

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Understanding Delegated Administrative Tasks: Beyond Academics' Professional Identities

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Abstract

This paper examines the implication of administrative task delegation on academics' professional identity construction at a Cameroonian university. Academics at Cameroonian universities are juggling multiple tasks, including teaching, research, outreach and administrative tasks. Using a qualitative case study design, 11 academics selected purposively from diverse disciplines were engaged in in-depth interviews to explore their experiences with administrative tasks and the implications on their professional identities. The force field model for teacher development and distributed leadership theory guided data production and analysis. The study found that administrative tasks are seen as an opportunity for professional growth and career advancement. However, they also prevent academics from engaging fully in their key professional roles because they spend more time on them. The study recommends that all stakeholders should encourage university leaders to move away from a "one-size-fits-all" philosophy that assumes a uniform understanding of the roles of all academics, where academics must integrate administrative tasks with their key roles. Administrative tasks should be delegated to those academics who consider it a path towards developing an additional identity in administration, not by coercing academics to prioritise administration over their key responsibilities.

Keywords: administrative tasks; community outreach; higher education; leadership; professional academic identity

Introduction

Scholars across the global academic landscape, including those within the Cameroonian context, assume pivotal functions in teaching, research and community outreach (Schamp, 2018). Bothma and Rossouw (2019) argue that the global nature and extensive impact of higher education transformation over the past decades have resulted in significant changes in the nature, demands and objectives of higher education. These changes have been driven by governments' political philosophy and strategic objectives for economic growth and social progress. As a result, the responsibilities and expectations of academic work are in a state of continual flux (Bothma and Rossouw, 2019). Academics face a complex challenge in balancing their core responsibilities, such as teaching, research and community outreach, with various administrative tasks. These multidimensional roles require academics to adeptly juggle their identities, which are closely tied to their disciplines and primary academic functions (Leišytė and Wilkesmann, 2016; Jögi *et al.*, 2020). Universities place high demands on every aspect of academics' professional activities, often leading to contested and fragmented multiple identities (Leišytė and Wilkesmann, 2016). Literature has unavoidably failed to adequately define professional identity. This may have led to misunderstandings and assumptions that impede research and perplex specialists, while assisting individuals (Fitzgerald, 2020) in undertaking research in that context. However, professional identity has been defined as a "professional self-perception based on attitudes, beliefs, feelings, values, motivations, and experiences that are related to a specific profession" (Haghighat *et al.*, 2019: 139). According to Haghighat *et al.* (2019), having a strong sense of one's professional identity and consequent job satisfaction are prerequisites for having increased

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interpersonal communication skills, self-confidence and self-esteem. What Haghghat *et al.* (2019) may mean here is that a person's ability to comprehend and recognise both their individual selves and their overall life purpose may serve as the foundation for their professional identity. According to Bentley *et al.* (2019), professional identity construction is the process of constructing and developing a new future, as it is a crucial component of a person's professional career development.

Understanding academic identity requires a discussion of the complex changes in higher education. These changes include, among other changes, academics' working conditions, the curriculum, student profiles and the effects of leadership on academics' personal and professional lives (Drennan *et al.*, 2020). Van Lankveld *et al.* (2016) and Žydžiūnaitė *et al.* (2019) argue that an academic's professional identity can be a combination of the construction of both the personal self and the profession, which is constantly shifting and made up of many competing influences that vary depending on the academic and social context. A study conducted by Flecknoe *et al.* (2017) in Australia has highlighted that academics construct their identities based on the education-focused academic's framework, which places teaching and research on an equal scale to avoid imbalance. Academics assume diverse roles, notably centred on their identification as teachers (Trautwein, 2018), researchers (Ylijoki and Ursin, 2013) and community service providers (Ogunsanya and Govender, 2020). The universities in Cameroon were founded with a three-fold mission of teaching, research and community outreach (Andoh, 2017; Ntui, 2018; Schamp, 2018), which elements constitute the core performance areas for academic staff at these institutions (Ntui, 2018). This paper asserts that academics shape their professional identities through teaching, research and outreach activities (Schamp, 2018; Trautwein, 2018). However, since administrative tasks have been delegated to academics, participants' narratives in this study will ascertain how these implications impact their primary responsibilities.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have seemingly incorporated administrative tasks into academics' responsibilities. However, there is a gap in the literature that interrogates academics' strategies for navigating their complex identities and managing conflicting roles, especially when taking on administrative tasks (Yang *et al.*, 2021). This paper aims to address this gap by exploring these aspects within the context of a Cameroonian university. To understand how academics balance their core performance areas with new administrative roles as a significant challenge, this paper does not seek to exclude the fact that delegated administrative tasks is a culture at some universities. Rather, this paper attempts to respond to the research question: What are the implications of delegated administrative tasks on academics' professional identity construction at a Cameroonian university? In response, the paper begins by exploring existing literature on academic professional identity construction. The paper then delves into scholarship on the delegation of administrative tasks to academics in higher education. A discussion of the theoretical framework and research methodology ensues, followed by a presentation of the findings. A discussion, conclusion and recommendations for future studies are then presented.

Delegation of Administrative Tasks in Higher Education

Henkel (2009) postulates that the primary source of academic identities has long been seen in the context of discipline. However, some scholarship has argued beyond the traditional teaching, research and community outreach activities of the academic to contend that academics have had to manage many projects and work in diverse disciplines that sometimes go outside of their discipline by engaging in administrative tasks (Clarke *et al.*, 2013). What these authors likely intend to convey is that academics' fundamental role has transformed to encompass supplementary obligations. The identities of academics undergo continuous development under the influence of institutional pressures, prompting them to depart from the traditional dichotomy of researchers or educators. Instead, they embrace a fluid and evolving identity, adapting to new roles, disciplines and diverse approaches to work (Drennan *et al.*, 2020). The idea that managerial and structural changes contribute to the complexity, diversity and fragmentation of academic identity in higher education is supported by various scholars (Billot and King, 2015; Madikizela-Madiya and Le Roux, 2017; Yang *et al.*, 2021). Reddy *et al.* (2016) suggest that academic identities are no longer stable but are instead becoming more fragmented in terms of roles (researcher, teacher, administrator and community engager). In the past, academics were relatively free to develop their diverse academic identities in their spaces and paid less attention to other aspects. Clarke *et al.* (2013: 130) claim that this fragmentation is the reason "*academics try in different contexts to meet their professional obligations across the different areas of teaching, research, administration, academic writing, networking and acquiring new skills, and competencies*". To understand this fragmentation, this paper explores the implications of delegated administrative tasks on academics' professional identities within a Cameroonian university.

Nevin *et al.* (2014) contend that academics have a difficult time constructing their teacher identities because they are continuously struggling for attention, especially at the university level. However, it is argued that academics' teacher identities are merely a small subset of their academic professional identities and that only a small number of variables affect these identities (Nevgi and Löfström, 2014; Trautwein, 2018). Clarke *et al.* (2013) contradict this notion by asserting that the conventional perspective on HEIs has historically been characterised by a dual interpretation: one pertaining to academic matters and the other to administrative or managerial aspects. In other words, academics must not only fulfil their primary responsibilities but also take on managerial responsibilities. In contrast, Yang *et al.* (2021) contend that to enhance their national and international rankings, the majority of universities worldwide must prioritise the promotion of research productivity. They further elaborate that the institution's prioritisation of research above teaching has led to worldwide disputes regarding academic identity, initiating a complex discourse about the precise composition of an academic's professional identity. Despite the scholarly discussion increasingly shedding light on progressions within both academic and managerial spheres (Clarke *et al.*, 2013), there remains a lack of empirical studies exploring the explicit occurrences of these overlaps and their impacts on the professional identities of academics. Academics are currently contending with a few complex challenges. Among these challenges are the disparity concerning the practical realisation of the triple mission within academic environments (Andoh, 2017; Preece, 2017) and the contention that teaching frequently takes precedence over research and community outreach in some universities (Andoh, 2017). Another challenge is the assertion that community outreach follows teaching and research (Preece, 2017). Furthermore, academics are re-evaluating their roles due to delegated administrative tasks, which adds to their primary responsibilities.

Barbour and Lammers (2015) postulate that professional identity offers a place for understanding the connection between work and identity more broadly and its implications for the individuals and organisations. Henkel (2009) states that ongoing changes in HEIs are partially to blame for academics' identities being both transient and multidimensional; however, she argues that academics can view identity construction as a cumulative process. From this process, dominant identities could be created that permeate their professional context and their entire existence. This can happen to the point where, regardless of their formal role, academics find that they are a part of the larger positions of power. It is consequently possible that individuals would construct and reconstruct how they identify their identities throughout time and these many diverse identities may be challenging to reconcile (Henkel, 2009). Fitzmaurice (2013) supposes that HEIs have a propensity to adopt a "one-size-fits-all" philosophy in which being an academic and determining success are based primarily on research publications, perhaps to the neglect of other roles such as successful teaching and perhaps community outreach activities. She contends that these institutions should give up the notion that all academics have the same conception of what it means to be a teacher, researcher, academic, professional or manager. Fitzmaurice (2013) may have been suggesting that due to academics' diverse approaches in managing their professional responsibilities, a uniform experience in their roles cannot be expected for all.

Ultimately, academics may be juggling multiple identities as they contribute to their multiple roles and responsibilities in institutional research and development, research, enterprise and community partnerships (Lamont and Nordberg, 2014). As a result, because academics construct multiple identities, this conceptualisation fits academics as they move between contexts and take on different roles and positions, such as teacher, life coach, parent, friend, researcher, general public service provider and administrator (Achirri, 2020), which may influence their core roles and responsibilities. In light of this, a study conducted by Akinmayowa and Kadiri (2014) found that academic workload, student-related issues, research and career development, interpersonal relationships and administrative-related issues are also strongly linked to stress among academic staff at a Nigerian university. However, the study did not fully address how these stress factors, especially administrative elements such as task delegation, influence the development of academics' professional identities. Abramov *et al.* (2017) found that academics in HEIs have traditional professional roles such as researchers, teachers and experts. However, administrative tasks hinder their full participation in these key responsibilities, despite the potential for professional and career advancement in administration. Furthermore, academics who spend a significant amount of time on administrative tasks strive to maintain their reputation as academic specialists rather than administrators (Abramov *et al.*, 2017). The study also revealed that university administrative tasks often assigned on short notice and characterised by bureaucracy add complexity to the labour process and divert faculty time and effort from their primary work. This leads to stress and a sense of alienation, transforming the perception of the profession from a calling to a routine desk job. Abramov *et al.* (2017) suggest that such changes in professional role perception can have broad implications for academics' identities.

Theoretical Framework

Academics' perspectives on the impact of delegated administrative tasks on their professional identities were examined through Samuel's (2008) force field model for teacher development and Spillane's (2006) distributed leadership theory. Samuel's (2008) force field model examines the interactive forces that shape teachers' identities in a school system. The model is relevant for understanding how delegated administrative tasks influence academics' professional identities at a Cameroonian university. This is because Samuel's (2008) model suggests that there are push and pull forces that exert a force charge on the teacher's identity in different directions. Understanding these forces is crucial for teachers to excel in their profession while being accountable to the larger system, learners and the discipline or curriculum. Samuel's model draws on student teachers' biographical forces; contextual forces, such as government policies; programmatic forces, including curriculum enactment; and institutional forces, such as school experiences. These forces contribute to the development of teachers' professional identity. In the context of biographical forces, Samuel (2008) highlights that personal experience brought from different backgrounds, such as family, gender, age, religion and ethnicity, into the teaching and learning schooling system, where teaching and learning are negotiated informally, also shapes teachers' identities. Macro-contextual forces relate to educational demands from external policymakers. In this macro-contextual context, excessive administrative tasks can hinder academics' innovation and weaken the construction of the professional identity. Institutional forces are those distinctive values and the vision and mission that influence the role and identity of their members.

Given that institutional norms often dictate the expectations placed on academics, if administrative task delegation becomes a norm, academics might view these tasks as part of their professional role, thus potentially affecting how they view and shape their identities. Programmatic forces, also known as "curriculum intervention forces", regulate the teaching and learning content and materials within an institution. According to Samuel (2008), these forces have the potential to shape how teachers interpret their roles and identities. Although distributed leadership theory has gained popularity in various disciplines (e.g., social sciences, business and health), its application in higher education has received relatively less attention. Concerns have been raised about universities using the concept as a means to avoid consulting staff and students. However, Timperley (2009) argues against the hierarchical leadership style and its top-down decision-making process. Distributed leadership proposed by Spillane (2006) challenges the traditional view of leadership as a top-down process. It recognises leadership as a shared responsibility among multiple actors within the organisation. Distributed leadership involves comprehensive task and social interaction sharing (Wan, 2014). What this means is that distributed leadership is not just a conceptual idea but also a practice. It involves engaging in collaborative decision-making, shared responsibility and distributed problem-solving. It emphasises the importance of fostering an organisational culture that values and supports collective leadership practices. In this paper, data were analysed using Samuel's force field model for teacher development and Spillane's distributed leadership theory. Both deductive and inductive approaches were employed to develop codes and themes that helped understand the implication of delegated tasks on academics' professional identities. The subsequent discussion delves into how this analysis unfolded.

Methodology

This paper is framed as a qualitative study that used a single case study to obtain an in-depth narrative of participating academics' insights into the implication of delegated tasks on their professional identities in teaching, research and community outreach. Snowball sampling was used to acquire access to learn from, comprehend and gain insight from 11 informed participants from a Cameroonian university with in-depth knowledge of specific issues (Merriam, 2009). Data gathered through semi-structured interviews were transcribed and coded, and the themes and sub-themes that emerged were analysed using thematic analysis. Demographic information was gathered, including participants' age, gender, academic rank, academic qualification, faculty/department and years of experience. The majority of the participants were between the ages of 35 and 40, with male participants making up 82% of the sample. Regarding the participants' academic background, nine had PhDs, while one was undertaking PhD studies; and two were associate professors, four lecturers, four assistant lecturers and one an instructor. Participants were from a variety of disciplines, including the humanities, agricultural and veterinary medicine, social and management sciences, law, and science. The research approach was driven by ethical considerations, which included seeking and securing an ethical certificate and obtaining gatekeeper authorisation from the research site's deputy vice chancellor for research. An informed consent form was also distributed to

participants, which they had to read and understand and then sign. This was done to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

Presentation of the Findings

The obtained and coded data were sorted into categories that reflected diverse experiences. Following that, these categories were combined to form five overarching themes: administrative role and teaching performance, workload-related teaching effectiveness, access to administrative research data, underperforming research productivity, and time constraint on community outreach activities.

Administrative role and teaching performance

University leaders should formally involve academics in administrative tasks, providing mentorship, as there are no established training programmes for developing these leadership skills. Some leaders have likely advanced to leadership positions through administrative responsibilities. One participant said,

"I am preparing myself too for leadership in the future, which means that as a university lecturer or an academic, I already know that I will not end up only as a teacher or a researcher."

The participant continued that:

"It is also helping me not only to grow as an academic but to be able to contribute to the administration of the university in case I am appointed to similar positions tomorrow."

Administrative responsibilities are vital for enhancing the overall success of the institution. Consequently, it may not impact on academics' teaching negatively because it is not a key role. Attesting to this, one participant noted that, *"administrative tasks have no adverse implication on teaching performance, because the tasks are not like a yearly thing."* Academics who love teaching and are mindful of their workload can adeptly juggle teaching and administrative responsibilities. This reflects their skill in managing time and workloads efficiently, rendering the allocation of administrative tasks inconsequential to their teaching. One participant noted that, *"administrative tasks are always outside of your teaching hours."* Given the need for these administrative tasks to be delegated formally following the due procedures, the complexity of its implication on academics' professional wellbeing should be considered. A participant noted that:

"It has to be a kind of mentor-mentee relationship because, as young lecturers, we are also future university administrators, and if you don't engage us formally, guide us and supervise us, then you are creating a vacuum for the future."

The university labour process is marked by increasing complexity brought on by duties given on short notice that are frequently bureaucratic in nature and require time and effort from faculty, which should have been expended on their primary work. Such work schedules lead to stress and a sense of alienation from the profession, which is no longer seen as a calling but rather as a routine desk job (Abramov *et al.*, 2017).

Workload-related teaching effectiveness

The debate on assigned administrative tasks and their impact on workload is significant in HEIs as it highlights their influence on academics' teaching effectiveness and students' learning outcomes. Balancing teaching and administrative tasks may impact the teaching outcome, as academics may spend more time on administrative duties, inhibiting their ability to concentrate on teaching. One participant attested that, *"the allocation of administrative tasks to lecturers affects lecturers' effectiveness in the teaching and learning process."* The intricate balance that academic professionals often need to strike between various responsibilities may have negative consequences, including a potential decrease in efficiency, challenges in time management, and concerns about the overall quality of work. Attesting to this, one participant argued:

"Negatively, it is like adding [to] my work because I'm already doing research and I'm teaching, and you give me an administrative function again to assist in the running of the university. It means you are adding work, which reduces my efficiency in teaching. Because I will not only concentrate now on teaching; I will have to shift some of the time to administration and writing reports on what I'm doing."

While teaching is deemed central, administrative tasks might draw focus away due to organisational expectations, the struggle to balance conflicting duties, and potential tensions between academic priorities and administrative demands. One participant alluded that:

“Even though we know that the essence of your career and your job description is to teach, but because of some of this administrative work, your teaching becomes secondary because it is not possible, for example, to tell a senior administrator or your hierarchy that you did not fulfil a particular task because you went to class to teach. I think the normal response will be, ‘Why didn’t you give an assignment? Why didn’t you tell them you’d come later?’”

The delegation of tasks is perceived as a sign of laziness and a lack of department heads’ engagement in administration. A participant argued that:

“A head of department that is lazy would just distribute departmental task; he would say that, ‘Okay, respond to this, this person should be in charge of scheduling students for their proposal and pre-defence. This person should be in charge of collecting students’ complaints and treating them’ You realise that the head of department just gives these tasks, goes, sit him somewhere, and is drinking his beer.”

Ultimately, maintaining a balanced and successful approach to teaching and administrative responsibilities amid teaching workload, administrative tasks, student, and departmental expectations can be difficult. A participant noted:

“The courses, for instance, that you even have to teach are so many, the number of students that you have to handle; you have one course for about 500 to 600 students ... Then they still gather administrative task and give you. The students are there calling you, ‘Sir, we are supposed to be in class’; the head of department is there threatening you that you’re supposed to do this, you’re supposed to do that.”

Administrative tasks appear to have an impact not only on students’ learning outcomes but also on academics’ professional identities, as it becomes challenging to effectively manage both areas of responsibility. The experience of managing heavy workloads, including teaching a large number of students, grading multiple scripts, managing student expectations and experiencing pressure from their superiors, emerged as a challenge to participants in this study. This challenge may result in a significant level of stress and pressure on academics’ teaching identities. Nevin *et al.* (2014) contend that academics have a difficult time constructing their teacher identities because they are continuously struggling for attention, especially at the university level. Clarke *et al.* (2013) maintain that the conventional perspective on HEIs has historically been characterised by a dual interpretation: one pertaining to academic matters and the other to administrative or managerial aspects. In light of this, it appears that the participants in this study were required to develop multiple identities that encompass both academic and administrative identities. The findings resonate with Samuel’s (2008) institutional component of the force field model. This component argues that understanding these institutional forces is crucial for teachers to excel in their profession while being accountable to the larger system, learners and the disciplinary or curricular process of shaping professional identity development for teachers.

Access to administrative research data

One primary role of academics is research, and research cannot be carried out without accurate data. Administrative engagement can offer researchers unique insights and perspectives that contribute to more comprehensive and informed academic work. Corroborating to this, a participant asserted that:

“Positively, it may give me opportunity to access data, administrative data, if I want, if I’m doing a research that is related to leadership within higher education, or within the university”

To this end, being assigned administrative tasks within a university context may have provided some participants with access to administrative data they would not have had access to if they were not involved in administrative responsibilities. This would be true especially if their research includes topics related to leadership in higher education within the university itself. This finding may align with that of Yang *et al.* (2021), who argue that in order to enhance their national and international rankings, the majority of universities worldwide must prioritise the

promotion of research productivity. This finding fits into Spillane's (2006) distributed leadership theory, which states that distributed leadership is not just a conceptual idea but also a practice that involves engaging in collaborative decision-making, shared responsibility and distributed problem-solving.

Underperforming research productivity

Although the findings indicate that administrative tasks can enhance research performance by granting access to research data, it is important to note that not all participants held this opinion. The findings reveal that participants have had to manage many projects and work in diverse disciplines that sometimes go outside of their discipline, such as engaging in administrative tasks (Clarke *et al.*, 2013). This compels them to reframe their identities away from the dichotomous views of academics as researchers or educators towards a fluid and evolving identity as new roles, disciplines and different ways of working emerge, thus influencing their professional identities (Drennan *et al.*, 2020). Explaining further, a participant argued that:

"So, while my friends were writing articles, I was writing memoirs. So ... it's quite a challenging thing, it chops up all your time It takes an extra effort to be able to publish the same way that you publish when you are not an administrator, so building an administrative career ... impact significantly on and probably negatively on building a research career."

Another participant voiced that:

"of course, it affects it because at the level of research, if I'm supposed to go out, for example, data collection, or to get some pertinent information – because I have to be around to let the administrators know that I am around or because I have to get the administrator's approval before I leave – it becomes very difficult for me because they want to see you around not just in class according to your timetable but being around to assist them when they need your assistance."

Multiple roles and heavy workloads have constrained the time available for generating high-quality research papers. This has led to some participants publishing lower quality papers or extracting articles from their students' theses for article publication, in addition to preventing them from engaging in collaborative research. Attesting to this, a participant detailed that:

"at the end of the day, you realise that you don't even have time to concentrate and conceptualise good papers, to do good research and look for avenues where you can collaborate with other teachers from other universities. You hardly have time for yourself, and that makes you to not write top-quality papers. But you just hurry up, maybe at the end of the day, to write some kind of funny things. And that's why you see, at the end of the day, teachers tend ... to extract articles from students' theses to publish, because they practically have no time to do those things because of the administrative tasks that are ... given to them all the time."

To support this, another participant concurred that:

"Yes, it influences a lot because it works against my time. If I were to research or ... to work on a paper to publish, and I'm on the field doing an administrative activity, which was not supposed to be done by me, that time can never be gotten again. So, it weakens my research ability."

Another participant argued that:

"It might have influence on your research because you take less time on research, you take most of the time on administrative work. It reduces your performance; it reduces the time you spend to carry out research."

Reddy *et al.* (2016) argue that academic identities are no longer stable but are instead becoming more fragmented in terms of roles (researcher, teacher, administrator and community engager). In the past, academics were relatively free to develop their diverse academic identities in their spaces and paid less attention to other aspects. Academics, regardless of their formal role, find themselves switching between various working environments, tasks, roles and reference groups, causing the concept of multiple identities to grow in strength. As such, there is

a possibility for them to construct and reconstruct how they define their identities over time. These many different identities could be difficult to reconcile (Henkel, 2009).

Furthermore, this study has revealed the counterproductive effects of time constraints, workload and hierarchical pressures on participants' careers, which may inform this fragmentation on their professional development as academics. It appears that compromising their primary role to accommodate administrative tasks further exacerbates this fragmentation. In view thereof, understanding academic identity requires a discussion of the complex changes in higher education, such as academics' working conditions, the curriculum, student profiles and the effects of leadership on academics' personal and professional lives (Drennan *et al.*, 2020). Drawing from Samuel's (2008) force field model, the challenge of harmonising multiple identities and roles corresponds to the biographical forces that shape individuals' role perceptions through their personal experiences. Furthermore, the counterproductive effects of time constraints, workload and hierarchical pressures on participants' key roles demonstrate the institutional forces and expectations that exert influence on academics' professional identities.

Time constraint on community outreach activities

The need to efficiently manage tasks can often result in time constrained for extra responsibilities. This highlights the difficult balancing act that academic professionals undertake when juggling many commitments within time constraints. Emphasising this, a participant stated that, "*virtually, you hardly find time to even do community things except that they have to put them on weekends.*" Time constraints posed limitations on participants' engagement in outreach activities, as effective workload and time management become essential. Consequently, this affects their ability to take on administrative tasks alongside their primary responsibilities. Engaging in these outreach activities becomes viable only when they are scheduled for weekends, which fall outside the participants' regular working days. In this regard, a participant noted that:

"leadership is all about serving the people and influencing the people to do what is necessary to attend to the goals and objectives of the organisation, or the nation, or society, and, therefore, when I'm engaging with the community, I am looking at how I can push for changes in society that will influence the local people and get them also to contribute positively to national development."

Considering that leadership often revolves around service, influence and positive societal change, the delegation of administrative tasks drives positive change that resonates with leadership encompassing more than just individual achievement. It extends to enhancing the welfare of society and promoting the wider objectives of the community through outreach efforts. This resonates with distributed leadership theory, which emphasises the importance of fostering an organisational culture that values and supports collective leadership practices (Wan, 2014).

Discussion

It is argued that managerial and structural changes are to blame for the complexity, diversity and fragmentation of academic identity in higher education (Quigley, 2011; Ylijoki and Ursin, 2013; Billot and King, 2015; Madikizela-Madiya and Le Roux, 2017; Yang *et al.*, 2021). In this study, academics' professional identities cannot be solely understood in terms of teaching, research and community outreach but also in terms of the integration of administrative tasks. Building on the work of Leišytė and Wilkesmann (2016) and Jögi *et al.* (2020), it appears that the participants in this study are expected to fulfil multidimensional roles that include managing and leading various administrative tasks. This is despite their identities being primarily associated with their disciplines and their main academic roles of teaching, research and community outreach. Some participants were excited about handling administrative tasks, seeing them as opportunities to support university leaders, contribute to the institution's service and build identities that aid their professional growth. This perspective resonates with Spillane's (2006) theory of distributed leadership, which emphasises the distributed nature of leadership within educational organisations, recognising that leadership is not solely the responsibility of a single individual but rather is shared among multiple actors within the organisation. In this regard, the interactive process between the leaders and the participants is seen as important as it informs comprehensive tasks, social interaction and sharing (Wan, 2014). Thus, leaders' delegation of administrative tasks to participants demonstrates Spillane's concept of distributed leadership.

Bentley *et al.* (2019) describe the process of constructing and developing a new future as a crucial component of an individual's professional career development. This intricacy is seen in the empirical data as administration, which, not being a core responsibility of academics, should be delegated to those academics who are willing to participate. This is due to the pressure participants experienced from their leaders to prioritise administrative tasks, which detracts from their primary responsibilities. They criticised leaders for neglecting their leadership duties by indulging in leisure activities, spending time at bars and then delegating these responsibilities to others. Participants believed that the construction and development of a new future based on multiple identities should be pursued through reasonable methodologies rather than through coercion. This approach will allow them to develop a strong sense of professional identity and consequent job satisfaction, which will lead to increased interpersonal communication skills, self-confidence and self-esteem (Haghighat *et al.*, 2019). This finding underpins Samuel's (2008) notion of institutional forces, which push and pull participants in different directions as they negotiate their identities with leadership attitudes and institutional norm expectations towards engaging in administrative tasks.

Furthermore, the study resonates with Henkel's (2009) assertion that academics can view identity construction as a cumulative process from which dominant identities could be created. These dominant identities permeate not only their professional context but also their entire existence. This happens to the point where, regardless of their formal role, academics find that they are a part of the larger positions of power. It is consequently more likely that they would construct and reconstruct how they identify their identities throughout time, and these many diverse identities may be challenging to reconcile (Henkel, 2009). The study also aligns with contradictory findings which argue that despite being seen as a pathway to professional development and enhanced career prospects, university administrative tasks prevent academics from participating fully in their key responsibilities (Abramov *et al.*, 2017). This supports findings by Akinmayowa and Kadiri (2014), who found that the significant association between academic staff's stress levels and workload factors that influence their career development is related to administrative-related matters.

It appears that the participants challenged the idea of a "one-size-fits-all" philosophy that assumes a uniform understanding of the roles of a teacher, researcher, academic, professional or manager among all academics (Fitzmaurice, 2013). The participants' narratives indicate that this notion actually impedes the development of their professional academic identities within their primary roles, as they are seldom allowed to determine the context of their own professional identity.

Conclusion

Integrating administration into the core responsibilities of teaching, research and community outreach involves developing a new identity. Understanding this identity shift will help in supporting the transition from the identity of the core roles to an integrated administrative identity. Using the force field model and distributed leadership theory has provided valuable insights into understanding the push and pull forces and the relationship between the leaders and participants that influenced participants' roles and responsibilities as they integrate multiple identities. Many of the participants acknowledged what seemed to be the implication of administrative tasks not only on their primary responsibilities but also on balancing multiple identities. While this may in part be attributed to the institutional leaders' pressure on them to prioritise administration over teaching, research and community outreach, we have argued that the best way to pursue this direction is to allow academics who view administrative tasks as an opportunity that can hone their professional growth and career advancement to integrate administration as an additional identity. Doing this thus excludes the complexities that precede such responsibilities and the consequent professional identity development challenge of those not willing. Instead of shifting their administrative responsibilities to academics, we recommend that the university leaders of the study context should display leadership by being committed to their roles as administrators rather than spending quality time on leisure.

We suggest that administrative responsibilities should not be assigned to academics without proper notification, process, and rationalisation. Standard procedures should be established to govern these assignments. Furthermore, workload management measures, such as prioritisation and time allocation, should be applied to balance key responsibilities with administrative activities. Finally, yet importantly, providing professional development programmes and training opportunities can assist academics in developing the required skills to balance and manage administrative tasks and their core responsibilities efficiently. Limitations of the study include its focus on a single case, limited generalisability and reliance on self-reported data by academics, which introduces potential bias and the exclusion of perspectives from university leaders and administrators. Future research should examine this topic across a broader range of Cameroonian universities, comparing experiences

and involving various stakeholders to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics and decision-making processes related to assigning administrative responsibilities.

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