



# Leading, but are there followers? Exploring the influence of heads of departments on staff and students in Ghanaian higher education institutions

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Received: 20 July 2022 / Accepted: 30 March 2023

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## Abstract

This research investigated followers' expectations of their heads of departments (HoDs) and how they felt about the fulfilment of the expectations within the context of Ghanaian higher education. It further explored the nature of the challenges the HoDs faced as they tried to meet followers' expectations. The research used a phenomenological design and engaged 36 participants selected from three large Ghanaian universities to participate in individual interviews. Data were analysed using the interpretative phenomenological analytical technique. The research revealed that while the subordinate staff expected a more supportive work environment, the students wanted a more conducive learning environment. The HoDs were, however, constrained to do much because of the ethos of the Ghanaian HE sector. The study concluded with recommendations informing policy and practice, both locally and internationally.

**Keywords** Followers · Ghanaian higher education institutions · Heads of departments · Leadership competency theory · Leading

## 1 Introduction

Growing evidence in recent years suggests that globally, management of higher education institutions (HEIs) requires, more than ever, leadership competence that would ensure strategic planning and implementation of policies and programmes to overcome the increased marketisation and intense competition in the sector (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016; Black, 2015; Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017; Hemsall, 2014; Phillips & Snodgrass, 2022; Quinlan, 2014). This research focused on heads of departments (HoDs) in higher education (HE) because of their position as middle-level leaders whose competence counts in successfully implementing policies and programmes in universities and colleges (Branson et al., 2016; Marshall et al., 2011). Departments that heads lead are, according to Bryman (2007), "... the key administrative division for the allocation of resources, and the chief

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springboard for the organization's main teaching and research activities" (p. 695). It is also the administrative division in charge of organising and delivering courses and managing teachers, support staff, and students (Creaton & Heard-Laureote, 2019). While the subsequent use of teachers in this paper will refer to lecturers, senior lecturers, associate professors, and professors, support staff will refer to secretaries, drivers, security personnel, and cleaners in Ghanaian HEIs. Collectively, teachers, support staff, and students will be identified as followers or subordinates.

Across the globe, the appointment of HoDs in most HEIs depends on academic achievements rather than previous leadership or managerial experience (Bryman, 2007). It is usually short-lived and rotates among professors and other senior members of the department (Creaton & Heard-Laureote, 2019). According to the University of Louisiana (n.d., p. 1), the HoD's leadership role is crucial yet not straightforward—it changes very often and is "influenced by dynamic conditions shaping higher education". Marshall et al. (2011) buttress this assertion. They observe that, generally, "... the notions of leader, leading, leadership... are problematic in higher education because they are confounded by conceptual ambiguity" (p. 87), bringing about a situation where "... position descriptions and workload formulae are often unclear and non-specific..." (p. 88).

In most cases, HoDs are not trained leaders of the department they manage, yet their responsibilities are enormous. For instance, they plan and create long-term goals to promote teaching and learning in the department (Nguyen, 2013). They also supervise and control followers, some of whom are highly educated colleagues in the department. Furthermore, HoDs explore feasible ways of managing their departments by choosing appropriate leadership approaches that best suit their contexts (Black, 2015). They are required to evaluate the work of teachers and support staff. Again, they are supposed to recruit, select, advise, and counsel students (Nguyen, 2013). Largely, leading a department enjoins HoDs to be "effective advocates, negotiators, consensus builders, budget managers, as well as good colleagues, advisors, mentors, and communicators" (University of Louisiana, n.d., p. 1).

From the discussion, it is apparent that the position of HoDs in HE is very strategic (Creaton & Heard-Laureote, 2019), yet it appears they are under-researched. Consequently, "little is known about how these middle managers [HoDs] go about their tasks", how they satisfy the expectations of followers, and the challenges they face "despite their obviously critical position in the managerial hierarchy of universities" (Degn, 2015, p. 1180). Intending to contribute to the burgeoning literature in the field of educational leadership, this research used the specific context of Ghanaian HE to achieve three objectives: First, to unpack the nature of followers' expectations of their HoDs. Second, to explore how the followers felt about the fulfilment of their expectations by HoDs; and third, to find out from HoDs the nature of the challenges they faced in trying to meet the expectations of their followers. Based on the objectives, the research addressed the following questions:

1. What do followers expect of their HoDs within the Ghanaian HE context?
2. How do these followers feel about the fulfilment of their expectations by their HoDs?
3. What is the nature of the challenges confronting the HoDs in trying to meet the expectations of their followers?

The study assumed that leading followers meant influencing them to accomplish goals through their contributions. By influence, the leader should create an environment that meets followers' expectations to play their roles diligently to assist in realising goals. So

far, this paper has given the study background, problem, objectives, and questions. Subsequent sections will cover the leadership structure of HEIs in Ghana, the review of scholarly literature, the methodological processes informing the study, findings, and discussion. The paper will conclude with a summary of the main findings, implications, and recommendations.

## 2 Research context: the leadership structure of HEIs in Ghana

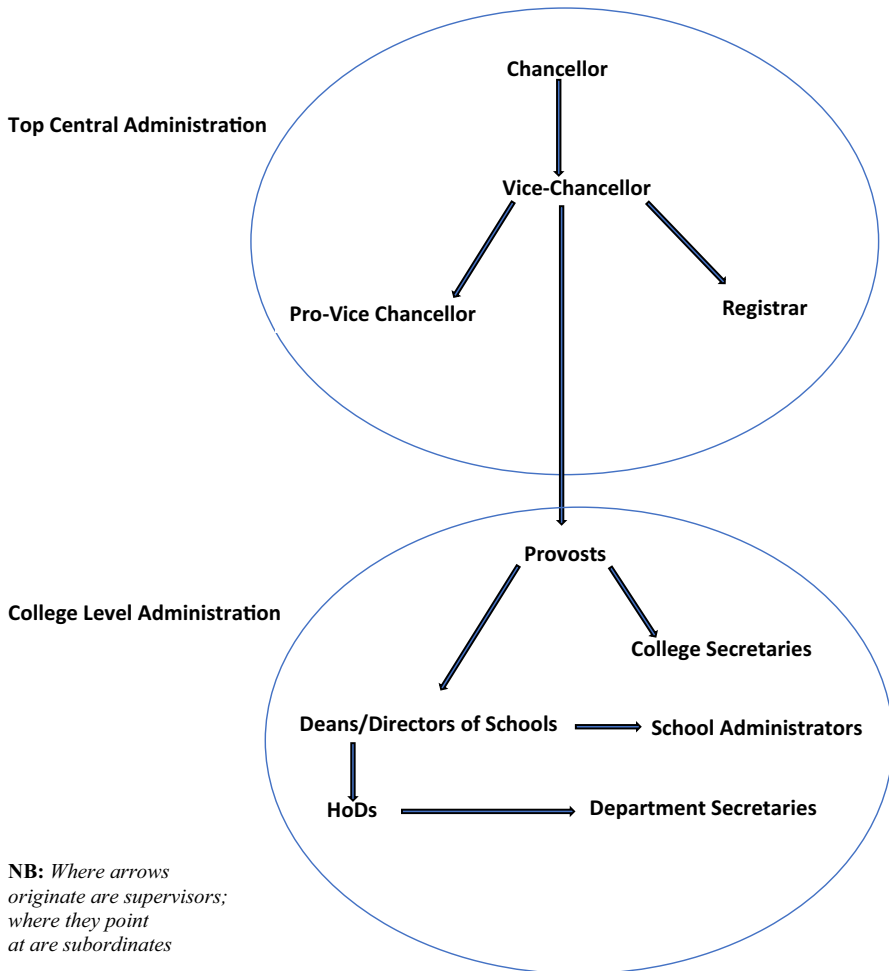
The literature has established that HEIs globally have different missions, so their leadership structures are not the same (Black, 2015; Devies & Guthrie, 2022). This situation manifests in the context of Ghana because the country's HEIs are managed according to two leadership structures—the collegiate system and the non-collegiate system. While the HEIs practising the collegiate system have one central administration and several constituent colleges, those running the non-collegiate system have one central administration with no provision for constituent colleges.

It appears the collegiate system has a more decentralised leadership structure and gives more opportunity for distributed leadership because of the delegated authority given to provosts who manage colleges to make management decisions in line with university-wide policies. That notwithstanding, the two HE leadership structures have a comparable hierarchy (see Figs. 1 and 2). At the very top, both leadership structures have vice chancellors (VCs) who centrally manage the institutions. The VCs are assisted by pro-vice chancellors (Pro-VCs) and registrars. Although in terms of hierarchy, the VCs in both structures are under chancellors, the relationship is only ceremonial, and the former are directly answerable to governing councils. At the down level, both leadership structures have HoDs performing their role as middle leaders who implement policies and programmes decided at the top to directly affect the three categories of followers (i.e. teachers, support staff, and students). The responsibilities of HoDs are many and similar across Ghanaian HEIs. The main ones extracted from the University of Ghana's (2016) handbook for heads of departments include:

- i. Provide leadership, maintain and promote efficiency and good order in the department in accordance with the policies and procedures of the university.
- ii. Provide physical facilities and equipment for the promotion of teaching and learning in the department.
- iii. Organise approved teaching and research programmes and promote research among faculty in the department.
- iv. Maintain acceptable standards of teaching and any other academic work.

## 3 What does it mean to lead as HoD in HE?

While leadership is widely accepted to play an important role in institutional management, what it means and how it works in HE has been a highly contested issue among scholars in recent years (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017). According to Black (2015), there is no consensus on the precise definition of leadership, and the term, together with its derivatives “lead”

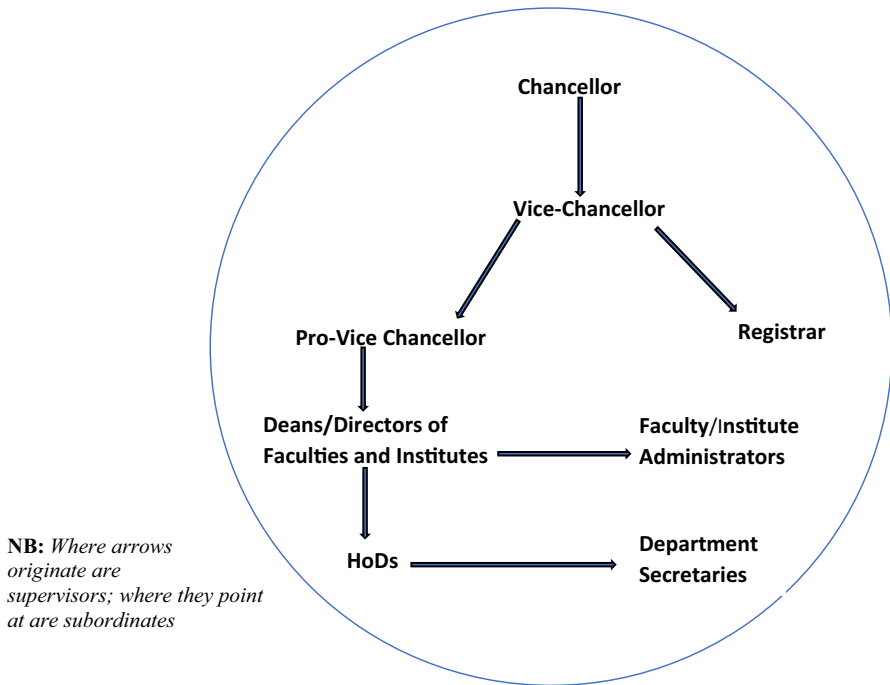


**Fig. 1** The collegiate leadership structure of Ghanaian HEIs

or “leader” or “leading”, is nebulous and defies a specific explanation. Alonderiene and Majauskaite (2016) argue that the definitional difficulties of leadership are because of its multidimensionality.

Despite the definitional issue surrounding leadership, a substantial part of the literature defines it as a social process whereby a person in authority influences the goal-directed behaviour of followers to achieve a common institutional goal (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017). However, it appears this definition makes no clear distinction between the positive and negative aspects of leadership. It is necessary to highlight the negative aspect of leadership exhibited by destructive leaders because of consequences such as causing anger and bitterness in followers (Bryman, 2007; Einarsen et al., 2007), leading to low morale and motivation for hard work (Salifu & Odame, 2022). This situation could jeopardise HoDs’ desire to meet the expectations of their followers.

Followers’ expectations of their leaders vary, depending on factors such as age, gender, and status in the institution (e.g. teacher, support staff, or student) (Abujaber, 2018).



**Fig. 2** The non-collegiate leadership structure of Ghanaian HEIs

However, the most common ones include accessible leadership, respectful treatment, appreciation, opportunities for personal development, and the supply of the right tools for performing tasks (Abujaber, 2018; Drewniak et al., 2020; Simons et al., 2015). Meeting followers’ expectations is crucial for many reasons, including promoting cordial relationships and cooperation within the department necessary for achieving leadership vision and mission (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016; Creaton & Heard-Laureote, 2019).

#### 4 Challenges facing leadership of HoDs in HE

It is necessary to feature this section on the challenges confronting the leadership of HoDs in HE because of their crucial role in the institutional success (see the third paragraph of the Introduction section). Yet, the complex and demanding nature of their job means that it is a daunting task to perform in that middle leadership position. Creaton and Heard-Laureote (2019) asserted that the most strenuous aspect of the HoD’s work is leading people because human beings have different personalities resulting in differences in their aspirations and goals. Hemsall’s (2014) research, however, found funding and policy issues as critical challenges facing HE leaders, including HoDs. For his part, Drew (2010) observed that failure to maintain academic quality and poor management of physical facilities are fundamental setbacks to HoDs. Nguyen (2013) also noted that HoDs’ low level of autonomy sometimes makes it impossible for them to make certain crucial decisions, such as recruiting and selecting qualified applicants to fill vacancies to make their leadership

more effective. Even where they could do so, they have to follow bureaucratic processes to implement the decisions, often resulting in delays in making them. From Marshall et al.'s (2011) estimation, the difficulties HoD face as middle leaders are more than a person can imagine, including:

1. how to envision the future while creating an enabling environment for realising it
2. how to manage heavy workloads, poor subordinate appraisal practices, inadequate resources, and inappropriate administrative structures
3. how to cope with non-cooperative staff and students who should have been helping to develop an effective environment for instructional delivery.

## 5 Theoretical framework: the leadership competency theory

The present study is grounded in the leadership competency theory (LCT) (Chow et al., 2017). In the literature, leadership competency (LC) has also been referred to as leadership competence or leadership skills (Chow et al., 2017). LC is explained as the hidden qualities of a leader that manifest in the body of knowledge the person uses to achieve desirable results through followers (Chow et al., 2017). Sutton and Watson (2013) define LC simply as performance ability of leaders.

The relevance of LCT to this study on HoDs' leadership lies in its focus on leaders' ability to use knowledge and skills to perform in organisations. In Gigliotti and Ruben's (2017) opinion, "outstanding leaders (should) possess knowledge of leadership and demonstrate an ability to translate this knowledge into practice, thereby advancing their knowledge and the effectiveness of their skills" (p. 100). This assertion justifies assessing the performance of HoDs as HE middle leaders based on their use of knowledge and skills to meet the expectations of their followers.

A distinctive principle of LCT is the emphasis on the competency approach to leadership, which requires flexibility and realignment to "strategies, goals, capabilities, and values of the organizations, so as to contribute towards optimal effectiveness" (Chow et al., 2017, p. 151). It also requires an integration of vertical and horizontal competencies in the performance of leadership roles. While vertical competency connotes the knowledge and skills unique to a specific discipline or industrial field, horizontal competency suggests cross-cutting leadership competencies exhibited in a variety of settings (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017), including the HoD position in HEIs.

Leading according to the principles of LCT requires HoDs to surmount complex institutional challenges using personal traits such as self-awareness, self-efficacy, integrity, vision, emotional intelligence, resilience, and tolerance. These traits are necessary to enable the HoDs to achieve their broad leadership goals, which include meeting followers' expectations (Chow et al., 2017; Quintana et al., 2014). As a framework, LCT is multi-faceted given that it blends all the ideas of the different categories of leadership theories, such as behavioural, charismatic, situational, power and influence, trait, and transformational, to make a case for an all-embracing leadership construct (Abelli, 2016). Current leadership competency theorists such as Chow et al. (2017), Sutton and Watson (2013), and Quintana et al. (2014) posit that the concept of leadership competency will dominate leadership performance in the twenty-first century because of its emphasis on not just leading but using multiple leadership theories to meet the expectations of followers.

Up to this point, the paper has discussed extant literature pertinent to the present study on followers' expectations of HoDs and how the latter fulfilled them in the face of challenges. The review is in two parts. The first part examines the empirical literature, covering scholarly views on the dynamics of the leadership position of the HoD in HE, the importance of HoDs meeting followers' expectations, and the challenges hampering HoDs' desire to satisfy their followers. The second part of the review exercise explains LCT and its aptness for the study. Overall, the literature reveals that the challenges facing the leadership of HoDs are multi-faceted, ranging from institutional bottlenecks to personal destructive leadership traits. However, HoDs must live up to the expectations of their followers for many reasons, the most important of which is the promotion of healthy relationships needed for achieving leadership vision and mission. The section to continue is the study methods.

## 6 Methods

### 6.1 Approach and design

The study employed a qualitative research approach and specifically utilised the realistic phenomenological design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Hayes et al., 2013) to explore followers' experiences of the leadership of HoDs and the HoDs' experiences of managing their challenges. I chose the design because it allows researchers to interact with participants to understand and interpret how they uniquely or commonly experience a phenomenon (Hayes et al., 2013).

### 6.2 Participant selection

Three selection techniques guided the selection of the participants. The first technique was the modal purposive (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), which guided the choice of three HEIs because they were the largest in terms of student and staff population. The second technique was the opportunistic (accidental) method, which enabled the selection of any qualified participant available and willing to participate in the research but on a first-come, first-served basis (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995). To implement this second technique, I initially obtained permission from the registrars of each of the three selected institutions and, subsequently, placed details of the research, including my email address, on the bulletin boards of the institutions inviting volunteers. The request yielded over 200 responses from potentially qualified participants across the institutions. However, given that I did not need all in the study, I used the non-proportional quota method as a third technique to select a uniform number of 12 volunteers. The volunteers comprised three HoDs, three teachers, three support staff, and three students from each of the three institutions, bringing the total to 36 participants. Of the number, 18 were females, 18 were males, and all were between 30 and 56 years of age. Whereas the HoDs' experiences in the leadership position were between two and three years, the others had experienced their leadership between one and three years. The selection was on the basis that, together, the views of the participants would provide insights into perspectives held by people in various subordinate roles of teachers, support staff, and students.

### 6.3 Tool and data collection

I self-collected data using a one-on-one (individual) interview schedule as a tool because I intended to give participants, especially followers, an opportunity to express themselves more freely without fear of victimisation. The self-created tool had two sections. The first section posed eight preliminary questions based on which I probed further issues. The questions were on the experiences of teachers, support staff, and students considered in this research as followers of HoDs. The second section had nine preliminary questions, which also guided me to ask other relevant questions. The questions examined the challenging experiences of HoDs in the performance of their role as middle leaders. The questions in both sections were semi-structured and open-ended (see appendix), and I designed them according to the literature on the responsibilities of HoDs (see Black, 2015; Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017; Nguyen, 2013; the University of Ghana, 2016; the University of Louisiana, n.d.) and the challenges facing their leadership (see Creaton & Heard-Laureote, 2019; Drew, 2010; Hemsall, 2014; Marshall et al., 2011). The interviews were in-depth, lasting approximately 35 min via zoom to ensure safety protocols occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic. I received permission from each interviewee and therefore audio-recorded all the interviews. The entire data collection exercise took 46 days to complete.

### 6.4 Analysis

Once data collection was complete, I transcribed the data verbatim, and I analysed them inductively based on the technique of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to gain insights into the views of the participants regarding the phenomenon I was researching and to explore the meanings varied experiences held for them (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). The analysis involved reading the transcripts initially several times to decide on a coding scheme, after which I explored patterns of concepts and their relationships. I continued the exploration until I found no new information, thus allowing me to put codes into categories and, finally, under two emergent themes, viz., the concerns of followers and the leadership frustrations of HoDs. Under the first theme, the codes generated were “supportive work environment” and “supportive learning environment”. Under the second theme, codes found were “bureaucracy”, “physical facility deficit and inadequate resource allocation”, and “misconduct of followers”. These phrases (codes) were the result of perceptible meanings from the data and became my variable units of analysis (Hayes et al., 2013).

### 6.5 Ethical considerations

Before the research began, I obtained ethical clearance from the universities’ ethical boards for humanities, including permission to research from their registrars. I ensured participants voluntarily read and signed consent forms before taking part in the study. I further created an opportunity for the participants to withdraw from the research at any stage. I also concealed their identities by using anonymous quotes to substantiate the themes. To ensure rigour, I reflected and took the outsider position before the start of the research. My outsider position meant that I should see myself as a non-member of the group I was studying (Creswell, 2013), the awareness of which guided me not

to do anything that may influence the participants. For example, during the interviews, I avoided asking leading questions and pre-empting them. At the data analysis stage, I detached myself from the data, making me do the analysis entirely from the participants' perspectives. This effort, in a way, helped to minimise bias. Furthermore, I conducted an audit trail to ensure that all the research processes were transparent. To also satisfy member checking requirement, I provided the participants with their transcripts to certify as a true reflection of their views before drafting the research report, and when it was ready, I gave it to two colleagues to debrief (Bordia & Crossman, 2021; Johnson et al., 2020). Their constructive feedback guided the revision of the final report and its subsequent submission for publication.

## 7 Findings

The fieldwork generated varied data about followers' expectations of their HoDs and whether the expectations were met within a Ghanaian HE context. It also evinced the challenges confronting the HoDs as middle leaders. The two main themes that emerged from the data are the concerns of followers and the leadership frustrations of HoDs. Whereas the first main theme had two sub-themes, the second had three sub-themes. The presentation in this section will be done according to the themes, focusing initially on the issues raised by followers and continuing with what the HoDs claimed were their leadership hurdles.

### 7.1 The concerns of followers

This theme refers to the opinions expressed by the three categories of followers about their expectations of HoDs. The data show that whereas the subordinate staff (i.e. teachers and support staff) expected a more supportive work environment, the students anticipated a more enabling and promising learning environment from their HoDs. Supportive work environment and supportive learning environment will thus be the sub-themes to examine under this major theme.

#### 7.1.1 Supportive work environment

A supportive work environment motivates followers to play their roles diligently to assist leaders with their goals. It is used in this research as a generic referring to the aspects of the results connoting opportunity for career development, provision of equipment and physical space, and leader accessibility, and respect for followers.

Beginning with the opportunity for career development, the results show that the subordinate staff expected support from their HoDs to update their knowledge and skills in their occupations. In their view, doing so would enable them to perform more effectively in their assigned roles and boost their chances of getting promotions. They were, however, disappointed that their HoDs did not do much to facilitate their acquisition of study leave to further their education or attend short refresher courses such as workshops, seminars, and conferences in their specialised areas. Three teachers separately represented their sentiments as follows:

I expect my HoD to be able to organise writing workshops that would enable faculty to acquire more knowledge and skills for research and publication.

... the HoD should facilitate the acquisition of research grants by faculty to work as a team so that early career teachers could learn from their experienced colleagues.  
 ... the HoD may have to assist teachers to acquire funds for attending research conferences.

On a similar note, a department secretary also indicated her expectation this way:

I wish I were supported by the HoD to further my education to acquire more knowledge in my secretarial work. This way, I will be able to effectively and wholeheartedly deliver my duties diligently.

Two teachers separately blamed the lack of support for career advancement on two factors as expressed in the following excerpts:

... HoDs' low level of interest in faculty welfare leading to inadequate budgetary allocation for important activities that would lead to career development.

Many senior faculty are overwhelmed with administrative responsibilities and other personal development activities such as research and consultation. They thus, appear to devote no time for early-career faculty because they don't see that to bring any incentive.

To address the concern about career development, a department secretary suggested that HoDs should make the welfare of staff one of their priorities when making budgetary allocations.

The next issue under the supportive work environment the subordinate staff expressed concern about was the adequate supply of equipment for work, and the provision of quality physical space for office accommodation. For example, a teacher wished that his HoD "... made available enough instructional resources such as personal computers, projectors, and reliable internet connectivity". As the following quote demonstrates, another teacher said he preferred a convenient office space:

I would've commended my HoD if he were able to solve the enormous challenge teachers face in sharing office accommodation. This issue doesn't make me feel that someone is leading me...Putting three teachers in a small space because of limited office accommodation is troubling because they distract one another during online teachings that involve speaking. It is even worse when one gets a visitor, and both have to engage in conversation in the office.

Apart from the teachers, the department secretaries among the support staff also wished that their HoDs furnish their offices with "enough computers, desks, cabinets to keep staff and students' files" to make them more effective in performing their duties.

The last two issues under the supportive work environment which the subordinate staff noted were leader accessibility and respect for followers. Firstly, they were concerned that they did not have an opportunity to discuss their work-related challenges with their HoDs. They thus preferred "... a leader who would always open his door to colleague teachers to interact with him freely about duty-related challenges without the fear that out of frustration he could be angry". Secondly, they were also bothered that the HoDs did not treat them with respect. They, however, wished to be: "respected and communicated to in a manner that befits the status of an adult". Suggesting a way forward, some participants advised that HoDs should be retrained through:

... refresher courses to update their competence on cutting-edge human resource management practices that relate to how to maintain cordial relationships with fol-

lowers...because to succeed, HoDs need the support and cooperation of those they're leading.

### 7.1.2 Supportive learning environment

This second sub-theme under the major theme "Concerns of followers" refers to HoDs creating suitable conditions that ensure students achieve their academic goals through challenging and motivating learning experiences. The data indicate that the student participants wished their learning environment allowed "... periodic meetings with the HoD to discuss issues affecting student academic work..." The students also thought it was crucial to "... equip our lecture rooms with reliable internet facility and enough furniture..."

Interestingly, doctoral students wanted to see their HoDs allocate adequate office accommodations to teachers so that their thesis supervisors would not share office spaces because "... the presence of another person in my supervisor's office doesn't make me comfortable to discuss freely issues about my thesis work". Still, on postgraduate thesis supervision, the students did not appear impressed with the quality of work of supervisors. One student said: "... doctoral supervision is very poor in my department. ... There are no mechanisms to hold supervisors accountable in the form of submitting a progress report on thesis supervision". Another student lamented that:

There's currently a disagreement among my three supervisors, and it's all because my principal supervisor doesn't have the expertise in the complex statistical model that I'm using, yet he wouldn't allow his co-supervisors to guide my work at this stage that I'm analysing my data. I believe this is because he thinks he's a full professor, and they (the other supervisors) are lecturers. The situation is slowing down my academic progress.

When I asked what he did to resolve the impasse, he continued his explanation this way:

I initially wrote to my HoD to change my lead supervisor, and I gave reasons for my decision. Although, I proposed a new lead supervisor and followed up personally to talk to her (the HoD) about six weeks ago, up to now, she hasn't resolved my issue. Is that how a leader should lead?

In addition to the earlier concerns, the students further wished they were better protected against those they perceived to use superior powers to abuse them:

...many of my colleague female students complain of being sexually harassed by teachers who unprofessionally solicit from them sex in return for high grades. I expect my HoD to take up the matter and assist the victims to report the incident to the Anti-sexual Harassment Committee of the university, but he [the HoD] shields the perpetrators, perhaps because he doesn't want to betray his colleagues. ... to lead properly, a leader should be for all, including those who are vulnerable!

## 7.2 The leadership frustrations of HoDs

This theme denotes the claims the HoDs cited as hurdles confronting them as middle-level leaders in the leadership structure of HEIs in Ghana (see Figs. 1 and 2). As indicated earlier, the HoDs have been referred to as middle leaders in this research because they implement policies and programmes decided by those at the top of the leadership structure and deal directly with the three categories of followers. Their frustrations have been

sub-thematised as bureaucracy, physical facility deficit and inadequate material resource allocation, and misconduct of followers.

### 7.2.1 Bureaucracy

One of the sources of leadership frustrations that HoDs in the present study expressed concern about was bureaucracy. As used in this paper, it refers to the overly complex administrative procedures and protocols in the Ghanaian HE sector resulting in what one of the HoDs described as "... notoriously long procurement processes and delays in the release of funds for the management of departments". Lamenting his situation, another HoD said: "I'm often distressed about the never-ending procurement challenges because of the untimely release of money from the central administration of the university to executive projects that have timelines". Another HoD also explained the effects of procurement delays on his work in the following manner:

The procurement process in this institution moves too slow and goes through many stages, beginning from bidding ... this can be frustrating and tiring ... because of procurement delays I'm unable to timely provide instructional materials such as toner cartridges and markers every semester. I've been receiving many complaints from academic staff about faulty projectors. The request I made for projectors for more than a year ago is still in the procurement queue.

### 7.2.2 Physical facility deficit and inadequate material resource allocation

Insufficient supply of physical facilities and equipment from central administration to support teaching and learning were two related issues that also frustrated the leadership of the HoDs. Concerning physical facilities, one of the leaders claimed "... the provision of office space to both teachers and support staff is my biggest challenge now. Many of the complaints I get are about the difficulty of sharing office space". Another HoD was also concerned about inadequate lecture rooms:

We would have split large classes into smaller groups if we had enough classrooms. Students approach me most of the time to complain about congestions in the classrooms. I report the issue to the top but nothing happens ...

When I asked if he encouraged his teachers to switch to the virtual approach, he responded that "Yes, I've done so but because of poor internet connectivity in the university, we can't say that's a reliable alternative".

Closely linked to physical facility issues was the challenge of making available enough equipment for instructional delivery. A participant explained his hurdle as follows:

... because the department doesn't have enough projectors, many teachers use their projectors for teaching or wait for their colleagues to finish lectures to take over the material. I've also been getting several complaints from teachers and students about inadequate computers in the library ... my inability to resolve these challenges makes some of them feel that I'm not doing enough to address their concerns.

Having heard this from him, I probed further about the action he took to address the challenge, his reply suggested despair:

I keep following up with the material allocation section of the central administration to ensure that my request for additional laptops and projectors stay on their minds but so far, no positive outcome and I feel like giving up

### 7.2.3 Misconduct of followers

The last leadership challenge the HoDs shared during the interviews was about the misconduct of some teachers and students. For instance, one HoD was frustrated because "... some teachers are notorious for releasing student results late, sometimes denying final year students the opportunity to graduate on time". Another participant expressed a similar concern alleging that "... some faculty suggest good ideas. However, when it comes to helping me implement them [the ideas], they drag their feet, making me feel they're traitors". A third participant was instead bothered about the behaviour of non-conforming students claiming that:

...I often get complaints from teachers about their [students'] distractive behaviour during lectures—they're either talking or receiving phone calls while their teacher is explaining a point or intentionally dress provocatively and attend classes late to attract attention. I've had cause to speak to such undisciplined students on several occasions, but they can't be reformed. They're too difficult to handle. ... they behave as if they were forced to come to the university to learn.

A follow-up question about whether he sought the opinion of other leaders on what to do since his effort did not appear successful elicited the response that "... I consult with more experienced colleagues who have been in the position longer than me or have already served and are now former HoDs about what to do, but it appears my remedial measure is common with them too".

## 8 Discussion

This research investigated followers' expectations of their HoDs and how they felt about the fulfilment of the expectations within the context of Ghanaian HE. It further explored the nature of the frustrations the HoDs encountered in trying to meet followers' expectations.

The first part of the findings covers the expectations and their fulfilment and generally conveys a sense of disappointment. While the teachers and support staff expected a work environment that ensured accessible and respectful leadership, as well as improvements in career development opportunities and provision of equipment and office accommodation, the students awaited a learning environment that guaranteed improvements in doctoral thesis supervision and the number and quality of physical facilities and equipment such as classrooms, furniture, computers, projectors, and reliable internet supply. Again, the students wished for more protection against teachers who sexually abused their vulnerable colleagues and an opportunity for occasional encounters with HoDs to discuss academic issues. The students also expressed worry about sexual abuse.

The findings corroborate earlier research results by Abujaber (2018), Drewniak et al. (2020), and Simons et al. (2015) that most followers expect from leaders accessible and respectful leadership, appropriate tools to perform tasks, and opportunities for personal development. Generally, the findings reinforce the claim in the mainstream literature that the HoD position in HE may be prestigious yet intricate and demanding. In particular, the

findings suggest that the responsibilities of HoDs in the Ghanaian HE sector are many and varied but not very different from what pertains to global HE. For instance, Black (2015) and Nguyen (2013) noted that globally, the dominant responsibilities of HoDs include the creation of long-term goals and plans and supervising staff duties and student learning. The findings in the present study give further credence to the assertion that leading people is by far the most challenging aspect of the HoD's work because followers have varied personalities resulting in differences in their aspirations, needs, and goals, but the HoD is expected to meet every demand (Creaton & Heard-Laureote, 2019).

Based on LCT, one may argue that the arduous and enormous leadership responsibility on the HoD requires competence, which Gigliotti and Ruben (2017) explain as the ability to effectively use conceptual understanding (knowledge) and skills to achieve organisational goals. A competent leader is a person who addresses complex issues using personal traits such as self-awareness, self-efficacy, integrity, and tolerance (Quintana et al., 2014). Since this research uncovered that followers of the HoDs were concerned about unresolved issues relating to sexual abuse, disrespect, inaccessibility, and other examples of ineptitude, perhaps calls into question the HoDs' competence and providing evidence to interrogate their qualifications for their position. This development is not very surprising because evidence abounds that HoDs in Ghanaian HE, like their counterparts in many other parts of the world, are not trained as leaders. In most cases, they lack previous leadership or managerial experience, yet they have to supervise and control highly educated colleagues, support staff, and students (Sutton & Watson, 2013). Based on the ideals of LCT, HoDs in Ghanaian HE may benefit from competency-based training to be able to build consensus and be reliable advisors, mentors, and leaders who treat followers with dignity. HoDs' periodic meetings with followers to discuss their issues could be a necessary step towards building consensus and fostering closer collaboration to inspire a shared vision that leads to effective management (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Again, treating followers with respect may make HoDs responsive to their needs, including safeguarding their emotional, physical, and mental well-being and human rights (Branson et al., 2016; Marshall et al., 2011).

Aside from the first part of the findings, the second part reveals that the challenges faced by the HoDs in trying to meet the expectations of their followers emanated from the ethos of the Ghanaian HE sector. Prominent among them was the bureaucratic culture, which was characterised by overly complicated administrative procedures and protocols often prolonging procurement processes and causing delays in the release of funds for the management of departments. According to the leaders, the situation had a rippling effect on the timely completion of important projects causing staff and student agitations. The participants equally expressed worry about the insufficient supply of physical facilities and equipment such as lecture rooms, internet connectivity, projectors, and computers from central administration to support teaching and learning. Again, the leaders lamented the misconduct of followers, such as teachers delaying the release of results and the distractive behaviour of students during lectures.

The connection between the findings is worth noting. The subordinate staff felt disappointed because they expected a more supportive working environment that allowed respectful leadership, improvement in career development opportunities, and provision of equipment and office accommodation. The students were also disappointed because they expected a learning environment that ensured protection against power abuse, periodic meetings with HoDs, and improvements in doctoral thesis supervision and physical facilities and equipment such as classrooms, furniture, computers, projectors, and internet supply. However, the HoDs were constrained to do much to meet the followers' expectations because of the ethos of the Ghanaian HE sector, such as administrative bureaucracies,

physical facility deficit, inadequate resource allocation, and the misconduct of some followers.

As may be observed, although the HoDs occupied a key position in the leadership structure of Ghanaian HE, they were frustrated by limited autonomy, so they could not effectively influence the strategic direction of their institutions. The findings demonstrate the extent to which institutional systems can contribute to the frustrations of middle leaders, and in many cases, lead to conflicts with followers who expect from them more competent leadership. It appears the difficulties encountered by the HoDs are more of a ubiquitous phenomenon than a rare occurrence in Ghana. For example, Drew's (2010) research uncovered that, in Australia, the maintenance of academic quality and management of physical facilities made it difficult for heads to lead their departments effectively. Again, Nguyen's (2013) study also found that in Vietnam, HoDs' low level of autonomy made it difficult for them to make certain crucial decisions, such as the hiring of staff to fill vacancies to make their leadership more effective. According to Nguyen, the bureaucratic processes HoDs followed to implement important decisions often resulted in delays in making them. Again, Degn (2015, p. 1182) reported that in Denmark, "department heads experience changing and ambiguous conditions and expectations ...often triggering a need to make (new) sense of who they are, and how things are done within their organization". Despite their challenges, my understanding of LCT gives the conviction that HoDs have the potential to be competent leaders with the capacity to engender transformation in their institutions.

## 9 Conclusion

This research investigated followers' expectations of their HoDs and how they felt about the fulfilment of the expectations within the context of Ghanaian HE. It further explored the nature of the challenges the HoDs faced as they tried to meet followers' expectations. The findings show that the subordinate staff felt disappointed because they expected a more supportive working environment. Likewise, the students were disappointed because they expected a more conducive and safe learning environment. However, the HoDs were constrained to do much to meet their followers' expectations because of the ethos of the Ghanaian HE sector (see the penultimate paragraph of the discussion section).

The major limitation of the present study is its failure to analyse the findings according to the demographic characteristics of participants. Meanwhile, the literature has established that factors such as age, gender, and status in an institution could influence followers' expectations of their leaders (see the last paragraph of the section: What does it mean to lead as HoD in HE?). Further research is, therefore, necessary to compare how the varied experiences of the three categories of followers shape their expectations of HoDs.

Despite the limitation, the principal contribution of the present study to the body of knowledge in the field of educational leadership is its novel utilisation of LCT to discuss some aspects of the findings. Policy and practice-wise, the present study confirms that HoDs play a crucial role as middle leaders in HE and highlights the need for those at the top hierarchy of the leadership structure to support them so that they may be able to influence the strategic direction of their institutions. Given the intricate nature of the HoD position, locally, the findings draw attention to the need for a transformation of the ethos of the Ghanaian HE sector to make HoDs more responsive to the expectations of their followers. On the international front, the findings invite global discussions on making appointments to the position of HoD based on professional leadership training and proven

previous leadership or managerial experience rather than seniority and academic achievements. Arguably, training should make HoDs more competent and effective leaders capable of leading innovations, building consensus, and seeing themselves as good colleagues, advisors, mentors, and above all, leader-servants.

## Appendix

### Interviews with lecturers, supporting staff (secretaries, Drivers, SECURITY personnel, cleaners, etc.) and students in Ghanaian higher education institutions

**Preamble:** Leaders, they say, are servants of the people they lead. This research is conducted to find out your experiences as a subordinate under your HoD who should be serving you. By participating in this research, you are assured of absolute confidentiality and the information you provide shall be used only for this research.

1. Please, may I know the gender you prefer for yourself?
2. How old are you at the moment?
3. What is your current status in this institution? Teacher, driver or student, etc.?
4. May I know how long you have been under the leadership of your current HoD?
5. Considering your status as you've just mentioned, could you explain what your wishes are? In other words, what do you think the department should be doing for you to achieve your aspirations?
6. Would you say the department has lived to all the expectations you've just stated? If no, which of the expectations hasn't the department been able to meet?
7. What do you think is/are the cause(s) of your disappointment?
8. What do you suggest the department should do/be doing to address your concerns?

### Interviews with heads of department (HoDs) in Ghanaian higher education institutions (HEIs)

**Preamble:** The position of heads of department as middle leaders in Ghanaian higher education is very strategic yet complex and challenging given the diverse nature of followers heads lead and whose interests they have to satisfy. Your participation in this research is to assist with information regarding the issues thwarting your effort at serving your followers or subordinates. By participating in this research, you are assured of absolute confidentiality and the information you provide shall be used only for this research.

1. Please, may I know the gender you prefer for yourself?
2. How old are you at the moment?
3. May I know how long you have been serving in the current position?
4. How did you feel when you first received the information that you've been appointed as HoD?

5. Do you have any regrets for accepting to perform in this role of HoD? If yes, why so? If no, why not?
6. Could you tell me the aspects of your duties you perform with ease? Why is it so?
7. Let's come to duties you perform with difficulties! Which aspects of your duties do you find challenging?
8. Since leadership is a continuum, kindly explain what you have been doing to address the difficulties confronting you.
9. How successful are you in your efforts at addressing your bothers? What would you say are the issues frustrating your success?

**Acknowledgements** The author acknowledges the immense contributions of colleagues who provided the needed feedback for an improvement of the research.

**Funding** The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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