

## **Practices of middle leading in a University: Balancing leading and managing in challenging times**

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Middle leadership is an area of increasing interest in both schools and higher education contexts. In higher education, much of the current attention has focused on heads of schools or departments with less exploration of those in team or discipline leadership roles. Middle leaders at this level of a University are often charged with implementing strategy yet need to balance this with front-line management responsibilities and metrics. This paper reports on aspects of a study that investigated the practices of leading at a local level within an Australian University. The research used the theory of practice architectures to explore the practices of leading and what enabled and constrained leading practices. Although not part of the original goals of the research, the data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic and so also provides insights into how middle leaders were responding to the significant challenges that emerged during that time. Fifteen academic leaders across a Faculty were interviewed using the Interview to the Double approach supported by additional semi-structured interview questions to gain insights into specific aspects of leadership relevant to the Faculty. Of the fifteen leaders interviewed, 9 were head of a discipline or functional area.

Framed by the theory of practice architectures, the findings highlight the tensions inherent in middle leading in higher education, particularly for those in roles that are expected to lead strategically yet measured on their ability to manage people and resources. Leading in the Faculty was located within a context of rapid and often unpredictable change. Over the past two years, the Faculty had undergone a structural transformation that significantly shaped the cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements. Over the course of 2020, the practice landscape drastically changed with the COVID-19 pandemic; accelerating some trends and exacerbating pre-existing tensions within the Faculty. The practices of leading identified through the research were strongly relational and focused on managing others and marshalling resources, often to the detriment of the articulated aim of being a “strategic leader”. Among the many practices enmeshed in leading within the Faculty, four are the focus of this paper - advocacy, seeking approval, negotiation, and meetings. While this is not an exhaustive list, this curated list offers a narrative about what it means to lead and be led in higher education during these times of turbulent change.