

Critical Analysis of Heads of Department Understanding of Management Accountability and Leadership Responsibility in Higher Education

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Received: Aug 01, 2026

Accepted: Aug 28, 2026

Published: Aug 28, 2026

Abstract

This conceptual paper critically examines Heads of Department (HoDs) understanding of management accountability and leadership responsibility within higher education institutions. Drawing exclusively from 2024-2026 scholarly literature, the study employs an interpretive paradigm to analyse how HoDs navigate the complex intersection of academic autonomy, administrative demands and institutional governance. Findings reveal that HoDs operate within a paradoxical environment characterized by expanded accountability without commensurate authority, unclear role definitions, and systemic deficits in leadership preparation. The analysis demonstrates that effective departmental leadership requires balancing competing demands—strategic planning versus operational tasks, control versus autonomy, and individual agency versus collective responsibility. Critical barriers include cultural undervaluation of management roles, insufficient institutional support and the hybrid nature of academic leadership positions. Recommendations emphasize structured leadership development programs, clearer role definitions, enhanced institutional support systems, and recognition of management competencies alongside academic credentials. This research contributes to understanding the microfoundations of institutional governance and offers practical insights for strengthening departmental leadership in contemporary higher education contexts.

Keywords: Heads of Department, management accountability, leadership responsibility, higher education governance, academic leadership

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions worldwide face unprecedented pressures to demonstrate quality, accountability, and relevance while managing constrained resources and responding to diverse stakeholder demands (Edamo, 2026). Within this challenging landscape, Heads of Department (HoDs) occupy a pivotal yet paradoxical position—they serve as the primary interface between institutional strategy and academic practice, yet often operate with unclear mandates, limited authority, and insufficient preparation for their complex roles (Haugen et al., 2024), (Lakhno et al., 2026). Academic departments function as the fundamental building blocks of university

governance, representing the organizational level where faculty members most directly engage with leadership processes and where institutional policies translate into educational outcomes (Riffe & Pifer, 2026).

The contemporary HoD role has evolved significantly from traditional collegial models toward hybrid positions that blend academic leadership with managerial accountability (Lakhno et al., 2026). This transformation reflects broader shifts in higher education governance, including adoption of New Public Management principles, intensified quality assurance mechanisms, and increased emphasis on performance measurement and institutional accountability (Chikonde & Masaiti, 2026). However, these reforms have created fundamental tensions for departmental leaders who must navigate competing logics academic autonomy versus administrative control, collegial decision-making versus hierarchical authority, and scholarly identity versus managerial responsibility (Haugen et al., 2024), (Lakhno et al., 2026).

Research across multiple national contexts reveals consistent challenges facing HoDs: they are held accountable for outcomes without corresponding authority to implement change, they receive minimal preparation for leadership responsibilities, and they operate within institutional cultures that often undervalue management competencies relative to academic achievements (Chikonde & Masaiti, 2026), (Lakhno et al., 2026), (Paletta et al., 2026). These challenges are compounded by increasing complexity of higher education environments, including rapid technological transformation, diverse stakeholder expectations, and the need to balance teaching quality, research productivity, and administrative efficiency (Asad et al., 2025).

Understanding how HoDs conceptualize and enact management accountability and leadership responsibility is essential for several reasons. First, departmental leadership directly influences faculty morale, student outcomes, and institutional effectiveness (Riffe & Pifer, 2026). Second, sustainability of academic leadership careers depends on addressing institutional and structural barriers that currently undermine departmental leaders' capacity to fulfil their roles effectively (Lakhno et al., 2026). Third, as higher education institutions seek to enhance quality and accountability, strengthening governance at the departmental level becomes imperative (Edamo, 2026). This article examines these issues through critical analysis of contemporary scholarship, focusing on how HoDs understand their accountability and responsibility within diverse institutional contexts.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to critically analyse how Heads of Department in higher education institutions understand and enact management accountability and leadership responsibility within increasingly complex organizational environments. This study addresses a significant gap in higher education leadership literature by focusing specifically on the departmental level—a critical yet often overlooked microfoundation of institutional governance. The research examines tensions between academic autonomy and managerial accountability, explores challenges HoDs face in fulfilling dual roles as academic leaders and administrative managers, and identifies institutional and structural barriers constraining effective

departmental leadership. By synthesizing contemporary scholarship from diverse international contexts, this article aims to provide evidence-based insights that can inform policy development, leadership preparation programs, and institutional support mechanisms for departmental leaders in higher education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Evolving Role of Heads of Department

Contemporary scholarship reveals that the role of Heads of Department has undergone substantial transformation in response to global higher education reforms emphasizing managerial efficiency, decentralized decision-making, and performance accountability (Chikonde & Masaiti, 2026). Academic departments serve as microfoundations of institutional governance, functioning as the primary organizational level where faculty engage with leadership processes and where institutional policies translate into practice (Riffe & Pifer, 2026).

Haugen et al. (2024) characterize study programme leadership in Norwegian higher education through the metaphor of "leading as in alternating currents," reflecting the ever-changing educational context with conflicting demands and expectations. Their phenomenological study identified three main aspects of departmental leadership: transforming (acting as antennas, catalysts, and initiators), bridging (uniting diverse professional cultures and weaving programmes), and balancing (juggling various roles, navigating unclear mandates, and weighing control against teacher autonomy). This multifaceted characterization underscores the complexity of contemporary departmental leadership.

The hybrid nature of HoD positions creates fundamental tensions between academic and managerial identities. Lakhno et al. (2026) found that 83% of senior leaders in Swiss higher education reported incompatibility between leadership and science roles, reflecting perceptions that managerial responsibilities undermine scholarly credibility. This cultural tension manifests in undervaluation of management roles relative to academic accomplishments, with 54% noting that management competencies receive insufficient recognition compared to research achievements.

2.2 Management Accountability Without Authority

A recurring theme across contemporary literature is the paradox of expanded accountability without commensurate authority. HoDs are held responsible for outcomes yet lack decision-making power and resources necessary to achieve them. Chikonde and Masaiti (2026) examined this phenomenon in Zambian public universities, where institutional leaders described an organizational climate in which expectations for financial self-reliance are not matched with corresponding authority to act. Their study revealed that decisions such as tuition regulation, budgeting, and procurement require government approval, leading to delays and operational interference.

Similar patterns emerge in other national contexts. Haugen et al. (2024) found that Norwegian study programme leaders often lack formal personnel responsibilities and decision-making authority, relying instead on collaboration, negotiation, and advice to influence development. Some leaders described "navigating muddy waters" due to unclear guidelines, mandates, and limited authority, while simultaneously being held accountable for programme quality and student outcomes.

The accountability-authority gap is further complicated by intensified performance monitoring and reporting requirements. Edamo (2026) documented how Ethiopian public universities have implemented comprehensive strategic management practices including performance monitoring and data-informed decision-making, yet significant perception gaps exist among stakeholders regarding effectiveness of these practices. Leaders consistently reported higher perceptions of strategic management practices than teachers or students, suggesting accountability mechanisms may be more visible at higher organizational levels while their implementation at departmental levels remains contested.

2.3 Leadership Preparation and Professional Development Deficits

Contemporary research consistently identifies systematic deficits in leadership preparation and professional development for HoDs. Lakhno et al. (2026) found that 88% of Swiss higher education leaders reported inadequate preparation for leadership positions and lack of institutional support for leadership development. Many leaders described feeling "thrown into" leadership roles without training, having advanced based on academic performance rather than formal leadership development.

The consequences of inadequate preparation are substantial. Haugen et al. (2024) documented how Norwegian programme leaders expressed lack of preparation for handling complexity of higher education environments where different skills are required than research excellence alone. Furthermore, 92% of leaders in the Swiss study reported lack of peer community, exchange, and learning opportunities, indicating that leadership isolation compounds challenges of inadequate formal preparation (Lakhno et al., 2026). The professional development deficit extends beyond initial preparation to encompass ongoing support and career development. Lakhno et al. (2026) identified insufficient succession planning as a barrier reported by 83% of interviewees, revealing absence of systematic mechanisms for leadership knowledge transfer and career progression. The finding that 79% of middle leaders in Italian schools do not aspire to principalship further illustrates how systemic barriers and lack of support undermine leadership pipeline development (Paletta et al., 2026).

2.4 Ethical Leadership and Intrinsic Motivation

Recent scholarship has examined how leadership approaches influence organizational outcomes in higher education. Yeap and Shanmugam (2026) investigated relationships among ethical leadership, intrinsic motivation, and innovative work behaviour in Malaysian polytechnics, finding that while ethical leadership did not directly predict innovative work

behaviour, it significantly fostered intrinsic motivation ($\beta=0.581$, $t=11.138$), which in turn drove innovation ($\beta=0.548$, $t=6.142$). Intrinsic motivation served as a critical mediating mechanism, with the model explaining 33.7% of intrinsic motivation variance and 25.3% of innovative work behaviour variance.

These findings have important implications for understanding HoD effectiveness. Ethical leadership characterized by listening to lecturers, promoting autonomy, providing constructive feedback, and respecting diverse perspectives—creates conditions that enhance faculty members' intrinsic motivation by supporting their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Yeap & Shanmugam, 2026). However, the relationship between leadership support and career aspirations reveals unexpected complexity. Paletta et al. (2026) found that supportive leadership from principals decreased middle leaders' aspirations for principalship (odds ratio 0.694–0.726), possibly because high satisfaction in current roles creates a "comfort zone" that reduces motivation to pursue more senior positions.

2.5 Strategic Management and Institutional Governance

The effectiveness of departmental leadership depends significantly on broader institutional governance structures and strategic management practices. Edamo (2026) examined how strategic management practices influence educational quality and accountability in Ethiopian public universities, finding strong positive correlations between strategic management practices and both educational quality ($r = .72$) and accountability ($r = .68$). Performance monitoring and data-based decision-making emerged as the most highly correlated sub-dimensions with these outcomes. Riffe and Pifer (2026) proposed a framework of four factors contributing to effective departmental governance: organizing factors (how work is structured and understood), motivating factors (how work is encouraged and valued), facilitating factors (how work is enacted and supported), and socializing factors (how departmental culture and roles are learned). This framework emphasizes that effective governance requires attention to both structural elements (policies, procedures, resource allocation) and cultural dimensions (values, norms, professional development).

2.6 Digital Transformation and Conflict Resolution

The rapid advancement of digital technologies presents both opportunities and challenges for departmental leadership. Asad et al. (2025) examined challenges and opportunities for higher education leaders in developing digital Community 5.0, identifying multiple barriers including poor technological infrastructure, limited internet access, lack of faculty training in digital technology, and security risks. Their scoping review revealed that educational leaders face pressures to transform from traditional hierarchical models to roles as facilitators, motivators, trainers, and visionaries capable of managing rapid technological change. Departmental leadership inevitably involves managing conflicts arising from diverse stakeholder interests, resource constraints, and organizational change. Franca et al. (2026) explored conflict resolution management among academic leaders in Philippine state universities, examining how leaders apply five conflict-handling styles (competing, collaborating, compromising, accommodating, and avoiding) across different conflict types. Their findings revealed that

effective leaders adapt conflict-handling approaches situationally rather than relying on single strategies.

3. Theoretical Framework

This analysis is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that combines micro foundations theory, the Sustainable Careers Model, and Cognitive Evaluation Theory to illuminate how HoDs understand and enact management accountability and leadership responsibility within complex institutional contexts. The concept of micro foundations, drawn from organizational sociology, provides a foundational lens for understanding departmental leadership. Micro foundations theory suggests that organizational behaviour represents an amalgamation of the actions, decisions, and interactions of individuals within an institution—the behaviour of the whole is the sum of its individual parts (Riffe & Pifer, 2026). Applied to higher education governance, this perspective positions academic departments as critical micro foundations where institutional policies, strategies, and values are enacted through collective behaviours of departmental members under HoD leadership.

The Sustainable Careers Model (SCM), developed by De Vos et al. (2020) and applied to higher education leadership by Lakhno et al. (2026), provides a framework for understanding conditions necessary for viable, long-term leadership careers. The SCM defines career sustainability as an individual's capacity to pursue context-sensitive trajectories that promote well-being, health, and productivity over time. It emphasizes alignment of three core dimensions: person (individual agency, adaptability, and competencies), context (structural and institutional conditions), and time (the cumulative and non-linear nature of career development).

Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET), a sub-theory of Self-Determination Theory developed by Deci and Ryan (1985), provides insights into how leadership practices influence faculty motivation and behaviour. CET emphasizes that intrinsic motivation—stemming from fulfilment of psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness—is shaped by social and contextual factors including leadership behaviour (Yeap & Shanmugam, 2026). Leaders who promote autonomy, nurture competence through constructive feedback, and foster high-quality relationships enhance followers' intrinsic motivation and, consequently, their innovative work behaviour and organizational commitment.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for analysing HoD understanding of management accountability and leadership responsibility. Micro foundations theory establishes departments as critical organizational units where leadership matters significantly for institutional outcomes. The Sustainable Careers Model identifies the person-context-time alignment necessary for effective, long-term leadership. Cognitive Evaluation Theory explains mechanisms through which leadership practices influence faculty motivation and behaviour.

4. Data Collection

This study employed a literature-based data collection approach, systematically gathering and analysing scholarly publications addressing departmental leadership, management accountability, and leadership responsibility in higher education contexts. The data collection process focused exclusively on 2026 sources to ensure currency and relevance to contemporary higher education challenges and governance models.

The primary data sources comprised ten scholarly articles published in peer-reviewed journals representing diverse international contexts including the Philippines, Zambia, Malaysia, Ethiopia, Norway, Italy, and Switzerland. These sources were selected based on their direct relevance to departmental leadership, governance, accountability, and the roles and experiences of middle-level academic leaders including Heads of Department, programme leaders, deans, and other departmental-level administrators.

Data extraction focused on identifying key themes, findings, and insights related to: (1) HoD roles, responsibilities, and challenges; (2) management accountability structures and practices; (3) leadership preparation and professional development; (4) institutional and structural barriers to effective leadership; (5) governance models and their implications for departmental leadership; (6) leadership practices and their effects on faculty motivation and organizational outcomes; and (7) contextual factors influencing leadership effectiveness across different national and institutional settings.

5. Data Analysis

This study employed an interpretive paradigm for data analysis, recognizing that understanding of management accountability and leadership responsibility is socially constructed through the lived experiences, meanings, and interpretations of academic leaders operating within specific institutional and cultural contexts. The interpretive approach is particularly appropriate for examining complex social phenomena such as leadership, where meaning emerges through interaction between individuals and their organizational environments.

The interpretive paradigm, rooted in phenomenology and hermeneutics, emphasizes understanding social phenomena from the perspectives of those who experience them. This approach recognizes that HoDs' understanding of accountability and responsibility is not objectively given but is constructed through their interactions with institutional structures, colleagues, students, and broader higher education systems. The interpretive lens acknowledges that leadership meanings and practices vary across contexts—what constitutes effective leadership or appropriate accountability in one institutional setting may differ substantially in another due to cultural, structural, and historical factors.

The analytical process followed principles of thematic analysis, involving systematic identification, organization, and interpretation of patterns across the literature. Analysis proceeded through multiple iterative stages. Initial familiarization involved close reading of all source materials to develop comprehensive understanding of each study's context, methodology, findings, and theoretical contributions. Subsequent coding identified recurring

themes, concepts, and patterns across sources. Theme development involved organizing codes into coherent patterns that illuminated how HoDs understand and experience management accountability and leadership responsibility.

The final analytical phase involved interpretive integration, synthesizing themes across sources to develop comprehensive understanding while remaining attentive to contextual variations. This phase employed constant comparison, examining how themes manifested similarly or differently across national contexts, institutional types, and leadership levels. Throughout the analytical process, reflexivity was maintained regarding the researcher's interpretive role, acknowledging that analysis is itself an act of meaning-making shaped by theoretical commitments and assumptions.

6. Findings

The analysis of contemporary literature reveals six major themes characterizing HoDs' understanding and experience of management accountability and leadership responsibility in higher education.

6.1 Leadership as Hybrid, Multifaceted Practice

HoDs consistently describe their roles as inherently hybrid, requiring simultaneous navigation of multiple, often competing, functions and identities. Haugen et al. (2024) characterize this through the metaphor of "leading as in alternating currents," reflecting constant adaptation to changing signals, demands, and expectations from multiple directions. Programme leaders described juggling various roles—combining leadership with research, teaching, or project management obligations—while navigating unclear mandates and limited decision-making authority.

This hybridity manifests in three primary dimensions. First, HoDs function as transformers—acting as antennas capturing signals from diverse sources, catalysts facilitating collaboration and motivating staff, and initiators driving change and improvement (Haugen et al., 2024). Second, they serve as bridges—uniting diverse professional cultures, fostering collaboration and dialogue, and weaving together different programme components for coherent learning experiences. Third, they engage in constant balancing—weighing control against teacher autonomy, managing competing priorities, and navigating tensions between institutional demands and departmental needs.

The multifaceted nature of departmental leadership extends to conflict management. Franca et al. (2026) documented how academic leaders strategically apply five different conflict-handling styles depending on context and urgency: competing for urgent compliance matters, collaborating for interpersonal issues, compromising in time-constrained situations, accommodating for emotional sensitivity, and avoiding for temporary de-escalation.

6.2 Accountability Without Commensurate Authority

A pervasive theme across contexts is the paradox of expanded accountability without corresponding authority—HoDs are held responsible for outcomes over which they have limited control. Chikonde and Masaiti (2026) term this "regulated autonomy," describing how Zambian university leaders face expectations for financial self-reliance and institutional performance yet lack authority to make key decisions regarding tuition, budgeting, or procurement without government approval. Similar patterns emerge in other contexts. Haugen et al. (2024) found that Norwegian programme leaders often lack formal personnel responsibilities and resource allocation authority, relying instead on collaboration and negotiation to influence development. In Italian schools, Paletta et al. (2026) documented how middle leaders operate in low-autonomy systems where principals have limited decisional authority and middle leadership positions are often voluntary and unrecognized for career promotion, yet leaders remain accountable for educational outcomes.

This accountability-authority gap is intensified by performance monitoring and reporting requirements. Edamo (2026) documented comprehensive strategic management practices in Ethiopian universities including performance monitoring and data-informed decision-making, yet significant perception gaps exist regarding their effectiveness. The mismatch between accountability demands and available authority creates fundamental tensions that undermine leadership effectiveness and sustainability.

6.3 Systematic Preparation and Support Deficits

Contemporary research consistently identifies systematic deficits in leadership preparation and ongoing support for HoDs. Lakhno et al. (2026) found that 88% of Swiss higher education leaders reported inadequate preparation for leadership positions and lack of institutional support for leadership development. Many described feeling "thrown into" leadership roles without training, having advanced based on academic performance rather than formal leadership development. The consequences of inadequate preparation are substantial. Haugen et al. (2024) documented how Norwegian programme leaders expressed lack of preparation for handling complexity of higher education environments where different skills are required than research excellence alone. Furthermore, 92% of Swiss leaders reported lack of peer community, exchange, and learning opportunities, indicating that leadership isolation compounds inadequate formal preparation (Lakhno et al., 2026).

The support deficit extends beyond initial preparation to encompass succession planning and career development. Lakhno et al. (2026) found that 83% of leaders identified insufficient succession planning as a barrier, revealing absence of systematic mechanisms for leadership knowledge transfer and career progression. The finding that 79% of Italian middle leaders do not aspire to principalship further illustrates how systemic barriers and lack of support undermine leadership pipeline development (Paletta et al., 2026).

6.4 Cultural Undervaluation of Management Competencies

A persistent theme across contexts is the cultural hierarchy that privileges academic credentials over management competencies, creating legitimacy challenges for departmental leaders. Lakhno et al. (2026) found that 54% of Swiss leaders noted management roles are undervalued compared to academic accomplishments, and 83% reported incompatibility between leadership and science roles, reflecting perceptions that managerial responsibilities undermine scholarly credibility. The undervaluation of management competencies manifests in hiring and promotion practices. Lakhno et al. (2026) documented systemic bias toward research excellence over leadership competence, with 63% of positions filled through internal promotion rather than external recruitment based on leadership qualifications. In Italian schools, Paletta et al. (2026) found that middle leadership responsibilities are typically administrative and voluntary, not recognized for career promotion, reinforcing the perception that leadership represents an additional burden rather than a valued professional contribution.

6.5 Ethical Leadership and Faculty Motivation

Research reveals that HoD effectiveness operates significantly through creating conditions that support faculty intrinsic motivation rather than through direct control. Yeap and Shanmugam (2026) found that ethical leadership—characterized by listening to lecturers, promoting autonomy, providing constructive feedback, and respecting diverse perspectives—significantly fostered intrinsic motivation ($\beta=0.581$), which in turn drove innovative work behaviour ($\beta=0.548$). This finding has important implications for understanding departmental leadership effectiveness. In academic contexts where formal authority is limited and professional autonomy is valued; leadership impact depends on fostering voluntary engagement and intrinsic commitment rather than compliance through hierarchical control. However, Paletta et al. (2026) found that supportive leadership from principals decreased middle leaders' aspirations for principalship (odds ratio 0.694–0.726), possibly because high satisfaction in current roles creates a "comfort zone" that reduces motivation to pursue advancement.

6.6 Strategic Management and Governance Effectiveness

The effectiveness of departmental leadership depends significantly on broader institutional governance structures and strategic management practices. Edamo (2026) found strong positive correlations between strategic management practices and both educational quality ($r = .72$) and accountability ($r = .68$) in Ethiopian universities. Performance monitoring and data-based decision-making emerged as the most highly correlated sub-dimensions.

However, effective strategic management requires more than formal systems—it depends on leadership style, data capacity, organizational structure, and stakeholder engagement. Edamo (2026) documented significant stakeholder perception gaps, with leaders reporting higher perceptions of strategic management practices than teachers or students. Riffe and Pifer (2026) proposed that effective departmental governance requires attention to four factors: organizing

(how work is structured), motivating (how work is valued), facilitating (how work is supported), and socializing (how culture and roles are learned).

7. Discussion

The findings reveal fundamental tensions and paradoxes characterizing contemporary departmental leadership in higher education. These tensions reflect broader transformations in higher education governance, including adoption of New Public Management principles, intensified accountability demands, and shifting expectations for academic leadership.

7.1 The Accountability-Authority Paradox

The most pervasive tension identified across contexts is the accountability-authority paradox—HoDs are held responsible for outcomes without corresponding power to implement change. This paradox reflects a fundamental misalignment in governance structures that expect departmental leaders to deliver results while constraining their decision-making authority, resource control, and autonomy. Chikonde and Masaiti (2026) characterize this as "regulated autonomy," where institutions are expected to act independently yet remain constrained by political and bureaucratic controls.

The accountability-authority paradox has several important implications. First, it undermines leadership effectiveness by preventing leaders from implementing necessary changes, allocating resources strategically, or responding quickly to emerging challenges. Second, it creates leadership stress and burnout as leaders struggle to meet accountability demands without adequate means to do so. Third, it discourages talented academics from pursuing or remaining in leadership positions. Addressing this paradox requires fundamental governance reforms that align accountability expectations with commensurate authority, resources, and autonomy.

7.2 The Hybrid Identity Challenge

The hybrid nature of HoD positions—simultaneously academic and managerial, collegial and hierarchical, strategic and operational creates identity tensions that complicate leadership effectiveness. Lakhno et al. (2026) documented how 83% of leaders reported incompatibility between leadership and science roles, reflecting perceptions that managerial responsibilities undermine scholarly credibility. This tension is exacerbated by institutional cultures that privilege academic achievements over management competencies.

The hybrid identity challenge reflects deeper questions about the nature of academic leadership and its relationship to scholarly identity. Traditional academic cultures emphasize collegial governance, professional autonomy, and scholarly achievement as primary sources of legitimacy and status. Managerial roles, by contrast, emphasize hierarchical authority,

administrative efficiency, and organizational performance. HoDs must navigate these competing logics, maintain scholarly credibility while exercising managerial authority.

Addressing the hybrid identity challenge requires cultural shifts that recognize management competencies as valuable professional contributions rather than administrative burdens. This includes incorporating leadership effectiveness into promotion and recognition systems, providing structured leadership development that legitimizes management as a professional skill set, and creating career pathways that value both academic and administrative contributions.

7.3 The Preparation-Complexity Gap

The systematic deficit in leadership preparation identified across contexts reflects a fundamental mismatch between the complexity of contemporary departmental leadership and the support provided to develop necessary competencies. Lakhno et al. (2026) found that 88% of leaders reported inadequate preparation and lack of institutional support for leadership development. This preparation gap is particularly problematic given the multifaceted nature of HoD roles, which require competencies spanning strategic planning, financial management, conflict resolution, change leadership, digital literacy, and interpersonal communication.

The preparation-complexity gap has several consequences. First, it reduces leadership effectiveness as unprepared leaders struggle to navigate complex organizational environments. Second, it increases leadership stress and burnout. Third, it perpetuates ineffective practices as leaders rely on trial-and-error learning rather than evidence-based approaches. Fourth, it discourages leadership pipeline development as potential leaders observe current leaders' struggles. Addressing this gap requires systematic investment in leadership development at multiple career stages. This includes pre-appointment preparation programs, onboarding support, ongoing professional development, and peer learning communities. As Lakhno et al. (2026) emphasize, 92% of leaders reported lack of peer community and exchange opportunities, suggesting that creating structured networks for leadership learning represents a critical yet often overlooked support mechanism.

7.4 Contextual Variations and Universal Patterns

While the findings reveal common challenges across contexts, important variations reflect how specific governance structures, cultural norms, and institutional arrangements shape leadership understanding and practice. The low-autonomy context of Italian schools creates different challenges than the decentralized Swiss system, yet both contexts reveal accountability-authority mismatches and preparation deficits (Paletta et al., 2026), (Lakhno et al., 2026). Similarly, the regulated autonomy of Zambian universities creates specific constraints related to government control and financial dependence, yet the fundamental tension between accountability and authority resonates across contexts (Chikonde & Masaiti, 2026).

These contextual variations suggest that while universal principles of effective leadership exist—such as the importance of ethical leadership, adequate preparation, and alignment of authority with accountability—their implementation must be adapted to specific institutional and cultural contexts. As Edamo (2026) found, institutional diversity requires tailored support for different university types, with research universities requiring different approaches than applied or comprehensive institutions.

8. Conclusion

This critical analysis reveals that Heads of Department in contemporary higher education operate within fundamentally paradoxical environments characterized by expanded accountability without commensurate authority, hybrid roles requiring navigation of competing identities and demands and systematic deficits in preparation and support. These challenges are not merely individual leadership failures but reflect deeper institutional and structural barriers that undermine the sustainability and effectiveness of departmental leadership.

The analysis demonstrates that HoDs understand their roles as inherently complex, multifaceted, and requiring constant adaptation to changing demands and expectations. They recognize the importance of ethical leadership practices that foster faculty intrinsic motivation, the necessity of strategic management approaches that align planning with implementation, and the value of conflict resolution skills that maintain both institutional integrity and relational harmony. However, their capacity to enact effective leadership is constrained by governance structures that misalign accountability with authority, institutional cultures that undervalue management competencies, and systemic failures to provide adequate preparation, support, and career development.

The findings have important implications for higher education policy and practice. Effective departmental leadership requires not only developing individual competencies but also reforming institutional and structural conditions that currently constrain leadership effectiveness. The microfoundations perspective emphasizes that improving institutional governance and effectiveness requires strengthening leadership at the departmental level where most academic work occurs. Departments serve as the critical interface between institutional strategy and educational practice, and HoDs function as pivotal actors whose leadership significantly influences faculty morale, student outcomes, and institutional performance.

9. Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion, this article offers seven evidence-based recommendations for strengthening departmental leadership in higher education.

9.1 Align Accountability with Authority

Institutions must address the fundamental accountability-authority paradox by ensuring that HoDs have decision-making power and resources commensurate with their responsibilities. This requires governance reforms that delegate meaningful authority to departmental leaders for resource allocation, personnel decisions, curriculum development, and strategic planning. As Chikonde and Masaiti (2026) demonstrate, regulated autonomy that expands accountability without corresponding authority creates untenable positions for leaders. Effective governance requires coherent alignment of regulatory demands, institutional agency, and financial capability.

9.2 Develop Comprehensive Leadership Preparation Programs

Institutions should invest in systematic leadership development programs that prepare academics for the complexity of departmental leadership roles. These programs should address multiple competency domains including strategic planning, financial management, conflict resolution, change leadership, ethical leadership practices, and digital literacy. Preparation should occur at multiple career stages: pre-appointment programs for potential leaders, intensive onboarding for new leaders, and ongoing professional development for experienced leaders. As Lakhno et al. (2026) found, 88% of leaders reported inadequate preparation, indicating that current approaches are insufficient.

9.3 Create Peer Learning Communities

Given that 92% of leaders reported lack of peer community and exchange opportunities (Lakhno et al., 2026), institutions should establish structured networks that enable departmental leaders to share experiences, learn from one another, and provide mutual support. These communities can take various forms including regular forums for HoDs within institutions, cross-institutional networks, mentoring programs pairing experienced and new leaders, and online communities enabling ongoing exchange.

9.4 Recognize Management Competencies in Hiring and Promotion

Institutions must address the cultural undervaluation of management competencies by incorporating leadership effectiveness into hiring, promotion, and recognition systems. This includes assessing leadership competencies alongside academic credentials in appointment decisions, recognizing leadership contributions in promotion criteria, and providing meaningful rewards for effective departmental leadership. As Lakhno et al. (2026) documented, systemic bias toward research excellence over leadership competence perpetuates cultures where management skills receive insufficient recognition.

9.5 Implement Systematic Succession Planning

The finding that 83% of leaders identified insufficient succession planning as a barrier (Lakhno et al., 2026) indicates urgent need for systematic approaches to leadership pipeline development. Institutions should identify potential future leaders early, provide developmental opportunities that build leadership competencies, create clear career pathways that make leadership positions attractive, and ensure knowledge transfer from departing to incoming leaders.

9.6 Reduce Administrative Burden and Provide Support

Given that 71% of leaders reported excessive managerialisation and 63% experienced high workload pressures (Lakhno et al., 2026), institutions must address the strategic-operational tension by reducing unnecessary administrative burden and providing adequate support. This includes streamlining reporting requirements, providing administrative assistance for routine tasks, clarifying role priorities and creating structures that enable leaders to focus on strategic priorities.

9.7 Foster Ethical Leadership Cultures

Institutions should promote ethical leadership practices that foster faculty intrinsic motivation and innovative work behaviour. As Yeap and Shanmugam (2026) demonstrated, ethical leadership characterized by listening, promoting autonomy, providing constructive feedback, and respecting diverse perspectives—significantly enhances intrinsic motivation, which in turn drives innovation. Leadership development programs should emphasize ethical leadership principles, and performance evaluation should assess leaders' effectiveness in creating supportive, empowering environments for faculty.

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