

Instructional leadership in higher education: The case of Israel

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Abstract

Instructional leadership demands educational leaders to become intensely involved in improving teaching and learning. While extensive research found this approach to be beneficial in school settings, it was insufficiently explored in higher education. Therefore, the current study explored how Israeli higher education leaders perceive their leadership role in relation to teaching and learning. Participants were 22 heads of departments in higher education institutions in Israel. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and analysed in a four-stage process—condensing, coding, categorising and theorising. Findings indicated that higher education leaders in Israel demonstrated very little instructional leadership, based on three perceptions: regarding the autonomy of faculty members, the low priority of teaching quality in higher education, and the style of teaching required in academia. To enable the borrowing of instructional leadership from the school system context to the higher education context, a customised version of instructional leadership is needed.

תקציר:

מנהיגות הוראתית דורשת ממנהיגים חינוכיים להיות מעורבים בצורה נמרצת בשיפור ההוראה והלמידה. בעוד שמחקרים רבים מצאו כי גישה זו מועילה מאוד לבתי ספר, היא לא נחקרה במידה מספקת בהשכלה גבוהה. לפיכך, המחקר הנוכחי בחן כיצד 22 ראשי מחלקות במוסדות להשכלה גבוהה בישראל תופסים את תפקידם ביחס להוראה ולמידה. הנתונים נאספו באמצעות ראיונות מובנים למחצה, ונותחו בתהליך בן ארבעה שלבים - מיון, קידוד, סיווג ותיאוריזציה. הממצאים מלמדים שמנהיגי

ההשכלה הגבוהה בישראל כמעט ואינם פועלים על פי גישת המנהיגות ההוראתית, בהתבסס על שלוש תפיסות: ביחס לאוטונומיה של הסגל, העדיפות הנמוכה של איכות ההוראה בהשכלה הגבוהה, וסגנון ההוראה הנדרש באקדמיה. כדי לאפשר ייבוא של המנהיגות ההוראתית מההקשר הבית ספרי אל ההשכלה הגבוהה, יש צורך בגרסה מותאמת של המנהיגות ההוראתית.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Instructional leadership is the most frequently studied model of school leadership over the past decades (Hallinger, 2019). Instructional leadership can be construed as an educational leadership approach whereby school leaders demonstrate an ongoing and deep involvement in curriculum and instruction issues, having a hand in a wide array of activities aimed at bettering school teaching and learning (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Neumerski et al., 2018). This approach expects school leaders to focus their efforts on improving student academic performance while considering other managerial areas as less important (Rigby, 2014).

The positive relationship between instructional leadership and students' academic outcomes was well proved in the research literature (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2017). School leaders who serve as instructional leaders contribute to a growth in student achievement more than principals who favour other educational leadership styles (Bush & Glover, 2014; Murphy, Neumerski, Goldring, Grissom, & Porter, 2016). From a social justice perspective, instructional leadership is particularly significant (DeMatthews, 2018). Under a mandate that no talent be squandered, instructional leaders can contribute to the future assignment of individuals to the scholarly and social positions that match their abilities and motivations, regardless of their background and their socio-economic starting point (Wang, 2015).

Accordingly, scholars, policymakers and practitioners around the world have continually called upon school leaders to become instructional leaders (Hallinger & Wang, 2015; Kaparou & Bush, 2016; Park & Ham, 2016). However, instructional leadership in higher education was rarely discussed (Ersozlu & Saklan, 2016; Wang & Berger, 2010). Mainstream higher education research on leadership largely neglects this kind of leadership, calling for narrowing this gap in the available knowledge (Hofmeyer, Sheingold, Klopper, & Warland, 2015; Quinlan, 2014). This is precisely the reason for this study, which empirically explores how higher education leaders perceive their instructional leadership role.

This study examines instructional leadership in higher education as a borrowed policy. Policy borrowing refers to an effort to improve an educational system through the introduction of a policy that originated in another context (Nir, Kondakci, & Emil, 2018). Policy borrowing decreases the need to 'reinvent the wheel' when facing comparable challenges, lessens uncertainties associated with implementation and grants a justification that may diminish resistance to change. Nevertheless, policy borrowing can also cause unexpected problems that emerge from differences in institutional policy and values between the originating and receiving contexts. Both positive and negative consequences of borrowed policy models have been documented in the existing literature on instructional leadership (Ng, Nguyen, Wong, & Choy, 2015; Pan, Nyeu, & Cheng, 2017; Qian, Walker, & Li, 2017; Steiner-Khamsi, 2016).

The interview data will be used to identify the challenges involved in borrowing the instructional leadership approach from the school system context to the higher education context, as reflected in the study participants' perceptions of the apparent contradictions between instructional leadership and the principles and norms of higher education. Next, the discussion section will look at how instructional leadership adjustments can be made to address these apparent contradictions and thus allow the borrowing of instructional leadership to the higher education

context. Given the well-documented contribution of instructional leadership to student learning and results as well as social justice and equity (Glickman et al., 2017; DeMatthews, 2018), this topic deserves research attention.

2 | RESEARCH CONTEXT

This study focused on higher education leaders in Israel, seeking to find out to what extent higher education leaders in Israel see themselves as instructional leaders and what the reasons might be. In recent decades, Israel's higher education system underwent expansion and diversification in a series of path-breaking reforms (Menahem, 2008). Today, more than 300,000 students are enrolled in the Israeli higher education system. About 165,000 out of them study in nine large universities, about 115,000 study in 32 colleges, and about 25,000 study in 21 colleges of education (Klein-Avishai, Ophir, & Krol, 2014). In terms of social justice, inequality in the chance of attending higher education in Israel is similar to that in the United States (Ayalon, Grodsky, Gamoran, & Yogev, 2008).

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in Israel are governed by the Council for Higher Education. The Council consists mainly of faculty members representing the various universities, together with representatives of the colleges and the public. Through its Planning and Budgeting Committee, the Council regulates the government's financial allocations to higher education. Besides, the Council accredits the programmes of all HEIs. As such, it autonomously controls the development of the Israeli higher education system. The Council tends to view the higher education system as made up of two stratified layers of institutions: the 'first tier' of universities and the 'second tier' of colleges. This classification, which overlooks the diversity of institutions within each sector, reflects their relative status within the higher education system (Ayalon & Yogev, 2006; Hofman & Niederland, 2012). A privatisation process that takes place does not affect the Council's control of the higher education system (Gaziel, 2012).

Whereas in many countries league tables and ranking have a significant impact on higher education (Gourlay & Stevenson, 2017), Israel has no national ranking system that measures and compares the performance of tertiary education institutions. The large Israeli universities take part in international league tables, but their implications for national policies and institutional practices are negligible.

Insofar as the data for this study were collected in a particular context, further research to examine the findings' international validity is required. Study replication in different countries would be advisable. However, a generalisation of the findings to higher education systems that are characterised by expansion and diversity along with centralised management may be considered cautious speculation. Therefore, this study may contribute not only to the understanding of the higher education system in Israel, but also elsewhere in the world.

3 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

To establish the basis for this study, the first section of the following background presents the components, premise, challenges and nature of instructional leadership. Then, the second section details some of the topics discussed in the literature on leadership in higher education.

3.1 | Leadership in higher education

During the first decade of the 21st century, the available knowledge on effective leadership in higher education settings was limited (Bryman, 2007). Middlehurst and her colleagues (2009) asserted that higher education was under-represented in the leadership research literature, and therefore it was not analysed thoroughly concerning the impact of context on the exercise of leadership. Changes in the landscape of higher education required a rethinking of approaches and concepts of leadership research (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006). In

the last decade, however, the literature on higher education leadership has grown and developed (Hofmeyer et al., 2015; Potter & Devecchi, 2020).

One of the questions addressed in the research literature is to what extent higher education leadership should be hierarchical (Goffee & Jones, 2009). Is a pyramid-shaped structure, with a narrow centre of power, effective in helping higher education achieve its mission, or is the pyramid's flattening to create a decentralised structure more effective? Bryman's (2007) review of articles in refereed journals revealed that the existing literature on leadership in higher education emphasises the need to foster a collegial atmosphere. Although it is common in organisational studies to note that employees prefer to participate in decision-making at work, the intensity with which the literature suggests that leaders of universities and colleges are more effective if they promote this is very prominent. A distributed leadership style, which focuses on 'collective collaboration rather than individual power and control' (Jones, Lefoe, Harvey & Ryland, 2012, p. 67), has been proposed as a means for academics to develop shared responsibility in changing higher education cultures (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2008; Middlehurst et al., 2009). Distributed leadership takes a major place in the research literature on higher education published in the last decade (Bolden, Jones, Davis, & Gentle, 2015; Jones, 2017).

Under the collegial, democratic atmosphere of the academic world, leadership in HEIs has long had its authority questioned, depicted by both leaders and subordinates as having limited legitimacy (Clegg & McAuley, 2005; Goffee & Jones, 2009). Leadership roles in higher education are viewed as 'first among equals', where the leader has more responsibility or power but is actually at the same level as the other faculty members and cannot impose a specific opinion on others (Altbach, 2011; Dopson et al., 2019). This situation is even more complicated because leadership roles in higher education can be given on an honorary basis to a senior or established professor, and because of the transitory nature of higher education leadership roles, stemming mainly from a rotation policy, which involves the temporary assignment of a faculty member in a position for a predetermined period of a few years (Burke, Crozier, & Misiaszek, 2016; McCaffery, 2019).

Another issue discussed in the literature on leadership in higher education relates to the complicated relationship between teaching and research (Brew, 2012; Light & Calkins, 2015; Tight, 2016). For a long time, research has been prioritised over teaching in academia. The reward system in higher education around the globe is based mainly on faculty members' products of research (Chen, 2015; Shin, Arimoto, Cummings, & Teichler, 2014). In most HEIs, academic careers are mainly driven and determined by research success, and therefore most faculty members in leadership positions typically have a substantial record of accomplishment in research (Goodall, McDowell, & Singell, 2014; Spendlove, 2007). However, critics of higher education called for a renewed emphasis on the quality of the student experience and a broader definition of scholarship-based research, teaching and service (Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco, & Swanson, 2016; Spowart, Turner, Shenton, & Kneale, 2016). Research universities currently invest in improving the quality of teaching much more than before (Lindblom & Kola, 2018), and the common teacher-centred instruction, in which the lecturer is actively involved in teaching while the learners are listening in a receptive mode, gives way to more innovative teaching approaches (Seyfried & Ansmann, 2018), which seem to be more effective in terms of student learning and results (Ebert-May et al., 2015; Gilboy, Heinerichs, & Pazzaglia, 2015). Thus, more and more universities understand that academic leadership not only needs to be provided in research, but also in education (Grunefeld et al., 2017; Hofmeyer et al., 2015).

The research on leadership in higher education is limited. Particularly, instructional leadership in higher education has not been adequately investigated (Ersozlu & Saklan, 2016; Wang & Berger, 2010). The next section will explain what instructional leadership is.

3.2 | What is instructional leadership?

The conceptual framework of instructional leadership presented by Hallinger and Murphy (1985), which is very often used in the research literature (Hallinger & Wang, 2015), includes three dimensions. The first dimension,

Defining the School Mission, relates to school leaders' role in setting understandable, feasible and assessable school goals that concentrate on student learning and academic results. The principal also has to disseminate these goals to a variety of stakeholders, so they are valued and promoted by the school community. The second dimension, *Managing the Instructional Programme*, relates to school leaders' role in coordinating and monitoring instruction and curricula. It requires ongoing involvement in accelerating, controlling and supervising teaching and learning throughout the school. The third dimension, *Developing a Positive School Learning Climate*, relates to school leaders' role in creating and sustaining a culture of high standards and expectations for the staff and students. The principal has to develop norms and promote attitudes of teachers and students that positively affect learning in the school, largely through determining policies and practices (Hallinger & Wang, 2015).

Instructional leadership assumes that the ultimate purpose of schooling is student learning and academic success, which includes goals such as expanding and deepening students' knowledge base across various disciplines; developing their learning skills such as reading and writing, creative and analytical thinking, information mapping and summarisation techniques; supporting their love of learning; and sparking their curiosity (Biesta, 2009; Pritchard, 2013). Under this assumption, school leaders are required to concentrate on leadership activities designed to improve teaching and learning through intensive management of curriculum and instruction (Shaked, 2018).

Researchers have indicated a significant gap between the widespread expectation from principals to function as instructional leaders and their actual practice (Prytula, Noonan, & Hellsten, 2013). Many principals continue to consider teaching and learning as issues of secondary importance (Goldring et al., 2008, 2015; May, Huff, & Goldring, 2012). The literature suggests three main inhibitors of instructional leadership. First, principals do not have enough time to engage in teaching and learning improvement efforts (Camburn, Spillane, & Sebastian, 2010; Grissom, Loeb & Master, 2013). Second, principals do not have the knowledge base required to demonstrate instructional leadership, which relates to how students learn and how teachers teach effectively (Goldring et al., 2008, 2015). Third, deep-rooted organisational norms that view instruction as a teacher-only area push principals away from instructional leadership (Cuban, 1988; Murphy et al, 2016).

Instructional leadership has been depicted by some scholars as a top-down approach to educational leadership, which seeks to manage teachers towards moving in the direction of defined goals through strong central power, narrow professional freedom and limited pluralism (Barth, 1990; Day et al., 2001; Hallinger, 2003). The instructional leader controls the implementation of improvements through a hierarchical governing structure, and all teachers are informed what they are supposed to do (Aas & Brandmo, 2016). However, conceptualisations of instructional leadership have developed from hierarchical to non-hierarchical models over time (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2010), applying the concepts of distributed leadership to instructional leadership (Halverson & Clifford, 2013; Neumerski, 2013). Therefore, principals as instructional leaders play a key role in fostering a shared understanding of the necessity of change; engaging school middle leaders in instructional leadership initiatives; and providing the continuing support, resources and commitment required for teacher leaders to improve their instructional leadership capabilities (Gülcan, 2012; Klar, 2012).

Instructional leadership has not been sufficiently examined in the context of higher education (Ersozlu & Saklan, 2016; Wang & Berger, 2010). In order to add to the available knowledge base, the present study explored perceptions of higher education leaders regarding their instructional leadership role, seeking to contribute to both theory and practice.

4 | METHOD

The participants of this qualitative study were heads of departments in HEIs. Opportunity sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was used, as higher education leaders, whom the author knew, were asked if they were available at the time and willing to take part in the study. However, heterogeneous sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was also implemented in this study regarding principals' sex, age, years of experience and type of institution. The

goal was to 'interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know' (Kvale & Brinkmann's, 2009, p. 113). Therefore, this study involved 22 higher education leaders, 13 males and 9 females. Participants were between 43 and 64 years old ($M = 50.91$, $SD = 7.15$), and had 9–39 years of experience in higher education ($M = 21.14$, $SD = 7.82$), which included 2–23 years of experience as higher-education leaders ($M = 11.13$, $SD = 5.74$). They worked in universities (12 participants), colleges (8 participants) and colleges of education (2 participants). Table 1 below summarises the demographics of study participants.

Data were collected by the author through semi-structured interviews, which allowed the author 'to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic' (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 111). The key questions were pre-planned, based on Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) dimensions of instructional leadership mentioned above. However, the interviews were also conversational, with questions flowing from previous responses when possible. The interviews proved to be like conversations, or at times monologues, rather than a series of questions and answers. Although the interviews sought to explore principals' enactment of instructional leadership, the interviewers intentionally omitted the term 'instructional leadership'. This was to avoid priming participants to frame their discussions in this light. Thus, questions were asked such as: 'What are your priorities in your leadership work, and how were they determined?'; 'As a leader, what do you expect from the faculty of your department?'; and 'How do you rank instruction among the various areas requiring your attention—and why?'. Interviews generally lasted one hour, and were audiotaped for later transcription and analysis. To evaluate the soundness of the data, all participants' transcripts were sent back to them along with a request that they evaluate their responses and make any necessary additions or modifications (Koelsch, 2013).

Data analysis, which was conducted by the author, was a four-stage process—condensing, coding, categorising and theorising. First, the necessary sorting and condensing were performed (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), seeking out the relevant utterances that might represent instructional leadership, based on the previously mentioned Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) framework. At the second stage—coding—each segment of data (utterance) was coded according to the aspect it represented (Tracy, 2013). This stage, in contrast to the previous one, was data-driven and not theory-driven, as it was not based on a priori codes but rather on inductive ones, developed by direct examination of the perspectives articulated by participants regarding instructional leadership (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). After having captured the essence of the statements in the second stage, in the third stage—categorising—similar utterances were assembled into clusters in order to generalise their meanings and derive categories. Finally, the theorising stage sought to reach a conceptual construct of the categories derived in the previous stage, and to explore how they were interconnected and influenced each other as parts of one abstract construct (Miles et al., 2014).

5 | FINDINGS

The analysis of qualitative data revealed that higher education leaders in Israel, who took part in this study, exhibited very little instructional leadership. They did not attach much importance to improving teaching and learning and rarely participated in activities designed for this purpose. Their leadership approach was anchored in three perceptions: regarding the autonomy of faculty members, regarding the low priority of teaching quality in higher education, and regarding the style of teaching required in academia. These perceptions derived from the categorising stage, mentioned above. Table 1 shows the frequency of these perceptions, which are presented next, supported by participant excerpts.

5.1 | The autonomy of lecturers

The first perception identified through the analysis of the interview data, which may begin to explain the limited involvement in instructional leadership by participants, concerned the extended autonomy of higher education

TABLE 1 Study participants' information

	Pseudonyms	Sex	Age	Higher education experience	Leadership experience	Type of institution	Autonomy of lecturers	Low priority of teaching quality	Style of teaching required in academia
1	Alice	Female	44	16	8	University	✓	✓	
2	Anne	Female	55	27	16	University	✓	✓	✓
3	Bob	Male	48	22	14	College	✓	✓	
4	Charles	Male	51	16	7	University		✓	✓
5	Christopher	Male	43	15	8	University	✓		
6	Daniel	Male	52	23	14	College			
7	David	Male	43	9	2	University	✓	✓	
8	Elizabeth	Female	59	19	8	College			✓
9	Gloria	Female	46	14	6	College of Education			
10	Jacob	Male	64	39	22	University	✓		✓
11	James	Male	43	14	8	College			✓
12	John	Male	54	22	11	College	✓	✓	
13	Laura	Female	47	18	8	University	✓	✓	
14	Linda	Female	52	28	14	University	✓	✓	✓
15	Maria	Female	44	16	7	College of Education			
16	Martha	Female	53	20	9	University	✓		
17	Michael	Male	44	15	6	College	✓	✓	
18	Michelle	Female	61	27	16	University			
19	Philip	Male	47	19	8	University	✓	✓	✓
20	Richard	Male	64	37	22	College	✓		
21	Robert	Male	61	33	23	University			
22	William	Male	45	16	8	College	✓		

teachers. Study participants believed that the deeply rooted autonomy of lecturers, which includes, among other things, their right to teach in any manner they consider appropriate, significantly narrowed the possibility of requiring them to improve the effectiveness of their teaching. This notion was mentioned by 14 participants.

To substantiate the autonomy of lecturers, interviewees often mentioned the concept of academic freedom. For them, academic freedom, which protects against interference as to what and how faculty members teach, is a fundamental principle of academia, essential to its mission. As said Philip, with 8 years of leadership experience: 'Lecturers must have full freedom in the classroom because academic freedom is vital to society as a free press.' Similarly Linda, with 14 years of leadership experience, asserted, 'Researchers need freedom to communicate the results of their studies and educate the next generation of critical thinkers, so we must never interfere with what they do in their lectures.'

Another explanation for the wide autonomy, mentioned several times by the study participants, was the identity of lecturers. David, a novice head of department, argued: 'The lecturers are distinguished people, who have proven themselves in their research. It's not appropriate for us to interfere with their work.' Bob, with 14 years of leadership experience, elucidated: 'We did not collect the lecturers from the street. They are respectable people, so we trust their judgement on how to teach.' The fact that lecturers' promotion is based primarily on their research achievements will be discussed in the next section.

As a firmly established norm in higher education, the autonomy of lecturers makes components of instructional leadership, which are associated with controlling and monitoring, very complicated. For example, conducting observation in classrooms, which is a key practice of instructional leadership, was viewed by study participants as impossible. 'Observation of teaching is in complete contrast to academic freedom' (William, with 8 years of leadership experience). 'Classrooms observation is utterly unacceptable in higher education institutions' (Anne, with 16 years of leadership experience). Moreover, any discussion with lecturers regarding their teaching methods was considered by study participants as problematic. For them, the only way to evaluate the quality of teaching in higher education is through the questionnaires that students are asked to fill at the end of each course.

The autonomy of lecturers was highlighted by research participants who worked at universities more than those who worked in colleges. All of them, however, noted that higher education is characterised by each researcher working individually: 'When faculty members come to university, they don't have a shared workspace. They go directly to the classroom where they teach or work each in their own room' (Laura, with 8 years of leadership experience). 'Except for specific cases, they each work alone' (Jacob, a veteran head of department). Such a work environment does not encourage shared thinking on effective teaching methods and ways to implement them. 'I'm not sure they enjoy their loneliness, but that's the way it is in higher education, so it's hard to expect them to think together about how they teach and how they can improve it,' said Michael, with 6 years of leadership experience.

5.2 | The low priority of teaching quality

One more perception that emerged in qualitative data analysis, which may help to understand participants' restricted involvement in instructional leadership, was the secondary importance of teaching quality. Faculty members are primarily considered researchers rather than teachers, and the question of whether or not they are good teachers is marginal. Consequently, their leaders do not pay much attention to improving their quality of instruction. This notion was mentioned by 10 participants.

Study participants noted that the main work of university professors is research. They are required to teach only a small number of courses, so that most of their time remains available for research. Moreover, research performance is the main—and sometimes the only—criterion for tenuring and promoting. Alice, with 8 years of leadership experience, explained clearly: 'If you have great teaching and too few publications, you won't get tenure. But

if you have a lot of publications and terrible teaching, you will undoubtedly get tenure.' Therefore, most leadership efforts in higher education are aimed at encouraging research rather than improving the quality of teaching.

For study participants, being a fruitful researcher is one thing, making the content engaging so that students take an active role in their studies is another. The people who lead the research in their field and contribute to reducing gaps in available knowledge might not best impart this knowledge to students. For various reasons, HEIs definitely prioritise research excellence. Therefore, higher education leaders attach limited importance to improving the quality of teaching and learning.

Interviewees' responses suggested a difference between universities and colleges. Universities were perceived as much more research-oriented than colleges. Although study participants have noticed that in recent years there has been progress towards recognising and valuing the impact of teaching, research expertise still has absolute priority in universities. In colleges, on the other hand, the emphasis on research involvement is not as pronounced. In particular, colleges of education often pay attention to teaching quality, on the grounds that students who learn to be teachers must not only hear about quality teaching, but also feel it during their training.

5.3 | The style of teaching required in academia

An additional perception revealed in the current qualitative study, which may serve as an explanation for participants' narrow involvement in instructional leadership, was about the desired method of teaching in higher education. Study participants believed that the 'old' way of teaching, where the lecturer stands before the class and presents the material students need to learn, while students are mainly passive, is most suitable for teaching in universities and colleges. For them, the lecturer is responsible for covering a certain amount of material and for presenting this material clearly to the class, while each student's responsibility is to listen and understand. Therefore, there is no need for instructional leadership, which seeks to embed innovative, active teaching methods. This notion was mentioned by 7 participants.

Study participants considered professors as suppliers of knowledge, which students have to receive. They also wanted students to acquire respect for determination, a strong work ethic and accomplishments in research. Charles, with 7 years of leadership experience, viewed students' passive listening as something that should not be given up: 'I think it's very important that students get used to sitting and listening for an hour and a half. This is the essence of higher education.' John, with 11 years of leadership experience, distinguished between high school and higher education: 'I am in favour of active learning in school, even in high school. However, it is not appropriate for university. It's a disrespect to the academy.'

Specifically, study participants claimed that lecture-style instruction had to do with the subjects being taught: 'The subjects I teach in maths and physics are so complicated that if they are not attentive throughout the class they won't be able to understand them' (Bob, with 14 years of leadership experience). 'I need to cover a lot of material, so I'd better explain and they'll listen' (Elizabeth, with 8 years of leadership experience). In addition, it is related to the settings: 'I teach a very large group of students in the auditorium, so I can't be responsible for keeping them engaged' (James, with 8 years of leadership experience).

Study participants who worked in colleges of education made this claim less frequently than other participants did. Probably because their institution was engaged in exploring education and training educators, they believed in the importance of innovative teaching and active learning.

6 | DISCUSSION

While instructional leadership has been extensively researched in school settings (Hallinger, 2019), there has been limited application to higher education (Hofmeyer et al., 2015; Quinlan, 2014; Wang & Berger, 2010). The current

qualitative exploration of instructional leadership in higher education leaders in Israel was undertaken with the goal of narrowing this gap in the existing literature. Given the benefits attributed to instructional leadership when it comes to student achievement and social justice (DeMatthews, 2018; Glickman et al., 2017), its applicability in higher education, which faces challenges of student graduation success and equity (Byrd & Woodward, 2018; McArthur & Ashwin, 2020), may be seen as worthy of academic attention.

6.1 | Interpretation of the findings

The current study found that Israeli higher education leaders, especially in universities and to a lesser extent in colleges, described themselves as being involved in instructional leadership activities to a limited extent only. Improving teaching and learning took up only a secondary place in their leadership role. Interestingly, study participants did not claim to have no time for instructional leadership. Nor did they admit they lacked knowledge (although further research is needed on this point), as the literature found for school principals (Goldring et al., 2015; May, Huff, & Goldring, 2012). Instead, the explanation for their course of action was a backlog of perceptions that reflected apparent contradictions between the concepts of instructional leadership and the nature of higher education. Specifically, study participants emphasised three apparent contradictions between the instructional leadership framework and the inherent features of higher education.

First, study participants viewed instructional leadership as conflicted with the higher education's fundamental norm of lecturer autonomy. As mentioned above, instructional leadership has been portrayed by researchers as a hierarchical approach, which demands teachers to achieve predetermined aims through control and limited independence (Aas & Brandmo, 2016; Day et al., 2001). For this study's participants, instructional leadership requires them to undermine the deep-seated autonomy of HEIs' faculty, which grants them the right to teach in any way they see fit. Under the collegial atmosphere prevalent in higher education (Bryman, 2007; Jones et al., 2012), leaders participating in the current study felt that leading teaching and learning was neither possible nor desirable. It should be noted that also in school settings, organisational norms that see instruction as a teacher-only area were found to be an inhibitor of instructional leadership (Goldring et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2016).

Second, study participants considered instructional leadership as inconsistent with the low priority of teaching quality in higher education. According to them, universities are not centers of advanced learning but rather of a systematic research (Light & Calkins, 2015; Tight, 2016). Therefore, instructional leadership, which focuses on teaching and learning as the core business of schooling (Bush, 2013; Hallinger, 2019), is not relevant to universities. While the primary goal of schools is student learning and achievement (Biesta, 2009; Pritchard, 2013), and therefore instructional leadership is appropriate for them (Shaked, 2018), the main goal of higher education is the creation of new knowledge.

Third, study participants believed that instructional leadership's emphasis on improving the quality of teaching did not meet the needs of higher education. For them, implementing advanced teaching methods is neither necessary nor suitable for higher education, because the traditional teacher-centred methods work very well in academia. They claimed that we learn differently as adults from how we learn as children (Loeng, 2018), and therefore, while young learners may need active learning, older learners can and should learn while continually listening.

The perceptions identified in this study, which may explain the limited enactment of instructional leadership, were more common in universities than in colleges, especially in colleges of education. The autonomy of faculty members was emphasised by participants who worked at universities more than their counterparts who worked in colleges. In addition, universities were perceived as much more research-centred than colleges. In particular, colleges of education believed in the significance of innovative teaching methods and ascribed importance to teaching quality for their lecturers to set a personal example for students. As mentioned earlier, Israeli colleges are considered second-tier institutions that are characterised by lower selectivity, academic orientation and prestige

(Ayalon & Yogev, 2006; Hofman & Niederland, 2012). The findings of this study suggest that academic prestige and research excellence also have a dark side of limited attention to teaching quality.

6.2 | Instructional leadership as a borrowed policy

Insofar as the instructional leadership framework was developed for schools, its adoption in higher education can be viewed as policy borrowing. Our findings illustrate the intricacy of policy borrowing. By attracting policy solutions that have been proven effective in another context, borrowed policies involve less risk, reduce uncertainty and shorten the planning process (Nir et al., 2018; Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). However, this study demonstrates that borrowed policies are not free of limitations.

To overcome the challenges of borrowing the instructional leadership policy from school systems to the higher education context, a customised version of instructional leadership should be used, which keeps the commitment to improving teaching and learning while taking into account the priorities, characteristics and norms of higher education. Adjustments should be made in accordance with the above-mentioned apparent contradictions between instructional leadership and the features of higher education, found in this study.

First, a customised version of instructional leadership can leave considerable room for lecturer autonomy, bringing about instructional improvement without coercive instructions but rather through the efforts of multiple individuals working to simultaneously influence the contexts of leadership and the contexts of instruction. We can distinguish between the essence of instructional leadership and its elements. The core of instructional leadership is the leader's deep involvement in improving teaching and learning (Hallinger & Wang, 2015), while the authoritative or directive aspect of instructional leadership (Aas & Brandmo, 2016) could be adapted to be consistent with the norms of the higher education context. Further, over the years, research has begun to see instructional leadership as a mission in which many leaders within the school should take part (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2010). According to Lambert (2002), 'We no longer believe that one administrator can serve as the instructional leader for the entire school without substantial participation of other educators' (p. 37). Therefore, instructional leadership is a distributed, rather than centralised, approach (Halverson & Clifford, 2013). Faculty members, rather than position holders, can take the lead in adopting quality teaching methods, driving processes of assimilating innovation-oriented teaching methods.

Second, a customised version of instructional leadership can take into account the superiority of research in higher education. The norms in higher education render research a more prestigious and valued activity compared with teaching, hence continue to undermine the development of instructional leadership. However, today's HEIs invest great efforts in improving the quality of instruction (Lindblom & Kola, 2018). Recognition of the importance of effective teaching in higher education has expanded considerably in recent years, and the perception of teaching and research as competitors has changed (Seyfried & Ansmann, 2018). The customised version of instructional leadership can be based on the argument that even if teaching and learning are not the ultimate goal of research universities, improving their quality is of most importance. Moreover, research excellence and instructional improvements may be seen as complementing each other, exerting a positive mutual influence. The knowledge and skills that research staff gain through the improvements of teaching practices promote their academic research.

Third, a customised version of instructional leadership can bear in mind that innovative and active teaching methods appropriate for higher education may differ from those required for schools. Indeed, the principles of adult education (Andragogy) are different from the principles of children education (Pedagogy) (Loeng, 2018). However, the difference is not that adults are fit to be passive learners. Vice versa, adults need more autonomy in their learning because the child's self-concept of dependency changes into the adult's self-concept of independence (Clardy, 2005). Since they perceive themselves as self-directing, adults want to exercise power, influence and control over their learning experience (Ozuah, 2016). In fact, the traditional methods of teacher-centred instruction, which are common in higher education, are not sufficiently effective (Ebert-May et al., 2015).

Student-centred instruction, which is done in a way that suits higher education, could have produced much better results (Gilboy, Heinerichs, & Pazzaglia, 2015).

Overall, instructional leadership in higher education may be quite different from the one in schools and still be very useful for learning, results and social justice. Implementing instructional leadership in higher education while understanding the uniqueness and sensitivity of the context may be very helpful.

6.3 | Limitations

Compared to prior research, this study provided new perspectives on instructional leadership in higher education. However, it does have several limitations. First, heads of departments do not represent all leadership roles in higher education, such as presidents, deans and directors. Future research could reveal a more complete picture of instructional leadership in higher education by investigating a broad spectrum of postholders. Second, the interactions between interviewees' perceptions and factors such as their sex, age and seniority were not found to be significant, but may be detected in a study using a larger number of participants. Third, as with any self-reporting, the current method offered limited control over the possibility that participants might provide socially desirable responses. Further research using techniques such as direct observation could supplement higher education leaders' self-reporting with more objective data on their instructional leadership practices. Interviews with various stakeholders about leaders' instructional leadership may also provide less biased data.

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