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HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES IN A CHANGING WORLD: THE CASE OF A UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to explore the leadership practices and challenges at a university of technology in South Africa. This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach. I preferred to use in-depth individual interviews with five participants who were purposively selected from one university of technology (UoT) in South Africa. The interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis (TA) through an inductive process. Four themes emerged from the data analysis. The study recommends that university need to respond effectively to the leadership challenges and as well management in higher education institutions need to acquire skills and leadership practices in line with the 21st century. This study contributes to the literature on higher education leadership in South African UoTs which was noted to be scant.

Keywords: Higher Education, Leadership Practices, Leadership Challenges, 21st Century

1. Introduction

This study investigates higher education leadership practices and challenges at a university of technology in South Africa. Eddy *et al.* (2019) suggested that enhanced and improved leadership practices within the higher education sector are required within the 21st century in order for universities and colleges to improve the standards and the overall campus environment. Blessinga and Anchan (2015) purport that strategic leadership within the 21st century is now vital in higher education as the 21st century students are a new generation that is fully comfortable with technology unlike the past decades hence, a new kind of leadership is required tasked to help these students and prepare them for any challenges in their learning. Universities and colleges are facing a crisis of functioning effectively and efficiently due to failed leadership in certain areas. The main problem especially for leaders in academia is to adopt new leadership practices and follow them. Leaders within the academic environment of the 21st century need to improve their leadership practices to achieve high ethical standards which through their actions show their commitment. These leadership practices include planning, goal setting, priority setting, and budgeting and need identification (Day and Antanakis, 2018). A clear set standard must be set that all leaders will adhere to and follow.

Drew (2014) posits that several challenges at university of technology of the 21st century in the changing world have been realized. 21st century university leaders experience the

problem of trying to prepare the young minds for the future and what strategy as well as the support to implement to achieve that. Higher education leaders need to be flexible, reliable, hardworking, and persistent. There has been massive globalization and migration of educational leaders and students which has resulted in cultural blend and cultural fusion. Trying to understand various cultures and their tensions and conflicts seems to be an impossible task that is being faced by 21st century leaders. The ever-changing technologies nature, its progression and competition amongst the service providers has also resulted in those institutional leaders lagging technology to be unable to catch up on what will be new at certain points in time (Duignan, 2016). Furthermore, some individuals strongly believe that education is a public good in the 21st century and the government must be responsible for the education of its citizens which has resulted in too many strikes within the higher education system. Apart from the above challenges, other challenges such as individual needs of students through flexible curriculum, organizational politics, safety, and violence prevention on campus as well as unhealthy media violence are being experienced. All these changes pose to be challenges of leadership in higher education (Maxine, 2019). The next section of this article describes the problem statement of this study.

Grajek (2018) posits that recently the educational leadership work has increased drastically in strategic, organizational, instructional, and political leadership. This has led to increased complexity in the expectations of what leaders need to know and accountability. 21st century leaders within higher education are perceived to be lacking formal leadership training. Leadership training is useful and effective, especially in a changing world. Information technology is rapidly changing in the 21st century thereby forcing higher education leaders at the university of technology to adapt to changes more often. Higher education leaders need to be aware of what are the key values and goals for the institution and seek constructive feedback from those around them reflecting on how things can be improved. Higher education systems' biggest concern currently is to converge to technology's capabilities. This century technology advancements have managed to reshape every sector within the education system. Technology is introducing new potential futures for leadership within the academia. Due to higher education leaders' need to embrace new learning practices at the university of technology, there is need to introduce technology in the learning process to encourage active classroom participation and see each student's particular learning challenges even though this comes at a high cost since the equipment that will be used constantly need to be upgraded or changed and will need the support of the government funding and sometimes funding is unavailable, which hinders the learning process. The following are the research questions for this study:

- What are the leadership practices exercised by leaders at a university of technology?
- What are the challenges experienced by university of technology leaders in this changing world?
- Which strategies can be employed to improve leadership practices and challenges at this institution?

The aim of the study is to explore the leadership practices and challenges at a university of technology in South Africa. This study contributes to the literature on higher education leadership in South African UoTs which was noted to be scant.

2. Literature review
2.1. Leadership practices in higher education

In this article, the leadership practices in one South African university of technology are examined. Western (2018) defines leadership practice as the behavior the leader chooses to practice at a workplace. Yukl (2014) acknowledges that most leaders in higher education share the following common leadership practice, that is, challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way as well as encouraging heart. Gentry *et al.* 2018) reported the findings of one of the institutions where they studied the leadership practices and seven practices emerged in their studies, that is, leading by listening, demonstrating

respect for the members of the campus community, creating a healthy culture of evidence, inquiry and transparency; rallying support for shared goals through explicit, consistent focus on student success; incentivizing innovation and collaboration and lastly supporting risk-taking and allowing flops. Maxine (2019) suggests that leadership practice at an educational institution is all about listening, leading by example, motivating, and inspiring subordinates. Over and above, we believe that leadership practice at a university of technology should encompass the following attributes modeling the way and incentivizing technology and innovation.

2.2. Challenges of higher education leadership in the 21st century

Another focus for this study was to examine the leadership challenges at a university of technology in South Africa. Higher education leaders are faced with a series of challenges. These challenges are dynamic and new challenges always appear. Higher education leadership challenges have been cited by many leadership scholars such as Shin and Harman (2019) who explained that one of the most significant challenge in higher education during this digital age (changing world) has been embracing of innovative means of integrating technology. Ramsey and Wesley (2015) also reported that universities in this changing world are faced with the challenge of financial issues as government is dwindling its support for institutions of higher learning.

Today's higher education leadership challenges necessitate new forms of leadership. A volatile financial environment, the rise of international partnerships, greater accountability pressures, the need for new business models, new technologies, and changing demographics are just some of these challenges, which call for leadership solutions tested both inside and outside of higher education.

From the researcher's own perspective, given this current era of significant change in higher education, there is growing attention to the importance of understanding the leadership required to guide campuses successfully, and a growing concern that existing approaches to leadership are ineffective.

Literature review shows both the distinctiveness of each source and its similarities with the others. For example, Day and Antanakis (2018) have same view with reference to leadership practices and challenges in UoTs. These scholars corroborate each other in the view that leadership practices must involve leading by example and as well as challenging the process. These scholars also agree on most of the challenges leaders face in UoTs such as organizational politics, technology issues and managing change. Other scholars have opposing views regarding the challenges leaders face at UoTs, for example, Drew (2014) and Western (2018) insisted that leadership challenges arose from the practices of the leader. For us, we strongly believe that the leadership practices do have an impact on the challenges to be faced. If they do good leadership practices, the challenges they face will be also few.

2.3. Transformational theory

In this study, the transformational leadership theory is used. Transformational leadership models have tended to dominate the understanding of leadership within the HE sector (Day and Antanakis, 2018) and tend to resonate positively with their apparent foundation upon human interactions, which matches the demands of faculty and campus-based leadership roles. The expectation of "emotional intelligence" in leadership (Duignan, 2016) is attractive; HE institutions are essentially in the business of human interaction. At an academic level, the "learner-centered" approach to education matches the adaptive concepts of transformational leadership (Drew 2014). Additionally, the transformational approach is also perceived to match with the challenges of a changing sector (globalization and user-driven demands) and is a leadership approach which will better enable the creative solutions which are needed to meet those challenges. Certainly, the role of HE institution leaders as change agents has become increasingly important.

Transformational leadership is known by three indices (Grafton, 2017; Hickman, 2019). The indicators include:

- Ideal influence: transformational leaders can influence their followers through respect, trust and commitment and thus motivate the effort required to achieve optimal levels of performance in their followers,
- Personal considerations: transformational leaders are able to recognize the followers' needs and abilities and accompany them. Moreover, they coach their personnel well and provide good feedback,
- Spiritual motivation: transformational leaders give power to individuals by talking to people, increase optimism and enthusiasm and relate their insight of the future to their competence. They provide insight motivate ability needed to perform high levels of performance in persons.

The leadership practices in higher education as well as the challenges leaders face in this changing world has been discussed. Most notable from the literature were the five exemplary practices leaders follow in their workplaces: challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way as well as encouraging heart. The challenges the leaders in higher education are wide and complex. The most challenges were dealing with financial issues, dealing with change, and managing institutional politics. Having provided a brief relevant research literature, the next section discusses the research design and methodology adopted for this study.

3. Research design and methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach. The researcher preferred to use in-depth individual interviews with five participants who were purposively selected from one university of technology (UoT) in South Africa. The choice for this university was twofold: firstly, the researcher was near the proximity of this institution, therefore saving costs of travel and secondly, this university had several leadership challenges leading to the university becoming insolvent and maladministration. This delves into researching what challenges are faced and what could possibly be done to avert these certain challenges. The five participants had enough service years for our purpose, ranging from 4 to 21 years in their respective leadership positions. We believed that from the individual interviews, we would get rich information that is not influenced by responses of other participants as it might have been the case had we opted for focus groups. The five participants comprised of one female leader who is a Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) and has worked with the university for nine and half years. The other participants are four males, two H.O.Ds and two directors. The two H.O.Ds had four years and 15 years of service respectively. The two directors had 7 years and 21 years in leadership positions, respectively. All the 5 respondents had worked only at this one university in their life.

The researcher sent out consent letters to individual participants who had been identified for the study. In the consent letter, the participants were being invited to participate in a study entitled Higher education leadership practices and challenges in a changing world: A case of a university of technology. The aim of the study was clarified. The researcher also explained that the study would entail data collection using semi-structured, in-depth, individual interviews of 30 minutes in length to take place at a mutually agreed location, at a time convenient to them. It was explained that during the interviews, the participants had the right to decline to answer any of the interview questions if they so wished. Furthermore, they should feel free to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. To ensure rigor of the interview process, the transcripts were sent back to them to cross-check information purported to be submitted to them. The selected participants were also informed that the outcome of the research would be published in on–line access journals and that the report of the study would be disseminated through conference presentations for public consumption.

3.1. Data collection

Data was collected until saturation was reached. The five open-ended questions and follow-up probes evoked responses that we found explanatory for us to understand the perceptions,

feelings, and experiences of the selected participants. We could also understand what was relevant and of importance to them within their leadership positions.
The semi-structured interview protocol contained the following questions:

- What do you understand by leadership practice in higher education?
- Which leadership practice(s) are you using in your field and why?
- What challenges are you currently facing in your field of work?
- How do you solve the above-mentioned challenges?
- How do you perceive leadership practices to be in this 21st century?

3.2. Data analysis

The interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis (TA) through an inductive process because we wanted to identify underlying ideas, patterns and assumptions that were expressed by the selected participants (Saunders *et al.* 2007). In adopting TA, I wanted to identify patterns of meaning across a dataset that would provide an answer to the research question we posed: Which leadership practice(s) are you using in your field and why? In our choice for thematic analysis, we also aimed to meet trustworthiness criteria outlined by Creswell (2014), namely: the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Thus, a TA six-phase process invented by Saunders *et al.* (2007) was used to analyze our data, which is an iterative and reflective process that develops over time and involves a constant moving back and forward between phases, as suggested by Nowell *et al.* (2017). Organizing and preparing the data for analysis and describing/interpreting the themes aimed at ensuring that accurate information was validated (Saunders *et al.* 2007). These patterns were identified through a rigorous process of data familiarization, data coding, theme development and revision.

In phase one, I read through the entire data set once before beginning coding (Nowell *et al.* 2017). I then familiarized myself with the data by reading and re-reading the data to become immersed and intimately familiar with its content, searched for patterns and meanings, which led to the process of manual coding. Phase two involved the initial production of codes from the data, a theorizing activity through which we kept revisiting the data, reflecting on it, interacting and thinking about it (Nowell *et al.* 2017), focusing on specific aspects of the data. The entire dataset was coded manually, using numbers which were collated to identify broader patterns of meaning (potential themes) together with all relevant data extracts, for later stages of analysis (Nowell *et al.* 2017). I generated labels or codes that identified important features of the data (such as indications about professional development for leaders) that were relevant to answering the research question.

Focusing on specific aspects of the data led to the development of ideas about what was going on in the data (Creswell and Poth, 2018). I identified important sections of text and attached labels to index them as they related to relevant issues in the data (for example, feelings about work environment). An inductive analytic process informed how we theorized the themes (Creswell, 2014) because they are strongly linked to the data themselves (Nowell *et al.* 2017). The credibility of analysis was enhanced by having three researchers individually analyzing each data set and cross checking with each other to ensure credibility of the analysis. Individual extracts of data were coded into different themes. Phase three involved sorting and collating all the potentially relevant coded data extracts into the themes (Creswell, 2014). The data was then collated relevant to each candidate theme, so that we could work with the data and review the viability of each candidate theme (Creswell, 2014). The themes were described to draw on their interrelatedness and finally interpreted relative to the context of the study.

In phase four, I reviewed the coded data extracts for each theme to consider whether they appear to form a coherent pattern (Nowell *et al.* 2017). This was also to ensure the validity of individual themes to determine whether they accurately reflect the meanings evident in the data set as a whole (Creswell and Poth, 2018). In this phase, inadequacies in the initial coding and themes were revealed and made changes where it was applicable (Creswell, 2014). For example, I combined themes that seemed to portray similar explanations. We also deleted

themes that seemed not to have valuable information regarding the research question and where applicable we recoded (Nowell *et al.* 2017).

In phase five, the researcher determined what aspect of the data each theme captured and identified what was of interest about them and why (Saunders *et al.* 2007). For example, I looked at the theme, 'concept of leadership practice' and went through the data to identify which of its aspects related to this theme. This phase involved developing a detailed analysis of each theme, working out the scope and focus of each, determining the 'story' of each (Nowell *et al.* 2017). It also involved deciding on an informative name for each theme. We included sections of data with some overlap between themes, for example, the themes on 'leadership challenges'. I continually reflected on how each theme fitted into the overall story about the entire data set in relation to the research question posed (Nowell *et al.* 2017).

4. Empirical findings

Phase six involved the interpretation of the data and findings. The aim of this study was to examine the leadership practices and challenges at one UoT in South Africa. The findings were developed through a rigorous process of methodologies, trustworthiness, and audit trail to ease the reporting process (Nowell *et al.* 2017). Both shorter quotes within the narrative and longer block quotes are included, all of which are accompanied by a unique identifier to demonstrate that various participants were represented across the results (Nowell *et al.* 2017). All the themes are discussed below.

From our analysis most of the participants defined leadership practice from the same perspective. For example, one of the participants stated:

P1*: An ability to both inspire and take the subordinates and students in our confidents.*

Another participant said:

P2: *It is the practice of developing the strategic plan for the tertiary institution subject to higher education policy, creating policies compatible with the strategic plan and following the created policies religiously without fear, prejudice, and favor.*

One participant expressed a contrary view:

P3*: I am not sure what is meant by leadership practice, but I can say the leadership is leading people by example so that work gets done efficiently, timely and in an organized manner.*
P4: *Leadership practice in higher education is the ability to guide people and institutional processes effectively and positively.*

Northouse (2018) suggests that the notion of leadership practice is mostly concerned with the way leaders at any organization conduct their business. In fact, most studies that have investigated leadership practices and challenges across the world have found that there is still some variability in terms of practices of leadership within higher education institutions. Another participant had this to say:

P5: *Leadership in higher education (HE) involves being able to successfully manage the processes that promote teaching and learning at whatever level (of leadership) in order to achieve the objectives of higher education in terms of student success. Leadership thus entails pulling together resources from different areas in higher education institutions (HEIs) and enhancing their potential to promote student success in the most efficient and effective manner. Efficiency relates to cost saving as it relates to funds, time, and the like, whereas effectiveness relates to activating greater potential with the little resources being used to achieve the goals set. It is my opinion that a PhD does not necessarily create good leaders. Good academic achievements do not necessarily translate to good leadership potential. I do acknowledge that academics can be trained to be good leaders but not all academics have within themselves*

capacity to be trained as good leaders. There must be certain intrinsic leadership traits within individuals for such individuals to become good leaders. However, it does not mean that individuals born with intrinsic leadership traits do not need training. These individuals do need further training in leadership to sharpen their skills and increase their potential.

The data showed that all the participants are practicing different leadership practices within the same institution. One participant was not so sure which leadership practice he/she uses at work. For instance, this participant 5 said:

I am not sure what leadership practices are so I cannot answer you.

This might mean that the participant was a new leader or not necessarily involved in leadership duties at this institution. Another participant clearly stated the leadership practices he often uses at the workplace.

P2: *Democratic with a bias towards consultative because when people are consulted on issues affecting their lives; they participate and support the outcomes when it comes to implementation.*

Another participant stated:

P4*: As an acting H.O.D, applying the University policies in all spheres of governance in order to deviate from stated goals.*

From the interviews, there was generally good responses regarding their leadership practices except one leader who was not clearly sure what leadership is despite the interviewer clearly explains the concept of leadership practices. Northouse (2017) asserts that leadership practice is leading by example, understand the higher education, at both macro and micro levels, especially external factors that influence the higher education ecosystem. Therefore, Northouse (2017) suggests that leadership practice should be conformational.
Contrary views were expressed by other participants*:*

P1*: leadership practice - which basically involves finding ways to understand the environment within which you lead. My role is then, creating common vision/mission and goals for the people one leads and supporting people to achieve such. My role is then to support and motivate colleagues to achieve goals. I do believe people recruited in VUT where identified with certain leadership traits and potential. My role then is to provide a platform from such individuals to become creating, with guidance on the side in order for such colleagues to achieve their maximum potential. Keeping in mind that activities have to always be brought into alignment with the goals that have been set to achieve.*

From the data it seems that the leaders face almost similar challenges.
One participant said:

P2*: The vision and mission of VUT are not aligned to practices within the university. It appears that executive leadership do not have the ability to drive the vision and mission and ensure that policy and practices are aligned to the vision and mission of the university. Practices down at lower levels of the university seem to be grounded in old mission and vision and university leadership has failed to drive the vision and mission of the university. For example, the university indicates that one of its intensions is to improve research. However, as one goes down the leadership lines, practices discourage creation of research outputs that are healthy enough to achieve the set priorities.*

Another said:

P5*: The challenges of insubordination and lack of interest in meetings and other flora and some degree of apathy.*
P3: Bureaucratic measures that militate against efficiency.
P1: Corruption. Low pay. Bullying. Favoritism. No space for growth.
P4: Understaffing, lack of guidance from line managers. Over-work.

All the respondents provided recommendations to the challenges they face as leaders at their institution. For example, one respondent has to say:

P4: Hold management accountable. Hire more staff – this is influenced by a shoestring budget.
P3: To keep challenging leadership practices especially at the top for practices to be aligned with the direction the university is taking to ensure that the university still aligns practices with mission and vision. This is very difficult to achieve as power games come into play in the environment. This I must say takes a lot of energy and is sometimes exhausting. It saps one's energy.
P1: We need better leaders and management needs to listen to our collective efforts.
P5: As alluded earlier on the solution is consultative and involve as much stakeholders as possible and listen to all side of the story.
P2: Continuously making stakeholders aware of the problems emerging from the bureaucratic tape and pointing out the impact of the problems on daily progress.

Like the research findings, Barger (2017) asserts that leaders or managers need to listen to their subordinates' needs otherwise leadership challenge in this respect will arose. Other researchers like Duignan (2016) and Western (2018) concur with the above statement.

P1: Leadership is going to have to be aware of the direction of trends and changes in the world. Become informed of the changing nature of the clients we serve in terms of the needs we are addressing and come up with ways that may be different from our traditions in order to succeed in leading in the environments we lead in.
P5: I do not know…… I just know that any leadership practice should include the concepts I mentioned in my personal leadership philosophy.
P2: They are archaic. We need new frameworks, designs and methodologies.
P4: More technology on technology.
P3: Leadership in the 21st century is a bit of a problem as things seem to be imposed from top to bottom and subordinates are no contributors either to policy direction or critical strategic decisions taken. Lack of transparency also is another issue.

Findings from this study differ from those of earlier ones, especially given that the study is set in one university of technology (one region of the country). Despite this, few researchers from other countries have shown interest in this area of research though the subject has become topical in an era when societal emphasis is on economic issues (Barger, 2017). In the interviews, the question about what challenges leaders are facing in their field of work led to more questions as respondents ask more about the insubordination at the institution.

Leadership challenges and leadership practices differ from one person to another. Specifically, with this study, it has been evident that there are different challenges that people are facing and their views on leadership are the same. Although the study was done at one UoT it does not necessarily mean that each UoT is facing the same challenges, and future endeavors should be implemented in order to address issues that are directly affecting the staff or hindering them to perform their respective duties.

5. Conclusion

The limitations of this study are identified so that the findings can be interpreted correctly within the context of the study. The total population for this study from which the sample was drawn included only five participants from one university of technology. Considering that the study sample was limited to one region, so that other higher education institutions in the country were precluded and therefore inadvertently ignored. This makes generalizability difficult, so it is recommended that future studies are carried out to investigate the same issues in all public universities within the country, using a quantitative method or the mixed method approach to gain more insight. Another limitation of the study is around the population for the study. The time duration was not adequate to conduct a census of all universities of technology in South Africa. Data collection was limited to three months which may not have been sufficient for this study.

The study recommends that university need to respond effectively to the leadership challenges and as well management in higher education institutions need to acquire skills and leadership practices in line with the 21st century.

For leaders to improve their practices: feedback, self-perception and reflection are important tools which are central to university leadership development. This perception is in line with Western (2018) who alluded to the same sentiments. Therefore, the university should provide opportunities for them to reflect upon and question their leadership practice.

Lastly, individual leaders at this institution should be trained to give, receive, and seek out constructive feedback. Through training, leaders might explore their "blind spots" and improve their leadership practices. During regular training sessions of leaders, challenges they face may be discussed. A further research regarding leadership issues and effectiveness in higher education needs further exploration.

The conclusion states the main findings of the study and emphasizes on what knowledge it adds in the subject area. In this article, we have attempted to provide an account of how leaders at a higher education institution perceive the challenges they face and their daily practices at work. From the literature review, it is stated that five themes emerge from the data analysis, namely: Concept of leadership practice; the leadership practices; leadership challenges; solutions to the challenges and perceptions of leaders. We believe that this study, a novelty of its kind in the educational leadership context, creates research opportunities for further researchers in the field to expand the horizon of knowledge on these variables identified as job satisfaction antecedents.

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