

Investigation of Transformation Path of Middle Managers in Shandong's University Based on Distributed Leadership

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Abstract:

This study explores the role transformation of middle managers under the framework of distributed leadership at a public university in Shandong Province, China. Drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with six academic and administrative middle managers, the research investigates how their roles have evolved, the challenges they encounter, and the pathways that facilitate their adaptation to shared leadership models. Findings indicate a significant shift from task-oriented administrative functions toward more strategic, collaborative, and facilitative responsibilities. However, role ambiguity, hierarchical institutional culture, and insufficient structural support present persistent barriers to effective transformation. The study contributes to the theoretical discourse on distributed leadership and role theory by contextualizing their application in Chinese higher education. It also provides practical implications for university leaders and policymakers on strengthening institutional structures, professional development frameworks, and performance evaluation systems. Overall, the research underscores the importance of institutional alignment and cultural readiness in sustaining middle managers' leadership transformation and promoting distributed governance in universities.

Keywords:

Distributed Leadership, Middle Managers, Role Transformation, Chinese Higher Education, Organizational Change

1. Introduction

The role of middle managers in universities has become increasingly critical in the context of evolving higher education landscapes, particularly in China, where rapid expansion and institutional reforms demand adaptive leadership. This study explores the role transformation of middle managers at S University in Shandong Province through the lens of distributed leadership, a model that emphasizes shared responsibility and collaborative decision-making. By examining the characteristics, challenges, and pathways of role transformation, the research aims to provide

theoretical and practical insights into enhancing leadership effectiveness in Chinese universities, contributing to both institutional development and the broader discourse on leadership in higher education.

1.1. Background

Distributed leadership has emerged as a promising framework for addressing these challenges. Unlike traditional top-down leadership models, distributed leadership emphasizes the sharing of leadership responsibilities across multiple levels of an organization, empowering individuals at all levels to contribute to decision-making and problem-solving [39]. This approach aligns well with the collaborative and decentralized nature of academic institutions, where expertise and influence are often dispersed among faculty and staff. In the context of Chinese universities, distributed leadership offers a potential pathway for enhancing organizational agility and fostering a culture of shared responsibility, particularly among middle managers who play a pivotal role in bridging strategic goals and operational execution.

1.2. Problem Statement

1.2.1. The Role Ambiguity of Middle Managers in the Context of Distributed Leadership

In the evolving landscape of higher education, middle managers at universities face significant role ambiguity [27,53], especially within the framework of distributed leadership. Traditional hierarchical leadership structures in Chinese universities often assign middle managers administrative and operational duties, limiting their capacity to engage in strategic leadership and innovation [27]. However, distributed leadership emphasizes shared responsibility and collaborative decision-making, requiring middle managers to redefine their roles as facilitators, influencers, and change agents. This shift creates uncertainty regarding role expectations, performance metrics, and leadership competencies. The lack of clarity in these areas can hinder effective leadership practices and impede institutional development.

1.2.2. The Lack of a Defined Transformation Path for Middle Managers in Chinese Universities

Kavanagh [24] advocated that despite the growing adoption of distributed leadership models in higher education, there remains a lack of clearly defined pathways for the role transformation of middle managers. Role transformation is a complex process influenced by institutional culture, leadership support, and individual competencies. In the context of Chinese universities, where top-down leadership approaches have traditionally prevailed, middle managers often struggle in the transition from operational administrators to strategic leaders [44]. The absence of a structured transformation pathway leads to inconsistencies in leadership practices, reduced organizational effectiveness, and missed opportunities for institutional innovation.

1.3. Significance

The study of role transformation among middle managers in Chinese universities under the framework of distributed leadership holds significant value across theoretical, practical, and multi-level perspectives. Theoretically, it enriches the application of distributed leadership theory in the unique context of Chinese higher

education, where cultural, institutional, and policy factors shape leadership practices. From a practical standpoint, the research provides actionable insights for university administrators and middle managers seeking to enhance their leadership effectiveness. On a macro level, this study addresses the broader challenges of higher education reform in China, contributing to the sustainable development of the sector by promoting leadership models that enhance institutional agility and responsiveness. At the meso level, the study offers valuable insights for university administrators and policymakers in designing leadership development programs and organizational structures that facilitate role transformation. On a micro level, the research empowers individual middle managers by providing them with practical tools and strategies to navigate their evolving roles. Ultimately, this research aims to support the sustainable development of Chinese universities by empowering middle managers to lead more effectively in an increasingly complex and dynamic environment.

1.4. Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the role transformation of middle managers under distributed leadership at S University, it has several limitations. First, the research focuses on a single university in Shandong Province, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other institutions with different cultural, organizational, or regional contexts. Second, the study relies on self-reported data from middle managers, which may introduce biases related to subjective perceptions and experiences. Third, the cross-sectional design of the research limits the ability to capture the dynamic and longitudinal aspects of role transformation over time. Finally, while the qualitative-methods approach strengthens the validity of the findings by enabling deep, context-rich insights into participants' lived experiences, this is achieved through strategies such as purposive sampling, thematic coding, triangulation of researcher interpretation, and member checking.

1.5. Summary

This Chapter introduces the research background, highlighting the changing management environment of Chinese universities and the need for middle managers to adapt their roles under distributed leadership. It outlines the research objectives, questions, and significance, emphasizing the study's theoretical, practical, and multi-level contributions. The chapter also acknowledges the limitations of the study, such as its focus on a single institution and reliance on self-reported data, while defining key terms to establish a clear conceptual foundation. This sets the stage for the subsequent exploration of middle managers' role transformation in the context of distributed leadership.

2. Roles and Functions of Middle Managers in Universities

2.1. Positioning and Responsibilities of Middle Managers

Middle managers in universities have traditionally been cast as essential intermediaries, bridging the institutional vision of senior leadership with the day-to-day realities faced by faculty and staff. However, this positioning is not without contradiction. While literature such as Kruse [25] describes them as key implementers of institutional policy and academic standards, this dual function—part administrative executor, part academic leader—often leads to tensions and overlaps. On the surface, middle managers are expected to ensure operational compliance, resource efficiency,

and curriculum quality. Yet, these administrative duties may conflict with their strategic role in promoting innovation and collaboration. This misalignment suggests a need for universities to critically reassess whether the structure and expectations placed on middle managers realistically support these dual demands or merely overload them with role fragmentation.

2.1.1. Challenges in Role Adaptation

One of the primary challenges middle managers face is role ambiguity, which arises from conflicting expectations and unclear boundaries in their responsibilities. In hierarchical structures, they often find themselves caught between the directives of senior leadership and the needs of faculty and staff, leading to tension and stress [14]. For instance, while senior leaders may prioritize institutional goals such as cost efficiency or global rankings, faculty members may emphasize academic freedom and research autonomy. Middle managers must navigate these competing demands, often without clear guidance or support, which can hinder their effectiveness and job satisfaction.

2.1.2. Opportunities for Redefinition

Despite these challenges, middle managers also have opportunities to redefine their roles and contribute to institutional success. By embracing distributed leadership principles, they can foster a culture of collaboration and innovation within their units, empowering faculty and staff to take ownership of their work. This requires a shift in mindset, from viewing their role as one of control and oversight to one of facilitation and support. Ultimately, the ability of middle managers to adapt to their evolving roles will play a crucial role in shaping the future of higher education institutions.

2.1.3. Distributed Leadership Theory

Distributed leadership is a theoretical framework that challenges traditional, hierarchical leadership models by emphasizing the sharing of leadership responsibilities across multiple levels of an organization [19]. Originating from the fields of education and organizational studies, distributed leadership has evolved as a response to the increasing complexity and dynamic nature of modern institutions. Unlike centralized leadership, where authority is concentrated at the top, distributed leadership recognizes that expertise and influence are dispersed throughout an organization. Key principles of this framework include shared responsibility, collaboration, and empowerment. Shared responsibility involves distributing decision-making authority among individuals and teams, fostering a sense of collective ownership. Collaboration emphasizes the importance of teamwork and open communication, enabling diverse perspectives to contribute to problem-solving and innovation. Empowerment focuses on enabling individuals at all levels to take initiative and lead within their areas of expertise, creating a more inclusive and adaptive organizational culture [7].

2.1.4. Application in Higher Education

The benefits of distributed leadership in HEIs are manifold. First, it fosters innovation by leveraging the collective expertise of faculty and staff, encouraging creative solutions to institutional challenges. Second, it enhances adaptability by enabling quicker responses to external changes, such as shifts in educational policies or technological advancements. Third, it promotes a culture of trust and mutual

respect, which can improve job satisfaction and reduce turnover among academic and administrative staff [30]. By empowering individuals at all levels, distributed leadership aligns well with the collaborative and knowledge-driven nature of higher education.

In conclusion, while distributed leadership offers a promising framework for enhancing leadership practices in higher education, its implementation requires careful consideration of institutional context, cultural factors, and potential barriers. By addressing these challenges, HEIs can harness the full potential of distributed leadership to create more inclusive, innovative, and adaptive organizations.

2.2. Role Transformation of Middle Managers

2.2.1. Theoretical Foundations

The transformation of middle managers' roles in higher education institutions (HEIs) can be understood through the lens of role theory, which examines how individuals adapt their behaviors and responsibilities in response to changing expectations and environments [36]. Role theory posits that roles are not static but are shaped by interactions between individuals and their organizational contexts. In the case of middle managers, role transformation involves a shift from traditional administrative and operational duties to more strategic and collaborative leadership functions. This transition is further informed by leadership theories such as transformational leadership and situational leadership. Transformational leadership emphasizes inspiring and motivating others to achieve shared goals, aligning closely with the collaborative nature of distributed leadership [5]. Situational leadership, on the other hand, highlights the importance of adapting leadership styles to specific contexts and challenges, which is particularly relevant for middle managers navigating the complexities of HEIs. Together, these theories provide a robust foundation for understanding how middle managers can redefine their roles to align with distributed leadership principles.

2.2.2. Empirical Studies on Role Transformation

Existing research on middle managers' role transformation in HEIs highlights both facilitators and barriers to this process. Studies [37] have shown that successful role transformation is often facilitated by supportive organizational cultures, clear communication of expectations, and access to professional development opportunities. Researches [38] in Western universities has demonstrated that middle managers who receive training in leadership skills and are empowered to take initiative are more likely to embrace their evolving roles effectively. Additionally, the alignment of institutional goals with middle managers' personal and professional aspirations can enhance their motivation and commitment to role transformation.

However, significant barriers also exist. Institutional resistance to change, particularly in hierarchical or traditionally structured universities, can impede the adoption of new roles. Middle managers may face role ambiguity, where conflicting expectations from senior leaders and faculty create uncertainty about their responsibilities. Cultural factors, such as a preference for top-down decision-making in some contexts, can further complicate the transition. Empirical studies also highlight the importance of leadership support in overcoming these barriers [31]. When senior leaders actively endorse and model distributed leadership practices, middle managers are more likely to feel empowered to transform their roles.

In summary, the role transformation of middle managers in HEIs is a complex process influenced by theoretical principles and empirical insights. By addressing both facilitators and barriers, institutions can create environments that support middle managers in adopting more strategic, collaborative, and adaptive leadership roles, ultimately contributing to the success of distributed leadership initiatives.

2.3. Research Gaps

This study thus addresses these gaps by focusing on S University in Shandong Province, China, as a case study. By examining the role transformation of middle managers within the framework of distributed leadership, the research provides valuable insights into how this leadership model can be applied in Chinese HEIs. It explores the unique challenges and opportunities faced by middle managers in this context, shedding light on the cultural, institutional, and individual factors that influence their ability to adapt to new leadership expectations.

This study fills critical gaps in the literature by exploring the role transformation of middle managers in the context of distributed leadership at S University. Its findings offer valuable insights for both theory and practice, paving the way for future research and supporting the ongoing evolution of leadership practices in higher education.

2.4. Summary

This chapter has provided adequate review of the literature on middle managers' roles, distributed leadership theory, and the process of role transformation in HEIs. It highlighted the challenges and opportunities faced by middle managers in adapting to distributed leadership, emphasizing the importance of leadership behaviors, organizational culture, and individual adaptability. The chapter also identified gaps in the existing literature, particularly in the context of Chinese HEIs. The chapter sets the stage for the empirical investigation of middle managers' role transformation at S University, offering a foundation for both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of higher education leadership.

3. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to comprehensively explore the role transformation of middle managers at S University in Shandong Province under the framework of distributed leadership. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for examining leadership practices and role changes, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, beliefs, and contextual influences [15]. This design facilitates the exploration of how middle managers interpret and navigate their evolving roles within a distributed leadership environment.

Semi-structured interviews serve as the primary method of data collection, enabling open-ended, flexible discussions that uncover the complex and multifaceted nature of leadership role transformation [54]. These interviews are designed to probe key aspects such as shifts in decision-making responsibilities, collaborative practices, and perceived support systems. By capturing the voices of the participants in their own words, the study gains access to rich, context-specific data that highlight individual and organizational dynamics.

This qualitative research design emphasizes depth over breadth, focusing on a purposive sample of middle managers to gain detailed insights into their lived experiences. Rather than relying on statistical generalization, the study aims for

analytical depth, enabling a thorough interpretation of themes, patterns, and variations within the data. This approach aligns with the study's objectives of uncovering challenges, interpreting role adaptation strategies, and contributing meaningful knowledge to the discourse on distributed leadership in higher education.

3.1. Population & Sampling

The study focuses on middle managers at S University in Shandong Province, a middle-sized institution with approximately 13,000 students and 950 faculty and administrative staff. Middle managers—such as department heads, program coordinators, and administrative supervisors—are identified as the primary participants due to their pivotal role in implementing distributed leadership within the university setting. A purposive sampling strategy is employed to select participants who are best positioned to provide in-depth insights into the process of role transformation.

Participants are selected based on several inclusion criteria to ensure relevance and diversity of perspectives. (1) Each participant must have held a middle management position for a minimum of three years to ensure they possess sufficient leadership experience and contextual understanding. (2) Participants must have been actively involved in leadership or administrative decision-making processes that reflect distributed leadership principles, such as shared responsibility or team-based governance. (3) They must have undergone or observed notable shifts in their roles or responsibilities in recent years, particularly related to institutional changes or leadership restructuring. (4) Participants must demonstrate a willingness and ability to reflect critically on their experiences in an interview setting.

A total of six participants are selected to allow for rich, detailed, and context-sensitive exploration of the phenomenon. This sample size aligns with qualitative research standards, which prioritize depth of understanding over statistical representativeness [52]. The purposive sampling approach ensures that the selected participants offer diverse yet thematically relevant experiences, allowing the study to capture key patterns, challenges, and variations in role transformation under distributed leadership.

3.2. Data Collection and Instrument

This study employed semi-structured interviews as the sole method of data collection to explore the role transformation experiences of middle managers at S University under the framework of distributed leadership. This qualitative approach was selected for its ability to yield rich, detailed insights into participants' lived experiences, leadership practices, and organizational dynamics that are not easily captured through quantitative methods.

A total of six participants were purposively selected based on clearly defined criteria (see Section 3.2). Each participant was invited to take part in a one-on-one interview, conducted either face-to-face or through a secure video conferencing platform, depending on availability and convenience. Each interview lasted between 20 to 40 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent to ensure the accuracy of the transcription and subsequent analysis.

The interview guide was developed in alignment with the research objectives and organized into SIX thematic sections:

- (1) role transformation experiences
- (2) leadership practice
- (3) institutional barriers and enablers
- (4) support systems
- (5) personal adaptation
- (6) reflective insights.

Questions were open-ended to encourage detailed and reflective responses. Participants were asked to describe critical incidents that shaped their leadership role, the ways they delegate authority, and their perceptions of institutional culture under distributed leadership.

To ensure the clarity and relevance of the interview questions, a pilot test was conducted with two university staff members who met the general profile of the target participants but were not included in the final sample. Feedback from the pilot interviews was used to refine question wording, sequencing, and the overall flow of the interview. This step helped identify ambiguities and improve the instrument's effectiveness in eliciting meaningful data [21].

Following the development of the final English version of the interview guide, it was translated into Mandarin Chinese to accommodate participants who preferred to speak in their native language. A bilingual expert in education and research translation validated the accuracy and contextual appropriateness of the translation. The process of forward translation, expert review, and minor cultural adjustments was documented and reported to ensure linguistic and conceptual equivalence between versions.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions in Mandarin were translated into English by a qualified translator, and a sample of the translations was back-checked for consistency. These processes collectively ensured the trustworthiness of the data, particularly in terms of credibility and confirmability.

By combining careful instrument design, piloting, and language validation, the study ensured that the data collection process was methodologically sound, culturally appropriate, and aligned with the study's goals of understanding the nuanced transformation of leadership roles in a higher education context.

The interview protocol, which included detailed instructions, thematic question prompts, and ethical considerations such as confidentiality and informed consent, served as a standardized guide for conducting all interviews [40]. This ensured consistency across sessions while allowing for flexibility in follow-up probing. A complete version of the interview protocol is provided in Appendix 1 for reference.

3.3. Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, supported by the use of NVivo software to manage and code the data systematically. Each interview transcript was read multiple times to ensure immersion and familiarity with the content. The analysis followed an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being imposed by predefined categories [46].

The coding process began with the identification of initial open codes that reflected significant statements and experiences shared by participants. These open codes were

then grouped into axial codes, capturing relationships among themes such as “evolving leadership roles,” “decision-making authority,” “institutional culture,” and “professional identity.” Finally, these were organized into overarching thematic categories that aligned with the study's research objectives, including role transformation pathways, challenges and enablers, and leadership adaptation strategies.

To enhance the credibility and dependability of the findings, a second researcher was invited to review a sample of the coded data for cross-checking. Differences in interpretation were discussed and resolved through consensus. Member checking was also conducted by sharing preliminary findings with two participants to validate whether the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences [52]. These procedures strengthened the trustworthiness of the research outcomes and ensured a rigorous and transparent analytic process.

3.4. Summary

This chapter outlined the qualitative methodology used to investigate middle managers' role transformation at S University under distributed leadership. Six participants were purposively selected, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was pilot-tested and translated for clarity. Thematic analysis using NVivo, along with peer checking and participant validation, ensured data credibility. This approach provided a strong basis for exploring leadership transformation in higher education.

4. Demographic Information

This study engaged six middle managers from S University, selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research focus on distributed leadership. The participants represented a wide range of administrative and academic functions, including both academic affairs and support services. Their roles included Department Chair, Associate Dean, College Dean, and Vice President, providing a multi-layered view of leadership practices within the institution. The gender distribution included five male participants and one female, reflecting a gender imbalance that remains common in senior academic leadership roles across many universities [6].

The participants ages were estimated to fall within the 38–51 range, suggesting a mature leadership cohort with significant professional experience. All interviewees held advanced academic or professional degrees relevant to their leadership domains. These included PhDs in Education, Computer Science, Engineering, and Education Policy, as well as an MFA in Fine Arts and an MBA in Finance or Public Administration. This academic diversity underscores the interdisciplinary nature of leadership at S University and reflects the institution's commitment to professional qualifications in managerial appointments.

In terms of service duration, all participants had extensive experience in middle management, ranging from 7 to 14 years. Their specialties included computer science, engineering research, education leadership, fine arts administration, academic policy, and financial planning. Such breadth of expertise enriched the data by capturing unique perspectives from both academic and operational sides of the university. Their long-standing involvement in institutional governance provided deep insight into the evolving expectations and challenges of middle management roles under distributed leadership frameworks.

The participants were drawn from a range of departments and offices, including the Colleges of Engineering, Education, Fine Arts, Mechanical and Electrical Engineering, and central administrative units such as the Provost Office and Finance Division. Their job responsibilities varied widely—spanning curriculum development, research coordination, budgeting, logistical management, and faculty governance—yet all shared a common engagement with strategic planning and collaborative decision-making, making them ideal informants for this study (Table 1).

Table 1. *Demographic and Professional Characteristics of Interview Participants.*

ID	Gender	Age	Educational Background	Length of Service	Specialty	Working Institution	Position	Job Duties
01	Male	38	PhD in Computer Science	7 years	Computer Science	College of Engineering and Applied Sciences	Department Chair	Curriculum, Scheduling, Faculty Mentorship
02	Female	50	PhD in Education	11 years	Education Management	College of Education	Associate Dean for Academic Affairs	Curriculum Oversight, Faculty Development, Accreditation
03	Male	41	MFA in Fine Arts	14 years	Fine Arts / Oil Painting	College of Fine Arts	Chair of Oil Painting Department	Curriculum, Faculty Evaluation, Exhibitions
04	Male	47	PhD in Education Policy	12 years	Academic Affairs / Policy	Provost Office	Dean of Academic Affairs	Curriculum Policy, Faculty Governance, Strategic Reforms
05	Male	47	PhD in Engineering	12 years	Engineering Research	College of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering	Associate Dean for Research and Innovation	Research Oversight, Industry Partnerships
06	Male	51	MBA / Public Administration	12 years	Finance and Logistics	Finance and Logistics	Vice President of Finance and Logistics	Budgeting, Financial Planning, Logistics Management

4.1. Evolving Role Identities under Distributed Leadership

This section responds to Research Question 1 (RQ1): *What are the role characteristics of middle managers under distributed leadership at S University in Shandong Province?* Thematic analysis of the interview data reveals a significant redefinition of role identities among middle managers as they transition from traditional, hierarchical leadership roles to more collaborative, facilitative positions. The evidence suggests that distributed leadership has introduced a new set of

expectations—emphasizing empowerment, shared decision-making, and role flexibility. (Table 2)

Table 2. Overview of Evolving Role Identities under Distributed Leadership.

Respondent (P#)	Original Response	Code	Emergent Theme
Interviewee_1	“Initially, my role was very top-down... now, it’s more about facilitation.”	Shift from directive to facilitative	From Command to Collaboration
Interviewee_2	“I convene faculty working groups to redesign programs rather than imposing changes.”	Shared governance leadership	From Command to Collaboration
Interviewee_4	“I translate top-level strategies into something faculty can act on.”	Dual accountability role	Navigating Dual Allegiances
Interviewee_6	“I reserve specific times weekly to review strategic objectives...”	Time-bounded strategic planning	Strategic Agency and Adaptive Capacity
Interviewee_5	“We’re no longer just managing; we’re shaping strategy within our zones.”	Strategic leadership engagement	Strategic Agency and Adaptive Capacity
Interviewee_3	“My role was to provide resources and remove barriers, not to dictate the outcome.”	Enablement-focused leadership	From Command to Collaboration

Theme 1: From Command to Collaboration

Middle managers consistently described their evolving roles as moving away from top-down control toward collaborative engagement. Interviewee_1 explained, “Initially, my role was very top-down... now, it’s more about facilitation,” capturing a broad trend toward enabling rather than directing faculty teams. This shift in leadership function was also reflected in Interviewee_2’s narrative: “I convene faculty working groups to redesign programs rather than imposing changes,” emphasizing a clear departure from authoritative practices.

Such transformation aligns with distributed leadership theory, which views leadership as the outcome of interactions among individuals rather than the sole function of a single actor (Braganza & Aldhean, 2020). In this context, the authority of middle managers is dispersed and activated through influence rather than formal power. As TABLE 4-2 .

Theme 2: Navigating Dual Allegiances

Participants also described the complexity of serving as a “bridge” between senior leadership and departmental staff. As Interviewee_4 noted, “I translate top-level strategies into something faculty can act on,” highlighting their intermediary role. This dual accountability requires a careful balance of strategic alignment with institutional goals and responsiveness to departmental needs.

This theme echoes role theory, particularly the concept of role strain, where individuals must manage conflicting expectations from multiple stakeholders [29,47]. In the Chinese higher education context, the tension between hierarchical norms and emerging collaborative cultures intensifies this challenge.

Theme 3: Strategic Agency and Adaptive Capacity

Another emergent role characteristic was the growing emphasis on strategic thinking. Interviewee_6 shared, “I reserve specific times weekly to review strategic

objectives and delegate day-to-day operational tasks to my managers,” reflecting a deliberate effort to maintain long-term focus amid operational demands. Similarly, Interviewee_5 emphasized, *“We’re no longer just managing; we’re shaping strategy within our zones.”*

This evolution suggests an enhanced strategic agency, where middle managers are not merely implementers but contributors to institutional innovation. Their role has become more integrative, requiring them to simultaneously coordinate, advocate, and adapt.

The analysis reveals that middle managers at S University are redefining their roles in response to the principles of distributed leadership. Their responsibilities now extend beyond administrative oversight to include facilitation, strategic alignment, and relational leadership. These findings reinforce the view that leadership roles are not static but are socially constructed and contextually reshaped through institutional reform and cultural negotiation.

4.2. Challenges and Opportunities in Role Transformation

This section addresses RQ2: What challenges and opportunities do middle managers face in the process of role transformation? Through thematic analysis of the interview data, three major themes emerged: institutional ambiguity and structural inertia, cultural tension in leadership transition, and professional growth as an emergent opportunity. These themes capture both the barriers and enablers middle managers encounter as they attempt to redefine their leadership roles under a distributed framework (Table 3).

Table 3. Overview of Challenges and Opportunities in Role Transformation.

Respondent (P#)	Original Response	Code	Emergent Theme
Interviewee_2	“I’m expected to lead change, but there’s no framework or support to back it up.”	Lack of structural support	Institutional Ambiguity and Inertia
Interviewee_5	“Policies shift often... I’m constantly adapting to confusion.”	Organizational inconsistency	Institutional Ambiguity and Inertia
Interviewee_6	“Cultural expectation is to defer to senior leaders... that clashes.”	Cultural contradiction	Cultural Tension in Leadership
Interviewee_3	“Staff are used to just following orders. It takes time to change that mindset.”	Resistance to participation	Cultural Tension in Leadership
Interviewee_4	“Now I’m part of strategic planning meetings...”	Strategic engagement opportunity	Professional Growth as Opportunity
Interviewee_1	“This transition forced me to build new skills.”	Leadership skills development	Professional Growth as Opportunity

Theme 1: Institutional Ambiguity and Structural Inertia

Many participants reported difficulties stemming from vague role definitions and inconsistent institutional structures. These issues hindered their ability to enact leadership collaboratively and often left them caught between competing expectations.

Interviewee_2 remarked, *“Sometimes I’m expected to lead change, but there’s no framework or support to back it up. It’s like being asked to innovate without a toolbox.”* Similarly, Interviewee_5 shared, *“Policies shift often, but there is little coordination across departments. I feel like I’m constantly adapting to confusion.”*

This reflects institutional ambiguity, where structural gaps and unclear policies constrain effective leadership [34]. In Chinese universities, where administrative cultures are deeply hierarchical, institutional inertia often resists the decentralizing logic of distributed leadership.

Theme 2: Cultural Tension in Leadership Transition

Participants also highlighted the struggle to navigate between traditional hierarchical norms and the emerging ethos of shared leadership. This cultural contradiction created significant stress and conflict.

As Interviewee_6 explained, *“There’s a cultural expectation to defer to senior leaders. But distributed leadership asks me to empower my team. Sometimes those clash.”* Interviewee_3 added, *“You want to involve staff in decisions, but they are used to just following orders. It takes time to change that mindset.”*

These insights align with role conflict theory [23], where individuals are caught between competing behavioral expectations. The dual demands of conforming to hierarchical values while promoting distributed practices pose a unique cultural challenge.

Theme 3: Professional Growth as Opportunity

Despite these barriers, middle managers also identified significant opportunities for growth. Distributed leadership created space for enhanced strategic agency and broader institutional influence.

Interviewee_4 noted, *“In the past, I was only concerned with day-to-day tasks. Now I’m part of strategic planning meetings with senior leadership. That’s a big change.”* Interviewee_1 echoed this, saying, *“This transition forced me to build new skills—team facilitation, data-based decision-making—I feel more competent.”*

These reflections resonate with transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes leadership development and capacity-building as key to organizational change [1]. For many, the shift to distributed leadership served as a catalyst for expanding their leadership identity.

In summary, middle managers at S University face notable tensions in their role transformation, particularly due to institutional ambiguity and cultural inertia. However, the process also opens space for growth, self-reflection, and professional reinvention. These findings suggest that while distributed leadership presents implementation challenges, it can also foster long-term capacity-building and adaptive leadership culture when supported appropriately.

4.3. Transformation Pathways: Navigating the Shift to Distributed Leadership

This section responds to Research Question 3 (RQ3): What are the effective transformation pathways for middle managers from the perspective of distributed leadership? Based on qualitative analysis of the interviews, participants revealed a set of actionable strategies and conditions that enabled them to shift from traditional, directive roles to more distributed and collaborative leadership models. The thematic analysis generated three core transformation pathways: (1) Strategic Empowerment and Delegation, (2) Reflective Practice and Identity Shift, and (3) Structural and Cultural Enablement (Table 4).

Table 4. Overview of Transformation Pathways: Navigating the Shift to Distributed Leadership.

Respondent (P#)	Original Response	Code	Emergent Theme
Interviewee_6	"I delegated substantial decision-making to departmental heads..."	Empowerment through delegation	Strategic Empowerment and Delegation
Interviewee_5	"I encouraged junior staff to co-lead the curriculum review..."	Shared leadership practice	Strategic Empowerment and Delegation
Interviewee_3	"I often ask myself—did I guide or dominate today?"	Reflective self-assessment	Reflective Practice and Identity Shift
Interviewee_4	"Through reflection and peer feedback, I see leadership more as facilitation..."	Identity redefinition via reflection	Reflective Practice and Identity Shift
Interviewee_1	"My dean gave me the freedom to experiment with how I ran meetings."	Autonomy support from superiors	Structural and Cultural Enablement
Interviewee_2	"Cross-department workshops shaped how I now operate."	Cultural modeling of leadership norms	Structural and Cultural Enablement

Theme 1: Strategic Empowerment and Delegation

Middle managers emphasized the importance of distributing decision-making power to colleagues and subordinates as a key step in their leadership transformation. This process involved intentional delegation and empowering others to lead within their spheres.

Interviewee_6 reflected, *"I delegated substantial decision-making to departmental heads... that marked the beginning of distributed leadership in practice."* Similarly, Interviewee_5 noted, *"I encouraged junior staff to co-lead the curriculum review—it boosted their confidence and freed me to focus on strategic issues."* These actions highlight a conscious move toward shared agency and strategic focus, reducing over-centralization and creating leadership at multiple levels.

Theme 2: Reflective Practice and Identity Shift

Transformation was not only structural but also personal. Middle managers described their growth in self-awareness and a shift in how they perceived their roles.

Interviewee_3 stated, *"I often ask myself—did I guide or dominate today? That question helps me adjust."* Interviewee_4 added, *"Through reflection and feedback from peers, I've come to see leadership more as facilitation than instruction."* Such comments reveal how internal cognitive and emotional processing contributes to transforming leadership identities.

Theme 3: Structural and Cultural Enablement

While personal agency was critical, participants also stressed that successful transformation required systemic support, including organizational norms, mentorship, and alignment with senior leadership.

Interviewee_1 noted, *"My dean gave me the freedom to experiment with how I ran meetings. That autonomy made a big difference."* Interviewee_2 similarly said, *"We had cross-department workshops that modeled team-based leadership—those*

experiences shaped how I now operate.” These narratives underscore the importance of institutional environments that reinforce rather than resist role redefinition.

Transformation pathways for middle managers at S University were both internally and externally driven. Empowerment strategies, personal reflection, and organizational reinforcement worked synergistically to enable role redefinition. These pathways provide practical insight into how universities can cultivate adaptive, distributed leadership cultures—paving the way for deeper structural reform and innovation.

4.4. Summary

This chapter presented the findings of the qualitative study investigating the role transformation of middle managers under distributed leadership at S University. Drawing from in-depth interviews with six participants, the data revealed nuanced insights into the evolving role characteristics, the challenges and opportunities encountered during the transformation process, and the pathways through which this transformation occurs.

In response to RQ1, middle managers were found to adopt multifaceted roles, balancing traditional responsibilities with emerging collaborative functions. They increasingly positioned themselves as facilitators of shared governance, boundary-spanners, and influencers of institutional culture. Addressing RQ2, participants highlighted significant barriers to transformation, such as institutional ambiguity and cultural resistance, but also identified professional growth and expanded strategic involvement as meaningful opportunities. Regarding RQ3, transformation pathways were anchored in strategic delegation, self-reflection, and organizational support—each of which contributed to the internalization and practice of distributed leadership principles.

Collectively, these findings emphasize that middle manager transformation is not merely a structural reassignment but a developmental journey requiring cognitive shifts, relational strategies, and systemic alignment. The results set the foundation for the following chapter, which will critically discuss these findings in light of existing theories, propose practical implications, and offer recommendations for policy and leadership development in higher education.

5. Discussion of Key Findings

This section critically discusses the study’s main findings in relation to the three research questions. It examines the evolving roles, challenges, and transformation pathways of middle managers under distributed leadership at S University. Each subsection corresponds directly to one research question and integrates findings with existing literature to interpret their significance in the Chinese higher education context. The discussion focuses on the realities of role transformation, the conditions that influence it, and implications for leadership in hierarchical institutional cultures.

RQ1: What are the role characteristics of middle managers under distributed leadership?

The study reveals a shift in the roles of middle managers from task-based administrative coordination toward more strategic and collaborative functions. While traditionally confined to operational oversight, middle managers are now increasingly expected to contribute to institutional planning, lead team initiatives, and facilitate

academic innovation. This evolution reflects a broader institutional recognition of their capacity to bridge academic and administrative domains, resonating with Whitchurch's (2008) concept of "third-space" professionals who transcend conventional role boundaries. Middle managers are expected to interpret and implement university-wide reforms, yet often without sufficient structural autonomy. Their involvement in strategic discussions—such as on program development or team restructuring—signals progress toward distributed leadership, but the degree of influence remains constrained by centralized decision-making cultures.

RQ2: What challenges and opportunities do middle managers face in the process of role transformation?

Distributed leadership has opened up new spaces for involvement in collaborative initiatives and strategic decision-making, particularly in curriculum reforms and interdepartmental projects. Some middle managers are gradually developing more horizontal relationships with peers and senior leaders, fostering trust and mutual accountability. However, these opportunities are heavily dependent on the presence of enabling leadership cultures. Without senior-level modeling and policy reinforcement, distributed leadership risks becoming aspirational rather than operational.

RQ3: What are the effective transformation pathways for middle managers under distributed leadership?

The study indicates that successful transformation relies on a combination of personal, relational, and structural factors. Middle managers who adapted well exhibited high levels of professional reflexivity and emotional intelligence. Their ability to reflect on leadership practices, learn from peer interactions, and reposition themselves as facilitators rather than controllers was a key enabler of role transformation. At the relational level, transformation was supported by peer networks, mentoring, and cross-functional teamwork. Informal communities of practice allowed middle managers to exchange strategies, reduce isolation, and co-develop solutions. These interactions cultivated leadership confidence and modeled collaborative norms. However, the study found that these supports were often ad hoc and lacked institutional coordination, suggesting a need for more formalized mentoring schemes and leadership communities.

Structurally, transformation was most effective when middle managers received clear strategic direction, flexible autonomy, and visible support from senior leadership. In units where leaders encouraged experimentation and distributed tasks purposefully, middle managers were more willing to take ownership of new roles. Yet such cases were exceptions rather than the rule, indicating the necessity for university-wide systems that reinforce distributed leadership through policy, evaluation, and professional development.

5.1. Implications

This study offers both theoretical and practical implications by examining the role transformation of middle managers within the framework of distributed leadership in a Chinese university context. The research sheds light on how middle managers navigate evolving responsibilities amid cultural, institutional, and organizational constraints, providing valuable insight into the alignment of leadership practices with systemic and contextual realities.

5.1.1. Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this study enriches the understanding of distributed leadership by illustrating how its principles are adapted within hierarchical and collectivist educational systems. Unlike Western contexts where flat structures and participatory norms are assumed (Lu & Smith, 2024), this research reveals that Chinese universities require a recalibration of distributed leadership models to reflect embedded power dynamics and the persistence of top-down accountability. It suggests that distributed leadership, in such environments, operates more as a negotiated practice than a structural redesign.

Additionally, the study expands role transformation theory by emphasizing that role change among middle managers is not only functional but also deeply identity-related. Managers must balance behavioral shifts with cognitive reinterpretation of their professional roles in response to unclear authority structures and evolving expectations [17]. This highlights the importance of both individual agency and institutional support in shaping leadership adaptation.

5.1.2. Practical Implications

Practically, the findings underline the necessity for institutional leaders to provide middle managers with clearer role definitions, decision-making autonomy, and supportive leadership development programs. Without structured guidance and recognition systems, distributed leadership risks being symbolic rather than substantive.

Moreover, fostering professional learning environments—such as peer mentorship, cross-departmental collaboration, and reflective dialogue—can enhance leadership confidence and innovation. Institutions must move beyond policy rhetoric to implement concrete, culturally responsive strategies that enable middle managers to lead effectively. This calls for deliberate organizational reform to ensure that distributed leadership is not only ideologically endorsed but also operationally supported at all levels.

5.2. Recommendations

The transformation of middle managers' roles under distributed leadership in Chinese higher education is a complex and evolving process. Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made to guide future academic inquiry, policy development, and institutional practice. These recommendations aim to enhance the effectiveness of distributed leadership and support the professional growth and strategic contribution of middle managers.

5.2.1. For Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights from a single university context, there is a clear need for broader and more comparative research. Future studies could adopt a multi-case comparative approach involving different institutional types, such as research-focused, teaching-oriented, vocational, or private universities. This would allow researchers to examine how organizational scale, mission, and governance structures influence the implementation of distributed leadership and the role transformation of middle managers.

Additionally, cross-cultural comparative studies would be especially useful. Comparing Chinese universities with those in other systems—such as the United Kingdom, Australia, or Singapore—could provide insight into how cultural factors

such as power distance, communication norms, and institutional hierarchy affect leadership distribution and professional identity formation. Such research could refine the theoretical adaptability of distributed leadership across diverse educational settings.

Given the qualitative nature of this study, there is also potential to complement future research with quantitative approaches. Survey instruments assessing constructs such as role clarity, leadership self-efficacy, or perceived institutional support would offer generalizable data and facilitate the testing of hypotheses across broader samples. Mixed-method studies could triangulate findings, enhancing both depth and breadth.

Furthermore, longitudinal research would allow for the examination of role transformation over time, capturing how institutional reforms, leadership training, or organizational changes impact middle managers' roles and identities. Such studies could track how sustained support—or the lack thereof—influences outcomes such as job satisfaction, leadership retention, and institutional performance.

Finally, future research should include other stakeholders' perspectives, including those of senior leaders, frontline academic staff, and even students. Understanding how different groups perceive the role of middle managers in leadership processes can offer a more comprehensive view of distributed leadership's institutional dynamics and help identify gaps in perception, support, or communication.

5.2.2. For Policy

At the policy level, there is a pressing need for clear national or institutional guidelines that formally define and support the leadership roles of middle managers. Currently, many middle managers operate in a gray area, with vague mandates and limited authority. Policymakers in ministries of education and university councils should issue policy frameworks that explicitly recognize the strategic role of middle managers within distributed governance structures.

These policies should be accompanied by revised evaluation and promotion criteria that align with the expectations of distributed leadership. Rather than focusing solely on administrative compliance or output metrics, evaluation systems should consider collaborative behaviors, initiative-taking, mentorship, and strategic contribution. Policy alignment in this area would provide legitimacy to the evolving functions of middle managers and encourage a leadership mindset across academic units.

5.2.3. For Practice

At the institutional level, university leaders and academic units should work to create environments that support the evolving roles of middle managers. First, there should be a systematic clarification of role expectations. Job descriptions, strategic priorities, and reporting structures must be aligned so that middle managers understand their scope of authority and accountability. Ambiguity in this area undermines leadership confidence and impedes collaborative engagement.

Second, institutions should invest in establishing peer support networks and mentorship programs. Middle managers often experience isolation or role overload. Creating structured platforms for dialogue, experience sharing, and peer coaching can enhance leadership competence and psychological resilience. These networks can also serve as incubators for innovation and problem-solving.

Third, cross-functional collaboration should be institutionally embedded. Encouraging middle managers to lead or participate in interdisciplinary initiatives, task forces, or strategy development processes can foster a distributed culture and reduce departmental silos. Leadership responsibilities should be rotated or shared to cultivate a broader sense of ownership and inclusivity.

Fourth, senior leadership must model distributed values in their practice. When senior administrators actively involve middle managers in strategic planning, consult them on reform processes, and delegate meaningful responsibilities, it signals trust and respect. This top-down modeling is crucial in cultures where authority is traditionally concentrated.

Finally, internal communication and recognition systems should be strengthened. Celebrating leadership contributions, sharing success stories, and openly acknowledging middle managers' roles in institutional achievements can reinforce their legitimacy and foster a sense of purpose. Recognition—both symbolic and material—is a vital component of sustaining role transformation.

6. Conclusions

This study examined the role transformation of middle managers at S University within the framework of distributed leadership. It revealed that middle managers are increasingly expected to shift from traditional administrative oversight to more strategic, facilitative, and collaborative leadership roles. Their transformation is shaped by both institutional structures and personal agency, and is often challenged by role ambiguity, cultural resistance, and lack of systemic support. Nevertheless, distributed leadership offers a valuable framework to empower middle managers and enhance organizational agility, provided it is implemented with clear expectations, supportive policies, and a conducive cultural environment.

The findings contribute to the theoretical discourse on distributed leadership and role transformation, particularly within the Chinese higher education context. By addressing how middle managers experience and navigate change, the study not only fills existing research gaps but also provides practical strategies for institutional leaders and policymakers. Ultimately, the study concludes that supporting middle managers through structural alignment, leadership development, and cultural reform is essential for realizing the full potential of distributed leadership in higher education institutions.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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