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When shared leadership does not share authority: delegation, voice and accountability in a cross-border higher education partnership

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Article

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Abstract

International higher education partnerships increasingly rely on shared leadership arrangements, yet shared responsibility does not necessarily entail shared authority. This article examines how delegation, decision rights, accountability and voice were negotiated within a cross-border higher education partnership operating through a dual co-director arrangement. Using a self-reflective critical incident approach, the analysis draws primarily on contemporaneous reflective notes and three reconstructed incidents from a routine partnership project, with project records used to support chronology. Distributed leadership and micropolitical perspectives are used to examine how decision rights, quality standards and routes for challenge shaped everyday coordination. Across the incidents, responsibility was distributed before decision authority was fully specified; staff sometimes had to infer whose judgement was final when leadership signals diverged; and substantive concerns could remain outside formal review even when participation was invited. The analysis identifies an infrastructure of shared authority comprising decision rights, review standards, sign-off arrangements and routes for challenge. It contributes to research on higher education leadership by showing how authority is enacted through ordinary routines of delegation, review and voice in cross-border partnership work.

Introduction

Cross-border higher education partnerships often adopt shared leadership arrangements to signal joint ownership and responsibility. Yet formal sharing of leadership roles does not necessarily translate into shared authority in everyday practice. Where decision rights, review processes or escalation routes remain unclear, staff may face uncertainty over who can authorise action, whose judgement is final and where accountability rests (Bunnell 2008; Bolden 2011; Bolden et al. 2009). These tensions may become particularly visible in cross-border settings, where institutional arrangements, professional expectations and culturally shaped understandings of hierarchy, legitimacy and appropriate disagreement intersect.

This article examines these issues through a practice-informed reflective analysis of a cross-border higher education language-teaching partnership between a European university and a Chinese partner institution. The partnership operated through a dual co-director arrangement, with two academic leads sharing responsibility for programme coordination, quality assurance, student experience and external communication. The analysis focuses on a routine digital communication project that brought questions of task ownership, decision rights, quality expectations, review and challenge into sharper relief.

The analysis adopts an interpretivist, practice-based understanding of leadership, treating authority and accountability as enacted through routines, role expectations, documents, silences and everyday interactions rather than as properties of formal positions alone. Distributed leadership provides a lens for examining how leadership is stretched across people, situations and organisational artefacts (Gronn 2002; Spillane 2006; Bolden et al. 2009), while micropolitical and cultural perspectives focus on how legitimacy, hierarchy and relational expectations shape voice, judgement and accountability (Bunnell 2008; Jarvis 2024; Bush 2020; Mifsud 2024).

Research on distributed leadership has questioned individualised models of leadership while also showing that wider participation may coexist with concentrated authority. In higher education, Bolden et al. (2009) found that distributed leadership could be endorsed rhetorically while decision-making authority remained concentrated, while Lumby (2013) draws attention to the relationship between distribution and power. More recent reviews indicate that the field remains strongly shaped by school-based and Anglo-American traditions, with context, role negotiation and power still requiring closer attention (Mifsud 2024; Adams et al. 2025). Research on higher education governance further situates authority and accountability within wider institutional and political arrangements (Kushnir and Yazgan 2023). What remains less well understood is how authority is negotiated through routine practices of delegation, review, sign-off and challenge in cross-border higher education partnerships.

This gap matters because international partnerships often combine formally shared leadership with different institutional accountabilities and culturally situated expectations about legitimate authority and disagreement. Bunnell (2008) and Neufield (2019) indicate that formal role design alone does not fully explain how authority is recognised in dual-leadership settings. At the same time, Chen et al. (2026) show that relational context can affect whether concerns are raised, softened or withheld. The present article therefore focuses on how shared leadership is made workable through everyday organisational practice.

Two research questions guide the analysis:

RQ1: How were delegation, decision rights and accountability negotiated within a cross-border higher education partnership operating through a dual co-director arrangement?

RQ2: How did culturally shaped expectations and micropolitical relations interact to shape voice, challenge and accountability in the selected incidents?

The article uses a self-reflective critical incident approach to analyse three episodes in which tacit assumptions about authority, responsibility and challenge became visible. The incidents are used to examine organisational processes and the conditions under which distributed responsibility was, or was not, accompanied by clear authority. Recent reflexive scholarship supports the analytical use of researchers' situated professional experience where processes of selection, reconstruction and interpretation are made explicit (Wittmayer et al. 2024; Ruan et al. 2026).

The article develops an account of how shared leadership becomes fragile when responsibility is distributed without equally clear decision rights, accountability and routes for challenge. It also derives practice-oriented implications for delegation and review in cross-border partnership work.

Distributed leadership as a practice lens

Distributed leadership is useful here because it shifts attention from leadership as a property of formal office-holders to leadership as practice. Gronn (2002) and Spillane (2006) conceptualise leadership as

stretched across people, situations and artefacts. This perspective shifts attention from individual leaders to the routines through which work is allocated, authorised, reviewed and completed.

In higher education, however, wider participation does not necessarily imply wider decision-making authority. Bolden et al. (2009) showed that distributed leadership could be supported rhetorically while authority remained concentrated among senior actors. Bolden (2011) similarly emphasised that distribution depends on relationships, structures and context rather than the simple presence of multiple contributors. Lumby (2013, 2016) further cautioned that the language of distribution can obscure how power and responsibility are organised in practice.

This distinction is central to delegation. A task can be distributed without the authority needed to define standards, approve a direction or close a decision. When decision thresholds, review checkpoints or sign-off routines are implicit, staff may remain responsible for work while uncertain about whether they are authorised to act. The analysis therefore treats distributed leadership through the relationship between responsibility, decision rights and accountability.

Recent scholarship continues to underline the importance of context and power. Mifsud (2024) identifies persistent conceptual ambiguity in distributed leadership research, while Adams et al. (2025) show the continuing dominance of school-based knowledge traditions. These limitations are particularly relevant to cross-border higher education partnerships, where leadership is enacted across different institutional systems, professional expectations and accountability regimes. This study uses distributed leadership to examine how those conditions shape routine delegation and decision-making.

Dual leadership, coordination and authority

Dual leadership arrangements require more than a formal division of responsibility between two leaders. Their operation also depends on how priorities, standards and approval rights are coordinated. Two co-leaders may hold different assumptions about what counts as appropriate direction, support, monitoring or closure, and these differences become consequential when staff must decide whose signal to follow.

Transformational and transactional leadership are used here as sensitising concepts rather than as categories for classifying the co-leaders. Transformational leadership foregrounds vision and relational support, whereas transactional leadership foregrounds expectations, monitoring and accountability (Bass and Riggio 2006). In this study, these concepts draw attention to different forms of leadership signalling: how priorities are framed, standards are communicated and completion is authorised.

Gronn's (2009) notion of hybrid leadership is useful because leadership practice can shift between collective, dyadic and individual forms. Where coordination routines are weak, formally distributed arrangements may coexist with concentrated or shifting authority. Critical scholarship likewise warns that participation can expand workload and responsibility without redistributing influence (Fitzgerald and Gunter 2008; Lumby 2013). In dual arrangements, the central issue is whether differences between leaders are translated into sufficiently clear expectations for the wider team.

Existing dual-culture studies reinforce this point. Bunnell (2008) shows that authority can be organised through cultural legitimacy as well as formal role design, while Neufield (2019) identifies how different professional logics and assumptions may produce unclear decision pathways unless they are explicitly negotiated. Much of this literature is located in international school settings. Comparable processes are less extensively examined in higher education partnerships, where academic expectations, institutional procedures and cross-border relationships intersect in routine project work.

Culture, micropolitics and voice

Delegation is not only a technical allocation of tasks. It also depends on whether people feel authorised to speak, challenge, decide and accept responsibility. In cross-border arrangements, formal position interacts with institutional legitimacy, professional status, relational expectations and culturally situated understandings of appropriate disagreement. These influences are treated here as relational and contextual rather than as fixed attributes of national culture.

Dimmock (2020) argues that educational leadership ideas do not travel unproblematically across Western and Asian contexts because assumptions about authority and participation are contextually situated. Bunnell (2008) similarly demonstrates that cultural legitimacy can shape the practical division of leadership. Together, these studies suggest that hierarchy, loyalty or face become analytically relevant only where they can be connected to specific interactions and organisational conditions.

Micropolitical perspectives add a further layer by focusing on how power operates through participation, collegiality and everyday decision-making (Blase and Anderson 1995; Flessa 2009). Hatcher (2005) shows that shared leadership can be constrained by positional authority, while Lumby (2013) warns that distribution may extend responsibility without redistributing influence. Mifsud (2017) likewise demonstrates how collaboration and hierarchy can coexist. These perspectives direct attention not only to who participates, but also to whose judgement carries weight and where accountability is located.

For this article, the key micropolitical issue is voice. Shared leadership depends not only on whether staff are invited to contribute but also on whether concerns can be raised with comparable legitimacy and acceptable relational or professional risk. Chen et al. (2026), in a different organisational context, show that leadership effects on voice are shaped by relational conditions. In cross-border higher education partnerships, silence or indirect communication may therefore have several meanings, including uncertainty about authority, concern about relational consequences or preference for less public forms of disagreement. The analysis does not assume in advance which interpretation applies; these possibilities are examined against the incidents themselves.

Analytical framework

The analysis combines three connected strands. First, practice-based distributed leadership directs attention to task allocation, review, sign-off and the relationship between responsibility and decision

rights. Second, the coordination of leadership expectations focuses on whether co-leaders translate different priorities into shared standards and approval routines. Third, micropolitical and cultural perspectives examine how legitimacy, voice and relational risk shape whether staff can question decisions or raise concerns.

Taken together, these strands treat authority as something enacted in practice rather than simply attached to formal titles. Across the three incidents, the framework focuses on four linked questions: who was expected to act; who was authorised to decide; what standards or review processes made accountability visible; and how could disagreement or challenge be expressed? These questions connect the conceptual framework directly to both the incident-level analysis and the cross-incident comparison.

Methodology

Research orientation and methodological rationale

This study uses a self-reflective critical incident approach to examine moments in which delegation, authority and accountability became particularly visible during a cross-border higher education partnership project. The approach is interpretivist and practice-based: incidents are treated as situated organisational episodes whose analytical significance is developed through systematic reflection on the conditions, decisions and assumptions they reveal.

Critical Incident Technique was originally developed to examine consequential events in practice (Flanagan 1954). In educational research, critical incident analysis has also developed as a reflective approach in which apparently routine events become analytically significant because they reveal tacit assumptions, organisational norms and professional judgements (Tripp 1993; Francis 1997; Angelides 2001). This study draws on that reflective critical-incident tradition and uses the term self-reflective critical incident analysis throughout.

Recent work in Humanities and Social Sciences Communications provides a contemporary methodological precedent for analysing situated professional experience through explicit reflexive procedures. Wittmayer et al. (2024), for example, use collaborative autoethnography to analyse ethical dilemmas in research practice, while Ruan et al. (2026) use the authors' own narratives and reflections as research material in a collaborative autoethnographic study of academic careers. Although these studies employ a different methodological form, they demonstrate the importance of making the evidential basis, selection process and interpretive procedure explicit when professional experience forms part of the analytical material.

Reflective material and incident selection

The primary reflective material consisted of contemporaneous notes recorded during and shortly after key stages of a several-month partnership project. These notes documented emerging uncertainties,

decisions, task allocation, review discussions and concerns relevant to the author's coordinating role. Professional recollection provided contextual detail during reconstruction, while the contemporaneous notes remained the principal reflective material. Project-related records were used to check chronology and clarify the sequence of actions, decision points and review moments. They were not analysed as a separate documentary dataset, and emails, messages and meeting extracts are not reproduced.

Incident selection began with a reflexive memo that identified a wider set of project episodes. An episode was considered critical when it met three criteria: it disrupted expected work or coordination; it exposed uncertainty about delegation, decision rights or accountability; and it made visible an organisational or culturally situated assumption about communication, hierarchy, responsibility or quality. Three incidents were selected because they captured recurring tensions at different stages of the project and allowed these processes to be compared across planning, review and post-completion reflection.

Each incident was reconstructed in role-based, non-verbatim form. Institutional names, detailed timelines and contextual markers were generalised to reduce identifiability. The reconstruction retained the organisational sequence relevant to delegation, decision-making and review while removing detail unnecessary to the analysis.

Analytical procedure and reflexive safeguards

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, each incident was reconstructed from contemporaneous notes, with project records used to check chronology. Second, the incident was examined through Smyth's (1991) critical reflective questions: what happened; what assumptions about authority and responsibility were visible; whose interests were supported or constrained; what forms of voice or silence appeared; and what alternative routines might have altered the outcome. Third, these reflections were interpreted through the conceptual lenses of distributed leadership, coordination of leadership expectations, and micropolitics. Fourth, the three incidents were compared to identify recurring patterns and points of difference across delegation, review and challenge.

Reflexive safeguards were incorporated at each stage of the analysis. Contemporary documentation was distinguished from later interpretation, chronology was checked against project records, and alternative readings were retained where the available material supported more than one explanation. Silence, for example, was treated as analytically ambiguous rather than as direct evidence of cultural deference. Concepts such as hierarchy, loyalty and face were therefore examined in relation to specific interactions and organisational conditions rather than applied as fixed cultural explanations.

The analysis seeks analytical rather than statistical generalisation. Its purpose is to clarify processes through which responsibility, authority and voice were negotiated in the selected incidents and to consider their potential relevance to comparable shared-leadership settings.

Supplementary Information provides a de-identified methodological appendix setting out the incident-selection criteria, analytical questions, cross-incident comparison procedure and audit-trail summary for readers who wish to examine the analytical procedure in greater detail.

Positionality and reflexivity

The author's positionality is integral to the analysis. As a practitioner who participated in the partnership context and had transnational education experience, the author occupied both insider and analytical positions. This shaped what was noticed, recorded and interpreted. Reflexivity makes that standpoint part of the analytical account by attending to how the author's position may have shaped both the original notes and their later interpretation. The incidents are therefore analysed as organisational interactions produced within particular institutional and relational conditions.

Reflective incident analysis

Incident 1: unclear mandate and competing authority signals

During an early planning discussion, two priorities emerged. One emphasised keeping the project manageable within available resources; the other emphasised producing a stronger output for the partnership's external profile. Both priorities were legitimate, but no agreed decision threshold, written quality standard or sign-off route indicated which should govern the next stage. The team paused rather than committing fully to either direction, and clarification was sought informally before work progressed.

The difficulty lay in the relationship between delegated responsibility and decision authority. Work had been distributed, but staff did not have a sufficiently visible mandate for deciding which priority should prevail or who could approve the next step. From a distributed leadership perspective, the absence of an agreed authorisation process made coordinated action uncertain (Spillane 2006; Bolden 2011).

This uncertainty encouraged caution. Acting independently risked later reversal, while waiting reduced exposure to blame but delayed progress. The incident therefore points to uncertainty over authorised action rather than to a general failure of communication.

In this incident, effective delegation depended on a clearer mandate specifying project scope, decision thresholds, review points and sign-off. Without these elements, responsibility could be distributed while authority to proceed remained uncertain.

Incident 2: unclear standards and weak role protection

In a routine project review, one staff member's work was publicly questioned and linked to delay. The staff member indicated that the work had followed earlier guidance, yet no written specification or review checklist clarified the expected standard. The disagreement therefore also exposed a procedural uncertainty: responsibility for completing the task had been delegated, while the criteria for evaluating it remained insufficiently documented.

The absence of agreed standards affected how responsibility was interpreted during review. Shared work depends on artefacts that make expectations visible and contestable (Spillane 2006; Bolden 2011). Without a documented specification or review process, judgement of the work became more dependent on retrospective interpretation of what had previously been expected.

The incident also draws attention to the distribution of organisational risk. Responsibility for producing the work was visible, whereas authority to define and revise the quality standard was less visible. Critical accounts of distributed leadership show how responsibility and exposure can expand without an equivalent redistribution of influence (Hatcher 2005; Lumby 2013). Here, accountability became attached to the staff member's output before the process for defining and reviewing the expected standard had been fully stabilised.

The incident therefore links role protection to procedural clarity: where work is delegated, the standards against which it will be reviewed and the route through which those standards can be questioned need to be visible in advance.

Incident 3: unprotected review and cautious voice

The third incident occurred during an early post-completion review after continuing uncertainty over the balance between quality expectations and resource constraints. One co-director invited staff to raise concerns. Discussion nevertheless concentrated on minor operational matters, and comments were expressed cautiously. More substantive concerns about task allocation, quality standards and review processes did not enter the formal record and continued in informal conversations afterwards.

The contrast between formal participation and what entered the record is central to this incident. The meeting offered staff an opportunity to speak, but there was no structured review protocol, confidential route for sensitive concerns or explicit mechanism for recording and following up challenge. As a result, the review captured some operational feedback without bringing the more substantive concerns into the formal discussion.

Several interpretations of the cautious discussion are possible. Relational or reputational risk may have discouraged public criticism; uncertainty over the legitimacy of challenge may have mattered; or some staff may simply have preferred informal discussion. The material does not allow these explanations to be separated with confidence. What can be observed more securely is that substantive concerns appeared in informal communication but not in the formal review record.

Micropolitical perspectives help explain why formal participation may coexist with constrained influence (Hatcher 2005; Mifsud 2017; Jarvis 2024). Cross-cultural leadership research further suggests that legitimacy and appropriate disagreement are contextually negotiated rather than fixed (Bunnell 2008; Dimmock 2020). The incident therefore directs attention to the organisational conditions under which challenge becomes recordable and actionable, while leaving the motives behind individual silence open to more than one interpretation.

Cross-incident synthesis: authority, legitimacy and relational risk

Across the three incidents, shared leadership became most fragile where the routines governing decision-making, review and challenge were insufficiently explicit. These breach points made tacit organisational assumptions observable.

One recurring pattern concerned the separation of responsibility from decision authority. Responsibility for project work was distributed across staff and co-leaders, but authority to define standards, approve decisions and resolve disagreement was less consistently explicit. Incident 1 showed this through delayed action, while Incident 2 showed it through uncertainty over the standards against which delegated work was reviewed. Together, the two incidents give a practice-level form to existing critiques of distributed leadership in which participation and responsibility may expand without a corresponding redistribution of authority (Bolden et al. 2009; Bolden 2011; Lumby 2013).

A second pattern concerned the location of final judgement. The dual arrangement did not automatically establish how divergent leadership signals should be reconciled. When priorities or standards were not aligned in advance, staff had to infer which judgement would ultimately authorise action or closure. Gronn's (2009) concept of hybrid leadership is useful here because it recognises movement between individual, dyadic and collective forms of practice. In the present setting, that movement was also mediated by institutional position, professional status and perceived legitimacy.

A third pattern concerned the relationship between formal participation and recorded voice. Incident 3 showed that concerns could remain outside formal review even when participation was invited. The distinction is important: the absence of a concern from the formal meeting did not necessarily mean that the concern itself was absent. Micropolitical accounts similarly show how opportunities for participation may coexist with uneven influence (Hatcher 2005; Jarvis 2024), while Chen et al. (2026) demonstrate, in a different organisational context, that relational conditions shape the enactment of voice.

Across the incidents, these patterns converge on a practical problem of authority infrastructure. Responsibility was easier to distribute than the decision rights, review standards and challenge routes needed to support it. The analysis therefore locates the fragility of shared leadership not in collaboration itself, but in the routines through which authority is clarified, decisions are recorded and disagreement enters the formal process.

Discussion: designing shared authority in cross-border partnership work

The analysis reframes shared leadership as an authority-design problem. Distributed leadership scholarship has shown that leadership practice extends beyond formal office-holders while also cautioning that participation and power are not equivalent (Bolden et al. 2009; Lumby 2013; Mifsud 2024). The incidents examined here show how that distinction becomes consequential in routine work: responsibility can be assigned before decision rights, standards and routes for challenge are sufficiently clear.

Cross-border context also shaped how authority was interpreted. The incidents indicate that institutional position, professional status, prior interaction and perceived legitimacy influenced whose judgement carried weight and how challenge was expressed. Hierarchy, loyalty and face are therefore treated as situated relational resources rather than as fixed cultural explanations. This interpretation is consistent with cross-cultural leadership scholarship that cautions against transferring leadership assumptions uncritically across contexts (Dimmock 2020) and with higher education research that locates governance and accountability within wider institutional politics (Kushnir and Yazgan 2023).

The study also illustrates how reflective professional material can support organisational analysis when selection, reconstruction and interpretation are made explicit. Recent reflexive studies similarly show that professional experience can become analytically useful through systematic comparison and theoretical interpretation (Wittmayer et al. 2024; Ruan et al. 2026). Here, the incidents are valuable because they expose routine mechanisms that might otherwise remain implicit.

Four practice principles follow directly from the incident analysis. Decision rights should be clarified before delegation through explicit project scope, decision thresholds and escalation routes. Co-leaders should translate different priorities into shared standards before staff are asked to act. Review processes should provide structured routes for raising concerns and make follow-up visible. Accountability should also be traceable so that staff can identify who decided what, under which standard, and when responsibility transferred.

Three simple management tools can support these principles: a Delegation Charter that records task scope, decision rights, standards and escalation routes; a Decision Log that records key decisions and follow-up actions; and a Responsibility Matrix that distinguishes who is responsible, accountable, consulted and informed. These tools are presented as practice-informed resources derived from the analysis rather than as validated interventions.

Conclusion

This article examined how delegation, authority, accountability and voice were negotiated through three reflective critical incidents in a cross-border higher education partnership. The analysis identified a recurring separation between distributed responsibility and visible decision authority, uncertainty over

final judgement when leadership signals diverged, and a gap between invited participation and concerns that entered the formal record.

The central contribution is the concept of an infrastructure of shared authority: the decision rights, review standards, sign-off arrangements and routes for challenge that make shared leadership workable in everyday practice. Formal co-leadership and distributed responsibility do not specify these arrangements on their own.

The study is bounded by one partnership project and by the author's reflective reconstruction of selected incidents. The analysis therefore offers an interpretive, practice-informed account rather than a population-level claim. The use of contemporaneous notes and chronology checks strengthens the reconstruction, but the analysis remains shaped by a single researcher's positionality and by the selection of incidents in which coordination became problematic.

Future research could examine whether similar authority gaps arise across multiple higher education partnerships and could evaluate the proposed design principles through comparative or action-learning designs. Such work would help establish how far explicit decision rights, documented sign-off and protected challenge routes shape participation and accountability across different institutional and cultural settings.

Declarations

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Supplementary information

Supplementary Methodological Appendix: incident-selection criteria, analytical procedure, reflexive safeguards and audit-trail summary.

Author Contribution

J.Y. conceptualised the study, conducted the reflective analysis, developed the analytical framework, and wrote and revised the manuscript.

Data availability

The qualitative materials generated and analysed during this study comprise contemporaneous reflective notes; limited project records were consulted only to verify chronology. The raw materials are

not publicly available because they arise from a small, connected professional setting and contain contextual details that could permit indirect identification of individuals or institutions. De-identified supporting information on incident selection, analytical procedure and the audit trail is provided in the Supplementary Information. If requested by the journal, selected de-identified supporting materials may be made available for confidential editorial or peer-review purposes, subject to confidentiality obligations and institutional requirements. Full raw reflective notes and confidential project records will not be made publicly available where doing so would compromise confidentiality or indirect anonymity.

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