



**Understanding governance at universities: from
management to leadership. a case study of a Spanish
University**

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Understanding Governance at University: From Management to Leadership

The Higher Education system must move closer to society and its requirements, therefore process of transformation in the university context brings new challenges to be faced. The present paper presents a case study research that examines the perception of the middle-managers' role from their own perspective: how they describe it, the tasks associated, the skills perceived as necessary and what they think about the need of becoming academics leaders. We have adopted a mix-methods approach. The data were collected through an in-depth interview and an adapted version of the Personal Construct Grid (Kelly, 1955). Two types of analysis have been done, statistical analysis and content analysis following a category system. The participants were academics performing a management position selected according to certain criteria relevant for the study. The research shows how their perception collides with the traditional characteristics of the University which focus on the managerial and bureaucratic tasks of the middle-lined managers. The study also reveals there is evidence of the poor visibility of these managers with no place for action due their lack for power and decision making. The participants claim it is necessary for people who hold the position to become agents of change by creating a shared identity through teamwork and collaboration. At the end of the paper there is a tentative for developing a framework for action to this end.

Keywords: head of department; educational leadership; middle managers; higher education; personal construct grid; management

Introduction

The Higher Education system is based on traditional principles inherited from the past. New ideas and practices are emerging from posts of responsibility such as middle lined managers that should be accepted by the institution. To this end, it has become necessary to question traditional values that block advances towards new ways of working, through a process of reflection to be carried out by the institution itself. The question of governance and management in the University arises, with the introduction

of new ideas developed by the people in the posts themselves, which can serve as a way to increase the effectiveness of the institution (Kok and McDonald, 2017).

In the last few years, a number of economic, social and demographic changes in the European Union have been taken place. These as well as the new product guidelines of the Bologna Declaration have impacted on the University organizational system, and the organization and management process in the Higher Education (Linás-Audet, Giroto, and Solé, 2011). According to Llinàs-Audet et al., (2011) this implies a great concern for improving the quality of university services such as teaching, research, transfer, management systems, management, assessment, etc. This might suggest that the main idea of the new education policy is to adapt Higher Education to the demands and needs of the current society at this time of change.

The process of transformation in the university context brings new challenges to be faced: globalization, internationalization of higher education; the new economic model based on the Knowledge Society, the massification of Higher Education and the European Higher Education Area. Faced with these new challenges, the role of the University should adjust itself to fit into its context in which the traditional roles of research and teaching that prevailed at its traditional conception are complemented by others, turning the University into a multifaceted institution (León, 2011). Therefore, the functions awarded to today's University are: development of the innovation in teaching and research (León, 2011; Sevilla, 2010); development of students' skills (Martínez and Viader, 2008), knowledge generation, preparing graduates for future challenges (Bayen, 1978; Wieruszowski, 1966), improvement of employability (Castro, 2011) and the contribution towards the economic regeneration and progress of societies (Barnett, 2000; Bayen, 1978; Gaete, 2011; Mann, 2008; Osuna, 2009).

Certain references can be found in the literature to the need to create Intelligent

Universities (Barro, 2013) with the capacity for change and adaptation to new situations being flexible, solving problems, facilitating the cooperation between the members and continuously improving through innovation strategies (Bolívar, 2000). In this time of change, it may be necessary to rethink the organizational performance and the internal structures of the institution in order to attain an alternative model of university (Castro 2011; Fernández, 2008; Llinàs-Audet et al., 2011; Sánchez and Elena, 2007; Sánchez and Zubillaga, 2005).

Literature about governance in Higher Education has increased (Bush, 1999) and it leads to a major reconsideration of the process of change and the redefinition of the University, encompassing the structure and the people at managerial level that can serve as a platform for change. This is the reason for the emergence of new models of University management and organizational structures that adapt themselves to current circumstances (Aebischer and Ricci, 2008; Batanaz, 2003, Martínez and Viader, 2008). Therefore, in recent years, research into the need for improvements in governance systems and management can be found (Barro, 2013; Blackmore, Brennan and Zipin, 2010; Brunner, 2011; Casanova, 2012; Castro and Ión, 2011; Deem and Brehony, 2005; Ekman, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2018; Kezar and Lester, 2009; Shepherd, 2018; Solé and Llinàs-Audet, 2011).

However, for a better understanding of the internal University structure and the role of the managers, a study of the explanatory foundations of management processes and University governance is first required. Not only do we refer to the initial contributions, such as the models of University management proposed by Clark (1983), but also to recent conceptions of the subject, such as governance regimes and University management by Brunner (2011), the emerging paradigm called *New Managerialism* (Deem, Hillyard and Reed, 2007; Giroto, Mundet and Llinàs-Audet, 2013; Whitchurch

and Gordon, 2010), and the idea of professionalization of the management roles at the University (Whitchurch, 2007). These aspects, which define and provide an overview of the governance and management at the University, become real in the Head of Department role (HoD), the subject of this study.

Related to this issue, Zabalza (2000) comments that one of the weaknesses in the functioning of the departments is related to the lack of compromise with the quality of education offered by them at University and draws attention to the lack of leadership, experience, resources and shared aims of the departments. Therefore, there have been some studies in the last few years about the role of academic leadership at universities (Ralph, 2017), beyond management tasks and becoming social leaders committed to the needs of the environment and the processes of community change (Stephenson, 2011).

When talking about leadership, it should be considered that the University context is not normative and is characterised by having a loosely coupled structure (Schein, 1994). To this end, the concept of effective leadership (Hogg and Vaughan, 2010), refers to a leader who has succeeded in setting new goals and influencing others; this is the primary goal one should aspire to address in any department at the University. Infante (2008) also establishes that leaders with 'democratic attitudes, charismatic, informal and persuasive have been identified as the most suitable for the development group, both as a human production' (p. 101). And the literature also mentions the concept of transformational leadership linked to government in Higher Education (Nguyen, Mia, Winata, Chong, 2017).

Recent international research examines leadership in Higher Education (Breakwell and Tytherleigh, 2010; Hamlin and Patel, 2015; Jones, Lefoe, Harvery and Ryland, 2012; Marshal, Orrell, Cameron, Bosanquet and Thomas, 2011). There are also other studies that demonstrate the importance of the work of the middle-line managers

at the development of teaching in the class (Kezar and Lesler, 2009), or the studies that analyze the tasks developed by managers at University (Berdrow, 2010; Gardner, 1989; Kotter, 1990; Smith, 2002).

In order to understand how Higher Education system develop, this research is based on the concept of organization developed by Weinert (1985) where the University is perceived as an hierarchical authoritarian system influenced by a context and with common aims. Some important issues to bear in mind are the characteristics that influence the daily running of the HoD based on the organizational theories, (Weick, 1996; Ball, 1989; Mintzberg, 2005):

- University as a weakly articulated structure: educational organizations are called ‘loosely coupled structures’ consisting of a lack of coordination and control in the subunits of the organization (Ball, 1989; Weick, 1976).
- Professional bureaucracy: according to the five types of structural configurations of organizations (Mintzberg, 2005), Higher Education characterizes for the vertical and horizontal decentralization with a high level of autonomy of the professionals.
- Power and micropolitic: the fact that departments are loosely coupled structures, will lead to a fight for social influence and the creation of power groups. Within the classification by Mintzberg (1992) of the power structures, some authors identify departments with the political arena (Lopez and Rando, 2002).

This paper makes an approach to the middle-manger positions, as they play an important role as as pedagogical leaders and become a key catalyst for change by driving the department aims to improve the quality of teaching in Higher Education moving towards society new demands.

Purpose and Research Questions

The aim of this research is to examine the perception of the HoD role from academics' perspective: how they describe it, the tasks associated and the skills perceived as necessary in the performance of it as well as what they think about academic leadership.

The research questions are:

- Which skills are perceived as necessary for a middle manager to perform properly in the university context?
- Which tasks do middle managers consider as necessary to develop their position?
- To what extent do academics perceive that an informal leader figure is necessary for the better running of a department?

Method

To carry out this case study it has been adopted a mixed-methods approach. To this end there have been collected both, quantitative and qualitative data in order to provide a better understanding of the research topic. The study is based on the application of two instruments that have been designed: an adapted version of the Personal Construct Grid (Kelly, GA, 1955) and an in-depth interview.

Participants

The participants are made up of seven academics (5 male and 2 female) that hold a managerial post in a specific university context who were selected according to certain criteria relevant for our study: long career at university; experience in a management position and belonging to different fields of knowledge.

Data collection

There were designed two different instruments for the data collection:

Personal Construct Grid (PCG)

An instrument based on the technique of the Personal Construct Grid (R.C.P.; Kelly, 1955) has been designed in order to obtain the perceptions of the participants by using their own understanding of the concepts. It has been selected because it is possible to work with the ‘interpretative framework of reality’ of each subject, beyond the simple measurement of the elicited items (Padilla, 2002).

In the original P.C.G. there were three steps in the development that formed the basis of our instrument: the elicitation of elements, constructs and the grading of the intersection between them (Bottle and Feixas, 1998).

First of all, participants had to think about managerial tasks and located them at the top of the table. Secondly, they had to identify those skills to perform the tasks; they have to situate them in rows on the right-hand side of the table. The participants then had to formulate the opposite term (not necessarily negative) to each skill elicited and placed them in each of the rows for the original term on the left-hand side of the table. In this way, rows with dichotomous terms at each end were created. The third step consisted of grading the intersection of each task with each skill according to the need for this skill to the corresponding task.

In-depth Interview

Once all the grids were obtained, the participants were asked to make an in-depth interview designed to attain each participant’s general view of the management position. The interview questions focus on the procedure for the identification of the tasks and the skills, as well as the main goal of the department management and its relation to leadership in the management of departments.

Analysis Procedure

Due the qualitative and quantitative nature of the data obtained, two types of analysis have been performed: a qualitative analysis (content analysis) and a quantitative analysis (statistical analysis).

Content Analysis: Category Systems. We proceed to carry out a content analysis through the creation of two systems of categories: one for tasks and the other for skills. These systems include the concepts elicited in the different grids, by taking into account all the data generated in each grid individually. Thus, we obtained 8 tasks and 11 skills.

All the interviews were tape recorder and then transcribed verbatim.

Statistical Analysis: Study of the Frequencies. Secondly, the statistical analysis was performed through the study of the frequencies and averages. In order to represent the concepts, each one –both, the ones in the rows and columns- were classified according to the category to which they belong. This analysis has been enriched and supported by the statements from the personal interviews.

Results

The research results are presented in two sections the tasks and the skills.

Tasks and Functions of the Middle Management Positions at University

All the tasks elicited and its percentages are represented in the categories in Figure 1. They are in order so the category composed of the greatest number of concepts starts on the right-hand side of the figure 1 and the least numerous are on the left-hand side of the graphic. As it is showed, four tasks that, according with the participants, determine the middle line managers posts are: administration and regulation, with a frequency of 29.3%, control/order/monitoring/coordination (15%), external and interdepartmental relations (13.3%) and those ones related with the management of the department atmosphere (12.6%).

[Figure 1 near here]

The category **administration and regulation** (29.38%) comprises concepts such as: economic management, planning, and economic and temporal control. The participants maintain that, in some way or another, these are the main goals on performing this management post.

‘Every day a load of paperwork arrives which has to be answered and in many times a department meeting has to be held in order to satisfy an administrative requirement that the rector or the vice-rector demand from you’ (F.C.E.4).

On the other hand, other participants take this task of administration to an extreme, by relating it with the management posts directly or by placing the responsibility of the working conditions of their peers on the shoulders of the manager.

‘The HoD to me should primarily be an administrative position and, indeed it really is an administrative position’ (F.F.5).

The second category in number (15.4%) is that of **control/order/monitoring/coordination**, made of: delegation of tasks, decision making, activity coordination, establishment of departmental policies and goals, etc. These tasks are close to administrative tasks but remain unregulated by the University as part of the position. These functions involve a certain influence of the style of management through the implementation of certain values and a way to carry out the posts.

‘A HoD imposes a dynamic on the department and this is what I understand as policies and goals; if the principal has a clear goal and a policy of a clear relationship with others, the relations in the department are completely different’ (F.C.E.4).

‘...guaranteeing equity and justice that I believe is a transversal function present in many tasks (...).’ (F.C.1).

The third category (13.34%) mentions the **extra departmental relations**: managing external relations, negotiating with other departments, increasing the visibility of the department, institutional relations, etc.

'I believe that a department is not an island in the middle of the vast ocean of university life; departments have to relate to each other, first in the context of the faculties, but the departments even have to be sensitive to the relation between the university and society' (F.C.1).

Many of the participants grant great importance to the role of leadership in the mediation with the Rector's for the coordination and promotion of common goals.

'The HoD is responsible for, or is the representative of, lecturers at meetings held either in the faculty or in the Rector's, with the purpose of organizing the teaching of the center or even in the Rector's office when applying for faculty positions' (F.M.7).

On the other hand, participants also refer to the middle managers tasks of mediation with external institutions.

'I understand the University as an institution serving society and hence I believe in intra-university and extra-university institutional relations -and also in the highly important role of the management of the department in the motivation of the research process in relation with companies' (F.C.1).

As shown in the results, participants agree to do the middle managers responsible of tasks related with **departmental atmosphere** (12.63%) and it negotiation. The terms related with this category have been prevision, mediation and conflict resolution, professional balance and communication. A participant defines it as *'the human part of the post'*. (F.M.7)

'I believe that a department is a peculiar human community in which -because of many restrictions of university life- conflicts frequently arise (...). So that, I think a middle manager must be a person who makes a very positive mediation' (F.C.1).

In the categories **motivation and lecturers support** (8.02%) are included concepts as: encouraging participation, involvement, care and monitoring of lecturers, to be aware of the concerns, facilitate their participation, etc. These are related with the leadership style implemented.

‘I think a good HoD must know the problems and concerns of the members of the department (F.M.7).

‘...a HoD must have a design in mind and realise that if there is a deficit in something you have to encourage your department to develop it’ (F.C.1).

This category emphasises the idea of sharing responsibilities in the running of the department.

‘... I think it is very important to motivate lecturers (...) if the teaching staff is not motivated they will not understand that the department has to work so that we all can work’ (F.C.2).

Finally, there are the tasks related **to teaching** (8.85% and 6.12%) **and researching** (6.62%), they are less mentioned: teaching reference monitoring, organization and control of teaching and student care.

‘...the quality of teaching, control of the quality of teaching, control of absenteeism, which are also matters of the Dean, but the Dean cannot be in all the departments, must delegate into the HoD.’ (F.C.2).

The categories that correspond with the research are: coordination, supporting of research groups, monitoring the quality of research. These arguments are considered only in some interviews.

‘...the HoD has the capacity to promote, encourage, motivate everything in their department related with researching’ (F.C.1).

Skills and Characteristics of the Middle Management Positions at University

The system of categories related with the skills of the left and right poles of the grid are represented in Figure 2. Referring to the skills needed for the performance of the post, the most mentioned are: professional competence (15.3%), personal values (15.3%), interpersonal skills (13.3%) and planning/organization/prospective (12%).

[Figure 2 near here]

The most frequent category is **professional competence** (15.33%): effectiveness/efficiency at work, dedication to the tasks, evaluation of results, processes and people, ability to delegate or ability to manage information. The opposite terms refer to indecision, slowness, incompetence, lack of perseverance, etc.

Participants relate it to both, the exercise of those daily activities related with administration procedures, and to the exercise of teaching and researcher responsibilities as a lecturer:

‘...administrative efficiency in the processes, I think this should be one of the characteristics of a good HoD’ (F.F.5).

‘...a HoD (...) will have the moral authority to ask to his/her department to be in the vanguard on the researching, to carry out their teaching responsibilities...’ (F.C.1).

Secondly, we find the category **personal values** (15.33%), referring to involvement, generosity, humanity, being an enterprising, honesty, availability, openness, justice, etc. in the positive pole and distancing, resignation, lack of honesty, opacity, arbitrariness, etc. -in the negative one.

The participants emphasise on the importance of the personal values in the general daily life. Therefore, this category becomes important above others such as decision making or planning and organization that are more functional aspects for the administration post.

‘I think a good manager of a department has to be an honest person, you must be a person with an important ethical sense and a person that works, I think these are the key considerations, ethics and work ability’ (F.C.1).

In the third place, we can find the **interpersonal/relationships skills** (13.33%), which includes: social skills in conflict management, conciliatory capacity, explicit approach to conflicts and problematic situations *versus* isolation, introversion, no recognition of the achievements of the members of the department, not paying attention to the personal components, etc. This category is related to the tasks: departmental climate and motivation of teaching staff.

‘...in an unsettled department, maybe more important than this is the ability of keep in peace so that staff can work’ (F.F.5).

‘...the character of involving people in the task, saying I fully trust you, I am not going to be on top... knowing how to trust, knowing how to delegate...’ (F.C.1).

In some occasions, it appears to be that the knowledge of the law, the running of the department and the interest in the personal relationships have the same relevance for the participants.

‘...I think both equally... because an incompetent HoD that doesn’t carry out with the death lines, that doesn’t know the internal dynamic, can take directly to the sink of a department. And I think the same about a person that have a good command of the regulations but don’t have any interest in people. From my point of view, in the middle lies the balance’ (F.C.2).

The abilities related to **planning, organization and prospective** (12.02%) are between the four with the greatest number: the ability to establish priorities, to coordinate, to be far-sighted, *versus* the improvisation, disorder, lack of coordination and procrastination.

1
2
3 *'A HoD must be an organised and programmer person, in the sense of bringing forward*
4 *the deadlines and organise their work, both things are closely related'* (F.E.3).

5
6 According to the **communication skills** (10.82%), which includes the ability or
7
8 effective communication, listening skills, ability to dialogue and continuous information
9
10 of the members- the participants mentioned them as important to the practice of their
11
12 daily tasks:

13
14
15 *'Of course it is important (...). You must know how to suggest what you want or what*
16 *you think it is more advisable (...). When you have to try to convince them that the*
17 *things have been done this way because there is no other possible alternative or*
18 *because it is essential.... All this entails this skill'* (F.E.3).

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21
22
23 Regarding to the left pole, in most of the cases participants agree to establish the
24
25 introspection although the communicative awkwardness is also mentioned.

26
27 Referring to the skills related with the **training in the post** (6.34%) they are:
28
29 knowledge of the regulations, control, professional prestige, etc.

30
31
32 *'I think it is obvious: to know the regulations and legislation and then depending on the*
33 *department'* (F.F.5).

34
35
36 Finally, on the left side of the figure 2 we find those categories made up by the
37
38 smallest number of concepts elicited: **teamwork** (5.67%), **higher mental functions**
39
40 (4.81%), **decision making** (4.34%) and **intrapersonal awareness** (6.34%). There are
41
42 few arguments that refer to them in the interviews:

43
44
45 *'This intention of teamwork is important, it is not about being a superman or*
46 *superwoman and sort out 'the world' by yourself even if you are very well intentioned,*
47 *is about setting up a team'* (F.C.1).

48
49
50 Finally, we must mention **leadership** (5.67%). The opposite pole refers: to
51
52 follow others, immorality and self-control. Most of the participants agree in the relation
53
54 that should exist between leadership and management:
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56
57
58
59
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‘The leadership is important; it is essential and is the only thing that allows undertakes joint ventures’ (F.P.6).

‘To be a good HoD, I think it is essential this sense of leadership and moral authority’ (F.C.1).

Many of the testimonies relate leadership with relationships, conflict resolution, values, professional attitude, training to the post and personal assistance.

‘There must be any characteristic of leadership, that is, being able to handle groups, solving conflicts, being able to bring proceedings in relation to aims, setting goals, aims...’ (F.C.E.4).

Although the decision making was not mentioned at a very first moment, it does appear among the skills required for the performance of the leadership:

‘...there are also moments that the HoD must make decisions by him/her own (...) So, in part there comes, -as I say- the spirit of leadership’ (F.E.3).

Discussion and Conclusions

This research shows that the perception of the HoD collides with the traditional characteristics of the University: power struggle, individual model, absence of control mechanisms and lack of union between parts (Ball, 1989; Lopez and Rando, 2002; Mintzberg, 2005; Weick, 1976), which suggests that role is focused on leadership rather than on management in the practice. However, there is evidence of the poor visibility of the middle-lined managers within the University community since it is presented as a managerial position in which there is regularly no place for action due their lack for power and decision making.

Management is traditionally associated to automatic tasks such as bureaucracy, control and order, attending meetings, etc. These are the tasks used by the respondents to describe their daily running of the post and on which they spend more time (Berdrow, 2010; Smith, 2002) however they are perceived as less relevant in the performance of

the post by the participants. The everyday experiences of the HoD suggest that there are many more aspects that are involved in this role such as motivation, creation of a good working environment, mediation, conflict resolution, inspire confidence and respect, giving advice, decision-making, innovation, development of new ideas and coordination among others. These results correspond with the conceptualization of transformational leadership (Bennets, 2010) and its positive effects (Nguyen et al. 2017). However, this perception of leadership in the University context still remains far from what is developed in the daily running of the departments, as it would be necessary for people who hold the position to become agents of change by creating a shared identity through teamwork and collaboration as the concept is known in the literature (Zaleznik, 1977; Leithwood, 1992; Fernández, 2008; Rosenbach, Taylor and Youndt, 2012). Nevertheless the skills elicited by the participants are related with the leadership at departmental level established by Bryman (2007), the implications of the term *educational leadership* at University level (Marshall, Orrell, Cameron, Bosanquet and Thomas, 2011), and the concept of leadership (Gardner, 1989; Kotter, 1990).

The results of this study therefore show that the expectations about the post indicate that the HoD must work for something more than mere management processes and how leadership can bring the post to excellence (Kok and McDonald, 2017). However, this group of participants struggle to give visibility to these aspects, by demanding more power for the role in order to act as a group leader. Therefore, the inconsistency between the tasks they perform daily and what they think it should be done must be highlighted. Thus, it can be concluded that changes in the definition of the post are needed in order to adjust it to the needs and demands of the institution and the academics. These changes should begin with a redefinition of the position by giving less importance to the management processes and to bureaucracy, and emphasizing the

educational goals (Bush, 1999). Therefore, it is recommended the creation of collaborative workspaces which would render the universities as learning organizations (Bolívar, 2000) that focus on the process rather than on the results and to distribute roles and responsibilities. In these collaborative spaces various members of the department would be in charge, leaving the HoD as main coordinator of the process, under the idea of distributed leadership (Jones et al., 2012).

It is essential to overcome the individualistic model and to end the conflicts of interest and power at the University in favor of striving towards the creation of common goals and the promotion of collaborative work, where the department can be crucial thanks to its nature as a basic unit of organization in the University, whence the importance of the people in the post of HoD is derived. Given this situation, we propose an in-depth study into the implications of the creation of dual structures, in which managers and academics in collaborative spaces coexist and work together, as in the idea of the *third zone* developed by Whitchurch (2007).

Taking into consideration the needs identified, some of the proposals to implement would be: encourage the mentoring between middle lined managers, facilitate the collegial management at the department, provide more autonomy and power for decision making, reduce bureaucratic tasks through the use of New Technologies, create networks between departments and faculties and provide advisory services for problems and difficulties. And also suggest academic leadership programs (Ralph, 2017).

A way to improve the research and a limitation to consider is that the number of participants must be increased taking into account the differences between institutions and the idiosyncrasy of each department. Although there are few participants, they are diverse and their opinions allow to explore the research from their personal

perspectives.

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Understanding governance at universities: from management to leadership. a case study of a Spanish University

Keywords: head of department; educational leadership; middle managers; higher education; personal construct grid; management

Introduction

The Higher Education system is based on traditional principles inherited from the past. New ideas and practices that should be accepted by the institution are emerging from posts of responsibility, such as those of middle managers. To this end, it has become necessary to question traditional values that block advances towards new ways of working, through a process of reflection to be carried out by the institution itself. The question of governance and management in the University arises, with the introduction of new ideas developed by the people in the posts themselves, which can serve as a way to increase the effectiveness of the institution (Kok and McDonald, 2017).

In recent years, a number of economic, social and demographic changes in the European Union have taken place. These, together with the new product guidelines of the Bologna Declaration, have had an impact on the University organizational system and on the organization and management process in Higher Education (Linas-Audet, Girotto, and Solé, 2011). According to Llinàs-Audet et al. (2011), this implies a major concern for the improvement of the quality of university services, such as teaching, research, transfer, management systems, management, and assessment. This might suggest that the main idea of the new education policy is to adapt Higher Education to the demands and needs of society at this time of change.

The process of transformation in the university context brings new challenges: globalization, internationalization of higher education; the new economic model based on the Knowledge Society, and the massification of Higher Education and of the European

Higher Education Area. Faced with these new challenges, the role of the University should adjust itself to fit into its context in which the traditional values of research and teaching that prevailed at its traditional conception are complemented by other roles, turning the University into a multifaceted institution (León, 2011). Therefore, the functions awarded to today's University include: development of innovation in teaching and research (León, 2011; Sevilla, 2010); development of students' skills (Martínez and Viader, 2008), knowledge generation, preparing graduates for future challenges (Bayen, 1978; Wieruszowski, 1966), improvement of employability (Castro, 2011), and the contribution towards the economic regeneration and progress of societies (Barnett, 2000; Bayen, 1978; Gaete, 2011; Mann, 2008; Osuna, 2009).

In the literature, there are certain references to the need to create Intelligent Universities (Barro, 2013) with the capacity for change and adaptation to new situations; these universities must be flexible, capable of solving problems, they must facilitate cooperation between their members, and continuously improve through innovation strategies (Bolívar, 2000). In this time of change, it may be necessary to rethink the organizational performance and the internal structures of the institution in order to attain an alternative model of universities (Castro 2011; Fernández, 2008; Llinàs-Audet et al., 2011; Sánchez and Elena, 2007; Sánchez and Zubillaga, 2005).

The literature on governance in Higher Education has increased (Bush, 1999) and has led to a major reconsideration of the process of change and the redefinition of the University, by encompassing the structure and the people at managerial level that can serve as a platform for change. This is the reason for the emergence of new models of University management and organizational structures that adapt themselves to current circumstances (Aebischer and Ricci, 2008; Batanaz, 2003, Martínez and Viader, 2008). In recent years, research into the need for improvements in governance systems and

management has therefore appeared (Barro, 2013; Blackmore, Brennan and Zipin, 2010; Brunner, 2011; Casanova, 2012; Castro and Ión, 2011; Deem and Brehony, 2005; Ekman, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2018; Kezar and Lester, 2009; Shepherd, 2018; Solé and Llinàs-Audet, 2011).

However, for a better understanding of the internal University structure and the role of the managers, a preliminary study of the explanatory foundations of management processes and University governance is required. Not only do we refer to the initial contributions, such as the models of University management proposed by Clark (1983), but also to recent conceptions of the subject, such as those regarding governance regimes and University management by Brunner (2011), the emerging paradigm called *New Managerialism* (Deem, Hillyard and Reed, 2007; Girotto, Mundet and Llinàs-Audet, 2013; Whitchurch and Gordon, 2010), and the idea of professionalization of management roles at the University (Whitchurch, 2007). These aspects, which define and provide an overview of the governance and management of the University, become real in the role of Head of Department (HoD), which is the subject of this study.

Related to this issue, Zabalza (2000) comments that one of the weaknesses in the functioning of the departments is related to the lack of compromise with the quality of education offered by these University departments and draws attention to the lack of leadership, experience, resources, and shared aims of the departments. Therefore, there have been a number of studies in recent years into the role of academic leaders in universities (Ralph, 2017) that go beyond simply handling management tasks and assume responsibility as social leaders committed to both the needs of the environment and to the processes of community change (Stephenson, 2011).

When discussing leadership, the University context should not be considered normative but instead characterised by having a loosely coupled structure (Schein, 1994).

To this end, the concept of effective leadership (Hogg and Vaughan, 2010), refers to a leader who has succeeded in setting new goals and influencing others; this is the primary goal one should aspire to address in any department at the University. Infante (2008) also establishes that leaders with 'democratic attitudes, and who are also charismatic, informal and persuasive, have been identified as the most suitable both for the development group' (p. 101). The literature also mentions the concept of transformational leadership linked to government in Higher Education (Nguyen, Mia, Winata, Chong, 2017).

Recent international research examines leadership in Higher Education (Breakwell and Tytherleigh, 2010; Hamlin and Patel, 2015; Jones, Lefoe, Harvery and Ryland, 2012; Marshal, Orrell, Cameron, Bosanquet and Thomas, 2011). Certain studies also demonstrate the importance of the work of middle managers in the development of teaching in class (Kezar and Lesler, 2009), and other studies analyse the tasks developed by managers in a University (Berdrow, 2010; Gardner, 1989; Kotter, 1990; Smith, 2002). These authors have developed their research by using different instruments and methodologies for its assessment. In this research, we focus on the personal perception of the participants and hence the Personal Construct Grid is applied. This instrument has been used in numerous contexts due to its versatility and the possibility of application in both therapy and research regarding management and education, as Dalton and Dunnett (1992) illustrate in their research. This methodology has been used in the field of social science, where the interpretative paradigm is applied with the aim of obtaining personal information, and belongs to the Theory of Personal Constructs: one of the theories that has had the greatest impact on educational research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). This theory establishes that each person has a way of understanding the world in which they live through their own personal constructions (Thorpe & Holt, 2008). Therefore, each participant is considered to be their own "scientist" working on their own

1 constructions of their reality (Raskin, 2002) and in this process each person “would
2
3 include some comments about this emotionality, subjectivity, biased attitude, confusion,
4
5 and illogicalness” (Landfield, 1980, p. 32). Following the idea of the authors, the
6
7 instrument has been adapted to our field of study and the aims of the research since we
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9 intend to obtain information on the daily practice of the position.
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14 In order to understand how the Higher Education system works, this research is
15
16 based on the concept of organization developed by Weinert (1985) where the University
17
18 is perceived as a hierarchical authoritarian system influenced by a context and with
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20 common aims. Important issues to be borne in mind include the characteristics that
21
22 influence the daily running of the HoD based on the organizational theories, (Weick,
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24 1996; Ball, 1989; Mintzberg, 2005):
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- 29 • University as a weakly articulated structure: educational organizations are called
30
31 ‘loosely coupled structures’ consisting of a lack of coordination and control in the
32
33 subunits of the organization (Ball, 1989; Weick, 1976).
34
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- 36 • Professional bureaucracy: according to the five types of structural configurations
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38 of organizations (Mintzberg, 2005), Higher Education is characterized by vertical
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40 and horizontal decentralization with a high level of autonomy of the professionals.
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42
- 43 • Power and micropolitics: the fact that departments are loosely coupled structures,
44
45 will lead to a fight for social influence and the creation of power groups. Within
46
47 the classification of the power structures by Mintzberg (1992), certain authors
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49 identify departments with a political arena (Lopez and Rando, 2002).
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54 This paper makes an approach towards middle-manager positions, since they play
55
56 an important role as pedagogical leaders and have become a key catalyst for change by
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3 driving the department aims towards improvements in the quality of teaching in Higher
4 Education by moving towards the new demands of society.
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9 **Purpose and Research Questions**

10 The aim of this research involves the examination of the perception of the role of the HoD
11 from the perspective of academics: how they describe this role, the associated tasks, and
12 the skills perceived as necessary in the performance of this role, in addition to their
13 opinion of academic leadership. The research questions are:
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- 21 • Which skills are perceived as necessary for a middle manager to perform
22 properly in the university context?
23
- 24 • Which tasks do middle managers consider to be necessary to undertake their
25 position?
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- 27 • To what extent do academics perceive that an informal leader figure is necessary
28 for the better running of a department?
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36 **Method**

37 Following the categorization of the research designs created by Bryman (2012), this
38 study is categorized as part of a Case Study, which consists of the in-depth description
39 and analysis of a particular institution and of the investigation within the real-life context
40 in which the case study is executed. Furthermore, a mixed-method approach has been
41 adopted to carry out this case study. To this end, both quantitative and qualitative data
42 have been collected in order to provide a better understanding of the research topic. The
43 study is based on the application of two instruments that have been newly designed: an
44 adapted version of the Personal Construct Grid (Kelly, GA, 1955), and a protocol of an
45 in-depth interview.
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Participants

The case study is focused on a Spanish university. Specifically, there is a final sample made up of 7 academics (5 male and 2 female) that hold a managerial post in this context.

The sample of this investigation was selected purposively, as the participants were selected according to certain characteristics established beforehand: a long career at a university; experience in a management position; and belonging to different fields of knowledge. This reason justifies the sample size as well as the nature of the study (case study), the methodology (in-depth interview, qualitative data, and use of the grid) and the theoretical saturation that has been achieved with the current participants.

Data collection

Two different instruments were designed for the collection of the data, and all the respondents completed both methods:

Personal Construct Grid (PCG)

An instrument based on the technique of the Personal Construct Grid (Kelly, 1955) has been designed in order to obtain the perceptions of the participants by using their own understanding of the concepts. This kind of instrument has been applied by several authors to different fields in Education Sciences and Psychology and to diverse studies and groups of participants (Fransella, Bell & Bannister, 2004). This is one of the reasons for its selection as well as the fact that it is possible to work in-depth with the ‘interpretative framework of reality’ of each subject, beyond the simple measurement of the items elicited (Padilla, 2002). This instrument has enriched the data collection as has improved the qualitative information obtained in the interview, an aspect that, following Burr, King and Butt (2014), has been largely overlooked in its previous applications. The authors highlight the relevance of this grid because it “represents the participant’s voice” (p. 341) and they support the idea of it being used as a part of an in-depth interview.

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3 In the original PCG, there were three steps in the development that formed the
4 basis of our instrument: the elicitation of elements, constructs, and the grading of the
5 intersection between the constructs (Bottle and Feixas, 1998).
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10 Initially, participants had to consider managerial tasks and located them at the top
11 of the table. Secondly, they had to identify those skills required in order to perform the
12 tasks; they had to situate them in rows on the right-hand side of the table. The participants
13 then had to formulate the opposite term (not necessarily negative) to each skill elicited
14 and to place them in each of the rows of the associated original term. In this way, rows
15 with dichotomous terms at each end were created. The third step consisted of grading the
16 intersection of each task with each skill according to the need for this skill for the
17 corresponding task.
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28 *In-depth Interview*

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30 Once all the grids were obtained, the participants were asked to answer an open-ended
31 protocol of questions designed to attain each participant's general view of the
32 management position. The same protocol was used for all participants, however their
33 narrations differ in certain aspects due to their different experiences and the open nature
34 of the interview. The study was conducted in the academic's office, whereby each
35 interview lasted approximately 90 minutes.
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44 The protocol for the in-depth interview is made up of blocks of content in order to
45 stimulate the narrations about demographic data (age, gender, years of teaching
46 experience, type of position held), description of tasks, functions and skills they develop,
47 professional trajectories, motivations, expectations and opinions about leadership and
48 management.
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55 *Analysis Procedure*

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Due the qualitative and quantitative nature of the data obtained, two types of analysis have been performed: a qualitative analysis (content analysis) and a quantitative analysis (statistical analysis). The qualitative data was analysed by two researchers separately and agreement was met regarding the categories established.

Content Analysis: Category Systems. For the analysis of the interviews, the fundamental principles of *Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) have been taken as reference. The interviews were analysed using a category system and a coding process by “giving labels (names) to component parts that seem to be of potential theoretical significance and/or that appear to be particularly salient within the social worlds of those being studied” (Bryman, 2012, p. 568).

Regarding the grid, a content analysis was performed through the creation of two systems of categories that were linked with those used for the interviews: one for tasks and the other for skills. These systems include the concepts elicited in the different grids by taking into account all the data generated in each grid individually. Thus, 8 tasks and 11 skills were obtained.

All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

Statistical Analysis: Study of the Frequencies. Secondly, the statistical analysis was performed through the study of the frequencies and averages. In order to represent the concepts, each entry (both those in the rows and those in the columns) was classified according to the category to which it belonged. This analysis has been enriched and supported by the statements from the personal interviews.

Results

The research results are presented in two sections: the tasks, and the skills.

Tasks and Functions of Middle-Management Positions in a University

All the tasks elicited and their percentages are represented in the categories in Figure 1.

They are given in such an order that the category composed of the greatest number of concepts starts on the right-hand side of Figure 1 and those of the least numerous are on the left-hand side of the graphic. As shown, four tasks that, according to the participants, describe middle-managers posts are: administration and regulation, with a frequency of 29.3%, control/order/monitoring/coordination (15%), external and interdepartmental relations (13.3%), and those tasks related with the management of the department atmosphere (12.6%).

[Figure 1 near here]

The category **administration and regulation** (29.38%) comprises concepts such as: economic management, planning, and economic and temporal control. The participants maintain that, in one way or another, these constitute the main goals on performing this management post.

‘Every day a load of paperwork arrives which has to be answered, and many times a department meeting has to be held in order to satisfy an administrative requirement that the rector or the vice-rector demands from you’ (F.C.E.4).

On the other hand, other participants take this task of administration to an extreme, by relating it with the management posts directly or by placing the responsibility of the working conditions of their peers on the shoulders of the manager.

‘The HoD for me should primarily be an administrative position and, indeed, it really is an administrative position’ (F.F.5).

The second category in number (15.4%) is that of **control/order/monitoring/coordination**, which includes: delegation of tasks, decision making, activity coordination, and establishment of departmental policies and goals. These tasks are close to administrative tasks but remain unregulated by the University as

part of the position. These functions involve a certain influence of the style of management through the implementation of certain values and through the way of carrying out the work allocated to the post.

‘A HoD imposes a dynamic on the department and this is what I understand as policies and goals; if the principal has a clear goal and a policy of a clear relationship with others, the relations in the department are completely different’ (F.C.E.4).
‘...guaranteeing equity and justice that I believe is a transversal function present in many tasks (...).’ (F.C.1).

The third category (13.34%) mentions the **extra-departmental relations**: managing external relations, negotiating with other departments, increasing the visibility of the department, institutional relations, etc.

‘I believe that a department is not an island in the middle of the vast ocean of university life; departments have to relate to each other, first in the context of the faculties, but departments even have to be sensitive to the relation between the university and society’ (F.C.1).

Many of the participants place great importance on the role of leadership in the mediation with the Rector for the coordination and promotion of common goals.

‘The HoD is responsible for, or is the representative of, lecturers at meetings held either in the faculty or in the Rector’s office, with the purpose of organizing the teaching of the centre or when applying for faculty positions’ (F.M.7).

On the other hand, participants also refer to the middle-manager’s tasks of mediation with external institutions.

‘I understand the University as an institution serving society and hence I believe in intra-university and extra-university institutional relations, and also in the highly important role of the management of the department in the motivation of the research process in relation with companies’ (F.C.1).

As shown in the results, participants agree to make middle managers responsible for tasks related with **departmental atmosphere** (12.63%) and their negotiation. The terms related with this category have been prevision, mediation, and conflict resolution, professional balance and communication. A participant defines it as *'the human part of the post'*. (F.M.7)

'I believe that a department is a peculiar human community in which, because of many restrictions of university life, conflicts frequently arise (...).I therefore think a middle manager must be a person who makes a very positive mediation' (F.C.1).

In the categories **motivation and lecturer support** (8.02%), concepts are included such as: encouragement of participation, involvement, care and monitoring of lecturers, awareness of their concerns, and facilitation of their participation. These are related with the leadership style implemented.

'I think a good HoD must know the problems and concerns of the members of the department' (F.M.7).

'...a HoD must have a design in mind and realise that if there is a deficit in something you have to encourage your department to develop it' (F.C.1).

This category emphasises the idea of sharing responsibilities in the running of the department.

'... I think it is very important to motivate lecturers (...) if the teaching staff are not motivated they will not understand that the department has to work together' (F.C.2).

Finally, there are the tasks related **to teaching** (8.85% and 6.12%) **and research** (6.62%) that are less frequently mentioned: teaching reference monitoring, organization and control of teaching, and student care.

'...the quality of teaching, control of the quality of teaching, control of absenteeism, which are also matters of the Dean, although the Dean cannot be in all the departments, must be delegated to the HoD.' (F.C.2).

The categories that correspond to the research include: coordination, support of research groups, and the monitoring of the quality of research. These categories are considered only in certain interviews.

‘...the HoD has the capacity to promote, encourage, and motivate everything in their department related with research’ (F.C.1).

Skills and Characteristics of the Middle Management Positions at University

The system of categories related with the skills of the left and right poles of the grid are represented in Figure 2. Referring to the skills needed for the post, the most frequently mentioned include: professional competence (15.3%), personal values (15.3%), interpersonal skills (13.3%) and planning/organization (12%).

[Figure 2 near here]

The most frequent category is that of **professional competence** (15.33%): this implies effectiveness/efficiency at work, dedication to the tasks, evaluation of results, processes and people, ability to delegate or ability to manage information. The opposite terms refer to indecision, slowness, incompetence, lack of perseverance, etc.

Participants relate this category to both the exercise of those daily activities related with administration procedures, and to the exercise of teaching and research responsibilities as a lecturer:

‘...administrative efficiency in the processes, I think this should be one of the characteristics of a good HoD’ (F.F.5).

‘...a HoD (...) will have the moral authority to ask to his/her department to be in the vanguard of research, to carry out their teaching responsibilities...’ (F.C.1).

Secondly, we find the category **personal values** (15.33%), referring to involvement, generosity, humanity, being enterprising, honesty, availability, openness,

and justice, etc. in the positive extreme, and distancing, resignation, lack of honesty, opacity, arbitrariness, etc. in the negative pole.

The participants emphasise the importance of personal values in their general daily lives. Therefore, this category gains greater importance than others, such as decision-making and planning and organization, which are aspects of a more functional nature for the administration post.

'I think a good manager of a department has to be an honest person. You must be a person with an important ethical sense and a person that works. I think these are the key considerations: ethics and the ability to work' (F.C.1).

In the third place, we can find the category of **interpersonal/relationship skills** (13.33%), which includes: social skills in conflict management, a capacity for conciliation, and an explicit approach to conflicts and problematic situations, *versus* isolation, introversion, a lack of recognition of the achievements of the members of the department, not paying attention to the personal components, etc. This category is related to the tasks of departmental climate and motivation of teaching staff.

'...in an unsettled department, the ability to keep the peace so that staff can work is possibly of greater importance' (F.F.5).

'...the character of involving people in the task, saying I fully trust you, I am not going to be on top... knowing how to trust, knowing how to delegate...' (F.C.1).

On certain occasions, it appears to be that knowledge of the law, the running of the department, and interest in personal relationships carry the same importance for the participants.

'...I think both equally... because an incompetent HoD that doesn't meet deadlines, that doesn't know the internal dynamic, can directly sink a department. And I think the same about a person that has a good command of the regulations but has no interest in people. From my point of view, the balance lies midway' (F.C.2).

The abilities related to **planning and organization** (12.02%) are among the four categories with the greatest number of mentions: the ability to establish priorities, to coordinate, and to be far-sighted, *versus* improvisation, disorder, lack of coordination, and procrastination.

‘A HoD must be an organised and methodical person, in terms of bringing forward deadlines and organising the work; both things are closely related’ (F.E.3).

As for **communication skills** (10.82%), which include the ability of effective communication, listening skills, ability to enter into dialogue, and continuous information of the members, the participants mentioned these as important for the practice of their daily tasks:

‘Of course it is important (...). You must know how to suggest what you want or what you think would be more advisable (...). When you have to try to convince them that the things have been done this way because there is no other possible alternative or because it is essential.... All this entails this skill’ (F.E.3).

Regarding to the left pole, in the majority of cases, participants agree to establish introspection although communicative awkwardness is also mentioned.

Skills related with **training in the post** (6.34%) include: knowledge of the regulations, control, and professional prestige, among others.

‘I think this is obvious: knowing the regulations and legislation upon which the department depends’ (F.F.5).

Finally, on the left side of Figure 2, we find those categories made up by the smallest number of concepts elicited: **teamwork** (5.67%), **higher mental functions** (4.81%), **decision-making** (4.34%), and **intrapersonal awareness** (6.34%). There are only a few arguments that refer to them in the interviews:

'This intention of teamwork is important; it is not about being superman or superwoman and sorting out 'the world' by yourself, even if you are very well intentioned. It is about setting up a team' (F.C.1).

Finally, we must mention **leadership** (5.67%). The opposite would refer to following others, immorality, and self-reliance. Most of the participants agree on the relation that should exist between leadership and management:

'Leadership is important; it is essential and is the only thing that allows joint ventures to be undertaken' (F.P.6).

'To be a good HoD, I think this sense of leadership and moral authority is essential' (F.C.1).

Many of the testimonies relate leadership with relationships, resolution of conflicts, values, professional attitude, training for the post, and personal assistance.

'There must be any number of leadership characteristics, that is, being able to handle groups, solving conflicts, the ability to bring about proceedings in relation to objectives, setting goals, aims...' (F.C.E.4).

Although decision making was not mentioned at the very first moment, it does appear among the skills required for the performance of leadership:

'...there are also moments when the HoD must make decisions alone (...) whereby, in part, there arises the spirit of leadership' (F.E.3).

Discussion and Conclusions

This research shows that the perception of the HoD collides with the traditional characteristics of the University in terms of power struggle, individual model, absence of control mechanisms, and lack of union between parts (Ball, 1989; Lopez and Rando, 2002; Mintzberg, 2005; Weick, 1976), which suggests that, in practice, the role is focused on leadership rather than on management. However, there is evidence of poor visibility of middle managers within the University community since the role of the HoD is

presented as a managerial position in which there is regularly no place for action due to the lack of power in decision making.

Management is traditionally associated to automatic tasks, such as bureaucracy, control and order, and attendance in meetings. These are the tasks used by the respondents to describe their daily running of the post and on which they spend more time (Berdrow, 2010; Smith, 2002) however these tasks are perceived by the participants as less relevant to the performance of the post. The everyday experiences of the HoD suggest that there are many more aspects that are involved in this role, such as motivation, creation of a good working environment, mediation, resolution of conflicts, inspiration of confidence and respect, the giving of advice, decision-making, innovation, development of new ideas, and coordination. These results correspond with the concept of transformational leadership (Bennets, 2010) and its positive effects (Nguyen et al., 2017). However, this perception of leadership in the University context still remains far from that which is developed in the daily running of the departments, since it would be necessary for people who hold the position to become agents of change by creating a shared identity through teamwork and collaboration, as the concept is known in the literature (Zaleznik, 1977; Leithwood, 1992; Fernández, 2008; Rosenbach, Taylor and Youndt, 2012). Nevertheless the skills elicited from the participants are related with the leadership at departmental level as established by Bryman (2007), with the implications of the term *educational leadership* at University level (Marshall, Orrell, Cameron, Bosanquet and Thomas, 2011), and with the concept of leadership (Gardner, 1989; Kotter, 1990).

The results of this study therefore show that the expectations regarding the post indicate that the HoD must work towards something more than mere management processes and also show how leadership can bring the post to excellence (Kok and McDonald, 2017). However, this group of participants struggle to give visibility to these

aspects, by demanding more power as a group leader. Therefore, the inconsistency between the tasks that are performed daily and those that the participants think should be carried out must be highlighted. It can be concluded that changes in the definition of the post are needed in order to adjust it to the needs and demands of the institution and of academics. These changes should begin with a redefinition of the position by giving less importance to the management processes and bureaucracy, and by emphasizing educational goals (Bush, 1999). The creation of collaborative workspaces is therefore recommended, which would not only render the universities as learning organizations (Bolívar, 2000) that focus on the process rather than on the results, but would also lead to the distribution of roles and responsibilities. In these collaborative spaces, various members of the department would be in charge, leaving the HoD as the main coordinator of the process, under the idea of distributed leadership (Jones et al., 2012).

It is essential to overcome the individualistic model and to end the conflicts of interest and power at the University in favour of striving towards the creation of common goals and the promotion of collaborative work, where the department can play a crucial role thanks to its nature as a basic unit of organization in the University, whence the importance of those in the post of HoD is derived. Given this situation, we propose an in-depth study into the implications of the creation of dual structures, in which managers and academics in collaborative spaces coexist and work together, as in the idea of the *third zone* developed by Whitchurch (2007).

Taking the needs identified into consideration, the practical implications to be implemented would include: encouragement of mentoring between middle managers, facilitation of collegial management in the department, provision of further autonomy and authority for decision making (in human resources, materials, and financial resources), reduction of bureaucratic tasks through the use of new technologies, creation of networks

between departments and faculties, provision of advisory services for problems and difficulties, organization of networks of collaboration between departments and faculties, improvement in the means of communication with the rector's and vice-chancellor's offices, and motivation to run different positions at the University as a way to learn about management and leadership. Academic leadership programmes are also suggested (Ralph, 2017).

One way to improve this research and a limitation that should be considered is that the number of participants must be increased, while taking into account the differences between institutions and the idiosyncrasies of each department. Although there are few participants, they are diverse and their opinions enable the research to be explored from their personal perspectives. It is necessary to bear in mind that the conclusions cannot be extrapolated to the University in general because the study is a case study based on a specific institution with its own regulations. However, the study can be taken as a reference for the development of research in other universities and countries.

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