and specifically to South Africa. There is discussion on how scholarly research conceptualises and analyses leadership and its associated theories broadly and then specifically focusing on distributed leadership, the leadership approach of this research study. This is then discussed and analysed. Also

reviewed in this chapter is the literature around the higher education stakeholder contribution to university management and leadership.

Chapter three (3) discusses the theory and rationale for the choice of the conceptual framework selected for this study. It reviews the systems approaches of the Viable System Model, the rich picture technique of the Soft Systems Methodology all embedded within a qualitative methodology approach.

Chapter four (4) describes data collection methods. Qualitative methods were used to support both the Viable System Model and the rich pictures of the Soft Systems Methodology. A discussion on the research design and research strategy is also included in this chapter.

Chapter five (5) is a presentation and report of the research findings as well as the specifc distributed leadership model crafted for a University of Technology.

Chapter six (6) offers a discussion on the findings, including recommendations for future research before concluding comments.

## 1.10 CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided an overall context and rationale as justification for this study, whilst the problem statement sets out the specific area of inquiry. Also included in this chapter is a brief introduction to systems thinking, the primary research approach used in this study, which is discussed in greater detail in chapter three.

This study looked at the specific multi-stakeholder groups as the researcher's intention was not to broadly generalise (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003)

especially as leadership should always be related to a specific context (Bryman 2004; 2007). Within the current South African higher education environment, as well as global complexity and rapid changes, the practice of shared distributed leadership could hardly be more pressing. Given that leadership within higher education is viewed as significant (Bryman *et al.*2009), there appeared to be very little in the way of published literature on this issue (Floyd 2016) supporting a gap in knowledge which this study hoped to address. It is anticipated that this research will also make valuable contributions to the body of knowledge on systems thinking, in particular the diagnostic application of the VSM in examining multi-stakeholder distributed leadership practices at an institution of higher education. Another important contribution of this study was to develop a model of distributed leadership for multi-stakeholder participation within a higher education landscape.

# 2 CHAPTER TWO – REVIEW OF LITERATURE

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Despite leadership being a topic of study for millennia, there has been no lack of interest in this topic. From the ancient Greek philosophers, Plato and Socrates, to the plethora of modern day leadership gurus, the interest in leadership has not declined. Notwithstanding the triumphant successes of what are termed 'great leaders', there have also been the abysmal failures of others, even in recent history. Yet the fascination with the concept of and all things 'leadership' still continues (Dike, Odiwe and Ehujor 2015). Even in South Africa today, we hear the popular call for great leaders or leadership to rescue us from the current failings of our government and its ineffectual leadership. Consequently, it could be presumed that despite this sustained interest and study, the quest for effective leadership and models of leadership still continues unabated.

This chapter provides the philosophical context and rationale for the study by reflecting on its primary theories, concepts and research approaches. Through these various lenses it is hoped to situate the research topic "Distributed leadership at a South African University of Technology: A multi-stakeholder model" in context. As the area of leadership is vast (Dike *et al*. 2015; House *et al.*1997), the intent of this literature review is to present an overview of the leadership landscape, before moving specifically onto the distributed leadership model, the conceptual framework underpinning this study. To this end, this chapter will be divided into three parts with Part 1 focusing on the broad leadership discourse, discussing leadership its theories and definitions, before moving onto a review of distributed leadership specifically. Part 2 explores the higher education scenario, globally and then within South Africa to situate the higher education leadership discourse. Distributed leadership

and its fit for a South African higher education landscape post-apartheid is also described. Part 3 then focuses on the role of stakeholders within a higher education institution, which will then assist in locating and providing a perspective to this research.

**PART ONE**

## 2.2 THE LEADERSHIP DISCOURSE

Leadership is increasingly being seen as an elixir and panacea to the rapid changes and demands of the 21st century (Youngs 2017; Andersen 2016; Bolden 2011; Armandi, Oppedisano and Sherman 2003). This projection that the 21st century would bring significant social and technological changes, namely the Fourth Industrial Revolution, was due in large part to advances in technology and globalisation. In tandem with these developments is a constantly evolving society requiring organisational change leadership that can address complex problems and build bridges across existing chasms (Burnes, Hughes and By 2018; Hitt, Haynes and Serpa 2010).

In the rapidly-changing, dynamic global environment that is the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world we currently live in (Euchner 2013), there has never been more of a demand for effective, successful leadership. VUCA, a term coined by Bob Johansen, researcher and futurist, is also a United States military acronym which identifies a range of skills leaders would need to face the increasing challenges of this century and includes vision, understanding, clarity and agility. By offering us the alternate view of VUCA, underscores the fact that leaders in a VUCA world must consider the long term future of our resources, our environment and the collective interest of others. This, in turn, implies that leadership must be value driven to ensure

the sustainability of our organisations. In this VUCA environment, it is imperative that leaders remain constantly adaptable and flexible to ensure their skills do not become obsolete within an organisational environment that is unpredictable, volatile and in constant flux (Euchner 2013). The 21st century has seen the rise of the post-heroic leader who recognises that:

> Decisions are made by those best equipped to make them, fully empowered to do so through the deliberate delegation of authority and supported with information, tools and training to ensure they can make effective decisions in the best interests of the organisation (Hayward 2015: 10).

Thus, there is compelling evidence for leaders to deal with the increasing demands and complexity facing them by moving towards more collaborative and devolved ways of operating. The leadership sphere abounds with new theories and approaches to the study of a subject that has fascinated mankind for millennia and continues to remain a highly valued but complex phenomenon even today. This has resulted in ever changing and innovative ways of defining, describing and practising leadership. Gaps and challenges on this topic still remain, however, as invariably these innovative leadership practices come without supporting empirical evidence to validate them (Liang and Sandmann 2015).

### 2.2.1 Definitions of leadership

There does not appear to be a generally accepted, standard definition of leadership (Daniëls, Hondegehm and Dochy 2019; Tian, Risku and Collin 2016) and this has consequently become an area mired in controversy. Whilst leadership is alluded to in academic discourse and is an area of great interest in a wide range of fields, this concept is vast and amorphous. A scan of the leadership literature reveals that to date, there is still little agreement in the literature on a specific, concise definition of leadership (Lumby 2012; Bolden

2010). This is astounding, especially as over forty years ago Stogdill (1974), quoted in Bolden (2010: 37) observed that there are “almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept”. Even amongst academic researchers what constitutes leadership varies amongst researchers (Middlehurst, Goreham and Woodfield 2009; Bryman 2007). This confusion arose because leadership is in common usage as an everyday term, however, when these terms were taken up by academic scholars, they “become veneered as science” (Calder 1977 quoted in Gronn 2003: 276). There is support for this viewpoint by Collinson and Grint (2005) who describe leadership research as being at best fragmented and at worst trivial, and who also in a provocative gesture question the academic integrity of leadership as a legitimate field of study. From this it could be concluded that despite many years of scientific leadership research, the concept and definition of leadership continues to remain a moot area.

These differences were highlighted even in a cursory appraisal of a few definitions proffered by researchers in the field. Armandi, Oppedisano, and Sherman (2003: 1077) offer a succinct, pithy definition which defines leadership as “the ability to influence people toward the achievement of a common goal”, which contrasts with Wright’s (2008) view that leadership is shared, social influence which leaders and followers intentionally exert over others. This brief snapshot therefore supports the assertion that leadership is seen as being “an essentially contested concept” (Grint 2004 quoted in Bolden 2010: 37). This contestation was also reflected within the higher education context, where the idea of leadership was defined as “requiring one to balance what, at first glance, appear to be contradictory ways of approaching a perplexing situation” (Scott *et al.* 2008: 89).

### 2.2.2 Management and leadership

Another challenge that adds to the complexity around the construct and concept of leadership is the debate of leadership versus management. Whether these are distinct and different or could be conflated has contributed to considerable literary discourse on this topic (Christie 2010). The literature is replete with articles in which the concepts of leadership and management are discussed, compared and defined. There is, on the one hand, the school of thought which differentiate between leaders and managers implying that managers coerce whilst leaders persuade or that “leadership is a process, while management is a position” (Hughes, Ginnet and Curphy 1999 quoted in Andersen 2016: 73) or that managers “do things right” whilst leaders “do the right thing” (Bennis and Nanus 1985 quoted in Bolden 2010: 43).

There is also the alternate viewpoint which questions if this is really true in practice, especially as there is research evidence which supports the argument that these two concepts of management and leadership are actually an inherent part of the same job (Bolden 2004; Smit 2006) and so consequently are complementary and integral aspects of the same multi-faceted notion. In his review of the higher education leadership literature, Bryman (2007) opines that these are terms which are used in ways that do not distinguish between them and any distinction between these concepts have recently been challenged by Allio (2013) who asserts that in reality managers must lead and leaders must manage. Support for this position is also provided by influential researchers in this area who offer the argument that “most organisations are over-managed and under led” (Kotter 1990a: 156) and that “leadership is in the eye of the beholder” (Gronn 2003: 274), whilst querying if there is anything to be gained by distinguishing between leaders and managers. Further support for this line of thought is offered by Lumby (2003) who affirms that there is no clear distinction between administration, management and leadership, but that they occur simultaneously amongst all three, thus contributing to a composite

construct of leadership. Leadership and management, are not contradictory but could be seen as complementary to each other (Andersen 2016; Marshall 2012; Ahn, Adamson and Dornbusch 2004) and that both sets of skills are required and co-exist in a mutually reinforcing relationship with the other. In fact, Andersen (2016) speaks of managerial leadership as being essential to the attainment of organisational goals. For the purpose of this research, then, there will be no distinction made between manager and leader as there appears to be a significant amount of overlap between these two concepts, especially as the boundaries between the two remain blurred (Bolden 2010). Consequently, the two terms will be used interchangeably throughout this study.

More specific to this study's focus, managerialism as leadership, within the higher education sector was first identified in the United States in the 1970's, moving across the globe and reaching South Africa and other Commonwealth countries during the late 1990's and 2000's. This form of managerialism is described as

> A set of beliefs or an ideology that legitimises the authority of university executives as professional managers; it involves, and is typically described in terms of, the application of leadership styles and management approaches developed for business firms to the academic context of university governance (Luescher-Mamashela 2010: 261).

Within this strictly managerial paradigm, students (and any other levels of stakeholders) played a very limited role which would not sit well within the exceptional, post-apartheid South African landscape with its vision for shared, participative leadership. This then lends further support to the rationale for this research.

## 2.3 EXAMINING LEADERSHIP THEORIES

These general theories of leadership are being presented here so as to establish the historical framework within which distributed leadership emerged. It is expected that this will help in placing distributed leadership in its historical and developmental context *vis a vis* the other leadership theories.

Mankind has always had a fascination with the concept of leaders and leadership since the beginning of recorded history. There have been commentaries on leaders and leadership writing from the earliest times, namely 6th century writings of Confucius (Analects), Lao Tzu (Tao Te Ching) and Sun Tzu (The Art of War) (Allio 2013). In Aristotle's (384-322BC) model of virtue (Allio 2013), men became brave by performing acts of bravery and, by extending this inference, implying that people can evolve into leaders by performing acts of leadership. The fascination of mankind with leadership and its connotations have continued unabated over the centuries and is still relevant today. However, leadership has only been considered a scientific discipline for just over the last 100 years and yet is still viewed as work in progress (Allio 2013), for no single dominant paradigm of leadership has emerged.

In order to better understand distributed leadership, the theoretical approach of this study, a timeline of prominent leadership theories and descriptive review on how leadership models have evolved over the last century leading up to and influencing the development of distributed leadership is presented.

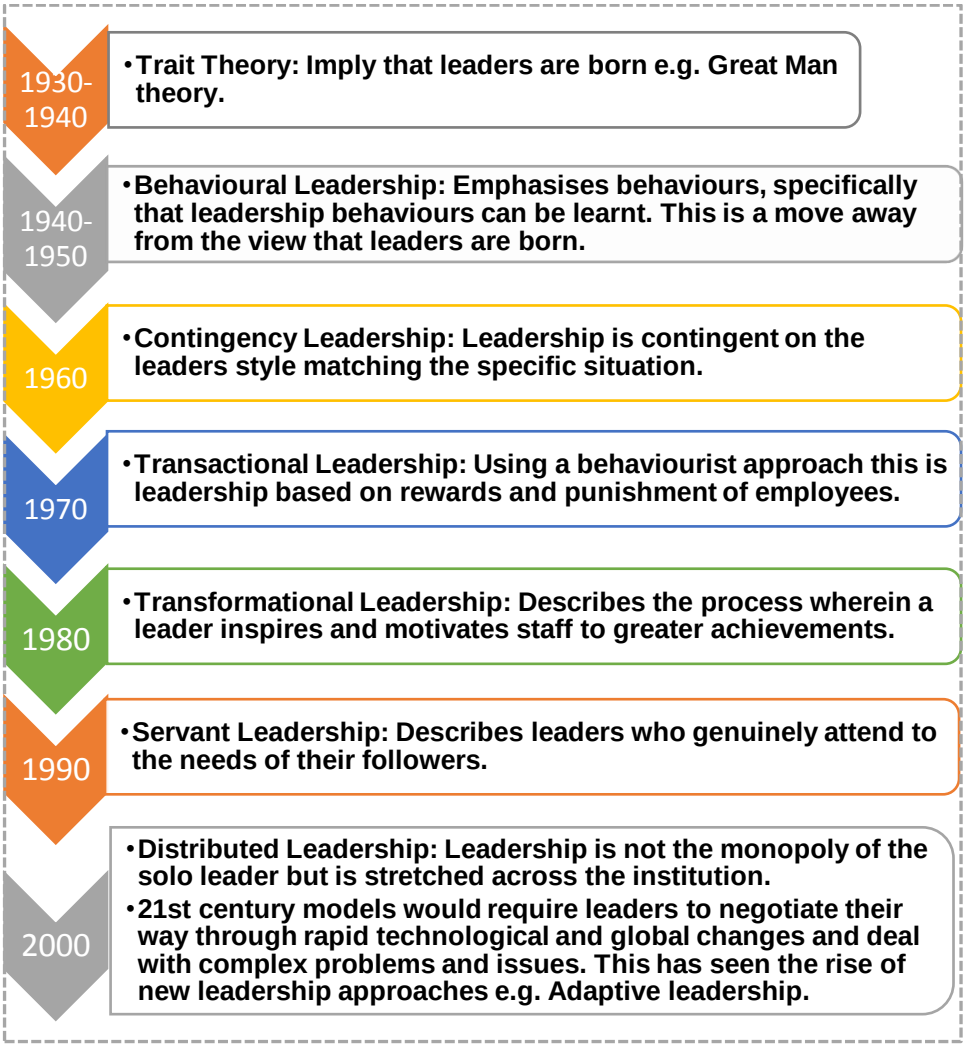



**Figure 1: Leadership Theories Timeline**

Whilst Figure 1 is a snapshot of some of the important leadership theories over the last century, the multiplicity of other leadership theories that exist must also be acknowledged. However, in order to gain perspective on the development of leadership as a shared process, selected theories that preceded the progress to distributed leadership are reviewed here.

The earliest theory of trait and factor with its focus on leadership as a collection of traits related to personality, had some of its influences drawn from the Great Man theories of the industrial revolution. However, this argument of traits

influencing leadership was refuted in the mid-20th century, in which studies concluded that no firm correlation existed between traits/personality and leadership (House *et al.* 1997). This was followed by the behaviourist approach with its emphasis on the notion of different leadership styles of the leader and the contingency approach where leadership efficacy was dependent upon the outcome of three variables namely nature of task, relationship between leader and followers and the power inherently held by the leader. Both of these theories continued to have a strong emphasis on the personal dynamics of the individual leader.

Transactional and transformational leadership, then followed, in chronological order. Up to now prominence was on the inspirational heroic leader but with the development of these theories there can be seen a slight move away from autocratic, individual leadership to a more relational form of engagement (Sherman, Kennedy, Woodward and McComb 2012). Within transactional leadership, there is an exchange in which power is vested within the leader to reward or punish based on the followers performance (Hayward 2015), whilst transformational leadership emphasises the ability of the leader to motivate and empower their followers (House *et al* .1997). Central to this latter approach is the concept of the morality of leadership. Whilst both these theories are still focused on the individual leader, there can now be seen the introduction of a collaborative spirit between leader and follower, which has a significant relationship with the concepts of shared influence and collaboration in distributed leadership (Hayward 2015).

In servant leadership (Greenleaf 2010 in McBath 2018) there was a realignment of the predominant focus on the individual leader to a more collective stance. In this leadership style the ethical and moral aspects of leadership are emphasised and the position of leader is more aligned to that of team leader. Here we can see the beginnings of the 'post heroic' leader developing with a de-emphasis on the individual leader as well as more inclusivity. It also has linkages with the concept of morality emphasised in

transformational theory. There appears to be limited research, however, on the efficacy of this theoretical model, perhaps because of its popularity with religious bodies, but it does demonstrate a shift and move towards a more shared leadership approach, more aligned to the emerging distributed leadership model (Hayward 2015). Shared leadership came into its own in the 1990's, in parallel with the emergence of distributed leadership and the two terms are often used interchangeably despite what Fitzsimons, Turnbull James and Denyer (2011) see as significant differences between them. These differences are attributed to the fact that there were two different communities of researchers looking at the respective concepts of shared and distributed leadership as a reaction to top down leadership. Shared leadership is based on organisational teams doing knowledge work with a rotation of team leaders and team members, to those who had the ability, knowledge and skill to cope with the particular problem or issue being faced at a particular time (Pearce 2004). Its development was a demonstration of a move away from horizontal authority to a perspective that was more lateral (Jones 2014).

However, it was only at the cusp of this millennium that distributed leadership gained in popularity with leadership practitioners and leaders (Crawford 2012; Bolden 2011; Gronn 2000), and emerged in response to a leader-centric approach which was no longer fit for purpose. Distributed leadership is a shared process, with a de-emphasis on the heroic leader and is a response to the dynamic, non-defined and complex nature of 21st century leadership with all its diversities. Rapid technological developments such as the Fourth Industrial Revolution have also contributed to leadership moving away from previous leadership approaches with its emphasis on relatively stable, non-diverse organisations which could engage in long term organisational planning within predictable scenarios. Hence, the current focus on distributed leadership.

Twenty first century institutions operate within rapidly changing dynamic times requiring a multitude of diverse stakeholders to contribute to leadership. New

leadership models will certainly have to take these factors into consideration and is already being seen in the rise of 'adaptive leadership', a leadership style with its origins in transformational, contingency, situational and complexity theories. It is in the process of becoming a leadership theory in its own right (Cojocar 2009) and identified as mobilising people to "use the turbulence of the present to build on and bring closure to the past. In the process, they change key rules of the game, reshape parts of the organization, and redefine the work people do" (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky 2009: 3). This model places emphasis on the leadership process as opposed to previous approaches which looked at the role of individual leaders. It also highlights the necessity for institutional stakeholders to adopt the role of leader in the change initiative (Randall 2012).

From Figure 1, it is possible to trace the historical development of the various models and the movement from the individual, heroic leader to an emphasis on shared, collaborative leadership practice. These leadership movements also track the societal, cultural and technological changes that have occurred globally over the last millennium. Several of the theories presented above still remain in popular usage today although there does not appear to be common agreement on which is preferable or most effective. It would appear though that most of them are grounded within a bureaucratic, hierarchical paradigm beyond which there is an urgent need to move, if we are to be relevant in the Knowledge Era (Hargreaves and Ainscow 2015; Pearce 2004).

This relevance is already being noted in a significant paradigm shift away from the positional leader to more post heroic models, as top down leadership styles have a long history of failure (Hargreaves *et al.* 2015). The move to a distributed leadership is the converse of the single, hierarchical leader and could be attributable to environmental stressors and 21st century demands requiring organisations to adapt more quickly if they are to survive (Thorpe, Gold and Lawler 2011). Within a post heroic scenario there is the recognition of "collective achievement, social networks, and the importance of teamwork

and shared accountability" (Fletcher 2004: 648). This implies that tasks and responsibilities are assigned across the hierarchy, both up and down, where leadership is envisioned as a social engagement and where the emphasis is less on the hierarchy and more on collaborative engagement (Fletcher 2004). Consequently, the understandings attained from this snapshot review of the leadership models, as well as the issues raised above regarding post heroic leaders, places into perspective the rise in support for distributed leadership.

### 2.3.1 Dark side of leadership

In times of change and within a climate of uncertainty, leadership is viewed as a universal remedy to cure all ills. However, also evident is a degree of cynicism about leadership, and this also needs to be addressed, if it is to be embraced and engaged with by all stakeholders. There has been demonstrated, in recent history, the shadowy, dark side of leadership, the most notable examples of which have been the likes of Hitler, Stalin, Hendrik Verwoerd and Slobodan Milosevic. The Enron and other banking scandals of the first decade of this century, and closer to home here in South Africa the issue of state capture, are all examples of how leadership can be hijacked for nefarious and personal gain or aggrandizement at the expense of its followers.

A scan of the leadership literature also highlights an increase in studies which focus on toxic or bad leadership (Braun, Kark and Wisse 2019; Kaiser, LeBreton and Hogan 2015; Allio 2013). The implication being that the concept of leadership remains a topic of debate and contestation. When the title of leader is bestowed the implicit understanding is of someone who is of ethical and moral upstanding. However, the dark side of leadership is exhibited by some leaders who are toxic and corrupt, who make poor decisions or sabotage the confidence of their constituents. Or as Allio (2013) asserts they consciously conduct themselves in ways that will benefit themselves. He further goes on to

offer the following advice “What’s the lesson for tomorrow’s leaders? Weigh the moral consequence of expedient decisions, cultivate humility, stay the course with integrity and resolutely earn the trust of stakeholders” (Allio 2013: 8).

A contra-response to this dark side of leadership has been a global shift in which the ethical, moral and social responsibilities of leadership are being demanded. Within this debate and combined with what is seen as the failure of heroic or top down bureaucratic, hierarchical leadership, there is increasing demands for shared, collaborative leadership which serves to counter any abuse of leadership power and where the concept of leadership as being vested within a position or a person is being questioned (Gronn 2003).

## 2.4 DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

This section aims to unpack the theoretical underpinnings of the distributed leadership model and set out its relevance to this study. Whilst the notion of a collective form of leadership existed in the work of Gibb during the middle of the last century (Gronn 2008), it was only since the turn of this 21st century that distributed leadership has been recognised as a significant, most promoted form of leadership practice (Lumby 2019; Harris *et al.* 2016; Bolden and Petrov 2014; Contractor, DeChurch, Carson, Carter and Keegan 2012). Distributed leadership has gained popularity in the 21st century (Bush and Glover 2012), is considered part of the collegial theories and has underpinnings in line with those such as participative, shared, dispersed, team, democratic and collaborative leadership (Harris *et al.* 2016, 2007; Bolden 2011). Whilst these terms are often used interchangeably in the literature and will be used in a similar manner in this study, there is the contention by Bolden (2011: 261) that further research is required into the contextual appropriateness of such terms in “clarifying whether differences in terminology are purely rhetoric or whether

they point to more fundamental differences in how leadership is accomplished". The attractiveness of distributed leadership lies in the fact that leadership can occur anywhere within an institution, is not related to position or authority and recognises the virtue of assembling together all the expertise available within the organisation (Bush 2013).

### 2.4.1 Distributed leadership: Genesis

As a concept, distributed leadership was first discussed by Gibb (1954), to describe the "dynamics of the influence processes within formal and informal groups" (Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons and Hopkins 2007: 339) and is therefore not a new idea. It was resuscitated at the end of the last millennium as an alternative to the solo leadership model. Distributed leadership originated in the fields of organisational theory, sociology and politics and draws on concepts such as the culture and climate of the organisation to demonstrate not only the contextual nature of leadership (Bolden, Gosling, Marturano and Dennison 2003) but is also distinguished for being rooted in the relational process of leadership (Liang and Sandmann 2015). Distributed leadership is being widely endorsed by practitioners and scholars as an efficient tool for solo leaders to disperse their increasing workloads especially as the solo approach that organisations saw as their best fit throughout most of the 20th century needed to be revised as it was no longer fit for purpose (Bolden 2011).

This conceptual model goes contrary to the popular notion of vertical leadership and the concept of singular leader and instead focused on the diversity of individuals who contribute to the leadership process through collective action (van Ameidje, Nelson, Billsberry and van Meurs 2009). By its descriptive title, distributed leadership does not exist in a specific position in an organisation but "presents the organic co-existence of positional/ formal

leadership and emergent/ informal leadership" (Liang *et al*. 2015: 37). In other words, this model is primarily about practice rather than any formal role, functions, title or structures, and is about the interactions of the leader, follower and the situation (Spillane 2005b). Its attractiveness lays in the fact that it is spread across an organisation enabling the empowerment and leadership development of its staff. Distributed leadership includes formal and informal leadership practice "within its framing, analysis and interpretation" (Harris 2013: 6), which is not opposing or incompatible with each other but instead are considered different aspects of leadership practice.

Spillane (2005b), an influential thought leader in the field, states that this paradigm should be considered a perspective on leadership practice, to be used as a diagnostic or conceptual tool and is in no way a monolithic construct. With the increased interest in complexity sciences, (the research paradigm of this study), traditional reductionist explanations of real-world phenomena is proving insufficient. This is especially pertinent when viewed in relation to the complexities and contexts which shape the leadership process. Examining leadership by breaking it into discrete phenomenon as is the reductionist approach, implies only a cause and effect paradigm. A richness of the real world complexities, the subtleties and nuances are missing from this type of research and consequently could be viewed as a study in isolation. All of this lends support to the distributed leadership model, particularly in knowledge work (a core tenet of university work) where there is a reliance on team based activities, which require a diverse group from a variety of disciplines to contribute to new knowledge. These shared activities are well aligned to the distributive leadership stance, a position supported by Contractor *et al.* (2012: 1009), who having reviewed the literature aver that "modern leadership theory is inherently relational, holding that leadership is the confluence of leaders, followers, and their relationships".

### 2.4.2 Distributed leadership: Definitions

Table 2 provides a synopsis of distributed leadership definitions, followed by a review of the literature, regarding this concept.

**Table 2: An overview of Distributed Leadership Definitions**

| Definition | Author | Key Concepts |
|---|---|---|
| Distributed leadership is "the interactions of leaders, followers and their situation in the execution of particular leadership tasks". Each is a pre-requisite for leadership activity. | Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2004: 10). | Interactions; followers; leaders; situation. |
| Distributed leadership locates clearly beyond the individual leader and within the relationships and interactions of multiple actors and the situations in which they find themselves. Thus, leadership is distributed. It resides not solely in the individual at the top, but in every person at any level who, in one way or another, acts as a leader. In brief, leadership is a shared and contextually situated social process. | Bolden (2010; 2011) | Relationships; interactions; shared; contextually situated. |
| Distributed leadership is at its core not the preserve of a single individual, not fixed, but is instead a fluid and emergent property. | Harris (2008) | Fluid; emergent. |
| Distributed leadership "while acknowledging traditional leadership focus on the traits, skills and behaviours of individual leaders, encompasses the need to take account of contexts, situations, environments and contingencies in which leadership occurs." | Jones, Lefoe, Harvey and Ryland (2012: 68) | Contexts; situations; alignment of vertical and distributed leadership. |
| Is an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals implying a broad based collaboration involved in the process. | Gronn (2002, 2008) | Interacting individuals; broad based; collaboration. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| "leadership is largely emergent, informal and widely dispersed" | Bolden, Petrov and Gosling (2008: 360) | Emergent, dispersed |
| "Distributed leadership is defined as an emergent group where two or more individuals share the role and functions of leadership" | Cannatelli, Smith, Giudici and Jones (2017: 582) | Emergent; group of people. |

There does not appear to be consensus, in the literature, on a widely accepted, universal definition specific to distributed leadership (Lumby 2019; Daniëls *et al.* 2019; Tian *et al.* 2016; Harris 2013; Hartley 2010; Wright 2008). As with the general definition of leadership distributed leadership has a variety of meanings and is linked to a range of practices (Botha and Triegaard 2015; Woods, Bennet, Harvey and Wise 2004), in which there are "competing and sometimes conflicting interpretations of the term" (Harris 2008: 173) and described as a "relatively unexplored concept (Thorpe *et al*. 2011: 240).

The various terms used to define this leadership style include *inter alia* distributive, collaborative, dispersed, devolved, democratic, co-operative, collective and relational amongst others. This lack of clearly defined terminology and association of multiple allied terms has meant that the concept is often misused (Harris 2008) or resulted in researchers being able to talk past each other (Mayrowetz 2008). Oftentimes the definitions proffered are in conflict with and challenge the common understanding of the term (Harris 2013), and very few provide a clear definition of distributed leadership (Bennet, Wise, Woods and Harvey 2003). Nonetheless, despite these converging definitions it has also been described as a popular concept (Flessa 2009) where this popular appeal "resides in its chameleon like quality; it means different things to different people" (Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons and Hopkins 2007: 338).

The lack of a distinct, standard definition arises from the fact that the term has evolved from its practice, rather than from a specific theoretical base (Fasso,

Knight and Purnell 2016; Thorpe *et al.* 2011) but it is evident that there is commonality across these definitions namely that leadership is not the monopoly of one individual and where leadership is an emergent, collective, collaborative practice (Bolden 2011). However, as with the general field of leadership, the definition of distributed leadership continues to be a concept that will be contested (Grint 2005). To seek a comprehensive universal definition of distributed leadership may be an unattainable goal given the multiplicity of definitions that have emerged (Mayrowetz 2008). There is further support for this lack of a universal definition provided by Spillane's (2005: 144) contention that "distributed leadership often is cast as some sort of monolithic construct when, in fact, it is merely an emerging set of ideas that frequently diverge from each other". It has also been suggested that in seeking a standard definition of distributed leadership could lead to losing its dynamic complexity and multi–dimensional features (Ritchie and Woods 2007). However, what all of these definitions do reinforce is the understanding that leadership is not the prerogative or responsibility of one individual but "a collective and systemic understanding of leadership as a social process" (Bolden 2011: 252) and is the definition that this study will adopt. This researcher also concurs with the view of it being a collaborative, shared vision and concept (Bolden 2011) which aligns itself well with a democratic, participative leadership stance such as that required of a higher education institution.

Notwithstanding the critique around its definition, distributed leadership still remains a favoured concept, especially within the educational domain and the definitions proffered still show some commonalities. A range of definitions of distributed leadership from leading researchers in the field were presented in Table 2. They extend across the spectrum from the normative to the theoretical position so as to provide a holistic overview. It is evident from Table 2 that there is general acknowledgement that distributed leadership emerges through the engagements of networks of individuals (Woods *et al*. 2004). However, Woods and Roberts (2016: 139) later attached the caveat that whilst it is emergent "it arises through complex, interactive processes, rather than being

the preserve of senior roles designated with leadership authority". This then implies that the hierarchical structure is much flatter, and where leadership work is conducted in collaborative relationships beyond the formal institutional roles (Woods *et al.* 2016) but they do qualify this by contending that distributed leadership has to co-exist alongside formal lines of authority. The belief that distributed leadership negates the role of the institutional head is also challenged by Spillane and Diamond (2007a) referenced in Bolden (2011) as this would reduce our ability to fully understand the dynamics of comprehensive leadership practice.

The perspective espoused by Woods *et al.* (2016) to this variety of different definitions is to offer three distinct concepts as intrinsic to understanding this concept. They are as follows: "leadership as an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals"; "openness of the boundaries of leadership" and the understanding that "varieties of expertise are distributed across the many, not the few" (Woods *et al.* 2016: 441-442). This understanding of distributed leadership coalesces with that of this research which reviews multi-stakeholder contributions to distributed leadership. In this study, the implication is that leadership at the university can be distributed amongst all its significant stakeholders, irrespective of their formal position or role. The practice of this leadership is identified by the concepts of collaboration and shared responsibility in an integrated approach (Jones 2014), ideals which are infused into all definitions of distributed leadership. Contrary to a hierarchical model, these definitions talk to a flatter, lateral style of practicing leadership, implying that members can be drawn from across the institutions stakeholder groups. Distributed leadership practice is dependent on skill and expertise and not role and status (Bolden 2011; Harris 2008) and is the engagements of people in their practice of leadership work. Such a perspective is seen by this researcher as being an appropriate fit for this study.

### 2.4.3 Conceptual framework

Distributed leadership is conceived of as offering a “systemic perspective on leadership rather than positioning itself as a distinct theory per se” (Bolden 2011: 257) thus contributing to the lack of a common definition (Tian *et al.* 2016). Aligned to this is the variety of concepts and terms, often used interchangeably by practitioners of distributed leadership. This is described by Bolden (2011) as the normative versus descriptive perspectives. The normative viewpoint is where the vast majority of distributed leadership researchers align themselves to concepts such as dispersed, shared and democratic amongst others. The descriptive stance, on the other hand, argues for an “analytical framework through which one can assess and articulate the manner in which leadership is (and is not) distributed throughout organizations” (Bolden 2011: 256) and is the approach employed in this study.

In its early development, this form of leadership was primarily perceived to be an analytical lens through which to observe the engagements and interactions of people as they practiced their leadership work (Bennet *et al*. 2003). A scan of the relevant literature (Fasso *et al.* 2016; Spillane 2005; Spillane *et al*. 2004) indicate that this conceptual framework was derived from three theoretical concepts namely distributed cognition, structuration theory and activity theory in which human activity is embedded within the situational context in which it occurs (Fasso *et al.* 2016).

Fletcher (2004) terms distributed leadership as post-heroic leadership, and the three distinct characteristics of post-heroic leadership are identified below. Fletcher’s post-heroic concepts also find support in the distributed leadership literature (Woods 2004).

- Leadership as practice, whereby leadership encompasses all levels of the organisation (Hayward 2015; van Ameidje *et al.* 2009, Harris 2008). It occurs across the hierarchy, both vertical and horizontal, and oftentimes transcends organisational boundaries (Cannatelli *et al.* 2017).
- Leadership as social process, in which the position, importance or role of a person does not imply leadership (Cannatelli *et al.* 2017; Liang *et al.* 2015; Bolden 2011).
- Leadership as learning, implying that part of the "democratic learning process, allow for more positive interactions between team members (member to member, member to leader, leader to leader)" (Hayward 2015: 66; Liang *et al.* 2015).

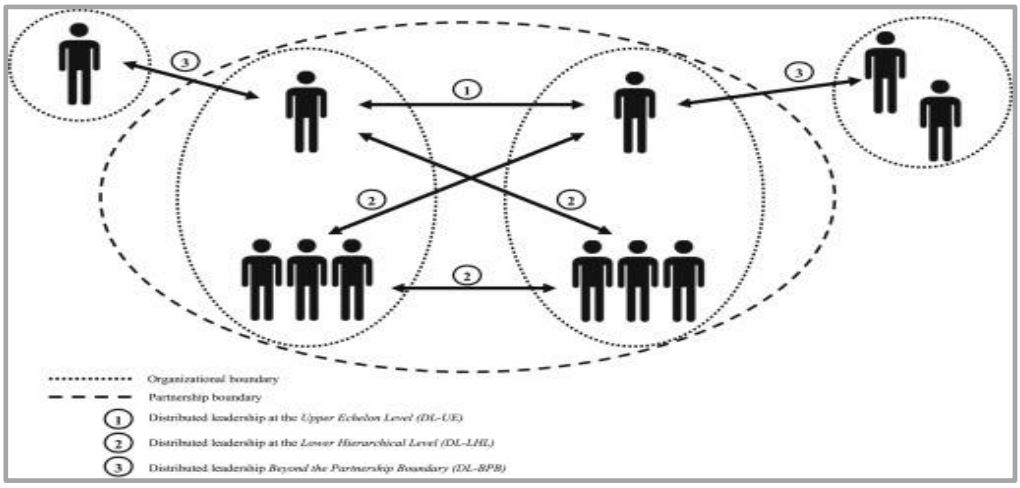



**Figure 2: Example of a Distributed Framework**

Source: Cannatelli, Smith, Giudici, Jones and Conger (2017: 589)

This conceptual framework then places emphasis on the use of multiple resources for leadership as well as the fluidity of leadership boundaries (Liang *et al.* 2015). This emergent leadership style de-emphasises the individual and

is considered a fundamental paradigm shift away from the traditional heroic form of leadership requiring an organisation to think about leadership from a new perspective namely “from a person solo to a person plus” (Harris 2008: 183). As leadership which is distributed amongst the many, not the few (Woods, Bennet, Harvey and Wise 2004), it is this collectively-embedded notion of leadership which requires a reconsideration of the distribution of power and influence within an organisation (Bolden 2007), allowing organisations to provide opportunities for their members to demonstrate their experiences of leadership (Bolden 2010; Woods *et al*. 2004).

In distributed leadership there is a clear demarcation between the concepts of ‘leader’ and ‘leadership’. Here, the leader is seen as emergent rather than predefined and the role of leadership is best understood through the relationship within the group implying that distributed leadership practice is grounded in activity rather than position or individual (Harris and Spillane, 2008). This said, distributed leadership also acknowledges the key role played by people in formal, leadership roles and emphasises that a dynamic and formal relationship still exists between the vertical and lateral leadership processes (Harris 2013).

The steady and growing interest in distributed leadership as a vibrant, dynamic engaged, sometimes controversial model, has seen a concurrent increase in research and publications in this area (Floyd *et al*. 2018; Jones *et al*. 2017; Tian *et al.* 2016; Jones 2014). With increased research new ground is being broken with concomitant emerging ideas being constantly developed.

### 2.4.4 Challenges to Distributed Leadership

Despite the general acclaim and popularity of this model there are dissenting and critical voices indicating that distributed leadership is not without its own

peculiar challenges. There is the critique that distributed leadership is being used interchangeably with other terms such as shared, dispersed, devolved and collaborative work which could lead to confusion in practice and research (Lumby 2019; Tian *et al.* 2016; Harris 2013) and this is possibly linked to the lack of a definitive definition (Lumby 2019; Harris *et al*. 2016) discussed earlier in this chapter. This linkages with various labels, according to Harris *et al*. (2007) could be viewed as a core weakness of distributed leadership. There is also the question of whether the popularity garnered by distributed leadership is because it is a familiar approach and easy to relabel where "distributed leadership is just another case of old wine in new bottles" (Spillane 2005b: 144), an argument countered by Hartley (2010) who avers that distributed leadership sits well within a contemporary, post-modernist culture; within a knowledge economy which supports team based collaborative work styles. Tian *et al.* (2016) queries the lack of substantive empirical evidence on the efficacy and practice of this model, as well as laments the absence of a solid theoretical underpinning to distributed leadership, but this finding is refuted as unfounded by Harris *et al.* (2016) who claim the scope of the review by Tian *et al*. (2016) was limited and that important empirical studies were excluded.

Power is intrinsic to any discourse of leadership as well as to its practice but is sadly absent in the literature on distributed leadership which adopts a neutral, apolitical stance (Bolden 2011). In fact, Bolden *et al.* (2009) suggest that distributed leadership, within higher education institutions, is oftentimes used to mask underlying power dynamics. In practice this means that this model then becomes open to abuse by those in the upper echelons of power to increase the responsibilities of their subordinates through delegation and could be disguised as a form of subtle manipulation and a micro political strategy to manipulate and justify the interests of top down, bureaucratic authority (Lumby 2019; 2013; Wright 2008; Ritchie *et al.* 2007; Johnson 2004). Other imbalances of power occur when leadership whilst distributed is not supported by a concomitant distribution or access to resources and influence (Bolden 2011). This implies then that those who occupy formal roles are really the gate

keepers to the practice and process of distributed leadership in their organisations, and one where changes in power structures might be difficult for organisational leaders to accept especially if they have to relinquish traditional roles of authority (Hulpia and Devos 2009). As a response to these criticisms, Jones *et al.* (2012) offer the hybrid or dual approach as a more flexible lens with which to practise distributed leadership in which there is a compelling and dynamic relationship that exists between the vertical and lateral levels.

The concept of power being redistributed to a wide range of people is not supported by substantive evidence in the literature (Lumby 2019; Harris *et al.* 2016; Woods 2016; Tian *et al.* 2016). On the other hand, Jones (2014) asserts that in the Australian context, the distributed approach did contribute to functional change within a higher education institution although its sustainability and transferability were in question. It is therefore inferred that because the application of this approach is dependent upon local context and culture for its efficacy, no universal model can be developed (Jones 2014). Speaking specifically to a South Africa, post-apartheid, in which distributed leadership is seen to be the solution to the toxic leadership of the past, could become a perilous exercise. It could further encourage the adverse outcome of distributing incompetent leadership (Timperley 2005).

The question of distributed leadership enabling more democratic decision making is refuted by the literature (Lumby 2013; Bolden, Petrov and Gosling 2008) but it does nonetheless allow for more sharing and engagement (Jones and Harvey 2017). Other questions have arisen around the coherence of the collaborative team with enquiries about boundary management issues and covert or alternate agendas (Harris 2008). Nevertheless there has been increasing evidence of high performing organisations across the various sectors practising distributed leadership as part of a managed, strategic operation in which those in formal leadership roles become enablers for others to take on leadership roles (Harris 2013). The implication of this is that the

formal leader serves as a catalyst for distributed leadership practice, thereby leading to improved organisational performances (Harris 2008).

Nonetheless, whilst we should not view distributed leadership as a panacea for current organisational leadership problems, there is also an alternate viewpoint to these challenges. This model not only offers us a starting point (Harris 2013) but demonstrates the hallmarks of survival (Gronn 2008). This, according to Gronn (2008), is due, in part, to the fact that it has overcome the initial stage of conceptual exploration, has matured into the empirical investigation phase and will soon be at the stage when its impact and differences will become clearer.

Thus, this post heroic model has been identified as the proponent for transformation, to influence learning from a multitude of perspectives, taking into account various stakeholders that will enable the creation of a learning organisation that has the ability to manage dynamic processes (Fletcher 2004). Therefore, using a leadership modality that is collective and distributed, enables experienced and talented members to be assigned to leadership activities and ensures institutional competence and survival. In order to move into the post heroic leadership era and achieve a successful and effective workplace requires an organisational mind-set change in principles and beliefs around power and sharing issues (Fletcher 2004). It must be highlighted though that whilst arguing for a distributed leadership style to prevail at higher education institutions, this should not be at the expense of formal, structured leadership but instead recognise the contributions of both formal and informal leadership.

Distributed leadership is currently the normative model of preference (Bush 2018) and this discussion highlights the argument and counter-argument around this leadership style. In fact, Timperley (2005) expresses surprise that educationists have been so long in recognising this, whilst also cautioning that we do not become blindsided to its limitations but to consider its intrinsic and

extraneous consequences. Such literary discourse and debate contributes to not only engendering new research in the area (Lumby 2019; Cannatelli *et al.* 2017; Tian *et al.* 2016; Woods 2016; Woods and Roberts 2016) but also to grounding distributed leadership as an empirical theory (Timperley 2005).

Distributed leadership also finds support in the rise of other new post-modern leadership approaches, such as Adaptive leadership (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky 2009; Randall 2012).In order to address complex issues and challenges (Heifetz *et al.* 2009; Jones and Harvey 2017) adaptive leadership states that we look for solutions amongst institutional stakeholders, in particular in their behaviours, attitudes and priorities. Such an alignment is demonstrated in the purpose of distributed leadership, which is essentially to facilitate adaptivity as an emergent property infusing the organisation through subsidiarity. The pointed choice of distributed leadership for this study however, as opposed to other leadership approaches is that it is seen as fit for purpose for a university environment with its associations of collegiality and collaboration (Jones *et al.* 2017).

**PART TWO**

As outlined in chapter one, this section serves to place the research study in perspective. It is located within a higher education institution so it was important to provide a leadership perspective on the current status of higher education globally and within South Africa, as well as discuss the distributed leadership model *vis-a vis* higher education.

## 2.5 THE HIGHER EDUCATION SCENARIO

Generally, higher education institutions are facing a myriad of complex challenges and demands, including but not limited to the search for alternate sources of funding to supplement decreased government subsidies, massification of students with increased demands for university entry, competitiveness of higher education not only amongst state institutions but with private institutions, increased government and societal scrutiny as well as the incessant demand for new knowledge (Jones *et al.* 2017; Warings 2017). In tandem with this is the global demand for higher education institutions to nurture and encourage leaders who can not only advance the mission of the institution (Chelf 2018; Juntrasook 2014) but allow it to not become outdated and redundant.

### 2.5.1 Current Global Picture

Within these shifting sands, the response of higher education globally has been to increase managerialism (Warings 2017; Jones 2014). Associated with this 'for profit' form of managerialism, described as 'new managerialism', has been the criticism that it is "overt control" or "subtle manipulation" (Lumby 2003: 283; Lumby 2013). This is where institutional culture is characterised by hierarchical, multi-layered decision-making structures and is associated with declining academic autonomy (Ekman, Lindgren and Packendorff 2018; Jones 2014). The consequence is that universities have transformed knowledge work and higher education institutions into commodities. As the higher education landscape is unique to itself, the solution of transplanting business models to an educational environment becomes fraught with problems.

This perspective needs to be reframed and there is general agreement in the leadership literature (Hempsall 2014; Bolden *et al*. 2009; Bryman 2007; Scott

*et al.* 2008) that a repositioning and reconfiguration of higher education institutions needs to occur if they are to become responsive to the challenges facing them. If knowledge work, a core component of universities, is to remain relevant, institutions have to shift their focus towards new modes of leadership. There is an emergent move away from the concentrated focus of individual leaders to looking through the lens of a more collective, shared view of institutional leadership (Jones 2014).

Substantive scholarly research (Ekman *et al*. 2018; Jones 2014; Hempsall 2014; Bryman 2007) also highlights the growing impetus within higher education to develop new models of leadership that are aligned to the basic tenets of academia namely collegiality and collaboration. Most modern theories on leadership advocate a collaborative approach to leadership (Warings 2017; Juntrasook 2014; Jones *et al.* 2012), based on relationships rather than the command and control models.

The uniqueness of higher education leadership (Lumby 2012) is that its roots pervade throughout the institution strongly influencing all levels of formal leadership. This resonates with the growing shift from solo leadership to a dispersed concept of leadership, that is more democratic and less hierarchical (Vuori 2019; Diamond *et al.* 2016; Jones *et al.* 2012) and where leadership is a collaborative responsibility (Jones *et al.* 2012; Bolden 2011; Bolden *et al*. 2008). Distributed leadership encourages this approach to leadership, focusing on the development and promotion of leadership skills amongst all levels of people and not just those at the top of the hierarchy (Lumby 2019; Vuori 2019; Bolden 2011). Taken together in context, this therefore signposts distributed leadership as the most appropriate model for application within a higher education environment.

### 2.5.2 South African Higher Education: A Distinctive Picture

This study is located within a South African institution of higher education, and therefore it is important to understand the context within which it is placed. The higher education terrain in South Africa cannot be viewed without acknowledging the country's turbulent political history and racially divided legacy.

Pre 1994, the country was separated along racial lines and a bureaucratic, managerial style of leadership was the preferred model for apartheid South Africa (Williams 2011). Apartheid was a heinous systemic form of separating and differentiating between so called 'Europeans' and people of colour and higher education during this time was a fractured system, riddled with inequality and isolated from the rest of the world. Under the apartheid regime the relationship of tertiary institutions and the state also differed significantly along these racial lines whereby universities reserved for 'whites only' experienced substantial financial support and autonomy. Meanwhile, universities for people of colour were highly controlled administratively and with very limited academic autonomy. They were also bureaucratically defined according to their racial profile for example, Departments of Indian Affairs, Bantu Administration and Coloured Affairs (Mekoa 2018; Moloi *et al.* 2017; Christie 2010).

Post 1994, with the introduction of a democratic dispensation, South African higher education had to make substantive changes in its relationship with the state and society, to dismantle itself from the restrictive shackles of the apartheid regime (Mekoa 2018; Heleta 2016; Habib 2016; Badat 2010; 2015b). This resulted in the nature and concept of higher education leadership changing (Badat 2009), as the substantive intention of the South African Constitution was to demand that all public organisations address the scourges of apartheid (Habib 2016; Badat 2015b). Thus, South African higher education,

post-apartheid, had the urgent task to create an equal, integrated, national system of education (Mekoa 2018; Badat 2010) encapsulated in a policy paper titled *White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (1997). This directed the state and its institutions to "realise profound and wide – ranging imperatives and goals in and through higher education" (Badat 2009: 459). The document set out a participatory, co-operative governance model of management and leadership in higher education institutions, and a call for increasing stakeholder participation in order to ensure that there was widespread sector representation in mainstream decision making. This was so as to prevent the side-lining of any stakeholder groups.

Twenty-five years (1992-2019) into democracy, South African higher education institutions have become complex and diverse organisations. This is demonstrated by its robustness under pressure becoming one of the strongest sectors of the South African education system (Council on Higher Education 2016). Whilst it has been impacted by the phenomenon of globalisation and massification, like their international counterparts, the situation is further complicated by specific, national complexities. Despite the substantive, transformative changes that have taken place, South African higher education, is currently still experiencing unprecedented demands for change as evidenced by #FeesMustFall (Moloi *et al.* 2017; Luescher *et al.* 2017; Naicker 2016) decolonised curricula (Heleta 2016) and the dissatisfaction of students with regard to access and financial assistance (Mekoa 2018; Naicker 2016). Therefore, in order to contribute to the national debate on transformation, and address some of the concerns highlighted above, higher education leaders need to re-think the leadership agenda within their institutions.

For any leadership activity to be successfully implemented within the complexities of a South African higher education arena, it is incumbent upon university executives to draw on multiple perspectives (Middlehurst *et al.* 2009) and also consider 'context' (Bolden 2008; Bryman 2007). Within an 'African'

context the most commonly acknowledged model of leadership is 'Ubuntu" a concept which is linked to "collective personhood and collective morality" (Bush 2007: 403; Msila 2008). Whilst there is limited empirical research into this uniquely African concept, it nonetheless underpins the South African constitution as one of its fundamental values. This then implies that practitioners of leadership in South African universities must acknowledge the significance of the situation and context in which leadership is displayed and incorporate African values and principles into their practice. By substituting generalised solutions to specific problems unique to the South African context is dismissive of this country's hard worn democracy and values of participation and collaboration. The choice of leadership model has to comply with the democratic ideals and context which form the foundational basis upon which South African institutions operate. It is the view of the researcher that the model closest to representing both the ideals of democracy and 'Ubuntu' is that of distributed leadership. In particular, post-modernity, within which distributed leaders sits, is aligned to democracy advocating a consultative, inclusionary process of leadership (Bush 2007).

## 2.6 DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The concept of distributed leadership "has a particular affinity in educational circles as it resonates with humanistic intentions to develop students and also acts as a narrative of resistance against the centralisation of organisational management" (Harper 2015: 44). Within South Africa, the national education policy makers favour distributed leadership as the framework of choice (Williams 2011) as it is most closely associated with shared governance and a democratic ethos (Burke 2010). Although Gronn (2008) queries this alignment he nevertheless concedes to distributed leadership the idea of 'voice'. This resonates within a South African context as pre 1994, apartheid removed the

“voice” of the majority of its people and ruled through autocracy, separateness and fear.

> Voice, the quintessential mode of mass political engagement in a liberal democracy, entails the articulation of affirmative or negative claims, either directly by virtue of membership or indirectly through representations to managers and power-holders (Gronn 2008: 154).

This speaks directly to the concepts of shared, participative governance ascribed to by South African law makers. However, whilst this is seen as a robust theoretical lens through which to deal with the complex minefield of leadership post-apartheid, Grant (2017) offers the caveat for distributed leadership practitioners to ensure that the ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ of this practice be explored before implementation. Despite its current popularity within the educational sphere it also has its drawbacks and challenges, (discussed earlier in the chapter) and practitioners need to be cognisant of this.

The literature reveals that in educational discourse and within a knowledge economy, distributed leadership is receiving not only great attention but also support (Floyd *et al.* 2018; Grant 2017; Diamond *et al*. 2016; Harper 2015, Bush *et al*. 2012; Hartley 2010; Flessa 2009) and has a well-grounded theoretical framework to examine leadership practice (Wright 2008). This popularity is also undergirded by the development of significant technological trends in post-modern and complex 21st century organisations, which have been accompanied by a concomitant increase in the use of teams in which leadership is distributed (Allio 2013;Friedrich, Vessey, Schuelke, Ruark and Mumford 2009).

Thus, this model has increased in popular use, as leadership is seen as fluid, widely dispersed and not limited to the formal bureaucracy (Lumby 2012), whilst also providing an alternative, substantive empirical lens within which to view it (Harris 2013). This approach, too, is aligned to the concepts of collegiality and professional autonomy, a long tradition of higher education

institutions (van Ameijde *et al.* 2009). Within the South African context though difficulties have arisen in the translation from theoretical framework to a practical implementation of a distributed leadership model (Williams 2011) especially where stakeholders, despite strong legislation to the contrary, may still experience exclusion from distributed leadership practice based on race, age, language or gender (Grant 2017). Hence, the rationale for this study.

## PART THREE

This section reviews the academic literature relevant to the stakeholder groups that are participants in this study.

## 2.7 THE ROLE OF STAKEHOLDERS

The administration and management of higher education institutions, especially large, multi-campus institutions, is a complex integration of administrative and professional staff either converging or operating alongside academic staff and students. Invariably, all of these groupings are linked to various decision making and consultative forums (Harper 2015). Leadership within such organisational complexity can be challenging to say the least (Chelf 2018). The character of South African higher education institutions are changing, partly in response to legislation, but also to the needs and demands of wider society as discussed previously. These institutions are feeling the impact of academic competitiveness, driven by globalisation, accompanied by massification of students (galvanised by political policies of redress) which have unavoidably affected the role and identity of institutional stakeholders. The implications of this transformative process is that in order to remain relevant to its constituency, institutions have to reconceptualise their leadership stance and breach the traditional boundaries of the organisation

(Bush and Glover 2016; Whitchurch 2008). It is opined, in this study, that within the complexity that is the university environment today, embracing a distributed and multi stakeholder approach to leadership is the most relevant solution.

Stakeholder participation, is increasingly being seen as integral to effective corporate governance and is, in general, defined as groups or individuals who impact or are affected by organisational objectives and achievements (de Beer and Rensburg 2011). Conceptualising stakeholder engagement requires the recognition of relationships amongst people, rather than a set of transactions, and is a significant move away from the traditional hierarchical top down approach to a participatory form of engagement. This latter approach enables the institution to tap into a wealth of expertise and skill dispersed throughout the organisation, incorporate diverse voices as well as increase stakeholder commitment to leadership approaches and practice (Kezar and Holcombe 2017; Hempsall 2014; Bush 2008).

Numerous studies (Kezar *et al.* 2017; de Beer *et al.* 2011; Whitchurch 2006; 2007; 2008) indicate that the field of stakeholder contribution is being seen as significant to leadership and management of academic institutions, in particular. There have been dominant calls in the literature for more democracy and less hierarchy in leadership practice (Jones *et al*. 2012), an emergent view that leadership is dispersed (Bolden *et al.* 2008), and that in order to bring about institutional change a collective and distributed leadership style should be adopted (Bush 2018; Floyd *et al.* 2018; Diamond *et al.* 2016; Harris *et al*. 2016; Jones 2014; Jones *et al*. 2012). A 21st century higher education institution, operating within a VUCA world, requires a leadership style that is responsive to the complexities and technological challenges facing them, implying that if the future of our institutions are to be secured, it would require collaborative distributed leadership (Bush 2018; Hofmeyer *et al*. 2015; Bolden *et al*. 2008, 2010; Bryman 2007). This is a model which supports a multi-stakeholder form of scholarship and leadership development.

The rise in popularity of distributed leadership within higher education has seen the inclusion of key groups of significant stakeholders into institutional leadership (Hayward 2015). It requires stakeholders to engage and interact between and among the various tiers of management (Kulati *et al*. 2002) and for those stakeholders to exercise influence and demonstrate leadership (Bolden *et al.* 2008). The rising increase of distributed leadership research, particularly for higher education institutions, (Jones *et al*. 2017; Jones 2014; Hempsall 2014; Bolden 2008; Middlehurst *et al.* 2009; Bryman 2007) has a direct corollary in the cooperative participative leadership encapsulated in the South African White Paper on Education (1997).

### 2.7.1 Senior leadership

Whilst there does appear to be a lack of clarity around the notion and precise definition of senior roles in educational leadership (Hempsall 2014) this is countered in the national arena by the Council for Higher Education (2016: xvi) who speak of senior leaders as those who are people of action who are able to take decisions and successfully implement them and are also those who demonstrate leadership as an expertise that is essentially situated.

Globally institutions have seen a rise in managerialism, with an accompanying increase in prioritising the senior leaders within the decision making process (Moloi *et al.* 2017). Senior leadership, within a South African context, are uniquely challenged not only by the essential issues facing higher education institutions globally, but also the need to manoeuvre within a complex and demanding policy and political environment. Internally, they also need to juggle the often conflicting demands and requests of various stakeholders and it is within such a complex scenario that these senior executives must demonstrate their leadership (Council for Higher Education 2016).

These developments have resulted in a concomitant increase in the research literature around the role and practice of senior leadership (Chelf 2108; Hofmeyer *et al.* 2015; Hempsall 2014; Middlehurst *et al.* 2009; Bryman 2007; Kulati 2003) and serves to counter the criticism of limited empirical research directly examining the effectiveness of this leadership (Bryman 2007). In the South Africa context (Council on Higher Education 2016; Kulati 2003) however, whilst there exists a considerable amount of anecdotal reflections of senior leaders, substantive empirical research is generally limited. Nonetheless, this concentration on studies of senior and upper echelon leadership (Hempsall 2014) has resulted in a fractured understanding of leadership amongst those at senior and middle levels. There is additionally the absence of viewing leadership of institutions holistically (Lumby 2003).

### 2.7.2 Middle managers

Middle leadership is described as a unique, yet central form of leadership that can effectively contribute to the success of higher education institutions (Marshall 2012). They occupy the binary divide between the senior and operational staff, oftentimes colleagues or peers, which can create schisms if there are any contradictions or ambiguousness in the definition of their roles (Thornton, Walton, Wilson and Jones 2018; Thomas-Gregory 2014; Floyd 2012). However, within the increasing complexity of higher education there does not appear to be agreement on what exactly constitutes 'the middle' primarily because of the opaqueness of boundaries defining this sector (Floyd 2012; Whitchurch 2006; Clegg *et al*. 2005). In general, the middle managers role is multi-faceted, oftentimes having to deal with competing demands as well as institutional dynamics and structures (Marshall 2012). This lack of role definition and a 'collective voice' does serve to undermine the authority and autonomy of this level of management (Floyd 2012; Briggs 2001).

The lived reality of middle managers is that they find themselves having staff who they lead beneath them, engage laterally with colleagues and answer to senior authority above them, whilst simultaneously managing these relationships by having to shift often and quickly across them (Branson, Franken and Penney 2016; Thomas-Gregory 2014; Clegg *et al.* 2005). The multiple roles played by middle managers is underscored by the variety of activities falling within their scope, ranging from day to day implementation of institutional policy to contributing to strategy creation, thereby straddling the whole institution and even cutting across structured bureaucratic authorities (Floyd 2012). The leadership role of this sector is dependent upon the organisation being an enabler of collaboration, and middle managers inclusion by senior managers in shared decision making (Branson *et al.* 2016; Thomas-Gregory 2014; Briggs 2003). Other factors impacting middle managers involvement in institutional strategy includes but not limited to the flatness of the management structure, culture of the organisation and the leadership style of senior staff. By occupying such a mixed role set, these managers are likely to experience stress around the ambiguousness of their role, as well as feeling unprepared and unsupported (Thornton *et al.* 2018; Branson *et al.* 2016; Briggs 2003).

For middle managers this could become a political minefield as they juggle compromise and conflict issues amongst all these relationships (Branson *et al*. 2016). Many middle managers also find themselves in the dilemma of having some formal recognition as leader, but the extent to which they are able to exercise such leadership is questionable (Lumby 2012). Nonetheless, being in the middle, means that the middle managers institutional perspective is unique to themselves, of being able to view the organisation up, down and sideways.

It could be concluded then that middle managers hold pivotal roles within an organisation (Balogun 2003) and are integral to and a core asset of any organisation. There is evidence in literature (Clegg *et al.* 2005), that middle managers in higher education institutions are leading the charge for change

within their institutions and in this way demonstrating leadership skills and abilities. Despite a tacit acknowledgement that middle managers play a significant role in implementing strategy and can serve as strategic partners in change management (Marshall 2012; Balogun 2003) research in this area is relatively limited (Floyd 2016; Smit 2006; Balogun 2003).

### 2.7.3 Student leadership

Student leaders representation in decision making at institutions of higher learning is close to universal (Luescher-Mamashela 2013; Mbambo 2013) and has its genesis in the democratisation movement of the 1960's and 1970's. University democratisation with respect to students and governance issues was

> A reconstitution of internal decision making in universities with reference to democratic principles, inter alia, by making decision making processes in universities more representative of internal constituencies such as students (Luescher-Mamashela 2013: 1443).

Post 1994, in South Africa, the democratic model of cooperative governance mooted by the post-apartheid government, placed students as integral stakeholders within participatory governance and at the core of institutional democratisation within higher education as provided for in *The White Paper on Higher Education* (1997). Thus, students constitute a critical group as participative, collaborative stakeholders in institutional leadership (Mekoe 2018; Moloi *et al.* 2107).

The time spent at a university is a fertile learning ground for students to learn and hone their leadership skills. In fact, Astin and Astin (2000) assert that student leadership, integrally relates to purposeful change and any student who wants to contribute to change and become a change agent can do this. In

other words, leadership is not only for those holding formal positions or titles but anyone working to bring about positive changes to their society.

There is a political case for including students within formalised decision making structures otherwise there is always the potential for them to be disruptive (Luescher 2008) and cause institutional mayhem. Within these parameters, however, is the query as to whether a disjuncture exists between the ethos of participatory governance encapsulated in national policies with the actual practice of students as stakeholders in institutional co-operative leadership (Moloi *et al.* 2017; Mbambo 2013). Nonetheless, the question arises of whether a dichotomy exists between the policy and the application especially as a critique of national policy is that whilst they speak of 'democratising' and 'participatory' they do not offer clear guidelines on how to proceed with such a process (Mekoe 2108; Mbambo 2013; Smit 2006).

Students in higher education are their institutions most critical stakeholders and make up the largest constituency. The participation of students in the governance of their institution is not only their democratic right but could also serve as a powerful learning tool to complement the student's formal education. However, Mbambo (2013) found that, at best, the students role in formal governance bodies were a form of 'tokenism' or else students were dependent upon other more significant and powerful institutional role players for success with their demands. By virtue of sheer numbers, students have the ability to bring together various disparate groups on campus for a common purpose. This is student leadership at work. However, some students would question why issues of leadership should concern them at all (Mbambo 2013). Depending on political affiliations there may even be the cynical query as to which of the country or institutional leaders inspires respect and to whom they should aspire to model.

Studies conducted at higher education institutions a decade after democracy was installed in South Africa, indicate that the culture of student governance

was far from being democratic practice (Moloi *et al.* 2017; Naicker 2016; Luescher-Mamshela 2013). If we are to develop effective leaders who would contribute to building a better society, then this is a crucial investment for any institution of learning. By empowering our students we are contributing to our country's future growth and development. As Astin *et al*. (2000: 28) asserts that when we conceive of leadership as a group process, this is consequentially

> Predicated on group values such as collaboration and shared purpose, any sustained activity which regularly brings the student into contact with other people represents a potential opportunity to apply the leadership principles and to develop leadership skills.

Thus any institution committed to the concept of collaborative, participatory governance should authentically engage with students as significant stakeholders contributing to university governance and leadership. The ultimate outcome is when students are empowered sufficiently to lead collaboratively with other university stakeholders engaged in university governance (Naicker 2016).

There is a call for more research into student governance issues (CHE 2016) in South Africa. Indeed ,whilst it was rare to find studies that research formal student involvement in the governance of higher education institutions (Luescher 2005), this situation is now changing especially since the #FeesMustFall movement (Luescher *et al*. 2017; Moloi, *et al.* 2017; Naicker 2016). However, there appears to be confusion over the role that Student Representative Councils (SRC) play in institutional governance with 'stakeholderisation' occurring where student representatives advance the interests of their political affiliations or interest groups rather than that of the student body. It is important to acknowledge that the role of student leadership is to serve as custodians and representatives of student interests. Within an apathetic student mass, small groups of radicalised students are able to easily get onto leadership structures such as the student representative councils and

either support or prevent changes to the governance systems. In order to harness the full potential of students within institutional governance, where they contribute in an authentic and constructive manner, further research is required (CHE 2016).

Whilst there may be broad consensus on the need for student participation in institutional governance, there are, however, many reasons why students do not participate in these institutional leadership activities. According to Kulati *et al.* (2002) these may range from being disengaged from group activities to the passive role that students believe is expected of them by faculty and by extension, the institution. Other reasons may be more personal and range from issues of economic poverty (Moloi *et al.* 2017), child–headed households and health matters. Or more delimiting or disempowering is the perception by students that the university places no value on their contribution to and involvement in shared cooperative governance, and disappointment about what co-operative governance really means in practice.

Other challenges identified include the fact that as transient members of the community, students would not necessarily be impacted by decisions taken and that their limited knowledge and experience would not make them equal to other more experienced stakeholders (Luescher 2008). However, the counter argument to this is that the function of higher education institutions is to equip students with generic skills critical for responsible citizenry, personal growth, critical thinking amongst other life skills beyond university (*White Paper on Education* 1997: 1.3).

Students have taken measure of their political rights and the student unrests of 2015 - 2016 with hashtags of #FeesMustFall all signal the power of students in exercising their democratic rights and putting pressure not only on their institution but on government as well (Moloi *et al.* 2017; Luescher *et al.* 2017; Naicker 2016). If there is no inclusion of students within a participatory leadership and governance framework, and if students are not allowed to raise

issues within the institutional fora, then they will resort to political unrest, and national government intervention, to attain their ends. If this is the *modus operandi* of last resort by students, the outcome will surely be that of undermining the institutional autonomy.

## 2.8 CONCLUSION

Distributed leadership is the theoretical framework of this study and the academic literature around its form and practice was explored in this chapter. This was also reviewed in relation to the development of an institutional specific model. In doing this, it was important to place in perspective the development of distributed leadership, through a review of the leadership approaches over the last century. The aim was to demonstrate the development of leadership practice from 'heroic' leader to a collaborative distributed position. The leadership role and practice of key university stakeholders were also explored, especially with regard to distributed leadership. The following chapter discusses the conceptual framework and research modality used in this study. This study used a systems thinking perspective, specifically the Viable System Model with the rich picture technique drawn from a Soft Systems Model and this together with qualitative research, which undergirded these approaches, is also discussed.

# 3 CHAPTER THREE –THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

## 3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the theoretical paradigms underpinning this research as well as their relevance to the study. The overview of the research process, is presented in Table 3, to identify and align the systems thinking approaches used in this study. Through this table, the specific systems approaches namely, the VSM and SSM rich picture techniques, used in respect of the research objectives of this study, can be traced and connected.

**Table 3: Overview of the Research Process**

| | **Phase 1:** | **Phase 2:** | **Phase 3** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **RESEARCH OBJECTIVE (RO)** | RO1. To understand leadership and its practice at a University of Technology | RO2. To determine senior managements understanding and practice of participatory, co-operative and distributed leadership<br><br>RO3. To determine the understanding and practice of leadership among middle managers at a South African higher education institution.<br><br>RO4. To determine the influence and role of student leadership in co-operative management and governance and understand if this is supported by the universities governance structures. | RO5. To develop a model based on distributed leadership which allows for co-operative, participatory governance and leadership practice in a higher education setting. |

| **SYSTEMS APPROACH** | Soft Systems Methodology | Viable System Model | Viable System Model Diagnosis +SSM Rich Picture themes |
|---|---|---|---|
| **DATA SAMPLE** | • 2 x Focus groups.<br><br>• N (12): 2 x 6 group participants | • Qualitative semi-structured interviews (SM)<br>• Qualitative semi-structured interviews (MM)<br>• Qualitative semi-structured interviews (SL)<br>• 1 x focus group (SL)<br>• Archival data<br>• Participant observation<br>• N: 25 participants | |
| **RESEARCH DESIGN** | Finding Out Process<br>• Rich Picture workshop.<br>• Group Discussion.<br>• Theme development. | • Thematic analysis of data.<br>• Populate VSM model with thematic analysis regarding<br><br>▪ VSM operations<br>▪ VSM Meta-System<br>▪ Environment<br><br>• Implement VSM diagnosis.<br>• Compare generated VSM to the generic model.<br>• Identify issues that could comprise viability of institution. | • Consolidate findings from thematic data analysis from phase 1 and VSM diagnosis in phase 2.<br><br>• Develop a distributed leadership model, for a University of Technology, incorporating these findings. |

Twenty first century societies, noted for being extremely complex and interconnected, becomes even more complicated and difficult for institutions and/or individuals, when they are confronted by constant change with its uncertainties, in tandem, with rapid technological growth (Espejo 2004). Thus, any research activity needs to take cognisance of this world context and utilise robust, research methods in order to be relevant. Leadership until early this 21st century focused on leader centric research, with an emphasis on survey based quantitative methods (Harper 2015) providing a narrow, often singular perspective, which now appears to be outdated offerings when faced with present day demands. This emphasis on linear causal relationships is what

vexes many organisations as most issues are an interconnected web of circular relationships (Anderson and Johnson 1997) which require a wider perspective for effective problem solving.

Since the times of Aristotle's assertions, that knowledge is obtained from an understanding of the whole and not its singular parts, researchers have been examining the content and dynamics of systems (Mele, Pels and Polese 2010). Multiple perspectives, challenges and uncertainties implies a complexity which conventional approaches, with its reductionist and singular perspective, cannot successfully resolve and it is for these reasons that systems thinking, identified as the paradigm of holistic thinking (Checkland 2000), informed the theoretical approach as well as the methodology selected for this study. This paradigmatic approach was also informed by the fact that systems thinking offers a framework, as well as a set of tools, for addressing messy problems as systemic wholes (Anderson *et al*.1997).

## 3.2 SYSTEMS THINKING

The Viable System Model as well as the Soft Systems Methodology both fall within the genre of systems thinking, defined as the "science which provides a deep understanding of systems and by which consistent inferences about their behaviour can be made" (Richmond 1987 referenced in Rezk *et al*. 2019: 438). This then provided the researcher with a deeper perspective to understand and assess the dynamic complexity (Rezk *et al.* 2019) of the case study under review. It is a framework best designed to deal with the increasing variety of concentrated, highly complex societal problems (Rios 2010; Jackson 2001) faced by 21st century societies and organisations and is as a reaction to the failure of traditional methods to deal with such issues (Rios 2010; Jackson 2010). It is about harnessing a variety of systemic methodologies which can best deal with the problem situations that we face in a volatile, uncertain,

complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world. Critical systems thinking embraces both hard (positivist) and soft systems (interpretivist) approaches alike; views them as postmodern paradigms (Jackson 2010) and is a unique perspective to evaluation in that it is interdisciplinary bridging the social, natural and physical sciences (Cabrera, Colosi and Lobdell 2008).

The fascination with and popularity of systems thinking is because it offers a different conceptual framework, or alternate new way of thinking about and conceptualising the world around us, whether or not our interests are of a global or local nature (Cabrera *et al.* 2008). Essentially, systems thinking contends that in order to fully understand a phenomenon it cannot be broken up into its elemental parts and then reconstituted, but that we instead apply a universal vision to understand its functioning (Mele *et al.* 2010). It recognises that our world and ourselves are constantly being challenged resulting in changing dynamics, relationships and interconnectedness, which conventional research approaches using a reductionist approach will not do justice to.

### 3.2.1 Systems Thinking and this study

Critical systems practice is an action research approach, implying that it not only contributes to research, but also improves real world problem situations. The fundamentals of any systems approach acknowledges the following: it is a holistic view of the situation rather than a reductionist view of real world problems and that the relationships between the elements of the system supersede that of individual elements (Jackson 2009; 2010).

The use of a systems theory stance was to understand how the institution organises itself in respect of multi-stakeholder leadership implying that the emphasis will be on the relationships and interactions between the various categories of stakeholders. Thus, it is about balancing the focus between the

whole and its parts and ensuring that multiple perspectives are taken into account (Mele *et al*. 2010; Cabrera *et al*. 2008). As the ontological perspective of this study is systemic, implying holism thinking, it would be possible, within the dynamic institutional environment, to understand the organisational complexity and interconnectedness. In implementing a systems approach, a wide, holistic overview of the issues was obtained, which allowed for constructive recommendations to be made and a model of distributed leadership to be developed. Selecting a systems approach for this study also received further support in the assertions of Jackson (2001: 236) that

> Organizational cybernetics was a response to the failure of the traditional approach when confronted with extreme complexity; soft systems thinking is a response to its ability to handle human and social aspects of problem situations.

### 3.2.2 Using Systems Multi-Methods

This research used a multi-methodology approach: the Viable System Model (VSM), with the rich pictures technique of the Soft Systems Methodology (SSM). Multi-methodology is defined by Mingers and Brocksley (1997: 491) as being the utilisation of "more than one methodology, or part thereof, possibly from different paradigms, within a single intervention". Within research practice, using a multi-method approach is seen as a common occurrence (Munro and Mingers 2002; Ormerod 1997), deemed to be useful, as it may well yield a better result or outcome (Mingers and Gill 1997) and viewed as the definitive form of postmodern research practice (Mingers *et al.*1997). There is a general recognition in literature (Mingers and White 2010; Schwaninger and Rios 2006) that when tackling complex problems, this may be the appropriate intervention, especially as the issues of the real world are complex and multi-dimensional requiring differing paradigmatic approaches, at different phases, to yield a richer result (Kinloch, Hulva, Francis and Taylor 2009; Mingers *et al.* 1997).

Systems research, using such a multi-perspective, allows for differing lens to obtain a rich understanding and appreciation of the essential attributes of the problem situation and is termed ‘creative holism’ or Critical Systems Thinking (Jackson 2009). At its core, the systems approach is all about coping with complexity and the choice of using only one model could result in “organisational blindness” (Schwaninger *et al.* 2006: 160), where important aspects or relevant options could be ignored and where “model monism tends to restrict the repertory of behaviour of an organisation” (Schwaninger 2004: 451). Jackson (2009) also argues for systems practitioners to be allowed the freedom to tailor their choice of models, methods and techniques to the requirements of the problem situation they are intervening within.

The synthesis of the VSM with the rich picture technique of SSM enriched and enhanced the data analysis process, thus allowing for a depth and richness to be achieved. Whilst the SSM rich pictures assisted and informed the researcher about ‘what’ is occurring, it does not clarify ‘how’ this corrective action should be undertaken (Kinloch *et al.* 2009). The VSM, on the other hand, has the ability through its monitoring function to provide insights into what is occurring within a system thus answering the ‘how’ question (Kinloch *et al.* 2009: 6). The research methodologies selected for this study were as a result of the learning process, as part of the Leadership and Complexity programme at a University of Technology, which has provided the researcher with the theoretical foundations as well as understandings of the relationships between methods and context and ensured that the risk of paradigm incommensurability did not occur. In this particular study, whilst both the SSM and VSM systems embody a specific, distinctive paradigm, combining the two systems approaches is not unusual, as they both have their genesis in general systems theory (Schwaninger and Rios 2006) and could be viewed as synergistically complementary systems.

## 3.3 SOFT SYSTEMS METHODOLOGY (SSM)

The Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) is viewed as a powerful research approach to attain an overview of the problem and finding out of the problem (Mehregan, Hosseinzadeh and Kazemi 2012; Checkland and Poulter 2010; Bronte-Stewart 1999; Lewis 1992). SSM is defined as

> An organized, flexible process for dealing with situations which someone sees as problematical, situations which call for action to be taken to improve them, to make them more acceptable, less full of tensions and unanswered questions (Checkland and Poulter 2010: 200).

Lewis (1992) opines that the architects of SSM regarded the creation of rich pictures as a useful technique and effective alternative to a textual description. This study only used the rich picture technique of the SSM, a pictorial representation of the problematical situation, identifying the different stakeholders and their concerns, including some of the structure underlying the issues raised (Checkland and Winter 2006; Lewis 1992). It was selected as a complementary research tool, as it allowed for a variety of different stakeholder world-views to be expressed, it galvanised people to think deeply about the problem and understand it well enough to pictorially represent it and is best suited to situations which are complex and problematic (Checkland and Poulter 2010; Checkland and Winter 2006).

The rich pictures enabled a process of 'finding out', and ensured that thinking is organised so that interventions within a real world problematical situation can be carried out (Checkland *et al.* 2006). It is seen as a primary contributor to examining personal issues and is especially appropriate for analysis and assessment (Mingers *et al.* 1997). More appropriately, for this study, it allowed for a deeper, inductive understanding of the problem situation, with its nuances and underlying agendas, and where complex, wicked and messy issues could be directly expressed. Using the SSM lens, specifically the rich pictures,

encouraged managers and students to view the problem situation from different perspectives, thereby developing a varied set of pictures or images of the institution. This research paradigm contributed to a holistic appreciation of the problem situation and assisted with the research inquiry.

The SSM rich pictures assisted in offering expression to the problem or situation and provided the foundational questions for the qualitative semi-structured interviews which then informed the VSM diagnostic process. It should be highlighted that using techniques and tools of SSM to support a VSM model is possible because "the bonding between paradigm and research techniques is not inviolable" (Mingers *et al.* 1997: 497) thereby making it possible for techniques to be separated from their paradigms to support other interventions.

## 3.4 VIABLE SYSTEM MODEL (VSM)

The Viable System Model (VSM), has been an applied model for more than half a century and is currently considered to be the most far reaching organisational theory of the cybernetic genre. The VSM identifies a viable system as being an entity which is adaptable for survival in a changing environment (Beer 1984; Espinosa, Harnden and Walker 2007; Rios 2010) and where viability emerges as "a result of the development of the embedded system as an autonomic living network (e.g. the cell, organs, human beings and complex social organisations)" (Espinosa *et al.* 2007: 338).

Since Stafford Beer developed the VSM and published it in his book "Brain of the Firm" in 1972, it is recognised as being the primary initiator in applying cybernetic principles to management (Gregory 2007; Schwaninger 2004) and is in sharp contrast to previously held views of management thinking which saw human inefficiency as organisational failure. Beer's VSM was a paradigm

shift when he identified the model as being defective rather than the human participants (Hardman 2016).

VSM has been widely used as a conceptual tool to understanding and redesigning organisations (Hardman 2016; Espinosa *et al* 2007; Espejo and Gill 1997). Beer's model is underpinned by complexity theory; not limited by organisational structure and completely disconnected to top down pyramid style structures, focusing instead on the design and efficacy of the institution (Davies 2002). It is identified as a powerful diagnostic tool for determining the viability of organisations (Rios 2010; Espinosa *et al.* 2007) and contributes to the VSM being viewed as a uniquely discerning and astute tool (Brocklesby and Cummings 1996; Leonard 2000; 2007) for understanding and redesigning organisations through change management (Mele *et al.* 2010).

The variety and popularity of this tool (Schwaninger and Rios 2006) has seen it being utilised in far reaching ways, from small companies (Schwaninger *et al.* 2006) to analysing whole countries (Beer 1984). Examples of VSM applications are seen in instances such as the UK Police Force (Kinloch *et al.* 2009); the Scottish tourism industry (Harwood 2009); integrating sustainability practices for human communities (Leonard 2008), a Swiss youth hostel association (Gmur, Bartlett and Kissling 2010); diagnosing issues of viability in small to medium sized enterprises (Burgess and Wake 2012) and systems of innovation (Devine 2005). More importantly for this study, it has been used in various applications within the higher education field (Rezk *et al.* 2019; Sweeney *et al.* 2000; Hart and Paucer-Caceres 2016). These examples all illustrate the growth in the corpus of VSM empirical evidence and demonstrates that the VSM is in a continuous process of testing and verification.

### 3.4.1 Application of VSM to this study

Higher education is deemed to be a crucial element for any viable society as it has “responsibility for knowledge creation, sciences diffusion, society development, and community engagement” (Rezk *et al.* 2019: 444) which all contributes to its complexity and dynamic nature. Trying to determine an appropriate leadership style for the university illustrated a complicated problem as it involved multiple stakeholders offering varying, divergent viewpoints not only on the nature of the problem, but on possible solutions as well. This complexity was exacerbated when the several interdependent elements to the problem were taken into consideration and which included political, social, economic and ethical elements (Hoverstadt and Bowling 2005). The issue of distributed leadership lies at the heart of this research study and it is the perspective of this researcher, that the VSM is ideally suited to capture the essence of the institutional shortcomings by drawing together the multiplicity of opinions into a holistic, systemic understanding. It is being argued here that a better understanding of multi-stakeholder leadership at an institution of higher learning will emerge if a systems thinking approach is employed to not only diagnose but understand the institution as a systemic whole. It is where “the role of manager is not merely to identify human deficiency but understand and intentionally shape the innate intelligence of organizations” (Hardman 2016: 113). As a diagnostic tool, the VSM will provide information about the various systems operations and functions and through this knowledge an analysis of the systems strengths and weaknesses can be identified. This strong diagnostic capacity of the VSM supports its suitability to the current research study.

Thus the choice of the VSM was premised on the fact that it serves as an exemplar for organisational diagnosis and modelling as it provides a new, democratic model of control (Espinosa *et al.* 2007), which is in stark contrast to the reductionist approach to problem solving used by hierarchical, traditional

models (Walker 1998). Using a reductionist approach “masks failures that occur because of missed connections or untapped resources because it does not consider the whole system - it never sees why they occurred and may not even register *that* they occurred” (Leonard 2000: 710). On the other hand, the VSM is a ‘whole systems’ theory introducing a rich new language, and is an innovative way of examining how systems are viable, and capable of independent existence.

In Stafford Beers generic VSM model, there are no similarities to the conventional, top-down bureaucratic design of conventional organisations. The VSM is concerned with ensuring that all members of an organisation, as well as external partners who communicate with the organisation in one way or another, are involved in the organisation’s matters and this ethos lies well with a distributed leadership style. It is further asserted that the model argues for decentralised, devolved decision making, where autonomy should be provided to the lower rungs of the organisation so as to deploy requisite variety effectively (Mingers *et al.* 2010).

### 3.4.2 The VSM theoretical framework

Through the use of a VSM based analysis and design, organisations can be shaped and their processes made more effective as this systems approach provides a “framework for designing flexible, adaptable organizations that balance external and internal perspectives and long and short-term thinking” (Espejo *et al.* 1997: 1). This theoretical framework is purposed for structuring organisations as viable systems, which focuses on dealing with complexity in an adaptive and recursive manner.

For any system to be viable, it needs to be capable of independent existence (Beer 1984) and operate in its own right (Leonard 2000). This means that

despite the changes in its environment, for viability, an organisation must be able to survive and sustain a separate existence, through self-regulation, adaptation, learning and evolution (Rios 2010). It must be pointed out that the viability of a social system only exists if it satisfies a number of requirements specified by the theory and that any deficiencies in the structure will negatively impact upon this.

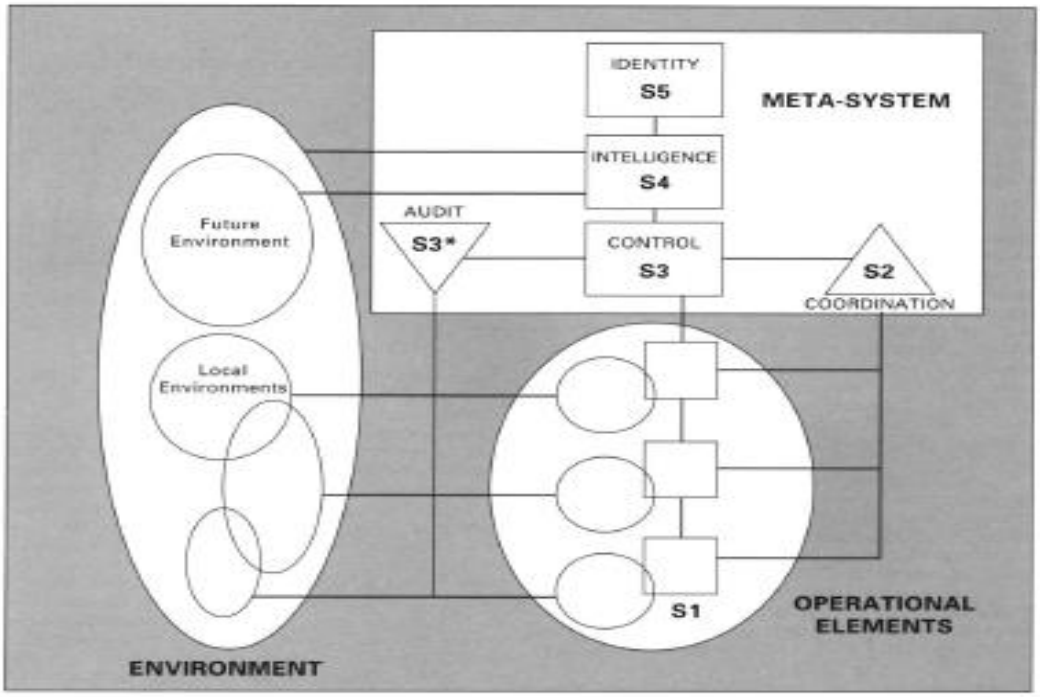



**Figure 3: The VSM Framework**

Source: Brocklesby and Cummings (1996: 51).

**Table 4: VSM Framework Descriptors**

| System | Description/ characterisation |
|---|---|
| System 1 (S1) | This is the "engine room "of the organisation, where things get done (Walker 1998: 10) and is described as "the management of a basic subsystem" (Schwaninger 2006: 955).<br>They are the operational units that perform the systems essential duties and interact directly with their environment i.e. consist of primary activities and basic operations of the system (Devine 2005) and which operational units are in themselves also viable systems (Beer 1984). |
| System 2 (S2) | This system achieves optimal and smooth operation of the system by coordinating the operational units and handling fluctuations. It aims to achieve harmonious relationships and resolve conflict amongst the primary activities (S1) and serves as co-ordinator between S1 and S3. S2 "includes "tacit knowledge of how things are done here" which is expressed as attitudes towards safety, confidentiality and other informal controls" (Leonard 2000: 712). It is described as "coordination of subsystems, attenuation of oscillations between them" (Schwaninger 2006: 955) and the role of this subsystem is that of conflict resolution and stability (Walker 1998). |
| System 3 (S3) | Works with an overview of the entire complex of interacting system1 units and optimises efficiency through synergy. It is the operative management of a collective of subsystems (Schwaninger 2006), where executive functions take place and decisions made, including managing performance delivery (Hoverstadt 2010). Thus it has responsibility for activities such as daily management and control systems (accounting, production and budgeting), implementation of corporate interventions, engaging in resource bargaining, monitoring performance of operational units and establishing an optimal and smooth operation amongst them (Leonard 2009) and can be described as the "here and now'' of the organisation (Rios 2010: 1532). This system manages existing operations and functions as a support rather than an autocratic, top-down management. As system 3 is there "to regulate system 1 - its function is optimisation" (Walker 1998: 10). In summary, it can be described as providing Internal regulation, optimisation and synergy. |
| System 3* (S3*) | Auditing and monitoring functioning on behalf of system 3 best describes this channel (Leonard 2000). |
| System 4 (S4) | This system assesses and scans the environment, identifies needs or the potential for change and relays this information to the organisation. This, |

| | |
|---|---|
| | therefore, is the system involved with adaption, future planning and strategizing. System 4 looks at the outside world for threats and opportunities and is there "to produce plans to ensure long term viability" (Walker 1998: 10). This system is concerned with managing long term relationships with the overall environment (Schwaninger 2006) as well as to "observe the anticipated future environment and its own state of adaptiveness and act to bring them into harmony" (Leonard 2009: 228). It takes care of the "outside and then" (Rios, 2010: 1532) ensuring that the organisation is in a constant readiness to change.<br>System 3 and system 4 need to be in continual and close contact to ensure that there is a balance or stasis between what is required in the here and now and for the future is reflected - "this direct connection enhances their ability to share the knowledge from Systems 3 and 4 and to adjust their activities in the light of what they learn" (Leonard 2009: 714). |
| System 5 (S5) | This system is essentially concerned with policy, ultimate authority as well as identity and provides the ground rules and means for enforcing them. It "ensures a balance between the need to change (system 4) and the need to control resources (system three) in order to prevent the organisation from aimlessly reacting to external challenges" (Leopold-George 2005: 61). This is achieved through communication channels which not only connect all the systems or functions, but also provide linkages between the institution and the environment This system is viewed as the ultimate authority (Walker 1998) and represents normative management and corporate ethos (Schwaninger 2006). Normative management ensures the coherence of the system and defines its identity, culture, values and direction (Beer 1984), commonly known as governance (Hoverstadt 2010). |
| The Environment | S1 (looking at the current environment) and S4 (anticipated future), are the only systems who communicate directly with their environments. They need to have "knowledge of their transactional and contextual environments to understand them and interpret the feedback that they receive" (Leonard 2000: 712). |
| The Meta System | This meta system is a combination of systems 3, 4 and 5 in which "system 5 sets policy and direction, system 4 identifies the necessary changes and system 3 implements these changes" (Bititci, Carrie and McDevitt 1997: 6) and is responsible for determining and managing change. |

An organisation, in terms of the VSM, is a number of operational units working together as an integrated, cohesive whole. For any system to be considered viable, two sets of activities need to be connected namely, primary activities and regulatory activities (Rezk *et al.* 2019). Primary activities are those operations involved in the production of goods or services whilst the regulatory activities are those which "encourage the primary activities and support the co-operation between system's units to achieve the collective purposes of the system" (Rezk *et al*. 2019: 439). This regulatory functions of the VSM is also referred to as the Meta system whilst the primary activities are represented by S1 (Rezk *et al.* 2019).

The model also comprises six (6) vertical channels which provide communication lines and interaction between the different subsystems and are also responsible for providing control and coordination (Jackson 1988). These communication channels have distinct lines of responsibilities as described by Hildbrand and Bodhanya (2015) and include the following:

- Channel 1 (C1) is the corporate intervention channel and is used to transmit instructions, policy and procedure from the meta-system to the operational level.
- The responsibility of Channel 2 (C2) is to serve as a conduit between System 1 (operations) and System3 (management) in the bargaining as well as provision of resources. C2 also serves in an accountability role.
- Referred to as the squiggly line, the role of Channel 3 (C3) is to expedite communication and interaction between the operational units in System 1.
- Communication that occur within the environment as well as between the operational units and the environment is the responsibility of Channel 4 (C4).

- Coordination processes is the primary responsibility of Channel 5 (C5) and provides linkages through System 2 to the operational units in System 1 as well as to the control and management of System 3 (Hildbrand *et al.* 2015).
- System 3* is given access to enable audit activities at the operational level (System1) through Channel 6 (C6).

Beer (1984) conceived of viable systems as an interconnected system of communication channels, joining five complementary sub-systems (Davies 2002) and where no one particular sub-system is considered significantly more important when contributing to the viability of the organisation. However, the standard VSM was critiqued for not including these channels until Rios (2012) and Espejo and Reyes (2011) referenced by Rezk *et al.* (2019: 442) described "six vertical additional channels which can be considered as loops for communication and information delivery in the VSM". These communication channels lead to increased efficacy of the model and is included in the VSM used for this study. Thus, the communication channels running between the five sub systems, as well as between the environment and sub systems have also to be present for the system to be viable. Any shortcomings in this structure will impair the viability of the organisation.

To extend the discussion from Table 4, in the VSM model all operations are contained within System1. Systems 2 and 3 engage with the internal environment, whilst system 4 interacts with the external environment. The metasystem consists of Systems 2, 3, 4 and 5 which seeks to ensure that the operational units work together as a cohesive whole. In practice then "the essence of the interaction is to balance the data coming in from the external environment (into S4) with the information coming from the internal environment (into S3) and plan accordingly" (Walker 1998: 11). System 5 has an oversight role and only intervenes if policy is flouted.

The VSM regards an organisation as a whole system, in balance with its environment. It is this balance which substantially informs a VSM diagnosis and implies that the VSM is not just a model that diagnosis issues around the structure of the organisation but also importantly looks at feedback and communication functions and capabilities between those structures. Therefore, for any organisation to be viable, there must exist proper functioning of all its five sub-systems and six channels (Schwaninger and Rios 2006).

The three essential elements to a VSM namely the operation, the meta-system and the environment are all continuously interacting with each other implying that this is not a bureaucratic model working with top down communication only. In the VSM approach the metasystem is there to benefit the operations of the system as opposed to traditional institutions in which metasytemic activities are carried out by upper management instructing those below them as to tasks and activities (Walker 1998). As well as the various subsystems, the environment is also included in a VSM model. This is considered essential as it allows for grounding and conceptualising the internal interactions of the institution (Kinloch *et al.* 2009). The relevance of this systems model is that it is a holistic way of looking at an organisation in contrast to the reductionist viewpoint of a top down, bureaucratic managerial position and is a system to "understand an organisation, its external environment and the functions within the organisation that combine to ensure the organisation achieves the agreed upon goals" (Leopold-George 2005: 60).

Figure 4 is a diagrammatic representation of a University of Technology as the research system-in- focus and places it in perspective with the generic model described above.

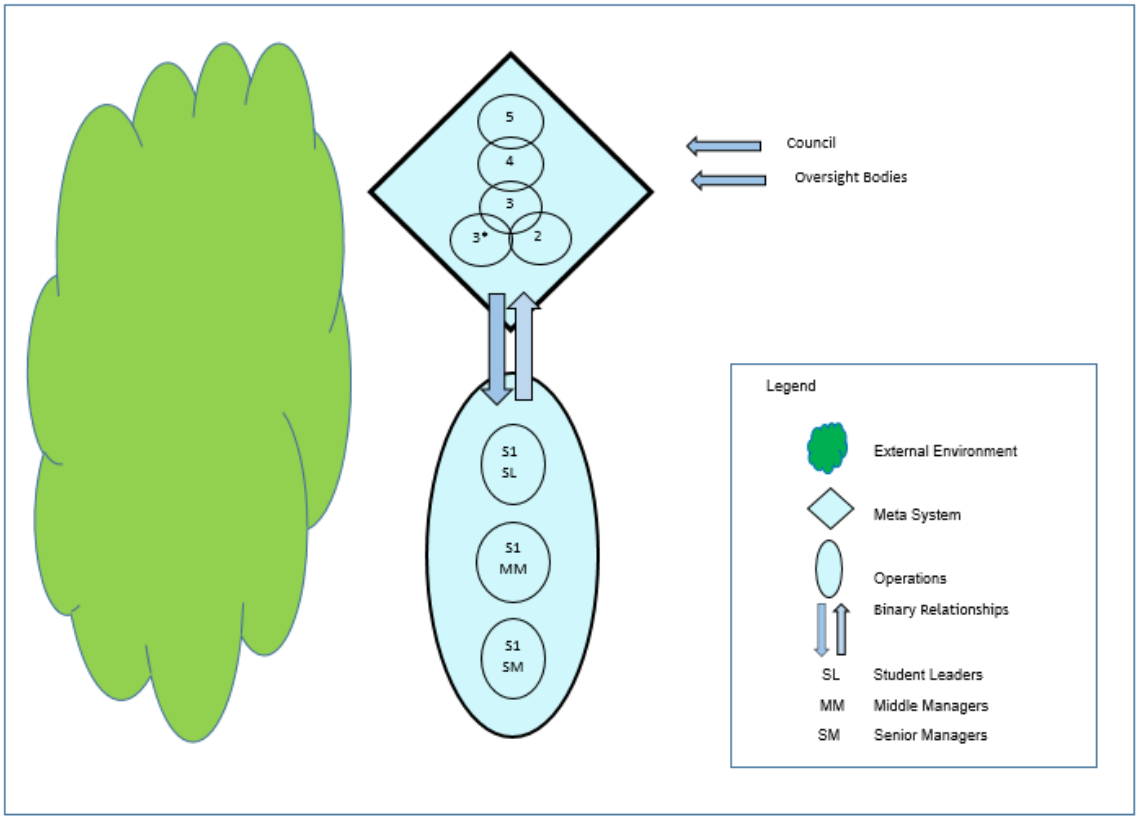



**Figure 4: Overview of a South African University of Technology as System-in-Focus**

### 3.4.3 Key Concepts of the VSM

The VSM model uses certain key concepts to deal with organisational complexity. For any organisation to ensure its stability and viability, it must be able to adapt and survive constant and dynamic internal and external processes. An organisation is said to be viable if it is able to create "its own internal environment that is able to respond effectively to external stimuli at all levels (viability)" (Mele *et al.* 2010: 131). To achieve this viability it must possess the ability to learn, self-regulate, adapt and evolve (Rios 2010).

Whilst the basic VSM system appears simple, it also accounts for dealing with complex and large organisations through the consideration of 'recursiveness', a concept implying the repetitive nature of systems thinking. The implication of this recursive organisation is described as being akin to that of a set of Russian dolls, each one fitting or nesting within one another. Thus, in an organisational structure that is recursive, "any viable system contains, and is contained in a viable system" (Beer 1984: 14) so that a viable system contains viable systems, which are themselves contained within viable systems, all of which consist of the five systems or functions prescriptive for viability (Rios 2010). In fact, system 1 or the implementation system is of itself described as being a set of viable systems (Thomas 2006; Gregory 2007; Schwaninger 2006). In other words, each viable system is embedded within another more complex system, which can be then interpreted, in this study, as the department nestled within the faculty, embedded within the university, which is then rooted within the higher education sector. It must also be highlighted that each level of recursiveness displays emergent properties which are not found in the level below it and that any complex viable system is implanted within more than a single set of recursive relationships. Leonard (2000) maintains that the recursive nature of the VSM allows for missions, standards and policies to be tracked up and down the system to determine its appropriateness and fit.

Another important component of Beer's VSM is the principle of requisite variety. This is based on Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety (Ashby 1956 quoted in Hoverstadt 2010: 90) which states that "only variety can absorb variety". This is where variety is a measure of complexity, "the number of possible states of the system". This definition is rephrased by Brocklesby and Cummings (1996: 50) where "variety is the number of distinguishable environmental stages or scenarios, present and potential, that have a bearing on the purposes of the system" implying that an organisation, to be considered viable, must have requisite variety with its environment, or to quote Hardman (2016: 115), the "organisation needs to have more 'moves' than the environment requires".

### 3.4.4 Strengths and limitations of VSM

The strength of the VSM lies in its diagnostic abilities to highlight weaknesses or shortcomings in the current system and by comparing it with the generic VSM model, determine improvement strategies. A review of the literature affirms the VSM's strength as a diagnostic tool (Hildbrand *et al.* 2015; Espinosa and Walker 2013; Hoverstadt and Bowling 2005; Schwaninger 2004; Walker 1991) is seen as a "powerful heuristic for a model-based diagnoses" (Schwaninger and Rios 2006: 155) and an "extraordinarily powerful instrument" (Schwaninger 2006: 965). Using the VSM as a template enables the diagnosis of structural organisational weaknesses as well as flaws in an organisations' ability to maintain viability in their chosen environment (Hoverstadt *et al.* 2005).The linkages between the VSM and distributed leadership should also be recognised. In particular, this is demonstrated in the recursive and subsidiarity elements of the VSM aligning itself to the distributed leadership activities at the different institutional levels. Shared leadership between the different stakeholders at the different institutional levels, specifically the synergistic nature of their inter-relationships, contributes and supports institution wide transformation.

In this study, the VSM is used as a diagnostic tool, where the researcher employed the VSM as a normative model for comparison against the institutional situation to identify deficiencies, weaknesses and or missing systemic elements to understand the problems being experienced (Hoverstadt 2010). The VSM, whilst not a straightforward model, does provide a perceptive and profound framework for thinking about organisations differently. There is emerging evidence of a corpus of relevant case studies and empirical evidence related to the use of VSM as a conceptual tool for diagnostic purposes (Hildbrand *et al.* 2015; Espinosa *et al.* 2013; Schwaninger 2006). This study aims to contribute to this corpus of evidence.

This should not imply that this model is without flaws as there are criticisms that it is too theoretical, with slow, limited common sense appeal to the pragmatic manager (Burgess and Wake 2012; Gregory 2007); that organisations are viewed "in a mechanistic and functional way" (Harwood 2009: 316) and that it ignores the human factor (Laumann, Rosenkranz and Kolbe 2007). The model is also seen as a prescriptive, cybernetic approach (Devine 2005); "a tool of managerial fascism" (Thomas 2006: 20) and "conceptualised as conflictive battlegrounds and power struggle situations" (Paucer-Cauceres 2009: 451). A cautionary note is also extended by Hildbrand and Bodhanya (2013) that the VSM ignores the role of the human component in the system and by not handling power issues could be viewed as dictatorial.

Despite these critiques of the VSM, it does however provide "an analytical framework which guides a systematic and systemic analysis of any social system and thereby avoids rambling" (Harwood 2009: 317) and demonstrated its usefulness as a diagnostic tool (Harwood 2009; Laumann *et al.* 2007; Devine 2005). Therefore, this implies that whilst individual systems methodologies have their peculiar strengths and weaknesses, it is up to the researcher to capitalise on the advantages that the methodology brings to the investigation whilst accommodating for their deficiencies.

## 3.5 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

This study used qualitative research methods to populate the SSM and VSM processes. This was based on the understanding that this form of research is "a systemic and reflective process for development of knowledge that can somehow be contested and shared, implying ambitions of transferability beyond the research setting" (Malterud 2001: 483). Qualitative research is people-oriented and concerned with the dynamic of social phenomena and its relevance as a scientific method of research is fast increasing (Attride-Stirling

2001). It was for these reasons that qualitative research was used to inform both the rich pictures workshop of the SSM as well as the diagnosis of the VSM, the systems approaches used in this study.

The paradigmatic schema employed was the constructivist-interpretive paradigm which provided a common understanding of the lived experience in a complex world through the perspective of those who live it (Schwandt 1998). The original ideas of constructivism-interpretivism, and qualitative research have been attributed to Kant's (1881-1966) Critique of Pure Reason which essentially implies that the interactive relationship between researcher and participant is considered crucial and at the core of being able to co-construct conclusions through interaction, dialogue and interpretation (Ponterotto 2005). In other words, this implies that qualitative research, has the unique ability to enable research questions to be examined from a multitude of angles (Barbour 2001). It has also been variously described as "the exploration of meanings of social phenomena as experienced by individuals themselves, in their natural context" (Malterud 2001: 483), where the "researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting" (Creswell 1998: 15). It is seen as being a successful form of present day social research (Bryman 2012). This study used a qualitative approach to obtain richly textured data about an area that is little known (Bowen 2005) and which is difficult to achieve using quantitative methods (Bryman 2004). Leadership studies supports the use of a qualitative method of research especially since there is a definite move by qualitative researchers to move away from the focus of heroic leader to investigating the implications of shared or dispersed leadership (Cannatelli *et al.* 2017; Jones *et al.* 2017; Bryman 2009, 2007).

The organisational changes required of South African higher education, post 1994, to a more co-operative, participative form of leadership required a reshaping and reengineering of the leadership processes at higher education institutions. Using qualitative methods to determine leadership practice at a

University of Technology was supported by the increased interest in and use of qualitative research in leadership studies (Lumby 2019; Jones *et al*. 2017; Cannatelli *et al*. 2017; Hempsall 2014; Bryman *et al*. 2009). When examining such contextually rich topics as leadership the cornerstone methodology should be qualitative research as it captures the richness of the participants' personal opinions and perceptions as well as the nuances accompanying these changes. This is as opposed to quantitative methods which measure only "static moments in time" (Conger 1998: 110). A qualitative approach is also ideally suited to unpacking the multi-dimensional aspects of leadership as it allows in-depth nuanced exploration and flexibility to investigate the unexpected (Conger 1998), to be sensitive to context (Bryman, Stephens and a Campo 1996) and thereby able to understand its deeper complexities.

Qualitative methods also implied that the researcher immerse themselves within the phenomena being investigated, allowed for greater flexibility to explore and refine perceptions as well as to discern any individual or environmental changes that might have occurred. In addition, it is realistic to acknowledge that multiple viewpoints of equal validity exists and must be considered (Gerwel Proches *et al*. 2015; Barbour 2001). It was for these reasons that this study used a qualitative research approach to collecting data.

## 3.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter provided a theoretical overview of the primary research modalities used in this study. The overarching framework was that of systems thinking namely the Viable System Model, with the rich picture technique of the Soft Systems Methodology. Informing both these systems approaches was qualitative research. The following chapter (Chapter 4) will discuss the practical application of these research paradigms.

# 4 CHAPTER FOUR – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

The chapter describes data collection methods, sample selection as well as data analysis techniques linked to the research questions. This was formulated within the systems thinking framework of SSM and the VSM. Both these systems approaches used qualitative data collection which is also discussed in this chapter. Through this presentation of research structure and application it was intended to demonstrate how academic rigour had been maintained to a high standard, producing credible and ethical outcomes, whilst not compromising the confidentiality aspect of the individual during the research engagement.

## 4.2 STUDY DESIGN

Table 5 is presented here to provide an overview and describes the relationships, process and procedures undertaken in this research activity.

**Table 5: Overview of the research process**

| | **Phase 1: SSM Process** | **Phase 2: VSM Process** | **Phase 3: Model Creation** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **RESEARCH OBJECTIVE (RO)** | RO1. To understand leadership and its practice at a University of Technology | RO2. To determine senior managements understanding and practice of participatory, co-operative and distributed leadership<br><br>RO3. To determine the understanding and practice of leadership among middle managers at a | RO5. To develop a model based on distributed leadership which allows for co-operative, participatory governance and leadership practice in a higher education setting. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | South African higher education institution.<br><br>RO4. To determine the influence and role of student leadership in co-operative management and governance and understand if this is supported by the universities governance structures. | |
| **SYSTEMS APPROACH** | Soft Systems Methodology | Viable System Model | Viable System Model Diagnosis +SSM Rich Picture themes |
| **DATA SAMPLE** | • 2 x Focus groups.<br><br>• N (12): 2 x 6 group participants | • Qualitative semi-structured interviews (SM)<br>• Qualitative semi-structured interviews (MM)<br>• Qualitative semi-structured interviews (SL)<br>• 1 x focus group (SL)<br>• Archival data<br>• Participant observation<br>• N: 25 participants | |
| **RESEARCH DESIGN** | Finding Out Process<br>• Rich Picture workshop.<br>• Group Discussion.<br>• Theme development. | • Thematic analysis of data.<br>• Populate VSM model with thematic analysis regarding<br><br>▪ VSM operations<br>▪ VSM Meta-System<br>▪ Environment<br><br>• Implement VSM diagnosis.<br>• Compare generated VSM to the generic model.<br>• Identify issues that could comprise viability of institution. | • Consolidate findings from thematic data analysis from phase 1 and VSM diagnosis in phase 2.<br><br>• Develop a distributed leadership model, for a University of Technology, incorporating these findings. |

### 4.2.1 Case study

This research activity used a case study approach as it contributed to deep learning about this particular institution (Starke 1995 in Woods *et al.* 2016). A University of Technology was selected as the site for this investigation as it is one that the researcher is familiar with, thereby enhancing the opportunity and scope to collect rich data from participants who were acquainted with her. This then enabled the researcher to acquire answers to “how” and “why” type questions whilst also allowing for many facets of a phenomenon to be revealed and understood (Baxter and Jack 2008).

Permission to conduct the research at a University of Technology is attached as Appendix A and ethics clearance as Appendix B. Using a case study approach not only enabled the phenomenon under scrutiny to be comprehensively examined and explored (Bryman 2012), but also allowed for data to be analysed between and within subunits (Baxter *et al.* 2008). This supported the aim of this study which was focused on studying leadership, specifically distributed, shared leadership amongst a multiplicity of stakeholders within a bounded institution. It was the researcher’s expectation that the findings or conclusions drawn from examining this one institution could have broader implications for similar institutions of higher learning (Bird 2016).

## 4.3 QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION

Both the SSM rich picture focus groups as well as the VSM diagnosis used a qualitative data collection approach. In the case of the VSM this was informed by the individual semi-structured interviews as well as the student leaders’ focus group. Interviews, as well as focus groups, are regarded as such significant research instruments to qualitative researchers and provide a

primary source of data collection in many qualitative methods (Knox and Burkard 2009).

A notable advantage of qualitative research is that it is able to generate not only large quantities but also extremely rich data (Bryman 2012; Conger 1998; Creswell 1998), thus making this methodology also more suited to an interpretive study such as this. With its emphasis on words rather than quantification (Bryman 2012; Miles and Huberman 1984) it allowed the researcher to not only understand the participants' responses but to also observe them, in situ. This therefore provided greater opportunities for non-verbal behaviours and nuances to be observed, noted and clarified. Further support for selecting this specific data collection tool was that it created a unique opportunity to enter into the world of others, and to not only gain insight into but also examine their points of views (Krauss 2005).

Qualitative data was gathered through fieldwork that included a SSM rich picture workshop with staff and students, and continued with in-depth semi-structured interviews with senior managers, middle managers and SRC leaders. A focus group was used with other categories of student leaders, for example, those representing residence committees, clubs and societies, and academic faculty. Participants were contacted by email initially requesting them to take part in the study. This request was accompanied with informatory communication (Appendix C) providing them with a brief outline of the research study, and informed consent document (Appendix D). This was followed up, a few days later, with a personal call or visit where any queries or apprehensions raised was discussed with them. The interviews were conducted based on staff and student availability and preference to be interviewed at a time and place that took cognisance of their work/academic commitments, whilst for other students meeting in a focus group accommodated their academic timetables. The interviews were held in those spaces that the participant felt most comfortable within such as their personal office, researcher's office or neutral

third space to be identified by them whilst the focus groups were held at a pre-arranged site convenient to those agreeing to participate.

The structure of the SSM workshops, student focus groups and individual interviews were fairly broad and non-directive as the aim was to understand the institution from a constructionist, interpretivist stance. Significant observations noted was that a general unease existed amongst some of the managers, both senior and middle level, to express their true and honest feelings when being audiotaped, but felt comfortable in post interview chats to share their misgivings, as an aside, after the interview was concluded. There were notes of these conversations made by the researcher, post interview, which are included in the discussion and results chapters.

Other data collection methods included archival data, namely, policy documents as well as information that was already in the institutional domain such as internal memos. There was no incongruity to using a qualitative paradigm to inform the systems approaches of VSM and SSM as they all adhere to an interpretive paradigm (Schwaninger 2004, Golafshani 2003) meaning that they melded together through the data analysis process. In this way, they contributed to the creation of knowledge through the development of a model of distributed leadership specific to a University of Technology.

### 4.3.1 Trustworthiness

As qualitative studies rely upon an interpretive paradigm, there was a focus on trustworthiness rather than the conventional quantitative criteria of reliability, validity and objectivity in ensuring research rigour. Denzin and Lincoln (2000), quoting the seminal work by Guba and Lincoln (1981), offer four criteria to be considered when establishing trustworthiness namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability within a naturalistic (qualitative)

paradigm and are expanded on below. Strong, reliable and trustworthy qualitative research requires that robust data collection techniques are consistently implemented and that all stages of the research process, especially the data analysis procedures, are comprehensively documented.

Credibility refers to what confidence can be placed in the truth of the findings. In this study, trustworthiness was attained through using multiple methods and multiple sources of data to establish the credibility of the findings, that is, triangulation, member checking and negative case analysis. Negative case analysis requires a "re-examination of the analysed data to determine whether any cases (themes) were contradicted by the evidence, or whether the characteristics or properties of the emergent themes were applicable to all" (Bowen 2008: 148). When it was confirmed that there were no negative cases or contrary evidence, the analysis was considered complete. Member checking, the process of confirming facts and observations with the research participants was also conducted to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study. This is viewed as a process of self-correction. Triangulation, a corroborative technique ensured research validity by using multiple sources of data collection including respondent interviews (primary data gathering method), observation (both interviews and focus groups) and document reviews (Creswell and Miller 2000).

Although qualitative research does not necessarily require replicability and generalisability (Bryman, Becker and Sempik 2008), 'thick description' or rich accounts (Bryman 2012) were presented so as to ensure the transferability of these findings to other studies. Further tangible evidence using audit trails, member checks and memos were used to support trustworthiness. An exhaustive audit trail ensured that comprehensive records of the entire research journey was maintained and available for scrutiny, ensuring that the research study is dependable and confirmable. In this way transferability was achieved as the findings of this research could be applied to other studies. This also applied to dependability which not only refers to the consistency or

stability of the data but also its replicability. The audit trail was used to provide validation for dependability and confirmability, concurrently.

By ensuring that the four criteria of trustworthiness were met as well as attending to issues of saturation made the research robust and its evidence cogent and understandable. The trustworthiness, reliability and validity of this study, was attained by ensuring that the research process observed rigour, thoroughness and transparency in all stages of the research study.

It must be expected that, in general, an in-depth qualitative study will generate vast quantities of data. For research rigour during data analysis the researcher ensured a thorough familiarity with and knowledge of the material being studied. The researcher was familiar with data content and what it meant, and was able to distinguish in the material collected what was relevant to answering the research question. Research rigour was also maintained by ensuring that themes emerging from the data were reconfirmed in a process of constant checking and rechecking.

### 4.3.2 Population sample

As described in Table 5, the samples used were specific to the stakeholder group as well as the systems approach used. There is inconsistency amongst qualitative research methodologists as to guidelines for estimating sample size (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar and Fontenot 2013) so it rather depended upon the quality of the selected participants and the data that they provided. There is nonetheless an understanding in the literature that qualitative sample sizes are often smaller than those used in quantitative studies (Dworkin 2012; Bryman 2012) as qualitative studies are often more concerned with gathering in-depth knowledge of a phenomenon (Dworkin 2012).The predominant concept for

sample size in qualitative research is saturation (Malterud 2001; Bryman 2012). Thus, sample size was directly informed by theoretical saturation, which was reached when the last few interviews provided limited or no new insights.

Purposive sampling to determine the best sample size and composition was strategically determined, as the emphasis in this study was on quality not quantity (Bowen 2005). Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select those individuals who best represented the issues being studied, whilst also ensuring that there was adequate representation from each category being reviewed (Bryman 2012). This was not meant to be a coercive process so purposive sampling also enabled the researcher to interview only those who were willing to speak freely with her.

As indicated previously, qualitative methodologies offer limited guidelines for estimating the optimum size of a research sample. As this study used a multi-method approach to data gathering, this was reflected in the samples used. The SSM rich picture focus groups comprised of 12 participants across the stakeholder groups. Since this was an exploratory, 'finding out' focus group exercise the sample size was considered sufficient, as Bryman (2012) quoting Morgan (1998a) recommends focus group size of between six to ten participants. Within these smaller groups there is the increased likelihood of participant involvement especially with complex, possibly controversial topics (Bryman 2012) and also allowed for the more diffident group members to contribute and not be overlooked. Consequently the use of two focus groups of six participants each was considered appropriate representation for the SSM rich picture workshop.

In a literature review of qualitative sample sizes there is a recommendation of anywhere between twenty to thirty (20-30) interviews (Marshall *et al.* 2013; Bryman 2012; Dworkin 2012). This is considered an appropriate number as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the research questions whilst still ensuring that sufficient data has been collected to clarify relationships and identify any

variations in the process (Dworkin 2012). As described above, this study employed purposive sampling and selected those participants best suited to answering the research questions. For the semi-structured interviews, which informed the VSM diagnosis, the population sampled was 25 participants and included five (5) senior managers, ten (10) middle managers and ten (10) students who influence and practice leadership at the institution. Of the ten student leaders interviewed the four (4) SRC members had one on one interviews whilst the other student leadership members namely six (6) of them participated in the focus groups. This was viewed as a more convenient arrangement for them as it accommodated their study and lecture commitments. In the VSM focus group a similar rationale to focus group size as that employed for the rich picture was used.

The logic for this selection was that through the lenses of these different stakeholders it was expected that diverse, multiple perspectives and evaluations of the system (university leadership) would be obtained. As the literature review in chapter two highlighted, there already exists a surfeit of studies around senior executive leadership so a limited number of interviews of this group was conducted for confirmatory purposes. The literature also revealed the paucity of studies around middle managers, specifically, and student leadership, in general, thereby supporting the need for larger samples in these groups for exploratory purposes. Interviews and focus groups with each of these representative sample groups stopped when interviewees started providing similar responses, indicating that saturation point had been reached.

## 4.4 THE DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

Research data was collected through the SSM rich picture focus groups (Phase 1) and was a precursor to the individual qualitative semi-structured

interviews and student leaders' focus group which informed the VSM diagnosis (Phase 2). A notable benefit of these approaches was the close collaborative relationship between researcher and participant, whilst still allowing for the individual participants' voice and story to be heard.

Data collection was also informed by a systems thinking worldview, grounded in the constructivism-interpretivism of the qualitative tradition, as it provided the philosophical assumptions and context guiding the research (Knox *et al.* 2009).

### 4.4.1 PHASE ONE: SSM RICH PICTURE WORKSHOP

An overview of the population, process and queries that informed the rich picture data collection is presented in Table 6 below. This phase saw the following research objective being addressed.

**Research Objective 1:** To understand leadership and its practice at the university

**Table 6: Overview of SSM Rich Picture Workshop**

| Areas of Query | Population Sample | Process |
|---|---|---|
| • Describe the current status of the leadership at the university.<br>• How is it practised?<br>• Is it inclusive of all the role players within the instituion? | • Senior Managers: 1<br>• Middle Managers: 5<br>• Student Leaders:6 | • Group Engagements<br>• Group Discussions<br>• Develop rich pictures<br>• Identify common themes |

Data collection in the rich picture workshop is described as the 'Finding Out' process and applied as an investigative tool to identify organisational messes or problems (Lewis 1992; Bell and Morse 2013). Visual (or rich picture) communication provides a medium through which it is possible to gain an understanding of the different perspectives particularly issues or viewpoints held on a particular 'messy' or wicked problem. This was seen as a non-linear, innovative and creative way to express their views on leadership (Woods and Roberts 2016).

Invitations to participate were sent out to approximately twenty (20) relevant stakeholders as per the process described earlier. Twelve (12) persons actually presented on the day, as tabulated in Table 6, and were divided into two (2) focus groups with a representative proportion of each stakeholder group within each. No member from the Student Representative Council attended for reasons unknown although other student leaders were represented. Further, only one senior manager accepted the invitation.

However, this was considered to be a representative enough sample with which to conduct the SSM focus groups which were simultaneously held within a large venue that allowed for both comfortable drawing and seating. The informed consent form (Appendix D) was signed by all participants.

Large sheets of drawing paper and coloured pens were provided for the construction of the rich picture. As it was important that all the group members understood what was required of them, the researcher did a brief presentation on what it was that needed “finding out” or explored as well as defined and explained what the key elements of a rich picture should include namely structure, process and concerns (Appendix E). It was important that this initial step be undertaken in the research process as it ensured common understanding of the process and highlighted the need for the group to interact to determine what were the ‘messy problems’.

This exploratory exercise was conducted to ensure sense making of the situation through the interaction and discussion amongst the various stakeholders. There can be no hard and fast rules regarding the creation of the rich picture “since each one will be unique and will reflect the particular meaning that those creating it attribute to the figures on the paper” (Lewis 1992: 358). It was emphasised in the presentation that whatever went into the picture (drawings and diagrams) was entirely up to the group. It was further emphasised that the contributions and insights of all group members were to be considered important contributions and that the drawing was to be laid out on a flat surface and clearly visible to all.

There were shortcomings to this process as there was only the one senior manager and no SRC members attending the workshop. Nonetheless, there were other students holding leadership positions who attended. In general, it has been the researcher’s experience that those absent stakeholders may have considered this research activity ‘not important’ enough to attend or alternately did not wish to express themselves within a group setting. In view

of the responses that emerged during the qualitative interviews it is also more likely that being in those senior positions, staff and students alike, may have had concerns around confidentiality and were wary about how their responses would be interpreted by the upper echelons of management. This reflects stakeholders' unease around the impact of personal disclosure in groups despite assurances from the researcher and an informed consent document accompanying the invitation to participate. This aspect of confidentiality should be a matter for consideration in any future research seeking personal opinions in discussions with mixed groups of multi-stakeholders.

It was observed that the group with the senior manager found him to be dominating, opinionated and not allowing other viewpoints to be expressed. The dynamics of the group interactions were interesting. The group went through stages of respectful listening, before members became restless and irate that their opinions were not being heard. They were also becoming aware that the other group, in the same venue, were demonstrating a very collegial, democratic interactive process. Their frustrations were expressed by an assertive middle manager who then voiced the feelings of the group in that they were not being given a representative share in the discussion. The participants then regrouped and went on to complete their rich picture in which all group members were given an opportunity to contribute. The robustness of this exercise enabled the researcher to attain a multi-perspective holistic overview of leadership, but more importantly to also obtain the stakeholders specific perspective of their experience and issues with leadership at the institution.

As this technique is action research which sought to provide a holistic, contextual overview of the problem situation (Kotiadis and Robinson 2008; Bronte-Stewart 1999) each of the pictures (Appendix I) were then presented by a group spokesman and explanations and additional inputs provided by team members where necessary. Each group then identified the themes that they believed their picture represented. This was supplemented by

suggestions from the other group participants which were then discussed for either adoption or discarding. In the pictures created, some responses formed a natural cluster, and so formed a theme. Each thematic title was then written up on chart paper and all the workshop participants were invited to vote for their themes. The participants were each given a total of 10 coloured sticky dots and were requested to allocate a higher number of coloured sticky dots to the themes they felt were most significant. Not all of the participants used up all of their sticky dots. Nonetheless, this 'finding out' process of the rich picture workshop led to the emergence of five (5) generalised themes in order of participant rating. Using this approach was also a means of ensuring that stakeholders looked at the complex problem holistically, thereby allowing for connections and relationships to be identified and expressed. In this exercise an inductive approach was employed meaning that themes and patterns emerged out of the data rather than being imposed prior to data collection and analysis (Bowen 2005). These themes are presented and discussed in chapter five.

Arising from this rich picture workshop, there was creative discussions which enabled the researcher to explore and understand the individual participants' interpretation of the rich pictures. This then also provided the researcher with the opportunity to analyse the goals, values and perspectives of the different stakeholders (Gerwel Proches *et al.* 2015). There was overall consensus and agreement from the group that the themes identified captured the essence of their rich pictures in terms of primary themes they were pictorially describing. What was interesting to note from this exercise was that the participants in the group were drawn from diverse sectors within the university, had never previously as a collective reflected on leadership matters and their roles in this concerted and holistic fashion, yet were able to collectively and mutually agree on the themes agreed upon. This then lent support and justified the choice of using the rich pictures technique of the SSM, in the exploration of the problem situation, as it enabled sense making of the situation, through the comments and insights of the stakeholders directly impacted. Thus this first stage of data

capturing provided baseline data which then informed the qualitative interview query.

The exercise of using graphic representations also found much favour amongst the participants as it was seen as a fun, entertaining exercise engendering much conversation as to what should, or not, be included in the rich pictures. It is being suggested that this could be useful as an introductory, ice breaker strategy in general focus group activities.

### 4.4.2 PHASE TWO: THE VSM PROCESS

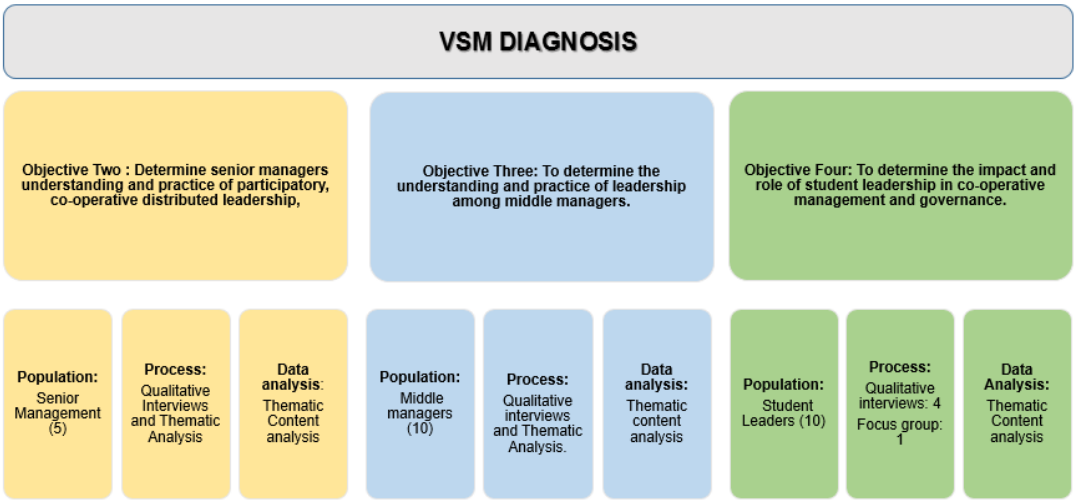
This phase involved individual, semi-structured interviews with senior and middle managers as well as SRC members, and also included a student leader focus group. This data then contributed to the VSM diagnosis. In this phase the following objectives were examined:

**Research Objective 2:** To determine senior managements understanding and practice of participatory, co-operative and distributed leadership.

**Research Objective 3:** To determine the understanding and practice of leadership among middle managers at a South African higher education institution.

**Research Objective 4:** To determine the influence and role of student leadership in co-operative management and governance and understand if this is supported by the universities governance structures.

**Table 7: Overview of the VSM Process**




Multi-stakeholder qualitative individual interviews and a student leader's focus group were the primary sources of data collection contributing to the institutional VSM diagnoses. A semi-structured interview guide for the different groups and aligned to thematic information obtained from the rich picture workshops was used. This provided guidance and direction whilst still allowing for flexibility and the opportunity to ask probing follow up questions or clarification of comments. Using a schedule of open ended questions also allowed for comparisons to be made across findings. An iterative, non-linear data collection process was followed in which data collection and data analysis occurred concurrently. This meant that the transcriptions were done as the interviews were conducted, providing some preliminary analysis which enabled the interviewer flexibility with the questions asked as themes were suggested. It must be highlighted that the lines of query dealt with general and relevant leadership issues without focusing on VSM specific questions. Hildbrand *et al.* (2013) assert that this then allows for the emergence of soft issues, which may not have arisen had the questions been aligned to a VSM focus, and is a viewpoint supported by this researcher. Appendices F, G and H identify the specific questions asked during the interviews of senior

managers, middle managers, and student leaders respectively. It was also used as a guideline for the student leaders' focus group.

Rather than treating these interactions as formal interviews they were conducted as conversational exchanges which allowed for rapport to be quickly established. It was also important to obtain truthful responses rather than clichéd answers from the respondents which was attained by allowing for flexibility and freedom within the interview. Such an approach resulted in the expression of personal experiences and individual opinions, thereby allowing a rich vein of thoughts, opinions, knowledge and feeling to become open and accessible to the interviewer. This adaptability of the interview process ensured that the quality of the data obtained was enhanced (Bryman 2006).

The interview process is being described here so as to ensure transparency in how data was collected to achieve a VSM diagnosis. Each interview took approximately 60 minutes, was conducted in the interviewee's offices, generally, which assisted in them feeling at ease. An informed consent form (Appendix D) was signed by both the interviewee and the researcher prior to the interview thereby ensuring the research respondents' right to privacy and protection from harm was guaranteed. Confidentiality was a serious concern with many respondents, as in their view, there was the feeling of taking a risk in revealing their honest opinions. This was discussed and reassurances provided about the ethics of the research which is reviewed below.

The interviews were recorded (with the interviewee's permission) on a digital recorder. Each interviewee was given a code, assigned according to their category, to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The recording of the individual interviews was kept securely in separate files for transcribing purposes and future reference, if necessary. To assist with part of the transcribing services a professional audio typist was employed to transcribe the data verbatim with no editing. Notes taken down by the researcher during

the interview were used to reflect upon after the interview as well as to identify potential themes for coding purposes.

The focus group was comprised of students holding leadership positions, other than the SRC, and started initially with five students with the sixth joining the group 15 minutes later when her lecture was over. After introductions and explanation as to the reason and intent of the workshop, confidentiality documents were signed. Any queries were dealt with at this stage and the group gave permission for voice recordings to take place. The members of the group were all acquainted with one other, many serving in the same leadership structures and several had interacted previously with the researcher, so trust and rapport was quickly established. Their verbal and nonverbal behaviours indicated an eagerness to engage as they were appreciative of being given this opportunity to air their feelings. It was the researcher's opinion reinforced by their spoken messages that they often felt side-lined and overshadowed by the more dominant student leadership group, the SRC, and felt unheard by the university community so were very willing to engage positively. The group conversation initially was also lead by an extremely confident and vocal female representative but through careful handling of the group dynamics the researcher was able to ensure equitable participation by all the members. All of the group members had an opportunity to voice their opinion or feeling and in this way to be captured in the data collected. It must be acknowledged that they were very respectful of each other, listening carefully, allowing each other to speak without obvious interruptions and in general concurring with one another's words.

As described above, parallel to the interviews, SSM and focus groups, but part of the process was the utilisation of other qualitative data collecting techniques which not only involved direct observation (nuances, verbal and non-verbal behaviours) but also allowed for personal experiences and reflections to be shared. This was supplemented by written archival documents such as policy documents and newsletters. This was to ensure that there was a multiplicity of

perspectives on the research query being obtained. Such an approach is supported by Conger (1998) who maintains that observation when combined with interviews is a powerful methodology as it allows one to uncover data either distorted in interviews or data not accessible through interviews.

As the primary aim of these interventions was to obtain saturation on the topic, it is the researcher's opinion that this was attained with the sample used and is demonstrated through the rich vein of transcribed information available for data analysis. Once it became apparent that there were commonalities emerging from the respondents' answers, the researcher deemed that saturation had occurred and data collection ceased (Bowen 2008).

The data collected and the analysis thereof contributed to the development of a distributed model of leadership, specific to a University of Technology and which will be discussed in detail in section 4.6 as Phase Three.

## 4.5 DATA ANALYSIS

In its application, the data analysis process in this study sought to understand and construct meaning of the complexity of distributed leadership at a university of technology through the systems lens of its primary stakeholders. Qualitative data analysis enabled a holistic appreciation of the phenomenon under study (Baxter and Jack 2008), thus making it a "unique and powerful epistemological tool for understanding even seemingly mundane experiences" (Krauss 2005: 765). The ontology of this study was to examine real-world situations and effective data analysis processes needed to take cognisance of these philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the research to strengthen its findings. Qualitative data analysis contributed to this via the implementation of a VSM diagnosis.

The qualitative analysis drew from a number of sources including interviews, observations and archival source. In this way then it was demonstrated that qualitative research methods “can get at temporal dynamics that quantitative research cannot” (Bansal and Corley 2011: 235). To ensure transparency of the data analysis process it was important for the researcher to provide detailed insights and rich descriptions of the analytical outcomes whilst rigor was demonstrated through honesty and candour. Whilst large sets of transcribed data was analysed and coded, these were synthesised into the overarching themes that were developed and are discussed later in this chapter. The inclusion of direct quotes will demonstrate the process through which the researcher moved from raw data to the conclusions reached.

Using a qualitative approach meant that the researcher immersed herself within the phenomenon being investigated, thus allowing for greater flexibility to explore and refine perceptions as well as to discern any individual or environmental changes that might have occurred. Such a vast array of text and field notes meant that the data needed to be organised and arranged so that none of its richness was lost (Irvine and Gaffikin 2006). The transcription of the broad range of audio taped data, collected through the interviews and focus groups, was, however, found to be a most demanding and time consuming process (Irvine *et al.* 2006).

There have been some criticism in the literature though that qualitative research is “sprawling, undefined, diffuse and diverse” (Lofland 1974: 101), with a need to provide greater disclosure (Attride-Stirling 2001) and where those “crucial underpinnings of analysis remain mostly implicit, explained only allusively” (Miles and Huberman 1984: 22). The implication of these critiques is that the qualitative researcher needed to identify the what, how and why of their data analysis in their reports, as in general, the writing up of the analysis process is often lacking (Attride-Stirling 2001; Braun and Clarke 2006).

There exists a myriad of complex and diverse qualitative analysis tools in the literature. However, taking heed of the criticisms raised above, and to ensure a robust, transparent process, the data analysis tool used in this research was the thematic analysis framework and guidelines outlined by Braun and Clark (2006).

### 4.5.1 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is described as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke 2006: 79), is a common research approach in qualitative analysis (Attride-Stirling 2001) as well as being a reliable and independent approach to data analysis (Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas 2013). It was selected for this study as “through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (Braun *et al.* 2006: 78) and is seen as particularly useful when doing applied research such as this one (Braun and Clarke 2014).

An advantage of this form of data analysis is that it works across a wide array of research questions; can be used in the analysis of various types of data from interviews to focus groups to secondary sources; is not prescribed by the size of the data set and has application to both data driven and theory driven analyses (Braun *et al.* 2006). Thematic analysis also allows for direct information from the study respondents to be heard without there being any theoretical preconceptions.

Credence for choosing thematic analysis was its flexibility, allowing it to be employed with both inductive and deductive methodologies (Alhojailan 2012). A VSM diagnosis required the generation of an institutional VSM model to be compared against the generic VSM meaning that fault lines, issues and

problems had to be identified. This then implied a more deductive approach targeting specific information to be used for model creation (Hildbrand and Bodhanya 2017) whilst the interview transcripts and field notes were also assessed using an inductive approach. It was important in this exercise that the voice of the stakeholders be captured in the thematic outcomes.

This study used the six phase thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2013; 2006) long seen as being a widely used yet unacknowledged analytical method. However, there is evidence that the tool has been gaining increasing popularity as a foundational, basic method which allows the researcher to reflect and unravel the surface of participants' 'reality' (Braun *et al.* 2006).

**Table 8: Phases of Thematic Analysis**

(Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2013: 121; 2006.)

| PHASES | DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|
| 1. Familiarisation with the data | This involved the researcher immersing herself in the data. Familiarisation also required listening to the audio recording as well as reading and re reading the data to establish any initial analytic observations. |
| 2. Coding | This process involves producing brief, concise and succinct labels for important features of the data set relevant to the research question. Coding is an analytical process, in which the codes encapsulate both the semantic and conceptual essence of the data. In this phase all data items are coded and then collated. Also of importance here is the identification of appropriate data extracts. |
| 3. Searching for themes, response or meaning within the data set. | A theme is defined as "a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data relevant to the research question" and is best described as "coding your codes to identify similarity in the data" (Braun and Clarke 2013: 121). It "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* response |

| | |
|---|---|
| | or meaning within the data set" (Braun *et al*. 2006: 82). In this stage themes are constructed and all codes relevant to the theme are collated. |
| 4. Reviewing themes | This phase involves ensuring that the theme is representative of both the coded extracts as well as the full data set. In other words, is it telling a true and honest story about the data, and is it defining "the nature of each individual theme, and the relationship between the themes" (Braun *et al*. 2013: 121). In this stage themes may be split into several themes, combined or even discarded. |
| 5. Defining and naming themes | This phase requires that the researcher write a detailed analysis of the essence of the theme by asking what story is it telling and its relevance to the data set. A name or title for the theme is also developed. |
| 6. Writing-up | This stage involves writing up a story about the data ensuring that the researcher interweaves analytical narrative with rich data extracts. The narrative must be clear and coherent and placed in context with existing literature. |

Data obtained from audio transcriptions, written notes as well as related documents were then coded, analysed and organised into themes through the identification of patterns across the datasets (Braun *et al.* 2006: 2014). Both individual and focus group interviews were transcribed and then coded after reviewing line, paragraph and sentence portions of the transcribed data. Coding is a requisite requirement in the data analysis process as it enables deep and complex analysis of the dataset to occur. Failure to develop these rich codes impacts the development of relevant themes.

An essential component of this analytical process then was to ensure that systemic coding procedures were put in place. This meant that as new data was collected it was continually being compared with previously gathered data to ensure that themes developed which were supported by concrete evidence arising from the dataset. Coding enabled themes and concepts to be developed and constructed, and thereby allowed for participants' words and

experiences to be captured. This not only contributed to the richness of the research findings, but enabled meaning and sense making to occur. Such sense making is considered well suited to a qualitative, interpretive paradigm (Bryman 2004).

Sensemaking is defined as the process through which “people make sense about the organisation in which they work as a social process of storytelling, discussion and making sense of complexity together” (Hayward 2015: 93 quoting Weick 1979b). Sensemaking, regarding multi stakeholder worldview in leadership and governance, was achieved through the application of a systems lens, using qualitative analysis which promoted the meaning making process (Krauss 2005). Sensemaking is a very useful way to observe the social processes required in the move to a more distributed leadership style as this requires stakeholders at various levels of the institution to be flexible in their roles and behaviours, with a willingness to change their mind-sets (Hayward 2015). This sensemaking resulted in the generation of a distributed leadership model specific to a University of Technology.

Coding of the data then led to the development of themes and key phrases derived directly from the data. It should be noted that in any analysis of data there is a constant interaction with the data as codes and concepts are verified and then further rechecked, not only to identify patterns and clusters, but to organise emergent ideas as well. The construction of storylines and themes, especially when using the respondents own words adds meaning, depth and richness to the findings (Krauss 2005). In this study it was important for the researcher to provide rich descriptors of the themes identified from the entire data set, as a whole, as a systems approach required a broad overview of the issues rather than a narrow focus on the nuances of specific issues. Using such rich overall descriptors is also important, if as in this study, this is an under-researched area (Braun *et al.* 2006).

In using an inductive approach to thematic analysis also ensured that the themes identified emerged from the data itself and were developed not to fit into a predetermined coding frame or researcher preconceptions but was an inquiry across the data set to find repetitive patterns of meaning. Whilst the thematic analysis of the dataset has been presented here as a linear process, this was not true in practice, but was instead a reflective, iterative process oftentimes requiring the researcher to constantly move across the data set, analysis of segments of data, verbatim extracts and the data codes itself (Braun *et al.* 2006). An integral part of this process was also the writing up of each of the stages.

Possible pitfalls to conducting thematic analysis and ones which this researcher made all attempts to avoid, included but was not limited to the following (Braun *et al.* 2006):

- Negligence in not analysing the data but instead paraphrasing content or stringing together data extracts with no narrative.
- Using interview questions to formulate themes.
- Developing poorly constructed themes with questionable consistency and coherence and where often these themes overlap.
- Where a discrepancy exists between the data set and the researchers analytical claims about it. In such an instance “the claims cannot be supported by the data, or, in the worst case, the data extracts presented suggest another analysis or even contradict the claims” (Braun *et al.* 2006: 95).
- When there is inconsistencies or conflict between the research questions and the type of thematic analysis used.

For methodological rigour it was important that the researcher took cognisance of these possible pitfalls to ensure a thematic analysis which was insightful and inextricably linked to the research questions. Leadership studies using a

qualitative paradigm has only come into its own within the last few decades and this is attributable to the fact that it “is a methodologically conservative field that is slow to innovate, perhaps because it is oriented to practitioners who are likely to be (or are perceived as more likely to be) persuaded by apparent scientific rigor” (Bryman 2004: 740).

Interpretation is fundamental to qualitative research and aids in making meaning of the data (Krauss 2005). This interpretation of data meant that latent or underlying meanings or implications were drawn out to give broader significance to the analysis. Analysing qualitative data also required decontextualisation which “allows part of the subject matter to be lifted out and investigated more closely, together with other elements across the material that tells about similar issues” (Malterud 2001: 486). Furthermore, recontextualisation ensures that the themes or patterns identified are coherent with the context in which they are gathered. However, it is important to ensure that reductionism does not occur by maintaining connections between the participants’ account of reality and the field of study. This process is also referred to as the ‘deconstruction’ and ‘reconstruction’ of data (Baxter and Jack 2008).

Further, the use of a constructivist-interpretative paradigm enabled the researcher’s data interpretation to provide building blocks for model construction. However, Malterud (2001: 486) warns that “knowledge never emerges from data alone, but from the relation between empirical substance and theoretical models and notions”.

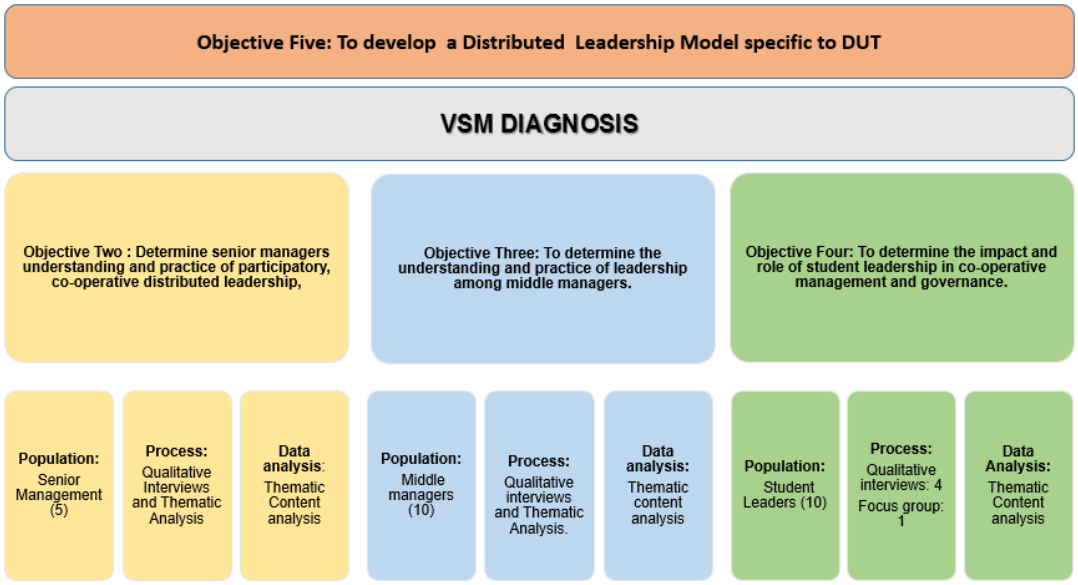
## 4.6 PHASE THREE: DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP MODEL

As outlined in Table 5: Overview of the Research Process at the beginning of this chapter, this phase used the combined data findings of phases one and

two to develop a distributed leadership model specific to a University of Technology.

**Objective 5:** To develop a model based on distributed leadership which allows for co-operative, participatory governance and leadership practice in a higher education setting.

**Table 9: Overview of Distributed Leadership Model Development**




The development of a University of Technology leadership model was dependent upon the thematic findings used to support a VSM diagnosis. The use of the VSM as a diagnostic tool is supported by the fact that it "provides rigorous theory grounded on cybernetic principles" (Richter and Basten 2014: 4594). In this study, a VSM diagnosis implied that the model was used as a platform for building an organisational representation and then testing the viability of this organisational representation. The outcomes of this diagnosis then informed model development.

In its practical implementation, a VSM diagnosis required that after qualitative data collection and analysis, a VSM model of the organisation under study be created, which could then be compared to the generic model (Espejo and Reyes 2011). This modelling enabled the researcher to get a contextual understanding of the communication and decision making concerns as well as the organisational issues impacting leadership, especially distributed leadership. Through highlighting areas of strengths and weaknesses within the system, the VSM diagnosis then contributed to informing the development of a distributed leadership model specific to a University of Technology.

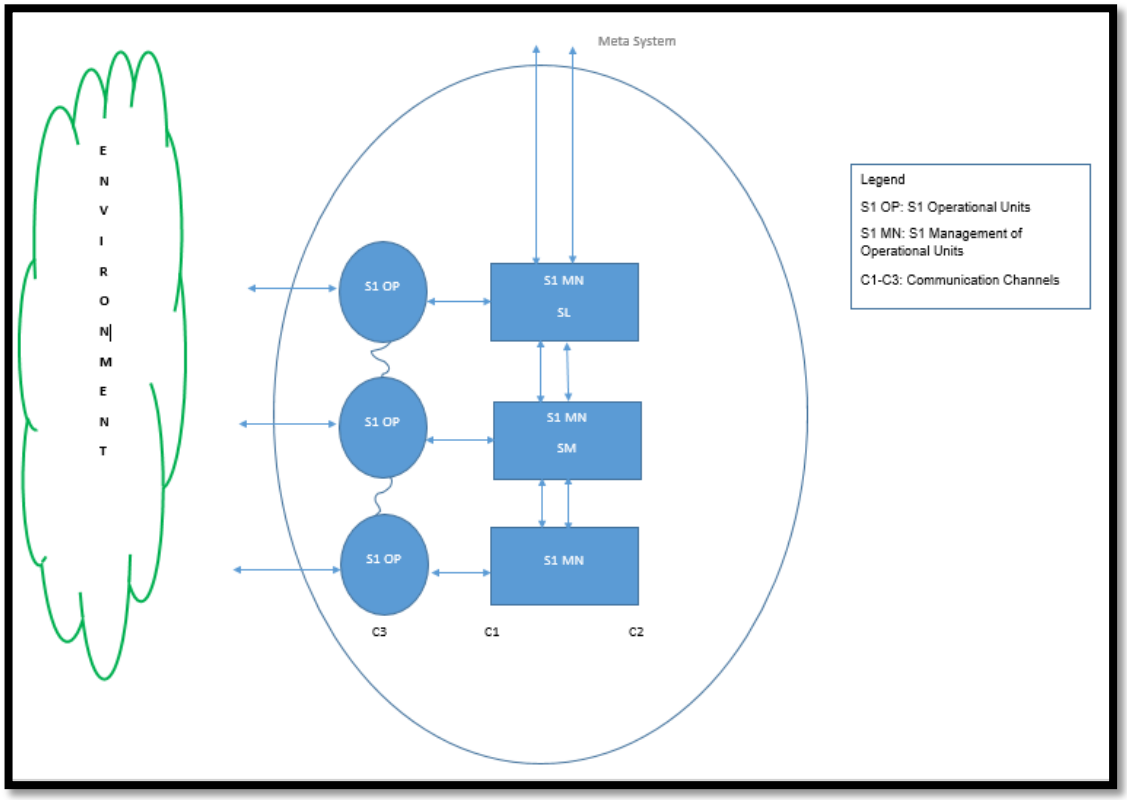



**Figure 5: Operational Unit: System 1 (S1)**
(Adapted from Hildbrand 2013: 154)

The operational units illustrated in Figure 5 are a thumbnail, graphic sketch of the specific area of the VSM under review in this research. These operational

units comprised the senior managers, middle managers and student leaders and are described below:

- Student leaders, are officially required to represent their constituency, raise relevant issues with all levels of university management, do advocacy work on students' behalf as well as sit as members at various committees and Boards on behalf of their constituents. They included both Student Representative Leaders as well as those students holding other leadership positions including house committees, faculty representatives and similar.
- The middle manager cohort of university stakeholders represented academic, administrative and administrative support managers and were drawn from academic, administration and academic support.
- Senior managers included directors of academic support, student support, Registrar and Risk Principal Officer. The senior managers interviewed in this category all hold positions with reporting lines either directly to the Vice Chancellor or to some member of executive management.

This research focused on the leadership roles of the stakeholders identified above with the outcome of developing a distributed model of leadership. Key stakeholder views on university leadership, particularly distributed leadership, enabled this process. As discussed previously the VSM as a diagnostic tool contributed to this model creation.

Whilst the VSM application provided a holistic overview of the system in focus and enabled a specific diagnosis to be made it should be acknowledged that a difficulty in using this systems approach was a tendency to confuse the VSM with a hierarchical, bureaucratic structure. This was something that the researcher had to guard against. Another difficulty experienced was that there were no clear guidelines in the literature as to how a VSM diagnosis was to be

conducted (Hildbrand *et al.* 2015; Burgess and Wake 2012; Beckford 1993) and criticism of its “apparent susceptibility to autocratic abuse”(Beckford 1993: 1). In fact, whilst the literature speaks of using the VSM diagnostically there was certainly for this researcher, a scarcity of practical procedures and standards on the “how to” of conducing a VSM diagnosis. Instead of presenting the researcher with an approach which is practice based, this model asks that the researcher situate her own institution onto the generic model without any guidance on how to do this (Burgess *et al.* 2012; Brockelsby *et al.* 1996). This lack of practical support then limits the VSM as a user friendly format to the research community. Such critique may provide opportunities for future research.

## 4.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study conformed to accepted norms, standards and values in accordance with DUT research and ethics criteria. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the DUT Institutional Research Ethics Committee in November 2017, reference number REC107/17 (Appendix B). Whilst any researcher has the right to search for answers, this should not be at the expense of any of the research participants. There was a Gatekeepers letter from the Director: DUT Research and Post Graduate Support (Appendix A) to conduct the study using University of Technology staff and students, prior to data collection starting. There was also a document giving informed consent (Appendix D) from those people being interviewed, in other words voluntary participation through informed consent on an anonymous basis. In addition, any participant was entitled to withdraw from the study freely without there being any repercussions. These were the primary ethical foundations upon which this research was conducted.

A literature review (Bell and Bryman 2007; Bryman *et al.* 2008) identified four ethical principles that any qualitative research methodology had to take cognisance of. This included the following - the protection of privacy, obtaining informed consent, avoiding any form of harm to the participants and not practicing any form of deception. A qualitative methodology with its smaller samples of respondents and within an identified site could inadvertently breach this ethical boundary unless due diligence is paid to erasing all identifiers from the results, particularly verbatim data (Bell *et al.* 2007).

To address such issues, discussions with the respondents focused on the implication of informed consent, the protection of the subjects' identity and data confidentiality. In this study, all identifying information was removed from transcripts, audio tapes and written documents, and instead a specific code relevant to the category of stakeholder was assigned to each respondent. This was to assuage concerns from participants around issues of anonymity as well as whether sharing their thoughts, feelings and observations could lead to punitive steps being taken against them were also addressed. Understandably some participants felt that expressing their opinion about their area of employment may be a risk to them. The signing of a confidentiality document which highlights anonymity of the participant was emphasised so that trust and rapport between interviewer and interviewee was established. It was also highlighted to the participants that all data collected, whether written information or digital audio recordings of the interviews will be treated with the utmost confidentiality, used only for the purposes of this specific research activity and kept securely locked throughout the research process and beyond. This reassurance to participants was made at the initial stages of inviting participants to take part in the study; setting up the interview, focus group or SSM workshop; and at the event itself when a confidentiality document was signed.

Whilst research ethics encompasses participants' privacy and confidentiality, it must also include ethical responsibility to research practice. This was

practiced by the researcher in acknowledging all sources of information and defending against plagiarism.

## 4.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter discussed the application of the research paradigms and modalities within which this research is embedded. This study used VSM with a SSM tool to understand the real world issues of multi stakeholder participation at a South African University of Technology with the outcome of developing a model of distributed leadership. These systems approaches used qualitative data collection and analysis to inform their application and this is included in the discussion on research design which described the methods and processes through which data was collected, analysed and interpreted, the selection of participants and ethical considerations specific to the study. The following chapter will focus on the analytical outcomes and results of these applications.

# 5 CHAPTER FIVE – RESEARCH FINDINGS

## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

The research findings is reported in three phases as per the research design described in Table 10. Phase one will discuss the outcomes of the SSM rich picture workshop and Phase two the VSM diagnosis of leadership practice at a University of Technology. Phase three will focus on the development of a distributed leadership model specific to a University of Technology, which was informed by the findings of Phases one and two. Table 10 is presented here to demonstrate the process and procedure which resulted in these research findings.

**Table 10: Overview of the Research Process**

| | **Phase 1: SSM Process** | **Phase 2: VSM Process** | **Phase 3: Model Creation** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **RESEARCH OBJECTIVE (RO)** | RO1. To understand leadership and its practice at a University of Technology | RO2. To determine senior managements understanding and practice of participatory, co-operative and distributed leadership<br><br>RO3. To determine the understanding and practice of leadership among middle managers at a South African higher education institution.<br><br>RO4. To determine the influence and role of student leadership in co-operative management and governance and understand if this is supported by the universities governance structures. | RO5. To develop a model based on distributed leadership which allows for co-operative, participatory governance and leadership practice in a higher education setting. |

| **SYSTEMS APPROACH** | Soft Systems Methodology | Viable System Model | Viable System Model Diagnosis +SSM rich picture themes |
|---|---|---|---|
| **DATA SAMPLE** | • 2 x Focus groups.<br><br>• N (12): 2 x 6 group participants | • Qualitative semi-structured interviews (SM)<br>• Qualitative semi-structured interviews (MM)<br>• Qualitative semi-structured interviews (SL)<br>• 1 x focus group (SL)<br>• Archival data<br>• Participant observation<br>• N: 25 participants | |
| **RESEARCH DESIGN** | Finding Out Process<br>• Rich Picture workshop.<br>• Group Discussion.<br>• Theme development. | • Thematic analysis of data.<br>• Populate VSM model with thematic analysis regarding<br><br>▪ VSM operations<br>▪ VSM Meta-System<br>▪ Environment<br><br>• Implement VSM diagnosis.<br>• Compare generated VSM to the generic model.<br>• Identify issues that could comprise viability of institution. | • Consolidate findings from thematic data analysis from phase 1 and VSM diagnosis in phase 2.<br><br>• Develop a distributed leadership model, for a University of Technology, incorporating these findings. |

## 5.2 PHASE ONE: SSM RICH PICTURE: FINDING OUT

**Research Objective 1:** To understand leadership and its practice at the university.

The rich pictures generated in this finding out process are attached as Appendix I. Thematic analysis informed the findings of the SSM rich picture focus groups. The issues that were identified by the two focus groups as well as the whole group exercise surfaced significant repetitive issues which were then identified as themes. These themes are depicted in Figure 6, followed by a discussion on each of them.

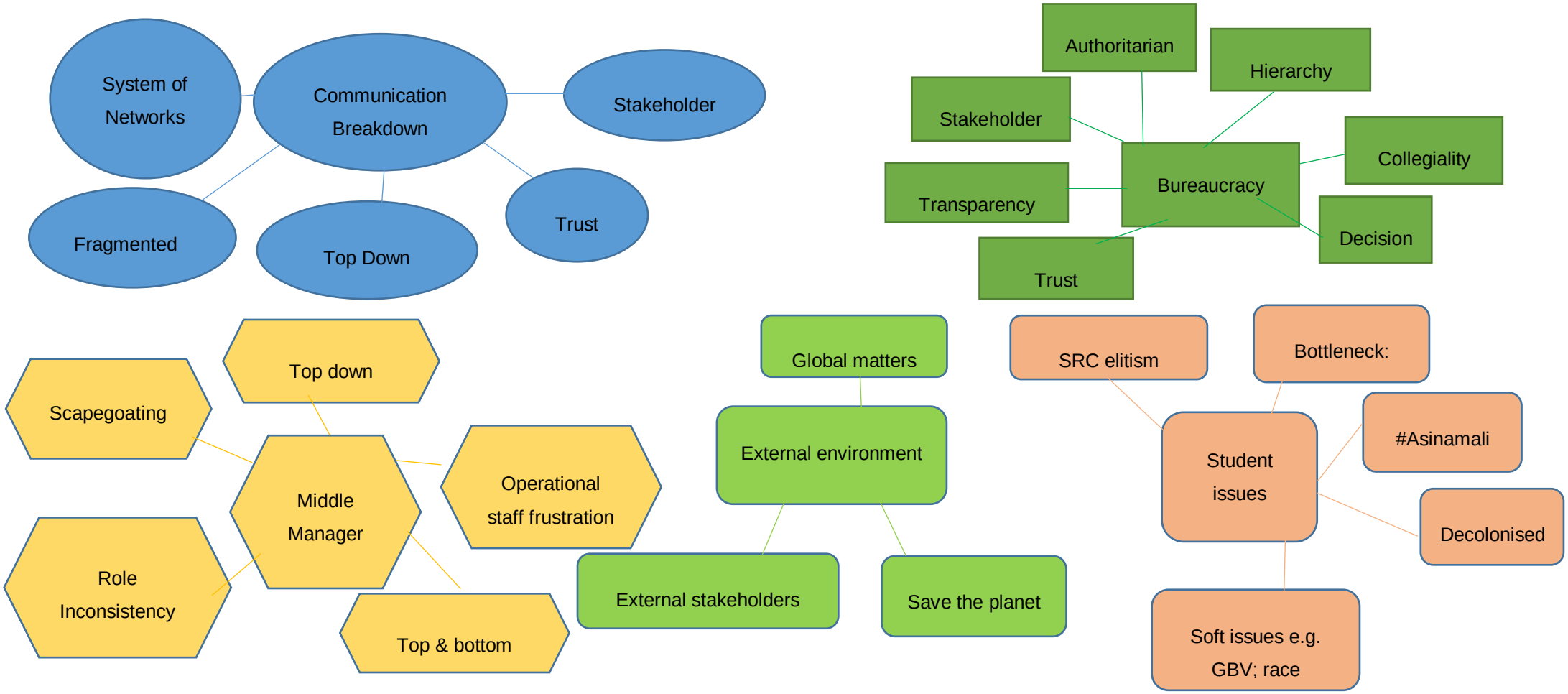



**Figure 6: Overview of Rich Picture Themes**

### 5.2.1 Communication

There was unanimous agreement amongst the stakeholders that communication at the institution was flawed and fragmented. The bureaucratic hierarchy of the institution was seen as the primary contributor to impaired communication lines.

*"There is a breakdown of communication…"* (SL2).

There was also a general recognition that trust amongst the stakeholders was affected, often leading to the withholding of information as 'power'. Students in particular indicated that when they felt stymied and frustrated at their lack of 'voice', then they resorted to strike action. They emphasised though that this was a last resort action.

The institution was described as being an interrelated system of networks and if the information and communication pipelines between them were obstructed or impeded then this negatively impacted not only the operations but the collegial relationships amongst the stakeholders.

### 5.2.2 Hierarchy / Bureaucracy

There was a generalised opinion from all stakeholders, but from the student leaders in particular, that the institution was adopting a less consultative, more authoritarian approach. The view is that the university is being currently administered from the top with power concentrated in a titular head. In any instance of centralised power all changes would have to be initiated from the head. This could be seen as a management ploy and tactic to keep institutional control and to restrict stakeholder input into decision making.

*“And you know everybody is complaining to me that they can’t get things done because of the bureaucracy. The university is coming to a standstill because of it”* (SM).

Hierarchy has created tiers of bureaucracy which stifles initiatives and creativity from operational staff. It also negatively affects decision making at the operational level as it requires hierarchical endorsement. Soft interpersonal issues such as collegiality, trust and transparency were also impacted by the bureaucracy resulting in strained relationships.

### 5.2.3 Middle managers issues

This group identified themselves as the “filling in the sandwich”, “squeezed” between the senior managers and operational staff. There was concern that there was no standard position as to their role and function but instead was impacted by the demands of their senior manager. There was also the expressed view that in order to protect themselves from accountability for poor decision making, their senior managers rather saw the implementation of these decisions as being poorly executed. Issues specific to this stakeholder group also focussed on clarification of their roles. Role confusion centred on the duality of their positions in which they were leaders in relation to operational staff, but operational in terms of their relationship with their seniors. This confusion also extended to their job profiles when compared with other middle managers holding similar office.

### 5.2.4 Student issues

Student funding and protest action across the country represented by the #FeesmustFall campaigns have also sparked debate with students at the

University of Technology. Students are looking to the institutional management to not only support them in these demands, but also in their transformational demands for example, decolonisation of curriculum.

Critique from those student leaders, other than the SRC, was that the latter viewed themselves as a group apart and superior to other student leaders within clubs, societies and faculties. This posturing of SRC leaders did not augur well for advancing the general student issues.

Other soft issues regarding the general student body that student leaders wanted high on the managements agenda included but not restricted to drugs and alcohol abuse, gender based violence; xenophobia, tribalism and racial discontent. These were topics of concern as they impacted on students' academic performance.

### 5.2.5 External environment

Cognisance should be paid to university decisions that impacted on the external environment in the form of its engagements with the surrounding community, industry and other external stakeholders. In addition, fast paced societal and global changes require rapid leadership responses which the university management needs to recognise and action.

"*I do believe though that people like you and I and probably every stakeholder as they presently exist in the university …. are not prepared, haven't engaged and though about in 5 years' time what will education be."* (MM1).

### 5.2.5 SSM Rich Picture Conclusion

The primary themes identified above, whilst issues in their own right have an interdependency and correlation with other themes. Communication informed the hierarchy/ bureaucracy issues which were infused within the middle manager and student specific matters. Such interactions between the themes implies then that this rich picture or 'finding out' exercise provided a holistic overview of the institutional leadership rather than an insular viewpoint.

The rich picture focus groups assisted in identifying the primary issues, highlighted where to look for these problematical situations, as well as provided an understanding about the climate and culture within which the situation resides. In the researcher's opinion then, these were profound outcomes of the rich picture workshop exercise which provided a "dynamic working document" (Bronte-Stewart 1999: 87) within which to proceed onto the next stage of the research, that is, the VSM diagnostic analysis.

## 5.3 PHASE TWO: VSM PROCESS

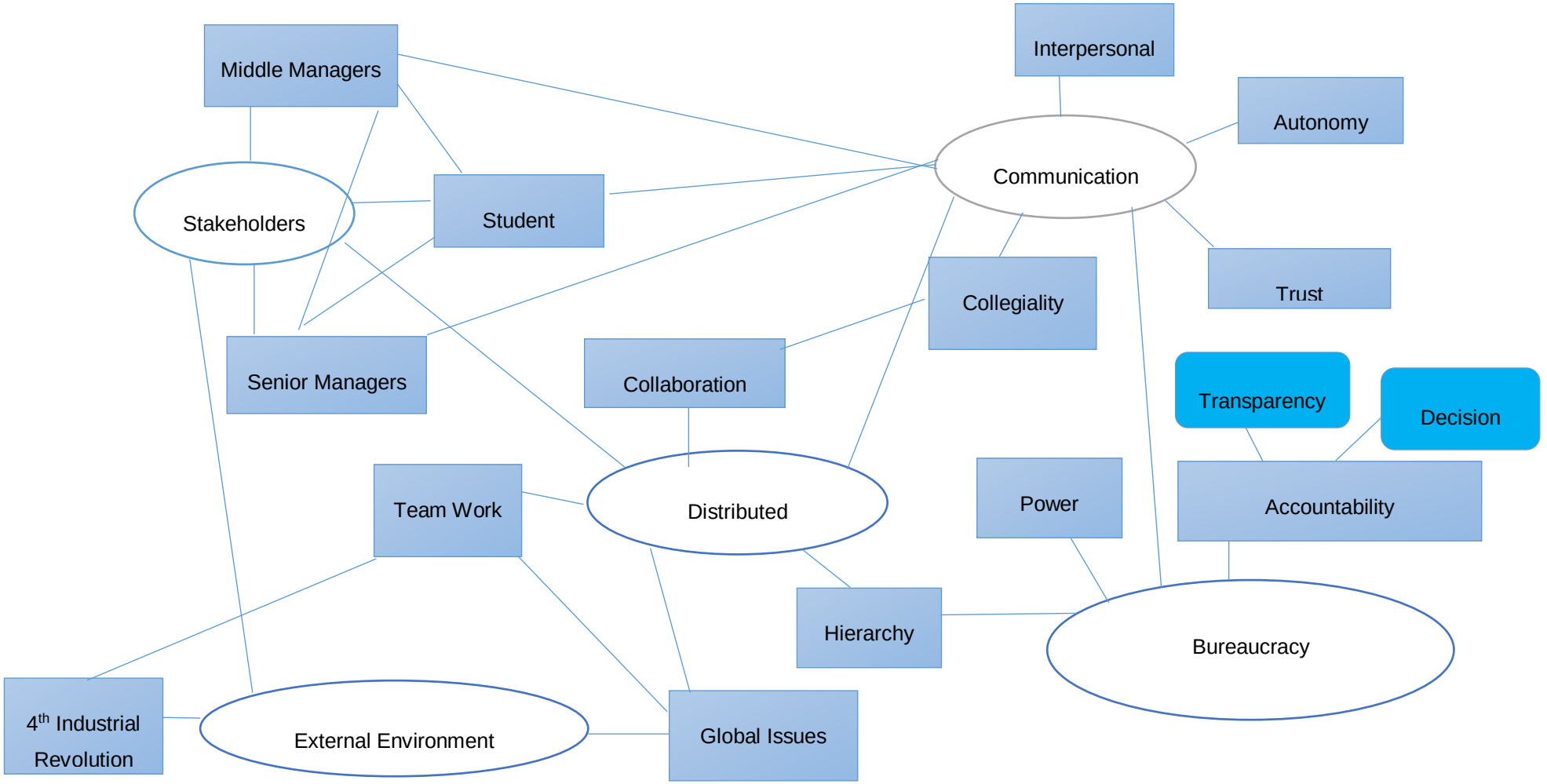
Thematic analysis also informed the findings of the VSM diagnosis of institutional leadership which are deliberated on in this section. Identification of primary and subthemes informed this process and is represented diagrammatically below (Table 7). This thematic analysis then formed the basis on which the VSM diagnosis was conducted and applied to the following research objectives. The results are presented as a holistic overview of the opinions of all stakeholder groups, in line with a systems perspective.

**Research Objective 2:** To determine senior managements understanding and practice of participatory, co-operative and distributed leadership.

**Research Objective 3:** To determine the understanding and practice of leadership among middle managers at a South African higher education institution.

**Research Objective 4:** To determine the influence and role of student leadership in co-operative management and governance and understand if this is supported by the universities governance structures.

**Figure 7: Thematic Map Showing VSM Main Themes** (Adapted from Braun and Clarke 2006: 90)



These overarching themes, identified in Figure 7, had relevance for the generation of a VSM diagnosis. As the aim of this research was to obtain a holistic systemic overview of leadership practice at the university, the themes will be discussed by conflating all the stakeholder groups into overarching themes where commonalities exist. In those cases where themes were more aligned to a particular stakeholder group this will be specifically identified and then discussed.

### 5.3.1 Communication

Communication was seen as key to good relationships by all stakeholder groups. However, they were also all in agreement that at their higher education institution it is flawed.

*"…so its communication……The problem about it is we speak about it all the time and they agree. It is not something that they dispute. It is disputed in practice…"* [SL1].

Their interpretation of the current communication channels at the institution is that whilst open communication lines have being given credence in policy, the reality is that this is not so in practice. Impaired communication lines impact institutional relationships, especially as interwoven within all of these communication issues is a lack of trust in the engagements with the institutional hierarchy. This was seen as a significant concern. The issue of communication was also linked to those of collegiality and healthy interpersonal relationships. Poor or impaired communication lines resulted in a breakdown of trust leading to strained interpersonal relations. This was identified by senior managers as hampering daily operational tasks, especially since they believed compromised communication channels allowed for detractors to flourish, a breakdown in trust and queries around the

transparency of the messages they were receiving. Both groups of managers used the staff strike of 2018 to highlight this issue.

All categories of managers affirmed that in any engagement if there is no respect for the input of all staff then it becomes a dictatorship. Amongst the frustrations expressed with regard to communication channels was the poor, often toxic communication lines between the middle managers and their senior counterparts.

*"I was once told "Don't tell me what to do. Do as I say". And this was said to me in front of my subordinates by my senior; so that is why I am saying you need to be careful how you lead and you need to project a certain kind of leadership"* [MM 4].

There was stakeholder consensus that the tiers of reporting lines in such an entrenched bureaucracy, resulted in communication breakdown and restricted flow of information. There was a sense of isolated top down communication, with limited or restricted connectivity with the other tiers of leadership. They also identified some resistance and reluctance to the sharing of information with staff being very territorial about their knowledge.

Nonetheless, the middle managers were in agreement that good communication meant respecting the dignity of others, leading to improved interrelationships and understanding between the different tiers of management. They also saw their role as listening to their subordinates and to take key learnings from them. It also meant that when brokering solutions good communication often resulted in a win-win relationship for all the parties concerned.

Student strikes were seen by the student leaders as a last resort for their 'voices' to be heard. This was perceived to be an extreme response to the poor communication lines between the institutional leadership and themselves.

Student leaders also recognised the importance of ensuring open communication with the general student body and supported the idea that good communication and the sharing of information improved relationships. A concern expressed is the disjuncture of reporting between the Durban and Pietermaritzburg campuses. They identify this breakdown of communication between the two centres as a fault line that needs to be urgently addressed.

#### *5.3.1.1 Sub-theme: Trust*

Trust, a sub theme of communication, found strong emphasis in the respondent interviews. They argued for institutional relationships to be one of transparency, honesty and support.

Trust, as an issue, was identified by virtually all senior and middle managers as vital to their function and role, albeit for different reasons. The managers felt that they needed to be given space to manage their portfolio but also to be entrusted to lead from the front. Being entrusted placed a responsibility on the manager to do the job well so as not to lose the confidence of colleagues and subordinates. Aligned to the issue of trust was the need for these managers to be led by an “enabler” as this was empowering and established confidence for them. Middle managers were particularly vocal on this point. The questioning of their decision making or actions taken, by senior managers, engendered distrust and suspicion, resulting in them being seen as weak leaders by those reporting to them.

From the perspective of the managers groups, they also viewed the relationship between themselves and the vice chancellor/ upper management as being so damaged that it would require the intervention of a third party namely Council, intervention to heal the breach. They expressed the plea for

the higher echelons of university management to demonstrate their trust in them.

*"…it would be the responsibility of council to have a concerted effort, because it is council's responsibility to ensure that management and staff members then build trust between the two. Unfortunately I don't see that happening at this point in time…"* [SM5].

The implications of the comment above is a sense of pessimism and defeatism about any reconciliation between Vice Chancellor or upper management and the general staff body. There was also pessimism expressed about the ultimate authority governing the University, namely Council's role in mediating between the different university stakeholders, with one senior manager expressing fear of retaliatory punitive action being taken against him for expressing his honest opinion.

Whilst all groups refer to a strained relationship with upper management this was emphasised by the senior managers. It is suggested that this is because of the institutional hierarchical practice where senior managers have more contact with upper management. The interrelatedness of trust and communication issues in stakeholder responses were succinctly encapsulated in a student leader's comments below.

*"Which is another thing that I have learnt that if you communicate especially to institutional* management *or anyone in the institutional space you must be able to do it via email so there is proof as well"* [SL2: Focus Group].

This extract captures the breakdown of trust with stakeholders having to resort to maintaining a paper trail to ensure evidential proof.

#### 5.3.1.2 Sub-theme: Interpersonal Relations

Interpersonal relationships based on trust and communication were seen as critical elements for university leadership and the emphasis on this issue, particularly by staff, but recognised by students, had its origins in the staff strike of 2018 which ended shortly before the interviews for this study commenced. The current Vice Chancellor's handling of the 2018 staff strike at their higher education institution had intensified the breach between himself (and possibly his executive management) and the general staff body, which in turn impacted on issues such as service delivery. In response to the manner in which upper management handled their strike issues, operational staff reacted by working within the specific, narrow parameters of their job descriptions. This in turn impacted on senior and middle managers outputs with the ripple effect that student leaders were not able to fast track their requests through the system. Students described the institution as not only being divided between cities but between staff and upper management.

All categories of respondents were critical of the Vice Chancellor's interpersonal, interactional style which was seen as non-people centred and aloof. There were constant comparisons and contrasts drawn with the previous incumbent, whose personality and interpersonal skills were described as being collegial and engaging.

### 5.3.2 Bureaucracy

*"… if I can be blunt ,some people in upper management are rather egotistical so they feel that they have to be the leader and they have to have a top down approach, and they care about nothing else"* [MM7].

*"And you know everybody is complaining to me that they can't get things done because of the bureaucracy. The university is coming to a standstill because of it"* [SM5].

Both categories of managers saw issues of hierarchy and bureaucracy as a point of contention. They viewed the bureaucracy as a chokehold on the institution and called for a less regimented approach to leadership. The institution has seen a revolving door of vice chancellors over the last 15 years and with each successive vice chancellor there are changes to protocol and procedures. A case of 'out with the old and in with the new', a practice which particularly frustrated the managers.

Student leaders too identified bureaucracy and hierarchy, as obstacles to collegial collaborations. The student leaders' relationship with their Vice Chancellor and upper management was also portrayed as very protocol driven which they argued hampered and stifled student leadership operations. In similar tone many senior managers felt short-changed in that whilst they required support, acknowledgement and constructive critique from their executive management, instead many found that their areas of responsibility were curtailed and in some cases even downgraded which demeaned their status and experience. This was expressively stated in the comment below.

"*The first thing our new VC did was to delimit or cut down and reduce whereas Bawa expanded and I felt I could see myself contributing…"* [SM3].

Institutional bureaucracy ensures that student leaders primary contact is limited to operational staff who, they opine obstruct issues of student concerns. It is thus their firm belief that institutional bureaucracy, in this way, contradicts and undermines the university's stated ethos of student centeredness.

There was unanimous agreement by stakeholders in identifying silo operations at the institution. It was submitted by many of the staff respondents that

managerialism and bureaucracy breeds rigidity and silo operations and that lacking a person centred leadership approach stifles the opportunity to harness collegial knowledge and experience. Such a leadership approach could prove to be a stumbling block to distributed leadership as rigid operational boundaries and non-collaboration between significant university stakeholders could result in departments being in competition with one another. This impacts on collaborative, co-operative working relationships.

*"…I see that there are different departments in the hierarchy but there are no pipes connecting those departments"* [SL1: Focus Group].

Bureaucracy, a slow moving behemoth, hinders decision making and consequently leads to management by crisis, as it is particularly slow to react to issues arising spontaneously. This often triggers student unrest as they believe that management is only reactive and responsive to student mass action, a last resort tactic by students to be heard.

University bureaucracy is also described as being contradictory. This is demonstrated in the SRC being represented at Council level yet are excluded from other minor boards and committees of university management. It is described by them as being a 'power' ploy used by management to keep power tilted in managements favour. As they explain it, the University management uses divide and rule tactics to control and manipulate student leadership. This not only handicaps the effectiveness of the SRC in helping the student body but such tactics can also lead to infighting amongst the student leadership resulting in action paralysis and ineffectual leadership.

Middle managers, specifically, raised concerns that they were being side-lined especially in decision making either by their senior managers or consultants who did not know the operational work. Whilst preferring a more consultative participative role in decision making, they believe however, that within the current management scenario, this is unlikely to happen. Their perspective is

that the present institutional hierarchy and autocratic top down leadership has resulted in group think described as:

*"He'll say something, they'll agree. Not necessarily because they agree with it because they don't want to differ from him so they agree"* [MM4].

There are some managers who describe the institution as being historically structured in this way so that it can only work as a hierarchy. Middle managers expressed the viewpoint that entrenched hierarchies implies entitlement over others, which is contra to democracy. They also question the validity of the information reaching them through their hierarchical structures and believe that whilst everybody has their own idea of what good leadership is, it is still important for people at the top to have their finger on the pulse at the lower rungs. Leadership, for these middle managers, should be all about engagement with staff and not isolated, ivory tower leadership. They see the current status quo at the institution of top down leadership as isolated leadership, meaning that they have no insight into what is happening to the tiers of managers below them. It also implies that since they are dependent on feedback from the select group that reports to them it brings into question the quality and truthfulness of this information.

Middle managers also feel that bureaucracy challenges and undermines their leadership in that any initiatives from these middle managers are seen as being threatening to the system. Just as middle managers are dependent upon the goodwill of subordinates to get the job done, they opine that good leadership at the highest levels of the institution requires them to give recognition and respect to the intrinsic worth of all levels of staff in the institution.

There was also the contra view to this perspective with one middle manager preferring the protocol and defined structural parameters of bureaucracy and hierarchy as it was essential for effective management.

#### *5.3.2.1 Sub-theme: Accountability*

There was an over whelming sense by all stakeholder groups that the institution is being paralysed by bureaucracy and fear. They raised their unhappiness with the institutions high levels of accountability upwards.

"…*So you're accountable up the hierarchy and that assumes that there's expertise that resides at the top of the hierarchy that may not be present lower down"* [MM8].

This is seen as demeaning to the skills and expertise of the middle manager. At the same time, these managers are then left to manage the fallout of these decisions at the operational level.

The hierarchy has created tiers of bureaucracy which stifles initiatives and creativity from staff. There is a paralysis of action even when decisions are taken especially since these stakeholders appear not to trust their judgements or decisions which in turn then leads to leadership by incrimination, that is, 'pass the buck'. As a consequence, this has a ripple effect, with senior and middle managers second guessing themselves and hindering decision making, as these managers appear unwilling or fearful of taking personal responsibility for decisions made.

*"I don't know if you probably must have seen that, where there is so much passing of the buck. The reason for this is because people are scared. Let's not do wrong because things are so punitive"* [SM2].

There was the strong underlying notion that this management by fear is detrimental to the efficacy and efficiency of the institution. Senior managers find themselves in an operational conundrum. They are confused as to their role, particularly as on paper, leadership at this University of Technology is

seen as a consultative process, whilst in practice this is not so. Senior managers whilst acknowledging their ultimate accountability to the executive head of the institution, nonetheless find the present executive leadership approach is to restrict and even thwart managers input into decision making. This was found to be frustrating and demeaning.

*"You can't be coming hard on people and expect people to be innovative and creative and come up with grand ideas. When as soon as they open their mouths and before they finish a few sentences you stifle them. You don't only stifle them you spit on them….it's humiliating…"* [SM2].

The response to this conundrum is for managers to pass decision making responsibility onto others and not take personal responsibility for fear that they may be chastised for errors or mistakes incurred.

Student leaders, generally, saw transparency as leading to increased responsibility and accountability, but also to a more collegial relationship with the student body. However, in their view, institutional managers lack transparency in their dealing with students.

*"But the problem is that they don't trust us as student leadership. Trusting issues that is the problem"* [SL1: Focus Group].

This demonstrates that even amongst the stakeholder groups, a lack of trust and inclusivity has led to a strained relationship. Student leaders see themselves as significant university stakeholders who are excluded from important communiques. Student leaders express the view that increased transparency will not only expose flaws and defects in management leadership, but will also lead to intensified calls for more institutional accountability.

The stakeholders currently view the present executive leadership approach as restricting managers input into decision making. Even though institutional leadership is presented as a consultative process, in practice this is not so, as power is still vested within the Executive Heads. Senior managers find the current executive leadership approach stifling as they believe that they should be given space and trusted to lead from the front as this encourages them to do their job well and ensures a cooperative interactive engagement with all tiers of staff. By not engaging with their stakeholders the hierarchical leaders stifles the opportunity to harness collegial knowledge and experience.

### 5.3.3 Participants view of Distributed Leadership

There was supportive opinion amongst the majority of respondents that distributed or shared leadership suits academia. It was described as people oriented, promoting trust and genuine engagement with the general sentiments captured in the following quote.

*"…that is a brilliant model .That is what we looking for ….. it is what our institution needs. Not only our institution, outside our institution, this is what leadership is…"* [SL1].

"*So the concept of shared leadership is most ideal and highly needed in the institution"* [SM1].

Underpinning their endorsement of the model however, was the caveat that this form of leadership practice could work if only the institution recognised the leadership potential within all categories of stakeholders. Distributed leadership was viewed as a 'game changer' for student leaders especially as this approach placed them as equal partners with other university stakeholders. Staff, too, believed that the university should draw on it's in-

house talent pool and latent leadership potential as increased leadership inclusivity would equal a better, more efficient institution. They claim that there is current institutional evidence of distributed leadership practice but that it operates in an informal arrangement.

Questioned about a hierarchical model working alongside a distributed model, in other words a hybrid model, middle and senior managers viewed this as the most workable scenario as it provided for the formal executive offices, whilst allowing for team work or shared leadership to be practiced within the institution. Team work would encourage participative, collaborative leadership leading to better information reaching top management. For all managers, generally, the concept of incorporating the hierarchical model alongside a distributed model in a blended format was appealing.

Amongst this group of senior managers there was support and endorsement for a distributed, shared leadership model in which active staff participation in shared leadership would result in a 'leapfrog approach' for the university leading to growth, development and new opportunities aligned to technological and societal changes. This endorsement is however accompanied with the proviso of a line of accountability to upper management, in other words a hybrid model as quoted below.

*"I think it's very important to distribute leadership, to distribute responsibility. One I think it creates efficiency in the system, it also allows the budding of new talent, people to show that they have the ability to rise to another level of leadership….It allows creativity, it allows flair but I think traditionally important because you need someone to actually have the vision to say this is the broad direction in which we are going and this is how we will work together in achieving it"* [SM4].

There were, however, some cynical viewpoints expressed about the hybrid model implying that the upper echelons of management would merely pay lip

service through protocol to the concept of distributed leadership, all the whilst continuing along the traditional style of bureaucratic leadership. This was particularly the perspective of the student leader group. Staff too expressed their reservations questioning whether these changes can be affected within the current politically charged institutional environment. They described current staff relations as the individual vs team players in which self-promotion is at the expense of the team. As any changes to leadership practice would have to be initiated from the top where power is held, would prove difficult they conclude, as the Executive leadership, in their opinion, uses a closed system of management. In fact student leaders believe that using a distributed leadership model would create tensions and divisions as upper management would be unwilling to share power in a distributed leadership model.

*"Management equally will always want to be seen as the controllers and the powerness and the decision makers of the system…"* [SL3].

There was however common acknowledgement that under the previous Vice Chancellor collective leadership existed and was especially demonstrated at the time of #FeesmustFall national student protests. Students, at this University of Technology, did not go on formal strike at the time and this was attributed to university leadership engagements with student leadership. Decision making was a shared, combined engagement thereby preventing a crisis during that tumultuous time. The shared leadership practiced by the university management was also mirrored in the actions of student leaders during that period.

### 5.3.4 Leadership practice

Around the practice of distributed leadership stakeholders offered varying opinions and recommendations. Participation in distributed leadership would

not only require the development of skills and talents of all stakeholders but also implied that any good manager recognise his limitations and give credence to team members with more skill and knowledge to take the lead. This was not to be seen as an abdication of their management role as accountability and responsibility still remained with the primary head. They caution, however, against any continued micro-management as this would be an anathema to participative leadership.

They made several suggestions as to the implementation of this approach including the following:

- Top leadership need to do a comparison between current leadership practice and using a distributed leadership model.
- Have a clear definition and policy of distributed leadership practice for the institution.
- Provide guidance on the structure and parameters of this form of leadership.
- Buy in from stakeholders would be essential for this approach to work.
- Identify potential leadership in staff.
- Allow for leadership to emerge or develop from lower level staff. Not to micro manage.
- Institutional change dependant on individuals' commitments to change.

Using a distributed approach, because of its team based nature would inculcate a sense of collegiality and cooperativeness across all stakeholder groups which already existed within academia. Another positive outcome is that this would remove the present silo operations and thinking, whilst encouraging a more cohesive leadership approach. The managers interviewed believe that if the institution freed itself from its current hierarchical and bureaucratic chokehold, then alternative leadership practice could be followed.

*"I think if we could divorce ourselves of the rigours of the ball and chain and allow ourselves to be, without abandon, free to be innovative; I believe that would promote a far more conducive environment for distributed leadership to function"* [MM1].

#### *5.3.4.1 Sub-theme: Current Leadership*

Whilst acknowledging that current leadership practice at the university is akin to an obstacle course, there was also the opinion that small steps taken in the right direction could change the situation. A senior manager expressed her dilemma though at the fact that whilst the present leadership sees management as a consultative process, on paper, the reality is that power and ultimate decision making is still vested within the Executive Head.

*"But there's something I can't put a finger on ……there is this thing that lacks in meting it out .And in full ownership to the people to take full ownership and to take and run with those decisions Because if I look at how consultative the new leadership is it is actually very, very consultative…….it is so well documented…"* [SM2].

There was a call from the senior managers particularly, but echoed by the other respondents that leadership should be an engagement with staff rather than isolated, ivory tower leadership practice where you have no insight into what is happening below you. When managers are dependent upon feedback from their heads of department, the truthfulness of this information is questionable. A perceptive observation of how leadership by the institutions head should be practiced is best described by a senior manager in the following interview excerpt.

*"…if you want to be a good leader, you must be able to harness not only the strengths in your executives but in the entire university. Unfortunately not everyone has that ability. If you are an isolated leader you will never get to that point .So that's what we don't have…that harnessing of the people .Now that is a leader. A true leader if he wants to make the wheels turn, well-oiled in any organisation must be able to harness that strength of people. And not just those that directly report to him"* [SM5].

There were consistent comparisons made between the previous and current Vice Chancellors and their different leadership approaches. They expressed their views of the previous vice chancellor, where university stakeholders felt able to share their thoughts and ideas with him and where they also revelled in the status and 'gravitas' that he brought to the institution. The previous incumbent of the vice chancellors office, according to the respondents, had a leadership style that was more participative and inclusive, more aligned to a democratic ethos. This imbued them with a sense of pride and purpose as he not only raised the profile of the university but with the introduction of new initiatives also raised the academic status of the institution. During his tenure confidence and enthusiasm was high and especially appreciated by the senior managers, as on reflection they believed that the morale of top management significantly impacted the general morale of all staff and encouraged collegiality.

There was consensus amongst all stakeholder groups that power should not be concentrated in a titular head. The future forecast of senior managers, regarding the institution's leadership style, is that it will be more of the same hierarchy, with no management change going forward over the next five years. The outcome of this is the expectation of increased demoralisation and loss of staff.

*"Well it's going to be a top down leadership… continuous……. Staff morale is going to be down, the unions are going to be broken, people are going to come*

*and go….The institutional environment is not conducive to working, they come here just to do their work and go. I mean that shouldn't happen…"* [SM5].

The current management style of leadership, as far as students are concerned, is not collegial and non-collaborative and negatively affects them.

*"Now at the end of the day the management not working hand in glove, it will always come back to affect students. Understanding that when two bulls are fighting it is only the grass that suffers in the process"* [SL2].

In response to the staff strike (2018) student leaders conjecture that if this dysfunctional, negative relationship between staff and upper management continues, there will be a widening gap between staff and students as well as staff and management. The students predict that this would become the 'new normal' and the resultant outcome would be unhealthy for the institution with its continued discontent and unrest.

*"….even those who are in the middle they are also being victimised by the top…..most people are now running out of … because of the system we are using."* [SL 3].

A senior manager submitted that authority without trust was unfair and further maintained that it was essential in a distributed type of leadership practice to respect the right of managers to have different opinions. The current scenario at the institution was, in order to avoid being punished, managers either deferred or delegated decision making or else collaborated in informal pockets.

*"But you must remember that it (informal collaborative relationships) is a begrudging one. It is not one that is voluntary. It is one where you begrudgingly do it"* [SM5].

### 5.3.5 Institutional Stakeholders: Identity and Role

A clear concern raised by the institutional stakeholders, particularly the managers, was to have clearly defined parameters within which to practice as well as recognition of their status. At present, they see themselves as just the conduit through which messages and instructions are relayed to the operational staff. This, they feel, reduces their role and identity as contributors to leadership practice. Such leadership perspectives are linked to the themes of bureaucracy and hierarchy discussed earlier.

#### *5.3.5.1 Sub-theme: Senior managers*

Whilst these senior managers are struggling to define their role, they are also clear and specific on what constitutes good leadership.

*"Good leadership is understanding your role, I think first of all. And how you respond and what the impact will be if you don't respond…….You need to understand what is your role and you need to be principled about it"* [SM3].

They also emphasised the 'soft' issues of leadership practice namely morality, trust, ethical behaviour, emotional intelligence and using 'gut instinct'.

*"Leadership is also about morality. Yes. And ethics"* [SM3).
*"They call it …. Emotional intelligence. But it actually is beyond that it's….what I call the gut"* [*SM2].*

*"… And the other thing that I expect from those that leads me is honesty professionalism and being exemplary"* [SM1].

As a group they emphasised that good leadership requires interpersonal skills of engagement, trust, and communication as this enhances their relationship with and promotes mutual respect with their subordinates, peers and superiors. Furthermore, there was an awareness that the higher education sphere globally, but especially in South Africa, is in a constant state of flux and challenges. To this end, they acknowledge that their leadership style and interpersonal interactions needs to be dynamic to meet these changing needs, while also recognising that they have to make tough decisions which may not always be the popular decision. Recognising your limitations was also a popular refrain from this group of stakeholders.

#### *5.3.5.2 Sub-theme: Student leaders*

*"…. As much as that particular document* (executive order on SRC issues) *is good, in the formation of that particular document there was no student voices that was included"* [SL1].

In this comment, students described an official university document where their role and practice as student leaders was not taken into consideration. By ignoring their 'voice' is seen as an affront to their leadership role and practice. They also indicate that the power play at the institution is not tilted in their favour.

*"… sometimes you are really scared to voice out your opinion because sometimes you get threats that you'll get taken out of your position if this and this happens*" [SL3: Focus Group].

There was also criticism that students enter into leadership positions for the power and popularity that it brings to these roles.

"*Because at some point, many people go to the SRC's for the sake of being popular, for the sake of having a platform, for the sake of going around campus and being pointed "hey there's the President" and students greeting you and saying" Hi president, can I take photos with you". Not understanding that the main point for you to be in SRC is to be a servant and to lead your people in a highly matured level that you can portray as a leader"* [SL2].

The SRC in particular find that their student leadership to general student numbers are not synchronised and this hinders their practice. They are then viewed by the general student body as being inefficient and incompetent.

*"We are 15 SRC members here and providing service to 28 000 students so looking at the numbers the ratio it is out"* (SL4).

Student leaders also find themselves stymied by the institutional hierarchy in fulfilling their roles.

*"The structure of … is a problem also. Because sometimes you refer to this person and they refer you to this person…….So that frustrates us as the SRC…. Protocol so who do we report to..."* [SL4].

*"…at … you'll find it very interesting that in most cases student voices are not particularly taken into consideration when taking major decisions*" [SL2].

#### *5.3.5.3 Sub-theme: Middle managers*

Issues, specific to this group, focused on their identity and role within the institution where they saw themselves serving as a conduit between senior managers and operational staff. A common refrain from this group was encapsulated in the quote below.

*"Yes, we are making the sandwich. So you have to appease people below you and people above"* [MM7].

These managers felt compressed between the top and bottom tiers of management and believe that this increased the job stress of being in the middle. They see this position as doing the *"fairly mundane stuff"* [MM8], being the cogs that ensures the university machines operate efficiently. They also submitted that for any middle manager to survive and thrive in this position, they needed to develop a toolbox of skills for staff and student interactions as this position could prove difficult and onerous.

Middle managers ascribed many of their current opinions and learnings around leadership to have arisen out of the staff strike. There was demonstrable staff defiance in response to upper management's highly disciplined style of engagement after the 2018 staff strike. Post this event, many middle managers found operational staff unwilling to cooperate with them, as a response to upper management's restrictive leadership style. This group of respondents saw their role as being key to the institution as:

*"…we create the culture of the university…*" [MM2].

Middle managers recognise, however, that adequate training and mentoring is essential to enable them to hold the centre of the university on an even keel. This was considered especially important as they are seen as facilitators of policy and those who provide action to institutional plans. Middle managers are also looking for support when decisions are made and acknowledgement of their pivotal role within the institution. They require guidance on broader university issues that the middle manager may not be privy to. In this way it is anticipated, the middle manager will not only take but transfer these learnings from the senior manager through to the operational staff.

There was also the dark side of being in middle management where the toxic environment engendered conspiracy theories described as:

*"…. When people are hamstrung and paralyzed by this thing of having to look at how the boss acts or what the boss will think, you know then it becomes fertile ground for conspiracy theories, you know that… "* [MM2].

The relationship of middle managers with their senior leadership also appeared impaired with middle managers describing it as a strange phenomenon or toxic environment with its absence of collegiality. Often middle managers felt sabotaged by the unrealistic demands being placed upon them by the senior manager, believing that they were being set up for failure. Not being led or adequately supported by their senior manager was also a critical refrain heard by this researcher and is very descriptively captured in the following excerpt.

"*Teflon is the word that comes to mind. I expect more assistance from my line manager than I get*" [MM1].

However, there was also the individual case of a middle manager [MM9] who felt conflicted in his role as he had a good relationship with his senior manager but had a problematic relationship with his staff.

Leadership is practiced in siloes and being constantly hindered by roadblocks and speedbumps leading to a paralysis in institutional leadership. A candid opinion by a middle manager, described the present status of leadership at the organisation as a 'dictatorship' operating on 'bully boy tactics' within which middle managers need to become dictators themselves if they are to function within the environment.

*"If you look at our current way, it's more a dictatorship. This university runs on a bully boy tactic sort of environment and to shift their mind-set you have to*

*become a dictator. So you would find that the person you rely on for things is actually stopping you to do your own work. The institution at the moment stands at that point, we are gridlocked ….We are in siloes because that comes with dictatorship"* [MM3].

Middle managers other criticisms of senior management was the 'passing of the buck' or blame game, a typical behaviour of those senior managers who were just afraid of taking personal responsibility or commitment to a position in case of "*blow back*" (MM2). This fear of taking personal responsibility leads to indecisiveness and a stagnant work environment. The view of senior managers as non-team players also contributed to strained working relationships between the two parties and is linked to the issues of trust and accountability discussed earlier. They suggest that historical baggage such as merger at the institution also impeded leadership.

Nonetheless, any successful implementation of distributed leadership should be driven at the middle managers level. The rationale for this suggestion is that it will then not be seen as imposed as a top down initiative but being led closer to the operational units. They also imply that institutional change is dependent on its individuals' commitments to change, because as they see it, with more leadership inclusivity and collaboration the outcome will be a better, more efficient institution. Participative leadership is also seen as leading to better information reaching top management, not information that is filtered and diluted through the hierarchical tiers and would also mean that work is not conducted in silos.

### 5.3.6 External environment

Student leadership operations, on the Durban campuses are described as being a heavily politicised battleground and critiqued for not looking at general

student issues. This has resulted in student leaders not looking at students institutional issues but rather becoming engaged within larger national student political structures.

*"…the political ground here I can say is unhealthy, it's very unhealthy. It's abnormal in actual fact…"* [SL1]

There was also scathing comment that the student and staff unrest (2018) marred the reputational value of the institution.

Rapid technological changed, in tandem with societal demands were listed as crucial environmental challenges for any higher education institution in the country. They require rapid and collective responses to which all institutional stakeholders should contribute.

*"… I don't see the structure of the university changing until the attitude about how the universities perform and need to perform in the future are actually addressed"* [MM1].

These managers also emphasised the need for the institution and those who lead and work within such institutions to be visionary in their approaches and future planning. This implies that they need to be aware of what is occurring in both the local and global environment, as well as become responsive to the opportunities and challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. This was seen as an imperative if universities are to retain their significant role and position in the society at large.

The senior managers' reflections on the current external milieu as it impacts higher education also highlighted the environmental challenges (resources, politics) to institutional leadership and is best encapsulated as:

"….*but I think the external milieu is also going to be a huge challenge .Higher education comes with a whole set of challenges where I think leadership will be a very difficult environment to be within. There are going to be resource challenges, the entire environment has become politicized…"* [SM4].

No institution or its leadership can remain static in their roles but need to become creative thinkers. This is particularly relevant as future forecasts on the pathways of higher education is not clear. This is expressed by one senior manager:

*"….leadership at the moment has to embrace this era of disruptions that we are experiencing. Higher education is going through what I would call almost the pangs of rebirth. Universities are not going to be the same in the next 20 or 30 years and we have to embrace that. We have to strive to find that balance, keeping the stability of what we know and what still works and not throwing the baby out with the bath water with innovative thinking*" [SM4].

The viewpoint of stakeholders was that in leadership practice we should not have an insular, inward looking perspective but take cognisance of and respond appropriately to societal and national needs.

### 5.3.7 Other data sources

In addition to data gathered through the interview process other sources of data were stakeholder observations, field notes and archival information. Particularly informative were the vice chancellors communiques to staff especially that to managers which outlined prescriptively how communications between the tiers of hierarchy should be conducted.

### 5.3.8 Conclusion

The data was analysed against the primary themes identified in Figure 7. They support and confirm the themes identified in the rich picture workshop. The analysis of the semi-structured qualitative interviews showed that in general there was a fair amount of concordant opinion and consensus around the primary themes by all categories of stakeholders. Whilst all respondent groups identified role, identity and status as issues, this was particularly pertinent for middle managers. There was nonetheless generalised consensual agreement and support for the distributed leadership model.

This thematic analysis then informed the diagnostic application of the ideal VSM against the organisational model.

## 5.4 The VSM DIAGNOSIS

This diagnostic exercise also formed part of the VSM process as highlighted in Table 10. The VSM was used as a diagnostic tool, as it is "an insightful framework for thinking differently about organisations" (Brockelsby and Cummings 1996: 49).

### 5.4.1 System-in-Focus: Institution of Higher Education

A VSM diagnosis involved examining the system-in-focus using cybernetic principles which underpin the system. In this instance an important consideration is that whilst there is general consensus that the purpose of the system is to be a higher educational institution, "what the system does is not necessarily what the stakeholders think it does, or indeed, want it to do" (Beckford 1995: 1).

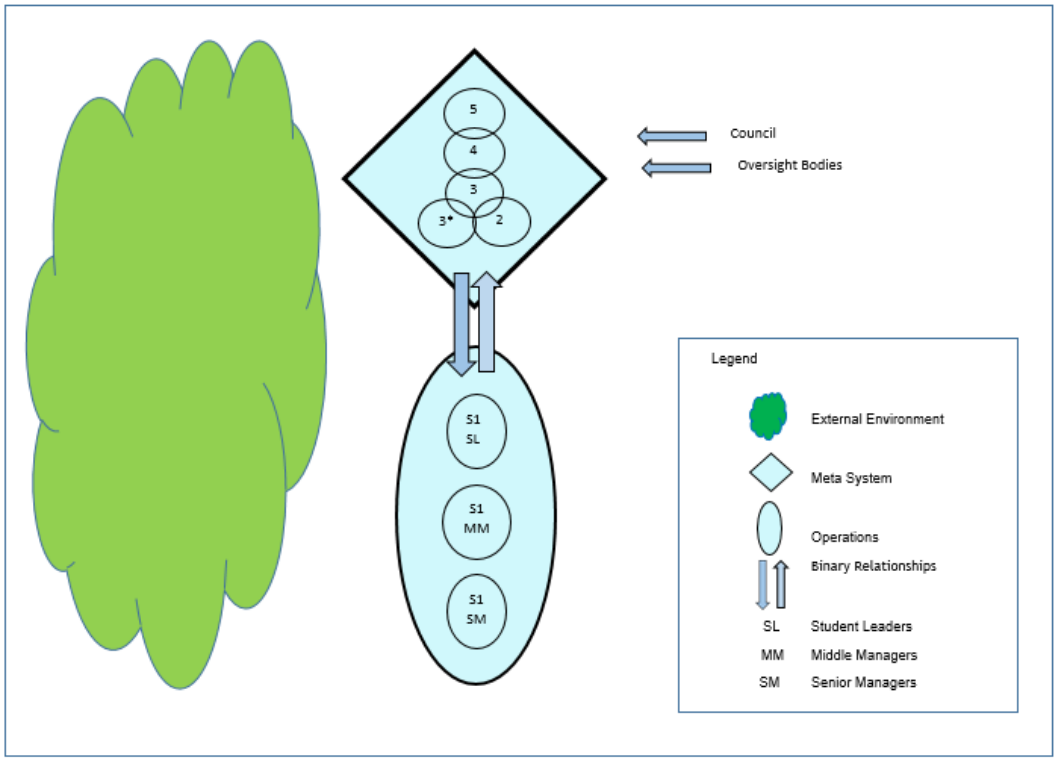



**Figure 8: Overview of the System-in-Focus**

In Figure 8, the broad outline of a VSM identifying the system-in-focus (University of Technology) and its multiple, binary interactions between the operational units with the Meta system, as well as between the operational units and the environment is depicted. Figure 8 also describes the engagement and interaction of the Meta system with its environment.

The operational or S1 system in Figure 8 engages in the primary activities of the institution and is where this study is primarily located. In examining how fit for purpose it was in its implementation tasks, was also where the diagnostic exercise began. Views on university leadership, particularly distributed leadership, was ascertained from amongst the key stakeholders in the study to enable a VSM diagnosis. Each of these stakeholder groups formed an operational unit and are in themselves viable systems.

Thematic data analysis was then used to evaluate both the operational system and the Meta system. The Meta system comprises systems 2, 3, 3*, 4 and 5 whose roles are that of coordination (S2), overview, daily management and audit, also known as the 'here and now' (S3 and S3*), future planning for long term viability or the 'outside and then' (S4) and policy (S5). The environment comprises the external world which also engages in a binary relationship directly with the institution. It is the effective collaboration of the operational systems, the meta system and the environment which lead to a healthy, viable system. This is the ideal VSM model against which the institutional VSM was compared and critiqued to obtain a diagnosis regarding its viability.

Oftentimes when viewing the VSM model, there was the danger of seeing this model as hierarchical in structure which is an incorrect perception. It is important to highlight that the meta system is there to provide a service to the operational units and should not be confused with a hierarchical bureaucracy or chain of command.

### 5.4.2 VSM System Diagnosis

This study focused on the S1 or operational systems (Figure 8) of a VSM to examine how viable it was in its implementation tasks. This was where the diagnostic exercise began. Viability of an organisation is described as "the competency of a system to exist, have an identity and survive despite disturbances" (Hildbrand and Bodhanya 2015: 187). However, a viable system is vulnerable to failure owing to inadequacies or faults in any of its five system and communication channels. As a diagnostic tool, this model allowed for organisational strengths to be identified and maintained and weaknesses to be corrected.

A VSM institutional diagnosis of the institution highlighted that whilst the basic structure was aligned to other Universities of Technology in general, there were specific areas of weakness. Figure 9 provides a graphic representation of the diagnosis and is followed by a descriptive table of this diagnosis.

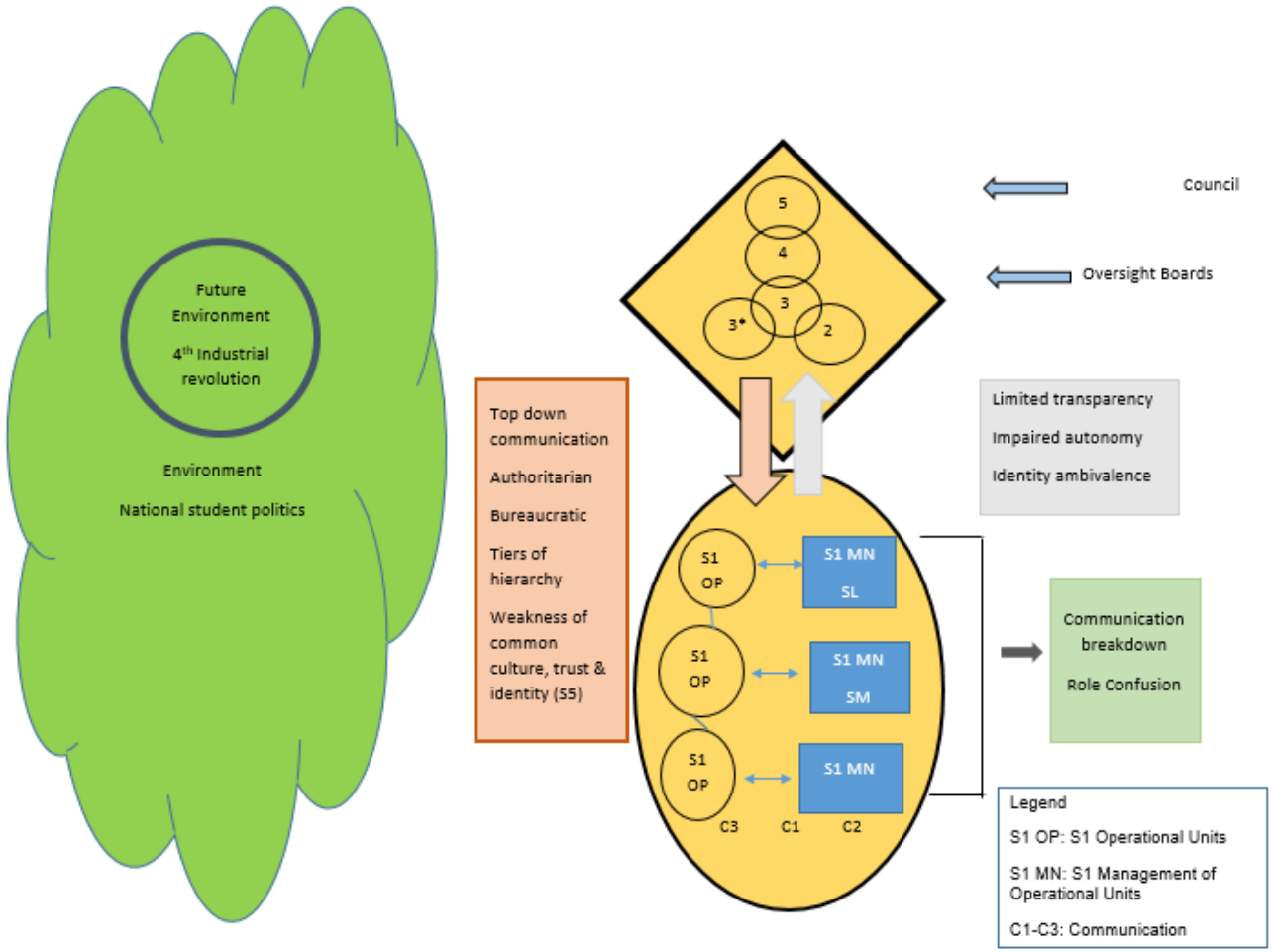



**Figure 9: Diagnostic VSM model of the System-in- Focus (Adapted from Brocklesby and Cummings 1996)**

## Table 11: Institutional VSM: Diagnosis and Description

| **Communication Channel C1** |
|---|
| • Restructuring of the institution has led to tiers of command before reaching the Vice Chancellor resulting in increased challenges in communication. This is contrary to cybernetic prerequisites for effective communication channels.<br>• Impaired communication and information channels exist between the various management stakeholders with their reporting staff as well as between student leaders and the general student body.<br>• Each of the stakeholder groups interviewed for this study are in and of themselves individual systems encompassed within the greater institution, and so formal communication was governed by the larger system i.e. the University of Technology as the institution. Communication at the C1 level regarding formal operations were disseminated via this larger system, but it would appear that stakeholders felt that they were not receiving the nuanced messages. |
| **Communication Channel C2** |
| • No discernible flaws identified by respondents. |
| **Communication Channel C3** |
| • Poor communication lines between the different stakeholders at S1 level, identified a flaw in C3 highlighting a communication deficiency in the engagements between the different stakeholder groups. This is the operational hub of the institution but there did not exist clear protocols regarding their roles and responsibilities. This was especially so for the middle managers but frustrations around this was also identified amongst the other stakeholder categories. In addition, all categories of stakeholders, but middle managers in particular, claimed that there was insufficient training for their posts. This has resulted in both middle and senior managers feeling weighed down and overburdened. |
| **System 1 (S1): Operational units** |
| • There were flaws at S1 level regarding autonomy and decision making, with all categories of stakeholders reporting their frustration at merely being seen as implementers of decisions taken at the upper echelons of power within the institution.<br>• Restricted autonomy at S1 level impacts their effective functioning especially as within a higher education institution the operations of the S1 stakeholders are distinctly different and complex. This reasoning even extend to the operations within each of the stakeholder groups. In other words “the greater the ‘market ‘diversity, |

the more autonomy S1 needs to provide 'specialized' service" (Brockllesby and Cummings 1996: 56).

- Also at the S1 level there was dissatisfaction expressed by some managers, both senior and middle, regarding the role of the trade union with many expressing the view that a unionised institution did not allow for effective management of operational staff.
- Other issues at the S1 level revolved around identity and role confusion particularly amongst middle managers, with these managers feeling overburdened and 'sandwiched' between the senior managers and operational staff. They are also of the belief that senior managers sometimes straddled their areas of operation, oftentimes undermining their authority. In certain instances, conflicting messages meant duplication of work.
- Both manager groups and student leaders at the S1 level expressed their frustration at being overloaded by hierarchy and bureaucracy which invariably impinged and affected their areas of operation. Especially for middle managers the authority delegated to them was seen as opaque and not always clearly defined. From the viewpoint of the VSM, it appeared that this severely handicapped any interaction between the S1 and Meta levels.
- At the S1 level, amongst the manager groups, in particular, were references made to a 'reign of fear' for making a mistake or incorrect decision. This has resulted in staff morale being affected, has stymied innovation and introduced a decision making paralysis.

**System 2 (S2): Co-ordination of operational units**

- Compromised or weak S2 or coordination activities were observed in this study. Each of the different stakeholder groups worked individually without taking cognisance of the other groups and impaired communication impeded the coordination of activities. This silo operations has caused frictions and misunderstandings between the various stakeholder groups which in turn impacted on work outputs.

**System 3 (S3): "Here and Now" of organisation e.g. Daily management, Decision making, Control systems**

- Decision making is primarily the prerogative of the Vice Chancellor and upper management. They are sequestered and remote from the stakeholder groups at S1.
- At the S3 level the lack of clearly defined roles, performance standards or functional control meant that middle managers (S1) in particular were reliant on the goodwill of their operational staff to get the job done. The staff strike brought this relationship

into imbalance. It also meant that individual managers were engaged in pursuing their own agendas rather than pursuing the goals of the institution.

- This also resulted in staff, particularly middle managers feeling side-lined or overlooked resulting in either demoralized staff or those who have left the institution.
- In directing the activities of S1 and S2, S3 was hampered by poor communication, bureaucracy and hierarchy as well as issues around trust and authenticity. This phenomenon is described by Beckford (1993: 247) as "the whole organisation operated in a hierarchical and bureaucratic manner, adherence to the rules, doing the "right thing" being more important than doing things right" (Beckford 1993: 247). The implications of this was that the recursive levels of operations within the institution were hampered.

**System 3* (S3*): Auditing and monitoring for S3**

- No discernible fault lines with the audit operations at the S3* were attested to. Whilst policies at the institution talk to standard, routine audit activities, sporadic checks were not identified in the interviews undertaken.

**System 4 (S4): Future planning for long term viability or the "Outside and Then"**

- S4 activity on the environment and future developments which could have bearing and influence on the institution from outside (student calls for free education and decolonised education) and into the future especially referencing the Fourth Industrial Revolution were identified by senior managers and student leadership. On the other hand, middle managers did not focus on this as an area of concern for them. Middle managers appeared to be more inward looking, more concerned with their role within the institution as opposed to the other two stakeholder groups who demonstrated some limited scanning or engagement with the outside environment as it related to them. The latter engagements though appear to be piecemeal and situational rather than a cohesive, holistic discussion on the institutions long term viability.

**System 5 (S5): Ultimate Authority; Policy**

- Constant changes in Vice Chancellors has led to rapid changes in systems and operations, causing confusion in coordination and operations.
- Mixed and disparate signals at the Meta system level (S5) led to uncertainty, confusion and ambivalence at the S2 level.
- Currently the vision and institutional identity is being recrafted (System 5). Straddling the old vision and the new messages being offered by the S5 has caused confusion with many of the stakeholders holding the belief that future strategies are hanging in the balance.

| |
|---|
| • There is recognition of the role of Council and Senate operating as an effective S5 with clearly defined protocols and purpose with which to oversee all of the universities functions and roles. However, at the upper management level, the rapid turnover in vice chancellors has negatively impacted the stability of S5.<br>• A general impression that the university's management board (Council at S5) should be more involved in policy making and setting future directions.<br>• Soft issues identified by the stakeholders in this study particularly around role, common identity, communication, leadership styles, accountability and trust, however talk to a weakness at the S5. |
| **External environment** |
| • The SRC at the institution is heavily influenced by national politics occurring in the external environment.<br>• Insufficient attention being placed on external environmental factors. With the arrival of the present Vice Chancellor the institution has become inward looking as the focus is on identifying wrongdoing. |

### 5.4.3 Summary of VSM Diagnosis

In general, the Meta system of the institution is seen as viable, functioning adequately and holding the centre together, albeit in a hierarchical, bureaucratic fashion. However, there are issues in terms of stakeholder 'soft issues'.

The S1 stakeholder groups expressed discontent and dissatisfaction. This unhappiness was not necessarily with the structure itself, however, their matters of contention were around roles, identity, communication, authenticity and transparency, that is, soft issues. It becomes apparent too that the strict emphasis on hierarchy and bureaucracy was a significant contributory factor to stakeholders' frustrations and discontent, especially as this impacted leadership practice at the institution. These are all issues that should be dealt with by a proper functioning Meta system especially as they impair the appropriate functioning of the communication channels and sub-systems of the VSM. In its absence, stakeholders interviewed spoke of informal

collaboration in order to circumvent the bureaucracy and hierarchy so as to get the work done.

One of the underlying principles of the VSM is the concept of variety described in Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety which states that only variety can absorb variety. In the case of this University of Technology, the control or Meta system authority as represented by the council and upper management demonstrated this requisite variety through their assurances to students, staff and prospective students that their needs will be satisfied and that the institution will "continually innovate in order to stay one step ahead of the competition" (Brocklesby and Cummings 1996: 50). An area of concern though was that of the middle managers who believed that they were not given the requisite authority to control their area of operation, often expressed by them as being 'sandwiched in the middle'. For them, being accorded this title should have been accompanied by the relevant authority. Instead, this only served to highlight that the managers "capacity for managing is inadequate for the variety absorption of the role" (Beckford 1993: 5).

There were also concerns expressed that the institution was focusing on the 'here and now' rather than on the 'outside and then' implying that the external environment was being ignored. Such an insular perspective does not augur well for a 21st century higher education institution facing national and global stressors. Other related issues raised were around free education and students demands for better funding, better housing and decolonised education, but these are stressors facing all higher education institutions nationally and are not specific to this institution. In general though, the institution appears compliant in this regard as the institution's ability to absorb variety is underpinned by the fact that this University of Technology forms part of a more comprehensive national higher education system, which serves as a guiding and monitoring force.

### 5.4.4 VSM Conclusion

On reflection, the researcher maintains that the holistic overview of an organisation provided by the VSM made it advantageous as a diagnostic tool. Whilst it could be viewed as a complex rather than a simple application, “it is highly practical, and it offers an insightful framework for thinking differently about organizations” (Brockelsby and Cummings 1996: 49). Although the issues raised were more ‘soft’ or of an operational nature, using this model allowed for it to be viewed against the wider organisational structure.

The essential findings of the VSM diagnosis indicated that the institution is a viable organisation in which the foundations and basic structure are sound and operational. The concerns raised were primarily ‘soft’ issues which do not require it to be broken down and built up from scratch, but could through commitment and institutional investment be easily dealt with. Using the VSM diagnosis was to provide organisational knowledge that informed the development of a more collegial, democratic approach to institutional leadership namely a distributed leadership model. This is discussed in part two of this chapter.

## 5.5 PHASE THREE: DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP MODEL

This is a discussion of the specific institutional model developed out of the data analysis of Phase one and Phase two. It has reference to research objective 5.

**Research Objective 5:** To develop a model based on distributed leadership which allows for co-operative, participatory governance and leadership practice in a higher education setting**.**

Post 1994, higher education institutions have seen the leadership issue present on their agendas. Such concerns are not specific to South Africa, globally these are also issues being grappled with (Giroux 2015; Middlehurst *et al.* 2009; Gosling *et al*. 2009). Previous leadership research (Hempsall 2014) has raised concerns that within the higher education terrain, institutions generally do not appear to be demonstrating capacity or readiness to operate within the knowledge era, particularly the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Alternate approaches to leadership within higher education have to be explored (Jones and Harvey 2017) as institutions face the complex challenges of competing in a globally competitive world, whilst also positioning themselves at the cutting edge in the development and dissemination of new knowledge.

This study argues that in the presence of discordance about a leadership model, and in line with the democratic ethos of the country, distributed leadership should be considered, especially as it is "an idea whose time has come" (Gronn 2000: 133) and which "displays a number of the hallmarks of survival" (Gronn 2008: 141). Within the South African context the African philosophy of Ubuntu espouses principles that resonate well with distributive leadership such as the collective and cooperative working of people (Bush 2007) aligned to participative leadership (Msila 2008). Furthermore, "in an era of democracy, distributive leadership continues to attract attention as a relevant model for the twenty first century" (Naicker and Mestry 2013: 99). By using a distributed leadership model, organisations are then able to benefit from the abilities of a broad section of its members by allowing them to demonstrate and extend their personal strengths as well as to develop and appreciate how a collaborative stance impacts the organisation as a whole (Harris 2008).

In determining the choice of distributed leadership as the model for this research, various journal articles on distributed leadership (Cannatelli *et al.* 2017; Jones *et al*. 2017; Bolden 2011; Spillane 2005), were examined to provide the framework for this study. Within the dynamic and complex terrain

that is higher education, no single 'heroic leader' can provide expert direction and knowledge, instead, it is the interaction of multiple stakeholders who provide this leadership and that within organisations distributed leadership has always existed, albeit in informal collaborations, which we need to recognise and utilise (Timperley 2005). It must be emphasised, though, that whilst distributed leadership is regarded as an emergent process, it cannot function without there being some person or entity being held accountable and that leadership practice at any institution of higher education, anywhere in the world, is governed by these formal leadership tiers which give it the accountability and gravitas that such organisations require.

Thus, a distributed leadership model allows organisations to benefit from the abilities of a broad section of its members by allowing those members to demonstrate and extend their personal strengths as well as to develop and appreciate how a collaborative stance impacts the organisation as a whole (Harris *et al*. 2016; Harris 2008).

### 5.5.1 Distributed Leadership *vis-à-vis* the VSM Diagnosis

The VSM diagnosis highlighted that S1 communication between the different stakeholders needed to be re-established. These operational units all worked alongside each other in siloes, communicating within formal bureaucracy. In addition these university stakeholders are described formally as leaders, but the "degree to which they are perceived as exercising leadership is contested" (Lumby 2012: 5). This then implied that leadership practice cannot be inflicted upon followers, they need to be part of the engagements and this was particularly true of the stakeholders interviewed, who expressed confusion about role and identity. This also aligned well with the VSM diagnosis of dysfunctional communication channels, where stakeholders bemoaned

decisions made at the upper echelons of university leadership being imposed upon them to implement, without their input, into its suitability and application.

Other factors to consider were issues of micro politics and power relations that influence and impact leadership. The thematic analysis discussed in Phase one and Phase two highlighted these issues and emphasised the hindrance to leadership practice that excessive bureaucracy and hierarchy imposed upon the institution. These factors too became important considerations in the postulation and development of any leadership model for this University of Technology.

Cognisance of other identified VSM flaws in the development of the model included the ‘outside and then’, that is looking to engage with the external environment and long term planning, as well as clearly defined policy matters. A serious threat to any institution’s viability would be if their policy “does not set a clear direction and rewards the behaviour it espouses or switches an imaginative manager with a “safe pair of hands" loses talented people and saps the initiative of those who stay as well as losing the investments made in gathering information and building knowledge” (Leonard 2000: 710). These elements too were noted in the development of the model.

Certainly in the case of this institution, the concept of heroic leadership is front and forward and encapsulated in the position of Vice Chancellor. Whilst a distributed framework recognises the importance of this traditional form of authority, this should not be at the expense of a participative, shared form of leadership. At the institution currently this singular leadership role has become the practice in a snowball effect of communication and authority downwards.

In Table 12 the study’s respondent groups views on distributed leadership are captured.

**Table 12: Overview of Stakeholders perspective on Distributed Leadership**

| |
|---|
| Acknowledgement by all stakeholders of the need to have a shared or distributed leadership model but were unclear as to the exact format. |
| A recognition that team based leadership practice would engender collegiality and cooperative working across all bands of university staff. |
| Affirmation that a hybrid model incorporating accountability lines might be the preference of the majority of stakeholders. |
| Awareness that singular top down managerialism breeds silo operations and bureaucratic rigidity. |
| Unanimous declaration from all stakeholders that using a hierarchical leadership model only serves to widen the gap between upper management and staff, including upper management and student leaders. |
| Distributed leadership seen as inclusive and empowering by the majority of interviewees. |
| Corroboration amongst all interviewed that any change in leadership style would have to be initiated and endorsed from the top. |
| Frustrations expressed by both senior and middle managers that there was no acknowledgement of the individual staff member's unique leadership and management contributions. |

## 5.6 PROPOSED MODEL OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP FOR A UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

The development of this model had to take cognisance of the complexities of the institutional system as often models are presented without any appreciation of their "articulation with the huge complex social context that makes them meaningful" (Espejo 2004: 672). Even though there is the view that distributed leadership provides an appropriate "fit" for universities (Jones and Harvey 2017: 128), they claim it has not been widely adopted within higher

education. Yet in managing complexity it is sense making to “distribute power, decision-making and implementation responsibilities” (Espejo 2004: 672) thus demonstrating inclusivity, collaboration and collegiality, concepts considered integral to the higher education sector and articulated by the research participants.

Mayrowetz (2008: 425) in his analysis of distributed leadership identified four uses for distributed leadership:

- A “theoretical lens” for looking at the practice of leadership.
- Distributed leadership as a means of “democracy”.
- As a way of strengthening “efficiency and effectiveness”.
- As a means of “human capacity building.”

The model of distributed leadership developed specifically for this institution, has attempted to incorporate these four uses. Leadership is therefore viewed as relational and practiced within a community of university practitioners and includes all the stakeholder groups studied in this research. However, this model does take cognisance of and gives due recognition to the fact that traditional vertical leadership is intrinsic to organisational success and this is seen in its incorporation in this model (Harris *et al*. 2007). Consequently, within such a shared, distributed perspective, leadership is now no longer the sole prerogative of a specific leader or principal but is ‘stretched’ across the organisation. However, it must be emphasised that whilst there is this emphasis on participatory engagement by multiple role players and non-formal leaders, distributed leadership is not a substitute for formal leadership but an addendum to it as supported by Jones *et al.* (2012) in their study on distributed leadership and the higher education sector. This too is incorporated into the model of leadership activity. The features of the institutional model is outlined in Table 13.

In developing this model, leadership was envisaged as complex and wide-ranging in line with the broad ontology of systems thinking. The soft, relational issues derived from the VSM institutional diagnosis of stakeholder leadership practice were also used to inform this model development. Herein, leadership is viewed as a participatory process by all stakeholders, irrespective of whether or not they formed part of the formal institutional structures. In this way their expert contributions and opinion could still be sought and engaged with in the influence and practice of university leadership. Thus, such inclusivity of leadership practice is more likely to get stakeholders to own and implement the decisions taken (Jones and Harvey 2017).

This proposed model does not replace the role of the institutional head but is seen instead as shared interactions, where leadership in teams serve as "vehicles for harnessing collective expertise" (Gronn 2000: 333). It is a hybrid framework of leadership activity where the role of the formal leader and institutional structure is maintained but aligned to a distributive stance (Jones *et al.* 2012; Scott *et al.* 2008). This is affirmed by Friedrich, Griffith and Mumford (2016: 313) who aver that "there is evidence, in fact, that both forms of leadership, hierarchical and collectivistic are necessary in some form and contribute, together, to team effectiveness". Retaining the current status quo but diffusing it with distributed leadership practice is aligned to the respondents' views that they were not discontent with the structure of the institutional leadership but instead expressed unhappiness with the softer issues discussed previously. Through this distributed leadership practice model, multi-stakeholder relational conflicts inherent in bureaucracies also become eroded (Fitzgerald *et al*. 2013).

This proposed model allows for all stakeholder groups to be included in the leadership dialogue, be given access to information and be part of decision making relevant to their areas of operation. This is in contrast to a top down approach with one way communication. This model emphasised the fact that distributed leadership, if practiced authentically, would result in multiple

stakeholders working in interdependent supportive roles contributing leadership skills and abilities when required. It is anticipated that such a multi stakeholder approach would result in increasing collegiality, empower stakeholders and result in positive service outcomes. This then addresses the complaints by stakeholders of silo operations, poor communication lines and bureaucratic impediments.

Middle managers, in this proposed model, are given their rightful place amongst the other stakeholders and are seen as significant contributors to leadership practice. Their role emerged as a crucial factor in leadership practice as asserted by Fitzgerald, Ferlie, McGivern and Buchanan (2013: 236) that "distributed leadership is enacted by a core of middle managers, with the navigation skills and translational mechanisms, using local knowledge, professional expertise and political and professional networks to transpose national mandates" onto the organisation. Thus, it must be reiterated that the model being offered does not interfere with the traditional structure and framework of the institution, but instead requires adjustments to the process of leadership to make it more inclusive and distributed across all the stakeholders. Other changes to the processes are clear and transparent communication channels, role identification and authentic engagement as "underlying relationship conflicts erode the concerted capacity of distributed change leadership" (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2013: 237).

Organisations today function within a fast changing VUCA world and the demands of a dynamic knowledge era namely the Fourth Industrial Revolution. To ensure institutional viability as they operate within these global challenges as well as the specific dynamics of a South African higher education landscape, the influence of the environment cannot be ignored. This external milieu is expected to significantly impact university leadership (Moloi *et al*. 2017; Jones and Harvey 2017; Badat 2015a) and is therefore an integral feature of this proposed model.

**Figure 10: Distributed Leadership Model for a South African University of Technology** (Adapted from Cannatelli *et al.* 2017)

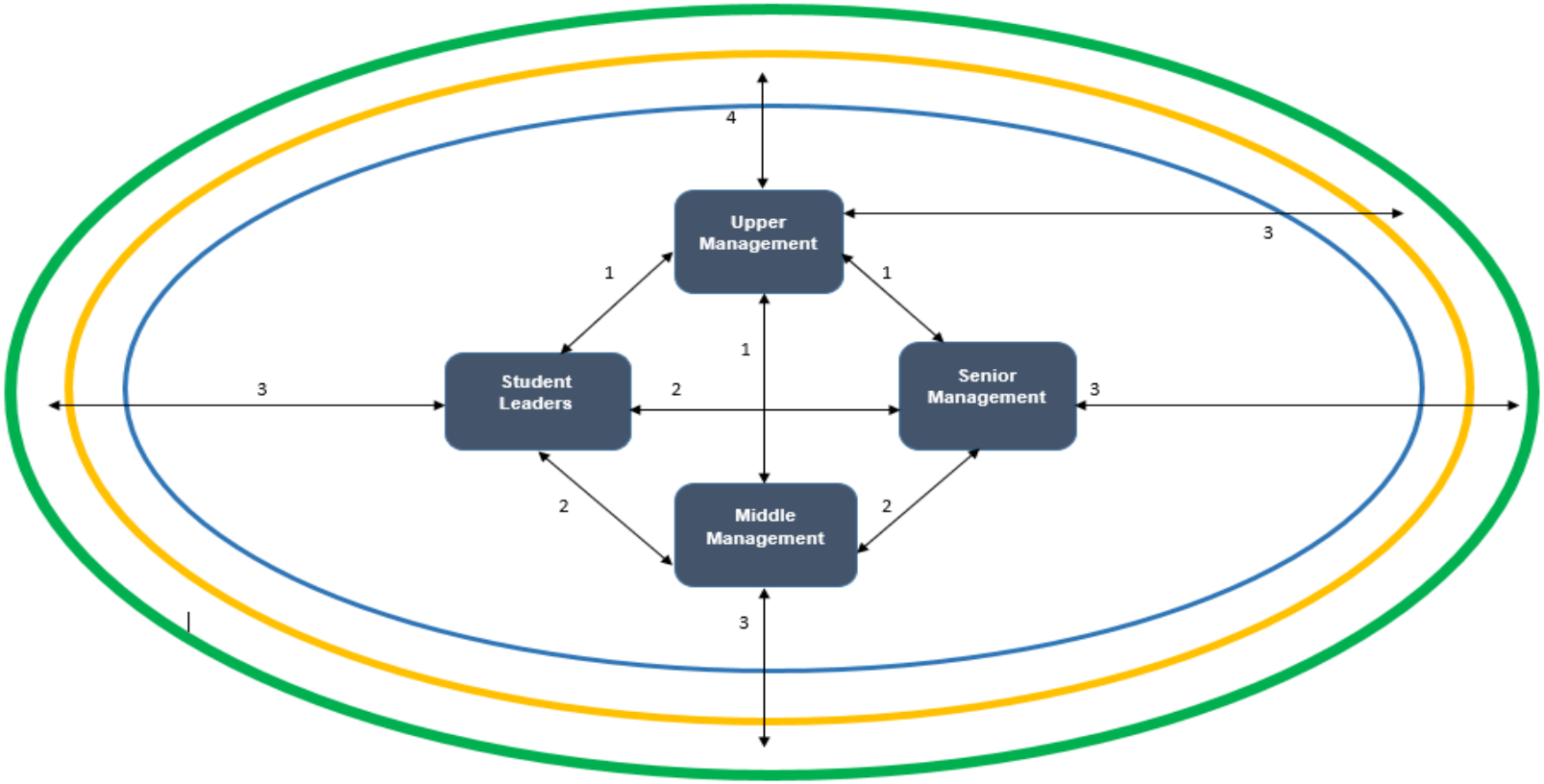


**Table 13: Features of a Distributed Leadership Model for a University of Technology**

| |
|---|
| Hybrid model incorporating traditional hierarchy infused with distributed leadership practice. It is a coordinated, interdependent model of leadership practice (Jones *et al.* 2012). |
| Leadership practice is widely shared and distributed thus enabling improvement in service delivery (Gronn 2000; Spillane *et al* 2004). |
| Stakeholder leadership activities are seen as intersecting and inextricable linked in the practice of leadership. |
| Takes cognisance of the multi-faceted nature of higher education leadership (Jones and Harvey 2017). |
| Leadership activity is broad based thereby ensuring its responsiveness to external and internal influences or factors. |
| Input of the individual stakeholder is recognised. Such an integrated approach means that all stakeholders are fully participant and contributing to leadership practice. This results in increasing the richness and complexity of leadership practice. |
| Autonomy of individual operations still ensured. |
| Engagements with the external environment seen as integral to the institutions viability (Jones *et al.* 2017). |
| Model engagement with external environment also means future forward thinking. Maintains relevance and viability of institution in knowledge era. |

It is suggested that this distributed leadership model would contribute to the development of significant stakeholder attributes which collectively would enhance leadership practice at the university (see Table 14). Important considerations focused on the issues of communication, authenticity and trust, amongst other soft issues identified as concerns by the stakeholders interviewed. Cognisance is taken of these factors, which this model incorporates into leadership practice through the direct engagements of all its stakeholders. This, in turn, contributes to collaborative sense making of issues pertinent to leadership practice (Vuori 2019) and addresses the notion of "steering at a distance" (Bundy 2005: 88). Its significance and inclusion in this model is an attempt to become more inclusive in terms of leadership and management, especially as this institution, in recent times, seems to have

reverted to a more managerialist and centralised governance practice. Other attributes that this specific model addresses is that of micro-politics. Even though leadership is practiced alongside the formal and traditional, by virtue of its distributed practice, this reduces the power play as noted in the purely vertical form of leadership.

**Table 14: Attributes of a Distributed Leadership Model for a University of Technology**

| |
|---|
| Multi stakeholder leadership capacity building. |
| Increased collaboration through engagements of formal and non- formal leaders. |
| Reduced hierarchical bureaucracy. |
| Increased communication, trust and collegiality amongst institutional stakeholders. |
| Multi-stakeholder environmental engagements as response to global and national dynamics. |

In conclusion, it would be simplistic to assume that changes in these causal relationships would immediately reap positive results but it is anticipated that over time and with increasing trust, collegiality, diminishing hierarchical bureaucracy and clear communication channels, there will become observable changes in leadership practice noted. It must be emphasised, though, that institutional changes would require a culture of courageous and open conversations to be initiated and nurtured (Heifetz *et al*. 2009). In fact, Heifetz *et al.* (2009:6) go onto assert that for leadership to be widely and responsibly distributed it is necessary to "mobilize everyone to generate solutions by increasing the information flow that allows people across the organization to make independent decisions and share the lessons they learnt from innovative efforts".

## 5.7 SUMMARY

Using the flexibility of a qualitative research approach combined with systems thinking, provided the researcher with a rich vein of different data sources from which to do this analysis. These research findings were derived from a data triangulation process in which data from the semi-structured interviews were triangulated with the rich picture themes and complemented with archival documentary data as well as participant observations. This provided the researcher with a rich vein of information. In this chapter the results or outcomes obtained from the application of the Soft System Methodology 'rich pictures' workshop, the qualitative interviews which informed the Viable System Model diagnosis and the development of the distributed leadership model specific to this University of Technology was analysed and discussed. The discourse and recurring themes of these engagements was also described and discussed. To ensure that that this study did not fall short of Malterud's (2001: 486) descriptor that "a thorough, well prepared and well documented analysis is what distinguishes scientific approach from superficial conjecture" the researcher aimed for scientific rigour in the analysis of the data through systemic coding for theme development, reporting and discussion, but also by ensuring that comparisons were made to allow for alternate interpretations. In the following chapter these results will be discussed and recommendations for future research suggested.

# 6 CHAPTER SIX – DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the core outcomes of each of the research objectives, before focusing on the contributions and value, as well as limitations of this study. Recommendations for future research are explored, and the chapter concludes with a condensed overview of the study.

Higher education leadership is complex and dependant on a variety of interdependent factors (Hempsall 2014). It is important however to place the study in its social and political perspective (Day, Gronn and Salas 2006). Despite the raft of legislation, post 1994, to right the injustices of apartheid, this study questioned if the shape and form of university leadership had transformed. The period 2015-2016 witnessed the national #FeesmustFall campaign by higher education students, demanding free education and expressing their frustrations at a complicated, socio-economic, cultural, ideological and political problem that is highly contested (Moloi *et al.* 2017). This then supported the focus of this study into the participative role of multi stakeholders in institutional governance. In particular, the inclusion of middle managers was considered to be particularly significant in view of the paucity of South African studies (Smit 2006) and even within the international higher education arena (Harper 2015; Whitchurch 2007).

## 6.2 THE SYSTEMS APPROACHES AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

A systems thinking approach was used so as to best understand the university as a complex social system, one in which the constituent parts of an organisation should not be examined in isolation. This, in practice, meant that

issues should be viewed holistically, from the perspective of the bigger picture rather than a narrow focus, to obtain effective solutions to problems (Anderson *et al.* 1997) and offered an alternate approach to problem solving. Another advantage of using a systems thinking approach was that it had already been used in problem solving, using multiple perspectives of different stakeholders (Cabrera *et al.* 2008). The research process was conducted in three phases and will be discussed accordingly.

### 6.2.1 PHASE ONE

This phase was the application of the SSM rich picture technique as a 'finding out' process. It offered a nonstandard alternative to a textual description of the problem (Lewis 1992) providing a pictorial representation of the stakeholders understanding of the current problem situation.

#### *6.2.1.1 SSM Rich Picture*

**Research Objective 1:** To understand leadership and its practice at the university.

The SSM rich picture demonstrated its efficacy as a practical and popular application of systems thinking (Mingers and White 2010) and this technique served its purpose as an exploratory approach to 'finding out'. The thematic findings of this exercise also provided a base-line for the semi-structured interviews of the VSM.

In general, this exercise yielded primary concerns around process and soft issues of leadership at the university. Issues around communication channels, hierarchy and the external environment were common to all stakeholders and

highlighted similar stakeholder frustrations. However, middle managers and students also had their own peculiar issues where both groups felt side-lined and excluded from university management. This 'finding out' process highlighted broad issues and was a holistic overview of the stakeholders' discontent but for deeper insights into the problematic concerns it was necessary to engage through qualitative semi-structured interviews and focus groups to obtain a more comprehensive understanding.

### 6.2.2 PHASE TWO

In this phase semi-structured multi stakeholder interviews and a student focus group enabled research objectives two to four to be thematically examined through a VSM diagnosis.

#### *6.2.2.1 VSM Diagnosis*

**Research Objective 2:** To determine senior managements understanding and practice of participatory, co-operative and distributed leadership.

**Research Objective 3:** To determine the understanding and practice of leadership among middle managers at a South African higher education institution.

**Objective 4:** To determine the impact and role of student leadership in co-operative management and governance and understand if this is supported by the universities governance structures.

The distinctive feature of a VSM analysis and diagnosis is that each application is unique and where "no two organizations will have exactly the same VSM

profile" (Brockelsby and Cummings 1996: 57). This case study has confirmed the efficacy of the VSM as an insightful tool for organisational analysis and diagnosis in that it provided a holistic, system wide appreciation of the institution and its issues of concern. Support for this confirmation follows in the discussions below.

A key priority for any organisation is to maintain viability or else they could "lose their way, become uncertain of their purposes and will tend to become highly stressful for the individuals who work in them and highly inefficient in their achievements" (Hardman 2016: 126). The viability of any institution is impacted by not only its external considerations, but also acknowledges the significance of its internal homeostasis, amongst which are leadership issues. Using the prism of a VSM diagnosis a variety of soft issues were identified that highlighted and pointed to a conflictual, dysfunctional relationship between the Meta system (oversight bodies) and S1 operational categories.

The responses of all categories of stakeholders indicated that the issues at the root of the stakeholder unhappiness resided within the domain of the upper management. Because of the institutional practice of top down communication and 'ivory tower' leadership style and with restricted or conflicted messages being returned upwards, the upper echelons of institutional management appeared not to be aware of the situation on the ground. More perversely though, there could also be the argument that by keeping these stakeholders in a constant state of flux and frustration allowed upper management to rule with an 'iron fist'. This could also be interpreted as the response of formal, upper leadership believing that in the face of student and staff protests and increasing national and global demands, 'strong' management and leadership was required.

The VSM diagnostic exercise also revealed inadequately functioning S1 stakeholders as not communicating effectively but rather working alongside each other. In other words, the key operational players demonstrated their

leadership through “silo” operations rather than collegial, shared participatory behaviours. This dysfunctionality was particularly observed by middle managers, who felt they were not being supported by their senior managers and compressed or ‘sandwiched’ between the senior manager and operational staff. Levels of collegiality amongst all categories of staff and student leaders at the institution were low and interpersonal, collaborative relationships weak. Thus communication lines amongst the university stakeholders are strained and in some instances even described as toxic. This does not augur well for the viability of an organisation which needs to be able to withstand external or environmental factors affecting it.

These are all relational soft issues which are well within the purview of upper management to correct. People concerns impact the organisation through inadequate functioning and coherence of several of the VSM’s subsystems and communication channels (Hildbrand 2013). Such issues should be addressed, in the main, through the offices of the upper management but responsibility and oversight still should reside with the Council of the university as the ultimate authority. Whilst these soft people centred issues are relatively uncomplicated and manageable to rectify and redress the outcomes could be substantive and positive for the institution. However, as with all people related matters, there must be seen to be demonstrable good will in engaging with stakeholders or it could be viewed as merely paying lip service to changes being implemented.

Constant comparisons were made between the former and current vice chancellors. There were nostalgic yearnings expressed for the collegial, democratic, open door policy practised by the previous vice chancellor as compared to the current vice chancellors hierarchical managerial style. This “backward view” rather than a “front and forward perspective” does not augur well for the viability of an organisation if its stakeholders are steeped in nostalgia.

Institutions need to be proactive in ensuring that they are able to deal with rapid 21st century environmental and technological changes, such as the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and specific national challenges such as decolonised education and free higher education for all. As discussed in the earlier chapters higher education institutions are facing global and national stressors, and with the incipient Fourth Industrial Revolution this requires a fully functioning, cohesive and viable institution to withstand and adapt itself to these rapid changes. Institutional stakeholders will play a significant role in ensuring not just the viability but the survival of organisations so it becomes imperative that 'soft' people related issues are dealt with.

#### *6.2.2.2 Stakeholder perspectives*

Even though the systems thinking approach used a holistic perspective and this is the way the data was reported, there were nonetheless the unique aspects of each stakeholder group which need to be acknowledged. These stakeholder insights were particularly important for the development of a distributed leadership model. Such a perspective implies that,

> Changes in one part of the system will have knock–on effects elsewhere, and patterns of activity combine to produce system level effects that could not be anticipated in advance, and which could not be dictated through command and control (Bolden, Jones, Davis and Gentle 2015: 13).

**Senior managers**

At the senior management level, these stakeholders were critical of what they deemed to be 'steering at a distance" (Bundy 2005: 88) from the upper managerial echelons of the university.Governance at the institution is regarded by these stakeholders as centralised (top-down), rigid (hierarchical and

bureaucratic) with limited room for senior managers to manoeuvre (restricted autonomy).

There was a clear recognition amongst senior managers that they face considerable difficulties in practising their leadership role (Bryman and Lilley 2009). Within such an environment many of these senior managers have become 'risk averse' and only do what is definitively expected of them as this is an easily defendable position (Hempsall 2014). However, it is suggested by this researcher that whilst such an approach may not have long-term sustainability, it could, nonetheless, have an adverse impact on the organisation. A deep-rooted effect of this phenomenon of control and command leadership is that "the effect of the collateral damage that occurs when those being led are not engaged and do not trust their leader, is unpredictable because of how long the effects of such damage last" (Hempsall 2014: 388). What also surfaced during the interviews is that the role of the senior manager had become burdensome for one person to manage and should be revisited and redefined (Hempsall 2014). In other words, implying that this is not a solo position but should be shared practice.

**Middle managers**

The researcher concurs that there are academic conversations within the management literature pointing to the importance of middle managers in making a significant contribution to substantive organisational change, but not receiving due recognition by senior management (Branson *et al*. 2016; Hempsall 2014; Clegg *et al*. 2005). Middle managers believe their role is that of 'second fiddle' to their more senior counterparts (Harding, Lee and Ford 2014).

The middle managers in this study indicated that they were not properly supported in their leadership role and this found support in the literature (Floyd

2016; Davis 2013; Clegg and McCauley 2005). What clearly emerged was, as a cohort, this group of stakeholders were not to be considered a homogenous grouping but were diversified and splintered (Thomas and Linstead 2002). This was not just the obvious differences of academic vs student support vs administrative middle managers, but also in the way they saw their role and position within the university. This has been described by Davis (2013: viii) as those "who operate within a machine bureaucracy, create systems within systems, in order to cope with organisational demands".

Whilst middle management is oftentimes described as a "multi-faceted phenomenon" (Clegg and McAuley 2005: 19) the findings of this study also confirmed that middle managers do not believe that their concerns are being taken seriously and often feel disempowered by the lack of trust and confidence displayed by the institutional hierarchy, in particular their senior managers (Davis 2013). The anomaly of their position was that whilst they did not receive much support from their seniors, they indicated that they in turn, provided much more collegial managerial assistance to their subordinates. It is suggested by Clegg *et al.* (2005: 28) that "corporate bureaucracies may serve as a substitute for the lack of comprehensive development (as opposed to growth) of the middle management cadre" and could very well explain the sentiments expressed by the current cohort under study.

Research evidence suggests that if the institution continues with the "culture of institutional neglect" (Floyd 2016: 179) then the significant role of middle managers would continue to be contested and undervalued. This study suggests that this group is the backbone of the university and at the interface of the university leadership and management system, in other words the engine room, which if continuously neglected could seriously impact the viability of the institution. This is supported by Fitzgerald *et al*. (2013) who contend that those in power need to take cognisance of middle managers if significant changes in leadership are to be institutionally realised.

**Student leaders**

Student leaders' participation within the leadership structures is a democratic prerequisite for all South African institutions (Luescher-Mamashela *et al.* 2014; Mbambo 2013; Luescher 2005) and the student leaders interviewed were all aware of this. Generally, student leaders did not believe that as important stakeholders at the university, they were fully engaged in participatory or shared leadership, even on issues that related directly to them. Support for this perception by students is described as "a more subdued topic in the literature" (Luescher 2005: 1). In general, student leaders at this institution demonstrated their leadership activities across a broad range, but the power balance was still tilted in favour of the institutional managers as their "influence depends on the extent to which the powerful role players are prepared to concede to their "demands" (Mbambo 2013: 56). Student leaders articulated their frustrations at being viewed as transient stakeholders, who were just passing through and whose opinions therefore did not carry much weight. In general though, these students were well aware of their legal rights to participate in institutional leadership and did admit to having access to other more combative, militant displays such as student protests (Luescher 2005). This was in sharp contrast to European students who criticised their lack of institutional participation describing it as "antiquated, out of touch with young people" and "ineffective when it comes to decision making" (Planas, Soler, Fullana, Pallisera and Vila 2013: 578).

In South Africa, student leaders and their leadership practice have been inextricably linked with national politics (Mekoa 2018; Luescher *et al.* 2017; Moloi *et al.* 2017; Naicker 2016; Thobakgale 2001) and this is no less true of student leaders at this higher education institution. National issues at the macro level are those which get student leaders recognised for political mobility upward so that they often abandon the mundane of everyday leadership for more high visibility ones such as #FeesmustFall campaigns (Luescher *et al.* 2017; Naicker 2016). In this way their institutional leadership

role may come off second best to one in which their national profile is raised and highlights an area of possible conflict irrespective of what leadership model the university adopts. Nonetheless, student leaders as stakeholders are a potent and powerful group which institutional management would do well to recognise and incorporate fully into a participative distributed leadership, especially as many go onto the national stage and become future political leaders (Luescher-Mamashela and Mugume 2014).

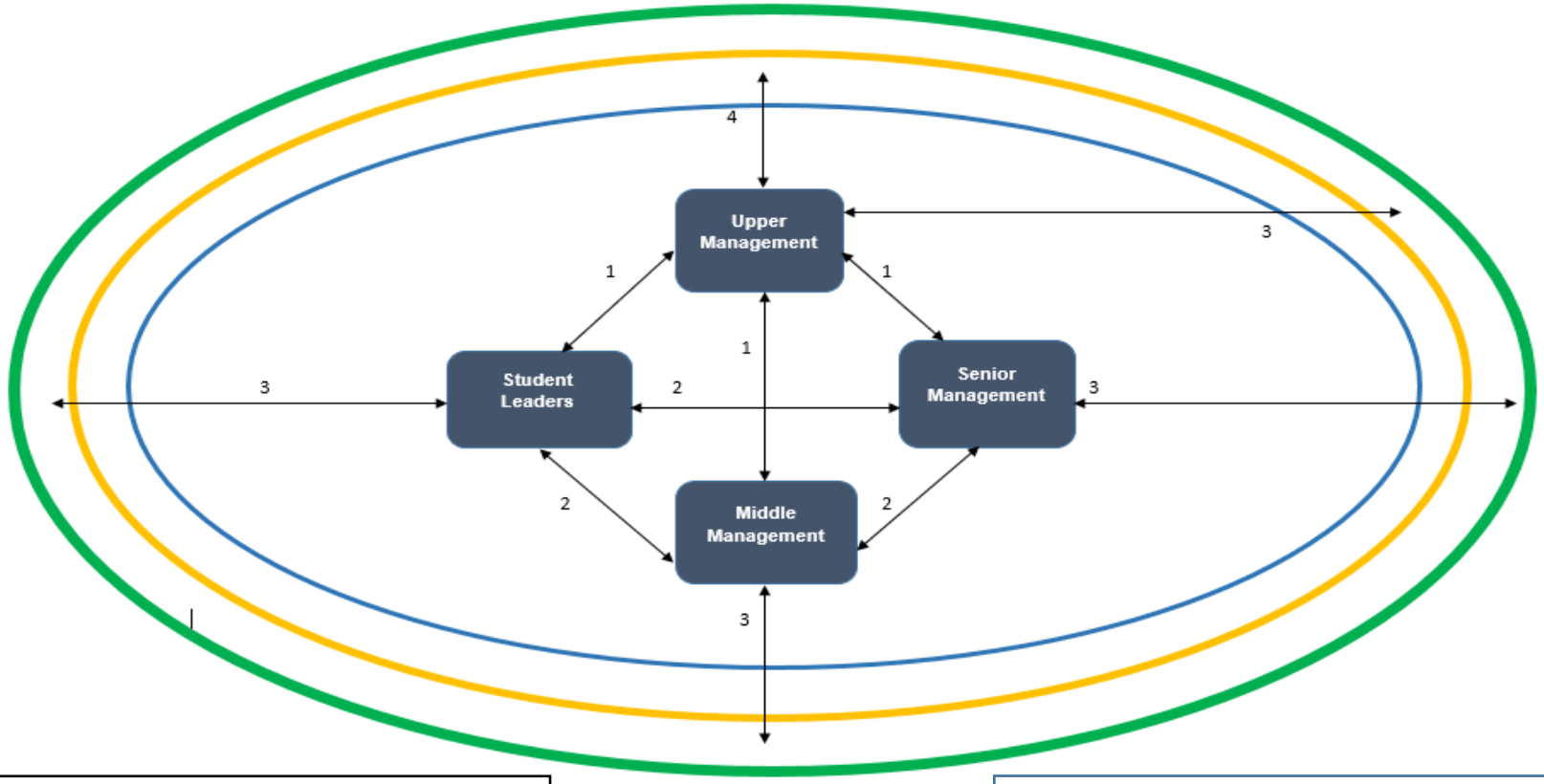
### 6.2.3 PHASE THREE

This phase saw the development of the distributed leadership model based on the data obtained from phases one and two.

#### *6.2.3.1 Distributed leadership model for a University of Technology*

**Research Objective 5:** To develop a model based on distributed leadership which allows for co-operative, participatory governance and leadership practice in a higher education setting.

**Figure 11: Distributed Leadership Model for a South African University of Technology** (Adapted from Cannatelli *et al.*




**LEGEND:**

- External Environment
- Traditional Institutional Boundary
- Distributed Leadership (DL) Practice

**DESCRIPTION:**

1. DL Engagement with Upper Management
2. DL Practice amongst Internal Stakeholders
3. Engagement with external stakeholders
4. Engagement of Upper Management with Council

A final outcome of this research activity was the development of a model of distributed leadership for a South African University of Technology. Universities in the 21st century are facing unparalleled challenges and the only way to deal with higher education complexity is to implement new innovative technologies in its design (Liber 1998). In addition, leadership within higher education is complex and dependent upon a number of interdependent factors (Hempsall 2014) and "can no longer rely on simple notions of top down, command-and-control leadership, based on the idea that workers are merely interchangeable drones" (Pearce 2007: 355). A distributed approach has been found to foster engagement of a cross section of university staff (Jones, Harvey, Hamilton, Bevacqua, Egea and McKenzie 2017). There is substantive evidence in the literature, that this form of leadership practice leads to increased autonomy and empowerment of experts holding non formal positions, thereby allowing them to engage and implement decisions (Jones *et al.* 2017). This supports the development of a model of distributed leadership, specific to this university, as a more palatable alternative to bureaucratic leadership, as it allows for organisations to be reconfigured as communities (Hempsall 2014).

Emerging from the stakeholder engagements was the view that the top down bureaucratic model, in its traditional form was not supported and they instead endorsed a more relational distributed leadership approach (Hempsall 2014; Pearce 2004). The call by institutional stakeholders for widening and opening up the boundaries of leadership (Woods *et al.* 2004) was also incorporated into the proposed model as this form of post-heroic leadership (Fletcher 2004) saw communication amongst all stakeholders as key to building a viable institution. This openness of boundaries was extended to include the external environment allowing for strong external relationships and partnerships to evolve (Woods *et al.* 2004) especially as distributed leadership is the engagement of groups of people working towards a common goal.

The context in which leadership is practiced also impacts its resonance. There are thought leaders in the field (Cannatelli *et al.* 2017; Diamond and Spillane 2016; Bush and Glover 2012; Bolden *et al.* 2008,2009; Bryman 2007) who share the view that those who practice leadership in higher education are cognisant of the significance of context, and usually dismissive of generalised solutions to specific problems. In other words, it is being postulated that leadership is better understood when it is viewed in relation to its practice in the workspace (Gronn 2002). The model developed here finds resonance in the expanded model of distributed leadership proposed by Cannatelli *et al.* (2017) in which the different applications of distribute leadership is explored (see Figure 2) in particular, that of relationships outside of the organisational boundary. Cannatelli *et al*. (2017: 599) used their study to extend the understanding of distributed leadership "beyond a static and monolithic" view of leadership to one that extends organisational boundaries and hierarchies. In the model developed in this study this extended boundary is termed the external environment.

Distributed leadership has for many years been an influential concept in the educational arena and has made significant contribution to leadership practice within higher education (Vuori 2019; Jones *et al*. 2012), being well suited to organisational learning within a knowledge economy (Hartley 2010). If we accept the notion that there is no singular or unidirectional leadership focus for higher education institutions and that one form of leadership is not a replacement for another, then distributed leadership is seen as an approach complementary to the traditional forms of leadership (Bolden and Petrov 2014; Bolden 2010; Harris 2007). In fact, it is the idea of the engagement of people, across the institution, collectively building institutional capital which resonated with all those who interviewed for this study. This research, supported by Vuori (2019), also queried the contention by Gosling *et al.* (2009) that distributed leadership within higher education settings was essentially just rhetoric. In this study, distributed leadership as a form of institutional practice found strong support from its participants.

The greatest benefit of this model was that with more participative leadership the 'power' of the top down approach would be eroded. This study found resonance in the comment that "most organizations are over-managed and under-led (particularly in times of change and uncertainty)" (Kotter 1990 quoted in Middlehurst *et al.* 2009: 314). The concept of bureaucracy was anathema to the stakeholders generally, who saw it as impinging on their autonomy and just reinforced the 'silo mentality' and operations of the current system. This 'silo mentality' frustrated them, enabled decision making to become delayed or stuck in the 'pipeline' and merely served to reinforce an autocratic stranglehold on the institution. Such critique and dissatisfaction with higher education leadership is not unique to the current study but in a United Kingdom higher education study is described by Gosling *et al.* (2009: 305) as "a rather thorough dissing of leadership".

The research data indicated that there was no single, uniform vision as to what stakeholders viewed as ideal leadership. Instead, a widespread desire for changes to be made to the current leadership style and model was noted, especially where the idea of a distributed leadership model found resonance. Amongst middle managers, in particular, was the perception that with this distributive approach there would be less role confusion and improved space within which they could practice their management and leadership.

Whilst the study revealed a strong upper management and bureaucratic hold over the institution this may not be as contradictory in relation to a shared stance. This is especially pertinent when viewed *vis-à-vis* the observations of Bennett *et al.* (2003: 9) that "the view of distributed leadership as concerted action through relationships allows for strong partners in relationships which at the same time entail power disparities between them". This viewpoint is supported by Woods *et al. (*2004) that strong senior leadership is not contrary to distributed leadership practice and does not mean the absence of hierarchical authority but could mean work done in teams (Woods 2010). In fact there is the school of belief that believes that successful organisations are

those who “meld strong personalized leadership at the top with distributed leadership” (Harris *et al.* 2007 quoting Graetz 2000). The model developed for this University of Technology incorporates this hierarchy, whilst allowing for communities of distributed leadership practice to occur across and between all tiers of the university’s hierarchy. This model allowed for the traditional forms of leadership, to co-exist with a distributed stance in which there is no disharmony. This then is a perspective in which distributed leadership “equates with the human potential available to be released within an organisation” (Harris *et al*. 2007).

The need to develop student leadership is also not just a South African phenomenon but an international quest to determine the most appropriate structure and process to enable student leaders’ participation in institutional management and leadership (Planas *et al.* 2013). The practice of distributed leadership within a safe, nurturing and learning space such as a university could help to develop the next generation of future national leaders through mentoring, guidance and being led by example.

In addition, higher education institutions cannot work in isolation from its external environment. Its position in society is inextricably linked to knowledge creation and community engagements and if cognisance of this is not taken into consideration it will be unable to “originate new opportunities and face environment’s challenges” (UNESCO 2017 reported in Rezk *et al.* 2019). To overcome this hurdle the distributed model for the institution incorporated the significant engagement of the university stakeholders with the environment for optimal viability of the institution.

For the future sustainability of the institution however, the use of a distributed leadership model is strongly mooted since “for leaders to operate effectively, they not only need to have a very clear sense of where they are going and what they hope to achieve, they must also be able to engage all stakeholders in this vision” (Hempsall 2014: 392).

## 6.3 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

The following areas were seen as making a positive contribution to the extant body of knowledge on higher educational leadership.

**Table 15: The Research Contributions**

| |
|---|
| This study investigated middle manager contribution to university leadership, unlike previous studies which primarily looked at the role of the university's upper echelons (CHE 2016; Hempsall 2014; Bryman 2007). This study addressed the sparse knowledge around middle managers role in South African higher education (Smit 2006). |
| Through investigating multi stakeholder perceptions of university leadership, primarily distributed leadership, the role of participative, shared leadership was investigated. There is concern in the literature about inconsistent or unsubstantial empirical evidence underpinning leadership theories (Harris 2007; Middlehurst *et al.* 2009), so studies such as this will have contributed to correcting this deficit. |
| Another unique contribution was the use of systems methodology to investigate university leadership, meaning that issues were analysed from a macro level, providing a holistic systemic overview of the issues unearthed. This implied that the researcher did not get bogged down with the minutiae. |
| Contemporary literature on leadership generally places emphasis on people rather than systems (Alvesson and Svengingsson 2003; Bartlett and Ghoshal 1995) so this study with its systemic overview allowed for a whole different perspective on multi-stakeholder leadership. It also provided a distinctive profile of the specific organisation, unique to itself (Brockelsby *et al.* 1996). |
| This study determined that the use of a systems lens would be well employed by university leaders who are determining strategies for effective and relevant management. |
| Using qualitative research methods allowed for 'rich, thick' data to emerge, which strongly reinforced and provided a firm foundation for the diagnostic application of the Viable System Model. |
| Whilst it is acknowledged by this researcher that this is a case specific study, which cannot be generalised, it could still be argued that that because of the interpretative nature of the findings, they could be used to compare findings in other similar situations (Bryman 2012; Floyd 2012). |

## 6.4 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Limitations are an inherent part of all studies. The research was conducted at a University of Technology, thereby implying that the results or outcomes would only be generalisable to same or similar institutions.

The use of a systems methodology also implied that a broad worldview of the situation was obtained in which the individual voice and differences are muted. Perhaps a more focused study on specific groups of stakeholders might ameliorate this defect. Another issue regarding the use of methodology used was that the VSM diagnostic application does not place much credence on soft issues and was consequently an area of identified weakness (Hildbrand 2013; Hildbrand and Bodhanya 2014).

On a structural level, the researcher identified limitations with the use of qualitative research as it produced condensed, thick data which potentially hampers its replicability (Bryman 2012). Generalising from such data was also problematic as the results obtained are applicable only to this specific institution and not necessarily to other such institutions.

## 6.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Arising out of this study the researcher has identified several areas for future research and these are described in Table 16.

**Table 16: The Recommendations**

| |
|---|
| The viable systems model appears to be reticent on the impact of soft issues on the functioning of a viable system (Hildbrand 2013; Espego and Gill 1997) and identifies an area for more focused research (Hildbrand *et al.* 2017). |
| Increase in evidence based research on higher education institutions to better inform leadership practice where "leadership would be better served by understandings more closely connected to the realities of workplace practice" (Gronn 2002: 441). |
| Research into the application of distributed leadership within a higher education institution would enable increased understanding of leadership in this sector. With the paucity of evidence based research in this area, this opens up new opportunities to also explore leadership through longitudinal, qualitative field studies (Middlehurst *et al.* 2009). |
| There also arises the question, for further study, of whether a distributed leadership style could function and survive within a hierarchical bureaucracy. In particular what is the intersection of vertical vs distributed leadership? |
| Is leadership within higher education different to that in any other industry? Although distributed leadership is not a relative 'newcomer' on the leadership scene more research is required on its efficacy and effectiveness as a model for higher education. According to Middlehurst *et al.* (2009: 313) "the jury was out" on this issue and could be an area for future research on whether the higher education arena is unique to itself or could borrow learnings from other organisations. |
| These results are not conclusive about what the impact of a multi stakeholder, distributed leadership style at a South African higher education institution would be like. Perhaps an ethnographic approach would be required in this instance. |
| Group and power dynamics at play in leadership practice is another area which should be investigated (Bolden 2011). "Any research that does not support greater clarity about power relationships and micro politics is likely to generate data that do not fully explain the influence of situation on leadership" (Fasso *et al.* 2016: 209). |

## 6.6 CONCLUSION

Distributed leadership should be studied within the specific social context of that organisation (Day, Gronn and Salas 2006) which is why this research was conducted within a "realistic organisational setting" (van Ameijde *et al.* 2009)

of a higher education institution. The social context of any institution is “intense, dynamic and multifaceted” (Day *et al.* 2006: 213) thereby contributing rich, possibly untapped data which was true of the findings of this study.

Using a systems thinking approach, namely the VSM supported by the rich picture technique of the SSM, offered the researcher a toolkit which allowed her to evaluate institutional leadership in a holistic way. This big picture then informed the development of a model of distributed leadership specific to this institution.This aligned with the literature (Hardman 2016; Hildbrand *et al.* 2015; Brockelsby *et al.* 1996) in demonstrating that the VSM was a valuable diagnostic instrument which allowed for the diagnosis of the whole institution whilst still considering the needs of its significant parts, that is, the multiple stakeholders in this case (Hoverstadt *et al.* 2005; Schwaninger 2006; Hildbrand *et al.* 2014; 2015). A drawback however is “the theoretically daunting manner in which the model has been presented, and the lack of practical, easy to follow, case studies” (Brockelsby and Cummings 1996: 49).

The development of a leadership model that took cognisance of the demands of its stakeholders, but more importantly, that aligned itself to open engagements not only within the institution itself but also to the environment, is relevant for any 21st century higher education institution. The student protests of 2016-2017 in particular, show this new dynamic at play within South African higher educations. At its very essence this requires a mind-set change from managers and leaders for power to be more widely distributed and inclusive, and stakeholder engagements to occur with more transparency and open communication lines. It is also incumbent upon those in authority to not only provide the mechanisms and structures for this distributive leadership to practice and thrive but to support these initiatives by practicing it themselves. There is seen to be a need for leadership to be responsibly distributed, substituting traditional formal hierarchical authority “with organizational bandwidth which draws on collective intelligence” (Heifetz *et al.* 2009:6). However, whilst the concept of distributed leadership has found resonance

within higher education, there is caution expressed as to whether the term "performs a rhetorical function that may well outstrip its ability to hold up under scrutiny as a true descriptor of leadership practice within the sector" (Gosling *et al.* 2009: 303). In addition, whilst the academic literature proliferates with studies on school leadership, within higher education such a body of work is rather sparse (Lumby 2012). These are all considerations which would need to be tested in future studies.

The effectiveness of leadership practice is impacted by the situational context in which the participants find themselves, so to this end there can be no prescriptive one-size-fits all arrangement (Bryman and Lilley 2009) and supports the case study approach used here. This research was also supported by Vuori (2019) in countering the argument by Gosling *et al*. (2009) that distributed leadership within higher education could be seen as just rhetoric. Instead the stakeholders in this study supported and saw relevance for this form of leadership practice especially as any 21st century institution that is solely dependent upon its senior managers to cope with critical and complex issues is at serious risk of failure (Heifetz *et al.* 2009). It is the hope of the researcher that this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of distributed leadership practice and contribute to an improved understanding of multi stakeholder participation in leadership namely distributed leadership. At the same time, it also suggests the need for a more widespread, nuanced research into leadership, particularly that of middle managers.

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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

*Directorate for Research and Postgraduate Support*
*Durban University of Technology*
*Tromso Annexe, Steve Biko Campus*
*P.O. Box 1334, Durban 4000*
*Tel.: 031-3732576/7*
*Fax: 031-3732946*

3 November 2017

Ms Naseem Haniff
c/o Faculty of Management Sciences
Durban University of Technology

Dear Ms Haniff

**PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT THE DUT**

Your email correspondence in respect of the above refers. I am pleased to inform you that the Institutional Research Committee (IRC) has granted full permission for you to conduct the research "Distributed leadership at a South African University of Technology. A multi stakeholder model" at the Durban University of Technology.

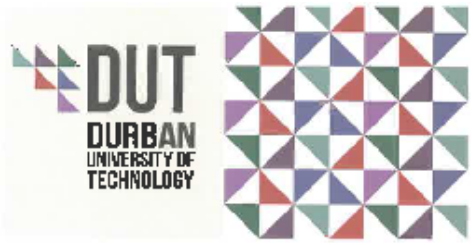
The DUT may impose any other condition it deems appropriate in the circumstances having regard to nature and extent of access to and use of information requested.

We would be grateful if a summary of your key research findings can be submitted to the IRC on completion of your studies.

Kindest regards.
Yours sincerely

PROF CARIN NAPIER
DIRECTOR (ACTING): RESEARCH AND POSTGRADUATE SUPPORT DIRECORATE

# APPENDIX B: ETHICS CLEARANCE



Institutional Research Ethics Committee
Research and Postgraduate Support Directorate
2nd Floor, Berea Court
Gate 1, Steve Biko Campus
Durban University of Technology

P O Box 1334, Durban, South Africa, 4000

Tel: 031 373 2375
Email: ire-alex@dut.ac.za
Http://www.dut.ac.za/research/ethics/irec_research_ethics

www.dut.ac.za

8 November 2017

IREC Reference Number: **REC 107/17**

Mrs N Haniff
84 Malaga
44 Pembroke Road
Durban North
4051

Dear Mrs Haniff

**Distributed leadership at a South African University of Technology. Development of a multi-stakeholder model.**

The Institutional Research Ethics Committee acknowledges receipt of your gatekeeper permission letter.

Please note that FULL APPROVAL is granted to your research proposal. You may proceed with data collection.

Any adverse events [serious or minor] which occur in connection with this study and/or which may alter its ethical consideration must be reported to the IREC according to the IREC Standard Operating Procedures (SOP's).

Please note that any deviations from the approved proposal require the approval of the IREC as outlined in the IREC SOP's.

Yours Sincerely,

Professor J K Adam
Chairperson: IREC

# APPENDIX C: LETTER OF INFORMATION


**LETTER OF INFORMATION**

**Title of the Research Study:**
Distributed leadership at a South African University of Technology. Development of a multi – stakeholder model.

**Principal Investigator/s/researcher:**
Mrs Naseem Haniff

**Co-Investigator/s/supervisor/s:**
Dr Preeya Daya

**Brief Introduction and Purpose of the Study:**
Thank you for considering taking part in this study and thereby contributing to new knowledge in the area of multi – stakeholder distributed leadership.
I am a PH.D student at the Durban University of Technology and am conducting research into the role, impact and participation of various significant stakeholders in leadership and governance at this institution.
This study aims to examine the issue of university transformation by looking at multi – stakeholder participation in South African university leadership and to determine how transformed are higher education institutions in ensuring multiple stakeholder engagement in participatory, co-operative, leadership and management. As an outcome of this study is the development of a distributed leadership framework for multi –stakeholder participation at a South African University of Technology.

**Outline of the Procedures:**
An invitation to take part in the study is sent out to prospective interviewees, like yourself, from the various stakeholder groups. The study sample will comprise a minimum of 30 people and include five senior managers, 10 middle managers and 10 students at the Durban University of Technology.
Participation is completely voluntary. I would like to highlight that ethical clearance has been obtained for this study and that your contributions to this research is confidential and your anonymity is absolutely assured.
The interviews/focus groups and Soft Systems Methodology workshops will be conducted by the researcher and will be held in venues that are secure and private, thereby ensuring confidentiality. The interviews will be conducted at a venue and time convenient to you. There will be informed consent forms which will be signed by both yourself and the researcher.
During our engagements, field notes will be collected in the form of written as well as voice recorded transcripts. They will later be analysed by the researcher for validity and coding.

**Risks or Discomforts to the Participant**
There are no risks to you.

**Benefits:**
Your participation in this research will contribute to an increased knowledge and understanding of multi-stakeholder participation in university leadership and governance. Another outcome of this research is a model of distributed leadership for multi- stakeholder participation in South African higher education institutions. .
The opportunity also exists for the publication of a journal article.

## APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM


### CONSENT

**Statement of Agreement to Participate in the Research Study:**

- I hereby confirm that I have been informed by the researcher, Naseem Haniff, about the nature, conduct, benefits and risks of this study - Research Ethics Clearance Number: **REC 107/17**.
- I have also received, read and understood the above written information (Participant Letter of Information) regarding the study.
- I am aware that the results of the study, including personal details regarding my sex, age, date of birth, initials and diagnosis will be anonymously processed into a study report.
- In view of the requirements of research, I agree that the data collected during this study can be processed in a computerised system by the researcher.
- I may, at any stage, without prejudice, withdraw my consent and participation in the study.
- I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and (of my own free will) declare myself prepared to participate in the study.
- I understand that significant new findings developed during the course of this research which may relate to my participation will be made available to me.

_____ _____ _____

**Full Name of Participant** **Date** **Time**

**Signature / Right Thumbprint**

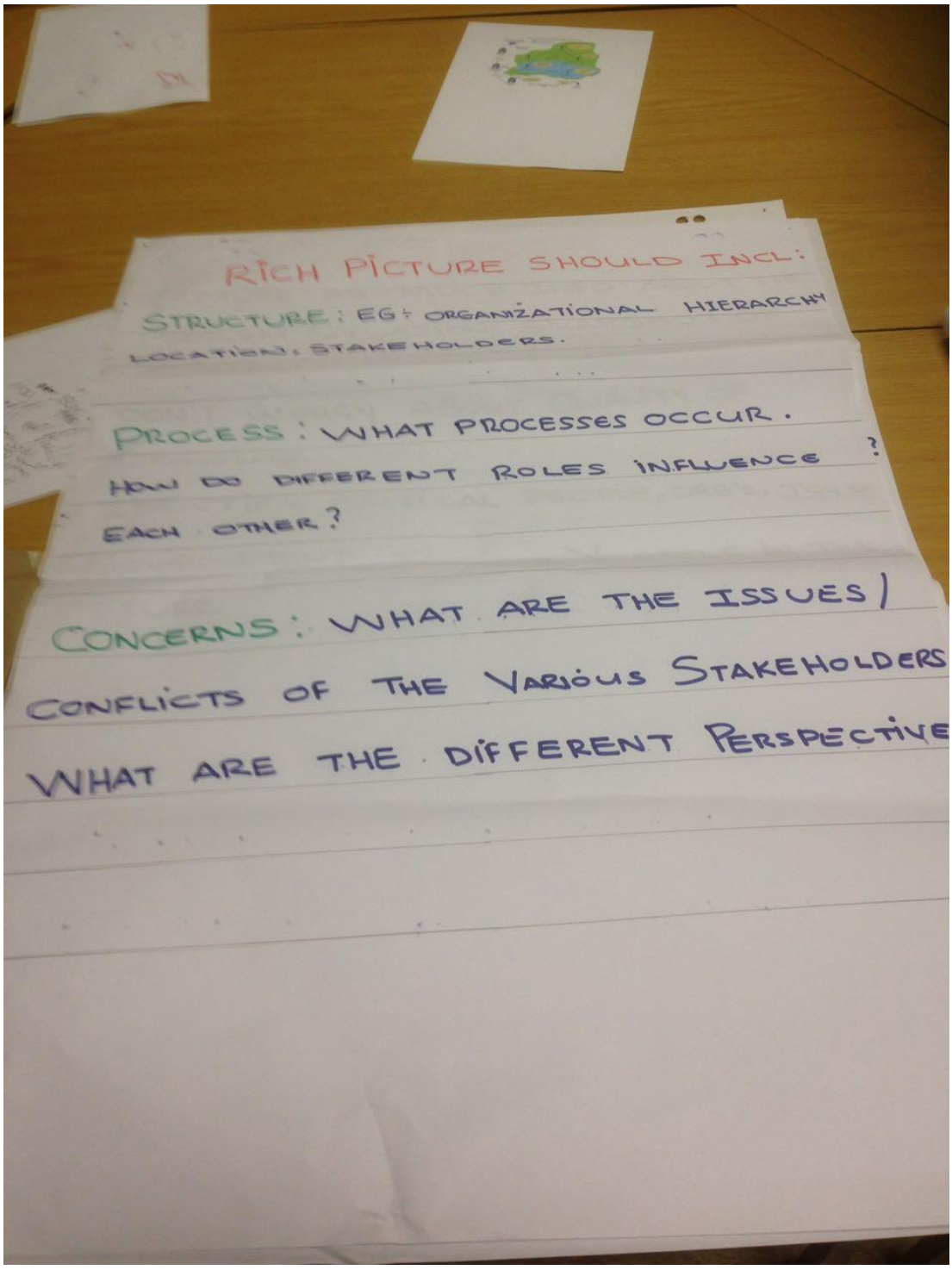
I, Naseem Haniff, herewith confirm that the above participant has been fully informed about the nature, conduct and risks of the above study.

**Full Name of Researcher** **Date** **Signature**

**Full Name of Witness (If applicable)** **Date** **Signature**

**Full Name of Legal Guardian (If applicable)** **Date** **Signature**

## APPENDIX E: RICH PICTURE PROCESS



## APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE: SENIOR MANAGER

**Senior Managers Interviews: Discussion Guide**

**Date: ……..** **Time: ……** **Place……..**

**Introduction:**

I am a doctoral student in the area of leadership and complexity and the key focus of my research is to better understand the processes of leadership at different levels and from various stakeholders within the university. The specific focus of this study is to understand the transformation of a higher education institution in ensuring multi-stakeholder engagement in shaping participatory, co-operative, distributed leadership and management. The stakeholders who will be interviewed for this study include staff viz. senior and middle managers as well as students in leadership positions.

I am conducting interviews with a range of senior managers to understand and get their views and opinions on the topic mentioned above. I am particularly interested in evidence of how leadership is distributed and shared amongst key stakeholders of the institution as well as evidence of how these practices have become integrated into institution –wide strategies and systems and becoming a part of the institutional practice. I would also like to know how you acquired and developed your leadership skills and how this senior leadership position impacts upon your role and practice.

You have been identified as a participant in this study because you are an experienced senior manager in a leadership role at XXX. I will also be interviewing other people who occupy similar levels, as yourself within the organisation. It is important that you note that all interviews will be entirely confidential and non-attributable (anonymous) but I would like to record and transcribe them for my own data collection purposes.

Finally thank you very much for participating in this interview and I trust that it will be both thought provoking a well as an enjoyable experience.

## Interview Guide: Senior Managers

### 1. Introduction

- Acknowledgement of participating in research
- Focus of study
- Anonymity and confidentiality--- fill in form.
- Request permission to audio-tape.

### 2. Setting the Scene/ Role Description

- Please describe your position in the institution and tell me at what point in your career did you take on leadership activities?
- In your opinion do you feel that you were prepared for the role of senior manager or did it occur in a more ad hoc manner?

### 3. Current status of Institutional Leadership

- Can you describe the current leadership practice at the institution?
- Do you believe that in your current leadership practice you are contributing to the transformation agenda of higher education?
- What, in your opinion is the level of leadership engagement between university stakeholders e.g. senior and middle level staff; between staff and student leaders?

### 4. Trends/ Challenges/Strengths

- During your tenure at this institution, what leadership changes, trends or movements have you noted? Could you describe these as turning points? Why?
- What would you describe as the key leadership strengths of the institution? Explain.
- Could you also describe some key challenges that you have noted that is either current or that you anticipate for the future? What would be your suggestions for improvement?
- What do you believe best describes good leadership? How do senior managers transfer these good leadership skills in order to develop and extend leadership work to other institutional stakeholders?

### 5. Distributed Leadership

*The theoretical model used in this study is that of 'distributed leadership'. This is "where leadership is conceived of as dispersed across the organisation (within*

*systems and relationships) rather than residing within the traits and capabilities of formally recognised 'leaders' "* (Petrov, Bolden and Gosling 2006: 2).

- How familiar are you with this leadership style.
- In your view is there a common institutional understanding of shared/distributed leadership? Explain your viewpoint.
- In your opinion is shared /distributed leadership practiced at the institution. If yes, give examples. If not, why.
- Is this a leadership practice that would suit you? Please explain why?
- How widespread, do you believe, is the practice of leadership generally shared amongst other institutional stakeholders, or is it dependent upon key strategic individuals?
- Who are the institutional stakeholders that you believe should be involved in this leadership distribution?
- How would you describe stakeholder relationships at this institution?
- How do you think the formal accountability structures could co-exist (or not) with shared distributed leadership?
- In what way do you believe distributed leadership is given or could be given long term institutional form (e.g. *team structures, committees etc.*)?Could you describe any evidence or examples of distributed/shared leadership being practiced at this institution?
- Do you believe that there is a relationship between distributed/shared leadership and institutional improvements?

**6. Future Impressions**

1. In your opinion, how do you see leadership evolving within the institution over the following 5 years? Do you believe you have a role to play in developing leadership amongst the various institutional stakeholders? What do you think would be the challenges and or opportunities?

**7. General**

- Are there any other comments that you would like to make regarding the practice of leadership at this institution. This could be something that has not been touched on previously or perhaps you might wish to add onto comments made already.
- Who else do you think it would be important to interview who could help me understand leadership style at this institution and whether or not distributed leadership has a place or practiced here?
- Are there any documents or printed data you think would be helpful for me to look at that would enrich my understanding of leadership style and distributed leadership at this organisation?

## APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE: MIDDLE MANAGER

**Middle Managers interviews: Discussion Guide**

**Date ……. Time: ……. Place…….**

**Introduction:**

I am a doctoral student in the area of leadership and complexity and the aim of my research is to better understand the processes of leadership at different levels and from various stakeholders within the university. The specific focus of this study is to understand the transformation of a higher education institution in ensuring multi-stakeholder engagement in shaping participatory, co-operative, distributed leadership and management. The stakeholders who will be interviewed for this study include staff viz. senior and middle managers as well as students in leadership positions.

I am conducting interviews with a range of middle management stakeholders to understand and get their views and opinions on the topic mentioned above. I am particularly interested in evidence of how leadership is distributed and shared amongst various stakeholders of the institution as well as evidence of how these practices have become integrated with institution-wide strategies and systems and thereby almost becoming a part of the institutional practice. I would also like to know how you acquired and developed your leadership skills and how this leadership position impacts upon your role and practice.

You have been identified as a participant in this study because of your role as a middle manager at XXX. I will also be interviewing other people who occupy similar levels, as yourself within the organisation. It is important that you note that all interviews will be entirely confidential and non-attributable (anonymous) but I would like to record and transcribe them for my own data collection purposes.

Finally thank you very much for participating in this interview and I trust that it will be both thought provoking a well as an enjoyable experience.

## Interview Guide: Middle Managers

### 1. Introduction

- Acknowledgement of participating in research
- Focus of study
- Anonymity and confidentiality--- fill in form
- Request permission to audio-tape.

### 2. Setting the Scene: Role Description

- How would you describe your role in the institution and how has this role changed, in any way, since you joined?
- Could you describe to me your understanding of leadership? Do you believe that you also have a leadership role aligned to your position as a middle manager?
- In your opinion do you feel that you were prepared for the role of middle manager or did it occur in a more ad hoc manner? Could you describe your style of leadership in this role?
- In your role as middle manager what do you expect of those that you lead? What do you expect of those who lead you?

### 3. Current status of Institutional Leadership

- Can you describe the current leadership practice at the institution?
- As a middle manager do you believe that you have independence or freedom to practice leadership? (How? Why? Why not?). Do you work individually or as a team?
- In what way do you believe that you in your role middle manager impact, influence and shape institutional strategies and policy?
- Do you believe that in your current leadership practice you are contributing to the transformation agenda of higher education?
- What, in your opinion is the level of leadership engagement between senior and middle level staff; between staff and student leaders?

### 4. Trends /Challenges/Strengths

- During your tenure at this institution, what leadership changes, trends or movements have you noted? Could you describe these as turning points? Why?
- What do you believe best describes good leadership? Do you believe that there is a collaboration between the various tiers of management and or stakeholders e.g. student leadership?

- What would you describe as the key leadership strengths of the institution? Explain.
- How do you believe middle managers should transfer these good leadership skills in order to develop and extend leadership work to other institutional stakeholders?
- Could you also describe some key challenges that you have noted that is either current or that you anticipate for the future? What would be your suggestions for improvement?

**5. Distributed Leadership**

*The theoretical model used in this study is that of 'distributed leadership'. This is "where leadership is conceived of as dispersed across the organisation (within systems and relationships) rather than residing within the traits and capabilities of formally recognised 'leaders' "* (Petrov, Bolden and Gosling 2006: 2).

- Is this a leadership style that you are familiar with? Is this a leadership practice that would suit you? Please explain why?
- Particularly in terms of the country's transformation agenda is there a common institutional understanding of shared/distributed leadership? Explain your viewpoint.
- In your opinion is shared /distributed leadership practiced at the institution. If yes, give examples. If not, why?
- How widespread, do you believe, is the practice of leadership shared amongst other institutional stakeholders, or is it dependent upon key strategic individuals?
- Who are the institutional stakeholders that you believe should be involved in this leadership distribution?
- How would you describe stakeholder relationships at this institution?
- How do you think the formal accountability structures could co-exist (or not) with shared distributed leadership?
- In what way do you believe distributed leadership is given or could be given long term institutional form (e.g*. team structures, committees etc.*)?Could you describe any evidence or examples of distributed/shared leadership being practiced at this institution?
- Do you believe that there is a relationship between distributed leadership and institutional improvements?
- Do you believe that in your leadership/management practice you are contributing to the transformation agenda of higher education?

**6. Future Impressions**

- In your opinion, how do you see leadership evolving within the institution over the following 5 years? What do you think would be the challenges and or opportunities?

- Do you believe you have a role to play in developing leadership amongst the various institutional stakeholders?

**7. General**

- Are there any other comments that you would like to make regarding the practice of leadership at this institution. This could be something that has not been touched on previously or perhaps you might wish to add onto comments made already.
- Who else do you think it would be important to interview who could help me understand leadership style at this institution and whether or not distributed leadership has a place or practiced here?
- Are there any documents or printed data you think would be helpful for me to look at that would enrich my understanding of leadership style and distributed leadership at this organisation?

## APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE: STUDENT LEADERS /FOCUS GROUP

**Student Leaders Interviews / Focus Groups: Discussion Guide**

**Date: ……..  Time: ……  Place…….**
**Leadership position ……**

**Introduction:**

I am a doctoral student in the area of leadership and complexity and the aim of my research is to better understand the processes of leadership at different levels and from various stakeholders within the university. The specific focus of this study is to understand the transformation of a higher education institution in ensuring multi-stakeholder engagement in shaping participatory, co-operative, distributed leadership and management. The stakeholders who will be interviewed for this study include staff viz. senior and middle managers as well as students in leadership positions.

I am conducting interviews with a range of key stakeholders to understand and get their views and opinions on the topic mentioned above. I am particularly interested in evidence of how leadership is distributed and shared among student stakeholders of the institution as well as evidence of how these practices have become integrated with institution-wide strategies and systems and thereby almost becoming a part of the institutional practice. Students are significant stakeholders in university governance and I would like to know how you acquired and developed your leadership skills and how this leadership position impacts upon your role and practice within your student affiliations. I would also like to gain insights into how you perceive and experience the impact and participation, of student leaders, on university governance matters. You have been identified as a participant in this study because of your role in student leadership activities at XXX . It is important that you note that all interviews will be entirely confidential and non-attributable (anonymous) but I would like to record and transcribe them for my own data collection purposes. Finally thank you very much for participating in this interview and I trust that it will be both thought provoking a well as an enjoyable experience.

## Student Leaders Focus Groups: Interviews/Discussion Guide

### 1. Introduction

- Acknowledgement of participating in research
- Focus of study
- Anonymity and confidentiality--- fill in form.
- Request permission to audio-tape.

### 2. Setting the Scene/ Role Description

- Please describe your student leadership position in the institution and tell me at what point in your student career did you take on leadership activities?
- What attracted you to study at this institution? What attracted you to stand for this student leadership position?
- What in your opinion is the purpose of student governance? What is the nature and extent of student leader's participation within the governance structures of the institution?
- What, in your opinion, is the response of the institutional leadership and student body to student leadership?
- How would you describe your leadership style?
- In your opinion do you feel that you were prepared for this role or did it occur in a more ad hoc manner?

### 3. Current status of Institutional Leadership

- Can you describe the current leadership practice at the institution?
- Do you believe that in your current leadership role and practice you are contributing to the transformation agenda of higher education?
- What, in your opinion is the level of leadership engagement between university stakeholders e.g. senior and middle level staff; between staff and student leaders?

### 4. Trends/ Challenges/Strengths

- During your time as a student at this institution, what leadership changes, trends or movements have you noted? Could you describe these as turning points? Why?
- What do you believe best describes good leadership? Do you believe that there is a collaboration between the various tiers of management and or stakeholders e.g. student leadership?
- What would you describe as the key leadership strengths of the institution? Explain.

- Could you also describe some key challenges that you have noted that is either current or that you anticipate for the future? What would be your suggestions for improvement?
- As student leadership in what way do you transfer and develop good leadership skills in other students?

**5. Distributed Leadership**

*The theoretical model used in this study is that of 'distributed leadership'. This is "where leadership is conceived of as dispersed across the organisation (within systems and relationships) rather than residing within the traits and capabilities of formally recognised 'leaders' "* (Petrov, Bolden and Gosling 2006: 2).

- What do you think shared or distributed leadership means within this institution? Is this a leadership style that you are familiar with? Can you tell me what you understand by shared or distributed leadership?
- In your opinion is shared /distributed leadership practiced at the institution. If yes, give examples. If not, why.
- Do you participate in shared, co-operative leadership? Could you describe evidence or indicators of distributed leadership being practiced at this institution?
- Is this a leadership practice that would suit you? Please explain why?
- In what way do you believe that you, in your role as student leaders impact, influence and shape institutional strategies and policy?
- Do you believe that there is a relationship between distributed leadership and institutional improvements?
- Do you believe that in your role and practice as student leaders you are contributing to the transformation agenda of higher education?
- How widespread, do you believe, is the practice of leadership generally shared amongst other institutional stakeholders, or is it dependent upon key strategic individuals?
- Who are the institutional stakeholders that you believe should be involved in this leadership distribution?
- How would you describe stakeholder relationships at this institution?
- How do you think the formal accountability structures could co-exist (or not) with shared distributed leadership?
- In what way do you believe distributed leadership is given or could be given long term institutional form (e.g*. team structures, committees etc.*)? Could you describe any evidence or examples of distributed/shared leadership being practiced at this institution?
- Do you believe that there is a relationship between distributed/shared leadership and institutional improvements?

**6. Future Impressions**

- In your opinion, how do you see leadership evolving within the institution over the following 5 years? What do you think would be the challenges and or opportunities?
- Do you believe you have a role to play in developing leadership amongst the various institutional stakeholders? Please describe.

**7. General**

- Are there any other comments that you would like to make regarding the practice of leadership at this institution. This could be something that has not been touched on previously or perhaps you might wish to add onto comments made already.
- Who else do you think it would be important to interview who could help me understand leadership style at this institution and whether or not distributed leadership has a place or practiced here?
- Are there any documents or printed data you think would be helpful for me to look at that would enrich my understanding of leadership style and distributed leadership at this organisation?

## APPENDIX I: RICH PICTURES