**DEVELOPING MIDDLE LEADERSHIP IN A VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY-**

**PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES:**

**A CASE STUDY FROM THE MEKONG DELTA**

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1. **Introduction**

This study investigates ten middle leaders of a university in Vietnam to explore some important areas of educational leadership such as professional learning activities, participants’ perceptions of effective leadership, and challenges faced by the educational leaders in their leadership work. Its purpose is to raise some recommendations for the leaders to improve the quality of their leadership practices in this university setting, and also to indicate some implications for Vietnamese universities generally.

1. **Significance of the study**

This study is significant in a number of ways. First of all, it is useful for the institution being researched. Its findings identified tensions between participants’ perceptions and the literature, which may help the participants to reflect on their own leadership practices. Moreover, this research provides these leaders with an understanding into the on-going leadership situation that they are involved with every day, so that they become more aware of ways in which their leadership could be improved. Importantly, the recommendations of this study serve as good sources of reference for these leaders to learn how to develop professionally, as well as for the university’s top leaders to facilitate leadership work. In addition, the findings identified barriers and difficulties in leadership work, and provided guidance to help improve the quality of educational leadership practices within this university.

Secondly, this study is significant in that it holds some implications for other Vietnamese universities. The institution researched in this study is a provincial multidisciplinary university with typical features in such aspects as governance, structure, and socio-cultural influences; hence the implications may be applicable to some other institutions of a like type.

Thirdly, this research raises public awareness of and attracts more attention to the area of educational leadership in Vietnam, especially in areas of professional learning and effective leadership. Noticeably, it identifies some gaps in knowledge that need further examination, and creates foundations for further research within the Vietnamese context. In addition, this study adds some insight to the existing literature of educational leadership in Vietnam, a largely undocumented subject in this country.

1. **Method**

This study was positioned within the interpretive research paradigm, and used qualitative research approaches. It adopted the research method of the case study with two data collection methods, namely, interviews and an online questionnaire.

The ten participants in this research are middle leaders of a university in Vietnam. They were selected according to criteria that included balance in gender, a wide range of age and professional experiences, and representation for different units across the university.

1. **Findings and discussions**

**4.1. Professional learning**

The study revealed that the participants in this study adopted a wide range of activities for their professional learning. These included modeling and mentoring; pre-service and in-service learning opportunities; professional reading; reflective practice; and engagement in the Vietnam Youth Union.

### 4.1.1. Modeling and mentoring

This study found that modelling was the most frequently mentioned learning activity reported by the leaders at this university. The participants insisted that they learnt professionally from observing the ways their colleagues and senior leaders led. Further to that, questionnaire data indicated that modeling was valuable to leadership professional learning.

It is worth noting here that at this university, while modelling is recognised as a powerful professional learning activity, mentoring is ignored, although these two concepts are mutually inclusive, because modelling can be one of the roles or strategies employed in mentoring. The participants appeared to be not yet aware of the positive influences of mentoring on leadership professional learning. Some participants said that they had no mentors; others assumed that their mentors were their higher leaders such as those in the President Board, who they turned to for professional instructions in times of difficulty. This suggests that there exists uncertainty and confusion about the concept of ‘mentoring’ in this institution.

One possible reason for the poor knowledge of mentoring in this institution is that these leaders are not exposed to this concept due to limited literature on educational leadership in Vietnam. Also, though the area of mentoring has been well written about, most of the literature in this field is presented in the English language and in Western settings, which might create the barriers of language comprehension and contextual differences and difficulties for these leaders. This limited knowledge of mentoring could also be due to the cultural and historical setting of Vietnam where these leaders have never been exposed to ‘mentoring’ in their professional lives, and have therefore never had the opportunity to experience it themselves. This finding about the lack of theoretical knowledge and practical application of mentoring in Vietnamese universities identifies a gap in the literature that requires further investigation and research.

### 4.1.2. Pre-service and in-service professional learning opportunities

Most participants examined in the present study had not traditionally received any compulsory training prior to assuming their position as leaders, and thus they felt unprepared for the job. Notably, they did have postgraduate study at Masters level before appointment, but in most cases, their study did not specialize in educational leadership or educational management, a lack which presented certain challenges to them at an early stage. They were appointed to leadership positions probably because they were good teachers or because they were knowledgeable in their field, rather than in leadership or management. This practice may seem unreasonable; however, it is exercised commonly in Vietnam where issues of educational leadership and management are still under researched and where it is traditionally believed that leaders do not need pre-service learning and prior knowledge in leadership before their assumption of leadership roles. Therefore, this finding which highlights the significance of pre-service learning challenges a traditional belief held by this university leadership, and more broadly, by the wider Vietnamese society.

In-service professional learning opportunities in this study are defined as the opportunities offered to the leaders during the time they hold their leadership positions, to attend long-term or short-term training courses in leadership within Vietnam or overseas to improve their leadership knowledge, understanding and skills. The findings indicated an insufficient provision of in-service professional learning opportunities for these middle leaders that hindered the effectiveness of their leadership practices. The leaders at this university did not have enough in-service learning opportunities during their assuming of leadership roles, which had made their leadership work more difficult.

There are several possible reasons why the middle leaders at this university had not had enough opportunities for in-service professional learning. The first explanation, noted by one participant, is that leadership training programmes in Vietnam tend to concentrate on top leaders and pay little attention to the middle leaders. Consequently, few training opportunities are offered to these middle leaders. Further to that, this institution as a young provincial university with limited funding cannot afford to send all of its leaders to leadership centres in the region or overseas for professional learning as requested. This disadvantage requires the leaders, if they are to get training in leadership, take an active role in looking for opportunities from external leadership organisations or scholarship programmes, rather than wait for opportunities to come to them from within the university.

Many participants insisted that traditional training activities such as short workshops, seminars, and training courses were very beneficial to them in that these activities helped them to gain knowledge and skills that could be applied to practical settings. For example, one participant commented that she would have led better if she had been attended more ‘one-shot’ workshops and seminars in leadership. This claim is, however, based on the participants’ perceptions and is not necessarily what may be best for them. In fact, the literature suggests that leaders can gain little more than superficial information through traditional types of short-term training activities such as ‘one-shot’ workshops, seminars, and training courses (Lieberman & Miller, 1999; Speck & Knipe, 2001). This finding thus indicates a tension between the participants’ perceptions and the literature. This finding is related to another finding which revealed that short-term non-degree training courses such as workshops, seminars, or conferences were preferred to longer-term courses with degrees such as postgraduate study in leadership. Moreover, it was noted that when the participants mentioned learning opportunities, they mainly meant short-time activities such as ‘one-shot’ workshops, seminars, training sessions, and the like, rather than long-time activities such as postgraduate study with degrees. This indicates a tension between their preference and some research in the literature which suggests that longer-term deep learning is more beneficial than short-term immediate learning (Davies, 2007; Fullan, 2005), and that longer more intensive programmes and qualifications are more effective than short ones.

Another question that has emerged from data concerns the quality of leadership training courses. It is encouraging to learn that a two-week training course in leadership was organized at this university last year for senior and middle leaders. However, the quality of the course was brought into question. Some participants complained that the course was too theoretical and failed to link theory with practice. This happens not only in Vietnam; a failure to link theory with practice in leadership programmes is also reported in developed countries like the United States (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). In the context of Vietnam, this finding is not surprising. The education system in Vietnam still fosters a theoretic learning approach, so most programmes, including leadership training programmes in the participant’s view, tend to concentrate too much on theory and lack practical application of new knowledge. This problem has been long identified as a weakness of the Vietnamese education system, and concerted efforts have been made to improve it. However, it takes time before this theoretic approach can be shifted to a more balanced one.

### 4.1.3. Professional reading

Professional reading was another learning activity reported by the participants. The participants could benefit greatly from reading professional materials in educational leadership. However, it was added that professional reading should not just mean discussing at surface level or skimming materials due to lack of time. Rather, it should move beyond that superficial reading and involve professionally focused reading practices to achieve a foundation of content knowledge.

An interesting finding from the data raised the question of how to apply the knowledge and insights acquired from professional reading to the daily reality of leaders at this university. A few participants expressed their concern about the suitability of the literature to their context. It should be taken into account that most of the existing literature in educational leadership available and accessible in Vietnam is written in the western context which is different from the eastern context of Vietnam. Consequently, the unquestioning application of these insights without reference to the particular context of Vietnam in general and of this university in particular would have little prospect of success. Indeed, some leadership theories proven to be effective in western countries do not always work well in Asian countries like Vietnam because of cultural, historical and political differences such as hierarchical thinking and the centralized mechanism of governance. In other words, context matters, and thus should be taken into consideration in educational leadership studies. All these concerns require the leaders at this Vietnamese university be selective and cautious in applying what they have read in the literature to their actual practices of leadership. The leaders should be selective and thoroughly consider the suitability and appropriateness of the western literature in educational leadership before realising it.

### 4.1.4. Reflective practice

Reflective practice, in this study, refers to self-reflection and learning from one’s own leadership experiences and mistakes. Evidence from this study suggests that reflective practice also benefits educational leaders professionally. In fact, several participants in asserted that they learnt best by reflecting upon their own experiences and mistakes.

It has been argued that reflective practice has a close correlation with critical thinking (Brookfield, 1995; Roffey-Barensten & Malthouse, 2008). Therefore, it could be inferred from the participants’ engagement in reflective practice that they have started to think critically, or at least they have developed an early stage of thinking critically. This finding is important given that Vietnamese culture does not foster a practice of critical thinking. In fact, since early education, Vietnamese children are taught and expected to observe social conventions without questioning. As a result, most Vietnamese people tend to become uncritical. This uncritical thinking is threatening to any profession and discipline in Vietnam, including educational leadership. In this sense, this finding is exciting as it discloses a shift towards more critical reflection amongst professionals in education. However, further examination and research are needed in this area to help the educational leaders at Vietnamese universities to be aware of the importance of critical thinking and also to learn to think more critically throughout their time in leadership. Equally importantly, further effort and attention is needed in this area to help leaders develop confidence and capability to put some of the initiatives into action to bring about change. This will require significant cultural change from top university leadership as well.

### 4.1.5. Engagement with the Vietnam Youth Union activities

Data indicated that leadership knowledge and skills could also be acquired through engagement in the Youth Union activities. Youth Union, short for Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, is a social-political organisation of Vietnamese youth, and is led by the Communist Party of Vietnam. In Vietnam, within each tertiary institution, there is a branch of Youth Union that organises a wide range of community service and development activities for students and staff that offer good opportunities to learn to be active and to work with others. The participants noted that engagement in these activities could have positive influences on leadership development in such areas as self-confidence, communication and organisation skills. This finding is revealing in that it links another professional learning activity for educational leaders in Vietnam to the existing literature; that is, learning through engagement in the development activities of a social-political organisation.

**4.2. Perceptions of effective leadership**

This study revealed that qualities of effective leadership, in participants’ perceptions, were divided into ‘Tầm’ and ‘Tâm’ categories. They were considered to be correlational, with each unable to work well without the other. Although these two terms seem to be similar in spelling- with only a little mark as the difference, they are very different in meaning. ‘Tầm’ qualities refer to task accomplishment and abilities, while ‘Tâm’ qualities refer to consideration and relationships. It is worth noting here that the definitions of these two terms are interpreted relative to this study, and different disciplines might interpret them in different ways.

### 4.2.1. ‘Tầm’ qualities

Literally, ‘Tầm’ means vision. As indicated by questionnaire data, ‘Tầm’ qualities were defined by the respondents as associated with task accomplishment and thus concerned primarily with the leaders’ abilities to achieve effective leadership. In this study, these abilities are reported to include a clear sense of vision, a profound knowledge base and effective communication skills.

### 4.2.2. ‘Tâm’ qualities

Literally, ‘Tâm’ means heart. Within this general meaning, ‘Tâm’ might mean different things to different people. However, ‘Tâm’ qualities in this study were understood as including collegiality, integrity, equity, and recognition of contribution and accomplishments (praise and rewards).

## 4.3. Salient challenges to leadership performance

This study identified some of the challenges faced by participants that inhibited the effectiveness of their leadership practices. These challenges included lack of collaboration, the particular dilemmas experienced by female leaders, and lack of autonomy.

### 4.3.1. Lack of collaboration across the university

Data from this study revealed that poor collaboration amongst units across the university was a primary factor inhibiting effective leadership. One probable reason for this lack of collaboration could be the traditional academic approach of individual work that has been exercised for years in the Vietnamese culture. In addition, Vietnamese people are not exposed to teamwork approaches, so they are new to interactions with others, and hence not yet familiar with collaboration. Another reason for this poor collaboration might come from the particular structure of this university, in which the three main campuses are located separately. This physical separation might, to some extent, hinder collaborative relationships amongst units. To assist with that, this university has highlighted the significance of using Internet as a tool to promote a stronger sense of collaboration. Furthermore, regular meetings with all leaders of the university that offer a good opportunity for collaboration are organised every Monday afternoon. However, the use of Internet and regular meetings can do no more than provide fora through which collaborative relationships may develop; what matters more is whether or not the leaders are committed to developing collaboration. Some participants suggested that the President Board should issue an act of collaboration across the university to make people collaborate more in their work. This recommendation of forced collaboration is not tenable because collaboration definitely cannot be forced. In fact, enforcement goes against the very notion of collaboration. Collaboration is not about authority or forced legislation; rather, it is about a willingness and commitment to working with others, and it should be promoted in a culture of trust and mutual respect. This claim of forced collaboration indicates a tension between the participants’ perceptions and the literature in this field (Friend, 2000; Friend & Cook, 2003; Ross & Gray, 2006). For example, Friend and Cook (2003) emphasise that collaboration should be voluntary and come from personal commitment, rather than the use of forced legislation. They continue that personal commitment towards collaboration could be achieved by raising leaders’ awareness of the benefits of collaborating with colleagues.

### 4.3.2. Female leaders’ dilemmas

Most female participants of this study reported a number of challenges specific to being female leaders. The participants identified gender inequity in terms of being attributed status inferior to that of their male counterparts, and bearing the double burden of work and family. The problem of women being considered as inferior faced by female leaders at this university mirrors the wider socio-cultural norms of Vietnamese society. These norms are difficult to change, and is a much bigger issue than in this university alone. This gender inequity problem is common not only amongst Vietnamese female leaders, but also amongst those elsewhere in the world (Akao, 2008; Vali, 2010; Warsal, 2009). In the context of Vietnam, this finding is unsurprising given the socio-cultural influence of Confucianism. Culturally, Confucianism has strongly influenced Vietnamese society, and has accordingly shaped the lives of Vietnamese women. Along with a feudal ideology, Confucianism has traditionally allowed Vietnamese society to perceive the status of women to be inferior to that of men, and female leaders like those in this study are, unfortunately, not exempt from this norm.

In addition to inferior status, Vietnamese women are also expected to conform to the femininity norms of the “heavenly mandate” (Truong, 2008, p. 19) which involves giving birth, breast feeding, teaching children, and taking good care of the family and elderly relatives, along with a number of other unpaid unnamed jobs in addition to their full-time professional employment. One participant stated that she was always very busy balancing her family life and professional life, and this made her stressed and exhausted. All these factors including inferiority, prevailing femininity norms and the double burden of work and family have, undoubtedly, put tremendous pressure on women in Vietnam. In the case of those in leadership positions such as those at this university, some might expect that they could be exempt from these traditional demands to concentrate on their leadership work. They are not, unfortunately. In fact, the female leaders in this study claimed that they had to work even harder to meet socio-cultural expectations and at the same time fulfill their job as leaders at work.

### 4.3.3. Lack of autonomy

This study suggested that the participants had restricted autonomy, which inhibited effective leadership. Leaders at this university lacked professional autonomy in terms of financial control and staffing decisions; that is, leaders did not have enough autonomy to recruit suitable people for their units, or to control expenditure as they wished. Every decision regarding staffing management and financial control was decided by the President Board, and then arranged by the Personnel Office and Financing Office. This procedure reflects the deeply rooted culture of central planning and bureaucratic decision-making in Vietnam, in which the ultimate power stays with those at the top, and every final decision must be made by the highest authority.

## 5. Recommendations and implications

**5.1. Recommendations for further leadership development for this university and implications**

In order to improve the leadership practices of the middle leaders at this university, concerted efforts are needed not only from these middle leaders themselves, but from top university leadership as well.

Firstly, the findings indicated an existing practice representing a hierarchical managerial model of leadership. This model of managerial leadership with a focus on strong management can result in a bureaucratic and stifling atmosphere that produces order for order’s sake (Kotter, 1990). It is, therefore, recommended that this hierarchical managerial model be gradually shifted to a more balanced and distributed leadership model. To promote this shift, it is important that an awareness of the significance of leadership distribution be developed among leaders from top to middle level, across the university. In addition, workshops, discussion sessions and forums focused on distributed leadership would help make the concept more acceptable to the institutional culture, and to these leaders. In addition, the President Board should also encourage the faculty to write articles about distributed leadership and have them published in local, national and international journals. These articles would bring the concept closer to the university’ staff and faculty and make them more aware of it.

It is, however, worth noting that all of these activities would simply enhance awareness of the university’s staff and leaders about the concept of distributed leadership, rather than result in its actual implementation. Such implementation would require further effort from ministerial authority and a dramatic change in the hierarchical-thinking culture that has long been inherent in many aspects of Vietnamese society, including education. Differently put, in order to realize the distribution of leadership in education, it is highly important to address the tension between the socio-political culture of the country and the expectation around this transition period at university level. This is, by any measure, a challenging process. To achieve it would necessitate endless effort and determination from all levels of all aspects of the society.

Secondly, the current study indicates a considerable gap in understanding the term ‘mentoring’. Some participants claimed that they had no mentors; others confused ‘mentors’ with higher leaders who provided professional instructions. The university, therefore, should try to introduce this concept to its leaders and staff by promoting the practice of professional reading of literature concerned with this area; by organising workshops and discussion sessions about ‘mentoring’; and by encouraging the faculty to write articles about this topic. These activities would help the university’s staff and faculty to acquire further knowledge of this concept. Then the university should encourage them to use this knowledge to develop a mentoring programme of their own.

Thirdly, a lack of preparatory training for middle leaders at this university is evident. Preparatory training matters to any professional, and even more to those in leadership, a demanding and challenging job. Some leaders at this university, however, had been appointed to leadership positions without prior knowledge or experience in leadership and management, and this resulted in confusion and lack of confidence in their leadership work. It is, therefore, recommended that preparatory leadership courses be organised for new emerging leaders as an induction programme. These courses could be undertaken by current experienced leaders and delivered right on campus, where the new leaders could also familiarise themselves with the working culture of the institution.

In addition to pre-service preparation, in-service opportunities are also claimed to be important to middle leaders. However, findings showed that most in-service opportunities focused on principalship and hence were unsuitable for these middle leaders at a university. One participant suggested that the President Board should pay more attention and effort to enhancing the leadership performance of middle leaders by sending them to regional leadership centres or overseas for leadership development. This recommendation might not be practicable, given the limited funding of this provincial-level university. Instead, it seems more feasible that the middle leaders at this university should actively seek professional learning opportunities from external leadership fellowship programmes rather than passively waiting for opportunities to be offered. Alternatively, they could apply for postgraduate study in leadership and management from bilateral scholarship programmes funded by the government of a developed country. These programmes usually prioritise those working in higher education institutions, thus improving the possibility of being selected and benefiting from programmes of greater relevance.

The study indicated that the participants preferred attending short-term non-degree training courses such as ‘one-shot’ workshops, seminars, or conferences rather than longer-term degree programmes such as postgraduate study in leadership. It has been, however, well proven in the literature that longer-term deep learning is more useful than short-term immediate learning for promoting change (Davies, 2007; Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). This reveals a disparity between the participants’ preference and what is indicated in the literature as being most effective. Therefore, it is recommended that the leaders at this university should reconsider their appraisal about the relative benefits of short-term and long-term learning. They should learn to recognise the significance of long-term study more, and try to look for opportunities for long-term study rather than short-term study. This change is important to their self-improvement; however, it might be problematic within the context of this country. In Vietnam, the short-term model of learning has prevailed for years, and the long-term learning concept is foreign to the society. Such a change would therefore take time and require a change to the societal structure and the cultural norms as well.

Another issue related to professional learning concerns the quality of leadership training courses. The study’s findings found that the leadership course that was held last year at this university was overly theoretical and short of practical methods. Things could be improved by the development of practical follow-up programmes after this course. The leaders at this university, especially those who had attended some leadership workshops and training, could work together to develop a follow-up leadership course that balances theory and practice, and is compatible with the different leadership concepts. Importantly, the new design should be more reflective of the concepts of distributed leadership.

This study also addressed the matter of contextual differences. With limited literature concerning educational leadership in Vietnam, some participants said they had acquired their leadership knowledge and understanding from reading western literature instead. In their efforts to apply knowledge to practice, some were concerned with the contextual differences between the western literature and the particular context of this Vietnamese university. Their concerns are reasonable as the Vietnamese context differs greatly from the western setting historically, politically and culturally. However, the benefits of professional reading are undeniable, and have been well established in the literature (Bloom & Krovetz, 2009; Kwakman, 2003). Therefore, the recommendation here would be that these leaders should read professional literature to widen their knowledge and understanding, and then reflect upon these insights carefully before applying them. In other words, they should read professionally and critically.

As mentioned by participants, engagement in the Youth Union activities could help develop skills and abilities such as self-confidence, communication and organisational skills that are highly beneficial to leadership work. It is, therefore, recommended that this university work with the local Youth Union branch to organise more developmental activities for students and staff. Equally importantly, it should also encourage and facilitate its students and staff including middle leaders, especially emerging ones, to take part in those activities. This could be considered as a valuable opportunity for pre-service and in-service leadership learning of leadership. Some might argue that the middle leaders are too busy to participate in these activities. Thus, a regulation issued by the President Board specifying the middle leaders’ right and responsibility to take part in these activities with time given to them to do so would be most beneficial. It is also important that these activities should be followed up on in the university with additional opportunities for staff development in order to ensure that the skills and knowledge acquired are put into practice in a way which reflects models of distributed leadership and sustainable leadership.

Praise and rewards as a means of recognising contributions and accomplishments was perceived by the participants as a strategy used by effective leaders. This claim, however, indicates a divergence between the participants’ perceptions and the literature which suggests that rewards have negative effects on intrinsic motivation (Cameron, Banko, Pierce, 2001; Carton, 1996). Therefore, it is recommended that this perception could warrant re-examination.

One impediment to leadership work reported in this study was the practice of favouritism and nepotism. Favouritism is the practice of the leaders’ favouring those from influential families; nepotism means the leaders’ favouring their own family members or relatives. These practices hinder the development of integrity and equity, and result in a culture of distrust within the university. It is, therefore, recommended that these practices be eliminated. The university should issue transparent policies regarding appointment procedures, and make sure that every decision relating to rewards and promotion be made with integrity and based on merit. Additionally, there should be regulations specifying disciplinary measures for those who practise favouritism or nepotism. On a lager scale, further efforts from all societal aspects are needed to eliminate these unfair practices. It is, however, easier said than done; it is conceded that such a change would require wider societal and cultural change as a context.

It was evident from this study that a lack of collaboration across the university inhibits leadership work. It is, therefore, necessary that a sense of collaboration be promoted. Data showed that a few leaders believed that collaboration could be achieved through authority and forced legislation. This is a misapprehension. In fact, collaborative relationships are only possible in a culture of trust and mutual respect, and no power or authority could enforce them. The university’s top leaders could foster this collaborative culture by holding informal relaxed meetings where the leaders could communicate freely to better understand each other.

Another impediment to leadership work at this university concerns gender inequity faced by the female leaders. These women leaders claimed that their status had been considered as inferior to that of male leaders, and that their voices had been undervalued and sometimes ignored. This problem of women being considered inferior reflects the wider cultural norms and societal environment of the country, which are difficult to change. However, action needs to be taken in order to improve gender equity for women in general, and for female leaders in particular. To tackle this problem, first a support network for women leaders at this university could be established. This network could be run by women and serve as a forum where female leaders and staff could discuss their difficulties at work, and share opinions concerning how to improve the situation so as to encourage each other to move forward in their professions. Second, it is necessary that the university initiate formal policies specifying gender equity and clarifying the important role of women’s representation. Further to that, the university should consider developing a cadre of female leaders to balance the gender representation in leadership. This target should be clearly specified in the university’s development strategies, and be assessed regularly. Third, on a broader scale, Vietnamese society should abandon the backward traditional thinking defined by socio-cultural norms about women’s inferior status to their male counterparts. This traditional thinking is the mental obstacle that prevents women from enjoying self-confidence and gender equity. In addition to inferior status, women leaders in this study also had difficulties balancing the double burden of work and family. To help address this problem, gender role expectations should be challenged. Housework and family care should be shared equally between women and men. Importantly, men should learn to understand their wives’ multiple burdens and support them physically and mentally.

Lack of autonomy is also reported to be inhibiting to effective work at this university. Several leaders complained that they did not have enough autonomy to carry out their leadership work effectively, especially in terms of financial control and staffing decisions. It is thus recommended that the university’s top leaders should allow more autonomy to the middle leaders, so that the latter could lead more effectively. This would require significant cultural change from top university leadership. Specifically, it would require the top leaders to learn to have trust and confidence in the middle leaders and to distribute authority down to lower levels.

Although this study investigated only one case of a Vietnamese university, it nonetheless provides some useful messages for a wider picture of educational leadership in Vietnamese universities generally. As a typical public-sector university in Vietnam, this university shares common features with other Vietnamese tertiary institutions in terms of governance, structure, and socio-cultural influences. Consequently, implications concerning similar issues could also be made for other universities in Vietnam.

## 5.2. Recommendations for further research

This study has identified a number of areas where further research could be useful. Firstly, it is recommended that larger scale studies on the same topic be conducted to provide a more detailed and comprehensive picture of educational leadership in higher education in Vietnam. These studies could be carried out with a larger sample and at a number of universities throughout the country. Secondly, more research concerned with educational leadership in the Vietnamese context, especially in terms of distributed leadership and mentoring is needed. These are identified in the present study as areas where knowledge gaps exist. Thirdly, as educational leadership is affected by the Socialist political system and the Confucian philosophy, it would be interesting to further explore in what other ways the political system of Socialism and the socio-cultural thinking of Confucianism in Vietnam has influenced the area of educational leadership.

## 6. Conclusion

This study explored how middle leaders at a university in Vietnam have learnt professionally in their leadership work, how they perceived effective leadership in education, and some salient challenges faced in their leadership work in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of the topic. The research made a number of interesting findings, some of which are compatible with the existing published literature; others were specific to the context. It also indicated some tensions between the participants’ perceptions and the literature that need challenging. In addition, the study made practical recommendations for further leadership development in this university, and noted relevant implications for other Vietnamese universities. Additionally, the study identified areas that necessitated further attention and research. In the context of Vietnam where the topic of educational leadership is still largely undocumented, it is believed that this study made significant contributions in revealing the reality of leadership practices in higher education. It also disclosed major issues this university faces within its shifting process from a hierarchical bureaucratic model to a more shared distributed one. More broadly, this research identified the socio-cultural, historical and political barriers to the transitional period of the country, which makes this transition process longer and more challenging. To overcome these barriers and to promote further development of leadership in the Vietnamese education system, concerted efforts and attention are needed from every echelon of Vietnamese society.

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