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# Executivism and deanship in selected South African universities

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## ABSTRACT

It has been argued that traditional governance practices and decision making associated with the collegial model are no longer effective in universities, and business-like management techniques should be adopted. Dwindling resources, external demands for accountability, and increased competition for market share, have resulted in efficiency measures and increased demand for performativity. Executive leadership techniques that crept into universities during the early 1980s, referred to as ‘managerialism’ or ‘executivism’, are now widely practised. The increased focus on managerialism in the last decade has resulted in collegial crises and heightened conflicts between academics and administrators. The emergence of ‘executive deanship’ in South African higher education about a decade ago was in keeping with international trends and local demands for efficiency and performativity. With specific reference to the universities in the Gauteng province, this paper argues that the blanket introduction of executive deanship (referred to as executivism) appears not to have contributed to the envisaged operational efficiency, performance, and effectiveness, as initially claimed. Rather than fostering an enabling and empowering environment, it has added new layers of complexity to deanship pointing to a potential crisis in the advancement of the academic project. The position of dean is now more management oriented and allows little or no room for strategic intellectual and academic leadership.

## KEYWORDS

University deans; executive leadership; executive deanship; managerialism

## Introduction

Some writers claim that traditional governance practices and decision making associated with the collegial model are no longer effective in universities, and more business-like management should be adopted (Ramsden, 1998; Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008; Seale & Cross, 2016; Yelder & Codling, 2004). Dwindling resources, external demands for accountability, and increased competition for market share have resulted in the use of efficiency measures and increased demand for performativity in universities. Executive leadership, professional administration, and new public management practices that surfaced in universities during the early 1980s, which some refer to as ‘managerialism’ or ‘executivism’, are now widely practised. According to Johnson and Cross (2006), this increased focus on performativity in the

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last decade has resulted in collegial tension and heightened conflicts between academics and administrators. The emergence of 'executive deanship' in South African higher education about a decade ago was in keeping with international trends and local demands for efficiency and performativity (Johnson & Cross, 2006). They go on to argue that this new organisational concept and practice 'is doomed to failure' and 'it may prove disastrous to much-needed institutional rejuvenation' (p. 36). The evidence generated for this paper confirms these assertions about local executive deanship at universities in the Gauteng province.

This paper explores the challenges and complexities of leadership and management in relation to executive deanship in six universities located in the Gauteng province, South Africa. To this end, we endeavour to identify patterns and trends in executive deanship at these universities, investigate whether there is convergence and/or divergence among them, and highlight common patterns across institutions and contextual or institutional specificities. A key question raised is whether there is an identifiable discursive trajectory relating to the understanding and implementation of executive deanship in South Africa. The paper demonstrates that the conception and practice of executive deanship in South African universities, without the requisite enabling drivers at systemic, institutional, and individual levels, have had serious consequences for some universities, given the complexities and requirements of their environment. Our main argument is that, in the case of the universities in the Gauteng province, the blanket introduction of executive deanship appears to have contributed very little to the envisaged long-term and far-reaching operational efficiency and effectiveness, though it might have triggered temporary positive organisational adjustments. Its implementation, especially in universities that do not have an enabling and empowering environment as the key driver, has added another layer of complexity to deanship. This shift of focus from academic leadership to executive management points to a potential crisis in the advancement of the academic project, since the position of dean is now more management orientated, and allows little or no room for strategic academic leadership.

## Theory and method

Our approach rests on three key theoretical underpinnings. First, it draws on Parry (1998), whose work is directed largely towards *leading change* in complexity. Parry (1998) focuses on leadership processes in a particular context, rather than on what individuals do as leaders. As Parry (1998) indicates, careful scrutiny of these notions and practices in context should shed light on the social influence processes at work in complex organisational settings such as universities, and what this means in terms of understanding the identity and roles of deans.

Second, central to our analysis is the notion of *reflectivity* in understanding how deans, as traditional academic leaders, adapt to and cope with an environment of change and complexity in a reflective modality, i.e. how they focus on related leadership problems in a relatively unknown executive frame, how they experiment with solutions and learn from positive or negative response consequences (Bandura, 1977). Schön (1983), who was influenced by Dewey, emphasises the centrality of reflection in any investigation on the practice of professionals. He introduces an epistemology of practice grounded in social constructivism, 'in which the knowledge inherent in practice is being understood as artful doing' (p. 35). Schön's (1983) contribution is centred on advancing an understanding of what professionals such as deans do, through the ideas of reflection and action.

Third, our approach resonates with the work of Lambert et al. (2002) who address the dynamic interplay between leadership and learning, in particular, the application of theory to practice. If leadership is about learning, social constructivism may help to unearth and explore the dynamic relationship between how deans are formed by their prior experiences, beliefs, values, sociocultural histories, and perceptions of their world, and how these social constructs translate into their understanding of leadership and management practice in a complex, changing environment. Related to this aspect is the concept of *reflexivity*, which requires that deans need to understand who they are, how they operate, and what their dispositions and pre-dispositions are for the job. These three dimensions are key requirements for an investigation into the genesis of executive deanship in South African higher education.

Besides a review of the literature on leadership, management, and leadership development, the paper draws on data from two surveys that formed part of a doctoral study by Seale (2015) and interviews with 26 deans, their line managers, human resource managers, and other key informants at six universities in the Gauteng province in 2012: University of Pretoria (UP), University of South Africa (UNISA), University of the Witwatersrand (Wits University), University of Johannesburg (UJ), Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), and the Vaal University of Technology (VUT). For triangulation of data, additional semi-structured interviews took place with 12 other key informants, such as the deans' line managers, human resource managers, and others, including the Chief Executive Officer of Higher Education South Africa (HESA). Another set of interviews with selected senior administrators was conducted in 2016 to probe current trends in executive management. These methods enabled commonalities and differences to be compared and contrasted among participant responses and presented an opportunity to gather multiple sources of information rich in context.

## **The advent of executive deanship in South African universities**

Although reference is made to the office of 'dean' in universities as far back as 1816, definitional uncertainty remains on their role and functions (Greicar, 2009). Historically, deans focused mainly on student concerns and curriculum oversight, with less emphasis on staffing and finance related issues; their responsibility for administrative tasks was minimal. According to Wolverton, Gmelch, Montez, and Nies (2001), such a dean was considered a scholar and teacher first, and an administrator second. In line with the advent of executivism and the corporatisation of universities, the nature of deanship has changed dramatically over the past 20 years, from an elected academic leader responsible mainly for faculty administration, to a strategically appointed, politically astute and economically savvy executive (Johnson & Cross, 2006). The concept of 'executive dean' has its roots in globalisation discourses, the pressure of decreasing resources, increasing accountability pressures, the intensification of institutional complexity, and the administrative role of senior academic staff as executives within the university (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2008; Middlehurst & Lewis, 1992; Ramsden, 1998). In South Africa, the advent of executive deanship may be ascribed to the corporatisation of universities globally and the introduction of 'managerialism' or 'executivism' around the 1990s.

The redesigned role of deanship is characterised by setting and implementing a strategic academic vision, leading change in complexity, efficient financial management, emotionally intelligent people management, and responsive stakeholder management (Gmelch &

Wolverton, 2002; Seale & Cross, 2016). The position in the contemporary university has evolved from a historically collegial, temporary, custodial nomination, to a professional, contractually bound appointment. This global trend points to a significant shift in the conceptualisation and practice of deanship locally, as illustrated in the comment below by one of the deans interviewed:

I've been in executive management, the job is hotter, more complex and much more strategic than I expected. If you simply want to be a dean that administers the faculty in traditional terms it's a much simpler space. (Interview with Dean 08-11, UP, 7 April 2011)

What this means, suggest Johnson and Cross (2006), is that deans previously regarded as the 'custodians of collegiality [have] become the guardians of efficiency' (p. 34):

The collegiate or academic leader has now become more of a corporate manager. Deans are now known in many circles as chief executive officers or more precisely executive deans. This is not just a mere change of nomenclature. (Johnson & Cross, 2006, p. 35)

Shakespeare reminds us in his classic work *Romeo and Juliet*, 'What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet'. When applied to the notion of 'executive dean' in some local universities, the name means everything and different things, especially for the universities who participated in this study.

When asked whether they would describe their position as an 'executive dean', deans responded as follows:

It ... has greater responsibilities and greater power in order, in a sense, to elevate the game to another level. More weight is ... placed on that individual's decision-making power and the ability to inspire colleagues and students, and ... to be able to relate to the external environment to enhance the academic project. (Interview with Dean 08-11, UP, 7 April 2011)

It is described as 'executive', but our deans are often frustrated that it is not really executive because there are many things that we would like to make decisions on, and it is sometimes a bit bureaucratic. (Interview with Dean 19-11, UJ, 2 August 2011)

I think you can be as executive as the top management allows you to be. ... To be quite blunt around this, I think ... the term 'executive dean' has become a flashy term from about three years ago. To me, I think 'executiveness' means to what extent you have got autonomy to do what is really best for your faculty within the broader framework of the university. (Interview with Dean 18-12, UJ, 17 January 2012)

The deans were generally in agreement that they are meant to be executive deans, but there appeared to be uncertainty amongst their ranks on what this evolving executive management role really means in the contemporary university.

The concept of executive deanship and its implications for the universities yielded interesting results. At one end of the spectrum, deans at Wits University, for instance, are considered to be executive deans, in a devolved management structure with decentralised resource allocation and decision-making power, reporting to central administration via the office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC): Academic. In all cases, devolved management structure meant the replacement of the notion of dean as representative of the faculty with the notion of dean as representative of the central management hierarchy, with incredibly improved employment packages. A vice-chancellor gave the following rationale:

And by the way, we are paying you a good salary ... another important development ... I don't want you to be worried about cents; you know, turning over the cents at night. (...) At night, instead, if there is a need, focus on how you'll pull your faculty out of where it is to where it needs to be, and where we have agreed it needs to be. (Interview with the VC, UJ, November 2016)

Wits University introduced executive deanship during a major restructuring exercise in 2001. For Johnson and Cross (2006) this exercise resulted in three key changes regarding the structure and operations of deanship at Wits: (i) the establishment of executive deanship; (ii) the abolition of the rotational model and adoption of formal appointment procedures; and (iii) extension of the period of service to five years. This was in keeping with international trends and practices. However, the title 'executive dean' was not introduced at Wits, to avoid the negative corporate connotation associated with it (Interview with LM 04-12, Wits University, 12 June 2012). This approach took account of resistance by deans at the time, a fact that was corroborated by the Director of Human Resources (Interview with HRD 04-12, Wits University, 4 June 2012). As Johnson (2005) points out, 'the deans at the time, however, did not feel comfortable with the blatantly crude adoption of business jargon and retained the designated title Dean' (p. 267).

At the other end of the spectrum, the notion of executive dean at the VUT appears to be mere nomenclature, with a dean having no or little authority to manage his or her faculty, given the hierarchical, centralised decision making and control of resources in place there (Interviews with Dean 20-12, 11 January 2012; Dean 21-12, 11 January 2012; and Dean 22-12, 11 January 2012 at VUT).

Bundy (2006) claims that post-1994, some local institutions such as the UP and North-West University, followed the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) criterion of responsiveness to societal interests and needs. This was one approach to the introduction of executive deanship. But as Johnson and Cross (2006) point out, at other universities, following restructuring and repositioning in the democratic era, the advent of executive deanship was meant to have a positive impact on their responsiveness, efficiency, and overall performance and, equally important, to derive benefits from 'the potential and range of possibilities that it has for facilitating the rehabilitation of South African universities after apartheid' (p. 36). However, as will be demonstrated, this appears not to have been the case for most of the universities under investigation in this study.

What follows is a synopsis of the impact of executive deanship on institutional management.

## **Institutional management implications of executive deanship**

As mentioned earlier, the universities in Gauteng have all adopted and implemented executive deanship, albeit in varying degrees. From their study on distributed leadership at 12 universities in the United Kingdom, Bolden et al. (2008) produced two models for university structures. The first model illustrates a devolution of financial and line management responsibility from the central administration to either the dean or head of school. Resource allocation and formal accountability for the budget and related financial matters reside at this management level. The difference in the second model is that financial and line-management responsibilities are devolved even further to the third level, namely to the head of school or head of department. The shift was brought about mainly by changing funding mechanisms, external regulation, legislation, assessment of organisational performance, increasing competition, and the merging and/or downsizing of separate institutions (Bolden et al., 2008).

Unsurprisingly, these developments mirror the contextual realities of the higher education sector in South Africa; the six universities have adopted similar approaches to organisational structure and management for the reasons mentioned earlier, but with some distinct variations. We have identified three categories of faculty management, resource allocation, and

institutional decision making evident in these universities: (i) Category A—decentralised management and decision making; (ii) Category B—partially decentralised management and devolved decision making; and (iii) Category C—centralised management and decision making (see Table 1).

In Category A, the management of operations and decision making relating to the academic project, including finance and human resources, is entirely decentralised and devolved to the deans. The central administration's role is to provide institutional oversight, and to monitor and report on faculty performance in line with strategic objectives. Of the six universities, only one, Wits University, features in this category. The shift in management devolution and decision making at Wits University in 2001, was confirmed by the responses of the deans during their interviews (Interviews with Dean 23-11, 5 December 2011; Dean 24-11, 22 December 2011; Dean 25-11, 12 December 2011; and Dean 26-11, 29 November 2011). Deans at Wits University are members of the executive team and are held accountable through performance management for achieving their faculties' objectives, effective leadership, and the efficient use of the financial and other resources allocated to them. An advertisement for the recent vacancy for the Dean of Humanities at this university reads as follows:

The successful applicant will be an outstanding academic in a field within the humanities and will have a proven ability in the following key performance areas: (i) academic leadership; (ii) strategic planning and administration; and (iii) human resource and financial management. ([http://www.wits.ac.za/newsroom/vacancyitems/201211/18504/Dean:\\_faculty\\_of\\_humanities.html](http://www.wits.ac.za/newsroom/vacancyitems/201211/18504/Dean:_faculty_of_humanities.html))

**Table 1.** Faculty management and administration structures in six Gauteng universities.

Category	Institution	Introduction of executive deanship	Organisational structure	Resource management (finance & human resources)	Academic administration
A	Wits	2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 faculties—report to DVC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Faculty determined and controlled</li> <li>• Centrally allocated</li> <li>• Managed by the deans</li> <li>• Performance reporting requirements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomous</li> <li>• Devolved to deans and heads of schools in terms of operations, HR, and finance</li> <li>• Controlled by the faculty</li> </ul>
B	UP	2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8 faculties—report to DVC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Centrally determined and controlled</li> <li>• Faculty allocated</li> <li>• Managed by the deans</li> <li>• Performance reporting requirements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Semi-autonomous</li> <li>• Partially devolved to deans in terms of operations, HR, and finance</li> <li>• Controlled by the centre</li> </ul>
	UNISA	2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 colleges—report to DVC</li> </ul>		
	UJ	2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8 faculties—report to DVC</li> </ul>		
C	TUT	2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6 faculties—report to DVC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Centrally determined and controlled</li> <li>• Faculty allocated</li> <li>• Managed by the centre</li> <li>• Performance reporting requirements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not autonomous</li> <li>• Centralised in terms of operations, HR, and finance</li> </ul>
	VUT	2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 faculties—report to DVC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performance reporting requirements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hierarchical, controlled by the centre</li> </ul>



In Category B, there appears to be advancement of a more devolved management model, but some degree of control is still held by the centre in terms of decision making and the allocation of financial and human resources. Examples of this organisational management type include UP, UNISA, and UJ. Although deans at UP affirmed that they are executive deans, their understanding of what this means and how it impacts on their management ability appears to differ (Interview with Dean 05-11, UP, 16 May 2011). This is captured by the views of two deans on their experiences in terms of their approach to organisational management and decision making:

In some ways, you are an executive dean, in others you have delegated authority. Whereas in others you are encouraged and develop and create within that framework, you need to get executive support for doing it. (Interview with Dean 08-11, 7 April 2011)

If you say an executive dean in the sense of 'here is your money now run your faculty and do not come back', then I do not think our university works along those lines. A lot of the decision making related to finance and human resources and facilities is centralised. (Interview with Dean 09-11, 4 August 2011)

Universities that were affected by mergers during the early 2000s, such as the UNISA, used that opportunity to restructure and align their governance and management structures in line with similar developments globally and locally post-1994. Following their merger with Technikon South Africa and Vista University Distance Education Campus in 2004, UNISA created the 'college' management model and, in keeping with global and local trends, introduced executive deanship (UNISA Annual Report, 2011, p. 5). An advertisement for a new dean in the College of Law at UNISA described the position as:

An Executive Dean is an executive officer of the College. S/he is a member of the Extended Management Committee of the University, and is required to advance the strategic goals, academic objectives and the management philosophy of the University.

Deans at UNISA have delegated authority to manage all the operational issues within a specific college. According to the director of human resources, vice principals are expected to define strategy and provide broad direction in the alignment of the university's vision and mission. The deans, on the other hand, are responsible for effecting and executing this strategy. This shift reflects what Johnson and Cross (2006) refer to as the 'de-DVCization' of the faculty; that is, a transfer of authority and influence traditionally held by the deputy vice-chancellor to the faculty—a fact which was echoed by the director of human resources at UNISA (Interview with HRD 01-12, UNISA, 22 June 2012). The Institutional Audit Report of the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2010) makes reference to this requirement for deans and particular challenges being experienced in this regard:

Interviews with the Deans and academic staff across the colleges suggest that there is considerable unevenness in the way in which each Dean discharges their role, the support they feel they are receiving from the institution's management and the confidence that they themselves elicit among their peers. (p. 13)

As with other institutions affected by mergers, UJ used the opportunity to restructure and reposition itself locally and internationally. The rationale for adopting executive deanship at UJ is outlined in its various strategic plans, and appears to be sound and necessary, as claimed by one dean, given the transformation imperatives at that time (Interview with Dean 17-11, UJ, 10 November 2011); and over time it has subsequently become entrenched (Interview with Dean 18-12, UJ, 17 January 2012).



Over and above their primary roles as Academic and Strategic Leaders of their faculties, Executive Deans at the University of Johannesburg fulfil a typical operational management role in respect of the allocation and utilisation of resources within their faculties. (UJ, 2005)

At Wits University, UP, and UNISA, deans prepare their faculty business plans and budgets in line with institutional strategic and operational plans. Financial resources are then allocated to support the faculty's activities under the leadership and management of the dean. Decision making in this model is either fully or partially devolved and deans are held accountable through their management reporting line. However, at UJ there appears to be more centralised control in decision making and the management of financial resources, as shown by this finding in the CHE Institutional Audit Report (CHE, 2010) for the University of Johannesburg:

Nevertheless, the Panel heard during interviews with the Deans that their input to the budget and allocation of resources is limited and as a result cuts have had to be made in the faculties, which negatively affect the delivery of the learning programmes. The Panel suggests that the University consider giving more authority to the Executive Leadership Group, and in particular to the Deans in this process. (p. 16)

This situation was confirmed by the deans during their interviews (Dean 15-11, 1 December 2011; Dean 19-11, 10 November 2011; and Dean 18-12, 17 January 2012).

The TUT and VUT appear to fall into the third category (Category C), in which institutional management and administration remains centralised and decision making in terms of resource allocation is controlled largely by the executive (Interviews with Dean 12-11, TUT, 1 September 2011 and Dean 14-11, TUT, 13 September 2011).

TUT adopted a similar position in 2004, as did other merged institutions, in its conception and implementation of executive deanship:

Executive Deans occupy a unique place in the continuum of academic administrators/managers in higher education. They are the facilitating links between departments, through heads of department, academic staff, support staff and students, and university leadership through the office of the DVC Academic. (TUT, n.d.)

According to their line manager, executive deans at the TUT are now empowered with a greater range of responsibilities than previously, and enjoy a higher level of relative autonomy (Interview with LM 03-12, 15 June 2012). However, this situation is characterised by challenges posed by higher levels of leadership in terms of implementation:

When [names a former vice-chancellor] came in and [names a current DVC] they started the two of them running the university on a micro scale. Even if a department wanted to appoint a student assistant, it had to go through a DVC for a signature. A ridiculous situation and I often said we are not executive deans, we are more operational clerks, all we did was manage and they kept us busy in a lot of meetings, but when something went wrong it was your fault. (Interview with Dean 13-11, TUT, 31 August 2011)

VUT, on the other hand, appears to have adopted executive deanship, caught up in the frenzy of increased corporatisation as *the* solution to their institutional leadership and management ills. But the experiences of deans at this institution tell a different story, as reflected in the following statements:

When I started this position I was a dean and then we changed it to executive dean; not in salary, not in executive power, nothing, only a name change. I always ask myself what executive powers do I have and no—nothing. Nothing changed. (Interview with Dean 20-12, VUT, 11 January 2012)

So we have adopted the executive dean issue, we were just deans but I still feel we are not defining it the way it is defined elsewhere ... But we accept what it is, that we are executive deans but in actual fact we are not. (Interview with Dean 21-12, VUT, 11 January 2012)

As already mentioned, Johnson and Cross (2006) claim that the blanket introduction of executive deanship at some local universities 'is doomed to failure and may prove disastrous to much-needed institutional rejuvenation' (p. 36). This situation rings true in some instances, as post-1994 challenges relating to the introduction of executive deanship have not diminished. For some deans at three of the universities participating in this study, the adoption of the term 'executive dean' appears to be conflicted and contested (Interviews with Dean 13-11, TUT, 31 August 2011; Dean 15-11, UJ, 1 December 2011; and Deans 20-12 and 21-12, 11 January 2012 at VUT).

A pattern emerges around what was earlier referred to as a misalignment between the conceptual framing and lived reality of deans at universities in Johannesburg (Interviews with Dean 05-11, UP, 16 May 2011; Dean 08-11, UP, 7 April 2011; Dean 15-11, UJ, 1 December 2011; and Dean 23-11, Wits University, 5 December 2011). The views of these deans were corroborated by other interviewees, including two line managers (Interviews with LM 01-12, UNISA, 14 June 2012 and LM 03-12, TUT, 15 June 2012) and a human resources director (Interview with HRD 01-12, UNISA, 22 June 2012).

The evidence derived from the interviews points to apparent general frustration amongst deans around perceived versus real authority. Although real authority was envisioned, the position still lacks strategic focus (Interview with Dean 22-12, VUT, 11 January 2012). Some powers in relation to key areas such as finance and human resources are still centralised (Interviews with Dean 09-11, UP, 4 August 2011 and Dean 17-11, UJ, 10 November 2011); top-down bureaucracy still hampers effective decision making; and in most cases decisions affecting faculties are still taken at the top level of management (Interview with Dean 18-12, UJ, 17 January 2012). As is the experience elsewhere, it seems that deanship at local universities has become more strategic, with direct accountability in most instances to the executive under the leadership of the deputy vice-chancellor responsible for academic matters. Around 2012, all the deans participating in Seale's (2015) study reported to the DVC: Academic, or a similar function, except for deans at Wits University who until recently reported directly to the vice-chancellor. Following the appointment of a new vice-chancellor at Wits University in 2013 and reorganisation of executive portfolios, the deans there now report to the DVC: Academic. This is in keeping with line management practices at other universities in South Africa generally. What appears to be an ongoing challenge in all the universities, though, is the ambiguous nature of executive deanship, as perceived by a multiplicity of role players, and the concomitant conflict between its core functions, as revealed in the following section.

## Managing definitional ambiguity and role conflict

The traditional concept of leadership upheld the notion that excellence in academia translates, via *primus inter pares*, into management excellence (Kotecha, 2003; Seale & Cross, 2016). Robertson (1998) depicts the plight of an academic leader moving from the collegiate 'gentleman amateur' to being an 'amateur manager', caught in the throes of leadership and executive management, without the requisite training or experience. He claims that the lack of a coherent theory of management and the amateur status of university leaders have

caused the parlous state of leadership and management currently evident in the academe. Johnson and Cross (2006) refer to the mismatch between academic leadership roles and the particular skill sets required for university management, which deans often do not possess, which Seale and Cross (2016) confirm. Citing Burns's transactional and transformational leadership theory, Gmelch (2002) defines academic leadership for deans as:

The act of building a community of scholars to set direction and achieve common purposes through the empowerment of faculty and staff. (p. 5)

From the literature and prevailing discourses, it appears that a dean's position today has greater political and social nuances, especially in relation to academe, compared to the traditional hierarchical or technical status (Gmelch, 2002; Johnson & Cross, 2006; Zimpher, 1995; Rosser, Johnsrud, & Heck, 2003; Seale & Cross, 2016). The leadership position of deans is complicated by the desire to lead their faculty to new levels of accomplishment and excellence, while bearing in mind that one day they will return to the same academic environment. As seen earlier, a key component of deanship centres on balancing the different but interrelated roles as academic leader and executive manager, especially amongst peers, as shown by Greicar (2009). This balance is at the heart of deanship, yet unfortunately it seems to be where the problem lies. In a sense, this appears to be the hardest part of the job—one dean referred to himself in the interviews as the proverbial 'meat in the sandwich' or, put another way, 'neither fish nor fowl' (Interview with Dean 24-11, 22 December 2011).

The deans serve two masters: the executive and the academe (Gmelch, 2002; Greicar, 2009; Johnson & Cross, 2006; Seale & Cross, 2016). For deans, keeping disparate, sometimes warring, factions simultaneously content is like 'walking a tightrope without a balancing pole' (Interview with Dean 24-11, 22 December 2011). A key element is being able to navigate the two camps (the executive and the academe), while directing their attention towards the faculty and university's strategic objectives in terms of the academic project (Interviews with Dean 09-11, 4 August 2011; Dean 10-11, 3 August 2011; Dean 16-11, 10 November 2011; Dean 23-11, 5 December 2011; Dean 25-11, 12 December 2011; and Dean 26-11, 29 November 2011). But as Morris (1981) points out, the nature of academic work engenders a special pride in not being responsive to institutional rules and regulations—an attitude which deans need to uphold and regulate in the faculty. This situation creates an inherent tension, since academics represent a constituency that is almost purely political in character. They cannot be commanded or led, except by the initiatives and cohesion of their own membership (Morris, 1981). In the interviews in this study, deans talked about 'bridging the gap' between the faculty and the executive by establishing systems that support both parts of the institution (Interviews with Dean 08-11, 7 April 2011; Dean 09-11, 4 August 2011; Dean 24-11, 22 December 2011; and Dean 26-11, 29 November 2011).

This duality of roles has led to particular challenges for deans, as illustrated by Johnson (2005), and corroborated by Greicar (2009) and Scott et al. (2008), in that they have become withdrawn from intellectual and academic life due to the increasing managerial demands. Most of the deans interviewed recognise that in theory their position is an academic one, with management responsibilities (Interview with Dean 24-11).

But in reality it appears to be something completely different. As alluded to earlier, the deans who participated in this study see themselves as representing the executive or management, which is not surprising given the evolution of the 'executiveness' of this role in South African higher education, akin to experiences elsewhere (Interviews with Dean 03-11,

2 August 2011; Dean 07-11, 1 June 2011; and Dean 17-11, 10 November 2011). Post democracy, in some local universities, there appears to be a greater emphasis on management and administration, with less attention being paid to collegiality, often at the cost of strategic academic leadership (Interviews with Dean 04-11, 6 September 2011; Dean 19-11, 2 August 2011; Dean 18-12, 17 January 2012; Dean 20-12, 11 January 2012; and Dean 22-12, 11 January 2012).

The experiences of South African deans mirror those in other higher education systems such as in Australia and the United States (Greicar, 2009; Scott et al., 2008). The study by Seale (2015) reveals a world in which deans, as traditional academic leaders, now have to navigate and negotiate the demands of executive management, which some find particularly challenging. This development is characterised by a clearer distinction between academic and administrative functions. At Wits University, for instance, with its liberal, progressive English-speaking tradition, academic functions are prominent and there is reliance on some form of constrained collegiality. Johnson (2005) refers to the demise of collegiality and the emergence of 'contrived collegial managerialism'<sup>1</sup> at Wits University, which is a result of the 'collegial discourse from below and managerial pressure from above'. This situation has been exacerbated by the devolved management model introduced at the university in 2001, as alluded to earlier.

Maintaining the academic/executive equilibrium in the dean's role is a key requirement today, as pointed out by another dean at Wits University (Interview with Dean 26-11, 29 November 2011). This necessity adds another layer of complexity to deanship and is not unique to Wits. Deans at Wits appear to be experiencing heightened levels of role ambiguity as they navigate the tensions of an academic culture that prides itself on debate and contestation, especially with central management, of which the deans are perceived to be an extension (Johnson & Cross, 2006). Moreover, although devolution comes with greater autonomy and financial independence, internal competition for dwindling resources and increased demands for doing more with less add to the leadership and management complexities.

The evidence provided in this paper also reveals that in former Afrikaans-speaking, historically white universities (e.g. Rand Afrikaans University—now integrated into the University of Johannesburg; the University of Pretoria; and the University of Potchefstroom—now integrated into the University of the North-West), administrative and management functions are more prominent, with greater centralisation of power and authority, and strong downward lines of accountability (Johnson & Cross, 2006). These practices appear to have been transferred in the merger process, especially where the dominant partner was a former white university, as in the case of the newly created University of Johannesburg (formerly the Rand Afrikaans University):

You see, I think there is an understanding for why it was necessary to perhaps have a lot of processes, bureaucracy, more managerial style perhaps; it was necessary if you take that it was a merger. (Interview with Dean 17-11, 10 November 2011)

This sentiment was echoed by the Vice-Chancellor who attributes a necessary reinvigorating historical role to executivism:

A key part of what we've been driving has been what is hated by our academic left, because of its emphasis on strategy, planning and plans, performance indicators with milestones, performance agreements, performance monitoring, performance managing, and performance rewards. Those who hate all of that, dismiss it as managerialism ... as corporatization. My response is: *Look at the results* [His emphasis]. (...) It's an instrument ... a tool. If it fails, we change it. So far it appears

that this tool, you know, has helped us get closer to things about this complex process: about reputation, model, authority and legitimacy. (Interview with the VC, UJ, November 2016)

In this environment of mergers and historically sensitive circumstances, another dean at UJ pointed to the frustration of being an executive in name only, with limited decision-making authority (Interview with Dean 19-11, 2 August 2011). This was echoed by their HR director:

I think one of the main ones has to do more with the governance structure above them (deans) ... one of their main challenges is that they feel sometimes that when they make certain decisions they can always be overruled by MEC [Member of the Executive Council] or some decisions come ready made. (Interview with HRD 03-12, 27 June 2012)

The current state of affairs in relation to executive deanship has seen some institutions, like UP, follow a change in leadership, adopting a more enabling leadership and management environment for deans with a revised 'corporate framework' (Interviews with Dean 08-11, 7 April 2011 and LM 02-12, 14 June 2012). Although the University of Pretoria has not adopted a completely devolved management model like Wits University, there has been an increase in the delegation of authority for financial and other decision-making processes (Interview with Dean 08-11, 7 April 2011). At UJ, the VC has expressed the need to shift from what he calls the 'battleship command model' to a more inclusionary mode of management:

We expect you to be a democratic collegial leader, but you must lead. You must win people over. You must be a good communicator. You must be an excellent dialoguer and debater. You must be a visionary, or at least part visionary. (Interview with the Vice-Chancellor, UJ, November 2016)

A dean at UJ had this to say:

I think the only change was in approach from strong steering required at the time of the mergers to much weaker forms of steering as the circumstances and the challenges have changed. The 'strong hand' used at the time is no longer needed. (Interview with Dean 08-11, 10 May 2017)

Other institutions, as in the case of UNISA, have embraced executive deanship in its totality as part of the post-merger re-engineering process, but decision making and resource allocation remains largely centralised. Deans at UNISA may be 'executive' in name, but in practice it appears that they are not empowered or enabled in terms of management capacity (Interviews with Dean 01-11, 1 August 2011; Dean 03-11, 2 August 2011; and Dean 04-11, 6 September 2011). At TUT and VUT, the understanding and practice of executive deanship appears to be largely notional, with the concept being adopted without putting in place the necessary systems and support structures to advance it.

Almost a decade into the post-merger era, the narrative and discourse on executive deanship at local universities in the Gauteng province remain contested in some, the envisaged outcomes aspirational, and the overall impact (in terms of improved efficiencies and effective performance in the sector), appears to be negligible with few exceptions. Our evidence illustrates that the blanket adoption of executive deanship, without the necessary enabling and empowering organisational framework, leadership commitment, and concomitant support for deans, is a failure, at most of the universities participating in Seale's (2015) study. However, there are some cases—for instance, at the UP, UJ, and Wits University—where executivism may have contributed to improved organisational performance, but by and large, the universities in this study, and the sector in general, have not benefited from the creation and implementation of executive deanship. What is telling for all institutions that

participated in this study is how key performance measures have been reworked to signal this shift towards executivism and performativity.

What these case studies reveal is an emerging disjunction between the conception and current practice of executive deanship, resulting in a contested discourse in South African universities. The situation points to a discord between the institutional framing of executivism and the lived reality of deans as academic leaders in practice. It is in the position of dean where academic leadership and executive management roles intersect, but more realistically, often collide, given the complex and changing context. The challenges are compounded by the expectations and negotiations around the generally ill-defined role of a dean, and the multi-layered institutional complexities of the position. The result is an erosion of collegiality in the academe generally, and role confusion, even schizophrenia, amongst some deans, who straddle what appear to be increasing tension and contestations between academia and the institution's executive management.

Overall, there is a skewed, imbalanced relationship between the dual roles of academic leadership and executive management expected of deans. This occurrence is consistent with the findings of studies on deanship undertaken by Bolden et al. (2008), Greicar (2009), Johnson (2005), and Scott et al. (2008). It also appears that, as in other higher education systems, local deans at the selected universities are not adequately prepared for, or supported for this redefined executive role with its ambiguity, concomitant challenges, multiplicity of expectations, functional negotiations, and lack of leadership development support. The leadership and management context of deans in local higher education has negatively influenced their ability to comprehend and perform their roles effectively, in a system noted for its uncertainty, complexity, and transitional nature. As illustrated in this paper, the environment is dynamic, in flux, and requires more adept, flexible responses to leadership and management for deans. In reality, the actual journey to deanship and the lived experiences of deans, especially in relation to the increased demand and requirement for executiveness, points to a context characterised by under-preparedness and a general 'adapt or die' approach. Unfortunately, this situation has an impact on the effectiveness of this crucial role in local universities (Seale & Cross, 2016).

## Conclusion

The case studies of the universities examined in this study illustrate that the blanket introduction of executive deanship in them seems to have failed to realise the broad, long-term, and far-reaching, perhaps unrealistic, envisaged expectations and outcomes. It may have had limited success by providing deans with greater autonomy and decision-making power in some universities such as UP and Wits, but more generally, it has created role confusion, role ambiguity, and unfortunately, in some cases, role alienation. The leadership narratives of deans confirmed that while this role has been reconfigured in the contemporary university and imbued with greater 'executiveness', most if not all incumbents are first and foremost academics. From an epistemological perspective, this underscores the apparent disjunction between the role construct and the profile of its actual inhabitants. In other words, the manner in which executive deanship has been implemented in South African universities appears to be at odds with entry to and preparation for this important role.



This paper points to one simple fact—deans under review are academic leaders and not executives in the corporate sense. Neglecting to recognise this assertion may result in potential conflict in how their identity is conceptualised, constructed, and ultimately lived. In terms of their biographies, most deans spend a significant amount of time on their academic and professional formation. This is their major contribution to the role. However, the redesigned notion of deanship nowadays requires an undisputed understanding of, and ability to carry out, management functions at an executive level, such as finance management, people management, income generation, building partnerships, etc.

The interface position of a dean, visible in their bridging role between the administration and the academe, is largely dependent on the kind of academic leadership that they provide, and sustained intellectual credibility amongst their peers and the people who report to them in the faculty. Although the deans in this study, their line managers, and other key informants recognised the duality of this role, in reality it is skewed towards the executive, administrative management dimensions, with little if any support for strategic advancement of the academic project.

The concept of executive deanship requires a renewed reflection on and response to what constitutes an effective dean in today's complex higher education environment. In order to address the erosion of collegiality in the academe and reinsert their strategic academic leadership focus, deans should advocate team, participatory, and distributed leadership in the faculty, given the integral role of the academe in the visioning and decision making which affects them. This paper also shows that deans in South African universities have not been equipped for the managerial requirements of executive office and have had limited training or prior executive experience. Parachuting them into an ill-defined, redesigned executive role under these circumstances is problematic and may prove disastrous for the individual, the institution, and the sector as a whole.

## Note

1. 'Contrived collegial managerialism' refers to a management model in which spontaneity, initiative, and voluntary interaction are constrained by management practices, regulations, and controls that are geared to promoting efficiency and increasing individual and institutional performance.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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