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Strategies for sustaining teachers' engagement by heads of departments in higher education institutions in Cameroon: Insights from Ubuntu

Abstract

Higher education institutions in Cameroon have undergone a major transformation (since the 1993 reforms) with a major objective to improve on the quality of graduates. However, concerns about leaders who are central to the implementation of these reforms have not been taken seriously. We live in a multicultural context, especially in Cameroon with diverse cultures and national languages, thus the issue of leadership is relevant for organisational productivity. Premised on the basis that the quality of education depends on the quality of teachers, this paper presents heads of departments' (HODs) perspectives on how their leadership practices sustain teachers' engagement in higher education institutions in Cameroon grounded in the philosophy of Ubuntu. It is a qualitative study that involved interviews with heads of departments (n=63) from state and private HE institutions in Cameroon, where thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data. The results revealed that HODs used five major strategies which focused on engaging teachers in the mission and vision of the institution, problem-solving, decision-making, shared responsibilities and staff development approaches. These strategies improved management, social capital and the capacity building of teachers.

Keywords: Higher Education, Leadership, Teachers' Engagement, *Ubuntu*¹

¹ Peer-reviewed article based on a paper presented at the international conference on Researching education decolonially: Towards alternative Global South epistemologies held at the University of Buea in Cameroon from 6 to 8 July 2023. The aim of this conference was to explore ways in which educational research in Africa and the Global South in general could be situated in non-western paradigms to challenge the epistemological foundations of modernism and to delink research from Eurocentric thought. External project leaders: 1) Professor Roland Ndille, department of history and policy of education and principal investigator at the Global South Epistemologies Research Centre at the University of Buea, Cameroon and 2) Professor Boitumelo (Tumi) Diale, formerly from the educational psychology department, University of Johannesburg



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1. Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in Cameroon have undergone a major transformation since 1993 with a major objective to improve the quality of graduates. However, concerns about leaders who are the major drivers of these reforms have not been given serious attention. Because of multiculturalism and multilingualism in Cameroon, leadership is relevant for organisational productivity. Thus, there is a need to emphasise leadership and multiculturalism to ensure the effective management of schools today (Pansiri *et al.*, 2021). Leadership deals more with the management of human resources, and this has a strong base on the human aspect of the organisation. This makes leadership crucial for employee engagement. Lerutla and Steyn (2022) contend that this should be contextual in its implementation for optimal employee output.

Based on the assumption that the quality of education depends on the quality of teachers, this paper presents heads of departments' (HODs) perspectives on how their leadership practices sustain teachers' engagement in HEIs in Cameroon, supported by the philosophy of *Ubuntu*. As a qualitative study, two major research questions serve as a guide (a) What are the strategies used by HODs to sustain teachers' engagement? (b) What are the positive organisational changes experienced as a result of teachers' engagement?

2. Leadership and teachers' engagement

Teachers' engagement is the ability and willingness to contribute to organisational success, especially their willingness to give discretionary effort, going beyond what is typically required in their position to make the organisation successful (Rana & Chopra 2019). This must be nurtured and developed by the leader through interpersonal relationships (*ibid*). Therefore, educational leaders' knowledge of their role in enhancing teachers' engagement is relevant for school improvement (Hellbusch, 2022). One of such roles is the collaborative workgroup which differs with context (Patrick, 2022). Patrick's research on "school leadership and teachers' engagement in collaboration" revealed that teachers collaborate more under a conducive climate than the administrative climate. She recommends that leaders enhance regular collaboration but with the involvement of the teachers in the decision-making process (Patrick, 2022). Another approach identified to improve employees' engagement is job demands such as work-related stress and expectations which is linked to training and development, career development and organisational development leadership (Aniku & Wyk, 2024). This implies that a leadership approach that stimulates teachers' engagement is relevant to teachers' development (Park *et al.*, 2016).

TL behaviour is grounded by four major components: charisma or idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and personal and individual attention. Idealised influence requires leaders to provide a sense of mission and vision to followers' trust and respect which enhances employee engagement (Mdletshe & Nzimakwe, 2023). Inspirational motivation encourages team spirit which is essential for achieving sustainable innovation (Koeslag-Kreunen *et al.*, 2021). Intellectual stimulation requires that leaders challenge assumptions, take risks and help followers think outside the box (Koeslag-Kreunen *et al.*, 2021). Personal and individual attention requires leaders to acknowledge every follower's needs, provide support and empathy, and consider the individual's talents, background and situation. This creates a sense of belonging, self-confidence and self-worth. Applying this theory to a school system, Abbasi and Samani-Miandashti (2013) found a positive correlation

between TL and organisational learning and the performance of teachers in Iran. A similar study by Alzoraiki *et al.* (2023), revealed a positive effect of transformational leadership on teachers' commitment and sustainable teaching performance.

A previous study on heads of departments' leadership styles in Hong Kong universities revealed that HODs employed transformational and transactional leadership styles which influenced academic job satisfaction in diverse ways. However, transformational leadership was more dominant in influencing academic job satisfaction (Mgaiwa, 2023). This supports a similar study by Etomes *et al.* (2021) in Cameroon higher education institutions where HODs practise transformational their teachers with transformational leadership having a significant positive effect in both state and private higher education institutions. While effective leadership in universities is required to foster growth, the Academic Leadership Group (ALG) (2023) says transformational leadership and servant leadership are more effective while transactional and laissez-faire leadership styles are less effective. Findings from Oghogu and Ademola (2018) revealed that HODs in Nigerian Federal universities utilised diverse leadership styles such as democratic, transactional, transformational and charismatic. Their choice of leadership style depended on the set goals to be attained, availability of working facilities, cultural environment, attitude of subordinates, job stress, leadership patterns of colleagues, past leadership experience and personal temperament. This implies that they practise the situational leadership style because the choice of leadership style depends on the situation.

3. Leadership and *Ubuntu*

Ubuntu is a "humane" style of governance based on collective solidarity and communality rather than individualism and particularity (Nzimakwe, 2014). Imbibing the philosophy of *Ubuntu* in leadership is relevant for ensuring good governance (Nzimakwe, 2014) because it ensures inclusive practice which is a call for concern to enhance the performance of contemporary higher education in Africa (Shanyanana & Waghid 2016). It encourages equal participation, transparency, and accountability, and protects human rights (Murithi, 2009) which enhances interpersonal relationships and teachers' engagement (Davis, 2021). The principles of *Ubuntu* such as sharing of opportunities, responsibilities and challenges, participatory decision-making and reconciliation are key to effective leadership (Mulaudzi, 2007). Botha and Claassens (2010) argue that the practice of *Ubuntu* includes teamwork and attention to relationships which require empathy between a leader and the follower. It requires team members to consider both individual and team goals for the success of their organisation. As such, Mayaka and Truell (2021) describe *Ubuntu* as people-centric, inclusion and a sense of community. It focuses on the humane aspect of leadership which is relevant for engaging employees to higher productivity. According to Setlhodi (2019), *Ubuntu* Leadership is substantial for responding to the African way of life that improves school performance. That is, what it means to be a leader in the African context?

In examining perceived heads of departments infusion of the *Ubuntu* value in curriculum and knowledge sharing leadership in South Africa, Nkambule (2023) found that most HODs used democratic (participative), autocratic, transactional, transformational and managerial leadership styles alongside the instructional leadership style to strengthen their instructional leadership role. However, participative and transformational leadership styles were found to foster the ethos of *Ubuntu* in HODs' instructional leadership role. This enhanced curriculum delivery processes and knowledge-sharing behaviour among teachers as well as between HODs and teachers.

4. Methodology

Research design: The study employed an exploratory research design of the qualitative approach. It is a nationwide study that involved heads of departments (HODs) from n=8 state and n=53 accredited private higher education institutions in Cameroon.

Sample population and Instrument: The study purposively selected heads of departments (n=63) from state (n=36) and private (n=27) HE institutions in Cameroon for interviews. Even though the private HEIs were far more than the state, the state HEIs are far more populated and most of the teachers in the private HEIs are from state HEIs. Also, some private HEIs do not have HODs but one or two directors of schools who manage all the departments. It was also observed that some of the HODs in the State HEIs also work as HODs in the private HEIs. This limited the sample in the private HEIs. However, only HODs with at least five years of experience in their current position were considered for the study. This is because the researcher considered experience as a major indicator for HODs to provide in-depth information required for the study. Proportionate sampling was used to ensure that HEIs in each region were represented in the study and also to select the number of HODs in each institution. The purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to select each HOD for an interview. An interview guide was used to collect data using face-to-face meetings, online Zoom meetings, WhatsApp calls and phone calls.

Data analysis: The Thematic Content Analysis used for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns for qualitative data (Braun & Clark, 2019) included relevant sub-themes and sample quotations developed from the direct statements of the participants. The themes refer to the umbrella words which capture the main idea of the participants' statements. All participants were assigned codes as follows:

- i. HODs in State HEIs were assigned as HS1, HS2, HS36
- ii. HODs in private HEIs were assigned as HP1, HP2,HP27

Ethical consideration: Participants' consent was solicited before participation – they were not pressured to participate as they read the consent form and agreed to participate in the interview. Participants were given at least a week and at most two weeks to participate in the interview session. This gave them ample time to read the information sheet and consent form and make their decision whether to participate or not. The anonymity of participants was ensured by assigning codes. In addition, a letter of authorisation and ethical clearance was given by the University of Buea Research Unit where the researcher is attached, to carry out this research project. This guaranteed access to other higher education institutions.

5. Findings

These results are presented with respect to the two major objectives of the study which include the strategies used by HODs to enhance teachers' engagement and the positive organisational changes experienced as a result of teachers' engagement.

5.1 Leadership strategies used by HODs to enhance teachers' engagement

Heads of departments from state and private HEIs were probed on how they engage their teachers to accomplish the goals and objectives of education. Themes were developed from their responses which did not show much variation in the leadership strategy used by

HODs in state and private HEIs. The five major themes identified include a focus on the mission and vision of the institution, problem-solving, shared responsibilities, teamwork and staff development.

a. Engaging teachers to focus on the mission and vision of HEIs: Figure 1 shows the leadership strategies used by HODs for teachers' engagement with regard to the mission and vision of the institution.

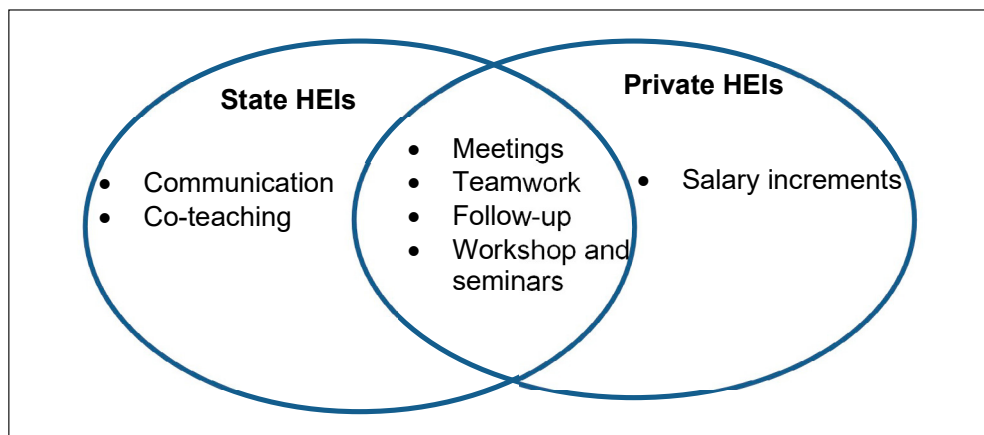


Figure 1: Engaging teachers in the mission and vision of HEIs

From Figure 1, both state and private HEIs used meetings, teamwork, follow-up, workshops and seminars to engage teachers in the mission and vision of the institution as depicted in some of their direct statements:

"I usually organise meetings with teachers to explain and inform them on the mission and vision and together, we discuss it and develop action plans on how to achieve them". (HP4, HS20).

Similarly, another participant expressed that:

"We usually organise workshops and seminars to enable teachers to follow the mission and vision of the institution. For example, during the COVID-19 lockdown, we had to provide training to enable teachers to go online. We also have a focal point who helps or assists our teachers when they have difficulties with the online platform." (HS15)

New policies are discussed regularly in departmental meetings to keep teachers informed and engaged in the attainment of the mission and vision of the department. Also, HODs encourage teamwork to ensure that teachers engage to attain the mission and vision of the department. They acknowledge teamwork as an informal approach to the professional development of staff.

Concerning the follow-up of teachers to ensure engagement, the approach differs in sectors, that is, state and private HEIs. On the one hand, HODs in state HEIs follow up teachers to know the extent to which they are doing the job effectively and identify challenges. This allows them to put in measures as a team to overcome these challenges for effectiveness and efficiency. For issues relating to teaching, co-teaching is usually encouraged to support the less knowledgeable teachers in specific areas of deficiency. On the other hand, the follow-up

practices by HODs in private HEIs were based more on reward and sanction. They follow up teachers to ensure they do what they are expected to do strictly on the table without attention to their personal challenges. Teachers with lateness and absenteeism were sanctioned by way of salary cuts and sometimes dismissal while teachers who were considered hardworking had an increase in salaries or received other bonuses.

To enhance communication, HODs in state universities put measures to inform teachers about relevant information and also make themselves available to attend to teachers' worries or at least listen to them. According to HODs, effective communication is relevant for teachers' engagement because it provides teachers the opportunity to express themselves and gives them access to relevant information that enables them to do their job effectively and efficiently. One of the HODs reported that:

"We focus more on communication to enable the lecturers to clearly understand the policies and dynamism of the school". (HS11).

b. Engaging teachers through problem-solving: One of the strategies that HODs use to ensure effective teacher engagement is resolving problems that arise among teachers and even between the administration and teachers. Most of the problems are associated with course distribution, supervision of students, tribalism, favouritism, co-teaching and timetables for teaching hours. Figure 2 presents problem-solving approaches used by HODs in state and private HEIs that enhance their engagement.

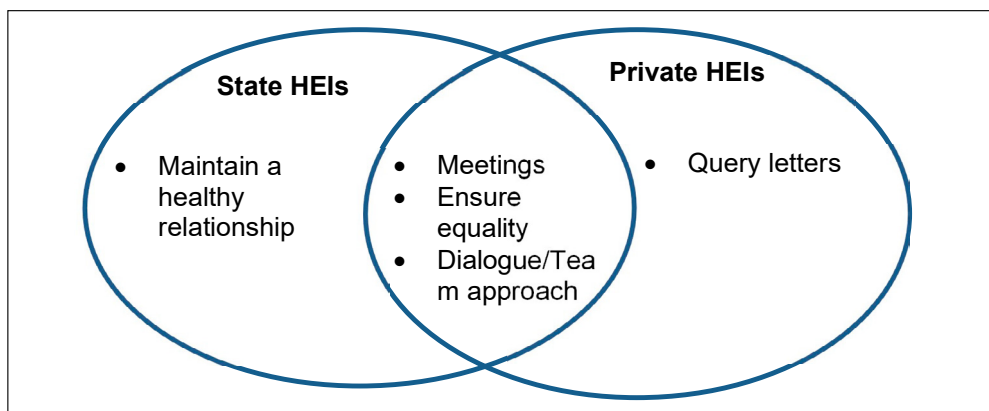


Figure 2: Engaging teachers through problem-solving

HODs in state and private higher education institutions resolve problems among teachers through meetings, ensure equal treatment of teachers and through dialogue or team approach. For instance, one of the HODs reported that:

"We used to have some problems especially at the beginning of a semester when it comes to course distribution. We usually have the problem of some lecturers saying I cannot teach this, this lecturer cannot teach this, etc. Also, issues of time allocation for teaching like you find some lecturers saying am not available to teach on this day. When such situations come up, we encourage negotiations between lecturers if they can solve the problem by themselves like swapping but when they cannot solve the problem between them, we call for a departmental meeting". (HS17)

HODs mostly organise meetings to resolve problems especially those relating to course distribution. During such meetings, all teachers are involved, and courses are distributed based on the speciality, rank (e.g., assistant lecturer, lecturer, associate professor and professor) and post of responsibility. The HODs ensure equity during such meetings because it has financial implications such as payment of extra hours, mostly applicable to state institutions.

However, while HODs in state HEIs try to maintain a healthy relationship in solving a problem, HODs in private HEIs use more of query letters as depicted in some of their statements:

“After some verbal warnings to teachers who do not adhere to institutional policies, I issue them query letters, but it must be approved by the dean of the faculty”. (HP10)

A contrary opinion was presented by an HOD from state HEIs:

“Maintaining a healthy relationship is key in solving problems. I have learned that one of the main functions of an HOD is calming down situations, as an HOD I often act as a mediator with a lot of calmness because sometimes there are problems and once you call the persons concerned in a very calm atmosphere to understand them you will always find durable solutions to problems. This improves on the relationship amongst teachers” (HS5)

Teachers have little say in the administration of private HEIs and are expected to just obey the rules. However, HODs in state and private HEIs agreed that they used dialogue and team approach to resolve conflicts/problems among teachers. They considered that teachers, as individuals, uphold different opinions on policies and display different reactions towards their actions. As such, having a conversation most often leads to a better understanding of the parties involved and therefore better collaboration.

c. Engaging teachers through decision-making: Participants acknowledged that decision-making is a crucial aspect of teachers’ engagement, especially with the frequent amendment of and development of new policies. Involving teachers to deliberate and contribute on how these policies can be best implemented sustains their engagement to its realisation as shown in Figure 3.

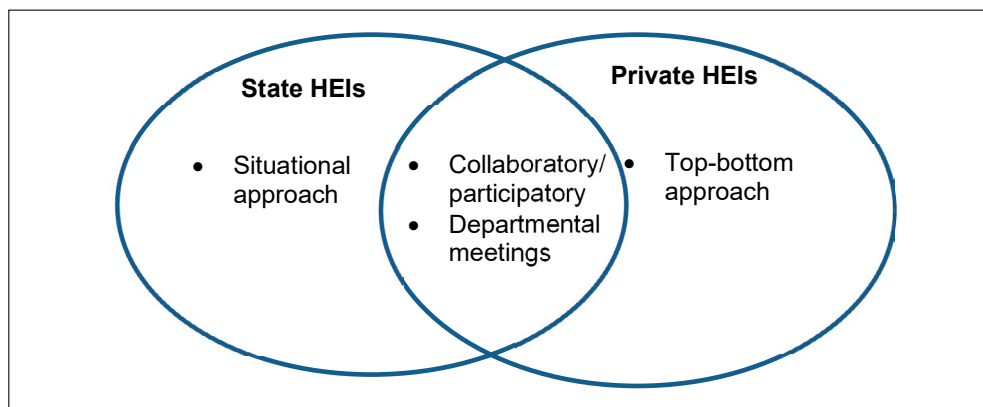


Figure 3: Decision-making approaches to sustain teachers’ engagement

Most of the HODs used a collaborative/participatory approach to decision making which is usually done during departmental meetings. One of the HODs reported that:

"In our department meetings, we do not use a dictatorial decision-making approach. We use a collaborative decision-making approach in the management of all aspects of the department. The collaborative decision-making approach in the department has even enabled us to ensure that there is no single course which is taught by a single lecturer in the department. This way, in the absence of a given lecturer, a class can still be held". (HS30)

Similarly, another HOD admitted that:

"Being an HOD does not imply I know everything. So, I learn from other people and cannot therefore make decisions alone. Involving my colleagues in decision-making is a strength to the department because we make better decisions". (HP22)

However, HODs in state HEIs usually involve only teachers concerned or the entire department, depending on the situation while HODs in private HEIs sometimes use the top-bottom approach which sometimes involves sanctioning teachers who do not adhere to policies.

d. Sharing responsibilities to sustain teachers' engagement: This is mostly done by assigning teachers to teams, taking into consideration individual competencies and the nature of tasks. They also ensure a friendly environment where colleagues can participate and accept to take up responsibilities as shown in Figure 4.

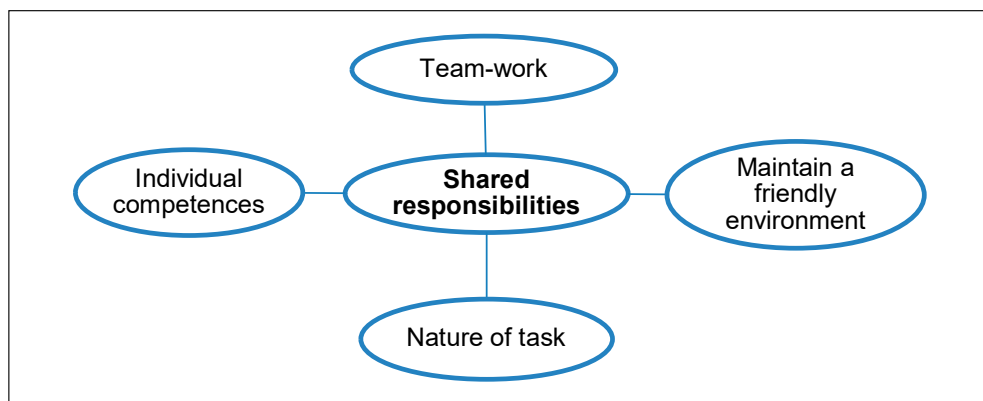


Figure 4. Shared responsibilities and teachers' engagement

Results did not show variation in the shared responsibilities between state and private HEIs. Encouraging teamwork in assigning tasks to teachers was a major approach used by HODs as depicted in some of their direct statements:

"We usually have meetings with the teachers at the end of each semester. This is done at the end because we want to make sure that each teacher is conscious of his/her responsibilities" (HS2).

Similarly, another participant reported that:

"I do not work as the head in my department, we work as a team, I hand them the responsibilities and observe how they are carrying out these responsibilities and try to correct them where they go wrong". (HP22)

Sharing responsibilities maintains a friendly environment and prevents conflict among teachers. HODs take into consideration the nature of the task and based on experience and the availability of the staff. This is also an aspect of situational leadership practices.

e. Staff development as a strategy for enhancing teachers' engagement: Findings in Figure 5 showed that HODs in state and private HEIs usually organise workshops for their teachers equally encourage them to participate in conferences. According to some of the HODs,

"We usually organise pedagogic seminars to enable those who have never taught to stay abreast with what awaits them"; (HS25)

"For the newly recruited lecturers in the department, we encourage them to participate in training seminars organised by the university. We also encourage teachers, while providing all relevant support to participate in national and international conferences". (HP19)

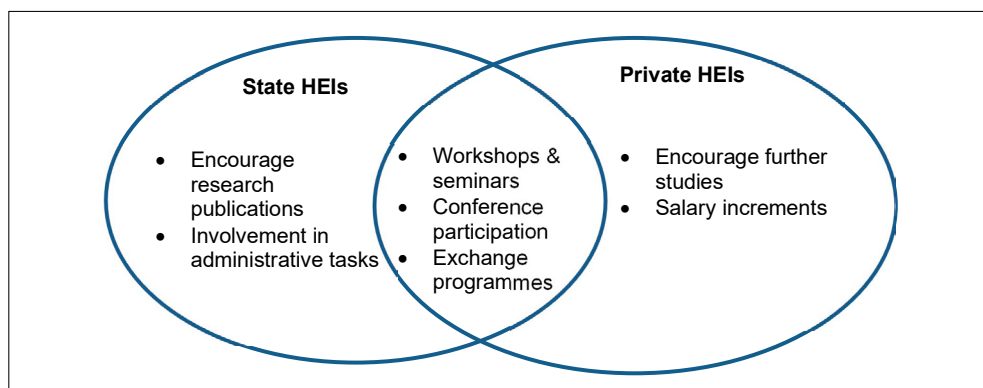


Figure 5: Staff development strategy for enhancing teachers' engagement

HODs also encourage exchange programmes for teaching and research for teachers. This involved institutions within the country, south-south collaboration and north-south collaboration. However, the practice is more with the state than private HEIs. A case was cited by one of the HODs who reported that:

For capacity building, two years ago I engaged in collaboration with the African Institute of Mathematics based in Limbe, and they came here for a one-week training of mathematics teachers. They contributed a lot in helping us in that domain. (HS3).

In addition to this, while state HEIs encourage research publication and involve teachers in decision-making to develop their competencies, HODs in private HEIs focus on salary increments, end-of-year recognition and exchange programmes.

One interesting finding from private HEIs is that they provide financial support for teachers who wish to further their education and try to manage their time slot because this will improve the overall performance of the institution.

5.2 Positive organisational changes experienced as a result of teachers' engagement

Similar to the leadership strategies for engaging teachers, this finding did not show great variation between state and private HEIs. These organisational changes were grouped into three major themes which include improving management, social capital and the capacity building of teachers. Figure 6 shows how the engagement of teachers using various strategies eases management by HODs.

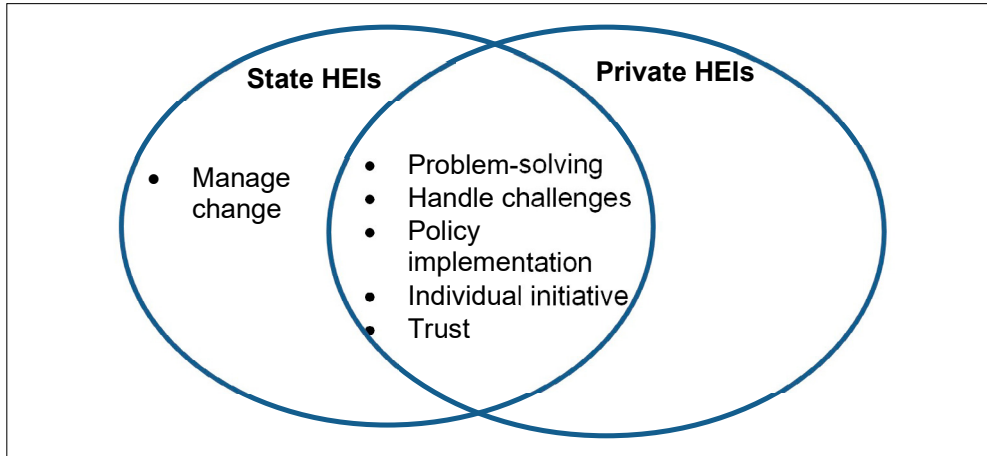


Figure 6: Enhance management of teachers

HODs in state and private HEIs reported that teachers' engagement has improved on their management concerning problem-solving, handling challenges, policy implementation, promoting individual initiative and instilling trust in them. One of the HODs reported that:

"Communication creates a spirit of trust and makes it easier for me to resolve conflict among teachers; I found this key to effective implementation of policy". (HP20).

Similarly, another HOD reported that:

Involving teachers in administration has helped improve on the management of the department. They can easily handle issues even when I am not there. Teachers easily take initiatives to solve departmental problems or respond to the needs of top administration even when I am not there. (HS27)

Engaging teachers eases communication which provides an opportunity for the HOD to understand teachers and vice versa. It creates a spirit of trust, and teachers easily listen to the HOD which makes it easy to resolve misunderstandings. Policy implementation is a major function of HODs which is sometimes very difficult with inadequate collaboration. With effective engagement, this is made easy, and individuals take initiative as the need arises for effective implementation of policy which eases management. Most of the HODs in state HEIs acknowledge that change of system and national policy is frequent especially after the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and due to changes in technology. However, the engagement of teachers has eased the management of these changes which is particular in state HEIs.

Engagement has also enhanced strong interpersonal relationships with teachers and among teachers. HODs expressed satisfaction with the way teachers interact and collaborate. Figure 7 shows how engagement has improved on the social capital of HEIs.

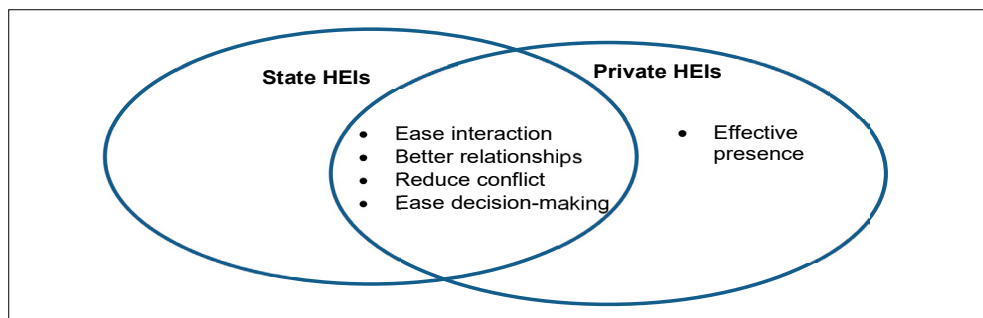


Figure 7: Social Capital

HODs in both state and private HEIs acknowledged that teachers’ engagement eases relationships between and amongst teachers, including the other school administrators. Teachers easily interact and get along with everybody especially students which makes it easier to handle students’ challenges, and relevant ingredients for the attainment of the goals and objectives of education. This also eases the decision-making process, especially prompt decisions. In addition, teachers easily share information and resources that ease the teaching-learning process. One of the HODs reported that:

As the HOD, I will say for the past two years, I am impressed with the way teachers interact and collaborate. It reduces conflict and problems raised are easily resolved which eases the decision-making process. (HP8)

HODs in private HEIs experienced an increase in the effective presence of teachers due to engagement strategies. This improves interaction with colleagues and students which reduces students’ worries and improves overall performance. Figure 8 shows how teachers’ engagement has improved capacity building.

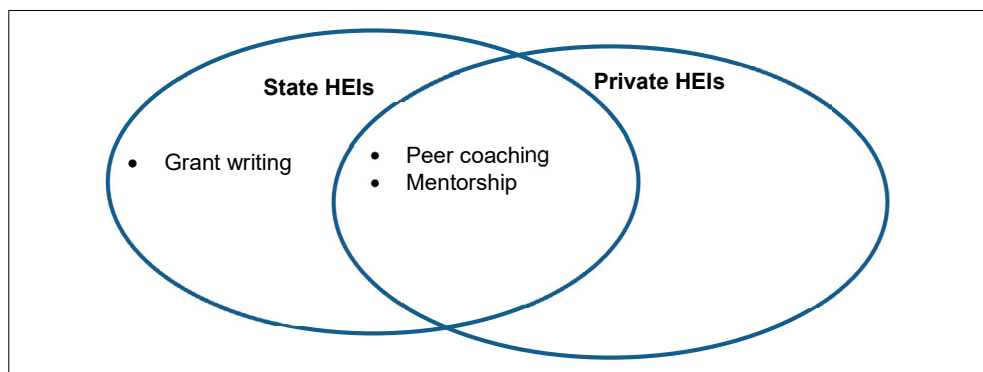


Figure 8: Capacity building of teachers

HODs in both state and private HEIs reported that the engagement of teachers encourages peer coaching, and mentorship as depicted in some of their statements:

Interpersonal relationships have improved the capacity building of teachers through mentorship and coaching. This has improved their skills, especially in the use of ICTs in the teaching-learning process" (HP18); "For about three years, I have been impressed with the output of colleagues which is a result of peer coaching. Sometimes, colleagues organise workshops among themselves which has greatly improved on skills acquisition among teachers. (HS32)

Mentorship was experienced in guiding colleagues concerning policy development and implementation and the research career of junior colleagues. Experienced colleagues guided the novice ones on how to improve their research practice and visibility. This was more experienced in state HEIs where the number of publications and research activities determines their career advancement and promotion. One of the HODs expressed that:

"For the first time, as a head of department, we won a grant. This is a great motivation for teachers". (HS30).

6. Discussion of findings

Teachers' engagement is a major determinant of organisational productivity because it encourages collaboration. In the present study, HODs in state and private HEIs used five major strategies to enhance teachers' engagement which included mission and vision, problem-solving, decision-making, shared responsibilities and professional development. HODs experienced positive organisational changes as a result of these strategies such as improved management, social capital and professional development of teachers. However, the practice was more on the state than private HEIs. This finding is in line with some of the findings of Hellbusch (2022) which revealed communication, developing teams, supporting teachers, building and sustaining relationships with teachers and providing professional development enhance teachers' engagement in basic and secondary schools in Mid-West District, Lincoln.

Heads of department usually organise meetings to imbibe teachers with the mission and vision of the institution and department. The meeting sometimes involved only specific groups of teachers as the need arose. Follow-up measures were also put in place to adhere teachers to the mission and the vision of the institution. This is a situational leadership approach to participation which Mgaiwa (2023) recommended for use by HODs to enhance job satisfaction of teachers. But for teachers to effectively use this leadership style, HODs need training (Ogina, 2017). While HODs in state HEIs put in follow-up measures with the major objective of understanding teachers' challenges and putting in measures to assist them, those of the private HEIs were based on reward and punishment. This shows that HODs in state HEIs use more transformational leadership while private HEIs practise more of the transactional leadership approach. However, the strategy of teamwork used by both sectors provided academic and moral support to teachers which created a sense of belonging and self-efficacy. This also improved the interpersonal relationship with teachers and amongst teachers which is relevant for collaboration. This supports the philosophy of *Ubuntu* that emphasises teamwork and attention to enhance collaboration (Botha & Claassens, 2010). While Polega *et al.* (2019) found a positive correlation between teamwork and teachers' engagement, this

did not go without challenges such as time constraints, relationship concerns and differences in experience. Despite these challenges, collaborative leadership is required for university leaders to promote diversity and inclusion which is critical for institutional growth and sustainability (ALG, 2023).

Where two or more human beings live and work together, there are bound to be conflicts and disagreements. This is because human beings are unique in their thinking, culture, objectives and perception towards situations and policies, which of course they are entitled to. These differences sometimes trigger conflict and misunderstanding. This is more critical in higher education with its complex nature of academics, the highly distributed organisational culture and diverse stakeholders (ALG, 2023). Therefore, to enhance teachers' engagement, HODs lay down measures to resolve such problems by ensuring equality of treatment among teachers and treating them as individuals and as a group which sometimes involves one-on-one meetings or departmental meetings to address conflicts. This creates a positive environment for teachers to thrive. One of the positive spillovers to teachers' engagement is building a strong social capital which encourages positive interpersonal relationships, eases decision-making and ensures the effective presence of teachers on campus, especially in private HEIs. Social capital in this study is the quality of relationships among staff. Diversity of culture and perception can sometimes make management very challenging. A strong social capital can bridge this challenge. Demir (2021) found that social capital among teachers enhances the implementation of change, professional development, introduction of new teachers, teachers' retention and job satisfaction and students' achievement which supports this study.

HODs in both sectors put in measures to ensure the continuous development of teachers such as workshops and seminars while encouraging them to attend conferences at the national and international levels. Professional development is one of the indicators of transformational leadership which Etomes et al. (2024) notes enhance employees' engagement and sustains organizational productivity. One of the positive organisational changes experienced with engagement is capacity building of teachers which included mentorship, peer coaching and grant writing. This enhances the continuous professional development of teachers which is less costly and improves overall productivity. Previous research has also shown that the continuous professional development of teachers in higher education improves students' skills and learning (Ventista & Brown, 2023).

The findings revealed that research projects and publications focused more on state HEIs because they have positive implications for personal career development and the productivity of the department. This helps teachers to change grades from assistant lecturers to senior lecturers and the professorial rank which also serves as a motivation to the teachers. As such, one of the benefits of engagement in state HEIs is a strong research collaboration that leads to grant awards and improves on students' performance. This encourages mentorship and research visibility of teachers.

This opportunity is rare in the private sector because they have few permanent staff with PhD and you cannot change grade if you do not have a PhD. Most of their permanent staff have a master's degree. It is worthy of note that most of the private HEIs offer the Higher National Diploma (HND) and the bachelor's degree programmes, with few top-up master's

programmes mostly handled by part-time lecturers from state HEIs who are more qualified to teach postgraduate courses. As such, they encourage and support their permanent teachers to enrol in PhD programmes to improve their capacity. They sometimes provide them with financial assistance and a flexible teaching timetable to accommodate them. This is the kind of support that Hellbusch (2022) says teachers need to enhance their professional development practice and meaningful engagement in their duties. It also creates a sense of belonging and community in teachers. This supports the *Ubuntu* principle of communality, consideration of individual needs to belong and survive in a community (Mayaka & Truell, 2021).). However, some private HEIs do not accommodate teachers who are continuing their education because they will not be regular and effective. This is a typical example of the transactional leadership approach which does not support teachers' engagement and the philosophy of *Ubuntu* which emphasises that people grow because others support them.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

This study examined the strategies that HODs used to engage teachers in HEIs in Cameroon and the positive effects of this engagement on the institution grounded in the principle of *Ubuntu*. The results revealed that HODs used five major strategies which include a focus on the mission and vision of the institution, problem-solving, shared responsibilities, teamwork and staff development. These strategies enhance teachers' engagement which improves on management of teachers, social capital and capacity building of teachers. These strategies support the principle of *Ubuntu* which is recommended for effective leadership in the African context. However, these strategies were practised more in the state than in private HEIs. While the study recommends the use of these strategies to improve teachers' engagement in HEIs, it also recommends the practice of the principles of *Ubuntu* for the effective engagement of teachers. This will go a long way to sustain the productivity of higher education in terms of teaching, research and outreach.

The populations of the study were HODs which poses a limitation because other administrators could be involved to provide a comprehensive result. In addition, other factors could affect teachers' engagement which were not examined in the current study. Therefore, further research can be carried out involving other administrators in higher education while testing other indicators.

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