Leadership as a strategic driver for higher education institutions today: A South African perspective

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Abstract

Organisations are experiencing immense changes due to numerous challenges posed by the global environment, and higher education institutions (HEIs) are no exception. Some of these dynamics are more prominent than others as they alter the industry landscape, or in this case, the higher education sector landscape. These prominent dynamics or influences, due to their strategic nature, are referred to as strategic drivers.

The purpose of this study was to explore and obtain more clarity on the influence of leadership as a strategic driver for South Africa HEIs. In this qualitative study, semi-structured interviews were conducted among 17 senior management staff members from public and private HEIs. The data from the interviews were analysed with the assistance of Atlas.ti. From the themes that emerged, leadership as an internal strategic driver was confirmed.

Leadership is crucial to HEIs in South Africa, and within the neoliberal economy, HEI leaders will have to remain well-grounded academics with good management skills – not only effective managers without a good academic background. However, to remain relevant today, HEIs in

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South Africa should strike a balance between their traditional socio-economic mandate and the opportunities raised by commoditisation and marketisation.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Contemporary organisations are experiencing immense changes due to numerous challenges emanating from the complexities posed by the global environment. This, in turn, directly influences the strategic direction of organisations (Bateman, Snell and Konopaske, 2019). Higher education institutions (HEIs), internationally and in South Africa, are not immune to these dynamics. In South Africa, institutions of higher learning are experiencing, *inter alia*, growth in student numbers in the face of ever-declining government funding for higher education. Furthermore, more students are dependent on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which seems to be underperforming and clouded by scandal, putting South African HEIs under severe pressure. In the midst of this, HEIs still need to be efficient and effective, which requires institutions to adopt new administrative practices and business models over time. This has led to a greater focus on student satisfaction and retention, giving rise to the commoditisation and marketisation of the higher education sector (Brown, 2015; Chen, 2021; Hughes, 2008; Mikulić, Dužević and Baković, 2015; Velayutham, 2021; Wangenge-Ouma and Kupe, 2020).

However, some of these dynamics or influences seem to be of greater importance as they alter the industry landscape, or in this case, the higher education sector landscape (Rossouw & Goldman, 2023a). These prominent dynamics or influences are labelled driving forces, change drivers, drivers of industry development or evolutionary processes (De Wit, 2020; Johnson, Scholes and Whittington, 2008; Porter, 1980; Thompson, Peteraf, Gamble and Strickland, 2020). Rossouw and De Bruyn (2010) refer to these as drivers and in a follow-up study, Rossouw and Goldman (2014) label them strategic drivers due to their strategic character in changing the setting of South African HEIs (Rossouw & Goldman, 2023a).

This paper forms part of a completed PhD study, entitled “Strategic Drivers for South African Higher Education Institutions”. This was a qualitative study with semi-structured interviews conducted among senior management to allow for a deeper understanding of the topic of strategic drivers. The data were analysed with the assistance of Atlas.ti, and from the themes that emerged, several external and internal strategic drivers for HEIs were confirmed, leadership being one such internal driver (Rossouw, 2022).

1.2. Problem Statement

In the literature and the PhD study, concerns are raised about the positioning of leadership as a strategic driver for South African HEIs (Rossouw, 2022). This is especially when they are serving their socio-economic mandate but expected to apply management principles of efficiency and effectiveness, steered by the neoliberal economy of commoditisation and marketisation.

Therefore, the research question is: How does leadership as a strategic driver influence South African HEIs in serving their socio-economic mandate within the neoliberal economy of commoditisation and marketisation?

1.3. Research objective

The objective of this paper is therefore to explore the influence of leadership as a strategic driver on South African HEIs in fulfilling their socio-economic purpose within the neoliberal economy of commoditisation and marketisation.

Following the objective, literature is reviewed, whereafter a description is then given of the methodology applied in the research. The ethics approval and clearance processes are mentioned, and the results and findings are discussed. This discussion is followed by managerial implications, a conclusion, a few limitations or challenges of the study and possibilities for further research.

2. Literature Review

The literature review commences with an overview on strategic drivers, followed by a discussion on leadership in higher education and some perspectives on higher education within the neoliberal economy today.

2.1. Strategic drivers

When considering the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world, the concept of strategic drivers and, more specifically, for HEIs in South Africa seems most appropriate (Persis, Venkatesh, Sreedharan, Shi and Sankaranarayanan, 2021; Stein, 2021) since the changing environment is nothing new for higher education (National Planning Commission, 2012; Council on Higher Education, 2016; García-Morales, Garrido-Moreno and Martín-Rojas, 2021). An example would also be the disruptive influence of new technology innovations on the digitalising of education in higher education (García-Morales et al., 2021). From a real-world view, it seems most evident in South African HEIs that learning management systems have changed the classroom. What once was known as the norm is now being frowned upon. The norm is being replaced by online classes, assessments, discussion forums and meetings. Even research has not escaped these dynamics. Instead of physically being present to conduct interviews, online platforms can be used that also have the functionality of transcribing the spoken (Rossouw, 2022).

Scholars such as Johnson et al. (2008) describe strategic drivers as environmental factors that affect strategy, while De Wit (2020) views them as change drivers impacting industry development. Porter (1980) defines strategic drivers as evolutionary processes changing industries. Thompson et al. (2020) are of the opinion that driving forces have a stronger influence than life cycles and view strategic forces as the most powerful change agents. Despite these views, Rossouw (2022) suggests that a distinction is to be made between external and internal strategic divers. External strategic drivers present themselves in the external environment of the institution, whereas internal strategic drivers are present within the internal environment of HEIs. Although a divide is possible, these drivers should never be seen independently, but rather as influences or dynamics which, as a collective, influencing the efficiency and effectiveness of HEIs due to their strategic impact and character.

2.2. Leadership in higher education

Leadership in higher education is important and cannot be ignored (Baba and Siddiqi, 2018; Leal Filho, Eustachio, Caldana, Will, Lange Salvia, Rampasso, Anholon, Platje and Kovaleva, 2020; McCaffery, 2019; Rehbock, 2020). According to Al Khajeh (2018), leadership is key in determining the success or failure of any organisation. Leadership within academia seems to be complex due to a dichotomy which requires a leader to fulfil more than one role, such as to manage staff but also to teach, do research and execute academic administrative activities (Baba and Siddiqi, 2018). McCaffery (2019) states that the role of women in leadership also seems to be undermined since less than 30% of the principals or vice chancellors in the United Kingdom are women (McCaffery, 2019). Jones and George (2020) also refer to this inequality in the light of top management appointments within organisations.

Within the African context, but not excluding other parts of the world, HEIs are confronted by challenges in global and local competitiveness, knowledge production, student growth, privatisation, technology and new administrative systems, reduced subsidies, new ways of resource usage, collaborations, autonomous governments, global rankings, regional accountability, donors and regulatory bodies. Geschwind, Aarrevaara, Berg and Lind (2019) also confirm the presence of managerialism, leaderism and a greater emphasis on strategy and budget and performance management in higher education. Therefore, higher education leaders in Africa must understand globalisation, defend their mission statements, formulate policies and be able to meet competitive demands. Strengthening higher education leadership in Africa is thus crucial, especially seen against the backdrop of political change (Frittelli, 2015).

Therefore, leaders should be developed – this includes student leadership (Bateman et al., 2019; Council on Higher Education, 2016; Jones and George, 2020; McCaffery, 2019; Shalka, Corcoran and Magee, 2019). Paterson and Addie (2019) are of the opinion that HEIs in South Africa seem to be

able to act as knowledge-production centres, place-makers and catalysts of economic development and innovation for their regions, cities and communities.

Since the higher education sector is bombarded with continuous change, leaders of these institutions will have to think in an innovative way. To do so, and according to Leal Filho et al. (2020), HEI leaders should implement policies and initiatives that are sustainable, but also manage complexities and challenges, be able to innovate and have a long-term orientation. Furthermore, Thompson et al. (2020) emphasise that when leaders do not have a clear understanding of drivers (or driving forces) within their environment, it is likely that timely adjustments and strategic decisions will not be made.

2.3. Higher education and the neoliberal economy today

Many academics concur that the changing nature of academia raises considerable concern. Increasingly typified by the commodification of knowledge, corporatisation of the academy and neoliberal management models (Poutanen, Tomperi, Kuusela, Kaleva and Tervasmäki, 2020), universities are seemingly less concerned with intellectual and humanitarian endeavours and more concerned with economic endeavours. The university of the 21st century, while claiming to still adhere to high academic standards and the advancement of knowledge, is also advocating a drive toward being entrepreneurial and globally competitive. This corporatisation has seen decision-making power taken away from faculties and faculty members and placed in the hands of university 'managers' (Poutanen et al., 2020).

This contributes to feelings of alienation and a diminished sense of autonomy among faculty members (Sims, 2019). These feelings have arisen because of the demanding nature of the neoliberal management ethos now pervading universities (Taylor, 2017), which is in sharp contrast to what academics were accustomed to. The work rate is higher, the demands far greater, the deadlines shorter and the resources – for all intents and purposes – are fewer.

A possible argument could be that if this is how academia is changing, then academics need to change with the times and adapt. However, academia is not the type of milieu where everything can happen 'quickly'. One cannot 'quickly' write and publish another article just because the annual departmental research output target has not been met yet. One cannot, in August, 'quickly' ensure that a PhD student will complete their study and submit the thesis by October just because the Faculty is behind on postgraduate graduation targets. Scholarship needs time. It needs time for ideas to incubate, be dissected and to permeate into a synthesis that is worthwhile writing an article, a thesis or a monograph about.

Yet, the pressures associated with the university of the 21st century do not always make provision for this 'slow scholarship'. Universities are increasingly driven by how many graduates obtain their qualifications, how many staff members have a PhD, how many patents have been registered, how

many research articles have been published in top journals. In short, academia is transforming into a numbers game. The unintended consequence is the fixation on, for example, the quantity of published articles rather than their quality. Is the quality of the published work still the main driving force, or is the driving force to get published?

Against this backdrop, Giroux (2010) reminds us that in democratic societies, universities should be geared toward being attentive to conflicts of the time and assist in imagining a more just world where anti-democratic forces are called out through connecting power, critical agency and knowledge. There should be a willingness to struggle for the ideal too (Giroux, 2010). Faculty members are thus seen as those that drive this process. They are the catalysts for imagining a more just world, and they should urge students to take the struggle 'out there'. Yet, in the neoliberal world, these processes and spaces to nurture a mindset of 'public good' focused on knowledge creation and critical agency are few and far between. This, in turn, has far-reaching consequences in terms of the traditional values of a university, as well as research and tuition quality.

In the neoliberal economy, the university is increasingly accountable to the government and regulatory bodies of the state. In South Africa, these would be, for example, the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the National Research Foundation (NRF). Universities are expected to produce graduates who are prepared for the demands of the global market and who will make the state more globally competitive (Kremakova, 2016). Research, also, is expected to have commercial value (Taylor, 2017). Therefore, the neoliberal university places a premium on the exchange value of the outcomes of its labour, rather than the use value of the outcomes of its labour, as it used to be in the more 'traditional' sense of the university. Exchange value seeks a positive rate of return on the work produced, rather than considering the public good and societal impact of the work produced. The use value is a secondary consideration, a 'nice to have' if exchange value has been realised. Neoliberalism, therefore, has impacted upon the very nature of universities.

Funding is being apportioned to where it can deliver the greatest rate of return and economic benefit. In so doing, some 'traditional' university departments are waning, especially those that do not contribute to the promotion of enterprise and globalisation, such as the liberal arts, whereas 'popular' and emerging disciplines, especially those that have commercial potential, are rapidly expanding and receiving a great deal of funding. Higher education, therefore, has become a commodity with commercial potential. Universities find themselves imbued with a culture of economic doctrine, where economic logic has surpassed educational concerns (Taylor, 2017). They exhibit a distinct market orientation, where the notion of 'consumer is king' is passed on to students (Smyth, 2020). This questions the effectiveness of education provision – as catered for by professional academics – and issues are reduced to an accumulation of choices by individual 'consumers' (Barer, Evans, Hertzman and Johri, 1998).

The neoliberal university is consequently typified by (i) a 'master and servant' style accountability relationship with government and regulatory bodies, (ii) a reorientation toward academic programmes that are profitable, (iii) research that can be translated into commercial value, (iv) adopting corporate and commercial norms, practices and criteria to structure, govern and evaluate the success of its endeavours, (v) locating the student as a consumer of higher education, (vi) the intensification of academic work, and (vii) increased cuts in government funding (which, in turn, places pressure on students to carry a higher portion of the cost of higher education, leading to more student debt) (Ross, Savage and Watson, 2020; Smyth, 2020).

The corporatisation and neoliberalisation of higher education cause an inherent tension that creates certain ethical 'grey areas'. This is because, in principle, a corporate outlook of market relevance, competition, strategic prioritisation, performance metrics and externalisation of social consequences is being forced upon an institution which, traditionally, has operated according to a different value system, promoting educational ideals, the pursuit of knowledge and the common good. It is obvious that the neoliberal, managerialist style of managing HEIs is at loggerheads with the traditional idea of what a university is all about. For example, if knowledge creation is reduced to a target as a way for the university to generate income through taking advantage of the research output subsidy system, the quality of these research outputs comes into question. It stands to reason that good research and good research outputs take time, and the greater the pressure to deliver outputs, the more questionable the quality of these outputs is likely to be. This, in turn, dilutes the traditional role of a university as a producer of knowledge to advance society, because the knowledge produced is now mundane at best.

Similarly, if we agree that the outcome of knowledge creation endeavours should find its way into the classroom, then we are doing our students an injustice too, by providing them with tuition that is not cutting edge, but based on produced knowledge that has not progressed thinking very much. As a university has a traditional obligation to advance society through knowledge creation and teaching, the scenario outlined above would suggest that this obligation is not being met. Instead, it would imply serving The Target, and therein lies the ethical challenge higher education faces.

It would be a travesty if the traditional role of the university is primarily to serve the interests of stakeholders other than students, their immediate community and society at large (Rossouw & Goldman, 2023b). However, managerial strategies that serve primarily external funders or the state's agenda, infighting over resources and question marks over exorbitant executive remuneration by university vice-chancellors all have the propensity to raise ethical questions that will detract from the traditional role of higher education and do great reputational damage to universities.

3. Research Methodology

This empirical study had an interpretivist paradigm (Creswell, 2016; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019), which is interested mainly in filling gaps to inform a better understanding. According to

Goldman (2017), the researcher could also be the interpreter and the co-creator of meaning, but care should be taken to maintain objectivity. In support hereof, a qualitative research approach was followed in which diverse data collection and analysis techniques could be used to construct a social reality (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Saunders et al., 2019). The research strategy was a qualitative survey (Jansen, 2010; Segares, 2022), in which semi-structured interviews were conducted. Initially, 24 senior management staff were purposively selected from the seven biggest public HEIs and one private HEI in South Africa. However, due to busy schedules, only 17 interviews were conducted, which still falls within the meaning saturation range. Senior management in this study refers to deputy vice-chancellors (DVCs) or vice-principals (VPs), registrars, deans, executive and senior directors and directors. Data analysis was conducted via conventional content analysis with the assistance of Atlas.ti. to ultimately create themes.

Trustworthiness was confirmed in applying the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. This is in line with a naturalistic inquiry paradigm – giving credit to the nature of truth statements and reality and the relationships between the inquirer and subject (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Ravitch and Carl, 2016).

4. Ethics

Ethical clearance and permission were obtained from the eight HEIs included in the study and consent was given by the interviewees to conduct and record interviews. During the study and interviews, all ethical requirements were followed to ensure *respect*, *competence*, *responsibility*, *integrity* (Braun and Clarke, 2013) and *safety*. The ethical clearance number at the registered HEI is CBEREC20SOM01.

5. Results and Findings

This section will commence with a brief overview of the positions of interviewees, followed by sub-sections reflecting on the themes created for this paper with accompanied literature references.

5.1. Positions of interviewees

Most interviewees (eight) were DVCs or VPs and two were registrars. Two deans of schools, two executive directors, one senior director and two directors were selected, based mainly on referrals from the DVCs' or VPs' offices. Refer to Figure 1.

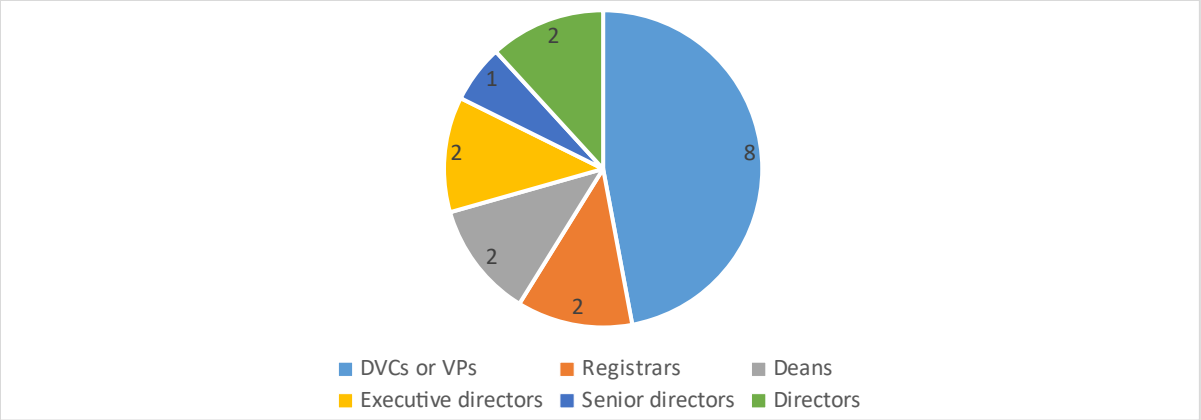

Figure 1: Positions of interviewees

Source: Authors' own construction

5.2. Themes

The following reveal the themes based on the data obtained from the interviewees which also include references to literature.

5.2.1 Importance of leadership

Interviewees mainly agreed on the importance of leadership for the success of an institution, but also for the higher education sector. When a suitable leader is not in place, the institution will go nowhere or may even "go backwards".[(1.15)] Scholars such as Baba and Siddiqi (2018), McCaffery (2019), Leal Filho et al. (2020) and Rehbock (2020) also mention the importance of leadership in higher education and Al Khajeh (2018) describes leadership as a key factor for failure or success. Leadership was described by interviewees as critical, self-evident, vital, the "oxygen" of an HEI[(1.17)] and an important strategic driver.[(1.1)] It is a calling for which one should take responsibility: "Everything rises and falls on leadership" (Economy, 2021).

Refer to Table 1 for evidence from the interviews as numbered in the findings. ([(1.15)] Note, for example, that 1. refers to the table number and 15 to the interviewee number.)

Table 1: Quotes from interviewees

Interviewee	Interviewee quote
15	*"…if you don't have the right leader in place, your institution is not going to go anywhere, in fact it can go backwards…"*
17	*"…leadership is the oxygen of an organisation, it's the oxygen of a university…"*
1	*"[Leadership]…and it is important uhm…as a strategic driver."*

5.2.2 Agile and strategic leadership

According to the interviewees, there will be no transdisciplinary research, collaboration, financial sustainability or stability without leadership. Furthermore, an institution will also be unsuccessful in managing climate change, digital transformation, economic uncertainties and greater demands from students and staff.(2.17) As mentioned by Bateman et al. (2019), managers have to have the ability to respond appropriately to challenges. Those leaders who know how to conduct performance management usually get the work done. An interviewee responded by saying that a leader has to have a solid strategy in place, but also be able to manage "factors" affecting strategy.(2.16) Thompson et al. (2020) refer to managers having to make much-needed strategic adjustments to manage the impact of strategic forces. Interviewees agreed that leaders have an impact on strategy, strategic direction, productivity, change, organisational climate and culture, transformation, ethical conduct and honesty. More specifically, interviewee 17 stated that leadership must appreciate the value of transformation in developing an inclusive, enabling and empathetic institutional culture.(2.17) Robbins, Coulter and DeCenzo (2017), Bateman et al. (2019) and Jones and George (2020) acknowledge the impact of leaders on the above.

As mentioned, HEIs will not be able to lead when leaders are not able to implement, monitor and drive key strategic initiatives and be accountable. Thompson et al. (2020) emphasise that when managers are not clear on the impact of drivers, they may not be able to take good and timely strategic decisions. A possible reason may be, as an interviewee stated, that a tendency among leaders is to focus only on issues pertaining to their tenure, which tend to be short term and self-enriching, instead of having a longer term or strategic view.(2.10). Poor leadership and a lack of strategic direction are also the cause, as mentioned by an interviewee, for HEIs being placed under administration.(2.1) Furthermore, it is difficult to turn these institutions around since there is also a lack of staff capacity, training, work ethic and concerns around workload matters. Leal Filho et al. (2020) emphasise long-term thinking as a requirement for sustainability at senior management level, while Jones and George (2020) postulate that success is dependent on effective leaders in managing performance goals, diversity, competitive advantage and ethical behaviour well.

Refer to Table 2 for evidence from the interviews as numbered in the findings.

Table 2: Quotes from interviewees

Interviewee	Interviewee quote
17	*"You need strong leadership, for you to be able to navigate through these crises, be it the climate change crisis, be it the digital transformation uhm…stuff that we see, be it the economic crisis that we dealing with, be it the challenges that we've experienced with increasing student demands, increasing demands from staff…"*
16	*"I don't think that uhm…a university leader would survive if he or she doesn't have a strong uhm…strategy, if they not keenly aware of what influences the strategy and if they not keenly of how they can harness the factors that can advance a strategy and eliminate factors that can damage the strategy…"*
17	*"You need a leadership that appreciates the value of transformation and the need to develop an inclusive, enabling and an empathetic institutional culture…"*
10	*"…many times leaders they come into their tenure of leadership and the focus is the now, whether the focus of the now is self-enrichment…But we are not looking sometimes into what is to follow after the tenure of yours."*
1	*"if you think about just recently, two institutions are sort of in trouble…you will realise that the leadership part of it is a problem. So, it tells you that uhm…if you have either weak leadership or leadership that may not necessarily be able to provide a strategic direction…"*

5.2.3 Effective and quality leadership

The biggest challenge in higher education pertains to senior managers to have good leadership skills. This is supported by the Council on Higher Education (2016) and Frittelli (2015), stating that it is critical to strengthen university leadership in Africa. According to an interviewee, over and above specific targets for senior academic leadership, there seem to be no definite indicators for effective leadership. Interviewee 1 referred to a leadership crisis in South African higher education and suggested that leaders should be trained to become directors, senior directors, DVCs and VCs.(3.1) There is thus a gap to be filled by ensuring quality leadership.(3.2) Ultimately, these leaders have to present themselves in a proper manner to academia and students.

An interviewee referred to the George Floyd case in the United States and said that strong HEI leaders who were against this travesty would last, but conservative leaders would not. Jones and George (2020) include fair and equitable diversity management to be part of effective leadership. According to interviewee 11, a lack of good leadership was also observed at the institution during the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall student protest actions. However, for the first time the institution has strategic direction. This is because leadership tends to be more visionary, imaginative, transparent and communicative, which creates an enabling environment and new opportunities.(3.11) Leal Filho et al. (2020) claim that HEI leaders have to instil policies and solve problems to ensure that institutions are more sustainable.

Refer to Table 3 for evidence from the interviews as numbered in the findings.

Table 3: Quotes from interviewees

Interviewee	Interviewee quote
1	*C1i1: "…if you think about uhm...leadership uhm…there's leadership crisis in the higher education…I started to look at uhm…how do we train or how do we develop uhm…leaders who will, would occupy your director, your senior director, executive director, VP's even VC's…"*
10	*T1i2: "But I think there is a gap that needs to be filled a gap of infusing good leadership quality…"*
11	*T2i1: "…for me, for the first time in a long time I'm beginning to feel that there is strategic direction that, you know, that the leadership that we have is, is the right leadership, that there now his vision, and imagination, but there is also this enabling environment where uhm…opportunities open, and there is, there is transparencies, there is communication."*

5.2.4 Leadership roles

Interviewee 17 referred to leadership as being a collective of people working together from the bottom to the top, benefitting the institution. A golden thread of accountability, service, good work ethic, dedication, passion and loyalty from the top downwards has to be present to develop leadership.(4.17) According to McCaffery (2019), collective leadership is dependent on the quality of tasks fulfilled by members of a group. Scholars such as Bateman et al. (2019), Certo and Certo (2019), Jones and George (2020) and Robbins et al. (2017) also support the principle of a golden thread in the management task of organising.

The important leadership role of a head of department (HOD) within an academic department was also emphasised.(4.5). This role seems to be difficult and compromised, the reason being that an HOD is appointed temporarily for a tenure of three years, and in some cases may include another term. HODs are expected to fulfil the role of a line manager, which includes performance management, and then afterwards they are expected to return as colleagues within the same department. However, the institution does provide orientation programmes to assist new HODs.(4.5) Baba and Siddiqi (2018) support this role and refer to the challenges in being responsible for managing staff but also being responsible for teaching and learning, research and administrative duties. Similarly, not enough attention is given to the importance and continuity of senior leaders within higher education in South Africa. A tendency is that excellent leaders only serve for a term or two, after which a new leader has to be found.(4.6)

Refer to Table 4 for evidence from the interviews as numbered in the findings.

Table 4: Quotes from interviewees

Interviewee	Interviewee quote
17	*"…leadership is a collective, it's a collective of people from the bottom through to the top management structure that work together for the benefit of the institution… you've got the chain, that golden link of accountability, service, good work ethic, dedication, passion, loyalty, unless you've got that throughout the system, it's very difficult to try and make it happen from the top down. You actually have to develop leadership…from the bottom up…"*
5	*"One thing that has come up uhm…many times in our conversations is the importance of leadership in a department…HOD's…there's programmes in [XXX] to uhm…support new HOD's orientation and so on…"*
6	*"…I think that we don't focus enough in the South African higher education sector on the importance of leadership and also leadership continuity, because we have a very rapid turnaround rate of leaders who you know are excellent and they serve a term or two and then you have to find a new leader…"*

5.2.5 Leadership development

As alluded to before, leadership is crucial for the sustainability of institutions, but it seems that leadership development is not a strategic focus(5.1a) and therefore not much is done to develop, support, mentor and coach pipeline leaders. This results in senior managers not being adequately equipped to take on their responsibilities.(5.6a) McCaffery (2019) suggests that managers even tend to undervalue their own training and development needs. According to an interviewee, there is a tendency to recycle leaders, while younger leaders are in the pipeline. Interviewee 11 said that more transformation in HEIs is needed since few women are appointed in executive leadership positions.(5.11) McCaffery (2019) states that women are still in a disadvantaged position since less than 30% of women are appointed as VCs/principals in the United Kingdom. In support, Jones and George (2020) affirm the relatively low numbers of women in top organisation positions.

Interviewee 1 suggested that HEIs have to develop their leaders to be policymakers and policy planners,(5.1b) and equip them to manage compliance and risk. A proactive strategic approach is required to develop the next generation leaders to equip them to steer higher education into the future. Even research outputs could be used to develop future leaders. Bateman et al. (2019), the Council on Higher Education (2016), Jones and George (2020) and McCaffery (2019) acknowledge the development of leaders, but also staff. An interviewee mentioned that current leaders have a great deal of knowledge and experience to be invested in new leaders,(5.6b) and HEIs tend to lose valuable resources and wisdom when these leaders retire. This also presents an opportunity to tap into developing the next generation of leaders.

Students also have to be developed as leaders,(5.10) which could be done by creating opportunities – not only to understand the role of a leader, but also to groom good stewards. Ownership is thus to be created when students are appointed to leadership positions. Shalka et al. (2019) state that student

leadership development is important for HEIs in the USA and suggest that academic staff and professional student affairs members of staff are the best mentors.

Refer to Table 5 for evidence from the interviews as numbered in the findings. (Note, lower case a and b are used to differentiate different quotes from the same interviewee.)

Table 5: Quotes from interviewees

Interviewee	Interviewee quote
1a	*C1i1: "...so our focus on leadership development uhm…is not strategic and yet leadership is the crucial element that is important in ensuring that institutions are sustainable…"*
6a	*C3i1: "we are not doing enough to ensure that the pipeline of leaders that can come into leadership positions are being proactively developed and primed…So often we find that you know, you have leaders uhm…in very senior roles who have not really been sufficiently equipped to…to uhm…assume the real heavy responsibilities and obligations that come with those roles."*
11	*T2i1: "…transformation in terms of women in leadership at an executive management level, I think there is two people, two women. Uhm…and so there's still, there's still, there's still quite a bit that's being, uhm…that needs to be done."*
1b	*C1i1: "…producing people from universities who are going to be your leaders, your policy planners, policymakers and policy planners…"*
6b	*C3i1: "...we use our current leaders who have a wealth of experience, a wealth of knowledge, how are they sowing into the next generation of potential leaders..."*
10	*T1i2: "...we need to be thinking much more on how to capacitate them [student bodies] as leaders."*

5.2.6 Leadership characteristics

The interviewees suggested the following qualities and characteristics for leaders in higher education:

- To be agile, dynamic and flexible. McCaffery (2019) states that adaptability and flexibility are part of a "learning organisation" leader, and Klein (2020) postulates adaptability and agility as digital leader characteristics.
- To have a vision, drive and energy and be inspirational.[(6.3a)] According to Klein (2020), an innovative visionary is the most important characteristic of digital leadership. McCaffery (2019) describes visionary leaders as having a long-term vision.
- To work as a winning and cohesive team at all levels[(6.3b)] and not to the benefit of individual portfolios. Certo and Certo (2019) emphasise teams as essential for success.
- To network and collaborate towards a common goal. Networking is affirmed by Klein (2020), and Certo and Certo (2019) acknowledge the importance of collaboration for building successful teams.
- To bring people together and create an enabling environment.[(6.11)]

- To take people along, to listen and deliver.
- To commit to the institution and the sector.(6.15)
- To be emotionally intelligent(6.6) and thoughtful. Jones and Georges (2020) confirm emotional intelligence as important.
- To be knowledgeable and astute and to have a broad perspective. Klein (2020) refers to a leader as being knowledge-orientated.
- To be accountable for an institution's resources, also in an ethical manner.(6.17)
- To lead by example, to act ethically and to be inspiring. Klein (2020) suggests that a digital leader should be a motivator and role model.
- To be stewards and take ownership. McCaffery (2019) affirms stewardship as a role of a leader.
- To have a long-term orientation whereby a legacy is created, instead of focusing on the short term.(6.10)
- To be transformational and a generalist. Al Khajeh (2018), McCaffery (2019) and Jones and George (2020) support transformational leadership.

Refer to Table 6 for evidence from the interviews as numbered in the findings. (Note, lower case a and b are used to differentiate different quotes from the same interviewee.)

Table 6: Quotes from interviewees

Interviewee	Interviewee quote
3a	*"...you've got to have an expansive vision, you've got to have drive and energy and you've got to be aspirational."*
3b	*"...you've got to have a winning team at all levels."*
11	*"...bring people together and create an enabling environment."*
15	*"...you have to have leaders who are genuinely invested not only in the institution, but in the sector in general..."*
6	*"...emotionally intelligent leaders..."*
17	*"...leaders make sure that uhm...the resources of an institution are looked after properly you know, accountably and ethically..."*
10	*"...we need not to be thinking of the now. I've mentioned earlier on the issue of projections that a true leader leaves the legacy that lives on."*

5.2.7 Academic leadership versus the neoliberal economy

In general, interviewees were more in support of appointing well-versed academics as leaders rather than good managers with a limited academic history. Interviewee 16 mentioned that good managers are not necessarily good academics, but good strategists that know the environment due to their network abilities. As observed, numerous VCs across the world (not necessarily from Europe) seem

not to be top-rated academics, which was not the case about 50 years ago. This is not necessarily better, but care should be taken not to lose the "soul" of HEIs. Today all tend to be about productivity and able managers, while scholarly academic leaders may be placed on the back burner.[7.16] In support, it was reported that leaders who are academically rooted tend to have a better understanding of the culture and will develop strategies that are sustainable, resilient and have ownership. To obtain ownership, close cooperation with staff has to be nurtured. If this is not happening, strategies will collect dust and will not last after the tenure period of senior managers.[7.4a] McCaffery (2019) supports inclusivity and ownership as part of a liberating organisation.

Interviewee 6 affirmed that except for some key elements, leadership within higher education differs from the government sector and the corporate environment due to different contexts.[7.6] Interviewees 1 and 9 suggested that a VC should actually be an academic and equipped to manage issues such as compliance and risk,[7.1] and have an appropriate vision for the institution.[7.9]

This debate has been spurred on by the ever-increasing corporatisation of HEIs[7.4b] in which able managers seem more prevalent than scholarly academic leaders. Brown (2015) and Chen (2021) refer to this occurrence as the marketisation of higher education, while Geschwind et al. (2019) state that managerialism and leaderism are steered by governance reforms and practices such as strategy, and performance and budget management. However, by default there seems to be resistance to the corporatisation of HEIs due to a deep-rooted respect for academic freedom. Geschwind et al. (2019) also share this concern raised by participants in a study among Norwegian universities on managerialism and leaderism.

Refer to Table 7 for evidence from the interviews as numbered in the findings. (Note, lower case a and b are used to differentiate different quotes from the same interviewee.)

Table 7: Quotes from interviewees

Interviewee	Interviewee quote
16	*"So you would notice that people become…leaders of universities are not necessarily good academics uhm…they are good people because of their strategy uhm…because how they read the terrain…Its surprising uhm…how many uhm…vice chancellors or Rectors you have in the world uhm…and I'm not speaking of European part really, but the rest of the world uhm…do not have…are not your top academics, uhm…and uhm…50 years ago that was the case, that you would not become uhm…a vice chancellor, if you not academically strong… I'm not saying that what happened 50 years ago is better what's happening now, but personally I do hope that the soul of the university would not be lost…and getting an able manager rather than a scholarly academic leader."*
4a	*"In other words, strategy can be envisioned with top management but if they are not developed with people of the organisation, they will remain on a 'bookshelf' and collect many layers of dust. This approach is also important as it builds 'ownership' of the strategy, i.e. it helps to sustain the strategy beyond the term of executive leaders (they are on contract terms, they come and go…) Stakeholder engagement is therefore key in any approach at a university. University leaders often miss this – they then fall into the trap of being everywhere, yet nowhere."*
6	*"…your type of leadership that you have in higher education, is also quite distinctive from the type of leadership that you would have in the corporate sector or government. I mean there's certain key ingredients that remain the same across all contexts, but the higher education context is sufficiently distinctive…"*
1	*"This notion of a businessperson, you know, if you're an academic you can be a vice chancellor, but we learnt thereafter that well, yes it's possible but you also have to have certain skills in order for you to do that, but then how do we develop? I mean uhm…we now have to deal with issues of risk, we have to deal with issues of uhm…compliance and where do we train these people?"*
9	*"…of course the person must be academically grounded, but if the person is unable to see and provide the kind of vision for the institution and also have an understanding for where the institution is, then you going to find out the wrong fit, you gonna find people making pronouncements that this university is going to be the number one, is going to be the [XXX] of uhm …South Africa…while forgetting what made that institution what it is today."*
4b	*"The one concern I have in uhm…in about universities internationally, I'm saying this very cautiously is increasing corporatization uhm…of universities…"*

5.2.8 Ethical leadership

Ethics is deemed very important to ensure sound higher education since the opposite may cause an institution to fail.[8.13] The Council on Higher Education (2016) affirms the importance of integrity and ethics, especially regarding research and community engagement. According to Jones and George (2020), leaders play an important role in setting an example to foster ethical behaviour within organisations. However, interviewee 2 was concerned that individual integrity and the appreciation of maintaining ethics in higher education may be compromised.[8.2]

Despite this concern, interviewee 8 said that there must be an understanding that leaders are expected to do the right thing for the right reason and to act ethically, irrespective of whether this would mean

more work and expenses. Tripathi, Gardia and Behal (2019) also refer to ethics as a way of dealing with what is correct and wrong. To link these findings to the corporatisation of higher education, interviewee 8 mentioned that leadership should not be about attracting more students to maximise income. In other words, there has to be a balance between academic integrity and student numbers.[(8.8b)] Furthermore, leaders need to be ethical when managing institutional finances, since taxpayers' and stakeholders' money is involved. Certo and Certo (2019) state that conflict between financial profitability and ethical practices always seems to be a concern. However, resources should not be wasted but allocated in a prudent way and it is key for HEIs to be good stewards of the resources entrusted to them.[(8.6)]

Refer to Table 8 for evidence from the interviews as numbered in the findings. (Note, lower case a and b are used to differentiate different quotes from the same interviewee.)

Table 8: Quotes from interviewees

Interviewee	Interviewee quote
13	*"…as I mentioned uhm…ethics, ethics of care uhm…all of those are very, very important to ensure that we have still a sound uhm…higher education platform…if an institution doesn't stay strong on uhm…ethics…then it might come to a fall."*
2	*"Individual integrity and appreciation of maintaining ethics gets compromised."*
8	*""…there needs to be an understanding, that doing the right thing is accepted and uhm…even if it means that there's more work…to be done, that is maybe incurring a specific expense…we need to have integrity and behave ethically. It's incredibly important for me. Uhm…I mean leadership then only uhm…looks at how many students we can attract and uhm…and the focus is too much on…on uhm… financials then that's not a good thing, but I think it is a good thing if it is combined. Uhm…so there needs to be a balance…"*
6	*"…it's absolutely key to good governance that universities are good stewards of the resources that they entrusted with."*

6. Managerial Implications

In view of the findings, the following managerial implications and recommendations are suggested:

- Effective leadership is necessary to manage challenges such as climate change, digital transformation, economic uncertainties and staff and student demands.
- Leaders should be held accountable for implementing and managing key strategic initiatives for success.
- There should be a golden thread of good service and work ethic, dedication, passion, loyalty and accountability within academic departments and support units.
- Leaders of HEIs are responsible for upholding ethics and acting in an appropriate manner – even when it results in more work and higher cost.
- Care should be taken to not compromise ethics and integrity within HEIs.

- Leaders of HEIs have to be good stewards of taxpayers' and stakeholders' money.
- Leaders should not only focus on increasing student numbers, but they should balance student numbers and academic integrity.
- HEI leaders should have a long-term, strategic focus which will continue after their tenure periods.
- Effective strategies should be implemented to manage organisational climate and culture, change, transformation and ethics.
- Leaders should lead staff and students by example and as a team to achieve the strategic goals.
- Leaders of HEIs should have a proactive approach to developing the next generation of leaders by "growing one's own timber" – current and retired leaders could mentor these candidates.
- More could be done to include women in senior management positions within South African HEIs.
- Leaders should be visionary, energetic, driven, agile, inspirational, astute, broad-minded, thoughtful, emotionally intelligent, transformational and generalists. They should also be able to work in cohesive teams invested in higher education and create a collaborative environment.
- An inclusive approach should be followed to ensure ownership and the sustainability of strategies.
- Leaders should be aware of the neoliberal economy of corporatisation or marketisation and not lose sight of an HEI's socio-economic purpose.
- Leaders of HEIs should be well-versed academics rather than only good managers or strategists with a limited academic background.

7. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

This section comprises the conclusions, limitations of the paper and future research opportunities.

7.1. Conclusions

This paper forms part of a PhD, and the objective was to explore the influence of leadership as a strategic driver on South African HEIs in fulfilling their socio-economic purpose within the neoliberal economy of commoditisation and marketisation. This exploration included the following conclusions:

- Leadership as an internal strategic driver influences South African HEIs profoundly in fulfilling their socio-economic purpose. For leadership to be effective, it should be agile, strategic, ethical and collective when dealing with challenges within and outside the

institution. However, what seems to be neglected is the development of leaders, while tenure periods tend to compromise the continuity of good leaders.

- With reference to the neoliberal economy in the latter part of the objective, senior managers in the HEIs feel strongly that leaders must remain well-grounded academics with good management skills and not only be effective managers without a good academic history. In other words, HEIs should draw from the traditional but also apply strategy and business principles, while still honouring their socio-economic mandate in providing relevant and quality education.

7.2. Limitations and Future Research

A possible limitation of this study may be the sample size, which was smaller than anticipated. However, it still fell within the range of meaning saturation. Also, a challenge was to secure appointments with the senior management staff due to their busy work schedules. Further to this, the institutional approval and ethical clearance processes for the eight HEIs were time-consuming and took nearly a year to complete. For future research, the researchers could explore how leadership as a strategic driver is perceived by HEIs outside the borders of South Africa.

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