



# Navigating the Delicate Balance between Academia and Administration through Transformational Leadership in a South African University

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## Abstract

This study investigated the challenges faced by middle-level academic leaders at a university in South Africa. It was guided by the transformational leadership approach. The study found that heads of departments faced many challenges, including disruption of the teaching programme, due to meetings and other responsibilities as well as persistent student protests, too much paperwork as a result of reporting to higher management, and lack of leadership induction. The study also established that there was minimal academic career growth for academics in middle-level academic leadership during the time they were in those positions, due to the pressure that came with the office, which reduced research activities. There is a lack of support in terms of capacity-building for heads of departments, which functions as an impediment to career growth among middle-level academic leaders. Once they get into leadership positions, most academics sacrifice their academic careers to satisfy the administrative demands of their office. Balancing academia and administration at the sampled university was very difficult for the middle-level managers. The study recommends that the university develops and implements a practical strategy for middle-level academic managers, which would allow them to strike a balance between the administration and academic sides of their careers.

**Keywords:** higher education, middle-level academic managers, transformative leadership

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## Résumé

Cette étude a examiné les défis auxquels sont confrontés les responsables universitaires de niveau intermédiaire dans une université d'Afrique du Sud. Elle a été guidée par l'approche du leadership transformationnel. L'étude a révélé que les chefs de département étaient confrontés à de nombreux défis, notamment la perturbation du programme d'enseignement, en raison de réunions et d'autres responsabilités, ainsi que les manifestations persistantes des étudiants, la bureaucratie excessive avec les rapports à faire pour la hiérarchie, et le manque de formation au leadership. L'étude a également établi que l'évolution de la carrière académique des universitaires occupant un poste de direction de niveau intermédiaire à l'université était minime pendant la période où ils sont en fonction, du fait de la pression qui en découle et qui a pesé sur les activités de recherche. L'absence de soutien en termes de renforcement des capacités des chefs de département constitue un obstacle à l'évolution de la carrière des responsables universitaires de niveau intermédiaire. Une fois qu'ils accèdent à des postes de direction, la plupart des universitaires sacrifient leur carrière académique pour satisfaire les exigences administratives de leur fonction. Dans l'université étudiée, il était très difficile pour les gestionnaires de niveau intermédiaire de trouver un équilibre entre le monde universitaire et l'administration. L'étude recommande que l'université développe et mette en œuvre une stratégie pratique pour les gestionnaires universitaires de niveau intermédiaire, qui leur permettrait de trouver un équilibre entre les aspects administratifs et académiques de leur carrière.

**Mots-clés :** enseignement supérieur, gestionnaires universitaires de niveau intermédiaire, leadership transformateur.

## Introduction and Background

The study documents the challenges faced by middle-level academic leaders in executing their duties at a university in South Africa. Most importantly, the article maps out ways and strategies for balancing the competing demands of academia and administration through a transformational leadership approach. The literature indicates that, often, these academics are not adequately prepared or capacitated to function successfully in these positions. They are thrown into the deep end of administration and they are often overwhelmed by the responsibilities of this role. This study was therefore motivated by the numerous challenges that often seem to drown middle-level academic leaders.

The university studied here had come under the spotlight for leadership and governance issues. At the complex centre of the matters of concern was the leadership style of the new vice-chancellor (which was not well regarded

by certain sections of the university community), the transformative decisions taken by the vice-chancellor, and the level of resistance to change. The developments contextualised above had led to the university being placed under the management of an administrator in the place of a University Council. The government, through the then Minister of Higher Education, had intervened by reinstating the vice-chancellor and dissolving the University Council before bringing in an administrator who was tasked to oversee the operations of the university for a period of twelve months. The issues at the centre of governance debates at this university cascaded down to middle-level management. These governance problems brought a unique context for the middle-level managers studied, namely a context of poverty and institutional instability.

In the context of this study, middle-level management includes course co-ordinators and heads of departments or of units within departments – the leadership that is generally not part of faculty management. Focus was given specifically to how middle-level academic leaders balanced academia and administration, in executing their duties and ensuring career growth. At the centre of the study is an experiment with a strategy package for navigating the balance between academia and administration, using a sample of heads of departments from one faculty at the university. The aim was to come up with an effective strategy for achieving some level of equanimity between academia and administration.

The starting point was acknowledging that the academia-administration scale was tilted in favour of administration. Furthermore, academics in management are often overwhelmed by their workloads, and this is attributed to inadequate resources to support their role (Gallos 2002: 174). Gevers (2016: 18) indicates that, while academics in leadership positions are generally regarded within the university ‘with a mixture of pity and apprehension as fallen people who have sold their souls for the scholarly equivalent of a mess of pottage’, it is very possible to balance academia and administration and excel in both. This calls on academics to maintain their academic selves, characterised by teaching, research and community engagement, in assuming their executive selves, characterised by university service and administration. The picture painted here is one of a precarious balance, which the study sought to establish.

As Gevers (2016) maintains, holding onto the key determinants of the academe, which include being empirical, coherent, original and creative, enhances the functionality of the academic leader in the executive post assumed. Research on university leadership in South Africa has often indicated that South African universities are characterised by ineffective and

inefficient leadership (Fullan and Scott 2009; Seale 2004), politicised and indecisive leadership (Ngcamu and Teferra 2015) and confusion (Bateman and Snell 2002). The major task in the study was, therefore, to come up with a strategy for managing the academia-administration balance, evening out the expectations and demands of both academia and administration that a middle-level manager deals with on a day-to-day basis. Also of importance in this study was the acknowledgement that, if not sufficiently balanced, one of the two areas, or both, will suffer.

The studied university is in a largely rural set-up. It is in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, which is the second-poorest province of the country (Human Research Council 2014; Statistics South Africa 2017).

### **Existing Body of Knowledge**

In South Africa, the 1997 White Paper on Education set the stage for the transformation of the higher education space. However, at that stage attention was paid to structural transformation (Soudien 2010; Fourie 1999; Bitzer and Bezuidenhout 2001; Waghid 2002; Van Wyk 2005), where focus was on ‘... sociological relationships, structural changes, efficiency, mergers of institutions, the forming of one national higher education system and institutional compliance in terms of redressing inequality (accessibility, equality of race and gender, demographical representation of staff and students of society)’ (Du Preez, Simmonds and Verhoef 2016: 3). The idea was to achieve equal and fair representation in terms of race, class, age and gender in the higher education landscape (South African Department of Education 1997), the reversal of what Ndimande (2016) calls manufactured social inequalities.

While issues of inequality and segregation still crop up in leadership in the South African higher education landscape (Bazana and Mogotsi 2017; Soudien 2015; Alexander 2007; Schrieff et al. 2005; Koen and Durrheim 2009), focus has also been on transforming the leadership styles in the universities (Van Niekerk 2015; Chipunza and Gwarinda 2010). Transformational leadership is urgently needed in the South African higher education context (Mader, Scott and Razak 2013; Seale and Cross 2016). This is because its tertiary institutions are part of a market context that is becoming increasingly demanding and competitive (Bendermacher, Egbrink, Wolfhagen and Dolmans 2016), and the transformation qualities of leaders in South African universities have been questioned (Herbst and Garg 2017).

Literature indicates that the major duties of heads of departments include department governance (Leaming 2006; Wolverson and Gmelch 2003; Montez, Wolverson and Gmelch 2003), teaching and learning

programme management (Wolverton, Gmelch, Wolverton and Sarros 1999; Leaming 2006; Tucker 1993), human resources management (Leaming 2006; Gmelch and Miskin 1993), and budget and resource management (Leaming 2006). There has been growing literature on the changing identities of academic managers and the emergence of new identities for the same. Most of this literature concentrates on the first decade after the turn of the twenty-first century, and it includes Whitchurch (2006), Henkel (2000), Barnett (2005) and Kogan and Teichler (2007).

## **Conceptual Framework**

The study was guided by the concept of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is generally change-oriented – engendering a change of individuals and change of social systems. Following Burns's (1978) use of the term 'transformational leadership' in relation to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a lot of research has been carried out to fit the concept to different contexts of leadership. While the preoccupation of a transactional leader is with the physiological, the transformational leader attends to the entire needs of the person (Hackman 2000). According to Brandis (2003), a transformational leader is idealised, has inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individual consideration. The success or failure of set goals in transformational leadership depends on the leader as much as it does on the led (Avolio and Bass 2002). Research indicates that notions of transformation in South Africa have tended to relate to race, change, efficiency and shift in organisational strategy (Ngcamu and Teffera 2015). This study extends transformation to the change in approach to academia and administration, in the process of striving for balance.

## **Research Methodology**

### ***Research Approach***

The study used a qualitative research approach. It was important that the phenomenon be studied and interpreted in its natural setting and specific context, which, in this case, was individual and personal narratives relating to middle-level leadership. This follows framing by such scholars as Swanson and Holton (1997) and, more recently, Denzin and Lincoln (2000, 2005), Schultze and Avital (2011) and Walia (2015). As Mohajan (2018) observes, qualitative research interests itself in people's experiences, meanings and relationships relating to specific samples. This study was, therefore, phenomenological in approach. Phenomenology has to do with the study of experience from the viewpoint of the individual and it focuses

on personal knowledge, personal (subjective) perspective and interpretation (Lester 1999). This study was interested in personal narratives of selected heads of departments in one faculty in the sampled university.

### ***Research Setting***

The sample consisted of six heads of departments, purposively selected from a faculty that has more than fifteen departments, institutes and centres. The interviews were conducted within the work environment, namely in the offices of the sampled participants. The researcher worked with the meetings cycle of the university as stipulated in the university calendar to set appointments with specific heads of departments. This was to avoid congesting the already heavy schedules of academic administrators. Further, and as Holloway and Wheeler (2010) indicate, research participants in interviews prefer to be interviewed where they feel comfortable and safe during the interview, and where there are as few interruptions as possible.

### **Discussion**

The study established several challenges that the middle-level managers in the sample experienced in their position as head of departments. The different narratives of the heads of department were a rich source of data. These are discussed in the section below under two major themes, namely ordinary everyday demands of administration, and rurality and notions of cultural collectivity. These are further split into several sub-themes.

#### ***Ordinary Everyday Demands of Administration***

##### *Routinisation of Academic Administration*

The participants raised several everyday challenges associated with middle-level academic leadership. The following sections discuss some of the major ones faced by the middle-level academic leaders sampled in the study.

##### *Disruption of Learning*

In the face of too much administrative work, including typing up official documents, attending meetings and dealing with students' issues, heads of departments are drowning. The participants indicated that the issue of time was affected by several problems, which related to the size of classes, disruptions of the learning programme, as well as too many responsibilities piled on their desks, among other challenges. One indicated:

Time is never on our side. There is hardly a semester when there are no disruptions of classes by the students, and once in a while by the university employees. Often, senior management ignores students' protests and they go on for very long periods. Sometimes, though, they tell employees to stay at home. (Interview: Head of Department 6)

Another indicated that when this happens, members of staff are often denied permission to enter university premises by the demonstrating students, which especially affects the working schedule of middle-level academic leaders.

The participants indicated that when student disruptions occur, dealing with other responsibilities becomes problematic. A head of department said:

When students go on strike there is often a lot of vandalism. However, what affects our time management more is that they shut down the university and there is no access to critical support offices and senior management offices. Even processing conference funding is often affected, as there are no people in the relevant offices. (Interview: Head of Department 2)

Thus, they indicated that career growth is significantly affected. The literature indicates that while middle-level academic leaders are central to university performance, they often have little autonomy (Nguyen 2012). The participants indicated that when the students' strikes are over there is often too little time to catch up, exposing them to a lot of pressure. In addition, because of this pressure, which they said is becoming the norm due to frequent student protests, heads of departments are always struggling with time management. Besides, there is a lot of paperwork that needs to be done as part of their reporting to higher management. When students fail, mostly due to the lost time, the issue still comes back to the desks of the heads of departments, confirming what Gallos (2002) stipulates, that middle-level managers are often accountable for issues over which they have no control. This points to the need for appropriate learner-management systems. All these affect the culture and quality of the university.

### *Lack of Leadership Induction*

The participants indicated that one of the major challenges they faced was the absence of orientation when they took up leadership positions. They indicated that, beyond the letter of appointment, academic leaders are on their own. One stated it thus:

There is no orientation. Once you get into the office, you have to discover things as you go by. Even your predecessor is often not interested in helping. (Interview: Head of Department 6)

Another added:

I always go around to other departments asking those who have been in head of department positions longer than me to help with information on how to do certain things and how to deal with certain situations. Therefore, you will be supposed to oversee policy implementation and adherence in the department, but there is practically very little you know. Decision-making becomes very difficult, dangerous even because you lack information. (Interview: Head of Department 3)

They generally agreed that lack of orientation was a huge obstacle as it meant they took, and stayed in, positions without adequate preparation. Head of Department 4 indicated that there was also lack of experience and skills transfer from one leader to the next since former heads of departments were reported to be always unhelpful. Skills and knowledge transfer is, however, central to success in academic leadership (Moore and Diamond 2000). The situation was compounded by very little to no capacity-building training for leaders at their level.

Furthermore, the participants indicated that while personality differences were often ignored, these always played a huge part in academic leadership as they determined whether a meeting about a simple issue was successful or not. Head of Department 1 indicated that personality differences related to departmental members' attitudes towards an individual's appointment, and towards the job itself. In addition, students' attitudes towards studying created many interpersonal issues between themselves and faculty staff, which needed mediation by the heads of departments.

### ***Rurality and Notions of Cultural Collectivity***

The narratives indicate that, in the context of the participants, the roles of a lecturer, to start with, were not always clearly demarcated. Before being appointed (or elected) as leaders, lecturers often found themselves playing the role of counsellor, because students brought them all kinds of challenges associated with education in the rural context. The lecturers also played the role of financial advisor. They were already functioning in the role of administrator, as they were informally required to deal with issues that only people already in management positions would ordinarily do. These informal duties were over and above the understood responsibilities of the lecturer, which are teaching, research and community engagement.

The above was peculiar to the sampled university's rural campus where, because most of the students come from the rural Cape, the Ubuntu paradigm pervades. The learners expected of the lecturer what



they ordinarily would expect of family and associates. Therefore, lecturers acted in loco parentis as students flooded to their offices for help in matters that were often not academic. '*Bhuti ndicela uncedo / Sisi ndicela usizo*' (Brother/Sister, kindly help me out) are common Xhosa phrases that heads of departments said lecturers often heard from students who came to their offices for help with social issues. This is a Xhosa social interaction cue used by students who felt very strongly about being helped by a *Bhuti* or *Sisi* lecturer. A participant said:

Students here are different from students in other universities where I have taught. Here, as long as you are a black lecturer they will call you *bhuti* or *sisi*, and once that happens they feel entitled to your help with anything, ranging from an opportunity to write a test late to advice on life, finance and other issues. It is even worse if you are a head of department. (Interview: Head of Department 5)

The students drew on these kinship references to communicate some social entitlement to help. Often, they got this help as academics bent to this entitlement, in the spirit of Ubuntu.

Participants indicated that students often did not recognise nor acknowledge the bureaucracy that was in place when they sought assistance with anything. This bureaucracy would include class representatives, supplemental instructors, tutors, the SRC and their course instructors. The students would skip all these and go to the *Bhuti/Sisi* who they thought would deal with their problems immediately. They viewed bureaucracy as an impediment to the resolution of their problems, and they just went straight to the head of department. This, the participants indicated, increased pressure on the heads of departments, who were already overloaded with administration duties.

The data also indicated that students would go to lecturers, especially course co-ordinators and heads of departments, to ask for part-time employment in their gardens. A head of department said:

I often entertain students who come to my office to ask for employment; all kinds of employment including working in my garden. Of course, I do not give them any, except the postgraduate ones who can work as research assistants on specific projects. (Interview: Head of Department 4)

Most of the other heads of departments in the sample also indicated having received such requests from students. This sees leaders dealing with issues related to poverty. The middle-level academic leader's role is then expected to go beyond the appointment letter to include providing humanitarian aid to the student.

A participant added:

These things can be frowned upon in Western and other contexts, but in our context, having emerged from the village ourselves, we are prompted to act; it is only natural to do so. If we cannot do anything to help, we can at least listen and give advice. (Interview: Head of Department 1)

This led to academic leaders assuming the role of counsellors, which consumed a lot of their time.

### *Stunted Career Growth*

Participants indicated that there was minimal academic career growth for academics in middle-level academic leadership positions during the time they were in those positions. They said this was due to the pressure that came with the office, which reduced the time available for research activities. One pointed out that:

Most academics stay away from these positions for purposes of career growth, resulting in some members being heads of departments for a long time. This is because it becomes difficult to do what other academics are doing, especially when it comes to research activities. (Interview: Head of Department 4)

Therefore, the heads of departments indicated, those who get into these positions, unaware of the realities that come with the post, often struggle the most. This is especially because of the lack of support in terms of capacity-building for heads of departments.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Drawing from the findings of the study discussed above, it can be concluded that the lack of orientation, absence of capacity-building programmes and the rural realities of the university sampled for the study, were critical determinants for transformational leadership among middle-level academic leaders. Lack of adequate support mechanisms for the academic administrators functioned as an impediment to career growth among middle-level academic leaders who were subjected to a lot of pressure due to the demanding needs of the positions they occupied. Often, they were not adequately prepared for these positions, as they rarely received orientation, making them stumble a lot along the way. It may also be concluded that once they get into leadership positions, most academics sacrifice their academic careers to satisfy the demands of the administration side of their office. Among middle-level managers, balancing academia and administration is an operational nightmare.

The study recommends the development of a practical and implementable balance strategy package for middle-level academic managers. This entails the middle-level leaders taking the initiative of deliberately setting boundaries between academia and management. However, this is very difficult as the boundaries between these two are increasingly becoming blurred (Whitchurch 2008). The package should include deliberate and rational allocation of time to academic and administrative activities, tasks and responsibilities by the heads of departments themselves. The success of this depends, however, on the broader development implementation of sustainable and effective student administration systems by the university, which would have the effect of limiting student protests and the consequent loss of learning time that has partly been responsible for the increased pressure on heads of departments.

The strategy package would also entail self-regulation by the heads of departments on issues like time management and delegation of duties to other members of their departments. This would include constituting several committees in the departments to attend to specific issues. The idea would be to take away part of the load that middle-level academic leaders deal with by assigning some of their duties to these committees, which would then report to the head of department. There are departments that are already successfully running outstanding course co-ordinator functions and departmental student selection committees; therefore, the study recommends the expansion of these to accommodate other responsibilities that are placed on the desk of the head of department. Besides recommending research committees, which would co-ordinate the research activities of the department, this study also suggests the formulation of research groups in the departments. These would act as a support mechanism for the middle-level academics as they would be able to collaborate on research activities with members in their research groups. The aim would be to boost the research profiles of academics involved in middle-level academic leadership.

Lastly, the study recommends that senior management devise effective capacity-development programmes for middle-level leaders. These should not be designed as a rescue package in reaction to challenges that arise, but as a proactive strategy that begins by preparing all departmental faculty for leadership. This would have the double effect of, firstly, preparing all members for leadership, such that when any one was appointed head of department, they would be able to function, and secondly, making sure there is minimal resistance as they would be aware of what leadership entails. This should be complemented by adequate leadership induction of new heads of departments, as well as all faculty that go into leadership positions.

Transformative leadership should thus take into consideration the specific context of the led, failure of which would potentially lead to resistance to leadership. The broader context, namely the external structural context, does have an impact on organisational internal leadership practices. For middle-level management to be effective in higher education institutions, there is need to design context-specific approaches. This would allow middle-level academic managers, such as heads of department, to balance academia and administration, to contribute to the effective management of higher education institutions without sacrificing their career growth, teaching, research or other important components of their career.

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