

# Managerial Leadership Competencies of Heads of Department in Higher Education Institutions in Kerala, India

**Cheryl Crosthwaite**

University of Southern Queensland  
cherylcrosthwaite.dar@gmail.com

**Ronel Erwee**

University of Southern Queensland  
erwee@usq.edu.au

## ABSTRACT

The study investigates the managerial leadership competencies and roles of Heads of Departments in higher education institutions. Thirty six Heads of Department who manage academic departments with subordinate staff in six higher education institutions in Kerala, India were interviewed using semi-structured interviews and an analytical tool. The results assist in clarifying the role of Heads of Department in Indian higher education institutions and enabled the respondents to articulate their perspectives about important managerial leadership competencies. Heads of Department perceive that they need to possess a unique balance of managerial leadership competencies in order to be effective in higher education institutions. Heads of Department confirmed that many of the managerial leadership competencies that they need to possess are commonly associated with managers in general. However, there are specific competencies which would assist them to deal with the cultural and organisation milieus in which they operate. A recommendation for practices is that if managerial leadership competencies can be identified, they can be operationalised in ways that will assist both the Head of Department and the higher education institution in terms of selection, performance management and development.

## KEYWORDS

Higher education institutions; leadership competencies; Indian universities; heads of department.

## INTRODUCTION

Globally, higher education institutions (HEIs) are facing significant change (da Motta & Bola 2008) as well as a greater need for accountability. As such managerial leadership (ML) within HEIs has become a focus of growing interest (Barth, Godemann, Riekmann & Stollenberg 2007; da Motta & Bola 2008; Kallenberg 2007; Temple & Ylitalo 2009). Increased accountability has fuelled the adoption of managerial leadership competencies (MLCs) in a number of HEIs for both academic and non-academic managers (Erwee, Willcoxson, Smith & Pedersen 2002; Mok 1999). A review of the literature indicates that Burgoyne's (1993) assertion that use of competencies has a strong relationship to Anglo-Saxon culture, still stands true as the majority of countries that use a competency approach are western (Horton 2000). It is thus important to consider the relevance of a competency approach in non-western cultures, (Denison, Haaland & Goelzer 2004) including India and in particular to understand what MLCs are needed within the higher education context (Barth et al. 2007). This has taken on a more important focus as large scale studies such as the GLOBE project (Chhokar, Brodbeck & House 2007; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman & Gupta 2004) have identified 21 global leadership characteristics. This current study provides additional insight into an understanding of managerial leadership behaviours within one state of India and in one industry – the higher education sector.

Various researchers have identified that variations in skills, functions and contexts of management roles makes a one-size-fits-all competency profile impractical (Hayes, Rose-Quirie & Allinson 2000). Thus, the different organisational culture of HEIs has required adaptation of competency development from that of the private sector (Erwee et al. 2002). As the department is considered to be the basic unit of the HEI (Bolden, Petrov & Gosling 2008) there is a clear need to better understand the managerial leadership role of head of departments (HoDs) (Thompson & Harrison 2002). The reasons for focussing a study on India and specifically Kerala HEIs are numerous. India is an important emerging economy (Björkman & Budhwar 2007), is predicted to become the world's fourth largest economy, and has the largest pool of scientific and technical personnel in the world (Budhwar & Khatri 2001). According to the United Nations report on Revision of the World Population Prospects (2004) India will overtake China as the most populous nation on earth from approximately the year 2030 onwards (Stephen 2005).

There is still little research on many Indian human resource practices (Budhwar & Khatri 2001; Gupta 2004). Further work needs to be done to focus on evolving patterns of specific human resource management practices (Amba-Rao, Petrick, Gupta & Von der Embse. 2000), and the need to both understand and validate competency utilisation in Indian organisations (Chandramouly 2002). India was one of the 64 societies studied as part of the GLOBE project identifying leadership characteristics (Chhokar et al 2007; Javidan & House 2003; House et al 2004).

In the state of Kerala, there are eight universities, which are state funded and based on an affiliating system of colleges (Powar 2001). However only four universities are accredited, as well as only 61 of the more than 290 affiliated colleges (Ummerkutty, Stella, & Shyamasundar 2004). Kerala purports to have the highest rate of literacy in India (State Planning Board 2008). In March 2005 the Minister for Education stated the intention to make Kerala an international higher education destination (Mahadevan 2005), and this requires a change in the way HEIs are led and managed. A step towards this has been the establishment of the State Higher Education Council in 2007 (State Planning Board 2008). This political imperative highlights the importance of conducting research in the field of academic managerial leadership within the HEIs in Kerala. Thus an examination of the required MLCs for HoDs provides an important platform for strengthening the managerial function in Kerala HEIs.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Managerial leadership in HEIs**

The roles and nature of leaders in HEIs have become recent areas of research (Santiago, Carvalho, Amara & Meek 2006; Winter 2009) Indeed, Osseo-Asare, Longbottom and Chourides (2007) argue that managerial leadership is essential for HEIs if they are to achieve their mission of providing the manpower needed development in the twenty-first century. There is an overall agreement amongst researchers that leading in HEIs is both complex and multidimensional (Filan & Seagren 2003). Temple and Ylitalo (2009) suggest that leadership in HEIs needs to move to embrace collaborative and inclusive leadership along with collegial traditions.

### **The Role of Head of Department (HoDs) in HEIs**

Studies looking at the role of the HoD (Hancock & Helliwell 2003; Kekäle 1999) have found distinctive challenges as well as tension in dealing with both senior management and academics and the impact of managerialism (Santiago et al. 2006). Santiago et al's (2006 p243) study in Portuguese universities suggested that HoDs suffered from various degrees of "ambiguity, contradiction and conflictedness". This ambiguity in the HoD role can be seen as one of dual identity - a) being a managerial leader and b) as an academic colleague (Gosling, Bolden & Petrov 2009). Deem's (2004) study included interviews of HoDs at 16 United Kingdom HEIs and identified difficulties with the HoD role including increasing student numbers, managing the dual demands of teaching and research, high workloads for HoDs and their staff, dealing with difficult people, a general shortage of resources and budget issues. The HoD role has been described as one of managing conflicts and tensions and balancing conflicting demands (Deem 2004; Henkel 2000). Henkel (2000) described the position of academic managers as having a variety of meanings for depending both on the incumbents' academic identities and the particular institutional environment.

Hancock and Helliwell's (2003) United Kingdom (UK) study found that the HoD's role was complex and could be described as that of an academic middle manager. Kallenberg (2007) argues that an academic middle manager has to manage several positions, processes and interests.

Spendlove's (2007) research indicated that the HEIs in his study had little or no organisational strategy for either identifying or developing leadership skills. Temple and Ylitalo (2009) suggest that often an academic leadership position is considered as a temporary role. With increasing scrutiny and criticism of public servants, the motivation to serve in a leadership role at HEIs, with no extrinsic rewards, may weaken or not be present at all (Hoppe 2003). Further, Wolverton, Ackerman and Holt (2005) maintain that HEIs exhibit faulty reasoning in selecting HoDs - assuming that being a good faculty member will make the person at least adequate in a managerial leadership role.

Thus HoDs operate in a difficult environment and the challenge is to understand their own position, the demands being placed on them and also to demonstrate the MLCs to perform successfully in the role.

Thompson and Harrison's (2002) results of a single case study at a UK university found there was no clear understanding or consensus between HoDs, Deans and staff on the role of the HoD. While these results are useful they are limited to one case study and originate from a western context. Bryman (2007 p 3) and Kallenberg (2007) argue that studies on what middle managers actually do in HEIs have been minimal and or not recent. The above literature thus shows a clear need to further investigate MLCs of HoDs in HEIs.

## **Organisational leadership in a global context**

Almost all the prevailing theories of leadership are North American (House & Aditya 1997) and the majority of leadership research over the past 50 years has been conducted in the west (Yukl 2005) notwithstanding the GLOBE project (Chhokar et al 2007; House et al 2004). Despite the argument that globalisation creates pressures on a country's culture creating potential homogenisation of culture (Stedham & Yamamura 2004), there is considerable evidence, that the value placed on any specific leadership behaviour, varies from culture to culture (Chhokar et al 2007; House & Aditya 1997; House et al. 2004; Zagorsek, Jaklic & Stough 2004). Zagorsek, Jaklic and Stough (2004) suggest the possibility that that there may be some leadership behaviours that are universal and that the impact of cultural differences on management and leadership may be decreasing. Indeed, House et al (2004) propose that the extent that leadership is contingent on culture is still relatively unknown.

The results of the GLOBE studies of 62 societies are suggestive that specific aspects of charismatic/transformational leadership are strongly and universally endorsed across cultures- including integrity, a team orientation and charisma, whereas some of the charismatic attributes were perceived as culturally contingent, - risk taking, ambitious, self-effacing, self- sacrificial, sincere, sensitive and compassionate (Chhokar et al 2007; Den Hartog et al. 1999; Dorfman, Hanges & Brodbeck 2004).

## **Indian managerial leadership competencies**

Relatively little has been written on describing aspects of Indian management style (Amba- Rao et al. 2000) or Indian leadership (Chhokar, in Chhokar et al 2007). Researchers (Budhwar & Khatri 2001; Sinha & Kanungo 1997;) have identified characteristics of Indian managers from the private sector. Chhokar's (2007) contribution to the GLOBE study has assisted in a better understanding of the Indian leadership style. Chhokar (2007) used the leadership dimensions from the GLOBE project to identify which were the most important to Indian (organisational) leaders within India. He found that the most effective leadership styles in India were charismatic and action orientated, autocratic and bureaucratic. However given the heterogenous nature of India and the wide range of organisational and leadership practices within (Chhokar 2007), it still provides an incomplete view of all of India (Triandis 2004) and further work needs to be done in other states of India.

This qualitative study was conducted through interviews and a specific research protocol. The aims of the study are to

- (i) understand the role of the HoD and factors impacting on the role and
- (ii) investigate the required managerial leadership competencies of Heads of Departments in higher education institutions in Kerala, India.

## **Methodology**

### **Sample - Higher Education Institutions**

From the higher education sector in Kerala, India, six case organisations were selected - three universities, one deemed university (an institution noted for its contributions in specialised subjects or disciplines and granted the status of a university) and two affiliating colleges. Each case offers a distinct difference in its type of organisational structure and is reflective of the variety of institutional types providing higher education in Kerala. Despite some difference in autonomy and size of the different institutions, in practice there are only some minor differences between heads of departments in Universities and Colleges in Kerala (see Table 1).

### **Sample – Heads of Department Interviews**

Thirty six heads of departments were interviewed for this study. Participants are managers who head academic departments at each of these higher education institutions, drawn from the relevant case organisation chart (see Table 1). Managers are defined as a head of department and in all cases have subordinate staff. As the sample was one of convenience there was no planned representation and all interviewees were competent English speakers.

The majority of interviewees were male (83%), Keralites (97%), with permanent tenure (100%), in the age range of 46-55 years (61%), holding a PhD (86%), who had worked for more than 20 years in academia (89%) and in the same institution for over 20 years (53%). Approximately 70 percent had been in the position for 4 years or less. HoDs from Cases A, B, D, and E were appointed to the position based on seniority whereas Cases C and F followed a three year

rotational period. All held permanent tenure. The group of interviewees demonstrated a wide variation in the numbers of staff reporting to them. On average HoDs managed 12 academic staff and nine non-academic staff (see Table 2).

**Table 1: Variation in case organisations**

Case Organisation	Type	Location	Age in years	Size by student no.	Size by Dept	Size by Staff no.#
Case A University of Kerala	State model General Individual Departments	Capital	80	3500 **	41	190
Case B Mahatma Ghandi University	State model General Departments in Schools	Regional	25	1500 **	22	100
Case C Cochin University of Science & Technology (CUSAT)	Federal Model Faculty organisation Specialist University No affiliating colleges##	Largest city in state	35	2400	24	160
Case D University College	Special status 'A' Grade college Government funded	Capital	140	3000	20	230
Case E Mar Ivanois College	Special status Private college with part government funding	Capital	57	1700	11	95
Case F National Institute of Technology- Calicut (NITC)	Centrally funded deemed to be university	Regional	46	N/A	14	187

\*\*Number of direct students including distance education is 18,000 and total student at all colleges is 68,000; # Approximate numbers only.

### Interview Protocol

An interview protocol was developed for this study. The focus for this paper is on four sections of the interview protocol with 7 open ended questions. The other sections of the interview protocol are not discussed in this paper as they were part of a larger study. The 36 HoDs were first given a short rationale for the study and semi structured questions were used. In the data collection process, three key principles were observed: use of multiple sources of evidence/ triangulation; creation of a case study database; and maintaining a chain of evidence.

### Qualitative Data Analysis

Triangulation of the data, through the use of multiple questions, in the interview protocol is part of the methodology. Two focus groups were held – one with other HoDs (FGH) and one with followers (FGF); and interviews of the HoDs superiors were also conducted. All of which assisted in triangulating the data from the interviewed HoDs. Pattern analysis was conducted to reduce a large amount of data into smaller analytic units (Huberman & Miles 1994). Even with the use of pre-planned questions and interview protocols a large degree of variety in the responses required content analysis in identifying primary patterns in the data (Cavana, Delahaye & Sekaran 2001). The data was reduced and represented in tables, and also by case by attribute matrices or by numbers (Huberman & Miles 1994). Due to the nature of qualitative research, not all questions at interview were answered resulting in varying numbers of responses for some analyses. In the original study individual case analysis was conducted to provide data for cross-case analysis. In this paper focusing on managerial leadership competencies only the cross case analysis is presented.

**Table 2:** Departments represented in sample 36 interviews.

Biosciences	English (3)	Mathematics (3)
Chemistry	Geography	Mechanical Engineering
Civil Engineering	Gandhian Studies	Phototonics
Computer Engineering	Hindi (2)	Physics (3)
Computer Sciences	History	Science and Humanities
Economics (2)	Legal	International Relations and Politics
Electrical Engineering	Library and Information Sciences	Zoology (2)
Electronics (2)	Management (3)	Geography

One limitation of this study is that the findings are only generalisable to the HEIs in Kerala due to lack of homogeneity in culture across India (Amba-Rao et al. 2000). A second limitation is that the study focuses only on academic HoDs and not non-academic (administrative) heads, such as in Erwee et al (2002) study. This is due to the fact that in Indian universities the non-academic heads of department have little real decision making abilities and act within a more rigid bureaucratic system (Powar 2001). According to Dr R.D Anand, Director Research AIU, New Delhi non-academic heads “undertake duties directed by the Vice Chancellor” (pers. comm., 2nd August 2005). Thus, the study is designed to focus on the HoDs who are responsible for the core business of these organisations.

## Results

### Implications of the cultural context on development of MLCs

Respondents were asked to comment on how the Kerala cultural context may impact on the development of MLCs for HoDs. Their responses across cases were analysed and are presented in Table 3

Respondents in Case A, a large university, confirm both strengths (relationships) as well as negative trends (corruption and seniority issues). Of the other two universities, Case B respondents also identified the same negative trends of corruption and seniority. Case D respondents also identified corruption (in politics and trade unions) as an issue. Respondents in Case E, a college, were more erudite and could clearly articulate both the positive strength of relationships as well as the negative issue of corruption. Only one respondent - the Director of, Case F - the deemed university, commented on the impact of globalisation on Kerala culture. He felt it was important to copy new ideas from the West (such as MLCs) but that this should not be done at the cost of Kerala Culture - imitate the west but never leave our traditions (F007).

Considering all cases, the strongest theme to emerge was corruption and politics/trade union influence (cases A, B, D, and E). The significance of seniority was identified within three cases (two universities and the private aided college) as one of the key drivers in the lack of acceptance of MLCs within the Kerala cultural value system. As a positive, respondents from two cases indicated the influence of relationships on the desired MLCs of HoDs.

### Implications of the organisational context on development of MLCs

The key perceived obstacles identified by respondents are that of vision / ability of decision makers followed by the themes of work culture, political interference, financial, legislation/ State government issues and lastly with union involvement. The themes and responses by respondents in all cases and from the FGs are presented in Table 4. Respondents from Case A, a large university, raised all the above issues as pertinent to their organisation as did the FGH. Respondents from all state run organisations, Cases A-D, identified legislation and state government as a factor influencing the development of MLCs and respondents from three of these organisations (A, B, D) also identified political interference. . Both FG respondents commented on the political implications –universities are politically structured (FGF) and there is a lot of political interference (FGH). Respondents from all universities (Cases A-C) also commented on the need for a vision and action from decision makers to support the development of MLCs in HoDs. One FGH respondent posed the question - what does the chancellor care about HoD management? (FGF). Case D respondents raised financial, political interference and work culture as obstacles. Case E and F also identified the role for decision makers as well as financial concerns.

**Table 3** Perceived cultural impact on the development of MLCs at Kerala HEIs

Perceived Cultural Impact ↓	A	B	C	D	E	F
<b>Theme: Corruption and Politics/Trade Unions influence</b>	■	■		■	■	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Trade unions are often against open recruitment (based on competencies) and protect their members for promotion (A006)</li> <li>-Unions: there is no prevailing atmosphere to create the motivation for change and without union support nothing will happen (E006)</li> <li>-Corruption is on the rise and is now part of the culture; unless process can be fair and transparent (it) will not work (D006)</li> <li>-Politics: at present can influence decisions; it is discriminatory and would not result in fair allocation of training i.e. certain selected colleges and people would benefit based on political affiliation (A001)</li> <li>-A competency approach is more transparent and logical and less able to be influenced (A003)</li> <li>-Politicians are very influential; there is corruption because the system is not transparent (B001)</li> <li>-It is critical to manage politics; Kerala has a strong cultural base brought about by the communist rules and development of socialistic thinking... (B006)</li> <li>-It is possible that a VC can pay money to get role then make money through corruption (B002)</li> </ul>						
<b>Theme: Significance of Seniority</b>	■	■			■	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Cultural clash between being senior as opposed to the best (A003)</li> <li>-Very important for recognition and appearance – a rotation of headship could face problems (A006)</li> <li>-Although Seniority may not put the best person in place at least it normally takes precedence over other considerations such as caste or religion or political affiliation... seniority can still be manipulated (but not in a direct or timely manner) (A001)</li> <li>-Makes it not acceptable that younger merit based person have more responsible role (B002)</li> <li>-Changing somewhat as younger generation are more questioning (E001)</li> </ul>						
<b>Theme: Relationships</b>	■				■	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Department needs to be like a family (A003)</li> <li>-Consensus approach; cannot force staff (A006)</li> <li>-The need for sensitivity and development of relationships are critical as competencies in Kerala; much more emphasis on deeper relationships than in the west (E001)</li> </ul>						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Being a Christian institution; role (of HoD) is a servant (E005)</li> <li>-It is harder being a woman HoD as most women find it harder telling men what to do and in being the boss (E001)</li> </ul>						
<b>Key:</b>	Positive	■	Negative	■		

(Source: Developed for this study using responses from question 27 of the interview protocol and unsolicited comments recorded during interview)

**Table 4: Theme and supporting comments: Obstacles to development of MLCs**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Supporting Comments</b>
Union involvement	-Unions: there is no prevailing atmosphere to create the motivation for change (A006), and, without union support nothing will happen (E006)
Legislation/ State government	-Seniority as key criteria for promotion to HoD is in statute of university and would take legislation to change this (A002; B002) -Has to be a government thrust for anything to occur (C002; D003) Government does not see a strong role for merit; has the attitude "why spend on quality; why bother?" (F004)
Financial	-Lack of funds for training on competencies (D002; E004; A004) -No budget for competencies development (F002)
Political Interference	-Politics - at present can influence decisions - it is discriminatory and would not result in fair allocation of training i.e. certain selected colleges and people would benefit based on political affiliation (A001; A003);- a competency approach is more transparent and logical and less able to be influenced (B002)
Work culture	-Unwillingness to change (A001)  -Not enough motivation or interest in changing (A003; E004; E005) -Work ethic needs to be redefined work ethic is still that of 50-60 years ago; needs to be in tune with modern times (D003) -The work culture is an obstacle to a competency approach (C008)
Vision / Ability of Decision Makers	-If the initiative need to come from administration then there will be difficulties because of financial constraints or getting an official decision (A004) -Mental mindset of decision makers (A001; C002) -No awareness of need for competencies (B004; D004) -University managed by people who do not know how to manage (B001) -Question of priorities - time; management are more concerned with routine issues; no collective ability to focus attention on need (E003) -Directive needs to come from university (B003) -Good vision and attitude to professional development needed at NITC (F001) -Awareness and initiative needed from management (F006) -Even good VC cannot transform system; need people with determination and creative leadership (B006)

*(Source: Developed for this study using responses to question 22 of the interview protocol; unsolicited comments from interviewees and from transcripts)*

### **HoD Changes in role or responsibility and perceived problems**

A pattern analysis of responses to the question of changes in HoD role and responsibility indicated three key themes: organisational change (or lack of), balancing demands as a HoD and a theme of changed ML practices. Supporting comments for each identified theme are provided below in Table 5.

Some interviewees were forthcoming about the current difficulties faced by incumbents in the role of HoD. These issues were identified as: motivation, lack of power, rotation of role, and political influence.

### **Identified MLCs required for HoDs**

HoD respondents were asked a number of different questions designed to elicit their views on the key MLCs required for HoDs. The number of responses and length of time taken by respondents varied. This meant that some respondents identified many more MLCs than others and used different terminology to describe these. A pattern analysis resulted in the Researcher needing to make determinations as to which descriptions fitted into which category. The final allocation of descriptions into categories is thus somewhat subjective and is a feature of competency identification (Thomas &

Sireno 1980). As a result of this analysis, 24 competencies were identified with varying frequency of occurrence and spread across cases, and these are presented below in Table 6

*Table 5 Identified themes in changes in role or responsibility of HoD*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Supporting Comments</b>
<b>Need for different managerial leadership skills</b>	<p><i>-With globalisation and the predicted entry of foreign universities, there will be a need for new courses to attract students and HoDs will need a marketing orientation to sell their courses (B004)</i></p> <p><i>-New generation of HoDs are more aware of management and need to apply modern management practices ... (D005)</i></p>
<b>Balancing demands</b>	<p><i>-Challenge is managing between the stability of the organisation and administration and the dynamism of an academic environment (B006)</i></p> <p><i>-More challenges than expected in becoming a HoD as there are many conflicting requirements (F004)</i></p> <p><i>-Balancing workload between students, research and (role of) HoD is difficult (F002; F006)</i></p>
<b>Organisational Change</b>	<p><b>Current organisational constraints</b></p> <p><i>-No incentive to become HoD- no autonomy, headaches; financial accountability if audit of books not correct then this can have a negative impact on the pension amount for retirement (A001)</i></p> <p><i>-Need to streamline administration procedures by reducing bureaucracy and (by) computerisation; making room for academic and people management role (B004)</i></p> <p><i>-More delegation and trust required from the management (F004)</i></p> <p><i>Need for more financial delegation at present can only spend Rs5000 (approx. A\$160) (F001)</i></p> <p><b>Future Change</b></p> <p><i>-Anticipate some changes in role as there will be more responsibilities e.g. curriculum and exam setting if college becomes autonomous (D002)</i></p> <p><i>-Also an increase in power of HoD with autonomy (of college) (D003)</i></p> <p><i>-No doubt there will be a change with the move to an IIT; increased administration responsibility; more time on infrastructure changes; structuring new course and improving existing courses (C002; C003)</i></p>

*(Source: Developed for this study from responses to questions 5 & 8 of the interview protocol and unsolicited responses)*

Of these 24 MLCs seven were identified by respondents from all cases and these are: figurehead, interpersonal skills, negotiation/ influencing skills, administration, problem solving and developing people. Organising skills was also mentioned by respondents across all cases but with a lower frequency. A second cluster of five MLCs were identified by respondents in five of the six cases and these are: academic role, communication, motivating others, innovation approach and managing resources. A third cluster of six was identified by respondents in four cases and these are: planning and objective setting, co-ordination, integrity/ ethics, monitoring and control, developing and communicating a vision and time management. It is interesting to note the inclusion on integrity and ethics by respondents given the comments made in regard to corruption in Kerala and even in the case organisations themselves.

The other MLCs identified by respondents were from three or fewer cases. Respondents from the three university cases (A-C) identified decision making, stakeholder focus, and teamwork in common. Case A respondents also emphasised change management, liaison and networking and quality improvement and best practice. Case D and F respondents also identified liaison and networking. In total 18 MLCs were selected by respondents from two thirds or more of the cases.

Table 6 : Identified MLCs of HoDs by HoDs: Frequency and spread N=36

Code	Identified Competency	Frequency	Spread	Frequency x spread
C12	Figurehead (including role model, head of family)	29	6	174
C11	Interpersonal skills (People management including: consultation, facilitation, demonstrating respect, counselling, relationship building and maintenance)	27	6	162
C17	Negotiation/Influencing skills (including diplomacy)	21	6	126
C2	Administration: e.g. following routine procedures; exercising authority to approve and request items and authority given to HoD by organisation	20	6	120
C20	Problem solving (including crisis management)	14	6	84
C8	Developing people: development mentality to develop both administration and academic staff	14	6	84
C1	Academic (role): as head of subject, research role; eminent scholar	14	5	70
C4	Communication skills: (including effective listening; giving and receiving feedback)	13	5	65
C16	Motivating others (including developing a positive work culture)	12	5	60
C9	Innovation approach (including initiative and development of new proposals)	11	5	55
C18	Organising: e.g. seminars, conferences, debates	9	6	54
C19	Planning and objective setting	13	4	52
C14	Managing resources: information, finances, infrastructure and multiple programmes	9	5	45
C5	Co-ordination	10	4	40
C10	Integrity/Ethics	10	4	40
C15	Monitoring and control: e.g. classes, staff, workloads, productivity, quality	10	4	40
C6	Decision making (including participative decision making and autonomous role (to make decisions)	10	3	30
C7	Developing and communicating a vision	7	4	28
C24	Time management	7	4	28
C23	Teamwork	7	3	21
C22	Stakeholder focus (including political and student stakeholder groups)	6	3	18
C13	Liaison and networking	4	3	12
C21	Quality improvement and best practice	4	1	4
C3	Change management	4	1	4

**Key**

Competency identified by HoDs from all 6 cases

*(Developed for this study from questions 1, 4 and 9 of the interview protocol)*

These 24 MLCs were presented to both of the focus groups. The FGH participants commented that though all of the MLCs were important, they identified a number of key

MLCs. Eight of the top ten MLCs identified by the HoD interviewees were supported by the HoD FG, with C19 planning and objective setting and C4 communication skills not being selected in the top 10. The FGF members supported all 24 of these identified MLCs. There was thus general support from both the HoD and Follower FGs for these results. The results described above, indicate a number of commonalities across the six cases, suggesting a high degree of similarity across all cases irrespective of differences in size or type.

## **Discussion**

### **Implications of the cultural context within Kerala**

Corruption and in particular in politics and trade unions, was a key issue raised in this study and this is consistent with findings from As-Saber, Dowling and Liesch (1998) and specifically to studies in Indian HEIs (Negi 2004). Therefore the use of transparent and observable behaviours such as competencies (Heffernan & Flood 2000) may run counter to the forces being applied in the case organisations by both political parties and trade unions who, according to respondents, have their own agendas for 'pushing' certain individuals into decision making positions within Kerala HEIs.

The lack of acceptance of MLCs within the Kerala cultural context, the significance of seniority was identified. Promotion by seniority is consistent with findings from Rao and Das (2004) who found a lack of value placed on performance appraisals in determining an applicant's competency for the position. Promotion by seniority, is thus contrary to promotion by merit using competencies (Heffernan & Flood 2000). This cultural implication limits the potential benefits of the use of MLCs for purposes of selection to the HoD position. However recognising the next person 'in line' for the position may well be beneficial in terms of offering competency based MLD to equip the incoming incumbent for their new role.

The third pattern is the importance of MLCs that are needed in managing relationships. Respondents identified the strength of family, consensus approach and the depth of relationships as important cultural factors. These two themes are consistent with the literature; in particular that the broader culture drives management culture (Hofstede 2001); and that different cultures value different aspects of leadership (Den Hartog et al. 1999). Additionally, the strength of relationships as an important cultural factor may be postulated as to the reason for the high ranking (second) of (C11) interpersonal skills MLC. This MLC has an emphasis on people skills, influencing and negotiation, demonstrating respect and relationship building, which are all highly important skills in supporting relationships.

### **HoD role: Current problems and changes in responsibility**

HoDs were clearly able to identify changes that are influencing their organisations, as well as their own role as HoD. The issue of lack of motivation to perform the role was raised by respondents and supports Hoppe (2003) view that the motivation to serve in leadership roles in HEIs may be eroded unless extrinsic rewards are present. The rotation of role raised an issue in relation to HoDs without the correct skills being selected and this was also raised earlier in relation to the role of seniority. Other issues to do with the need for organisational change and the need for different managerial leadership skills were also noted.

The role of politics, was seen as directly impacting on the current role of the HoD. This is supportive of Henkel's (2000) view of the HoD having to deal with external demands and crises. Another issue was that of balancing demands as a HoD and this was raised in both Henkel's (2000) and Deem's (2004) studies of HoD roles in HEIs.

The lack of clarity of the HoD role, demonstrated by the absence of any position descriptions, is consistent with Henkel (2000) and Thompson and Harrison (2002) identifying a lack of understanding of the role of the HoD. Thus it would appear that clarity of role, motivation to do the role, increased power and accountability, increased ML skills and ability to balance the role would all assist in the improved functioning of HoDs at Kerala HEIs.

### **Required competencies for HoDs**

The results showed some similarities across the cases with 75 percent of MLCs being selected by respondents from two thirds (4/6) or more of cases. The other 25 percent of MLCs were identified in three cases or less. This is suggestive that for HoDs across the various case organisations there is a degree of consensus as to what competencies are required to fulfil the role, though for some HoDs in case organisations there are specific competencies required

Some general observations can be made in regard to the MLCs identified in this study. Turning to the first cluster of seven MLCs identified through interview, three of the top MLCs listed above (figurehead, negotiation/influencing and administration role) are consistent with three attributes of Indian leaders identified by Chhokar (in Chhokar et al 2007). He commented on the need for leaders to be a role model and this was identified by respondents as part of the figurehead competency. Negotiation, in this study included the skill of diplomacy and this was identified by Chhokar (2007) as well as being administratively competent. The competency, developing people although not specifically identified in Chhokar's (2007) study of Indian managers, are supported by the broader GLOBE leadership attributes. The competency developing people can be associated with the leadership attributes of being encouraging, positive, a

confidence builder and team builder. As well the competency problem solving was also identified (Dorfman, Hanges & Brodbeck 2004).

In comparing the MLCs identified in this study to the top skills identified by Thompson and Harrison (2002) in their single case study in the UK, a number of MLCs identified in this study appear to relate to the competency identified by them of managing people. The findings of interpersonal skills and developing people above could be seen as associated with the competency of managing people. A number of these MLCs are comparable to attributes identified through the GLOBE project as a universal leadership attribute and these are communication; planning, co-ordination and objective setting corresponding to 'foresight' and 'plans ahead'; motivating others which is akin to 'motivational' and 'motive arouser'; integrity/ethics corresponding to 'trustworthy', 'just' and 'honest' (Dorfman, Hanges & Brodbeck 2004). Integrity was also raised by Chokkar (in Chhokar et al 2007).

Innovation, although not specifically mentioned in either of the studies cited above, is seen as key to the leadership role (Yukl 2005). Managing resources was identified as one of the key competencies in Thompson and Harrison's (2002) study. This study also identified the need to control costs and enhance value which could correspond to the identified competency of monitoring and control. Although not specifically mentioned time management can be seen as part of the competency of 'manag(ing) yourself' including 'personal emotions and stress' both identified in Thompson and Harrison's study. Lastly, Pulparampil (2000) identified the need to develop and communicate a vision as a key requirement for HoDs in Kerala HEIs and this is also supported by Chokkar's (2007) study of Indian managers.

In consideration of the difficult bureaucratic, political and corrupt descriptions levied on many of the case organisations by respondents, the high ranking for the MLCs of interpersonal skills, negotiation/ influencing skills, and problem solving can be postulated to arise from the need to operate in a highly bureaucratic and politicised environment. As described by respondents, the HoD in Kerala HEIs has to rely much more on relationships and influence in order to meet department objectives, and to negotiate within a political environment. The importance of relationships and also a poor work culture may provide the context for the rating of importance of certain MLCs - interpersonal skills, and motivating others in the top 10 competencies identified at interview.

Turning now to the second group of MLCs not identified more broadly across cases, it is interesting to note that three of the MLCs are found in the universal list of attributes from the GLOBE study; that of teamwork, decision making and quality improvement and best practice akin to an 'excellence orientation' (Dorfman, Hanges & Brodbeck 2004). The MLCs stakeholder focus and teamwork appear to have a more specific application in the State universities. The competency liaison and networking had a spread of results from respondents of a university, the college affiliated to that university (Case D) and the deemed university. Though the academic role was recognised in the top competencies, it was not ranked as highly. The variety of responses in this competency grouping was more focused on the research role and need to be seen as an eminent scholar.

### **Practical implications**

The managerial implications of the findings from this study for Kerala HEIs are two-fold. Firstly, there is a clear need for attention to the role of the HoD in Kerala HEIs. Vice Chancellors, Principals and Directors of Kerala HEIs need to consider, and act upon, the lack of clarity of the role of the HoD and lack of position description for this role. While the findings of this study have contributed to an understanding of the HoD role further research is still warranted.

Secondly, the MLCs identified in this study need to form the basis for development of competency statements that can be used for selection and development of HoDs. As suggested by Heffernan and Flood's (2000) study, it is difficult to envision that development of these MLCs into selection, appraisal and development tools can occur without a change to the HR function within each of the case organisations. Again for the six cases in this study, this is more than an internal change by the addition of formalised HR functions; it also requires a change in the external environment in the way both the State and Federal governments view the need to support and manage HR within the HEIs.

Recommendations to further enhance the HoDs skills included the need for training, an orientation programme, improved recruitment, selection and promotion processes. The differences in the two clusters of higher education institutions as well as the organisational context in Kerala, India need to be taken into account in contextualising results and recommendations.

### **Suggestions for future research**

While the findings of this study have contributed to an understanding of the HoD role further research is still warranted. Conducting both case study research and quantitative research could assist State governments to identify the MLCs of HoDs to perform more effectively in the various HEIs in other states of India, leading to a whole country perspective.

The authors agree with an independent reviewer who commented that there is a strong need for more external validity as the study was limited to Kerala, India. For example, by adding at least two more countries and four more schools from those countries, which could add up to 20 more interviews from two other locations, the external validity could be improved and create the opportunity to analyse potential international differences. Furthermore, the literature review could include role ambiguity research.

### Conclusions

This study indicates that in order to be effective, HoDs perceive that they need to possess a unique balance of MLCs that are commonly associated with managers in general, as well specific competencies which would assist them to deal with the cultural and organisation milieus in which they operate. This study has clarified the role of the HOD in Kerala HEIs, found that MLCs can be identified by HODs and in doing so provide the opportunity to operationalise these in ways that will assist both the HOD and the HEI in terms of selection, performance management and development.

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