



## Stories from the middle: Perceptions of the roles of curriculum development managers in a Maltese further education organization

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### Abstract

**Aim:** In this case study, middle managers in a Maltese Further Education (FE) organization express their views on professionalism. The selected managers will play an academic and administrative role as Curriculum Development Managers (CDMs).

**Method:** In this research, we used an instrumental case study approach guided by theory and interpreted through the lens of critical realism. In this case study, ten CDMs and two SMT members participated in semi-structured interviews to discuss their respective roles, skills, values, management education, and challenges.

**Findings:** Participants viewed their roles as administrative and managerial, with personnel management and dealing with unreasonable bureaucratic structures cited as the greatest difficulties. Efficiency, organization, fairness, and discipline were identified as the most important qualities for success in their position. Few respondents had formal management training, but nearly everyone agreed that internal training was necessary.

**Implications/Novel Contribution:** This paper demonstrates the potential of case studies for illuminating the lived experiences of individuals within organizations and comparing those accounts to those found in other parts of the world. Despite the study's limitations, such as its relatively small sample size, it may be worthwhile to broaden the scope of this investigation to encompass additional FE institutions.

*Key Words:* Further Education, Middle Management, Case Study, Critical Realism

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### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this case study is to investigate the functions and duties of academic middle management in a Maltese Further Education institution. The Foundation for Education (hereafter referred to as Academic1) is one of Malta's largest academic post-secondary institutions. There is a Senior Management Team (SMT) in charge, which includes the Principal, Vice Principal, five Senior Curriculum Development Managers (SCDM), and the Chief Development Officer (CDM). In contrast to CDMs, SCDMs are in charge of multiple subjects simultaneously.

Academic institutions have a reputation for being more egalitarian and collegiate than other types of businesses (Freedman 2012). One could argue that management's role in academic institutions has been downplayed in the past. Strategic management's ascent in the wake of incorporation in several countries (including the UK, the USA, and Australia) and the Bologna Process in the EU have challenged this view at the FE level (Hoareau 2012). Most research in this area has relied on surveying academic SMTs and interested parties outside of academia, such as members of government and business. On the other hand, this study draws on information from middle management, which offers a different perspective on organizational reality.

Middle managers in FE settings have been the subject of extensive research, which is summarized in this literature review. Due to the paucity of relevant academic literature, the author drew heavily from studies of middle management in the healthcare and Higher Education sectors. Broadbent (2011), in her discussion of the function of academic middle managers in UK universities, is just one researcher to adopt this approach. The results section comes after the methodology section, which discusses how case study research fits into the framework of critical realism. This is done so that it can be compared and contrasted with what has already been written. The final section provides an overview of the potential benefits of using case studies to reveal organizational realities, the

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takeaways from this research, and potential future directions.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

CDMs may be described as the mediators between the SMT on one hand, and lecturers and students on the other (Rooney 2010). This mediation may be construed as focusing on aspects of professionalism, empowerment and autonomy, roles, skills, and values displayed by CDMs. While CDMs might not have the positional power generally associated with SMTs, nevertheless they have influence over each other, over the SMT, and over lecturing staff. As with middle managers in other contexts, it is CDMs who might actually determine what gets done and what new ideas should be implemented within an organization (Williamson 2013).

An Australian case study was conducted to try and tease out the concept of professionalism as displayed by various types of middle managers in FE organizations. Different managers may hold different concepts of what it means to be a professional and professional identity (Briggs 2007). The author added, 'Professional identity is thus both a product and an agent of the systems and structures within which the individual's working life is located.' (Briggs 2007). Besides, FE middle managers may be influenced by a number of factors: their initial career, their present educational role, and their role in implementing organizational and government policy (Clayton and Blom 2002). Conversely, other researchers point out that the use of the term 'professional' does not apply to vocational colleges (Chappell 2000). The issue of professionalism in middle management may be considered as contested. The aim of this paper might reveal such contestations and compare them to other studies in the UK and Australia.

Research in the UK indicated certain tensions which existed within middle management (Briggs 2001). These tensions resulted in middle managers acting as buffers and absorbing pressure from different stakeholders. The perceived role of middle managers in the UK includes strategic leadership and localized strategy implementation. However middle managers encountered difficulties when implementing strategy and training for their roles seemed to be scarce (ibid.).

Evidence in other countries may be conflicting. Pepper and Giles' (2015) study on Australian universities proposed similar results as above, with middle managers identifying their role as overwhelming, with a sense of huge responsibility and little power. They labelled their role as reactive and feeling isolated while trying to make a difference in others' lives.

This was not evident in another Australian case study, conducted in a TAFE College, since a small number of middle managers dealt with the issues of, 'reconciling senior and team member expectations, leaving their colleagues free for managing implementation' (Briggs 2007). Results from interviews with senior management, middle managers, and external stakeholders indicated that:

1. Respondents had shared values including public service, inclusivity, and pride in student outcomes.
2. Middle managers help lecturers achieve better student outcomes.
3. Clayton and Blom (2002) duality strongly felt.
4. There was a difference between the UK and Australia with respect to middle managers' roles and management structure.

Middle-managers in higher education are the "unsung professionals in the academy yet they interact and participate with students, faculty members and the public and reflect the institution's overall spirit and vitality" (Rosser 2004). A quantitative study of 750 female middle managers in Australian higher education organizations determined that they did not undertake any formal training before or in their current position, maybe due to the fact that many educational middle managers are perceived to be involved with teaching, rather than managing. Besides, the authors report that this female middle management cohort is aging with few prospects of advancement. The authors call for a number of strategies to deal with this reality: the development of female middle management in academe; predicting workforce and retirement developments; more opportunities for lifelong learning (Wallace and Marchant 2009).

Middle managers may also be caught between two opposing organizational forces while they are perceived to be responsible for everything that falls under their remit, the opposing force, devolvement, might mean that middle managers would relinquish that same power (Klagge 1998). Empowerment might offer benefits to the organization including organizational democratization, accountability at lower organizational levels, and increased

efficiency and productivity (Ransom 1994). Employee benefits include increased motivation, personal strengths, and personal potential.

Problems with empowerment include fear of loss of control and the elimination of middle management positions. Building trust (Dodd and Gutierrez 1990), following best practice (Anschutz 1995), and using a bottom-up approach (Spencer and Loomba 1995), may help alleviate some of these problems. Contrary to other research, Klagge (1998) reports that middle managers do not necessarily oppose empowerment, even though there may be mitigating forces at work (e.g., the middle managers interviewed may have survived downsizing of their organization). All middle manager roles are important, that is, one cannot only focus on the traditional role held by such a position, such as focusing on curriculum development (Briggs 2005). Indeed, in Malta, while middle managers at various academic FE organizations contribute towards curriculum development, such curricula are the domain of the Matsec board. Table 1 delineates various roles as stated by various authors (abridged from Briggs 2005).

Table 1: Perceptions of middle management roles

Author	Middle Manager Role
Drodge (2002)	Educators, boundary management, personal leadership
Alexiadou (2001)	Middle manager facilitates change, acting efficiently within limitations and creating structures which house new realities
Gleeson and Shain (1999)	Mediators of change
Gillett-Karam (1999)	The buffer between faculty and administration
Brown and Rutherford (1998)	Servant leader, organizational architect, moral educator, social architect and leading professional
Glover et al. (1998)	Translators (of policy) and mediators
Turner and Bolam (1998)	Knowledge of people, situational knowledge, knowledge of educational practice, conceptual knowledge, process knowledge and control knowledge
Peeke (1997)	Servicing college bureaucracy, leading curriculum development, quality assurance, external liaison, managing people, managing resources and development

Organizational elements which might hinder or enable the above roles comprise: structure and territories: where structures and territories are problematic to steer, staff management, connectivity and implementation are all obstructed; system design: organizational networks may assist middle managers attain their aims. Contrariwise, excessively bureaucratic structures may deter the effectiveness of such networks; position: if middle managers discover that their contribution is valued, there is a better chance of role comprehension; role coherence and status; autonomy; and identification with leadership.

The broad range exhibited in Table 1 seems to indicate that middle managers in FE perform hybrid roles. While the term “hybrid” has scarcely been used in educational management research (see Briggs (2003) as an exception to the rule), its use is widespread in, for example, health management. Hybrid managers have been defined in different ways. While some authors emphasise technical skills and strategic responsibilities (Joffe and MacKenzie-Davey 2012), interpersonal relationships with upper management and staff (Fitzgerald and Ferlie 2000), and being able to conceptualize different sets of information (Llewellyn 2001), more broad definitions may be found, such as “managers who are skilled in an alternative profession” (Currie et al. 2015).

Academic literature seems to indicate that doctors who have managerial responsibilities perceive this role positively, but at the same time disparage management in general. Moreover, these hybrid managers viewed themselves as:

1. Primarily professional doctors with managerial responsibilities;
2. Puzzlement with regards to what management is, and its evaluation;
3. Medicine is clearly more valued than management.

The above tension has been described in various ways: Gouldner’s (1957) use of “cosmopolitans” and

“locals” was one of the earlier attempts made to discriminate between those representing the welfare of the professions with a slight allegiance to the organisation (cosmopolitans), and those who are anticipated to epitomise organizational interests (locals). A hybrid manager, such as a CDM or SCDM, for example, is concurrently cosmopolitan and local compared to other lecturers who might be classified as locals.

This theoretical construct was refined by subsequent researchers (Kaissi 2005; Watson 2002). However, these refinements did little to placate the inherent tension in hybrid managers. Indeed, it might be the case that knowledge brokering between different levels of hybrid managers in medical institutions is severed in situations where particular hybrid management levels are perceived as less knowledgeable (Currie et al. 2015). This tension is also evident in HE organizations and may be linked to the marketization and neoliberalism found within the sector (Broadbent 2011). Additionally, at least in British HE organizations, such hybrid managers while being unenthusiastic to hold such positions, thought that they were enhancing the life of students and staff (Deem, 2005). They also spent long hours fulfilling administrative tasks, whilst being viewed with suspicion by their colleagues.

Middle management has been perceived as a problem in many organizations, a problem solved through re-engineering and organizational delayering (Floyd and Wooldridge 1994). Unfortunately, in many cases, this did not lead to better organizational performance, since innovation and creativity declined. There is therefore a link between middle management and Barney and Wernerfelt’s Resource Based View (RBV) of organizations, since the knowledge held by middle management may result in competitive advantage. While competitive advantage might not be directly applicable to the Maltese FE sector, nevertheless, RBV might be a useful concept to consider when analyzing the importance of middle management and its role in crafting and implementing strategy.

## METHODOLOGY

The literature led the researcher to ask the following research question: How do CDMs construe professionalism in their work? This research question led to a number of interview questions based on length of time in their role as CDM, description of their role, changes in their role with time, management training, attitudes towards management, and skills and values needed to perform their job well.

A theory-led instrumental case study approach, as viewed from the lens of critical realism, was adopted in this study (Simmons 2009; Stake 1995). A case study may be defined as an “in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project” (Simmons 2009, p. 21). Instrumental case studies are chosen when one needs to explore and comprehend a particular problem.

Studying middle management in this way offered a number of advantages, namely that issues pertaining to middle management were studied in depth, whilst engaging in contested participants’ perceptions. Furthermore, a chance was given to participants to voice their opinions about realities that affect them professionally. Alternatively, certain problems arose. These problems were associated with the closeness of the researcher to participants, which may have resulted in biased answers.

Case study research has a rich history in educational research. For example, a qualitative case study on performance appraisal in a Maltese FE organization demonstrated the differing opinions among practitioners and academics (Pace, 2015). Whilst acknowledging the importance of performance appraisal and its role in educational systems, respondents were concerned with the way performance appraisal would be implemented. Another case study focused on change management in Slovenian adult educational organizations (Martincic 2010), indicating that organizational culture, leadership styles, and leaders’ behaviours may have impact on the success or otherwise of change management.

Critical realism was chosen as the theoretical lens underpinning this case study. Critical realism was a philosophy developed by the British philosopher, Roy Bhaskar. According to critical realism, reality is stratified and consists of three primary layers: the real, the actual, and the empirical (Zembylas 2006). The real are the underlying mechanisms that are responsible for what we observe. The real cannot be seen, but it can be speculated upon (ibid.). While Bhaskar has speculated on the meaning of the real, it seems that researchers in the field hold multiple meanings of the “real”. Therefore, critical realists hold the view that there are multiple realities. However, these realities are limited by our “selves”, rather than reality itself (Edgley et al. 2016). An example of this is human nature. Researchers speculate about human nature, without actually seeing it. The actual, which is conceptualized

as being below the real, refers to events which are caused by the mechanisms in the real (Scott 2005). The actual is indeed observable, for example, the interactions amongst CDMs and members of academic staff. According to critical realism, these interactions are caused by aspects of human nature. The third level in critical realism has been referred to as the empirical, which refers to observable experience, and is linked to the positionality that the researcher holds. This positionality is, in turn, reflected in how the researcher speculates about the real (Scott 2005).

In educational management research, critical realism may also be perceived as an antidote against a strict positivist mentality. Considering the small number of respondents available within this case study, a positivist approach would be very hard to justify, given the difficulty in applying statistical tests, and the nature of the research question(s) (Chan 2015). However, while a qualitative approach based on critical realism is used in this work, the author agrees with Nash (2005), regarding the importance of positivist approaches in educational research.

## **Methods**

Following ethical approval from the relevant authorities and permission from the Principal, the author sent letters of invitation to two members of the SMT, and all SCDMs and CDMs (n=20). Ten people decided to participate in this study (two members of the SMT, two SCDMs, and six CDMs). The letter outlined the importance of middle management in FE organizations, the lack of research done in this field, and the chance for middle managers to critically engage with their profession. In this way, the author prefers to use the word “participant” rather than “informant”, following its usage and meaning as outlined by Simmons (2009). Additionally, answers from CDMs were compared with those of the SMT resulting in what may be described as qualified triangulation, given the small number of participants.

To ensure reliability and validity, the author followed a strict protocol. Semi-structured recorded interviewing was used, making it easier to make rational and valid comparisons across informants (Gubrium and Holstein 2008). This may be labelled a “qualitative survey” (Miyashita et al. 2008). Transcripts were written in grammatically correct English to lessen informant distress (McCosker, Barnard, and Gerber 2001), and informants were given the option to answer in English or Maltese. Transcripts were sent back to participants for cross checking. In all cases, but one, participants altered certain parts of the data.

The interviews with all the informants followed the same semi-structured format, with the main research questions used as the basis of the interview schedule which consisted of an opening stage, main theme (main body of the interview) stage, and concluding stage. By using this consistent approach, the researcher aimed to make comparisons of the interview data more valid. In this investigation, one semi-structured interview was conducted with each informant in the period between April 2016 and May 2016.

## **Data Analysis**

Following transcription, interviews were coded using NVivo 10. A primary code, based on the research questions, was established and fine-tuned, e.g. one of the primary codes was “CDM roles” within which was subsequently fine-tuned according to role type. Content analysis was used to analyze the semi-structured interviews. Content analysis may be defined as a mental product that emerges “in the process of a researcher analyzing a text relative to a particular context” (Krippendorff 2004: 19). There is still much confusion related to content analyses, particularly the idea that content analysis is synonymous to word counting. In this study, the author focused on analyzing themes, as well as particular word counts, within a critical realist framework.

The project generated a considerable quantity of qualitative data: c. 20, 000 words of interview data resulting from c. 12 hours interviewing. The researcher read the interviews several times, until he became thoroughly familiarized with the data. Data analysis commenced after this period of accommodation, and included coding data into categories to develop themes which are the central concepts researchers attempt to describe (Miles and Huberman 1994). Codes were established during the interview process and those codes were “tried out” on consequent interviews to see if they “fit” (Miles and Huberman 1994).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Table 2 and 3 present an outline of the main results of this investigation.



Managerial roles: Most participants focused on the day to day running of their respective departments, mentioning timetabling, distributing and collecting attendances, preparing end of year examinations, contributing in syllabus setting, and preparing schemes of work. However, participants differed in the way they thought of themselves. For example, CDM2 used the word facilitator to explain his role, while CDM5 preferred managing people. Only CDM4 and SMT1 explicitly stated that CDMs, as middle managers, act as a link between administration and staff/students. Horizontal linkage between different CDMs (both formal and informal) were barely mentioned. Leadership (both academic and managerial) were mentioned by a large number of participants.

Change of role with time: Most participants argued that change occurred on both organizational and personal levels. For example, CDM8 and SMT1 stated that managing budgets was relatively new (organizational level), while other respondents stated that experience has made them view their role in new ways (personal level), leading to a certain ambivalence. In the words of CDM4,

“Now I am more confident. Before, I used to seek advice frequently. Now, because I have experience, I know what to do in certain situations. However, as a role to motivate, to push, I don't think it changed.”

This ambivalence, on the part of CDMs, is further pronounced by CDM6's insistence that the role has not changed with time.

Table 2: Participants' responses regarding length of time in role, role description, and change of role with time

Participant	Length of time	Roles	Change of role with time
CDM1	< 10 years	Day to day duties; problem solving; interviewing new applicants.	Shift from administrative to problem solving managerial activities; more active role in staff recruitment.
CDM2	< 10 years	Facilitator; day to day duties.	Recent change in administration has led to more autonomy; more experience.
CDM3	< 10 years	Day to day duties; academic leadership; problem solving.	Change of policies with new SMT; experience.
CDM4	< 10 years	Link between SMT and staff/students; activity coordinator; motivator; day to day duties; academic leadership.	Increase in confidence; seek advice from colleagues.
CDM5	> 10 years	Managing people; academic leadership; day to day duties.	HR part of management has increased; increase in administrative work; increase in accountability and responsibilities.
CDM6	> 10 years	Day to day duties; academic leadership; practical leadership.	No real change.
CDM7	> 10 years	Day to day duties; problem solving; academic leadership.	Change of policies with new SMT; more experience.
CDM8	< 10 years	Day to day duties; motivator; link between SMT and staff/students.	Increase in responsibilities; departmental budgeting.
SMT1	NA	Day to day duties; report problems; link between SMT and staff/students.	Departmental budgeting.
SMT2	NA	Day to day duties; problem solving.	Increase in confidence with experience.

Source: Interviews

Skills needed: Assertiveness, motivation, being organized, knowledge of the subject, and interpersonal skills were viewed by most respondents as being critical to their roles. However, a clear distinction was made by most participants between administrative and managerial skills. CDM5 explained,

I always thought of myself as a manager, maybe even given my training in management.

This contrasts with CDM3's declaration,

In the everyday running of the department, I know that I have to answer to administration, but I don't really see myself as a manager. I do, however, identify myself with administration, with the Principal, with the Vice-principal, and the secretaries, because I have to work with them.

Some respondents (CDM4, CDM6, and CDM7) refused to make a clear distinction between managerial and administrative roles, asserting that they were two sides of the same coin.

Management training: Only two participants had extensive formal training and professional practice. To date, Academic1 does not provide formal management training. However, according to CDM6,

Table 3: Participants' responses regarding length of time in role, role description, and change of role with time

Participant	Skills	Management training prior to appointment	Values	Challenges faced
CDM1	Administrative; interpersonal; patience.	Some practical training.	Patience; discipline; respect; fairness.	Role of SCDM limited; organizational policies; issues with staff.
CDM2	Able to compromise.	Very little formal training.	Ability to compromise.	Issues with staff; departmental procedures; limited autonomy.
CDM3	Organized; able to delegate; efficiency.	No management training.	Fairness; efficiency; reliability; dedication.	Dealing with staff; lack of belonging; poor compensation.
CDM4	Organized; motivational; interpersonal.	No management training.	Teamwork; religious values.	Lack of presence of SCDM; dealing with administration; poor compensation.
CDM5	Motivational; organized; administrative.	Extensive academic and practical training.	Fairness; discipline; leading by example; Responsibility; accountability.	Managing people; academic rigidity; increase in administrative duty; poor compensation; very small budget.
CDM6	Assertiveness; self-respect; organized.	Extensive academic and practical training.	Assertiveness; fairness; justice.	SCDMs should be more involved; personal problems with academic staff.
CDM7	Organized; efficient; motivational.	No management training.	Patience; discipline; fairness; religious values.	Irrational administrative procedures; dealing with staff.
CDM8	Administrative; common sense; able to compromise.	No management training.	Teamwork; efficiency; fairness.	Lack of involvement of SCDMs; poor compensation.
SMT1	Knowledge of the subject area; leadership.	Organization provides informal training.	Fairness; firmness; ethical.	Feeling of loneliness; Timetable issues; lack of formal training.
SMT2	Knowledge of the subject area; patience; temperance; listening; understanding.	Organization provides informal training.	Patience; temperance; honesty; loyalty; love.	Unpopular decisions may need to be taken; getting used to administrative procedures.

Source: Interviews

If I had to talk of management training here, that is mostly initiated by the use of academic work resources. If used appropriately, by attending conferences, reading, and building networks, then individuals working here will be able to widen their knowledge and skills set. Individuals should be allowed to follow their chosen academic path.

The lack of formal training seemed to be apparent in the answers given to this question, with some participants hoping that something will be done in the future. CDM4 explained,

I think it would help if we had a number of sessions dealing with certain aspects of management, such as focusing on human interaction. We could also make use of previous CDMs, who were deemed successful in certain areas. These areas could be focused on how to involve staff, or how to tackle certain areas of the curriculum with students. They would share their experiences in this way. The utilization of "stored" knowledge in order to add and sharpen the skills set of middle management might be considered novel in FE context of Malta, and if successful, be used elsewhere. This line of thought, with variations, was echoed by SMT2, We are working on getting people who have experience and who have made it. They are successful in their area. We can invite them to talk to these managers [CDM]. This could be in the form of a 2-hour talk or a seminar.

I agree a lot with this. When we meet we try to give our advice. However, people who are not part of our college might be able to make a bigger impact, coming from industry. It's another world out there. When people

here complain, they should remember that out there its much more difficult. That is the next step now.

Values: The major values stated by participants were a sense of fairness, justice, and discipline. At times, responses were amplified in different ways: while CDM3 concentrated on fairness with staff, especially when it came to issuing timetables, CDM2 and CDM8 focused on how they implemented fairness. Both these CDMs stressed the importance of private consultation with the person concerned, in order to try and convince the person on some particular point. CDM2 stated,

I think that I have to treat people differently, according to their character. When I have a problem, I like to seek and speak to people in private. I don't like sweeping statements, made publicly, which criticise specific members of staff. I prefer to deal with these things on an individual basis.

On the other hand, SMT1 focused on the importance of gathering all possible information before finding a solution,

Let's imagine we have a complaint by a student regarding a particular lecturer. One has to give attention to the student. One has to hear what the student has to say. When you hear the student's version you might be tempted to say that the student is saying the truth and that the student is suffering as a consequence. When you hear the students version, you might be tempted to take that approach. But the coordinator has to listen to the other version. This has to be made clear to the student. This is what I mean by fairness.

Challenges faced: The major challenges faced by CDMs were interpersonal problems with members of staff (CDMs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and SMT2), the lack of presence of SCDMs (CDMs 4, 6, and 8), administrative procedures (CDMs 2, 4, and 7), and compensation issues (CDMs 3, 4, and 8). The frustrations of both CDMs and SCDMs were not only evident in their answers, but also resonated with the answers given by SMT participants. CDM1 put it quite mildly,

Challenges faced: The major challenges faced by CDMs were interpersonal problems with members of staff (CDMs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and SMT2), the lack of presence of SCDMs (CDMs 4, 6, and 8), administrative procedures (CDMs 2, 4, and 7), and compensation issues (CDMs 3, 4, and 8). The frustrations of both CDMs and SCDMs were not only evident in their answers, but also resonated with the answers given by SMT participants. CDM1 put it quite mildly,

CDM3 was somewhat more forceful,

If I consult, then I will hear so many different things; if I don't consult, I stand being accused of not being democratic; I am accused of taking decisions, and at the same time pressured into taking decisions.

Several participants pointed out that the process used to choose CDMs may result in a situation where members of staff expect favours. CDMs are chosen after consultation between the SMT and members of staff within each department. In effect, CDMs are nominated by the members of staff. SMT1 admitted,

Sometimes CDMs find themselves in situations where they don't know what to do. There might be an issue that needs to be bridged and it would be difficult to tackle.

The role of the SCDM was questioned by many participants. For example, CDM1 perceived the role of SCDMs to be limited. This perception was reinforced by CDM2's response,

The SCDM rarely comes into the picture. We very rarely meet. I do not think he realizes the problems we face here. Luckily, we did not disintegrate as a department. There is one department where the problems were so ingrained that a new member of staff was forced to become CDM.

Financial issues were also seen as challenging, with CDM7 regarding compensation as "a joke". CDM1 questioned whether it was fair that CDMs got the same compensation, given that some of them ran departments with just three members of staff, while others had over 15 members of staff. On the other hand, incumbent CDMs knew beforehand the amount of compensation for services rendered in their new role (CDM6 and 7).

Middle managers (CDMs and SCDMs) are the hub of an organization, and they seem to have great operational influence. From the results obtained one might conclude that what they say and what they do matter significantly. In this sense CDMs are crucial to implementing organizational policy as outlined by Clayton and Blom (2002). Furthermore, in most cases, members of academic staff deal directly with their respective CDM.

An important aspect is the hybrid quality of CDMs and SCDMs: they are both professional in their academic and managerial positions. This tallies well with other research in the areas, namely Briggs (2001; 2007),



Gillett-Karam (1999), and Peeke (1997). Whilst teaching and researching both fall under academic professionalism, budgeting, preparing timetables, and dealing with day to day operational affairs of the department under their care fall under managerial professionalism. Some of the managerial activities displayed by CDMs also include mentoring new members of staff and ensuring that academic staff have access to IT resources. These are challenging tasks, not made easier by the way CDMs are recruited. One may argue that democratic values are important, through consultation with other members of staff, before CDMs are chosen. There is, however, one drawback: members of staff might push for a particular candidate who might not be fit for purpose.

It seems that both CDMs and SCDMs could do with more autonomy over particular decision making activities within their departments. It is apparent, that while many CDMs and SCDMs might not have any formal management training, they do have the skills and knowledge to do their job. One may point out the similarity of this finding with that of Rosser (2004), while researching middle managers in the Australian HE context, and Briggs' (2001) seminal research in the British FE sector. However, over bureaucracy in particular areas, coupled with what many participants perceived as irrational bureaucracy, may lead to frustration as well as loss of enthusiasm. Allowing more autonomy, freedom to innovate as well as certain risk taking is free: there is no budget allocated because no budget is needed. Enabling the organizational climate in this way might lead to better effectiveness and efficiency throughout the whole organization. There might also be a need for short in-house courses on leadership and management within the educational context for CDMs and SCDMs.

The lack of communication between CDMs and SCDMs is of particular concern. While the Principal meets with SCDMs and the respective CDMs under their charge, there seems to be a lack of engagement on the part of SCDMs. This seems to be a particular issue that may need to be organizationally, rather than individually, tackled.

## **CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

There a number of issues for practice and research that emerge from this work. First, the role and function of SCDMs may have to be redefined in the light of the findings. These should also be linked with organizational structures which help SCDMs fulfil their role. Such structures may also help strengthen horizontal communication between SCDMs and CDMs, an often neglected aspect in organizational dynamics.

Besides, senior management, together with HR, may take a number of different measures to ensure that CDMs and SCDMs' skills are utilized effectively. These include:

1. Focusing on setting up CDM profiles, indicating what CDMs should know, what attributes are needed, and what experiences are necessary to fulfill the job at hand;
2. Recognizing that different CDMs may have different developmental needs. Training should follow the identification of knowledge and skill gaps. A one size fits all approach should be avoided;
3. There may be the need for a formal transition period to ensure that new CDMs are given the right development training, as specified in 2 above;
4. Effective communication, delegation, and management actions might be needed to create the right atmosphere that engages and inspires CDMs. Organizational procedures and practices might need to be reviewed to ensure that CDMs attain organizational goals.

While the study has been helpful in uncovering realities related to the above mentioned organization, one must take care before generalizing in the wider context of international and national FE organizations. This is one of the limitations of the above study. Furthermore, only half of the CDMs at Academic1 decided to participate in this research, and may lead to biased answers.

These biases have been helpfully lessened by responses from SMT participants. Besides, this work has also shown how case study research may contribute to our understanding of organizations and how people create realities about themselves in their everyday lives. It is recommended that further research be undertaken to expand this study to incorporate other FE organizations in Malta. Maltese FE organizations are subject to different regimes and realities (Zarb 2015), and therefore the author suspects that respondents may have diverse views on their role. The objective of such studies should not be to undermine middle managers' roles, but rather, to identify problems which may be solved pragmatically, given a SMT that really cares for the organization that it manages.

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