

University Department Leadership: Systematic Review (2006–2025)

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ABSTRACT

University departments are strategic, necessary, and relevant intermediary entities between governing executive teams and teaching/research staff. This study examines the scientific research regarding university department leadership, categorizing it into six main areas: (1) training for managerial performance; (2) external perception of departmental leadership; (3) the head of department; (4) the leadership team; (5) the elements to manage; and (6) managerial competencies. A systematic analysis of scientific literature published in Web of Science, Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar was conducted, reviewing a total of 35 articles. The findings reveal the need for enhanced training in university management, a negative external perception of the position overly focused on the figure of the director, and personnel management emerging as the most contentious and significant element. The conclusions and discussion highlight numerous consensuses found in the analyzed articles, future research directions related to leadership training, positive perceptions, management teams, and leadership competencies. A noteworthy contradiction is also identified: the high demands imposed on directors by individuals who may never aspire to assume such roles themselves. Practical implications include guiding universities to design targeted training pro-

RESUMEN

Liderazgo de departamentos universitarios: revisión sistemática (2006-2025)

Los departamentos universitarios son entidades intermedias estratégicas, necesarias y relevantes entre los equipos ejecutivos de gobierno y el personal docente e investigador. Este estudio examina la investigación científica sobre el liderazgo en los departamentos universitarios, clasificándola en seis áreas principales: (1) formación para el desempeño directivo; (2) percepción externa del liderazgo departamental; (3) el jefe de departamento; (4) el equipo de liderazgo; (5) los elementos a gestionar; y (6) las competencias directivas. Se llevó a cabo un análisis sistemático de la literatura científica publicada en Web of Science, Scopus, ScienceDirect y Google Scholar, revisando un total de 35 artículos. Los resultados revelan la necesidad de mejorar la formación en gestión universitaria, una percepción externa negativa del cargo, excesivamente centrada en la figura del director, y la gestión del personal como el elemento más controvertido y significativo. Las conclusiones y el debate destacan numerosos consensos encontrados en los artículos analizados, futuras direcciones de investigación relacionadas con la formación en liderazgo, percepciones positivas, equipos de gestión y competencias de liderazgo. También se identifica una contradicción no-

grammes, reinforce leadership teams, and improve decision-making processes to enhance departmental performance and institutional effectiveness.

Key words: Management, University, Personnel Management, Research of Academic Literature

table: las altas exigencias impuestas a los directores por personas que quizá nunca aspiren a asumir tales funciones. Las implicaciones prácticas incluyen orientar a las universidades para que diseñen programas de formación específicos, refuercen los equipos de liderazgo y mejoren los procesos de toma de decisiones para mejorar el rendimiento de los departamentos y la eficacia institucional.

Palabras clave: gestión, universidad, gestión de personal, investigación de literatura académica

1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership in organizations and human groups has emerged as a central topic of inquiry due to its substantial influence on institutional processes, professional cultures, and organizational outcomes (Akbulut et al., 2015; Bystydzienski et al., 2017; Horne et al., 2016; Hundessa, 2021; Kruse, 2022; Kruse et al., 2020; Tahir et al., 2014; Yedidia & Bickel, 2001). In the field of higher education, this relevance has intensified in recent years as universities confront growing pressures linked to accelerated digitalization, increasing accountability mechanisms, and the profound reconfiguration of academic work following the COVID-19 pandemic. These transformations have altered governance structures, reshaped professional expectations, and amplified the strategic significance of the leadership exercised by heads of university departments, who operate at the pivotal interface between central administration and academic communities.

Although educational leadership research has traditionally focused on primary and secondary education, leadership in higher education has received comparatively limited attention (Bellibaş et al., 2016; Smothers, Absher, & White, 2012). This gap is noteworthy because university departments constitute the basic operational units through which academic decisions are implemented. They mediate between executive governance teams and teaching and research staff, influencing curricular design, research priorities, resource allocation, and academic cultures through multiple councils and committees representing the faculty (Nguyen, 2013; Degn, 2015; Creaton & Heard-Lauréote, 2021). Their centrality is underscored by the fact that approximately 80% of university decisions are processed at the departmental level (Tahir et al., 2014), highlighting the need to better understand their leadership dynamics.

Despite their strategic importance, the leadership of university departments is marked by a high degree of complexity. The role varies significantly across national higher education systems and requires the integration of professional, relational, managerial, and strategic

competencies that are not always clearly defined or explicitly supported (Hundessa, 2021; Kruse, 2022). Heads of department shape not only teaching and research activity but also faculty motivation and organizational commitment by fostering collaboration, articulating shared visions, modelling ethical and professional behaviour, encouraging innovation, and mediating tensions within academic communities (Tahir et al., 2014; Mefi & Asoba, 2020). Understanding these processes demands a more integrated conceptual framework capable of linking leadership practices with institutional outcomes, cultural contexts, and governance structures.

Nevertheless, many universities confront a persistent leadership crisis at the departmental level. Difficulties in recruiting individuals willing to assume these roles are widespread (Kruse, Hackmann, & Lindle, 2020; Castro & Ion, 2011), partly because the position oscillates between managerial and academic expectations without the structural support, authority, or training needed to fulfil its expanded responsibilities (Creaton & Heard-Lauréote, 2021; Ion & Castro, 2017; Hundessa, 2021; Nguyen, 2013). Successive university reforms have increased administrative burdens without clarifying decision-making capacity, generating ambiguity in responsibilities, competencies, and institutional expectations (Bellibaş et al., 2016; Thai et al., 2021). These responsibilities frequently coexist with teaching and research obligations (Degn, 2015), despite the absence of systematic training pathways to prepare academic staff for leadership roles (Pellow & Wilson, 1993a; White et al., 2016; Tietjen-Smith, Hersman, & Block, 2020). Furthermore, the lack of robust evaluative mechanisms limits the capacity to assess the outcomes and efficacy of diverse leadership styles (Akbulut et al., 2015; Hundessa, 2021).

In light of the scarcity of recent systematic reviews or bibliometric analyses that synthesize these challenges and advancements, this study aims to clarify the current state of scientific evidence concerning leadership in university departments and to articulate its implications for institutional management. By reviewing research produced over the last two decades, this work seeks to develop a more integrated conceptual understanding of departmental leadership, identify persistent gaps in the literature, and propose new lines of inquiry capable of strengthening middle management and improving governance processes within universities.

2. DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this study is to provide an international review of scientific studies conducted on leadership in university departments to understand and delineate its current

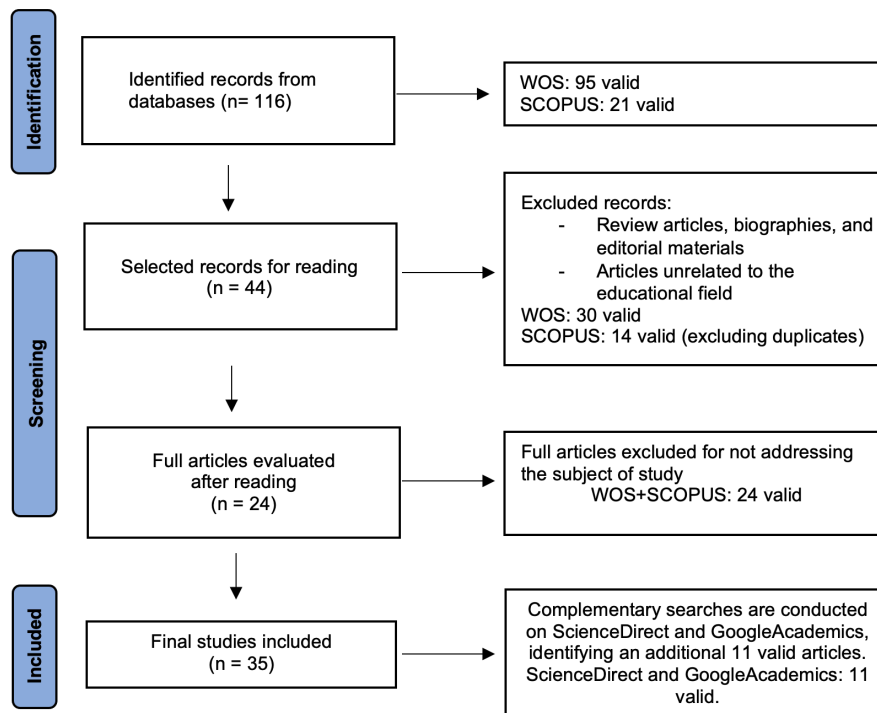
state, thereby identifying new research directions that contribute to improving university management. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

- What studies are available addressing issues related to the leadership of university departments in the last 20 years (2006-2025)?
- Has scientific production on the topic increased in recent years?
- What training is provided to department chairs?
- How is the department chair perceived?
- What ideas have been addressed in research on department chairs?
- What ideas have been addressed in research on departmental leadership teams?
- What elements do they manage?
- What competencies does a department chair possess?

To address this objective and these research questions, searches were conducted in the Web of Science (WOS) and Scopus, which were closed as of January 9, 2025. Following the PRISMA guidelines (Page et al. 2021), the search query was as follows: [universit* OR high* educat* OR academi*] (Title) AND [department] (Title) AND [head OR chair OR director OR coordinator OR leader] (Title) AND [management* OR leader* OR organi*] (Title). Subsequently, using the same parameters, the search was extended to two additional databases: ScienceDirect and Google Scholar. The searches were restricted to the last 20 years to trace the trajectory of research in the scientific literature published on university departments over a sufficiently broad period.

To ensure the validity of the review process, clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established. Only scientific articles published in indexed journals within the selected databases (Web of Science, Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar) between 2006 and 2025 were considered, provided they explicitly addressed leadership in university departments. Initially, 112 was located. After excluding those documents that were not scientific articles or did not address the subject under study (see Figure 1, Flow Diagram), we were left with a final count of 24 valid articles across the two selected databases. Review papers, editorials, non-academic documents, and studies that mentioned the topic without offering substantive analysis were excluded. Due to the limited number of located articles, the decision was made to expand the search to two additional databases, ScienceDirect and Google Scholar, resulting in an additional 11 valid articles, bringing the total to 35 valid studies amounted.

Figure 1. Flow Diagram



Own elaboration.

Certain methodological limitation must be acknowledged: the number of studies identified is relatively limited, which constrains the possibility of conducting broader comparative analyses. To conduct the analysis of scientific articles, we created a matrix table in Microsoft Excel to organize, systematize, and segment the information. We examined various variables related to six major study areas: (1) training for managerial performance; (2) external perception of departmental leadership; (3) the department chair; (4) the leadership team; (5) the elements to manage; and (6) managerial competencies. The data were qualitatively analyzed by categorizing the results obtained during the reading process of the articles.

The qualitative procedure followed to organize the information involved the construction of an analytical matrix in Microsoft Excel, where key variables from each article were recorded. Through a detailed reading of the texts, thematic patterns were identified and grouped into six main categories: training for managerial performance, external perception of departmental leadership, the department chair, the leadership team, the elements to manage, and managerial competencies.

Coding was conducted iteratively, contrasting similarities and differences across studies, which allowed for the systematization of information and ensured internal coherence within

the categories. The qualitative analysis technique employed was thematic analysis, aimed at identifying, organizing, and describing recurring meanings in the reviewed literature. This approach facilitated the development of an integrative perspective on the findings and the detection of both consensuses and contradictions regarding departmental leadership. It should be noted that the coding and analysis process was carried out manually, without the use of specialized software, requiring exhaustive reading and direct classification of content by the researchers.

The analysis of these articles reveals a growing interest in university departments, as evidenced by the increasing number of publications on the topic, particularly since 2016 (refer to Figure 2).

Figure 2. Number of articles published per year



Own elaboration.

All the analyzed articles are listed in the bibliography (Abahussain, 2020; Abusmara and Triwiyanto 2023; Akbulut et al., 2015; Awad and Fendi 2023; Bellibaş et al., 2016; Bystydzienski et al., 2017; Castro & Tomas, 2010; Castro & Tomás, 2019; Crawford, 2021; Creaton & Heard-Lauréote, 2021; Daradkah 2023; Degn, 2015; Dewes & Bolzan, 2018; Gonaim, 2019; Halupa, 2016; Horne et al., 2016; Huen et al., 2021; Hundessa, 2021; Ion & Castro, 2017; Keith & Buckley, 2011; Kruse et al., 2020; Kruse 2022; Loughridge, 1999; Mefi & Asoba, 2020; Mgaiwa 2023; Møthe et al., 2015; Nguyen, 2013; Pellow & Wilson, 1993; Reznik & Sazykina, 2018; Rybnicek et al., 2019; Saleem, et al., 2022; Salifu & Darkwah Odame 2022; Smothers et al., 2012; Tahir et al., 2014; Tamir, 2024; Thai et al., 2021; Tietjen-Smith et al., 2020; White et al., 2016; Wolverton et al., 1999; Yedidia & Bickel, 2001).

3. RESULTS

The results are categorized into six major themes: (1) training for managerial performance; (2) external perception of departmental leadership; (3) the head of department; (4) the leadership team; (5) the elements to manage; and (6) managerial competencies.

3.1. Training for Managerial Performance

In 16 out of the analyzed articles, training for managerial performance is not addressed. However, a consensus emerges regarding the imperative need for training, guidance, mentoring, practical experience, and skill development. Notably, only two articles propose the existence of a structured training plan aimed at enhancing management skills (Møthe, Ballangrud, and Stensaker 2015; Bystydzienski et al. 2017). This highlights a global challenge faced by universities in adequately addressing the training needs for departmental managerial performance. The absence of prior training is shown to result in heightened pressure, burnout, and turnover in leadership positions, as indicated by Tietjen-Smith, Hersman, and Block (2020).

Interestingly, one article emphasizes the importance of candidates possessing substantial previous academic experience to compensate for training deficits (Degn 2015). Another study suggests that departmental management should be entrusted to professionals specifically trained in management. This involves specifying the desired profile and selecting a qualified individual, which may not necessarily be senior members of the departments (Creton and Heard-Lauréote 2021).

3.2. External Perception of Departmental Leadership

Perceptions of university stakeholders regarding departmental leadership are not addressed in 16 of the studies. However, the rest of the articles briefly present some noteworthy ideas. The following observations are identified: (1) A low level of autonomy, where heads of department often act more as managers than leaders, assuming daily routines (Hundessa 2021; Creton and Heard-Lauréote 2021; Nguyen 2013; Thai et al. 2021); (2) Role ambiguity, which can interfere with deanships, administration, and other services, complicating the division of labor (Bellibaş et al. 2016; Dewes and Bolzan 2018); (3) The position is fraught with tensions, challenges, novel responsibilities, and complexity (Saleem, Afzal, and Amin 2022; Kruse 2022; Tamir, 2024); (4) Identity dilemmas: whether to focus solely on management or try to balance it with research (Degn 2015); (5) Strategic vision of the academic to ascend to leadership: the

head of department seeks opportunities to change their status (Tahir et al. 2014); (6) Different leadership practices concerning gender and diversity based on leadership style (Bystydzienski et al. 2017; Crawford 2021); (7) The position requires confidence and motivation (White et al. 2016); (8) The choice of a representative type, non-professional management, and the transience of the position (Castro and Tomas 2010); (9) Low level of involvement of teachers and students in university management (Reznik and Sazykina 2018); (10) May exhibit destructive leadership (Salifu and Darkwah Odame 2022); (11) Subordinates identify two types of leadership in management practices: transformational and transactional (Mgaiwa 2023); (12) They must work with outdated administrative routines and move towards distributed leadership styles with the faculty (Abusmara and Triwiyanto 2023). Overall, these observations reveal many more objections than possibilities in the leadership of university departments. Therefore, further research on these perspectives is warranted.

3.3. The Head of Department

All but ten of the articles focus on ideas related to the head of the department. Therefore, only a few ideas that have not yet been discussed in the article will be highlighted: (1) In five articles, the existence of different leadership styles is mentioned, although there is no agreement among authors on their denominations: democratic, transformational, participative, and laissez-faire (Hundessa 2021); facilitator, producer, driver, innovator, and mentor (Akbulut, Nevra Seggie, and Börkan 2015); autocratic, democratic, transformational, laissez-faire, and transactional (Mefi and Asoba 2020); transformational and transactional (Mgaiwa 2023); (2) It is common for many of their decisions to be negatively evaluated by subordinates (Abusmara and Triwiyanto 2023), and they may feel demotivated or controlled by the director's management (Salifu and Darkwah Odame 2022), with transformational leadership having the most impact on academic job satisfaction (Mgaiwa 2023); (3) The director has very little decision-making capacity and limited institutional authority (Kruse 2022); (4) The key to success lies in balancing organizational intelligence and administrative behavior (Awad and Fendi 2023); (5) The director must have relational and cultural skills (Tietjen-Smith, Hersman, and Block 2020); (6) The most important characteristics for a department chair from the perspective of both faculty and heads of department are five: "decisiveness," "integrity," "fairness," "honesty," and "good interpersonal communicator" (Smothers, Absher, and White 2012); (7) Their role and perception of leadership vary based on the time they have been in the position, the basis on which they hold it, and their status within the institution (Loughridge 1999); (8) Likewise, a director must plan and improvise, and the degree of improvisation is not related to variables such as gender, university, or years of experience (Daradkah 2023); (9) There is a need for a debate on whether

they should be elected or appointed nombrado (Møthe, Ballangrud, and Stensaker 2015); (10) Existence of women who do not apply due to subconscious limiting ideas, difficulties in work-life balance, or the lack of pay parity (Huen et al. 2021). However, further research is needed to contribute to a clearer understanding of how department chairs are perceived.

3.4. The Leadership Team

While most articles focus on aspects related to the department chair, the day-to-day work of the accompanying leadership team is not addressed in 29 out of the 35 examined articles. The few references made in studies that discuss aspects related to the team indicate: (1) 41.4% of departments have an assistant department chair (Reznik and Sazykina 2018; Kruse 2022); (2) Cohesive and collaborative work with the entire departmental team is required (Gonaim 2019; Castro and Tomas 2010); (3) Additional academic and administrative staff is needed to collaborate with the chair and assist them regularly (Bellibaş et al. 2016; Wolverton et al. 1999); (4) There is a low degree of distributed leadership, which is nevertheless highly valued (Abusmara and Triwiyanto 2023).

3.5. Managed Elements

All but nine of the articles discuss elements susceptible to management within a university department. Many contributions emphasize personnel management as a central element, including human relationships, communication, and formal and informal meetings (Wolverton et al. 1999; Bystydzienski et al. 2017; Castro and Tomas 2010; Kruse, Hackmann, and Lindle 2020; Mefi and Asoba 2020; Gonaim 2019; Nguyen 2013; Loughridge 1999; Castro and Tomás 2019; Dewes and Bolzan 2018; Mgaiwa 2023; Kruse 2022; Saleem, Afzal, and Amin 2022; Salifu and Darkwah Odame 2022). Given the emphasis in the studies, personnel management appears to be the central element upon which to base the training of new leaders. One article explicitly states that novice managers find two issues particularly concerning: (1) Conducting meetings, especially numerous ones or those expected to be contentious. (2) Making mistakes due to a lack of knowledge of current regulations on each topic. These fears lead directors to initiate negotiation or consensus processes before meetings with specific faculty or interest groups to avoid conflict or leadership fatigue (Castro and Tomás 2019). Additionally, another article suggests that directors who had gone through challenging processes (such as layoffs, managing poor performance, or claims) were often exhausted, or even traumatized, by the personal and emotional nature of the process and asserted that a considerable degree of resilience was needed to handle these challenging cases (Creaton and Heard-Lauréote 2021).

Moreover, the reviewed studies propose other important elements to manage, though not as relevant, such as economic management, programs, facilities, resources, reports, and plans (Nguyen 2013; Degn 2015; Thai et al. 2021; Møthe, Ballangrud, and Stensaker 2015). Additionally, they explore aspects like departmental culture and organizational commitment of the collective (Pellow and Wilson 1993a; Tahir et al. 2014; Salifu and Darkwah Odame 2022). The studies highlight the importance of conducting a strategic analysis to discover surrounding opportunities and threats, making decisions in situations of change or risk, and finding solutions to problems (Daradkah 2023). Other considerations encompass shifts from in-person to more online work (Kruse, Hackmann, and Lindle 2020), stress associated with document submission deadlines (Hundessa 2021), managing a high volume of daily emails (Creaton and Heard-Lauréote 2021), and making institutional decisions that may not be understood by some individuals while preserving anonymity (Crawford 2021; Abusmara and Triwiyanto 2023; Salifu and Darkwah Odame 2022).

3.6. Leadership Competencies

Different leadership competencies is a recurring theme in the analyzed articles, with only nine articles making no mention. In one study, respondents were asked about the most important attributes for the success of a director, and they listed the following: interpersonal communication (47%), strategic attributes (45%), experience/basic skills (22%), motivation attributes (e.g., ability to inspire, ability to persuade, leading by example) (16%), integrity (e.g., honesty) (36%), and altruism/tolerance and perseverance (36%) (Keith and Buckley 2011).

Various studies depict a broad range of leadership competencies, making synthesis challenging due to their diverse nature. These competencies include advocating for the department, guiding and supporting faculty (Møthe, Ballangrud, and Stensaker 2015; Kruse, Hackmann, and Lindle 2020; Tahir et al. 2014; Smothers, Absher, and White 2012; Castro and Tomás 2019; Dewes and Bolzan 2018; Salifu and Darkwah Odame 2022; Kruse 2022; Saleem, Afzal, and Amin 2022; Mgaiwa 2023; Tamir, 2024); having administrative and strategic capabilities: planning, executing, and reporting (Bellibaş et al. 2016; Hundessa 2021; Crawford 2021; Thai et al. 2021; Abusmara and Triwiyanto 2023; Daradkah 2023); managing meetings, committees, plans, and departmental regulations (Castro and Tomas 2010; Smothers, Absher, and White 2012); influencing the department's publication output, the ability to acquire funds, or its business activities (e.g., patents) (Rybnicek et al. 2019; Pellow and Wilson 1993a); disseminating the department's actions outside of it, having external projection (Smothers, Absher, and White 2012; Nguyen 2013; Loughridge 1999).

4. GLOBAL ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The systematic analysis of scientific literature published on Web of Science, Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar, involving 35 articles, allows us to draw several conclusions. Beyond the descriptive evidence, the findings reveal several critical tensions that warrant closer examination. The recurrent absence of structured training programmes for department chairs underscores a systemic weakness in university governance. While many studies highlight the urgent need for mentoring and skill development, the lack of institutional commitment to leadership preparation suggests a persistent gap between the responsibilities assigned to chairs and the resources provided to fulfil them. This contradiction raises questions about the sustainability of current leadership models and the risk of perpetuating cycles of burnout and turnover.

From a practical standpoint, the results point to clear avenues for improvement. The emphasis on personnel management as the most contentious element indicates that universities should prioritize leadership development programmes focused on conflict resolution, emotional intelligence, and collaborative decision-making. Furthermore, the evidence of role ambiguity and limited autonomy suggests that institutions must reconsider their selection policies, ensuring that candidates are chosen not only for academic prestige but also for managerial competencies. Transparent criteria and targeted training could significantly enhance the effectiveness of departmental leadership.

The negative perceptions surrounding departmental leadership carry important consequences for faculty members. When the role of chair is viewed as burdensome, transient, or lacking authority, academic staff may disengage from governance processes, reinforcing a culture of minimal participation. Such perceptions can erode trust, diminish motivation, and foster resistance to institutional initiatives. In the long term, this dynamic risk weakening departmental cohesion and undermining the collective capacity to adapt to external pressures such as digitalization or accountability demands.

Finally, the diversity of leadership styles identified in the literature has profound implications for departmental functioning. Transformational leadership appears to foster higher levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment, whereas transactional or laissez-faire approaches are often associated with demotivation and conflict. The coexistence of multiple styles within departments suggests that leadership practices are highly context-dependent, shaped by institutional culture, individual competencies, and faculty expectations.

Exploring these variations further could inform the design of flexible leadership frameworks that accommodate different contexts while promoting resilience, innovation, and shared responsibility.

5. DISCUSSION

Firstly, concerning leadership training, a significant consensus emerges from the analyzed studies regarding the evident need for training, guidance, mentoring, practical experience, and leadership skills development for university department heads (Møthe, Ballangrud, and Stensaker 2015; Bystydzienski et al. 2017; Tietjen-Smith, Hersman, and Block 2020; Degn 2015; Creaton and Heard-Lauréote 2021; Huen et al. 2021; Bellibaş et al. 2016; Tahir et al. 2014; Hundessa 2021; White et al. 2016; Reznik and Sazykina 2018; Halupa 2016; Abusmara and Triwiyanto 2023; Kruse 2022). In light of this, we propose a future research direction to analyze the training processes undertaken by them to learn their roles. Particularly, there is a need to evaluate and analyze the most relevant training experiences in this context.

Secondly, regarding the perception of leadership, there are several noteworthy ideas that consistently emerge from the reviewed studies. These include constrained managerial autonomy, role ambiguity, and a general lack of enthusiasm for departmental management, often emphasizing predominantly negative aspects such as tensions, challenges, complexities, insufficient training, the transience of the position, and culturally entrenched routines (Creaton and Heard-Lauréote 2021; Hundessa 2021; Nguyen 2013; Thai et al. 2021; Bellibaş et al. 2016; Dewes and Bolzan 2018; Kruse 2022; Saleem, Afzal, and Amin 2022; Degn 2015; Tahir et al. 2014; Castro and Ion 2011; Reznik and Sazykina 2018; Abusmara and Triwiyanto 2023). It becomes evident that further in-depth research is necessary to explore the positive aspects associated with departmental leadership. This exploration aims to strike a balance in the perception of departmental leadership by not solely focusing on difficulties or problems but also considering possibilities, opportunities, and successes.

Thirdly, regarding the department chair, the review of previous studies allows us to conclude that different leadership styles exist, each with different denominations and repercussions (Hundessa 2021; Akbulut, Nevra Seggie, and Börkan 2015; Mefi and Asoba 2020; Mgaiwa 2023; Abusmara and Triwiyanto 2023; Salifu and Darkwah Odame 2022). Once again, the emphasis is placed on the more challenging aspects of the position, such as the frequent negative evaluation of decisions by subordinates, limited decision-making capacity and institutional authority, and the need for a diverse range of skills, competencies, and qualities that

are difficult to unite in a single person. These include organizational and decision-making skills, honesty, effective interpersonal communication, planning and improvisation abilities, motivation, relational and cultural skills, etc. (Salifu and Darkwah Odame 2022; Kruse 2022; Awad and Fendi 2023; Tietjen-Smith, Hersman, and Block 2020; Smothers, Absher, and White 2012; Loughridge 1999). It would be interesting to further investigate the leadership styles of department chairs and analyze to what extent a chair can meet external demands for desirable skills, competencies, and qualities. If the external perception of the position is negative, and candidates do not receive specific training in this regard, it is highly contradictory that the chair is also subjected to multiple competency demands externally. This could be a topic of great interest to examine in future studies.

Fourthly, concerning the leadership team, it can be concluded that it has not received sufficient attention in research. The leadership team has been only superficially addressed in 6 out of the 34 reviewed articles, despite its potential contribution to alleviating the frequent challenges of managing a university department (Kruse 2022; Reznik and Sazykina 2018; Castro and Tomas 2010; Gonaim 2019; Abusmara and Triwiyanto 2023; Wolverton et al. 1999). Research tends to show more interest in the department chair than the team, making it relevant for the topic to be prioritized in future studies. This is especially crucial since several of the analyzed works also advocate for distributed leadership practices and collaborative work (Abusmara and Triwiyanto 2023; Reznik and Sazykina 2018; Castro and Tomas 2010).

Fifthly, concerning the elements to manage, it is noteworthy that there is an emphasis on issues related to personnel management, including human relations, communication, and formal and informal meetings (Bystydzienski et al., 2017; Castro & Tomas, 2010; Castro & Tomás, 2019; Dewes & Bolzan, 2018; Gonaim, 2019; Kruse, 2022; Kruse et al., 2020; Loughridge, 1999; Mefi & Asoba, 2020; Mgaiwa, 2023; Nguyen, 2013; Saleem et al., 2022; Salifu & Darkwah Odame, 2022; Wolverton et al., 1999). Therefore, it would be relevant for executive training to experience significant development in this aspect. This training could encompass learning how to listen, resolve conflicts, achieve consensus, and manage emotions in challenging processes such as exhaustion, stress, and anxiety, ultimately fostering resilience, etc. Moreover, it makes sense to develop a specific research line on the management of human relations between departmental leadership and other stakeholders.

However, as departmental management encompasses more than just personnel management and involves many processes related to other important elements, such as resource management, reports, programs, plans, cultures, commitments, strategies, changes, tensions, decisions, etc., it remains a focus of interest for future studies (Daradkah 2023; Creaton and

Heard-Lauréote 2021; Hundessa 2021; Kruse 2022; Abusmara and Triwiyanto 2023; Crawford 2021; Salifu and Darkwah Odame 2022; Degn 2015; Møthe, Ballangrud, and Stensaker 2015; Nguyen 2013; Thai et al. 2021; Pellow and Wilson 1993b; Tahir et al. 2014). In the analyzed articles, there is a notable dispersion in listing different managerial competencies established across various daily intervention levels: personal, curricular, work-related, strategic, administrative, etc., for faculty (Abusmara & Triwiyanto, 2023; Bellibaş et al., 2016; Castro & Tomas, 2010; Castro & Tomás, 2019; Crawford, 2021; Daradkah, 2023; Dewes & Bolzan, 2018; Hundessa, 2021; Keith & Buckley, 2011; Kruse et al., 2020; Kruse, 2022; Mgaiwa, 2023; Møthe et al., 2015; Pellow & Wilson, 1993; Rybnicek et al., 2019; Saleem et al., 2022; Salifu & Darkwah Odame, 2022; Smothers et al., 2012; Tahir et al., 2014). It would be particularly interesting to explore the best practices developed by department heads in this regard. This exploration aims not only for dissemination and knowledge-sharing but also to inspire new candidates to tackle similar challenges, fostering the development of new best practices that contribute to the improvement of their respective departments.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions of this study allow us to articulate a more solid interpretative framework on leadership in university departments, integrating the six thematic categories analyzed: training for managerial performance, external perception of leadership, the figure of the head of department, the leadership team, the elements to be managed, and managerial competencies. The synthesis of these dimensions reveals common patterns and contradictions that configure a complex but highly relevant field of study for contemporary university governance.

First, training for managerial performance emerges as a structural deficit in most of the reviewed studies. The absence of systematic training programs generates tensions between the demands of the position and the competencies actually available. This finding directly connects with the category of managerial competencies, since the lack of formal preparation forces directors to develop skills reactively, often through accumulated experience or informal learning. The emerging pattern is that of leadership built “on the go,” which explains phenomena such as burnout, high turnover, and the negative perception of the role. The resulting typology could be described as “improvised leadership” versus “professionalized leadership,” with the latter still scarce in the literature.

The external perception of departmental leadership reinforces this tension. Studies show that the position is seen as transient, ambiguous, and with little autonomy. This perception is

linked to the category of the head of department, whose figure concentrates most responsibilities without sufficient institutional support. The interpretative pattern that emerges is that of “overloaded leadership,” where external expectations exceed the real capacities for action. This contradiction is observed across multiple national contexts, suggesting that the problem is structural rather than circumstantial.

The leadership team, in turn, appears as a dimension scarcely explored, which constitutes a relevant theoretical gap. The literature focuses on the figure of the director, invisibilizing the role of support teams. However, the few studies that address this issue show that the distribution of responsibilities and internal collaboration are key to departmental effectiveness. The emerging typology distinguishes between departments with “individualized leadership” and those with “distributed leadership,” with the latter being more resilient and sustainable.

Regarding the elements to be managed, the evidence is clear: personnel management constitutes the core problem and, at the same time, the most decisive area for leadership success. Conflicts derived from interpersonal relationships, performance evaluations, and internal negotiation processes are the most exhausting. This finding connects with the necessary competencies, especially those related to emotional intelligence, effective communication, and mediation capacity. The pattern that emerges is that of “relational leadership,” where people management weighs more heavily than the management of material or financial resources.

Finally, the managerial competencies identified in the literature are diverse but converge on attributes such as integrity, communication skills, strategic vision, and resilience. Comparison across studies reveals that, although the lists vary, there is consensus on the need to combine technical competencies with interpersonal skills. This finding allows us to build a conceptual framework that defines departmental leadership as a hybrid practice, situated at the intersection between administrative management and academic leadership.

In summary, the conclusions of this study contribute to the field by offering an interpretative typology that distinguishes three major models of departmental leadership:

- **Improvised:** based on accumulated experience, without prior training, highly vulnerable to burnout.
- **Overloaded:** centered on the figure of the director, with little autonomy and negative external perception.
- **Distributed:** supported by leadership teams, with greater resilience and capacity for innovation.

The original contribution of this systematic review lies in having connected these categories to build an integrative conceptual framework that makes visible both the consensus and contradictions in the literature. In doing so, it offers a substantive reflection to the field of university management, underlining the need to move towards more professionalized, collaborative, and strategic leadership models.

7. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The critical analysis allows us to identify conceptual tensions and theoretical gaps that position this work within current debates on university leadership and educational governance. The reviewed literature highlights a central paradox: while the strategic importance of departments is recognized, the leadership that sustains them lacks training, institutional support, and recognition. This contradiction reflects a structural gap in university governance.

In contrast with previous studies, our findings show that personnel management is the most problematic yet decisive area. Here we observe convergence with research on transformational leadership, which emphasizes the ability to motivate, inspire, and generate commitment as key factors for job satisfaction and organizational cohesion. However, the literature also reveals transactional or even destructive leadership practices, evidencing the coexistence of divergent styles and the need for more flexible frameworks that integrate contextual diversity.

An aspect that deserves expansion is the analysis of the positive aspects of leadership. Although most studies emphasize difficulties, successful practices are also identified: building shared visions, promoting pedagogical innovation, mediating conflicts, and fostering inclusion. These elements show that departmental leadership can be a driver of institutional change when exercised with adequate competencies and organizational support.

In terms of practical application, the results suggest the need for specific training programs for department heads, focused on people management skills, conflict resolution, and distributed leadership. Likewise, good practices can be promoted, such as creating support teams, planned rotation of positions, and periodic evaluation of leadership styles. These proposals directly connect with the effective leadership required in university departments.

The discussion also positions this work within current debates on educational governance. The growing pressure of digitalization, accountability, and internationalization demands leaders capable of articulating strategic responses. In this sense, departmental leadership can no

longer be improvised or overloaded; it must evolve towards distributed and professionalized models. This reflection connects with recent studies on middle management in universities, which highlight its role as a hinge between central administration and academic communities.

Finally, the practical implications of this study are clear: improving educational and training processes in university management requires strengthening departmental leadership. Areas such as pedagogical innovation, inclusion, lifelong learning, and employability largely depend on the capacity of departments to manage people, resources, and projects effectively. Therefore, universities must invest in training programs, support structures, and evaluation mechanisms that enhance leadership at this strategic level.

8. LIMITATIONS AND PROSPECTS

This study presents some limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the number of identified articles (35) is relatively small, limiting the possibility of broader comparisons across national contexts. Moreover, reliance on specific databases may have excluded studies published in other languages or in non-indexed journals.

Regarding prospect, several future research lines emerge. Comparative studies across countries are needed to identify cultural and structural differences in departmental leadership. Longitudinal research analyzing the evolution of leadership styles over time is also required. Another promising line is the development of evaluative frameworks to measure the effectiveness of different leadership styles in terms of job satisfaction, pedagogical innovation, and institutional performance. It would also be pertinent to explore the role of gender diversity and inclusion in access to leadership positions.

This review, conducted on existing scientific studies in the field of leadership in university departments at the international level, has revealed the current state of research and identified new avenues for future work. These findings contribute to a more comprehensive diagnosis of this field, enabling improvements in university management grounded in scientific evidence. As a closing remark, this work highlights the importance of university departments as strategic units of management and leadership. By synthesizing the literature of the last twenty years, it offers an integrative conceptual framework that makes visible both the consensus and contradictions of the field. In doing so, it contributes to strengthening academic debate and guiding institutional policies that promote more professionalized, distributed, and resilient leadership, capable of facing the challenges of contemporary universities.

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