

Junior Academics' Perspectives of Leadership Behaviours at a Training and Vocational College in South Africa

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Abstract

The TVET sector and its academics continue to be plagued by many challenges, of which poor leadership and management feature prominently. Ascertaining what academics value in terms of leadership behaviours is thus of importance. The general objective of this research was to capture junior academics' perspectives on leadership behaviours at a TVET college in South Africa. A qualitative approach was utilised for this study, using an interpretivist worldview. A purposive sample of 27 junior academics participated in face-to-face semi-structured interviews, which were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using thematic analysis.

The findings revealed a prevalence of toxic and destructive leadership behaviours, interspersed with a few positive ones. Themes emanating from the study centred on academics' experiences of leaders' behaviours as they relate to (1) psychological safety, (2) work ethics, (3) professionalism, (4) empowerment, and (5) decision-making. The findings signal a need for positive leadership behaviours at the HEI to prevent a proliferation of toxicity. Capturing leadership experiences at a TVET college may constitute valid input into formulating appropriate human resource management policies concerning recruitment, selection, performance management, and training and development of academic leaders at TVET colleges.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

As one of the main pillars of the Post-School Education and Training (PSET) system, public Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges offer a range of education and training opportunities and cater for a diverse demographic of learners (Robertson & Frick, 2018). TVET colleges, formerly referred to as Further Education and Training (FET) colleges, have formed part of the Higher Education Institution (HEI) landscape since 2009 (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2013). The 50 accredited TVET colleges in South Africa (SA), distributed across its nine provinces with 264 multiple rural and urban campuses, have seen a considerable increase in student enrolment figures in recent years. Collectively, head-count enrolments have increased by 83.6%, from 357 885 in 1999 to 657 133 in 2018 (DHET, 2020), with an envisioned head-count target of 2.5 million by 2030, and further expansion anticipated in this sector (DHET, 2013). While access has expanded, quality appears to be lagging (DHET, 2020). TVET colleges were expected to be the cornerstone of SA's skills development system, addressing skills shortages in the country (DHET, 2013).

The underperformance of many SA TVET colleges has resulted in a public deficit of trust in the TVET education system (Nkosi, 2019; Sebola, 2022). Unfortunately, poor leadership and management have been cited as among the most pressing issues facing many TVET colleges nationally (Badenhorst & Radile, 2018). Other challenges facing the sector include the TVET curriculum being unresponsive to labour market needs and the fourth industrial revolution requirements, outdated infrastructure at most colleges and lacking infrastructural resources for students to complete their practicals, a large certification backlog (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2019), low student throughput and certification rates (Badenhorst & Radile, 2018), high student attrition rates (Ross et al., 2020; Zulu & Mutereko, 2020), a shortage of academic staff (Jonker, 2016), difficulties in attracting and retaining competent staff (DHET, 2020), and concerning lecturer qualification and competence levels (DHET, 2014; DHET, 2020; Mmako, 2016; Sebola, 2022; Van der Bijl & Oosthuizen, 2019). Additionally, the major disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in all spheres further exposed the weaknesses of HEIs (Engelbrecht, 2022).

1.2 Problem statement

Poor leadership and management feature prominently as one of the most pressing issues Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges have to contend with (Badenhorst & Radile, 2018; Buthelezi, 2018; Sithole, 2019). Leadership challenges experienced include a lack of leadership competency; deficient leadership accountability; inconsistency of leaders' qualifications and experience with the roles they occupy; ineffectual resolution of college issues (Sithole, 2019), ineffective conflict resolution, poor communication (Kwatubana & Bosch, 2022), leader shortfall in offering suitable instructional guidance to lecturers and students (Human Resource Development Council of SA [HRDCSA], 2014), a lack of participative forms of leadership and management (Dlamini, 2015;

Kwatubana & Bosch, 2022; Mothapo, 2019), a lack of synergy between the various tiers of management, administration, lecturing staff and students, poorly demarcated lines of leadership accountability (Badenhorst & Radile, 2018), and mismanagement of funds (Buthelezi, 2018). Furthermore, the major disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic exposed Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) weaknesses, putting additional strain on leaders and emphasising the importance of good leadership (Engelbrecht, 2022).

Although HEIs depend on the dedicated efforts of all staff members to function effectively (Poalses & Bezuidenhout, 2018), effective leadership is needed to foster favourable teaching and learning environments that deliver quality education (Motlhanke & Naong, 2021; Ramdass, 2015). Selesho and Naile (2014) assert that academic staff's lack of confidence in their academic leaders contributes to job dissatisfaction. According to Mardanov et al. (2008), the relationship quality between an employee and a leader predicts employee behaviour. A direct consequence of problematic leadership in HEIs appears to be weakening work engagement (Mmako, 2016) and employee attrition (Ross et al., 2020; Seeletse & Thabane, 2016). Mxenge et al. (2014) highlight the correlation between job engagement and intention to quit. At TVET colleges, increasing academic staff turnover further hinders their success (Mmako, 2016; Selesho & Naile, 2014). Employee retention in HEIs is a serious concern as the performance of academics contributes to students' academic excellence (Salau et al., 2016; Zulu & Mutereko, 2020).

For academic leaders, ascertaining what their faculty members value in terms of leadership is essential, as their actions inadvertently have a ripple effect on multiple parties, including students (Uusiautti, 2013). Seeing that TVET leaders contribute directly toward the development of learners and indirectly toward industry growth, societal growth and expansion at large (Coates et al., 2010), research on their behaviour and its impact is necessary. Within the TVET sector, there is presently a lack of research that examines how lecturers experience their direct managers' leadership behaviours (Mmako, 2016). Furthermore, evidence shows that leadership, with a specific emphasis on positive leadership, has not been fully explored within the SA HEI context, despite positive leadership styles having been proven to have a positive impact in educational contexts internationally (Aydin et al., 2013; Cameron, 2021; et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2016; Dahlvig, 2018; Hauserman & Stick, 2013). This study addressed the abovementioned gaps by exploring junior academics' experiences of their leaders' behaviours at a South African TVET college.

1.3. Research objectives

The general objective of this research was to capture junior academics' perspectives on leadership behaviours at a TVET college in South Africa.

The specific objectives of this research were to:

- Understand and describe junior academics' experiences of leadership behaviour within a South African TVET college.

- To make recommendations for leadership development at TVET colleges.

2. Literature study

Leadership behaviours can be examined from multiple perspectives. This study placed reliance on the view that leadership revolves around influence and is essentially not a function of position (Quinn & Quinn, 2009) and that leaders do not require formal power to be positive leaders (Dutton & Spreitzer, 2014). The study focused on the participants' direct managers as leaders, referring to the person directly responsible for the participant's performance and career progression. Despite the term "leadership" primarily being viewed as a positive concept (Krumov et al., 2015), generating a positivity bias in leadership (Hogan et al., 2021), the negative or "dark" side of leadership has garnered a considerable amount of attention in recent years (Hogan et al., 2021; Krumov et al., 2015; Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Tang et al., 2011; Veldsman, 2016; Yavas, 2016).

Destructive leadership

Theory dictates that destructive leadership behaviour is the absence of positive leadership behaviour (Aasland et al., 2010; Einarsen et al., 2007; Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Thoroughgood et al., 2012). Destructive leadership is defined as systematic and repeated behaviour (Einarsen et al., 2007) of a hostile or obstructive nature that occurs over a prolonged period (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Thoroughgood et al. (2012) point out the intentional nature of destructive leaders' harmful behaviours, thus removing the element of chance, isolated and accidental incidents (Einarsen et al., 2007). Concepts such as destructive leadership, toxic leadership, abusive supervision, workplace incivility, absentee leaders, aversive leadership, bullying, petty tyranny, and Machiavellianism are used to refer to the dark side of leadership (Burke, 2019; Cohen, 2016; Hogan et al., 2021; Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Singh et al., 2018; Skogstad et al., 2007; Smith & Lilienfeld, 2013; Tepper et al., 2017; Yavas, 2016; Zhang & Bednall, 2016). Leaders who engage in destructive behaviours display dysfunctional characteristics and are referred to as toxic leaders (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Veldsman, 2016). Yapp (2016) explains that toxic leaders are typically autocratic, narcissistic, manipulative, intimidating, overly competitive, and discriminatory. According to Hogan et al. (2021, p. 201), "the negative consequences of bad leadership outweigh the positive consequences of good leadership".

Positive leadership

In moments of ambiguity, positive leadership aids in reconstructing organisations, navigating crises, and shaping the way forward (Segel, 2020). The concept of Positive leadership has its origins in Positive Organisational Scholarship (POS) (Cameron et al., 2003; Cameron, 2008a; Luthans & Avolio, 2009; Zbierowski, 2016) and Positive Organisational Behaviour (POB) (Luthans, 2002; Luthans & Avolio, 2009), which are two areas of study that were spawned by positive psychology (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Meyer & Hühn, 2020; Seligman, 1999). Positive leadership applies positive principles arising from POS (Cameron et al., 2003; Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012), positive psychology (Seligman, 1999), and positive change (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Growth in positive forms of leadership has expanded in recent years as the leadership style represents "a more productive and efficient vision in managing today's

complex organisations” (Blanch et al., 2016, p. 174). There is considerable variability around the conceptualisation of positive leadership in literature, which often prompts critique of the domain (Zbierowski, 2019). Positive identity labels are commonly used in leadership theories to define leaders in terms of character strengths and admirable qualities (Roberts, 2014). According to Wijewardena et al. (2014), positive leadership behaviours are fundamental to channelling and influence employee emotions and behaviour in a positive direction. Leaders are critical shapers of an organisation’s culture as their behaviours model and influence what is appropriate conduct for organisational members (Dutton, 2014; Patrick et al., 2022). Positive leaders thus intentionally set norms around acceptable behaviours and call out and quickly address uncivil behaviours irrespective of their origin, thus minimising them (Porath & Pearson, 2013; Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). By promoting virtuous and eudemonic behaviours, positive leaders inspire followers’ optimal performance levels and maintain the same (Cameron & Plews, 2012). Positive leaders influence employees by exemplifying role models (Van Dick & Monzani, 2020). Malinga et al. (2019) proposed that positive leaders demonstrate leadership traits and behaviours that produce positive outcomes, such as improved total productivity, enhanced performance, organisational citizenship behaviour, and follower well-being.

Positive leaders see and treat employees as valuable resources (Sonenshein, 2014). They embrace the possibilities for expanding excellence by tapping into the best in people and organisations (Dutton & Spreitzer, 2014). They embody a strengths-based approach to managing employees, maintain a positive outlook during difficult times, and provide frequent recognition and encouragement (Arakawa & Greenberg, 2007; Patrick et al., 2022). According to Van Woerkom and Meyers (2015), their performance improves when employees experience a strengths-based climate in an organisation. Additionally, strengths use has important implications for employee well-being (Bakker & Van Woerkom, 2018). Positive leaders often reinterpret adverse events as growth opportunities (Arakawa & Greenberg, 2007). They frame mistakes as knowledge for learning and improvement, prompting employees to take risks, innovate and be creative (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014).

Leaders at HEIs must create a work environment that primarily engenders positive experiences for their employees (Wijewardena et al., 2014). By being mindful of their roles, understanding the importance of employees' positive experiences, and developing their ability to recognise these experiences, leaders at HEIs can enhance happiness and well-being within work units (Uusiautti, 2013). This could potentially change the current trajectory at TVET colleges.

3. Research Methodology

Research approach and strategy: A qualitative research approach (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Moser & Korstjens, 2017) with a descriptive design (Sandelowski, 2000) was followed for this study. An interpretivist worldview (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Dudovskiy, 2019; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Moore & Geboy, 2010) was adopted to explore, understand and ascribe meaning to junior academics’ experiences of leadership behaviour within a SA TVET HEI college context. This approach was

congruent with the study's purpose, enabling the researcher to understand and interpret the participants' (junior academics) experiences of leadership at an HEI in South Africa.

Research setting, entrée and researcher roles: The research setting was a public TVET college with four separate campuses in the Gauteng region. Permission granted specified that access to the TVET personnel was to be sought through each campus manager, acting as the appointed gatekeeper. Most of the interviews were conducted in person, with only one interview being conducted virtually.

Research participants and sampling: A purposive sample (Ritchie et al., 2013) of 27 junior academics participated. Participation was entirely voluntary, anonymous and strictly confidential, with participants having the option to withdraw from the study at will. The participant demographic profile contained 100% black participants, of which 48% of participants were female and 52% were male participants. Participant's ages ranged between the ages of 28 and 55. The length of service ranged from 1 year to 14 years, with the average service length being seven years. Inclusion criteria included that participants had to be employed as a lecturer at the HEI, working in the capacity of a junior academic, bearing the job title of lecturer. Academics with all other job titles in supervisory or management positions were not permitted to participate in the study. The final sample size was dictated by data saturation (Creswell, 2014; Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Data collection methods: Interviews were used as the data collection method. This enabled the researcher to control the direction of questioning and permitted participants to provide historical information (Creswell, 2014). Upon commencement, to accommodate for possible differences in reporting relationships across campuses, interview participants were advised that the focus of the study was on the participant's direct manager as a leader, referring to the person directly responsible for the participant's performance and career progression. All interviews were conducted in English. Within the interview setting, semi-structured open-ended questions with emerging questions were used to elicit participants' views and opinions on the topic for the researcher to understand the participants' world and the meaning behind what participants conveyed (Creswell, 2014). The following questions were asked:

- Within the TVET college setting, what would you say constitutes leadership behaviours?
- Describe the leadership behaviours of your direct superior/line manager.
- Do these leadership behaviours impact your work, and if so, describe how?
- In terms of leadership behaviours, what are your expectations or what would you like to experience from your direct superior/line manager?
- To optimise leadership at this TVET college, what recommendations would you make to managers or leaders in terms of leadership behaviours that they should display?

Recording of data: All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim (Creswell, 2014). Otter AI software was used to aid in the transcription process. The researcher took all necessary steps to preserve the participants' identities, maintain confidentiality, and safeguard the information obtained.

Data analysis and interpretation: Data collection and analysis were done simultaneously in keeping with the iterative nature of qualitative research (Creswell, 2014; Levitt et al., 2018; Moser & Korstjens,

2017). Data collected was analysed inductively using thematic analysis, facilitating the minimal organisation of data whilst describing it in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Although not taken as prescriptive, the researcher followed the six phases of thematic analysis, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006): data familiarisation, initial code generation, theme search, theme review, theme definition, and finally, report production. Transcripts were read several times to facilitate understanding of the data for a thorough analysis. After that, coding commenced by assigning labels to text and noting possible explanations for certain emerging phenomena in the data, either explicit (surface meaning – what participants actually said) or implicit (researcher's assessment of what participants may have actually meant). Initial patterns in the data were then identified. Patterns identified were tested against the research objectives to establish relevance and appropriateness – themes were then defined to distinguish boundaries in the emerging data to eliminate confusion. Data was then categorised and written up in the form of findings. A professional researcher was sourced as an independent co-coder to facilitate investigator triangulation.

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity: In promoting trustworthiness, the researcher complied with transferability, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To ensure credibility, the researcher established rapport with participants before the interview commenced. The independent co-coder aided in making coding, analysis and interpretation decisions, facilitating investigator triangulation. To promote transferability, purposeful sampling was utilised, and study details were provided in sufficient detail to facilitate recreation thereof. In addition, detailed descriptions and verbatim quotations of participants' experiences, including the context within which they occurred, are provided to ensure that they are meaningful to readers. For dependability and conformability, an audit trail that transparently describes the study's procedures and processes from start to finish has been maintained, wherein changes that occurred within the study are accounted for.

Lastly, the researcher kept a diary detailing her conceptual lens, assumptions, preconceptions and values during all phases of the study to ensure reflexivity.

3.1. Ethical considerations

Before the study, the authors had no personal acquaintance or direct association with any academic staff at the HEI, eliminating the possibility of conflict of interest and undue influence on Participation. Approval to proceed with the study was obtained from the Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee of the university.

4. Results and Findings

The findings revealed a predominance of negative leadership behaviours, interspersed with a few positive ones. It must be noted that many participants were wary of criticising their leaders directly. Instead, more insight into experiences of leadership behaviours was gathered when participants recommended how leaders' behaviours could improve or change or when they commented on how their

ideal leader should behave. Within each theme, experiences among participants were varied, and in some instances, participants' experiences differed. Themes were not separated into negative and positive behaviour categories to avoid duplication. Instead, both behaviours were reported simultaneously within each theme, emphasising the dominant behaviours in each category. A tabular summary of the themes, sub-themes, and identified behaviours is presented in Table 1.

Theme 1:

Psychological safety: Leaders often demonstrated negative behaviours that failed to foster a climate of psychological safety among academics. Psychological safety encompasses employees' beliefs in the absence of negative consequences when being vulnerable, such as making suggestions, raising questions and concerns, or making mistakes. Psychological safety is fostered in an environment where genuine consideration for the feelings of others is shown, such that they feel heard and experience empathy even in the face of shortcomings and conflict. It builds others up rather than tearing them down.

Lacking emotional intelligence: A common complaint among participants was that leaders often personalised matters, which hindered progress. According to Participant E 05: "Another thing is being personal, they mostly ... just become personal ... they attack a person ..." Participant K 11 stated: "They like to personalise things, they like to take things emotionally". Participant T 20 expressed the view that leaders should display emotional maturity, which is akin to EI: "A leader, it's someone who's ... matured, someone who doesn't get angry ... easily ... who's slower to respond, but listen ..." Participant M 13 stated that leaders needed to be aware of their emotions in an attempt not to be derailed: "Don't be personal about things, don't use emotions. Listen, try and understand ..."

Closed-minded: Participants felt that leaders were dismissive of divergent views. According to Participant V 22: "... they would attack ... subordinates, only because subordinates have got a different view ... and because they feel threatened ... they ... crush ... the views you have". Participant R 18 expressed frustration: "At times ... they don't listen at all. They think ... they always have the solution to everything ... it can't be that a person has answers for everything ..." Participant T 20 indicated that leaders should be more open and inclusive: "... being a leader ... be open ... have an open ear ... take the ideas of ... people that are supporting you ... give them a chance to talk."

Poor conflict resolution: Conflict at work is inevitable. When conflict is approached without diplomacy, this fosters disharmony. Participant B 02 commented on the confronting approach of their leader: "... in certain instances, his manner of diffusing situations that arise in class, they somewhat put the lecturer in a compromised situation". Participant W 23 expressed distaste for the confronting behaviour of their leader: "... you ... come in my class and shout at me in front of my students. How do you expect me to react?" Participant W 23 felt leaders should not be insensitive when mitigating conflicts: "If I'm wrong ... correct me, but not in front of students ..." Participant ZA 27 stressed the importance of leaders treating academics with respect in conflict situations: "Even if I make ... a very

big mistake ... treat me with respect, ... because I'm also an adult who still feels like I need to be treated like an adult”.

Punitive tendencies: Some leaders adopted a purely punitive stance. Participant E 05 explained that their leader primarily looked for opportunities for fault-finding, even before verifying the facts at hand: "... it's like they always waiting to see you making a fault, and then they hammer you on that fault ... even ... before realising that what you have done is actually not wrong". Participant I 09 expressed that leader "... are quick to charge but they are slow to reward". This participant furthermore expressed that there was a disparity in the enforcement of discipline among staff and leaders: "... discipline is only enforced on lecturers, but when it comes to our leadership, there is no discipline that is being enforced".

Empathy: Participants provided contrasting accounts on empathic behaviours displayed by leaders. Participant I 09 stated: "... our leadership, really need to work on their behaviour, especially in handling other people like human beings". Conversely, Participant K11 voiced appreciation for the compassion extended by their leader in instances when their children were hospitalised: "They are sympathetic, they do call me sometimes when I'm hospitalised with my kids, so I will say that they are like family". Participant Z 26 also spoke of a positive experience with their leader that left a lasting memory imprint: "I had problems in my pregnancy ... she came, she assisted ... she delegated my work to other lecturers ..., I will never forget ... because she came in the time of need”.

Table 1**Themes, Sub-themes, and Identified Behaviours**

Theme	Sub-theme	Identified behaviours
1. Psychological safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lacking emotional intelligence and maturity • Closed-minded • Poor conflict resolution • Punitive tendencies • Empathy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalising, immature • Dismissive, aloof, poor listening • Confronting, insensitive, disrespectful • Fault finding • Compassion (or absence thereof)
2. Work ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not leading by example • Confidentiality and trust breaches • Poor morals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actions contradict words • Untrustworthy • Devious, deceptive
3. Professionalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lacking subject expertise • A lack of appropriate professional relationship boundaries • Poor time management • Disengaged 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not understand subject content • Fraternising with staff • Tardy • Not hands-on, a lack of energy, unenthusiastic
4. Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor information sharing • Autonomy • Academic guidance/ mentoring • Support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disparate information sharing, undermining tendencies • Micromanagement • Disinterest, negligent, otherwise engaged • Varying displays of support, erratic resource allocation
5. Decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Indecisiveness ▪ Unilateral decision-making ▪ Inconsistent subjective decision-making ▪ Ambivalent decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Doubtful, avoidant ▪ Autocratic ▪ Unfair, favouritism, biases, preferential/unequal treatment ▪ Irresolute

Theme 2:

Work ethics: Work ethic is a combination of values, attitudes, and moral principles a leader internalises around work, which manifests as displayed behaviours. Participants' experiences of leaders' ethical behaviours and role modelling encapsulate this theme. Participants were often unimpressed with their leaders' work ethic and expressed that leaders often failed to display behaviour worth emulating.

Not leading by example: Participants unambiguously stated that their leaders should strive to lead by example. Participant M 13 expressed that their leader put in no extra effort: "*As a senior, if there are long queues, don't go home just because it's knock off time, if lecturers' are staying behind, stay behind as well ... lead by example.*" Participant I 09 felt that leaders' words and actions were not aligned and that their behaviours were contagious: "*... preach what you are doing ... we are contagious to one another ... the negative energy ... you ... bringing in the workplace, it can negatively affect somebody else. And now it becomes a chain of issues.*" Participant T 20 echoed similar sentiments: "*... lead by*

example, whatever that you want your subordinates to do, you must first do it, they must see it from you".

Confidentiality and trust breaches: Many participants felt that their leaders' lacked appropriate discretion around confidential information. Matters shared in confidence to leaders were divulged to other academic staff, breaching confidentiality which sparked distrust. Participant I 09 conveyed this as follows: *"She's quite a friendly person, but she's not a person that I can actually say, I can guarantee confidentiality ... you are even scared to tell them something, because you may find it roaming around this campus"*.

Participant U 21 expressed discontent at leaders discussing issues inappropriately: *"... he sometimes struggles to differentiate between professional and personal ... I don't like the fact that he would even discuss colleagues with colleagues ... it's not about how close you are, it's not personal, its work related"*. Participant M 12 shared concerns about being judged unfairly by seniors based on hearsay: *"I'm not impressed, and sometimes they lead with hearsay, if someone says something about you, they believe that, before even coming to you"*.

Poor morals: Some participants highlighted instances where leaders displayed deceptive tendencies to get their way. Participant C 3 highlighted the unethical and dishonest behaviour of their leader. Under the guise of developing them, he tried to pass his responsibilities onto them: *"I'd like him to do what he's supposed to, because the person has a tendency of passing what he has to do, and saying I'm developing you"*. In many instances, participants expressed the desire to have leaders who displayed ethical behaviours that adhered to existing policy frameworks, not a distortion thereof to push for their own agendas. Participant V 22 articulated this as follows: *I wouldn't want to come to work and worry about a leader who's taking the subordinates in a wrong direction ... do things by the book ..."*

Theme 3:

Professionalism: The level of professionalism displayed by leaders was often called into question. It would be natural to assume that TVET leaders possess specialised professional knowledge, demonstrate mastery in its application, demonstrate professional ethics and inspire others to model their behaviour; however, this was not the experience at this HEI.

Lacking subject expertise: Participants, especially those lecturing technical subjects, often expressed frustrations with their leaders' level of subject matter expertise. They felt that their leaders' lack of knowledge of subject matter hindered fruitful work-related discussions. Participant K 11 expressed this as follows: *"Sometimes when you talk about ... technical things, they don't understand those things ... we struggle to communicate"*. Participant J 10 felt that the lack of their leader's subject matter knowledge impacted negatively on the running of the department: *... if I'm doing {subject} they must bring someone who knows everything about {subject}, but ... they bring someone ... clueless ... then they will say no, a managerial position doesn't need someone who did that ..."* Participant E 05 commented as follows: *"If*

I were a senior lecturer ... I would make sure that I'm knowledgeable with the subjects ...” Participant U 21 expressed the view on the importance of leaders possessing subject-specific knowledge: “... *it should be ranked amongst the top requirements of being in that position ...*”

A lack of appropriate professional relationship boundaries: Appropriate boundaries at work provide a framework for conversation content, assertiveness, and healthy levels of interaction, among other things. Some participants alluded to their leaders' poor professional boundaries in describing their leaders' behaviours. Participant D 04 felt that their leader's lack of assertiveness and discretion around what constituted work and personal relations was a weakness, which interfered with this leader's ability to execute the leadership role adequately. This leader was described as follows: “... *he wants to maintain friendship at all cost (respect) ... he sometimes doesn't want to separate between ... task and the person. ... he wants to be seen not to be to be a bad person ...*” Participant H 08 felt that their leader's inability to maintain appropriate professional boundaries “... *ended up being a problem*”. It impacted negatively on the leader's ability to make objective choices and decisions: “*I'm not saying you shouldn't be friendly, but ... a too friendly manager ... ends up having favourites ... picking or choosing sides ... which will end up causing ... conflict within your staff*”. Participant I 09 expressed that leaders: “*should minimise more of personal relationships with their lower level employees, so that it cannot affect their leadership*”.

Poor time management: Participants often expressed disdain around their leaders' lack of punctuality and poor time-keeping tendencies. Participant M 13 commented as follows: “*I'm always early, earlier than my seniors, it doesn't make sense*”. Participant H 08 found their leader's work ethic around time-keeping to be demotivating: “*You're not motivated to even be at work early ... why am I here, but where are my seniors? ... I can tell you ... they not going to be here, not anytime soon ...*” Participant F 06 commented that their leader's tardiness around time-keeping impacted negatively on their lesson delivery: “*Sometimes when I go there ... he's not in the office ... he's always late ...*”. Participant E 05 commented that their leader displayed reactive tendencies with no planning: “*My leader waits until its exam time and then he realises that a certain venue doesn't have lights, that a certain venue needs some window panes ...*”

Disengaged: Some participants lamented that their leaders' exuded a lack of energy and enthusiasm for the profession and only did what was necessary to get by. According to Participant D 04, their leader is: “*not a hands-on person ... he's not present ... people don't feel his presence*”. Participant I 09 stated: “*With or without them, I can cope quite well ... even when they are absent, there's no gap*” Participant C 03 commented that their leader was clueless and that they only sought him out when they needed the leader's signature on official documentation for compliance purposes: “*This person whom I'm supposed to report to, seems as if he is clueless too, I only contact him when there's something that needs to be signed*”. Participant M 13 indicated: “... *it's like they are just coming to a job. I'm present - I'm absent that's it ... they don't have passion. They don't build any relationships. It's, it's just a job ...*”

it's not a calling." Participant U 21 expressed the desire to have a committed and engaged leader: *"Someone who loves the department, loves (subject), that way you'll be able to give more of {subject} to the students and lecturers alike"*.

Theme 4:

Empowerment: Empowerment in the context of the HEI reflects leaders' behaviours that either promote or constrain academics' professional latitude to achieve educational targets independently.

Poor information sharing: A significant issue of discontent among the participants was the haphazard way in which information was disseminated. This was cited as the source of many of the HEI's problems. Participant U 21 stated as follows: *"Communication is another bad, bad part whereby lecturers don't know certain things, or know things that are different from others"*. Participant P 16 expressed frustration with information not being uniformly shared within a department: *"This other one (leader) only shared certain information with his section ... when we ask why couldn't you send it to everyone, he said, no, but I'm only dealing with my people"*. Participant I 09 felt that the bureaucracy within the college served as a barrier to effective information dissemination: *"... we have too many levels of management in this organisation. There's a barrier in communication ..."* Participant V 22 voiced similar frustrations and commented on the conflict that ensues as a consequence: *"... certain matters are discussed with a group of ... colleagues. The very same matters are not discussed with the other part of the colleagues"* Participants lamented that leaders' communication was often not timely and that in some instances, it did not follow the correct protocols, which participants experienced as undermining to them. It emanated that in some instances, students were privy to important academic information before academics were informed by leaders. Participant Q 17 stated: *"... you will only hear when you get to work that, er maybe the timetable has changed ... the test date has changed, as the lecturer, I'm not aware of that, you'll only hear that from students"*.

Autonomy: Participants often expressed varied views on the level of professional freedom they were granted. Some participants expressed positive sentiments and linked this freedom to being trusted. Participant A01: *"They have given me the authority to be the manager of ... my own classroom ... they don't usually ... interfere ... So for me, it shows those people, they believe in me, and what I'm doing."* Participant X 24 felt that their leader gave good directives and granted them flexibility to fulfil their responsibilities as they saw fit, which was appreciated: *"... She does not tell you, because the minute an adult like myself ... is being told what to do, it becomes a problem. ... she gives a directive in a proper manner in how things should be done..."* Conversely, other participants expressed frustration with their leaders' tendency to control their classroom activities. Participant L 12 explained: *"they should give their lecturers space to work, they shouldn't ... interfere "*. Participant E 05 expressed frustration at being micromanaged: *"I have my own way of ... transferring the knowledge ... I don't need somebody to come and tell me, don't do it this way, do it that way ..."* Participant J 10 expressed the view that as academics, they saw themselves as managers of their classes; however, when their leader's displayed

micromanaging behaviours, this impacted negatively on their confidence levels and ultimately on their work performance: *“Sometimes a senior likes to control what is happening in a class ... So that brings people's confidence down ... even your performance ...”*

Academic guidance/Mentoring: Participants expressed dissatisfaction with leaders' mentoring behaviours. Participant V 22 explained their experience of having to figure things out by themselves after being appointed at the HEI as their leader was otherwise engaged: *... he's negligent ... and you realise that, eish, I actually do this on my own, I actually have to find my own ways ... to know ... how things work here ...”* Participant G 07 indicated a desire for or academic guidance: *“... guidance number one ... attributes that I most value ... guidance is either in career path guiding ... in student interactions ... and support ... mostly academic support ...”* Participant ZA 27 commented as follows on how academic guidance should be approached: *“... when they see where you are lacking instead of criticising, say, how can I help?”*

Support: In many instances, participants expressed sentiments related to the levels of support received from their leaders. In some instances, support was absent: Participant D 04 *“... he happens not to be so helpful”*. Participant D 04 went on to express frustration with the situation, *“And we find that ... there are no consequences to that ...”* In other instances support was sporadic. Participant F 06 commented: *“Most of the time, he is not supportive ... because at some point I will have to go to the HOD ... while he was supposed maybe to help me with that particular thing”* Some participants expressed frustration at leaders not supporting them with required resources, which they felt affected their performance negatively. Participant F 06: *“... you will report that in your class, you need this and that, but they don't fulfil their promise to deliver on those resources”*.

Conversely, Participant A01 was very satisfied with the level of support received: *“He's very supportive, whatever concern that we come with ... he comes in there and assists”*. Participant W 23 stated that their leader was supportive and that they were not afraid to ask for assistance; however, confessed that it was not always comfortable asking for help: *“I'm not afraid to ... ask for help ... she's always willing to ... assist”* To counteract this, the participant felt that leaders' should also check in with academics reporting to them: *“... She must come and communicate, check every time ... whether I'm fine or I'm having any challenges”*. Participant G 07 drew a comparison between the two leaders they reported to. They felt greater engagement with the second leader who displayed more supportive behaviours: *“..., the first one ... the nurturing type, you would understand the objectives of the department ... whilst (with) the other effort will naturally not be there”*. Participant V 22 drew a similar parallel and reported experiencing growth due to having a more supportive second leader. Participant V 22: *“... she's more engaging than the previous one ... she helps you to be ... updated ..., on your feet ... the impact is positive ... I can see growth...”*

Theme 5:

Decision-making: Decision-making involves consciously weighing up available options, considering situational variables, including prevailing TVET governance frameworks (policies, standard operating procedures, etc.), and thereafter indicating a specific course of action or issuing a directive. Decision-making at an operational level concerning routine matters is an essential part of an HEI leader's responsibility; however, leaders were experienced as indecisive, averse to decision-making, autocratic, lacking objectivity, and displaying ambivalence in decision-making.

Indecisiveness: The predominant approach to decision-making employed by leaders appeared to be one of uncertainty and avoidance. Participant E 05 stated that their leader is: "... *very indecisive...and ... doubtful about the answers that he may give me ...*" Participant B 02 commented that their leader: "... *understands the policies but then implementation and executing becomes a bit of a challenge ... it goes back to being indecisive*". Participants frequently expressed frustrations over the unwillingness of their leaders' to make autonomous decisions on routine matters under their jurisdiction, preferring to consult with the HOD instead. Participant M 13 explained this dynamic as follows: *It looks like he's not sure of the position, or he doesn't understand the powers that he has ... you end up losing interest, ...*. Invariably decision-making speed affects performance outcomes. Participant E 05 expressed frustration with their leader's indecisiveness and indicated that their leader's delayed responses affect their performance negatively: "... *I don't get answers immediately ... he will say I'll come back to you ... I have to remind him, it also affects my performance*". Participant V 22 attributed the lack of decision-making efficiency to the organisational hierarchy, and stated: "*I think bureaucracy somehow ... it makes it difficult ... to make decisions ..., we are failing at many things because of that*". This participant further commented that indecision was a major contributor to unfavourable outcomes at the HEI: "*Indecision has cost us a lot*".

Unilateral decision-making: Participants often commented that no consultation occurred before decisions were made. Participant V 22 stated: "*The autocratic part ... a few leaders ... got that in them*". Understandably, however, not all decisions lend themselves to collaborative decision-making, but ensuring camaraderie and a common understanding reduces the negative effect thereof. Participant G 07 articulated this as follows: "... *if there are decisions that they need ordered ... make us understand what is the decision ... and why ... try to be involved with the team rather than just setting out division between management ... and lecturing staff*". Participant H 08 felt that transparency and a willingness to consult academics were needed at the HEI: "*There are so many problems which are not presented to us, you know, that are kept in secret, you can see them but you know ... it's like they are afraid to ask for assistance*".

Inconsistent subjective decision-making: Concerns around subjective, unfair, inconsistent decisions and preferential treatment were raised in many instances. Participant B 02 felt that their leader's decisions were biased, and explained: "... *our organisation is very political. There is race issues ...*

gender issues so erm it ... he becomes a bit biased ... I think his decisions are ... mostly based on ... how is it going to be beneficial for me...” According to Participant F 06: *“Sometimes our leaders ... tend to have favouritism ...”* Participant H 08 expressed this as follows: *“I want to see ... being fair on decisions”*. Participant K 11 corroborated this statement: *“Sometimes they don't treat us equally ... If they can be just fair to everyone.”* Participant U 21 commented that they found their leader’s tendency toward unequal treatment to be demotivating: *“So we are not a very open group, and a lot of favouritism. ... it depends on who you know ... and it's really demotivating”*.

Ambivalent decision-making: Some participants indicated that leaders were irresolute and that once decisions were taken, those decisions were not always honoured. According to Participant H08: *“They're not firm on their decisions”*. The context of the TVET college with the prevalence of union activity was highlighted as a possible reason for decision-making ambivalence. Participant H 08 went on to explain: *“I understand because our environment is mostly influenced by constitution and unions, it's not easy taking firm decisions ... but it will... be nice to be firm as a leader”*.

The general objective of this study was to understand and describe junior academics' experiences of leadership behaviours at a South African HEI. These findings illustrate the dire need for positive leadership behaviours within the HEI. The discussion will examine leaders’ behaviours experienced in relation to positive leadership documented in the literature. Each theme identified in the findings section will be sequentially discussed below.

The findings show that leaders’ behaviours at the HEI are relegating psychological safety. Leaders demonstrated a lack of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2006), had punitive tendencies, and displayed insensitivity in handling conflict situations. Motlhanke and Naong (2021) highlight the positive correlation between a leader’s EI and employee job satisfaction, teamwork inclinations, organisational commitment, and task-oriented behaviour. Leaders’ ineffectual conflict resolution behaviours align with the findings of Kwatubana and Bosch (2022). Behaviours displayed by leaders, such as emotional outbursts, inappropriate blaming, public ridicule, insensitivity, and undermining employees, are consistent with abusive supervision and workplace incivility (Burke, 2019; Porath & Pearson, 2013; Tepper, 2000; Tepper et al., 2017). The literature indicates that leaders with lower emotional intelligence tend to be more abusive (Zhang & Bednall, 2016), which may be the case at the HEI. Leaders were also dismissive of divergent views and demanded unquestionable obedience, pointing to authoritarian leaders (Cheng et al., 2004; Yapp, 2016). This is concerning, as Amoo and Adam (2022) and Mmako (2016) indicate that allowing TVET academic staff to communicate upward is essential for their engagement. Interestingly, Zhang and Bednall (2016) indicate that there is also a significant positive relationship between authoritarian leadership style and abusive supervision. The absence of psychological safety in HEIs thwarts academics’ optimal functioning (Dhanpat et al., 2019).

On a positive note, some leaders displayed empathy and genuine concern for the welfare of academics, which academics appreciated. Effective leadership is grounded upon an interchange of mutual positive

regard and co-operation, as opposed to creating division, disharmony and a toxic environment of bullying, fear, and targeting behaviours (Ross et al., 2020). Individualised consideration, a component of transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Bass, 1998), relates to leaders' ability to demonstrate empathy (McClellan et al., 2017). Empathy and compassion are central to positive leadership strategies (Cameron, 2012, Shuck & Ghosh, 2022). With due consideration to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on employees' emotional state, compassion may act as the appropriate antidote to stress and aid leaders in fostering well-being and engagement among employees, as well as sustain themselves (Shuck et al., 2019, Shuck & Ghosh, 2022).

The findings indicate that leaders displayed poor work ethics. Leaders had inappropriate discretion around confidential information and breached the trust of participants. Participants indicated that leaders were guilty of gossiping, and in some instances, they judged academics unfairly based on hearsay. Pheko (2018) indicates that perpetrators of bullying use rumours and gossip as tools to oppress, undermine and humiliate subordinates to maintain social dominance, which may well be the case at the HEI. Bullying is rife in HEI settings (Lemon & Barnes, 2021) and detrimental to academics' well-being (Nel, 2019).

Furthermore, some participants indicated that leaders had poor morals, and used unethical and dishonest behaviour to get their way, a stark contrast to ethical leadership (Brown et al., 2005; Brown & Treviño, 2006; Wijewardena et al., 2014). Leaders' behaviours negate the internalised moral perspective of authentic leadership, and ethical power usage and trust are emphasised in servant leadership (Murari & Gupta, 2012). Internalised moral perspective stresses the deep moral convictions of authentic leaders (Gardner et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Leaders failed to lead by example. This poses a danger as employees look to the work environment to gauge appropriate behaviour and are inclined to reciprocate (Mayer, 2014). In contrast to the HEI leaders, positive leaders are exemplary role models (Van Dick & Monzani, 2020). Idealised influence, a component of transformational leadership, denotes leaders modelling the behaviours they expect from followers (McClellan et al., 2017). Idealised influence prompts the identification of followers with the leader and enhances leaders' ability to gain followers' respect (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Bass, 1998; McClellan et al., 2017).

Leaders' professionalism was a source of discontent for participants. Leaders' poor subject knowledge in specific departments was a source of frustration for academics, which they claimed negatively impacted the running of those departments and hindered academic excellence. Lacking leadership competency and inconsistency of leaders' qualifications and experience with the roles they occupy is consistent with the findings of Ramdass (2015), Seeletse and Thabane (2016), and Sithole (2019). This is problematic as a lack of confidence in leaders contribute to academics' job dissatisfaction (Selesho & Naile, 2014), turnover (Seeletse & Thabane, 2016), and poor overall outcomes for the TVET sector (Sebola, 2022). Some participants described leaders as being over-friendly with staff and indicated that they failed to maintain appropriate professional relationship boundaries with their staff.

Consequently, they could not take objective decisions and hold staff accountable for work outputs (Kaiser, 2020). Leaders were described as tardy, displaying poor time-keeping and reactive tendencies with no advance planning. Academics felt leaders exuded a lack of energy and enthusiasm and appeared disengaged. In short, leaders failed to demonstrate behaviours that could be characterised as effective (Hogan et al., 2021). Leaders who occupy leadership positions but are typically inactive, negligent, and uninvolved in the work of their teams denote absentee leaders (Hogan et al., 2021; Skogstad et al., 2007). These leaders fail to provide clarity around performance goals and expectations, and show an avoidance of conflict (Kwatubana & Bosch, 2022), which creates considerable stress for those who report to them (Skogstad et al., 2007).

The findings reveal unhealthy power and control dynamics in leaders' relations with academics, which were the antithesis of empowering behaviours. Leaders' information sharing (Konczak et al., 2000) proved to be a challenge for most participants, with power plays evident. This was a significant impediment to effective planning and smooth workflows for most participants. The findings of Mmako (2016) highlight that keeping TVET academics well-informed about college activities is crucial for their engagement. Employees cannot be expected to generate high-quality work performance in their roles if they are not furnished with all the necessary information (Mendes & Stander, 2011). Sharing information also constitutes positive communication, which forms a significant part of positive leadership (Cameron, 2012; Cherkowski, 2018; Malinga et al., 2019) and is emphasised as a strategy to enhance organisational performance (Cameron, 2008b, Cameron, 2012).

Leaders differed on the level of autonomy they afforded academics, with some participants highlighting being micromanaged by leaders. This contradicts with engaging leadership (Schaufeli, 2021). Schaufeli (2021) points out that disengaging leaders frustrate employees' need for autonomy and leave employees feeling emotionally exhausted. Micromanagement stirs resentment in subordinates and fosters unhealthy relationship dynamics, such as helplessness and dependency (Williams, 2022). Furthermore, it stifles innovation, creativity, and independent thinking - concepts associated with the intellectual stimulation component of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; McClellan et al., 2017). Seeletse and Thabane (2016) highlight work autonomy, employee involvement, and empowerment as key factors considered to improve academics' levels of job satisfaction, while Mey et al. (2021) point out the positive impact of leaders' empowering behaviours on employee retention. It is recommended that leaders be taught how to empower others to counteract micromanagement tendencies (Williams, 2022).

Participants' experiences of leaders' supportive behaviours were varied. Mmako (2016) and Amoo and Adam (2022) highlight supervisor and organisational support as crucial to enhance academics engagement levels in TVET colleges. Kraft and Papay (2014) indicate that supportive professional environments improve educators' effectiveness more over time than less supportive contexts. The provision of support denotes servant leadership, where leaders intentionally choose to put the needs of followers ahead of their own to enhance followers' development, and in so doing, they also promote

organisational success (Greenleaf, 1977). A desire for more significant academic guidance and mentorship from leaders was evident. This is consistent with the findings of Mmako (2016) and Naidoo-Chetty and Du-Plessis (2021). Mmako (2016) highlights academics' dissatisfaction with mentoring and coaching programmes at TVET colleges and indicates its propensity to affect engagement negatively. Academic guidance and mentoring align with two elements of empowering leader behaviour: information sharing and skills development and coaching for innovative performance - a dimension of leader empowering behaviour that promotes calculated risk, new ideas, providing performance feedback, and treating errors and setbacks as opportunities to learn (Konczak et al., 2000). It also aligns with individualised consideration, a component of transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Bass, 1998) that relates to leaders' ability to support, advise, mentor, and coach others (McClellan et al., 2017), as well as strengthening, a facet of engaging leadership that stimulates employees' strengths and talents by increasing knowledge and skills, thus fulfilling their need for competence (Schaufeli, 2021).

Leaders' behaviours around decision-making proved to be a source of frustration for most participants. Leaders' indecisiveness and aversion to decision-making are consistent with the findings of Kwatubana and Bosch (2022) and point to poorly demarcated lines of leadership accountability at the HEI, in line with the findings of Badenhorst and Radile (2018). Participants also indicated that bureaucracy at the HEI negatively impacted leaders' decision-making ability. Participants often complained that some leaders made decisions unilaterally, pointing yet again to leaders' autocracy and authoritarian leadership, whereby leaders exert complete authority and control over subordinates (Cheng et al., 2004). Interestingly, the lack of participative forms of leadership and management at TVET colleges are not uncommon (Dlamini, 2015; Mothapo, 2019). Mothapo (2019) points out that the SA education system is mainly bureaucratic and hierarchical, with little room for collaboration and democratic decision-making. Encouragement of self-directed independent decision-making is a critical element of leader-empowering behaviour (Konczak et al., 2000). It facilitates autonomy, learning (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014), and well-being (Cann et al., 2021). Sharing challenges openly and asking academics for assistance in positive ways could foster team work between leaders and academics, prompting enhanced, speedier resolution of problems (Cameron & Plews, 2012).

Participants often complained that leaders' decisions were inconsistent, subjective and ambivalent. Leaders' unequal treatment and favouritism of particular academics are consistent with abusive supervision (Pelletier, 2010) and prompt feelings of isolation (Blase & Blase, 2007) and distrust of higher authority (Van den Bos et al., 1998). It also points to leaders negating components of authentic leadership, namely the internalised moral perspective and balanced processing of information - considering information and making decisions in an unbiased way (Gardner et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Unfair treatment by leaders, combined with a lack of appropriate support, have been shown to prompt unfavourable outcomes such as absenteeism, reduced performance, turnover (Esop & Timms, 2019; Seeletse & Thabane, 2016), and turnover intentions (Rhoades et al., 2001; Timms et al., 2015). Leaders should focus on ethical conduct to prevent such unfavourable outcomes.

The findings of this study illustrate the significant influence immediate superiors exert on employees (Ramdas & Patrick, 2019), and serve to reaffirm the importance of leaders' behaviours in employees' work experiences (Aydin et al., 2013; Mendes & Stander, 2011; Ramdas & Patrick, 2019). Academics' experiences of leadership at the HEI show a prevalence of abusive supervision, bullying, and authoritarian behaviours. This is concerning as literature indicates a positive relationship between abusive supervision and subordinates' psychological distress (Tepper, 2000).

5. Managerial Implications

Swift action is needed to address leaders' toxic behaviours and leaders setting a poor behavioural example to prevent contagion. Additionally, an organisation-wide investment in building positive leadership acumen should be considered for leaders and academics alike. Recommendations directed to the organisation include (1) a shift to positive leadership approaches, such as strengths-based leadership, empowering and engaging leader behaviour, (2) cultivating a positive organisational culture where academics feel safe to express their opinions and embrace differences and make positive contributions to the organisations success, (3) implementing leadership development programmes, such as mentoring, coaching, the leader as coach initiatives, and formal leadership qualifications, (4) implementing proactive performance management practices, including ensuring role clarity, accountability, 360 degree feedback and continuous constructive performance and development feedback; appropriate rewards and correctional actions when necessary, and conducting crucial conversations), (5) promoting positive communication by clarifying expectations; facilitating two-way feedback; engaging in career discussions, and conducting "stay-in interviews", (6) ensuring the selection and appointment of individuals who possess the necessary competencies and potential to step into leadership roles, and (7) adequately developing junior academics to take control of their environment, manage themselves effectively, and effectively manage upward relationships.

6. Conclusion, Limitations and Future Research

Junior academics' experiences of their direct leaders' behaviours are varied; however, they are predominantly negative. Leaders' behaviours fail to create a climate of psychological safety, their work ethics and levels of professionalism are severely lacking, and they display disempowering behaviours. Leaders' behaviours disillusion junior academics, and it has the propensity to negatively affect their job satisfaction and engagement levels, which may filter down to the student level and negatively impact student outcomes. Addressing the identified needs is the first step in enhancing positive leader behaviours.

Although this study provides valuable insights into junior academics' experiences of their direct leaders, it is not without limitations. At the forefront, a possible limitation of this study is that the research sample was drawn from a single HEI/TVET college. This does not permit generalisable conclusions to be drawn. This study should thus be replicated in other HEIs to compare findings. The methodology was

restricted to the qualitative method with limited participants. A mixed-method study could be used for future studies.

Replication of the current study to assess collective sentiment across TVET colleges in SA on leaders' behaviours using expanded methodology is recommended. This study does not include the direct leaders' views and experiences, whereby challenges they encounter can be analysed and interpreted. It is suggested that future research should be conducted to explore this aspect. The culture and environment within the HEI could also be explored to examine factors that are conducive to or constrain effective leadership behaviours.

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