

# Bringing clarity to the leadership of teaching and learning in higher education: a systematic review

The leadership of teaching and learning in HE

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The study aims to investigate the state of higher education (HE) leadership research after the intensified focus on teaching and learning (TL) in academia.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors clarify the use of key concepts in English-medium empirical journal articles published between 2017 and 2021 by analysing 64 publications through qualitative content analysis.

**Findings** – The analysed papers on leadership of TL in HE activate a number of concepts, the commonest concepts being academic leadership, distributed leadership, educational leadership, transformational leadership, leadership and transformative leadership. Even if the papers highlight partly overlapping aspects of leadership, the study finds a rationale for the use of several concepts in the HE context. Contrary to the expectation raised in earlier scholarship, no holistic framework evolves from within the recent research to reveal the contribution that leadership of TL makes to leadership in HE generally.

**Research limitations/implications** – Limitations: Nearly 40 per cent of the analysed articles are from the United States of America (USA), United Kingdom (UK), Australia and Canada, which leaves large areas of the world aside. Implications: The found geographical incoherence might be remediated and the research of leadership of TL in HE generally led forward by widening the cultural and situational diversity in the field.

**Originality/value** – This research contributes to an enhanced understanding of the field of leadership in TL in HE in that it frames the concepts used in recent research and makes the differences, similarities and rationale between concepts visible.

**Keywords** Academic leadership, Distributed leadership, Leadership, Educational leadership, Transformative leadership, Transformational leadership

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Leadership of teaching and learning (TL) remains an understated topic in higher education (HE). The TL sector is critically important for the success and preservation of universities due to structural changes that tie a part of funding to the number of completed study units and degrees, the quality of teaching and supervision, and the employment of graduates [1]. The increasing professionalisation and regulation of TL calls for competent leadership. While the tension between the research sector and the TL sector is well-known, leadership in HE is still often discussed and investigated without an emphasis on the characteristic questions of



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TL (Ekman *et al.*, 2017). The focus of the current study is to explore how recent research structures the leadership of TL in HE.

Two foundational studies from the Anglo-American world suggested almost 15 years ago that precisely the TL sector held keys to HE leadership. A large Australian survey report by Scott *et al.* (2008) acknowledged the factors which distinguished leadership of TL in academia from leadership of research, such as extensive collaboration with a large pool of colleagues and a close commitment to external outcomes. The authors identified the characteristic features of leading TL as critical elements to lead HE institutions in general. In the following year, Fullan and Scott (2009) similarly argued for a holistic, TL centred approach to HE leadership. When put in the centre of reforms, TL would serve as an intersecting area at universities. Leadership of TL would be the integrative factor across all sectors of changing institutions. Even though the change leadership agenda proposed by these studies remains contested, the studies raised an expectation of an intensifying focus in HE leadership on the TL sector. Since the publication of the studies, an increasing number of academics have faced informal and formal leadership roles due to the ever-cycling trend of reforms in the TL sector (Gronn, 2011; Jones *et al.*, 2012; Youngs, 2017).

The studies by Scott *et al.* (2008) and Fullan and Scott (2009) drew on strong operational knowledge of the turbulent TL sector at universities, and on the international developments of change leadership practice. Two theoretical keys have been claimed: the critical scholarship of new public management (NPM), and the distributed leadership scholarship. NPM has been aiming at reforming public administration in private sector style management since the 1970s (Hood, 1991). These ideas find expression in the HE sector in concepts like excellence, quality and efficiency (Bleiklie, 1998; Santiago and Carvalho, 2012). A number of papers has focused on processes of leadership changes related to the fact that the academic organisations today are increasingly based on market mechanisms, corporate organisational structures and principles of accountability and responsibility (Ahlbäck Öberg *et al.*, 2016; Ball, 2003; Ekman *et al.*, 2017; Teelken, 2012; Hallonsten, 2016). NPM is further displayed in universities as a tightened interplay with the ministry of education and the society. Universities are expected to respond to urgent social and economic needs by adjusting the intake rates and the substance of education they provide.

The distributed leadership approach claims to represent a solution to the general discontent with the NPM model in academia. Distributed leadership calls for a change in perspective, which would emphasise leadership as a collective activity (Davis and Jones, 2014). Gibb (1954), Heifetz and Laurie (1997), and Gronn (2000, 2002) were early advocates of such adaptive “work of leadership” instead of “a leader’s work”. In the distributed leadership approach, leadership occurs by appointed, positional academic and professional leaders, those who lead by expertise and by everyone whose action attributes influence among colleagues (Gronn, 2000; Jones *et al.*, 2012, 2014). The distributed leadership model envisions the entire community being involved in the work of leadership. However, previous studies have shown that there are several interpretations and perceptions of what the concept distributed leadership refers to and that distributed leadership is also used as a rhetorical device to label leadership as distributed when it is not (Bolden *et al.*, 2009; Gosling *et al.*, 2009). Transformational leadership offers another concept to discuss and deal with the large-scale changes in HE institutions such as merging of institutions (e.g. Chipunza and Gwarinda, 2010). Transformational leadership shares the same aim on getting the entire community involved in change with distributed leadership.

Nonetheless, the broad corpora of NPM-related and the distributed leadership approach seem to not accommodate the entire picture of leadership of TL in HE. Previous research appears to be also conceptually loose to provide clarity to the leadership research and practice. In her review, Wang (2018) revealed nearly 300 concepts that had been used to frame the educational leadership research from 2005 to 2014. However, only 20 concepts were used

more than ten times, which suggests the elusive nature of the field. In addition, there are no widely agreed definitions or interpretations of some concepts (Tian *et al.*, 2016; Bolden *et al.*, 2009). We also acknowledge that there is a myriad and intertwined understandings of concepts of leadership and management. Whereas both concepts refer to motivating people and establishing the future direction, there are also differences between the two concepts. For instance, leadership being about looking further into the future and trying to anticipate organisation’s long-term needs whereas management focuses more on shorter-term needs like developing efficient processes (Kotterman, 2006; Bertocci, 2009).

In this study we aim at bringing clarity to the leadership of TL in HE by reviewing which concepts, contexts, nature of leadership and foci recent empirical studies do address in the field.

Research questions:

RQ1. What are the key concepts that anchor recent empirical studies of TL in HE to leadership research?

RQ2. What is the context for the concepts, the nature of leadership and the foci of investigations in the selected studies?

This paper is structured as follows. Sections two and three provide a presentation of methods and how the data analysis was conducted. Section four presents the results. The paper ends with discussion and implications.

## 2. Methods

We adopted a twofold method for this study; first we conducted a systematic literature review on scholarly articles relating to leadership in TL in a HE context, published between 2017 and 2021. We followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines [2] as we conducted the literature review (Figure 1). The search was limited to five years to keep the size of the data reasonable, while maintaining a large and meaningful data pool for our analysis. To identify potential articles, we conducted a search in the following databases: Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCO Academic search complete and Eric. We used the following 16 key words in combination with the key word *higher education*: *pedagogical leadership*, *educational leadership*, *pedagogical management*,

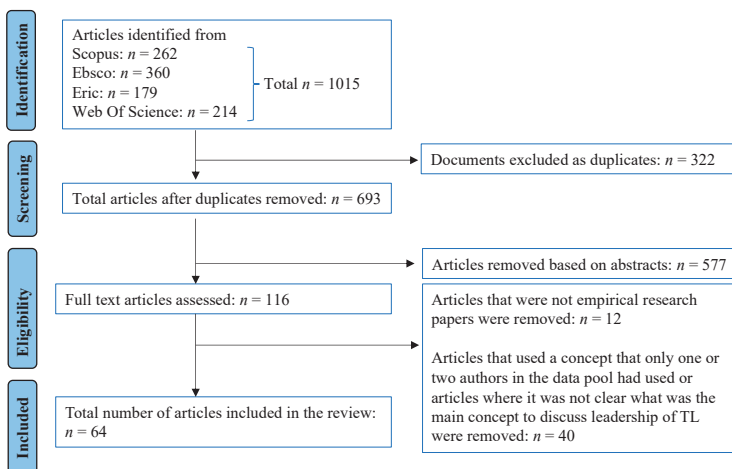


Figure 1. Overview of the search based on PRISMA guidelines

*leadership as pedagogy, leadership of TL, teacher leadership, distributed leadership, transformational leadership, transformative leadership, learning centred leadership, academic leadership, leadership management, pedagogical development, pedagogical support and curriculum leadership.*

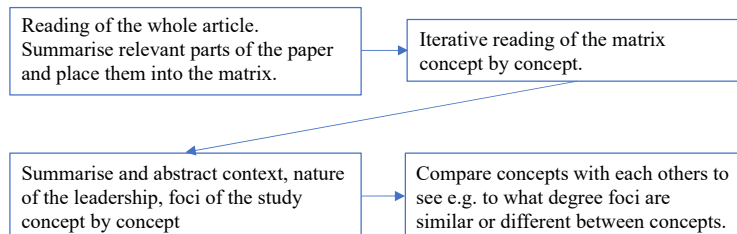
We included articles based on the following criteria: the article (1) had one or more of the previously listed key words in the main text, (2) had been peer reviewed and published in a scholarly journal, (3) was in English, (4) was published during 2017–2021 and (5) was accessible in full. After removing duplicates, we had 693 journal articles in our initial data pool.

The second screening of the papers addressed the abstracts. We included papers in which the abstracts had a focus on the leadership of TL in HE. Hereafter, our sample of articles consisted of 116 full-length articles. The third screening limited the data pool to empirical research papers. At this final screening phase, we also excluded papers that used concepts which no other author used in the data pool to ensure that we were able to do our analysis based on several articles. Some authors used several concepts. We included these multi-concept papers when one of the used concepts was clearly the main concept in the study. The main concept had to be found in the title, in the abstract or as a keyword as well as in the text. The final data pool consisted of 64 articles.

We continued analysing the 64 papers using a combination of a qualitative content analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994) and the Matrix Method (Goldman and Schmaltz, 2004). We conducted a qualitative content analysis to identify the concepts in each paper as well as how authors defined and used the key concepts. We then identified the following aspects: the research context, the nature of leadership discussed in the paper and the foci of the study. We used the Matrix Method to organise and abstract the data extracted from each article. See Table 1 and Figure 2 for an example of how we extracted and summarised the essence of the

Reference	Sundberg <i>et al.</i> (2017)
Concept	Educational leadership
How do the authors define the concept	Leadership is, e.g. the ability to cope with change within an organisation, setting a direction, motivating and inspiring. Features of educational leadership include independence and ability to lead change
Research context	Leading change (transition from a traditional preclinical/clinical curriculum to an integrated, thematic curriculum) in medical education
The nature of leadership	Teachers with educational leadership responsibilities within the programme (line level educational leadership) and on an overarching program level (mid-level educational leadership)
Foci of the study	How to lead change. How educational leaders influence the development of undergraduate medical curricula and the resistance they encounter related to this activity

**Table 1.**  
An example of data analysis matrix



**Figure 2.**  
The phases of the content analysis using the matrix

aspects we listed above. The matrix method enabled us to review literature systematically and create a system for designing structure to a large quantity of information. Iterative reading of each row in the matrix concept by concept revealed emerging similarities and differences between concepts. All authors were involved in reading and the interpreting of the texts to avoid an investigator bias and to enhance quality and trustworthiness of the results (Chowdhury, 2015).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Concepts and their frequencies

The first research question investigated the key concepts that anchor the studies in the data pool to leadership research. The results show that the most often-used concepts are academic leadership, distributed leadership, educational leadership, transformational leadership, leadership and transformative leadership (Table 2).

#### 3.2 The use of concepts

The second research question investigated the context for the concepts, the nature of leadership and the foci of investigations in the selected studies. The results are presented below concept by concept. It is good to observe that nearly 40% of the 64 articles came from the United States of America (USA), United Kingdom (UK), Australia and Canada.

**3.2.1 Academic leadership.** *Definition included in the data pool:* “Academic leadership is referred to as “the act of building a community of scholars to set direction and achieve common purposes through the empowerment of faculty and staff” (Wolverton and Gmelch, 2002, p. 35 in Jooste *et al.*, 2018, p. 693).

*Context:* Authors using the concept of academic leadership refer to leadership that not only covers the context of TL but also other academic domains such as research. When conceptualising “academic leadership”, researchers emphasise positive change (Acker and Millerson, 2018; Radwan *et al.*, 2020) and leaders as inspirational and motivational forces (Karadag, 2017). Nine out of twenty papers came from the Global North societies.

*The nature of leadership:* Academic leaders are identified as deans, directors or principles, heads of departments, department chairs and principal officers. Their responsibilities are described as tangible actions including oversight of development and implementation of curriculum, and administrative matters, and as having an oversight over student life. An influential colleague without a formal position can in practice act as an academic leader (Evans, 2017; Fassinger and Good, 2017). Thus, despite the clear identification of academic positions in which leadership is materialised, the concept “academic leadership” contains the idea of informal or even “leaderless” leadership. Academic leaders focus on encouraging their co-workers as well as connecting with them (Jooste *et al.*, 2018; Naheed and Mohsin, 2018). Controlling and deciding for academic colleagues is secondary to these aims.

*Foci of studies:* The focus of academic leadership in the papers is communication within and between communities of scholars and on working together, with the aim of achieving

Concept	F	%
Academic leadership	20	31
Distributed leadership	12	19
Educational leadership	10	16
Transformational leadership	10	16
Leadership	9	14
Transformative leadership	3	5

**Table 2.** Concepts used in the articles and their frequencies

goals (Evans, 2017; Fassinger and Good, 2017; Jooste *et al.*, 2018; Mohnot, 2019). The researchers using this concept focus on matters of social justice, like gender (Acker and Millerson, 2018; Chen and Hsieh, 2019; Kuzhabekova and Almukhambetova, 2017), but also on the various aspects of what effective leadership consists of (Akuegwu and Nwi-ue, 2017; Bharwani *et al.*, 2017; Ghasemy *et al.*, 2017), challenges and needs in terms of leadership (Zhu and Zayim-Kurtay, 2018) or the effect of academic leadership competencies on student learning outcomes (Radwan *et al.*, 2020). The Covid 19-pandemic has generated studies on how the pandemic has affected academic leaders (Gigliotti, 2021). However, the major interest seems to be on the preparedness and capacity of, priorities and values for, as well as expectations on, different actors/agents when to appointed leadership roles (Acker and Millerson, 2018; Evans, 2017; Fassinger and Good, 2017; Ghasemy *et al.*, 2018; Jooste *et al.*, 2018; Karadag, 2017; Mohnot, 2019; Phillips *et al.*, 2018; Zodikoff and Pardasani, 2020) and how these actors relate to neo-liberal reforms in HE (Machovcová *et al.*, 2019). A closely related topic is Gigliotti's (2017) study on the communicative practice of academic leadership.

*3.2.2 Distributed leadership. Definition included in the data pool:* "Distributed leadership (also known as shared leadership), involves a shift of perspective from leadership residing in a person and position to one that focuses on leadership as a group process and group quality" (Beckmann, 2017, p. 156).

*Context:* In the 12 papers, the distributed leadership is conceptualised as a way of organising work in the HE sector. Distributed leadership does not suggest any substantial aim; rather, distributed leadership refers to the organisation of collective processes in a particular way (collaborative process) rather than the power of a single leader (e.g. Vuori, 2019). The Global North societies (9/12 papers) and especially Australian context (5/12 papers) is emphasised in the distributed leadership papers.

*The nature of leadership:* Distributed leadership emphasises collaborative relationships and group activities. Most distributed leadership papers are studying teams and teachers (e.g. Sales *et al.*, 2017). However, there are exceptions to the strong general interest in collective processes. For instance, Floyd and Preston's (2018) study investigates how an associate dean's role is defined and positioned in relation to the university organisation.

*Foci of studies:* We found four major foci among the 12 studies. First, two papers take a meta-level stance by suggesting paradigm change in approach to leadership (Jones and Harvey, 2017) and pointing out that distributed leadership is used in universities to deepen the neoliberal administration (Amsler and Shore, 2017). Sewerin and Holmberg (2017) also take a meta-level look at distributed leadership by connecting the phenomena of leadership to an organisational perspective. Second, the work by Harvey and Jones (2021) suggests practice action statements to enable distributed leadership. Zou *et al.* (2021) suggest that distributed leadership can help to alleviate some contradictions triggered by teaching enhancement projects. Further, Carbone *et al.* (2017) and Jones *et al.* (2017) both demonstrate how it is possible to evaluate to what degree distributed leadership was effectively built and enabled. Third, leadership roles are in focus in two papers. Cronje and Bitzer (2019) are interested in broadening organisational leadership roles towards distributed leadership whereas Floyd and Preston (2018) study how the role of a leader is defined and positioned in the organisation. Fourth, developing the competencies and capacities of distributed leaders is studied by Beckmann (2017), Carbone *et al.* (2017), and Sales *et al.* (2017).

*3.2.3 Educational leadership. Definition included in the data pool:* "Within HE, an educational leader can be viewed as someone who holds a formal leadership position in a department or faculty, and who influences academic policies, strategies, structures, management, resource allocation and decision-making (Fields *et al.*, 2019, p. 218).

*Context:* The emphasis of the ten papers seems to be on leaders of the HE sector in the context of change. In the papers, the concept of educational leadership is used especially

within medical education and within specific development cases in that field (Laksov and Tomson, 2017; Sundberg *et al.*, 2017; Wijk *et al.*, 2019). The Global North societies (7/10 papers) and especially, the Swedish context (4/10 papers) is accentuated in the educational leadership papers.

*The nature of leadership:* Educational leadership refers to leaders who work lower in the formal hierarchy and often without position-related power (Wijk *et al.*, 2019). Rather than formal leaders, educational leaders are teacher-scholars, such as programme directors, who deal with practical tasks. They handle educational change, set directions, motivate and inspire them in curriculum work, for example. Educational leaders develop fruitful interaction between leaders, co-workers and interest groups (e.g. Laksov and Tomson, 2017; Sundberg *et al.*, 2017).

*Foci of studies:* There are two major foci among the ten papers. On the one hand, three papers discuss educational leaders' personal characteristics or development, such as development of educational leaders' identity (Tupling and Outhwaite, 2017), what does it mean to be an educational leader (Laksov and Tomson, 2017), and educational leaders' competence and capacity development (Fields *et al.*, 2019; Sharma and Pandher, 2019). On the other hand, four papers discuss the experiences and challenges educational leaders face and the strategies they use in their work. The work by Alenezi (2017) identify leadership styles and Frisk *et al.* (2021) study educational leaders' experiences and practices whereas others focused on how to lead change and deal with the challenges or resistance it might bring along (Akhras, 2019; Kruse *et al.*, 2020; Sundberg *et al.*, 2017).

*3.2.4 Transformational leadership. Definition included in the data pool:* "Transformational leadership entails the development of followers into leaders and creating an environment of change. Transformational leadership compasses the four Is (Idealized Influence; Inspirational Motivation; Intellectual Stimulation; and Individualized Consideration)" (Bisessar, 2018, p. 4).

*Context:* Transformational leadership was used as a major concept in ten papers. The papers mostly share a view that the emphasis of transformational leadership in the TL sector is on soft values. Most of the studies come from the Global South societies (7/10 papers).

*The nature of leadership:* According to the papers, a transformational leader is interactive, passionate, empowering, visionary and creative (Yüner, 2020) and is capable of increasing employees' commitment and effort (Yeap *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, transformational leaders inspire and motivate their followers (Andy-Wali and Wali, 2018). The attributes and effectiveness of transformational leadership has also been studied (Gochhayat *et al.*, 2017). Transformational leadership practice can improve employees' performance (Widodo, 2020), their job satisfaction (Mahzan and Nordin, 2021) and enhance their readiness for change (Yeap *et al.*, 2020) as well as stimulate teachers' collective learning processes (Lodders and Meijers, 2017).

*Foci of studies:* The papers focused on leaders and their characteristics, as well as effects of transformational leadership. Academic staff practising transformational leadership in their teaching can enhance students' self-efficacy beliefs in learning (Yüner, 2020), their usage of online learning (Aldholay *et al.*, 2018) and academic performance (Balwant *et al.*, 2019). Yüners' (2020) study argued that transformational leadership creates identification between the academic staff and the students and inspires the students to improve. Zhang *et al.* (2018) study studied the role of transformational leadership on students' creativity.

*3.2.5 Leadership. Definition included in the data pool:* "Leadership can be defined as the influence that one or more people have on a particular group to perform a particular action" (El Homrani *et al.*, 2017, p. 316).

*Context:* Nine of the papers used leadership as their main concept. The context of the papers is dominated by un-clarity and ambiguity of what constitutes leadership in the TL sector, and what the roles of leaders are. The concept is used in a variety of topics and with

reference to different levels of leadership. The Global North countries provide the context to the most of the papers in our data pool (8/9 papers).

*The nature of leadership:* Leaders in these studies were identified as belonging to lower management. They were administrative leaders (Schoepp and Tezcan-Unal, 2017), virtual leaders (Alward and Phelps, 2019), middle leaders (Thornton *et al.*, 2018) as well as university students as potential leaders (El Homrani *et al.*, 2017).

*Foci of leadership:* Despite some un-clarity in the papers, two themes seem to rise to the surface in the analysis of the papers using the concept of leadership. First, the main foci of five of the papers deal with either changes or reforms in the sector of TL or challenges regarding leadership and leadership roles associated with these changes or reforms (Alward and Phelps, 2019; Schoepp and Tezcan-Unal, 2017; Thornton *et al.*, 2018). Further, leadership from the perspective of NPM is seen as threatening the academic freedom of staff members (Schoepp and Tezcan-Unal, 2017).

Second, several papers deal with leadership at a surface level, that is, the main focus is on another topic, but the author also raised the aspect of leadership (e.g. Smith *et al.*, 2017; Rawn and Fox, 2018). The papers discuss the effectiveness and skills of a leader (El Homrani *et al.*, 2017; Franken *et al.*, 2018; Kok and McDonald, 2017) or leadership roles at different levels (Johnson *et al.*, 2017).

*3.2.6 Transformative leadership. Definition included in the data pool:* “Transformative leadership rests on two leadership theories – transformational leadership and distributed leadership; both foci on individual supports with an understanding of teachers’ individual and social sense making of reforms.” (Ronen, 2019, p. 75).

*Context:* The three found papers address normatively defined improvement in HE: reforms, social justice, public good, structural and cultural transformations, improvement of existing structures, practices and procedures, and structural and cultural elements that may be impeding change. The papers came from the USA, South Africa and Israel.

*The nature of leadership:* The papers identified transformative leaders as school administrators who act as an agent of social change (Liou and Hermanns, 2017), heads of departments (Grant *et al.*, 2018) and course instructors who lead the educational processes (Ronen, 2019).

*Foci of studies:* Grant *et al.* (2018) highlights the need for reform in South African universities influenced by student protests and examines the academic leadership role of heads of department in the context of decolonised HE. Whereas Liou and Hermanns’ (2017) paper addresses issues associated with diversity and demographic change in educational leadership programmes, Ronen’s (2019) paper examines the role of the leader in the educational process focussing on the features of the leader and its contribution to the students during an educational process.

#### 4. Constructing coherence in the usage of the key concepts

The RQ1 explored the key concepts that anchor recent empirical studies of TL in HE to leadership research. The analysis of 64 recent empirical scholarly journal articles shows that researchers use mainly six concepts: academic leadership, distributed leadership, educational leadership, transformational leadership, leadership and transformative leadership. Our results are in line with Wang’s (2018) study, showing the richness of concepts used to study leadership of TL-related phenomena.

The qualitative content analysis shows that there, in general, are clear differences between the key concepts used to anchor the leadership of TL to leadership research during 2017–2021, even if authors highlight partly overlapping aspects of leadership. Next, we discuss similarities and differences among the six concepts used in our data pool to highlight this observation.



The RQ2 investigated the context for the concepts, the nature of leadership and the foci of investigations in the selected studies. The concept academic leadership is used in papers in which the focus is on the qualities, preparedness and expectations of the leader whose conduct has extensive implications. The papers in our data pool highlight the delicate context of leadership at universities in a state of change: academia with its historically developed features, such as collegiality and academic freedom, which refers to “the right of academics to be free from external constraints in teaching and research and, further, to freely criticise their institutions” (Andreescu, 2010, p. 163). Academic leadership is not narrowed down solely to the TL context, but also covers other academic domains, such as research.

The concept of educational leadership, on the other hand, focuses on the leaders’ personal characteristics, personal development and challenges individual leaders face in the HE sector. When compared to academic leadership, educational leadership refers to the narrower and more precise TL sector in HE. Papers that use the educational leadership concept describe educational leaders as people who deal with improvement and development related tasks in their work. However, there are some similarities between the concepts: they share a focus on developing a fruitful interaction, a mutual relationship and an understanding between leaders and co-workers. When compared to academic leadership, educational leadership refers to leaders who work at a lower level in the formal professional hierarchy and often without position-related power. Consequently, their leadership is dependent on the commitment of other academics to the change processes, the implementation and the evaluation of educational reforms. This dependence on co-workers’ engagement and commitment bring educational leadership close to distributed leadership.

Distributed leadership stands out from within the papers in highlighting leadership as a collaborative activity. Individual leaders or the entire community at large implement leadership through collectively engaging processes. The context of processes is educational reforms, developments in study programmes and improvements of TL quality.

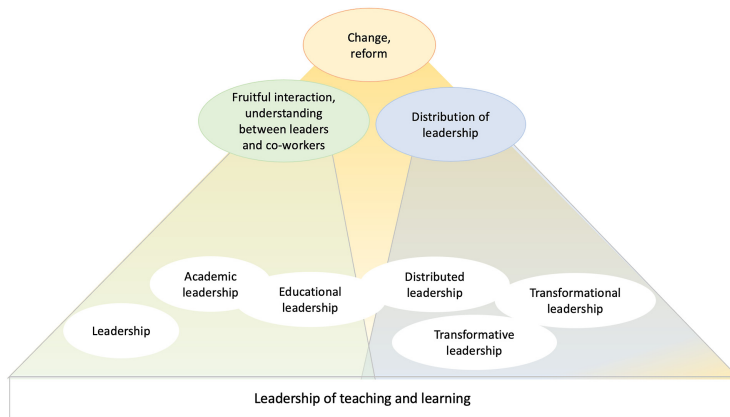
The papers in our data pool using the concept transformational leadership focus on leaders and characteristics of leaders whereas papers using the concept transformative leadership seem to focus on a change or reform with a value related goal. These concepts share similarities with distributed leadership in that they emphasise the distribution of leadership in a community, and they do not necessarily rely on any formal leadership title. However, the characteristic feature that distinguishes transformative leadership from distributed leadership is that transformative leadership contains normative ideals and aims. In transformative leadership, the leader carries values and morals. In contrast, the concept of distributed leadership seems to be used in a context where universities face the external pressure to renew themselves.

The concept of leadership is an ambiguously used concept, since the focus is fragmentary and branched. It is most used in topics related to change and reforms, such as the NPM management reform. Papers that use the concept leadership seem to bring forward the importance of communication to implement leadership.

Thus, the six most used concepts in our data pool provide different lenses or spotlights that the authors have used to highlight varying aspects of leadership of TL in their studies (Figure 3). The context of change and reform seems to be an overarching theme that is present in all papers. Fruitful interaction is especially highlighted in papers that use leadership, academic leadership or educational leadership concepts whereas distribution of leadership is emphasised in papers that use distributed leadership, transformational leadership or transformative leadership.

Our data pool consisted of scholarly journal articles published in 2017–2021. Thus, our data pool did not capture possible longer trends in how researchers have used concepts. We excluded articles written in languages other than English as well as dissertations and conference proceedings. Therefore, we might have missed publications that might

**Figure 3.**  
The overarching themes and the six most used concepts in the data



complement our results. In addition, we found only a few papers that used transformative leadership as the main concept and therefore the interpretation of what associations authors give to the concept should be understood as preliminary results.

To enhance the quality of the content analysis we familiarised ourselves with the data by reading the texts several times and conducting the analysis iteratively and as a group of at least two researchers. Some papers lacked research questions and clear aims and the results were fragmented, which posed some challenges for the analysis.

### 5. Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this study was to investigate how recent research structures the leadership of TL in HE after the intensified focus on the TL sector in academia. We focused on bringing clarity to the concepts authors use to anchor the leadership of TL in HE to leadership research. This investigation revealed a wealth of concepts that authors have used as their main concept (see also Wang, 2018). We identified clear boundaries between the six concepts we analysed. Yet, it seems that authors in some cases use them rather freely to highlight partly overlapping aspects of leadership of TL in HE. Consequently, we suggest perspectives of why researchers activate distinct concepts of leadership even inside the same study.

First, academia is such a specific operational environment that the academic leadership concept remains necessary. Second, pressures to reform HE makes the concept educational leadership increasingly apt, indeed on many occasions more precise than the broader concept academic leadership. Third, the concept of distributed leadership enables analyses of engaging and participatory processes in HE institutions. The concept connects these processes to the collaborative work of leadership and is clearly relevant both in analytical and practical terms. Finally, the concepts of transformational and transformative leadership address the values and purposes of leadership of TL in HE.

In light of these observations, it seems unlikely that the entire variety of leadership of TL in HE could be reduced to the critical scholarship of NPM (Hood, 1991) and the scholarship of distributed leadership (Davis and Jones, 2014) – the two broad corpora identified at the beginning of this article. Out of the concepts analysed in this study, the concepts academic leadership, distributed leadership and leadership seem to communicate most strongly with the overall idea and environment of NPM (e.g. Schoepp and Tezcan-Unal, 2017; Machovcová et al., 2019). Educational leadership, while certainly addressing the same operational context, seems to describe rather the everyday implications to leadership work of any current reform (e.g. Alenezi, 2017; Frisk et al., 2021).

Moreover, it seems unlikely that any of the concepts addressed in this study could alone cover the field. The TL sector remains a delicate field to lead (Scott *et al.*, 2008), which may be reflected in the wealth of concepts trying to capture the complex reality. However, the studies by Scott *et al.* (2008) and Fullan and Scott (2009) also enable us to ask why no more holistic frameworks have appeared over the years to reveal the contribution that leadership of TL makes to leadership in HE generally. One reason might be that investments to leadership of TL might be less appealing than investments to leadership of research in many universities, personally and institutionally alike. Furthermore, the now analysed, recently published articles contain an emphasis on the USA, UK, Australia and Canada, which leaves large areas of the world aside. We suggest that the established concepts in the Global North might not alone lead research forward. Culturally and situationally more sensitive approaches are needed, approaches that contain that the prevailing concepts don't necessarily resonate in the culturally and situationally diverse contexts of leadership of TL in HE.

### Notes

1. [https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG\\_2015.pdf](https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf)
2. <https://www.prisma-statement.org/>

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