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Amal Al Muqarshi (1), Maria Kaparou (2) and Anthony Kelly (3)

(1) The College of Applied Sciences-Ibri, Oman

(2, 3) Southampton Education School, University of Southampton, UK

Managing cultural diversity for collective identity: A case study of an ELT department in Omani Higher Education

Abstract
This paper employs a Social Identity Approach (SIA) to explore the management of a collective organizational culture in a culturally diverse context. Literature suggests that cultural diversity can be an asset for organizations if managed effectively. This study employs a qualitative case study design, drawn on data generated for a larger project that utilised sixteen interviews, eight team meetings observations, document analysis and field notes. It instrumentally uses a Department of English as its site due to the prevalence of cultural diversity in such context. The paper explores whether leadership is perceived as effective towards establishing a collective identity in an Omani Higher Education (HE) domain. The findings suggest that leadership impact is restricted by the central management of the system that translates largely into transactional leadership and hierarchical approaches at the level of the group and largely fails to establish such an inclusive identity. The paper argues that in a globalizing era, Omani higher education can only view cultural diversity as an asset that aids its intellectual capital establishment. Hence, it should cater for such a composition and engineer it effectively to achieve better alignment with the requirements of the current market. These findings can be of value to policy makers, researchers and professionals in HE.

Keywords

Introduction

Omani educational philosophy acknowledges the need for responding to global changes with yet an emphasis on preserving local cultural resources as drivers for its educational vision (*Philosophy of education in the Sultanate of Oman* 2017). This creates a challenge to Higher Education (HE) as educational policy in Oman has been directly and indirectly affected by the international context. In common with the oil sector in Middle East countries, Oman 'has been heavily reliant on expatriate workers both for

advanced technical and professional expertise and for manual labour' (Aycan et al. 2007:13). Higher education has been based on culturally diverse human resources since its inception. Despite the enactment of the policy of nationalizing workforce, cultural diversity continues to be a characterizing feature of higher education. Brandt and Dixon (2010) emphasize that expatriate academics are still occupying not only academic but also administrative and supervisory positions in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Still 50% of the academics are non-Omani at Sultan Qaboos University; the only state-owned university (Altbach 2011). Hence, Omani faculty members are minority working with colleagues from different nationalities such as Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and other Arab and western countries (Neal 2010).

Furthermore, the demands for coping with the global trends in programme provision has resulted in an expansion of higher education which led to importing academics to teach these programmes. Most of these programmes are provided through English as the medium of instruction. Such an international supremacy of English and the constantly increasing number of international English teachers in Oman could be seen as a threat to the vitality[1] of the Omani ethnolinguistic identity in the academic context. Despite their modernizing states and increasing openness to the world, GCC countries continue to hold to their distinguishing identities which results in a gap between the local context, where Arab are a majority ethnicity and Arabic is the official language, and the academic context where staff members are culturally diverse and English is the language of instruction. This creates an identity challenge especially that education, the main tool for preserving national identity, is largely based on culturally diverse staff, uses imported programs, and is chiefly provided through English. Despite its prevalence, such cultural diversity has received very limited attention in the Omani literature and most of this literature indicates that the effects of cultural diversity on individuals are largely negative.

Neal (2010) outlines that much of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) research on diversity focuses either on issues related to the influence of the national culture on the organisational culture, expatriate workforce experiences or on comparing locals to expatriates. Neal's (2010) ethnography is the only study that shed close light at the

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[1]Ethnolinguistic vitality is a term coined by Giles et al. in 1977 to refer to 'the degree to which an ethnolinguistic group acts as a collective entity and thrives as a distinct social group' (Hogg & Abrams, 1998:197).

group level where different cultural categories worked together. Such existing literature seems to view non-local workforce as a homogenous entity that stands as a counterpart to the local workforce. Thus, less attention has been paid to the actual group context constituted of such diversity and work dynamics have rarely been an interest (Neal 2010). van Knippenberg and Haslam (2003) stress that diversity has mixed effects relative to the way it is conceptualized. At the functional level (perspectives and opinions), diversity is advantageous because it leads to task-related conflicts that encourage elaboration and information processing towards resolution. However, diversity in values and social categories (such as nationality) could be detrimental to group functioning because of the relation-based conflicts that hinder interaction and communication.

Notwithstanding the prevalence of cultural diversity in GCC higher education, the implication of such cultural mix on leadership remains largely underexplored. Given such inconsistency in the reported effects of cultural diversity, managing cultural diversity could be a challenge to organizational leadership that is meant to guard organizational identity. While Islam and the traditional Arab culture seem to play a major role in the design and implementation of […] policies and practices in Oman.' (Aycan et al. 2007:13), the national culture can influence systems and structures and staff organisational behaviours. Thus, this paper uses the Social Identity Approach (SIA) to examine the management of a collective identity and organizational culture within the culturally diverse context of Omani HE.

Social identity and organisational context

Chemers (2001) defines leadership effectiveness as leader's ability to influence followers to achieve group objectives. Such a definition assumes that the group identity is key for defining leadership objectives. The Social Identity Approach (SIA) acknowledges that identity falls along a continuum that starts with individual self, defined by individual characteristics, and ends with social or group self that is based on group prototype (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Group prototype is 'context-specific, multidimensional fuzzy sets of attributes that define and prescribe attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that characterize one group and distinguish it from other groups' (Hogg 2001:187). The SIA acknowledges that people could have as many social identities as there are groups they cognitively identify with (Hogg 2005a; Hogg and Reid 2006).

However, a social category cannot form a basis for a social identity unless group members perceive it as salient and they cognitively identify with it. Social identity could have different levels of inclusiveness (Ashforth and Johnson 2001). Which level is active to inform behaviour within a specific situation is a function of identity salience (Haslam and Platow 2001). In organisations, the salience of organisational identity as a form of social identity is key for employees to work based on the organisation's norms and values.

Nonetheless, group identity cannot be assumed as a given in culturally diverse teams. The organization itself (represented by its leadership) needs to make the desired collective identity salient to the diverse employees, as the cognitive, motivational and contextual factors might be insufficient. According to van Knippenberg and Hogg (2003:249) 'social identification and the salience of the social identity […] mutually affect each other (i.e. people are more likely to identify with a salient group, and high identification is more likely to render group membership salient)'. Establishing such a group/ social identity is thus a paramount priority in a culturally diverse context where various individual identities exist.

Leadership as an identity management process

Given that Higher Education Institutions are complex organisations which operate in diverse environments, the role of leaders in addressing the challenges of creating 'a common organizational identity and a supportive culture, yet one that is open enough to encourage expression of an optimum level of differences in beliefs and values' (Bess and Dee, 2012: 5) is crucially important. The relationship between culture and organizational effectiveness is contingent on environmental conditions. (Denison, 1990 *cited in Bess and Dee, 2012: 375*) Steffens et al. (2014) suggest that the following constitute an effective leader within the social identity approach.

- **Identity prototypicality (being one of us)**

Group prototypicality is an important indicator of a leader's effectiveness to the extent that members highly identify with the group and the group is a salient aspect of their self-concept (van Knippenberg and Hogg 2003). Prototypicality (the extent to which a leader embodies a group's prototype), however, could be seen as an impractical

criterion for effectiveness in diversity contexts. Being context specific, collective prototype is potentially challenging in Omani higher education given the existence of diverse attributes and values that could give rise to inconsistent individual prototypes. To reap the advantages of cultural diversity and avoid its disadvantages within organisational groups, a superordinate identity based on a collective prototype should be made salient; one that is based on a superordinate commonality within the whole group but which also acknowledges the distinctiveness of the individuals' cultural identities. Such an intermediate ground, Brewer (1991) argues, is possible and in fact needed. This suggests that prototypes should not be rigid but rather negotiable and agreed. Without such negotiation, organisation-based identity is likely to become only a superficial category that is imposed on groups. Negotiating prototype entails instating cultural diversity as a prototypical feature of the high-order group by influencing members' beliefs about the defining characteristics of the group.

As leadership is a group process, group members should adapt their personal prototypes towards a cohesive one that appreciates difference. van Knippenberg and Hogg (2003) stress that both the leader's ability to influence followers to embrace group prototype and the motivation among followers to embrace this prototype decide on leadership effectiveness. According to Haslam (2004:36), for organisational teams to establish a collective prototype,

> *'they will […need to] attempt to sound out and refine their ideas in collaboration with other team members[…]. Group members also exert influence over each other by suggesting appropriate forms of behaviour and, if necessary, acting to enforce group norms'.*

Aycan et al.'s (2007: 25) empirical research in Omani government and state-owned organisations which comprised of 90 percent of Omanis and 10 percent of expatriates in a range of organisations, such as universities, telecommunications companies, petroleum development and so on, has shown that 'the collectivist orientation was more positively correlated with age and work experience, older, more experienced employees preferring collectivism more than younger and less experienced employees.'

- **Identity entrepreneurship (crafting a sense of us)**

Steffens *et al.* (2014:1004) define identity entrepreneurship in terms of the leader's ability in relation to:

- 'bringing people together by creating a shared sense of 'we' and 'us' within the group,
- making different people all feel that they are part of the same group and increasing cohesion and inclusiveness within the group,
- clarifying people's understanding of what the group stands for (and what it does not stand for) by defining core values, norms, and ideals'.

As identity entrepreneurs, leaders should define, revise and, if necessary, reconstruct the group's prototype (Hogg *et al.* 2012). However, with respect to cultural orientation, it might be rather challenging for a leader in a multi-culture organization to define core shared values. The literature suggests (e.g., Deal and Kennedy, 1982) that the degree of values consistency can determine the levels of organizational effectiveness. Although there is an element of inclusivity when sharing a set of core values , the dominant values embedded in the organizational culture might address multi-cultural issues and increase diversity. As Lumby (2012b: 580) argues, 'the dominant culture is likely to be working in [a] college in favour of some and disadvantaging others.'

- **Identity advancement (doing it for us)**

Group-oriented behaviour (identity advancement) is an additional merit for the prototypical leader (van Knippenberg and Hogg 2003; van Knippenberg *et al.* 2004) but Platow and van Knippenberg (2001) point out that it is a condition for non-prototypical members to qualify for both group membership and leadership. It enables them to engender the trust they require to function effectively within a group (van Knippenberg and Hogg 2003). Group-oriented behaviour could take different forms like commitment to the group, in-group favoritism, sacrifice on behalf of the group, and fairness and justice toward the group (Hogg 2001; van Knippenberg and Hogg 2003).

- **Identity impresarioship (embedding a sense of us)**

This aspect of effective leadership is concerned with the tangible outcomes that a leader needs to help the group to achieve in a way that enhances its collective identity. Maintaining this could include:

- promoting structures that facilitate and embed shared understanding, coordination, and success (and not structures that divide and undermine the group).

- providing a physical reality for the group by creating group-related material and delivering tangible group outcomes. (Steffens *et al.*, 2014:1005)

Meeting these criteria requires the leader to have a level of organisational agency and organisational support so that they are able to engage their teams in such steps that could create a common sense of the group. This might also suggest a collegial culture within an organization, characterized by shared understanding and power. From a social constructionist perspective 'campus leaders have the power to construct organizations that are caring, collaborative, and empowering' (Bess and Dee, 2012: 62) through promoting values that favor flexibility. However, organizational cultures with a hierarchical cultural orientation, such as in Oman, this might be difficult to achieve.

Identity management in Omani HE: conceptual framework

In the expanding higher education context in Oman, leaders could be faced with the challenge that two different levels of identity might be simultaneously exist due to the differences in tenure and staff flux within the group linked to cultural diversity and the process of localising the workforce. Conceptualised as the ability to simultaneously manage different identities construed at different levels towards a more collective superordinate identity, effective leadership in the Omani HE context could be theorised with the aid of transformational leadership theory (TLT) developed by Burns in 1978. Both the SIA and the TLT consider collective identity, shared goals, and shared outcomes focal premises. The TLT cherishes the role of the leader as one who influences the group members towards collective values and outcomes recognising their personal selves (Givens 2008). Thus, it values personal distinctiveness, creativity, and individual empowerment (Bass and Avolio 1993).

Transformational leadership model defines a leader as one who redefines what a group stands for (Bass and Avolio 1993) and functions as a change agent through practicing idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration. The role of the leader as an influence agent becomes central when the group composition is unstable. Thus, unlike the SIA in which the group prototype begets leaders, the leader in the TLT influences the members of the group towards collective identity (in this case a higher-order identity) which resonates with the four leadership processes outlined in the Identity Leadership Inventory in Steffens *et al.*

(2014). Leaders become entrepreneurs of identity who reconstruct the group's identity according to the organisational objectives. Transformational leadership model contains two distinct forms of leadership which are individual-identity-focused components (which conceptualises effective leadership in terms of dealing with followers as unique individuals) and collective-identity-focused components (which considers effective leadership as achieving a social identity based on shared values) and these distinct forms have differential impacts on the behaviours and attitudes among employees (Tse and Chiu 2014).

In light of the previous discussion of transformational leadership model, our current study adopts the Identity Management Model depicted in Figure 1.1 to understand the role of leadership in the process of identity construction in Omani higher education contexts. The model suggests that in the dynamic higher education context in Oman, group identity needs to be constructed in a way that makes diversity welcomed and retain a level of groupness (collective identity constructed at a higher order similarity). The model has two parts based on the group members' levels of self-concept. The upper part of the model depicts the situation when self-concept is based on personal level. This is likely to be the case when group composition is not stable and where newcomers join the group. In such a case members perceive themselves as distinct from the group or the other members based on personal identity or sub-group identity. Hence, a leader cannot assume the existence of similarity between group members and under low group salience and low group identification, the leader practises individualised consideration by focusing on individual's personal identity (van Knippenberg and Hogg 2003).

However, transformational leaders should work on establishing a sense of the overarching group identity because that is how the functional and informational advantages of cultural diversity could be utilised. van Knippenberg and Haslam (2003) stress that this higher order identity (that includes both the individual and the group levels) should be based on relational values such as fairness, equality, and respect of difference. In order to use the diverse staff perspectives for the good of the group, the leader would need to influence individuals to a level of collective identification over time. The second route (at the bottom part of Figure 1.1) is predicted based on the SIA logic. When a group (constructed based on the higher order level) is salient and social identification is high, leadership effectiveness is constructed in terms of this collective prototype. Group members build a shared cognition that results in a group prototype.

In this case, the group prototype is one that is diversity affirming. Individuals perceive themselves based on their personal characteristics and attributes (personal identity/self) and yet as they join the group and spend time within the group, they are likely to perceive a salient identity that is shared between themselves and the other group members based on the salience of work-related affiliation. Brewer (1991) argues that when balance is achieved between these two identities, motivation towards optimal distinctiveness is met. The salience of the collective group and the group identification enables the leader to practise a group-focused leadership in that they see the group as a cohesive entity (at the higher order level). As group members spend more time together, they could develop stronger identification with the group in which case leadership effectiveness could be conceptualised in terms of the criteria explained by Steffens et al. (2014).
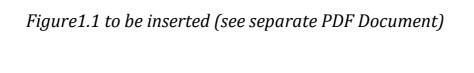
Figure1.1 to be inserted (see separate PDF Document)

Figure 1.1:Identity Management Model for Omani HE

Methodology

Researchers mostly approach the study of diversity with pre-established social categories instead of remaining open to context-specific constructions and they essentialise difference by viewing categories as objective realities that are not

influenced by power relations (Tatli and Özbilgin 2012). Organisational research that employed the SIA to understand group identification has largely conceptualised identity in terms of organisational groups that are distinct from each other. Such conceptualisations overlook the complexity of identity where social identities could interact with personal and role identities (Pratt 2001). This stream of literature also ignores the fact that group identities in organisational context are nested and embedded within one another due to organisational hierarchies (Ashforth and Johnson 2001). Hence, this study adopts a constructivist view by exploring natural workgroup utilizing case study. Such a methodology is important to uncover context-specific factors that affect collective identity construction in Omani higher education.

- **Case study**

In specific, the paper explores leadership in promoting social identity salience within a culturally diverse English Department at a College of Applied Sciences (CAS) in Oman (henceforth CAS-1). The CAS is a network of six colleges centrally governed by the Directorate General of the CAS, which is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). Strategic decisions concerning CAS are made at the Education Council governing the MoHE, but each College has an internal structure that tackles the different administrative and operational aspects. Academic leadership is also central and managed by the different programme directors (PD). CAS-1 is one campus of CAS that has just over 1000 students and around 85 academic staff belonging to a diverse range of nationalities. This exploratory instrumental case study is conducted at the English Department at CAS-1. This Department is selected because of the wider range of cultural background constituting its staff body. The study was conducted in November 2016 when the English Department was composed of 27 teachers including the Head of the Department. These teachers belonged to nine different nationalities, as explained later in the article. The salience of English as a linguistic identity in Omani HE led to sustaining the recruitment of non-Omanis despite the mantra of Omanisation. The field of ELT has been generally dominated by native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) who are considered an economic resource for countries such as the UK and the USA (Al-Issa 2006).

- **Methods of data collection**

This study is part of a larger study that employs three main complementary methods. This methodological triangulation serves the purposes of clarifying meanings through capturing different perspectives on the research issue using different sources and forms of data (Stake 2008). Interviewing participants is considered the main generator of data whilst semi-structured one-to-one interviews were conducted with 16 participants of diverse cultural backgrounds, years of experience and recruitment channels. Of the participants, five had experienced team leadership at certain point during their careers at the English Department in addition to the HoD who was overseeing the English Department. In addition, 11 regular teachers belonging to different cultural backgrounds and channels of recruitment were interviewed. As individuals are a focal point in this research being the group actors and the bearers of the diverse identities at the English Department, this integrative construction of reality draws on understanding the participants' mental models of reality (Woodside 2010).

As context is key for understanding meanings in qualitative studies, observations were used to complement the data collected through interviews and documentary analysis. Group interactions and dynamics could present a good source for data about how prototype was constructed and the extent to which cultural diversity influenced this construction process. A wide range of documents were also collected for the purpose of learning about the values, policies and beliefs of the organization (e.g, policy documents, such as CAS Bylaw, Civil Service Law and CAS strategic plan; copies of minutes/reports of six meetings; participants' CVs; Employee Handbook).

Data analysis

The analysis of the data started by first analysing the interviews as the main source of data whilst a descriptive coding-technique was adopted. After categorisation of codes was done, the resulting categories were grouped under sub-themes that were derived following the constant comparative logic defined as 'going through data again and again […] comparing each element- phrase, sentence, or paragraph- with all the other elements' (Thomas 2016:204). In using evidence from the interviews in the case report, the names of the participants were anonymised using the codes T1-T16. Quotes from participants' narratives were presented using the scheme [code-role-nationality-

employment type]. After interviews were analysed and major themes were identified, a draft of the case report was produced. Next, the notes from the observations and the documents were scrutinised for relevant content. The relevance of the content of the documents and the observation notes was decided based on the themes of the interviews as the reports of the participants were used as a guide.

Findings and discussion

A key aspect to understand leadership effectiveness in establishing a collective identity in the culturally diverse ELT context is conceptualizing leadership in the research context.

- **Conceptualizing identity management in the research context**

While the SIA suggests that the prototype is context-specific (Hogg 2001), the six CAS English Departments (of which the site of this study is only one) follow a centrally mandated system defining its prototype. Hence, this network is regarded as one big group rather than six distinct groups considering the particularities of each department. The prototype is believed to be followed by the six English Departments that conform to each other in terms of the programme content, objectives, deadlines, and assessment. This could be seen as a disadvantage given the cultural diversity variably characterizing these departments. A larger group size requires a more autocratic leadership (Szu-Fang 2013), which is perceived to be the case in this study. When the leader is positioned at a hierarchy level that is distanced from the group level (as is the case with the ELT academic leadership), they set the group prototype at the wider context, which creates a gap between the wider context and the micro-level group. Decisions are made centrally and there is a network of local coordinators (team leaders) expected to ensure cross-CAS consistency in the curriculum administration. This was evident in the meetings observed where discussions were mainly about ensuring that teachers are in line with the prescribed syllabus. As Bess and Dee (2012:383) argue, academic departments may have their own subcultures, whilst 'the administrative subculture tends to emphasize managerial or utilitarian values [,] faculty members, on the other hand, value collegial communication and expect to play a role in organizational decision making, especially in curriculum and research.

Societal culture also plays an important role in establishing organizational leadership prototypes. (O'Connell, Lord and O'Connell, 1990) The Arab culture seems to play an influential role in designing macro and micro level policies and implementing them into practice. Hierarchy-based leadership that is based on central decision-making is generally a characteristic of leadership ideology in Oman (Al-Hamadi *et al.* 2007) and this might contrast the .principle of transformational leadership where followers share a degree of decision-making power with superiors. Centralised higher education governance could be effective for maintaining national identity (Lo 2010), which is one objective for education in Oman (Al'Abri 2011). Such identity maintenance seems to be enacted by maintaining top-down influence, which is perceived negatively among the participants in this study as it does not value the variability of perspectives and needs at the micro level characterized by national diversity. The results of the current research confirm Aycan et al.'s (2007: 28) study that top-down decision making lead to hierarchy-oriented practices which 'were preferred by employees who believed in the necessity of maintaining status hierarchy in society and organization.' Placing high value of status hierarchy confirms the stereotypical perception of Middle East culture and values.

Lack of communication between the six English Departments and with the center was seen as a hindrance against the effectiveness of such centralisation. In contrast, Albulushi and Hussain (2008: 32) claim that 'transformational leadership has helped to improve internal communications and create a spirit of co-operation among the multi-cultural, ethnically diverse employees'. However, in such a hierarchical structure, Hogg (2001) argues that the leader is seen as an out-group member who is not representative of the group prototype which was also sensed in English Department as it was depicted as an opposition party that stands against what teachers think is right.

> *I think any decision that is made here has to be universal because there are six or seven colleges… especially when it comes to grades, maybe it is easier for students to write about a topic the are familiar with in the book and maybe consequently they might get a better mark …[but this is not possible because]it has to be the same.* [T8, member, British, outsourced]

Dissatisfaction with the bureaucratic practices associated with the hierarchy based decision-making echoes findings by Neal (2010) who observes that Omani and non-Omani academic faculty members at a state HEI equally consider the organisational bureaucratic practices as a shared enemy; albeit at an administrative level in his study.

It is inevitable that the hierarchical structure of the Islamic society of Oman reinforces the existence of hierarchical relations which affect decision making processes. As Bush (2011) argues, 'bureaucratic models emphasize *impersonal* relationships…This neutrality is designed to minimize the impact of individuality on decision-making. There was a perception that such a system did not value the variability of perspectives and needs at the micro level characterized by national diversity. Participants expressed dissatisfaction about the rigidity imposed by such a prototype, which is not being negotiable to cater for the diverse perspectives, attitudes and practices as expressed by T1:

> *… over the years I found both the trends happening; on the one side there is this tendency to centralise further and on the other side people who really face the ground realities they get fed up with this centralisation or lack of decision and then they do things that are suitable to them.* [T1, leader, Indian, MoHE-fixed]

A managerial organizational culture is prevalent in the CAS, with elements of hierarchy and bureaucratic order. Brandt and Dixon (2010) also highlight that central decision-making and lack of staff involvement in decision-making cause dissatisfaction among the staff working at GCC universities, a sense of exerting little influence in their every day job whilst these create intentions for turnover.

While one advantage of having culturally diverse staff body is making use of the different perspectives and experiences (Cox and Blake 1991; Hentschel *et al.* 2013), there was a perception that assimilating CAS under one prototype hinders the ability of the English Department to benefit from the different expertise of teachers or from other higher education institutions in Oman as T3 [leader, Omani, MoHE-permanent] expressed. Generally, leaders at the department thought that the central prototype was characterized by: restricted changes, persistent disagreements and lack of consistency, lack of communication, slow decision-making, undervalued contributions towards amendments, emerging tension between centralisation and autonomy, and lack of motivation for further cross-college coordination. These factors are perceived to hinder the effectiveness of this prototype enactment at the English Department level and to cause dissatisfaction and turnover among the participants. Such dissatisfaction that is largely experienced by the non-Omani teachers is also found to be the case by Khan

(2011) who reports that expatriate EFL[2] teachers in an Omani university feel restricted in their teaching practices for cultural reasons. Lumby *et al.* (2007) report comparable results stressing that downward control of communication and strategic decision-making by senior leadership restricts the influence of lower level leaders.

The need to influence teachers to conform to the ELT prototype that is non-responsive to change initiatives restricts the agency of the team leaders at the English Department to introduce new practices or respond to feedback from teachers to change current practices. This goes against the view of Rudhumbu (2015) that middle managers—being in a position that enables them to understand both the organisational perspective and those of the teachers at the micro level—are in a strategic position that enables them to be active participants in curriculum planning and change management. Hierarchy-oriented practices are confined with stakeholders who hold managerial positions at the upper echelons of governance. Kaparou and Bush (2016) highlight comparable results within a highly centralized context where centralised decision-making is viewed as restrictive at system level in Greece. This view on the hierarchy of authority seems to be consistent in highly-centralised systems which exert top-down and bureaucratic management approaches which do not favour egalitarianism, but hierarchy. Whilst the current study is conducted in a higher education context where academic autonomy is considered a core value (Lumby 2012a), centralisation seems more unattractive as it could be a reason for leaving CAS altogether. Oplatka and Arar's (2017) review suggests that the application of shared leadership in decision making and staff empowerment is extremely limited in Arab countries while Elmeski (2013) argues that such forms of leadership are impeded by bureaucracy and hierarchical nature of the education systems compared to Western countries.

However, while the English Department functions in subject-based teams, the parallel existence of the hierarchical structure and the centrality of decision-making at the ELT seem to encumber such advantages. In fact, the leadership of the ELT system represents a smaller cloned picture of leadership in Oman where consultative councils could only review practices but decision-making is the task of the 'elite' (Peterson 2011). This hinders transformational leadership enactment at the department level as leaders were

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[2] English as a Foreign Language.

not empowered to harness the prototype towards a more inclusive one but were expected to maintain the status quo which is a characteristic of transactional leadership (Bass and Avolio 1993).

- **Implications of lack of collective identity at the group level**

The lack of collective identity inspired by a shared prototype manifested in many implications at the group level.

- **Unstable group composition**

When this research was conducted, the Department included 27 teachers belonging to nine different nationalities: 30% of those were recruited through MoHE permanent contracts, 26% were recruited through MoHE fixed contracts and 44% were outsourced. Among the 27 teachers, Omanis (8 in total) were recruited permanently through the MoHE. Nineteen of the staff members were non-Omanis of whom almost twelve were outsourced recruitments. Thus, outsourced staff members represented a numerical majority in comparison to others and the outsourced category included all the NESTs in addition to others. Outsourcing most teachers through agencies resulted in fluctuating team stability due to the frequent terminations/turnovers and recruitments and the changes in the supplying agency. The resulting feeling of employment insecurity further increased the rate of turnover and hindered the retention of professional teachers. There was a general perception that with the frequent changes in the recruiting agencies, getting professional teachers at the English Department is a matter of *'luck'* as expressed by T4 (Omani leader on MoHE-permanent contract) due to the different standards observed by the different agencies as opposed to the MoHE. As a result, many teachers joined the Department and left it during the three-month probation period because of observed lack of professionalism[3].

Cultural aspects were also perceived to underlie staff instability. There was a view that outsourced teacher (mainly 'Western' or NESTs) come to Oman for the purpose of tourism which gives precedence to personal objectives over professional ones.

> *…a lot of Western teachers who have come here are travelling. It is a cultural thing… when it comes to Arab and Indian or brown teachers, there is a sense of permanence …*[T15, member, Indian, MoHE-fixed contract]

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[3] Defined by some participants here as qualification in teaching and respect of cultural differences.

Interestingly, staff instability at the English Department was also attributed to the location of CAS-1, which was perceived to be unappealing to many Western teachers who find adaptation a challenge. The resulting instability was perceived to negatively affect both team leaders (coordinators) and students as T4 explained.

> *… sometimes as a coordinator you will take over your shoulder to cover classes … [and] the responsibility of ensuring that everything related to the students…[is] documented and then transferred to the substitute teacher...*

A high rate of turnover translated into an analogous rate of recruitments in some semesters, which was perceived to outpace the ability of the leadership team to provide adequate induction to teachers. Induction in such a culturally diverse context is key for newcomers to understand the prototype guiding behaviour in the ELT centralised system. Hence, staff instability affects the establishment of a cohesive prototype and hinders the establishment of a group identity. T16 confirms that

> *… you can't build new teams every year with teachers who know the work and… some of them don't know the work … [who] don't speak the same language with you.* [member, Tunisian, MoHE-fixed contract]

The SIA suggests that the membership of individuals in a certain group is motivated by their quest for clarity, distinctiveness, and high self-esteem (Hogg 2005b). When these motivations are not satisfied and when individuals cannot act as a group to change the situation, they tend (as individuals) to leave the group in search of another group that better fulfill their motivations (Haslam 2004). At the English Department, employment categories exist due to an institutionalised policy, which makes mobility between categories impossible. The resulting unstable composition translates into inconsistent understandings of the ELT prototype because longevity moderates such an effect (Mael and Ashforth 1992). This sustains the salience of distinct categories and hinders the establishment of a cohesive prototype.

- **Relationship conflicts**

Perspectives about the nature of relations between staff members varied among the participants. Conflict emerged as a key theme that is perceived to characterise the climate and to vary in intensity from one year/semester to another. Conflict was generally associated with the salience of personal self among teachers. When personal identity is more salient than group identity, individuals compare themselves to other

individuals based on personal attributes that highlight differentiation from others (Hornsey 2008). There was also a perception that sub-categories sometimes appeared, which created tense intergroup relations as T7 relates.

> *... I watched people will say hello to me and will not say it to the person standing next to me because they are not in their group....* [T7, member, American, outsourced contract]

Staff instability and the associated insecurity were also seen as reasons that sustained such tense relations. T15 observed that:

> *From March 1st to June 15th, all [the teachers] who have been [at CAS-1] long enough, just keep to [their] offices because [they] know this is the period when everybody is on their edge; they don't know whether they have a job or not.*

In fact, lack of employment security in relation to non-locals are prevalent in the GCC countries generally due to the nationalisation policies they follow (Naithani and Jha 2010). Khan (2011), however, relates contradictory findings where expatriate ELT teachers in a state university in Oman feel motivated by their employment security and contract renewal. This difference in findings could be explained by the nature of CAS-1 where over 70% of the total number of staff members in the Department of English were non-permanent staff members of whom 40% were outsourced.

The resulting contingent status of non-Omani members, especially within the outsourced group, seemed to have affected the extent to which they conceived of themselves as in-group members. As a consequence, not only did employment insecurity affect the motivation of this category to work in a group-serving manner but even to remain within the group. Identification with a group is related to job satisfaction and willingness to remain in an organisation (Avanzi *et al.* 2014). The resulting voluntary turnover echoes findings by Romanowski and Nasser (2015) in relation to expatriate university faculty in Qatar where a similar nationalization policy is implemented. High turnover in turn affects establishing a collective identity as it reduces the shared history (longevity) between group members which is key for value conversion towards cohesion (Mael and Ashforth 1992). Staff instability thus hinders establishing a cohesive professional culture that informs a salient group prototype.

Kramer (2001) argues that insecurity affects the level of presumptive trust that develops as a result of social identification. Absence of trust might be the reason why individuals fail to see others as compatible in-groups. While professionalism was generally seen as

the commonality that could create a level of cohesion, there was a perception that professionalism was not consistently observed in recruitment, which also explained the high rate of conflict. An American member, T11 [outsourced contract], explained that:

> … *there were a lot of unprofessional instructors who were worried about very immature things… [and were] just creating unnecessary divisions. Not putting personal feelings aside for professionalism first…*

Thus, the salience of personal identities or sub-categories (e.g. westerners, native speakers, women, company staff, Ministry staff) undermined what participants thought of as the ought-to-be salient group identity; professionalism. Conflict is another effect of the absence of a common identity. At the English Department, diversity in views caused conflict and this has affected the way team tasks were carried out..

General department meetings or team meetings were seen as too formal and provide room for domination and conflict. This made team leaders deliberately keep meetings short and focused to avoid such conflicts. Some of the meetings observed were highly structured where content was emailed to teachers beforehand. Another reason for the negative perceptions about meetings was that, 'people don't *trust each other; so, [they don't] want to be that open about their classes' [T10].* The absence of trust then was a natural result for the absence of perception of a shared identity. In addition, teachers did not perceive meetings as a tool to contribute to decision-making as most aspects were controlled by the abstract macro-level of the organizational identity. In the meetings observed, most of the time was spent on explaining procedures and deadlines. Hence, such occasions do not enable negotiating matters which according to SIA is important to establish a collective identity.

- ▪ **Low staff interaction**

Low interaction was another observed characteristic of the Department, which was attributed to reasons related to both employment conditions and to teachers themselves. The employment conditions underlying low interaction were the style of housing and office allocation where that did not enable much interaction, the absence of communal area that could encourage socialisation, the high teaching load that left no room for interaction and the way teaching timetables were designed where teachers based in the same office did not see each other some days. Staff instability was also seen as one reason for low interaction where cohort-based sub-groups were the nuclei for networks and friendships.

You see so many people enter and leave with the tenure of teachers and so you are not sure even like 'shall I interact with this person? How long are they gonna be here?' [T12, member, South African, outsourced contract]

Communication and interaction are means for sharing knowledge about the prototype and creating a level of cohesion (Hogg and Reid 2006). While the leadership team emphasised 'team' identity in their meetings, views among teachers varied concerning the relevance of such a collective identity to reality. There was a perception that the three level-based teams constituting the department worked separately and *'there is a very little discussion [such that teachers could have] zero idea about how the other teams teach; what their style is and what kind of activities they do in their classes'* as T10 [a British teacher on outsourced contract] suggested.

At the English Department, such lack of interaction affected the extent of trust established between teachers. Effective communication takes place when individuals have a shared identity based on a shared cognitive understanding of reality (Haslam 2004). While a higher order organizational identity is more likely to be subjectively salient in centralised systems (Ashforth and Johnson 2001), it seems to be perceived as less relevant in this study largely because communication seems to be mostly one-way. Haslam (2004) maintains that communication in this way is ineffective because it is based on formal directives and forced influence rather than shared social identity and shared motivation. Thus, the rigidness of the centralised system hinders such an accommodation in the part of the organization.

■ **Impaired collaboration**

When members of a group identify with the group as a salient identity, they exert their efforts to achieve the collective objectives of the group (Hogg and Reid 2006). In this research, there was a perception that there was no actual groupness. One explanation was that the nature of the teaching profession in HE does not necessitate much cooperation between teachers. In fact, a considerable body of literature considers autonomy a characterizing feature of academic work (e.g. Macfarlane 2012). However, autonomy in this context was partially seen as a result of the lack of interaction. The Department had shared folders in the CAS-1 network, which were intended to work as collaboration zones. However, unwillingness to share experiences with others was seen as a common behaviour among some teachers. T7 thought that instability was one

reason because '*people don't like when teachers come and go; why would [a teacher] invest [their] time helping this teacher?*' Additionally, uneasy relations where teamwork could become a '*disaster*', as T10 [a British teacher on outsourced contract] pointed out, was another reason. During such times, team leaders '*had to think about which teacher will be working with which teacher because some teachers are not willing to work with each other... because basically they don't speak to each other ...*' as T2 [an Omani team leader] highlighted. Thus, there was a view that teamwork can only be effective if teachers '*... share the same values, ... the same perspectives, ... the same ideologies*' [T14, member, Filipino, MoHE-fixed]. This, however, contradicts the professional rationale for teamwork as seen by the leadership team. The SIA suggests that when members of a group perceive themselves in terms of a group collective identity, they like each other not based on personal attraction but due to belonging to the same collective group (Turner 1999). The absence of such collectivity hindered such attraction between the teachers in the department.

Conclusion

This research is an original contribution to knowledge in that it applies the SIA to generate evidence from the under researched Omani higher education context. The paper provides evidence that social identity salience in a centralised context characterised by cultural diversity is largely affected by the way cultural diversity is perceived and managed at the macro level. The lack of empowerment at the micro organizational level and the strict control of the macro level make it hard to cater for the needs of culturally diverse group. The consequences of the absence of social identity at the level of the Department is manifested in the unstable group composition, persistent conflicts, low staff interaction, and impaired collaboration.

Additionally, by adopting a social psychological conceptual framework to shed light on the group dynamics in culturally diverse educational teams, the study responds to Lumby and Morrison's (2010) call for widening the scope of educational leadership research by integrating theory from other disciplines especially in relation to the study of diversity. By doing this, the study also integrates the use of methodology commonly used in management/leadership research to explore both diversity and leadership from

a social psychological perspective that traditionally employed mainly experimental and post-positivistic methods for researching group and identity.

While the Omani higher education has depended on culturally diverse staff body since its inception, the demands for explicit management strategy about staff diversity seem to be stronger now with the echoes of Omanisation on the one hand and the further expansion of higher education on the other hand. As the literature suggests, transformational leadership could prevent the negative effects of diversity and promote its advantages. Despite the demand and drive for managing cultural diversity more effectively, the findings in the CAS suggest that leaders adopt characteristics aligned with transactional and hierarchical approaches to managing organisations, working with the existing systems and structures, maintaining the status quo within a hierarchical organizational culture. Leadership studies in the Middle East suggest that 'strong and decisive leadership is expected from an Arab person, hence the effectiveness of setting high goals and standards of performance characteristic of initiating structure, whereas a considerate leader might be perceived as being weak and indecisive.' (Dorfman and House, 2004: 64)

Thus, in centralised systems like CAS, devolving a level of authority to the micro level is necessary so that diversity is utilised in a way that individual identities are valued and welcomed. When a collective identity is made salient, perceptual, motivational, and evaluative behaviours will be guided by the norms underlying the collective identity, which could facilitate the transfer of knowledge and experiences. The need for adjustments in the way leaders manage diversity in higher education context in Oman derives from the demand to 'being able to lead within multiple cultural contexts, all existing simultaneously in the same organization [as social constructionists emphasize]' (Bess and Dee, 2012:380) Promoting dialogue among staff members could be a step forward to developing a collective identity and transfer of knowledge Kelly (2004:610) argues that value in knowledge-based economy is associated with managing intellectual capital represented partially by viewing staff as means for engendering intellectual capital through transferring knowledge from tacit form residing in the minds of individuals to explicit form that could provide a basis for new learning. The demand for considering cultural diversity in higher education as an asset to professional learning requires proper management. The management style within this

context needs to be sensitive to diversity of cultures. The empirical findings contribute to the limited knowledge base of leadership and cultural diversity in Omani HE. Investing on professional staff functional and informational diversity that underlie their cultural diversity could enable the Omani HEIs to make use of their competences for establishing intellectual capital. An important implication relates to the 'diffuse nature of the Arab [educational leadership and management] literature.' (Hammad and Hallinger, 2017: 449) As Locke (2007: 94) suggests that 'academic and other managers are likely to need support in thinking culturally about their role and the many interactions they have with colleagues.' Understanding cultural dimensions when working with people of diverse cultures is important and thus knowledge of cultural variations can inform practice to strengthen interactions among staff in such a diverse cultural environment. Leaders might benefit from training focused on an increase of their knowledge to cross-cultural interactions (e.g., reflecting on the results of the Globe Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research Program -GLOBE).

Interestingly, this study contributes to the rising volume of literature on educational leadership in Arab countries which has been limited, as emerged in Hammad and Hallinger's (2017) and Oplatka and Arar's (2017) reviews, and this reflects 'the maturation of Arab education systems and the increased importance attached to management practices in determining the quality of education' (Hammad and Hallinger, 2017:435). With this in mind, we wish to call attention for directing collaboration of scholars in accumulating knowledge drawn from the Arab world, as 'the Middle East is left behind in terms of international and cross-cultural management research.' (Aycan et al, 2007: 12).

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