

Leadership Styles of Mid-level Educational Leaders Perceived by Academic Members: An Exploratory Study among Chinese Universities

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Abstract

Purpose: The challenges faced by universities in China have presented opportunities to enhance the leadership of educational leaders in universities. Little has been written about the leadership styles of mid-level educational leaders in Chinese higher education (HE). The objective of this study is to provide an authentic understanding of 1) the leadership styles of mid-level educational leaders as experienced by academic members, 2) experienced contextual factors related to the leadership styles of mid-level educational leaders.

Design: Qualitative research was conducted, and the perceptions of 13 academic members from nine universities in China were explored.

Findings: This study revealed authoritarian leadership style was the most reported leadership style of the mid-level educational leaders, followed by transformational and transactional leadership styles. Participants suggested to minimise the adoption of authoritarian leadership style and to encourage the application of transformational leadership style. Regarding the factors that shape leadership style of mid-level educational leaders, this research supports the

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following factors: culture, organizational policies & administration, discipline, and incentive mechanism.

Originality: *We gained a deep understanding of the leadership styles of mid-level educational leaders and the contextual factors that shape the leadership styles in this study. The results can be conducive to future leadership training and to the mid-level educational leaders to create environments that facilitate the application of educational leadership practices.*

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been a significant focus on leadership in the compulsory education sector, while discourse in higher education has mainly centered around managing and leading universities at senior levels (Inman, 2011). Key challenges identified in this context include growing mobility and university leadership (Zomer & Benneworth, 2011). As a result, there has been a pressing need for leadership development, which has been emphasized in a number of studies highlighting the critical importance of leadership development for leaders and staff in university settings (Jooste et al., 2018; Zhu & Zayim-Kurtay, 2019; Cheng & Zhu, 2021; Cheng et al., 2023). This has led to an increased focus not only on senior leaders but also on appropriate leadership styles for mid-level educational leaders. In Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), mid-level leaders are generally defined as being in the role of being deans/vice deans of faculties,

heads of departments, and directors of academic offices, etc. (Pham et al., 2019; Butler, 2020). Often their leadership functions can be related to research, education, student affairs, etc. In the current study, a specific focus is set on mid-level leaders responsible for education in universities, for examples vice-deans responsible for education, and departments chairs responsible for education. In practising their roles, mid-level educational leaders' decisions are influenced by managerial mechanisms, relationships with others and different budgetary systems (Kohtamäki, 2019). In addition, there has been a growing interest within the academic community regarding the connection between leadership and culture. Studies analyzing cross-cultural leadership theory have argued that leadership behaviour and practice are closely linked to culture (Alves et al., 2006).

In the past decades, there have been various studies conducted examining the experiences of mid-level educational leaders in higher education (e.g., Johnsrud et al., 2000; Mather et al., 2009; Rosser, 2004; Sermersheim & Keim, 2005; Bodine Al-Sharif et al., 2021). Research shows that the mid-level leaders could influence their departmental vision as long as they tailored their leadership style to match existing levels of faculty competence, commitment and consensus (Mercer & Pogolian, 2013), highlighting the significance of leadership style in relation to faculty performance. Analyzing leadership styles allows mid-level educational leaders to recognize that their positional identity is formative and dialogic, Zhou and Deneen (2020) suggest that leadership development for mid-level educational leaders should begin with deeper reflection on the influence of peers, followers, and reform history within institutions. However, there is limited research on mid-level educational leaders (Bodine Al-Sharif et al., 2021), let alone leadership styles of mid-level educational leaders. Hence, the

purpose of this study is to further explore the leadership styles of mid-level educational leaders as experienced by academic members in Chinese universities and to gain a better understanding of the associated factors.

Theoretical Background

Mid-Level Educational Leaders in Chinese HE

Leadership of educational leaders at HEIs is important as it has a significant impact on students, researchers, and fellow educators through activities such as mentoring, sharing knowledge, disseminating scholarship, fostering innovation, creating social support networks, and providing social services (Cheng & Zhu, 2021). Educational leadership in higher education is part of academic leadership while educational leadership focuses more on leadership in teaching and learning aspects in higher education (Cheng & Zhu, 2021).

Regarding leadership roles of mid-level educational leaders in Chinese HEIs, there are mainly three leadership functions, namely vice-dean in charge of education, head of department in charge of education, and head of Jiaoyanshi (teaching and research office often related to a certain discipline, subject or sub-subject) in charge of education (Pham et al., 2019; Butler, 2020).

In higher education, educational leaders are expected to generate new knowledge, disseminate it quickly, and leverage their connections and resources in society for this purpose, according to Hannah and Lesterm (2009). Cheng and Zhu (2021) suggest that in Chinese universities, educational leaders have a significant impact on students, scholars, and other teachers by providing mentorship, disseminating

scholarship, sharing knowledge, building support networks, fostering innovation, and contributing to social services. However, in Chinese higher education, educational leader is typically characterized by top-down decision-making and appointments, and there is less emphasis on the impact of leadership on academics' personal lives from a critical perspective. If we aim to develop educational leaders to enhance teaching and guiding cultures, communities, and practices, we need to have a deeper understanding of the characteristics of educational leaders as emphasized by Fields et al. (2019).

In China, mid-level educational leaders connect university leaders and subordinates at Chinese colleges and universities, and their overall quality contributes directly to the quality of education in colleges and universities (Lin et al., 2013). What's more, mid-level leaders in higher education play a pivotal role in change management, and it is essential to understand and develop their agency and identity in the face of a complex innovation focus (Zhou & Deneen, 2020). While these leaders have good technical knowledge in their areas of expertise, they do not receive sufficient support to develop their intangible competencies, which is especially true in the context of China's Confucian tradition (Zhou & Deneen, 2020). It is worth noting that our understanding of work organization leadership comes mainly from Western research, in contrast, similar studies are rare in developing countries, such as China (Zhou & Deneen, 2020), where the institutions and cultural systems are different from those in the West. This situation raises concerns about the transferability of leadership structures and concepts from the West to the East (Akanji et al., 2020). To the best of our knowledge, research studies on mid-level leadership, especially mid-level leadership styles, among Chinese HEIs are significantly underdeveloped.



Leadership styles of Mid-level educational leaders

Lewin's framework of leadership styles (1939) identified three core styles of leadership, which are authoritarian leadership, democratic leadership, and laissez-faire leadership, and sketched out the impact of each style on fellow team members. His research also suggests that leaders who approach leading their teams differently get different results. This theoretical framework on leadership styles has in no uncertain terms influenced many of today's leadership theories and practices, including transformational leadership (which we believe is often the most effective leadership style to apply). The current study about leadership styles is thus under the Lewin's Framework of Leadership Styles (1939).

Within Lewin's framework of Leadership Styles (1939), authoritarian and democratic types of leadership are at opposing ends of the spectrum, in other words, the majority of leaders are in a certain position on this scale, ranging from the degree to which followers are allowed to participate or the level of dominance the leader exerts on decision-making (Schoel et al., 2011). Authoritarian leadership (Bass, 1990) concentrate authority, power, and decision-making (De Hoog et al., 2015). Leaders who adopt it also see subordinates "as either contributors or obstacles to the effort to achieve their goals" (De Luque et al., 2008). Transformational leadership can be introduced as elements that soften perceived rigidity of authoritarian leaders. It helps provide clear expectations while fostering a sense of personal responsibility among employees to achieve higher quality work output (Mustafa, 2020). Democratic leaders assign responsibilities, delegate authority to subordinates, and incorporate them into the decision-making process (Gastil, 1994). Aspects of the transformation style can be adopted for democratic leaders who value the decision-making

process involving all group members, so as to further enhance this inclusivity and making every member feel more engaged (Avolio & Bass, 2002). Given Lewin's classification of leadership styles, transactional leadership might oscillate in between autocratic and democratic leadership. As transactional leaders emphasize the interactivity and exchanges between leaders and the followers (Bass, 1996), which characterizes the incentives for the followers to meet the requirements, and vice versa is punishment (Avolio & Bass, 2002), and conditionally support their followers (Bass, 1999). A more authoritarian transactional leader would dictate precise methods, whereas a democratic leader would allow employees to autonomously in achieving set goals.

If organisations want to enhance its performing, leadership styles and their factors should be analysed and adapted to new demands (Popa, 2012). Study showed the choice of positional leadership styles by some participants was rooted in a culture where hierarchy and managerialism are deeply ingrained (Gennard & Judge, 2011; Akanji et al., 2020). Culture with Confucian values found in several Asian countries where academic members as overly compliant and subservient to their superiors, combined with a high-power distance culture, contributes to an authoritarian leadership style in this context (Akanji et al, 2020; Lee, 2001). In addition, several studies have identified associations between leadership style and mindset and demographic variables, such as openness to experience (Noordin, et al., 2011), age (Nwafor, 2012), and work experience (Cara, 2012). Age is a factor can be explained with reference to the creation process model, whereby human creativity declines after early adulthood (30 to 35 years) (Lehman, 1953). In China, the diverse social and relational experience of mid-level leaders in prior reforms proved play a role in

influencing their participation in and outcomes of the university initiatives in a powerful way (Zhou & Deneen, 2020). Based on the aforementioned literature review, this study attempts to context specifically explore the diverse types of leadership styles in Chinese universities as experienced by academic members in order to contemplate how educational leadership styles in the workplace are shaped.

Method

Design and sample

This study employs a qualitative approach within a phenomenological methodology to deeply explore the sensations, perceptions, observations, and reflections related to a particular phenomenon. This type of qualitative research method is well-suited to this type of exploration (Creswell, 2009) and can lead to a descriptive account of co-experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This study is an exploratory study on the experiences of academic staff in Chinese universities. Currently very little has been written about educational leadership in Chinese universities in Chinese, let alone in English (notwithstanding some excellent articles in CNKI = China National Knowledge Infrastructure). Consequently, an exploratory study can be of value to other scholars researching this area. These findings may be relevant to other particular context (Stake 1995) and can provide some useful insights for the contexts of other Chinese universities (Mercer & Pogolian, 2013).

The researchers provided respondents with copies of their transcripts to review and modify any information they found imprecise. The data was stored in a private database, and respondents had the option to stop the recorder or interview at any time or not answer questions.

These measures allowed participants to express themselves openly and provided the researchers with rich narratives in lieu of mere quantitative data. To this end, we conducted a descriptive study of 13 participants who were academic members at Chinese universities, nine universities were selected from different regions of China to exemplify the diversity and inclusiveness of the sample. Guest et al. (2006) found that in homogeneous studies using purposive sampling, such as many qualitative studies, 12 interviews could be sufficient to reach data saturation. In this study, despite of the age, university, and academic title, all the participants are from Chinese public universities, thus, they can be considered similar for the purpose of explore the leadership styles of mid-level educational leaders as experienced by academic members at Chinese universities. Table 1 displays their demographic characteristics. Overall, the study aimed to describe the nature of the co-experience being studied.

Table 1.

Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Profile of participants	f (participants)	Profile of participants	f (participants)
University		Age	
University 1	2	30-39	5
University 2	4	40-49	5
University 3	1	50-59	3
University 4	1	Academic title	
University 5	1	Professor	3
University 6	1	Associate Professor	5
University 7	1	Lecturer	5
University 8	1	Leadership position	
University 9	1	Faculty level	2
Gender		Department level	1
Female	8	Jiaoyanshi level	10
Male	5	Total	13

Research Questions

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the leadership styles of mid-level educational leaders as experienced by academic members at Chinese universities?
2. What are the experienced contextual and background factors related to leadership styles of mid-level educational leaders?

Data collection and procedure

The study used semi-structured interviews, as recommended by Creswell (2007), which took place over a three-week period. The goal was to obtain detailed accounts from participants about their experiences on leadership styles and experienced contextual factors related to the leadership styles of mid-level educational leaders. The interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes, and all were recorded and transcribed exactly as spoken. The researchers conducted membership checks to ensure that each participant's narrative was accurately captured, which is a crucial step in maintaining the research's rigor (Patton, 2002).

Data analysis

Once the data collection phase was finished, all interviews were recorded and transcribed word for word. The study utilized content analysis as it is a suitable method for analyzing data in written or oral form, and can be used to identify narrative themes, summarize main ideas, and draw inferences (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). To identify codes from the data and create subsequent categories and themes, the study used an inductive approach (Merriam, 2009). After the coding process was complete, the codes were translated from Chinese, and the frequency of each code was calculated to quantify the coding.

Ethical considerations

The study ensured that all participants were aware of the importance of confidentiality, the research's purpose and design, and that their participation was voluntary. The participants were asked for their recorded audio consent before their data was released, and they were informed that they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

Results

Leadership styles of mid-level educational leaders (RQ1)

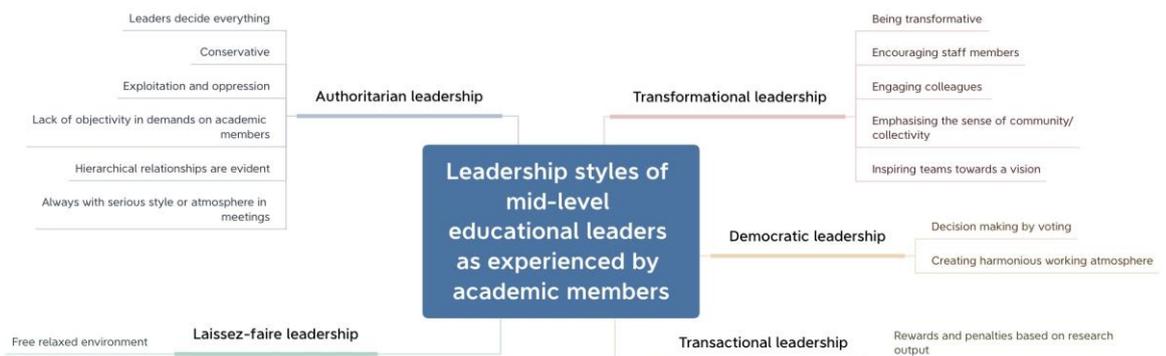


Figure 1. Leadership styles of mid-level educational leaders as experienced by academic members

Among the participants, about one third of the academic members experienced 'authoritarian leadership style' from their mid-level educational leaders (see Figure 1), as it happens, the codes under this leadership style were reported by four young academic members. The second experienced category was transformational leadership under which being transformative, encouraging, engaging people,



emphasising the sense of community/collectivity and inspiring teams towards a vision were highlighted. In addition, transactional leadership style, democratic leadership style, and laissez-faire leadership style were also identified as leadership styles for mid-level educational leaders among Chinese universities. Transactional leadership was stressed due to factors of performance evaluation system in Chinese universities, such as article publishing, rewards and punishment mechanism.

Participants also elaborated and illustrated the educational leadership practices under certain leadership styles. In this section, we highlighted these leadership practices with four quotations based on the answers from 13 participants.

First, students are the main followers for most of the educational leaders, accordingly, leadership styles of educational leaders' direct impact on educational leadership practices to students that they teach, or to the students they gave guidance on research. In terms of the application of leadership styles, it indicated that educational leaders need to be equipped with multiple leadership styles and apply them depends on the situation. Participant 2 stated:

Leadership styles may have great impacts on educational leadership practices. It's not that some academic members don't have leadership skills. It's just that their leadership may not be suitable for some aspects. (Participant 2, 43 years old, male, associate professor)

Participant 6 indicates "Good" universities often accompany educational leaders who can help young academic members apply for projects or curriculum design. The university where participants 1 and 2 are employed is one of China's leading universities, participant 1 and 2 reported faculty leaders in their university don't always serve academic members, and authoritarian leadership and transactional

leadership are dominant in some other faculties as well. As experienced by participant 6, authoritarian leaders are not regarded as good leaders, which is reflected in unequal rights and academic members are dominated to do many things, especially when there is a position gap, for example, the research or academic results of junior researchers are seized by authoritarian powers, causing demotivation to their job and lack of confidence for the future. Participant 6 stated:

Good leaders are often servant leaders who can drive the working atmosphere of the entire team... Conversely, authoritarian leadership can lead to unfair treatment or deprivation of the teaching or research results of young teachers and postgraduate students and demotivate them. (Participant 6, 33 years old, male, lecturer)

The guidelines and policies formulated by transformational leaders result in the future development positioning. This stems from the visionary nature of mid-level educational leaders who anticipate the future needs of the society, convey confidence in the organisation's vision, share risks with followers, demonstrate a sense of mission, show high standards of ethical behaviour, and emphasise a sense of achievement. This type of leader has the ability to instil beliefs in members of the organisation and promote cooperation with others. Participant 12 stated:

Our faculty develop new majors or programs according to the market and society needs, including enlarging the enrolment ratio, which has an important impact on the development of the faculty, on the employment prospects of students, faculty culture, etc., and subtly on the relationship among colleagues. (Participant 12, 38 years old, female, associate professor)



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Experienced Contextual Factors related to mid-level educational leadership styles (RQ2)

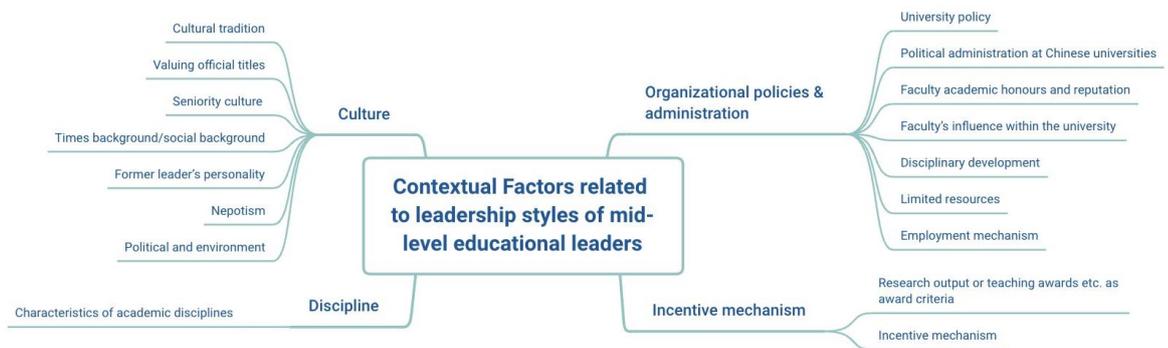


Figure 2. Experienced contextual factors related to leadership styles of mid-level educational leaders

The interviewees’ perspectives revealed that four dimensions of the factors listed in Figure 2. were associated with the leadership styles of mid-level educational leaders. The dimensions that were most frequently cited by the interviewees were culture and organizational policies & administration, categories of culture and organization policies & administration were considered highly important, in which culture tradition, valuing official titles, seniority culture, university policy, faculty academic honours, reputation, and political administration at Chinese universities are primary factors that impact



on their leadership styles. Furthermore, discipline and incentive mechanism were stressed by the respondents as well. Besides, participants also mentioned factors like leaders' age, work experience, and personal attributes, especially leaders' working experience regardless of their formal leader roles, transformational mid-level leaders give individualised consideration and show their empathy when they make decisions regarding the academic staff. Participant 3 stated:

I have been teaching for more than 20 years, I am willing to put my feet in my subordinates' shoes, consult them, and take their needs into consideration. When I make management decisions, I hope they're not just the leader's impractical personal ideas. I consider the decisions in my own practical capacity to see if these ideas can be implemented and achieve the expected effects. (Participant 3, 43 years old, female, professor/vice dean)

Discussion

In this study, the main leadership styles of the mid-level educational leaders were identified in the context of this research, including authoritarian leadership style, transformational leadership style, democratic leadership style, transactional leadership style and laissez-faire leadership style. With regard to the contextual factors related to leadership styles of mid-level educational leaders, the findings give emphasis to factors in four dimensions, including culture, organizational policies & administration, discipline and incentive mechanism.

Leadership styles of mid-level educational leaders

As per Eze's (2011) definition, leadership style refers to the general pattern of behaviours exhibited by a leader that are experienced by the

staff. Thus, the leadership styles of mid-level educational leaders as experienced by academic members in this study can possibly reflect the leadership styles of the mid-level educational leaders in the context of the participants.

Authoritarian leadership style was emphasized in the finding, the features are corroborated by De Hoog et al. (2015), as the most significant mid-level educational leadership style, interestingly, which was strictly reported by four young academic members. As in the traditional hierarchical system, the unity of leaders and staff is promoted through seniority and authority (Lu and Smith, 2020; Bush and Haiyan, 2000).

Mid-level educational leaders, falling into this category, primarily expect their staff to follow institutional policies and implement them in academic practices as a group. In accordance with Franken et al. (2015) and Zhou and Deneen (2020), leaders with this style tend to communicate through statements rather than engaging in dialogue with their staff. Staff may be reluctant to work under this atmosphere, leading to inadequate motivation, low morale, and a tendency among staff to resist established goals (Chukwusa, 2019). Therefore, the participants agreed that innovative ideas might elude organizations due to the adoption of authoritarian styles, which is to the fact that the staff cannot make contributions without consulting them (Northouse, 2015). In addition, based on the result of this study, project outputs under authoritarian leadership are usually of lower quality. On the other hand, participants also stated that authoritarian leadership can be effective at certain times, such as preventing students' plagiarism, which has a direct positive impact on leadership practice, as illustrated by Chukwusa (2019). In general, authoritarian leadership should be avoided in normal communication, as it is mostly commanding and



resulting in feelings of unappreciation and resentment among staff members and thus leading to high absenteeism and decreased motivation in faculties. However, due to the limited samples in this study, further research with a broad sample selection is needed to confirm academic members' perception of leadership styles of mid-level leaders. To address the above issues, it is recommended that academic members be given greater autonomy in their teaching and research responsibilities so that their workloads are more balanced in comparison with other staff members. What's more, it is also advisable to promote a culture of feedback and reflection, whereby mid-level leaders are encouraged to seek regularly feedback from their peers, subordinates, and superiors in order to assess the effectiveness of their leadership styles. Such feedback could guide them in making necessary adjustments.

Transformational leadership was reported as the second important educational leadership style at mid-level. Being consistent with those of Saenz (2011), Yukl (2013) and Ismail et al. (2010), transformational leaders formulate guidelines and policies that impact significantly on faculty development, the organizational culture will become optimistic, and TL fosters subordinates' commitment and results in a significant increase in work output (Yukl, 2013); after the TL determining the relevant faculty positioning, majors and programs can be developed according to the market and society needs. Thus, the importance of mid-level leaders' commitment is crucial to the faculty development (Williams, 2013), as it determines the capacity building of the faculty for the long term.

In addition, transactional leadership style was also stressed by the interviewees, the features are in line with the findings of Bensimon et al. (1989) and Bass and Riggio (2006), the nature of transaction

leadership is reflected as establishing expectations, monitoring and rewarding adherence and progress, and correcting or punishing deviations (Adserias et al., 2017). Interestingly, transactional leadership was stressed due to factors of performance evaluation system at Chinese universities, such as article publishing, rewards and punishment mechanism, which was reflected by Cheng and Zhu (2021). The performance evaluation system may lead to a less focus on teaching, which in turn leads to uncertainty about the teaching quality (Xin et al., 2022), and ultimately may impact on student learning outcomes (Adams et al., 2023), such as student satisfaction, and retention rates etc. Further research could explore whether transactional leadership practices, driven by these mechanisms, have an impact on job satisfaction and commitment of academic staff and the quality of education at universities. Comparative studies between Chinese universities and universities in other countries could also be conducted for different performance assessment systems, analyzing how leadership styles and practices differ in these contexts and the resulting impact on teaching and research.

Demonstrated by Adserias et al. (2017), researchers have discovered that a combination of various leadership styles is effective and has a higher probability of being adopted by leaders. It is true indeed that every leader cannot adopt a single leadership style, they would normally possess several leadership styles at the same time. Based on the findings above, it is important to encourage mid-level leaders to develop a broader range of leadership skills while ensuring alignment with the institution's mission and values. This includes developing skills related to transformational leadership, collaborative decision-making, and participatory leadership, promoting inclusive decision-making processes that take into account the views of a wide range of



stakeholders, including teachers, students, and staff. This helps to balance the rigidity that can come with authoritarian leadership and ensures a more participatory and collaborative approach. In addition, universities could invest in leadership training and professional development programmes that expose mid-level leaders to alternative leadership styles and approaches, providing workshops, seminars, and mentoring opportunities to help them broaden their leadership toolkit. On top of that, higher education institutions could look at strategies and leadership practices that help to better balance research and teaching priorities and try to investigate whether a more balanced approach can be achieved within the current performance evaluation framework so that teaching can also be given its priorities accordingly.

Contextual factors related to leadership styles of mid-level educational leaders

The factors that shape the leadership style of mid-level educational leaders were identified in this study. This research supports the following view: culture and organization have the greatest impact on leadership style, which is consistent with the research of Lok and Crawford (2004), Furmanczyk (2010) and Akanji et al. (2020). Culture has an influence on people's attitudes towards their surrounding environment, human nature, behaviour, time and interpersonal relationships, for example, the cultural socialization of the leaders affects their beliefs, behaviours and lifestyles (Furmanczyk, 2010; Lee, 2001; Akanji et al, 2020). Hence, our study results support the idea that workplace values and leadership behaviours are profoundly influenced by culture. As a result, mid-level educational leaders and administrators in Chinese universities should pay more attention to current cultural values to overcome long-standing traditions that obstruct effective educational leadership.

Furthermore, educational leaders' age and working experience were also emphasized by the respondents, which are aligned with studies of age (Nwafor, 2012) and work experience (Cara, 2012; Zhou & Deneen, 2020). Leaders' openness to experience is positively related to leadership styles, they tend to think more critically as they get older. The combination of this with the rapid changes in China's society makes this phenomenon more obvious. Moreover, if the leaders have the experience of working with those being led, then they will generally put themselves in the shoes of other members of the academic community, rather than just talking or, worse, proposing unrealistic ideas. One could make the argument that the value placed on future development by educational leaders may be influenced by their life experiences (Zhou & Deneen, 2020), and understanding these experiences may be necessary in order to support their leadership in the future (Inman, 2011).

In addition, discipline characteristics and incentive mechanism were also presented by the respondents, of those, disciplines such as foreign studies and other humanities and social sciences are reported to be having more open-minded educational leaders. As the evaluation systems of academic members also play an important role, future transformation policies could focus on the reform of the evaluation systems too (Cheng & Zhu, 2021).

Limitations and Recommendations

There are some limitations to be noted in our research. Our findings draw on reported perceptions rather than observed behaviours, and therefore these need to be interpreted with caution and cannot be generalised to other contexts without considering the specific situations (Bassey 2007). To supplement our qualitative research,



quantitative research can be conducted to explore other critical issues related to leadership styles at the mid-level and their effects. As leadership in higher education settings is crucial for promoting teaching, mentoring, and learning communities, as well as cultural change, it is also necessary to investigate how leadership training programs can encourage, impact, and cultivate the educational leadership of mid-level leaders in higher education, especially whether and how transformational leadership can be developed as the results of the leadership trainings.

Implications and Conclusion

This study addressed a significant research gap by exploring leadership styles of mid-level educational leaders, contextual leadership practices, and their impact, as well as the factors that influence leadership styles among mid-level educational leaders in the selected Chinese universities. The findings of this study have important implications for the development of leadership training programs and can help to enhance or refine leadership styles of educational leaders in the future.

Findings of this research revealed leadership styles of mid-level educational leaders reported by academic members under which leaders conduct leadership practice. It is suggested to minimise the adoption of this authoritarian leadership style, as under which innovative ideas may elude organizations. Moreover, the reason behind transactional leadership style is likely due to the performance evaluation system in Chinese universities, the incentive mechanisms for teaching and research should be appropriately balanced. In general, these findings show where the leadership at mid-level educational leaders can be improved and serve for future studies regarding

tailored leadership training programs. The study's findings suggest that educational leaders should pay more attention to existing Chinese cultural values to overcome traditional barriers, such as overvaluing official titles, and unnecessary seniority culture at work, to achieve effective leadership. Furthermore, leadership training programs could benefit from incorporating diverse disciplinary perspectives and building communities of middle leaders to facilitate mid-level leadership development (Zhou & Deneen, 2020). Finally, the study's implications could inform the design of future leadership training programs among Chinese higher education institutions.

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