

# Leadership Coaching for Deans in Public Higher Education

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## Abstract

Our research examines the impact of leadership coaching for deans at a South African public university, addressing the increasing complexity and societal demands on higher education. This study evaluates how coaching influences deans' roles and effectiveness. Through semi-structured interviews with eight deans, we identified six key themes: transformational leadership, organisational culture, relationship management, research promotion, operational systems, and institutional support. The findings indicate that coaching significantly enhances deans' strategic thinking, relationship management, and reflective learning. It helps them balance strategic and operational responsibilities, foster positive organisational cultures, manage complex relationships, and promote transformational leadership. The study highlights the necessity for comprehensive leadership development programmes incorporating coaching, mentorship, and ongoing support, focusing on strategic leadership, relationship management, operational efficiency, and positive organisational cultures. Enhanced induction and continuous improvement practices are recommended for newly appointed deans. Acknowledging limitations such as the small sample size and reliance on self-reported data, future studies should consider broader, more diverse samples and mixed-method approaches to validate these findings. Despite these limitations, our study offers valuable insights into the role of leadership coaching in enhancing the effectiveness of academic leaders, providing a framework for supporting deans in navigating higher education leadership complexities. Implementing these strategies can better equip university deans to lead effectively, fostering thriving academic environments that meet contemporary challenges and expectations.

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Background**

The landscape of higher education (HE) leadership has increasingly called for the development of decision-making abilities over the past five decades (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017; Hawkins, 2021; Nadeem, 2021; Passmore, 2010, 2018; Stout-Rostron et al., 2014). This need is underscored by a surge in research focused on enhancing these skills in HE leadership (Bush, 2008; Hallinger, 2013). In the last two decades, leadership research in public universities has shifted to address the challenges posed by increasing institutional complexity, escalating social expectations, and financial strains from the massification of HE (De Boer & Stensaker, 2007; Marginson, 2002; Nadeem, 2021).

Effective decision-making in academia is critical in this dynamic context, supported by insights from extensive research. Leadership coaching has emerged as a practical response to these challenges, particularly for deans navigating the complex HE landscape (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017; Hawkins, 2021; Nadeem, 2021; Passmore, 2010, 2018; Stout-Rostron et al., 2014). Over the past five years, the need for leadership coaching for deans has become apparent, emphasising the importance of contextual nuances in HE (Abdullahi et al., 2022; Alexander, 2023; Alsuraihi, 2022; Beerkens et al., 2022; Bothwell, 2020; De Villiers, 2022; Graves et al., 2023; Henry, 2021; Jameson, 2019; Johnson, 2021; Mabe & Bwalya, 2022; Melles et al., 2022; Morrow, 2023; Passarelli et al., 2023; Seal, 2021).

Internationally, the evolution of leadership research in public South African universities mirrors global trends in HE (Huisman et al., 2007; Teixeira et al., 2019). Managing increasingly complex HE institutions and meeting societal expectations and financial pressures are universal challenges. Examining South African deans' experiences with leadership coaching can provide valuable insights into the global conversation on effective academic leadership (Seale & Cross, 2018). The efficacy of leadership coaching, as highlighted by numerous studies, offers a universally applicable strategy for addressing common challenges in HE (Grant, 2015; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2007).

This study examines the leadership coaching experiences of deans at a public university, referred to as 'University X', for ethical reasons. At University X, the term "executive dean" refers to the head of a faculty or similar structure, including the Dean of the Business School, in line with the South African Business Schools Association (SABSA, 2023). In this study, "dean" refers to executive deans and deans who participated.

### **1.2. Problem Statement**

At University X, deans play a crucial role in achieving the university's objectives, monitored across six key performance areas (KPA) and 87 key performance indicators (KPIs). This research seeks to investigate how leadership coaching experiences

influence the performance of deans at a public university (University X). Specifically, the study aims to address the following research question: What is the impact of leadership coaching on the leadership effectiveness of deans?

To explore this question, the study compares the experiences of eight deans who have served in their roles for at least 12 months, grouped into two categories: 1) deans who have undergone leadership coaching and 2) deans who have not received leadership coaching. By analysing these experiences, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how coaching affects the leadership effectiveness of university deans.

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

Our research objectives are five-fold:

- 1) To investigate the impact of leadership coaching on the decision-making abilities of deans at University X.
- 2) To compare the leadership effectiveness of deans who have served in their post for at least one year, comparing those who have undergone leadership coaching with those who have not.
- 3) To understand the contextual nuances influencing the effectiveness of leadership coaching in a Higher Education (HE) institution
- 4) To examine the specific leadership performance through coaching in the context of a public university.
- 5) To contribute to the global conversation on effective academic leadership by drawing lessons from the experiences of South African deans.

### **1.4. Layout of the paper**

This paper first introduces the study's problem statement, research questions, and objectives. Then, we present a literature review, research methodology, findings, and managerial implications. Finally, we discuss the study's limitations and potential areas for future research.

## **2. Literature Review**

## **2.1. Literature on the roles and responsibilities of Deans**

Deans, also known as executive or academic deans, serve as senior academic leaders and administrators within university settings (Nadeem, 2021). They oversee the operations of colleges, faculties, or business schools in higher education institutions. In South Africa, deans report to their university's deputy vice-chancellors and hold membership in the executive leadership team, necessitating a blend of academic expertise, administrative skills, and leadership abilities (Seale & Cross, 2018).

The establishment of executive deanships traces back to the early 21st century, introduced initially at institutions like the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Pretoria in 2001 to enhance academic strategy development, talent management, organisational change navigation, administrative proficiency, and resource allocation (Gmelch & Wolverton, 2002; Seale & Cross, 2018). This development signalled prestige and prompted other South African universities to adopt similar structures. Scholars emphasise the critical role of strategic thinking and decision-making within academic institutions (Benson, 1961; Nauffal & Nader, 2022; Osagie et al., 2022), highlighting universities' need to continuously adapt internal processes, resources, and capabilities to meet evolving operational demands (Seale & Cross, 2018).

While some references may appear dated, they offer historical context or discuss enduring trends foundational to current understanding. Older studies, such as those by Gmelch and Wolverton (2002), provide valuable insights into time-specific trends or roles. Recent references, like Seale and Cross (2018), remain relevant by addressing persistent issues in higher education leadership. Contemporary challenges faced by universities include technological advancements, automation, and responses to global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasising economic revitalisation and risk management in university leadership (Bothwell, 2020; De Villiers, 2022; Johnson, 2021; Teece, 2018). Deans play pivotal roles in overseeing entire colleges, faculties, or business schools within universities, balancing responsibilities that include managing relationships with subordinates, peers, and stakeholders (Johnson & Cross, 2004; Koerner, 2020). They navigate diverse stakeholder expectations, budget uncertainties, and governance complexities while addressing curricular demands and student diversity (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002).

In conclusion, the literature underscores the need for enhanced training and support for deans to effectively fulfil their leadership and management roles. This includes developing targeted training programmes with clear outcomes to aid new deans in navigating their responsibilities successfully. Recent trends advocate for coaching interventions tailored to the needs of deans, involving collaboration among the sponsoring organisation, the dean as the coachee, and the coach.

## **1.2. Theoretical framework**

Effective academic leadership is essential for achieving organisational goals and creating a positive environment within academic institutions (Beerens et al., 2022). Since coaches are reported to play a pivotal role in enhancing deans' leadership effectiveness (Nadeem & Garvey, 2020), our theoretical framework focuses on three key components. Firstly, coaches emphasise the development of emotional intelligence (EQ) competencies among deans. These competencies include self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills. Deans can enhance their leadership capabilities by recognising and managing their emotions, understanding others' perspectives, and building effective relationships (Joseph & Newman, 2010). Secondly, coaches facilitate conversations around shared values within the academic context. Through these discussions, deans engage in dialogues aligning their values with institutional ones (Boehnke & Hanke, 2022). This alignment fosters authenticity and ethical decision-making, contributing to a more cohesive leadership approach.

Lastly, coaches guide deans in balancing their objectives with the institution's mission (Nadeem & Garvey, 2020). Deans promote effectiveness and cohesion by aligning their leadership practices with organisational goals. This balance ensures that personal aspirations align with the broader objectives of the academic institution. In essence, our theoretical framework is that through coaching, deans can develop the emotional and social skills necessary to navigate the complex landscape of higher education, ultimately leading to more cohesive and effective academic leadership.

### **2.3. Potential benefits of coaching deans**

Deans play a pivotal role in the success of their academic units, yet they often serve relatively short terms, averaging around five years (Henk et al., 2021). This high turnover can be attributed to several factors, including challenges in recruiting and developing new leaders from limited candidate pools. Moreover, the demanding nature of the dean's role often impacts their job satisfaction and longevity, potentially limiting their effectiveness and contributing to turnover (Henk et al., 2021). It is crucial to acknowledge that not all university deans are adequately equipped to handle the complexities of their roles.

Research in applied behavioural science underscores the positive impact of coaching as a form of reinforcement, yielding more constructive outcomes than punitive methods (González, 2023). González (2023) advocates for coaching as a proactive professional development tool, sensitising deans to enhance their skills and adopt improved approaches. However, it is essential to approach coaching with care to avoid punitive measures for underperforming individuals.

Coaching has been shown to elevate the performance of academic deans, fostering a collaborative and supportive environment that resonates well with academic leaders (Rathmell et al., 2019). A high-trust coach-coachee relationship accelerates learning through reflection and feedback, enabling deans to voice their professional development needs and acquire critical competencies for effective change management (Ellinger & Ellinger, 2021; Green & Palmer, 2018). Successful coaching hinges on confidentiality, trust, vulnerability, and nonjudgmental support (Love, 2021; Terblanche & Heyns, 2020).

Increasingly, academic institutions are integrating coaching into their professional development initiatives for leaders. Individual and team coaching empowers deans to explore efficiency issues, review administrative processes, and devise solutions for leadership responsibilities (Burleigh et al., 2023). By fostering a supportive environment, coaching equips deans with the skills and confidence needed to navigate the complex landscape of higher education effectively.

## **3. Research Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Site**

The research was conducted at a residential university in South Africa with eight faculties and a business school. Biographical information of the participants was recorded, including job titles, tenure as deans, highest education level, and primary disciplinary affiliation, while maintaining their anonymity.

### **3.2 Data Collection**

Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews, a preferred method for qualitative research (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022). These interviews included open-ended questions for in-depth exploration, with additional probing questions as needed (Seidman, 2013). All interviews were conducted online, adhering to the recommendations by Thunberg and Arnell (2022).

### **3.3 Interview Guide**

An interview guide was used to ensure a structured approach to understanding the professional background and experiences of the deans. The guide contained a phase that explored the experiences and benefits of coaching. Questions gathered essential background information and delved into decision-making processes, stress factors, job satisfaction, and the development of trust and goal setting in coaching.

### **3.4 Sampling**

The study employed an interpretivist approach, utilising qualitative data to investigate the potential benefits of leadership coaching for deans. Participants were purposefully selected based on specific criteria to align with the qualitative paradigm to ensure accuracy and suitability (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). Inclusion criteria included a minimum tenure of 12 months as a dean, possession of a doctoral degree, proficiency in English, familiarity with online interviews, and provision of informed consent. The sample group comprised eight deans meeting these criteria, with service durations ranging from 2 to 15 years, representing diverse ethnicities and academic disciplines such as Natural and Applied Sciences, Social Sciences, Business Sciences, and

Humanities. To safeguard confidentiality, participants were anonymised with coded labels from D1 to D8.

### **3.5 Data Recording**

Explicit permission for audio recording was obtained from participants, with thorough explanations of the study's purpose. All interviews were conducted via MS Teams, and a secondary recorder was used as a backup. Recordings enabled observation of emotional and behavioural responses, contributing valuable insights to data analysis and ensuring accurate verbatim transcriptions. Password protection safeguarded the confidentiality of recorded material.

### **3.6. Data Analysis**

A qualitative research approach and interpretive phenomenology analysis (IPA) were used (Smith, 1995). Thematic analysis identified patterns and insights, categorising narratives into six superordinate themes, providing a nuanced understanding of leadership coaching benefits and challenges for deans at University X. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2016) conceptual and design thinking, involving iterative coding, re-coding, analysis, and refinement. This process ensured a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and viewpoints on leadership coaching.

While IPA provides deep insights into individual experiences, it has certain limitations. The subjective nature of IPA means findings can be influenced by the researcher's interpretations, potentially introducing bias. This method's reliance on small, homogenous samples can limit the generalisability of results. Additionally, IPA's focus on detailed personal accounts may overlook broader contextual factors influencing participants' experiences. Despite these limitations, IPA was chosen for its strength in capturing the rich, nuanced experiences of the deans involved in leadership coaching.

### **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant university ethics structures (Ethical Clearance Code IPPM-2023-730(M)). Participants were informed about the study's nature and purpose, assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and their consent was obtained. Participation was voluntary, and participants could decline to answer any



questions or terminate the interview if they felt stressed or anxious. Pseudonyms (D1 to D8) were used to promote confidentiality, and data was safeguarded on a password-protected computer, to be destroyed five years after the study's completion.

### **3.8 Data Quality Assurance**

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were ensured to maintain the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Adler, 2022). Credibility was achieved through triangulation, coherence, quality sources, the interview approach, and peer reviews. Accurate details reflected the unique experiences of the deans to ensure transferability. Dependability was maintained through a detailed research methodology and audit trail. Confirmability was ensured through reflexivity and data triangulation.

### **3.9 Integration**

This methodology facilitated an in-depth exploration of deans' unique experiences and coaching expectations at a large South African public university. The qualitative approach provided valuable insights into developing a leadership coaching framework tailored to the needs of deans in a public HE institution, ensuring a comprehensive understanding and robust analysis of the data collected.

## 4. Research Findings

### 4.1 Introduction

In the past two decades, leadership research in public universities has increasingly focused on the growing complexity of universities, heightened social expectations, and financial strains from the massification of higher education (Beerkens et al., 2022; Bitzer & Wilkinson, 2012; Brink, 2018). As a result, continuous development of managerial and leadership skills has become essential for effective educational leadership. Leadership coaching has emerged as a valuable tool to address these challenges (Gigliotti & Roben, 2017; Hawkins, 2021; Nadeem, 2021; Passmore, 2015; Stout-Rostron et al., 2014).

We present this study's results in three steps:

1. Describe the experiences of deans who have served for at least one year and suggest coaching interventions based on identified themes.
2. Refining findings, comparing coached and uncoached deans, and proposing further coaching interventions.
3. Integrating the results from the first two steps to draw comprehensive conclusions.

### 4.2 Experiences of Deans in the course of their first year of deanship

The experiences of deans who have served their first year were categorised into six superordinate themes derived from 12 subordinate themes and 72 codes. These themes encapsulate the challenges and adjustments deans faced in their first year.

#### 4.2.1 Theme 1: Transformational Leadership Attributes

Deans, having completed their first year in deanship, faced a significant shift from operational roles to strategic leadership, needing to balance strategic, operational, and personal priorities.

- **Excerpt D2:** "I realised that my value would not be realised by learning the policies and procedures of the University and being administratively superb, but by relying on my private and public sector networks to add value to the university."
- **Excerpt D3:** "Despite difficulties and resistance, I navigated through challenges by emphasising collaboration and respectful behaviour."
- **Excerpt D4:** "I implemented changes in race and gender representation, focusing on diverse shortlists and strategic research outputs, which led to significant growth."

Literature suggests that influential academic leaders must balance strategic planning, organisational modifications, staffing, and budget control (Ginsburg, 1997; Yukl, 1994). South African universities, facing legitimacy crises and financial challenges, add to deans' complexities (Jansen, 2023; De Villiers, 2022; USAf, 2023).

#### 4.2.2 Theme 2: Establishing a Healthy Organisational Culture

Deans often encountered stress-related health issues while establishing a unified faculty front.

- **Excerpt D1:** "I had a major medical operation ... came back to work ... could not take real sick leave."
- **Excerpt D2:** "Contrary to warnings, my experience was that people were eager to collaborate and promote the faculty's success."
- **Excerpt D3:** "I wanted us to have a unified front."

Coaching can help deans prioritise self-care, work-life balance, delegation, and fostering a positive organisational culture (Gmelch & Wolverson, 2000; Koerner, 2020; Mills, 2015).

#### 4.2.3 Theme 3: Navigating Complex Relationships

Managing relationships with superiors and subordinates posed significant challenges for new deans.

- **Excerpt D1:** "Some thought my approach was abrupt, and I needed to get people on board."
- **Excerpt D2:** "Frustration with lack of acknowledgement from line managers and disagreements during performance management."
- **Excerpt D3:** "Initial scepticism eventually turned into total cooperation."

Developing strong interpersonal skills and effective communication strategies is critical for deans (Gmelch & Wolverson, 2000; Koerner, 2020; Mills, 2015).

#### 4.2.4 Theme 4: Promoting the Institutional Research Agenda

New deans were tasked during their first year with enhancing research in their faculties, often requiring a shift in mindset and strategic communication.

- **Excerpt D1:** "I did not know what was happening in academic administration and the research portfolio strongly enough."
- **Excerpt D3:** "You have to change the research mindset ..."
- **Excerpt D4:** "I had to emphasise perceptions of underperformance in research output."

Leadership coaching can assist deans in developing strategies to support research initiatives, encourage collaboration, and overcome obstacles (Mills, 2015; Koerner, 2020).

#### 4.2.5 Theme 5: Operational Systems, Data Management, and Finance

Managing operational systems, data, and finances were areas of concern for new deans.

- **Excerpt D4:** "I substantially improved our trust funds and left the Faculty with about R60 million."

- **Excerpt D7:** "Let's use this data to improve the Faculty."
- **Excerpt D8:** "No PA in this office for six months."

Coaching can enhance deans' financial and data management skills and promote efficient operational systems (Gmelch & Wolverson, 2000; Koerner, 2020).

#### 4.2.6 Theme 6: Inadequate Induction and Institutional Support

Many deans expressed dissatisfaction with the induction process and institutional support in their first year of appointment.

- **Excerpt D5:** "Essential to work on resilience consciously during times of institutional turmoil."
- **Excerpt D8:** "The induction was limited to the first two weeks I arrived."

Leadership coaching can help new deans navigate the initial stages of their roles, establish mentorship relationships, and proactively engage with institutional resources (Koerner, 2020; Mills, 2015; Nadeem & Garvey, 2020; Nadeem et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2014).

#### 4.2.7 Summary

Overall, deans' first year in office was marked by various challenges that could be effectively addressed through personalised leadership coaching. The identified themes underscore the complexity of their roles and the importance of targeted support in developing the necessary skills for effective leadership in higher education.

### 4.3 Evaluating Coaching Impact

This section compares the experiences of five coached and three uncoached deans, highlighting the differences in their development and the impact of coaching on their roles (Table 1).

**Table 1: Experiences of coached and uncoached deans by superordinate themes**

<b>Superordinate Theme</b>	<b>Coached Deans (D1, D2, D4, D5, D6)</b>	<b>Uncoached Deans (D3, D7, D8)</b>
Distinguished strategist and thought leader	13 occurrences	5 occurrences
Mastering the art of harmonising strategy and operations	10 occurrences	4 occurrences
Fostering a robust organisational culture	11 occurrences	9 occurrences
Catalyst for transformation and positive change	11 occurrences	2 occurrences
Showcasing proficiency in talent management	9 occurrences	6 occurrences
Adept in reflective learning and continuous improvement	16 occurrences	5 occurrences

A Welch's t-test (Delacre et al., 2017) compared superordinate themes between coached and uncoached deans. Coached deans (D1, D2, D4, D5, D6) exhibited significantly higher occurrences ( $M = 9.33$ ,  $SD = 2.73$ ) compared to uncoached deans (D3, D7, D8) ( $M = 5.67$ ,  $SD = 2.66$ ),  $t(8) = 2.99$ ,  $p = 0.013$ . This indicates a statistically significant difference between the two groups.

Coached deans were identified more frequently as distinguished strategists and thought leaders, suggesting that coaching might have significantly enhanced their strategic thinking and leadership capabilities. Moreover, the coached deans displayed a more remarkable ability to harmonise strategy and operations, indicating that coaching may have facilitated the development of a more integrated approach to managing their responsibilities. Both groups demonstrated substantial involvement in fostering organisational culture; however, the coached deans had a slight edge, implying that coaching might contribute to a more proactive role in shaping organisational culture. Coached deans were observed more frequently as catalysts for transformation and positive change, suggesting that coaching can enhance their ability to drive and manage organisational change. Additionally, the coached deans exhibited higher proficiency in talent management, indicating that coaching may have improved their skills in managing and developing team talent. Furthermore, coached deans demonstrated a slight advantage in reflective learning and continuous improvement, suggesting that coaching likely fostered a mindset of ongoing development and education.

Deans from various backgrounds shared their experiences and challenges without systematic coaching. Their insights reveal the complexities of their roles, especially under circumstances lacking structured support. For instance, one uncoached dean highlighted the emotional toll of constant opposition and escalation within their faculty, underscoring the difficulty of maintaining impartiality amidst these dynamics. Another uncoached dean lamented about reliance on self-reporting progress without much-needed guidance. Meanwhile, another uncoached dean wanted to bolster strategic thinking and analytical capabilities, particularly in interpreting data and graphs. These narratives underscore a common thread: Without coaching, deans cannot navigate their developmental journey mainly independently, facing the brunt of the learning curve unaided. They are candid about their areas for growth, from grappling with the administrative demands of their roles to adapting to the leadership challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This self-aware yet somewhat isolated stance points to a significant gap in leadership development within the university setting, where the potential for coaching to catalyse personal and professional growth remains largely untapped. Deans with six to 12 coaching sessions showcased significant progress and proficiency. This variability underscores the importance of tailoring coaching frequency to academic leaders' individual needs and career stages.

Based on the findings, coaching interventions for deans encompass a multifaceted approach aimed at enhancing leadership effectiveness and navigating challenges in higher education. Personalised development plans, tailored to individual needs and aspirations, are foundational, drawing on strengths assessments and career goals to foster targeted professional growth (Abdullahi et al., 2022). These plans

are complemented by initiatives to enhance self-awareness and reflective learning through feedback and assessment tools, enabling deans to deepen their understanding of their leadership styles and areas for improvement (Ellinger & Ellinger, 2021). Additionally, coaching focuses on skill-building in strategic thinking, conflict resolution, and communication, leveraging proven methodologies such as scenario planning and mediation (Gmelch & Wolverton, 2002). Stress management strategies, including mindfulness and resilience-building techniques, are integrated to equip deans with tools to effectively manage stress triggers (Green & Palmer, 2018).

Moreover, coaching supports deans in navigating organisational change by imparting effective change management strategies and fostering supportive networks within and beyond the institution (Clark, 2023; Johnson & Cross, 2004). Conflict resolution techniques are honed to promote constructive dialogue and foster a harmonious work environment (Hawkins, 2021). Emphasis is placed on setting SMART goals aligned with institutional objectives, supported by robust accountability frameworks to ensure measurable progress and goal attainment (Passarelli et al., 2023). By promoting innovative thinking and preparing deans for long-term success through succession planning and career sustainability strategies, coaching interventions aim to cultivate resilient and visionary leaders in higher education (Nadeem & Garvey, 2020; Henry, 2021). These interventions are informed by research and practice, illustrating their efficacy in equipping deans to meet the complex demands of modern academic leadership.

In summary, effective coaching for deans involves a combination of tailored guidance, skill development, stress management, and strategic thinking. Coaching and experience are crucial for deans' continuous growth and success in their roles. Further research is needed to develop a comprehensive coaching framework applicable to various middle-leader contexts.

## **5. Managerial Implications**

The study highlights several critical implications for the management and development of deans at public universities. These findings emphasise the need for strategic leadership, effective relationship management, and ongoing personal and professional growth. The main implications are as follows:

### **5.1 Strategic Leadership Development**

Tailored leadership development programmes should focus on strategic thinking and transformational leadership skills to assist deans in balancing their strategic, operational, and personal imperatives. It is vital to establish formal mentorship and coaching programmes for new deans, leveraging the experience of senior leaders to guide and support them in their roles. Additionally, work-life balance initiatives, such as flexible work arrangements and wellness programmes, should be implemented to support deans and their teams. It is also crucial to emphasise a positive organisational culture in leadership training, equipping deans with tools to build cohesive, motivated, and collaborative teams.

## **5.2 Relationship Management**

Training deans in conflict resolution, effective communication, and emotional intelligence can assist them in managing relationships with superiors, peers, and subordinates. Additionally, they should be trained to engage effectively with various can access, enhancing their ability to build trust and strong relationships.

## **5.3 Operational Efficiency**

We propose providing training in financial management, budgeting, and data analysis to improve the decision-making abilities of deans. It is crucial to ensure that deans can access comprehensive data management systems and administrative support to streamline operational management.

## **5.4 Supporting Research Initiatives**

To support the development of research strategies aligning with university goals, promote interdisciplinary collaboration, and secure funding for deans. Additionally, provide resources and training in academic writing and publication to enhance research output and quality.

## **5.5 Improving Induction Processes**

Develop comprehensive induction programmes encompassing all facets of a dean's responsibilities, such as orientation, mentorship, and sustained assistance. Provide support through frequent follow-ups, access to professional growth materials, and networking opportunities with peers.

## **5.6 Continuous Improvement and Reflective Learning**

Promote reflective practice for continuous leadership improvement, including self-assessment and peer feedback. Highlight the importance of emotional intelligence in leadership, helping deans develop self-awareness, empathy, and practical communication skills.

## **5.7 Summary**

Implementing the managerial implications outlined could significantly enhance the leadership skills of deans at public universities. Tailored training, comprehensive support, and a positive organisational culture can prepare university deans to adeptly handle the complexities of academic leadership and foster a flourishing academic environment.

# **6. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research**

## **6.1 Conclusions**

This study provides critical insights into the leadership experiences and challenges faced by newly appointed deans at a public university in South Africa. The findings highlight the multifaceted nature of a dean's role, encompassing strategic leadership, operational management, relationship building, and fostering a positive organisational culture. The research underscores the importance of leadership coaching as a valuable tool for supporting deans in their transition and ongoing professional development.

The six superordinate themes identified—strategic leadership, harmonising strategy and operations, fostering organisational culture, promoting transformation, talent management, and reflective learning—offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the key areas where deans require support and development. The study reveals that deans who received coaching significantly improved strategic thinking, relationship management, and continuous learning. This suggests that coaching can be an effective intervention for enhancing leadership capabilities.

However, the research also indicates that not all areas of leadership are equally impacted by coaching, suggesting that while coaching is beneficial, it must be tailored to address specific leadership challenges more effectively and be integrated with other organisational development initiatives.

The managerial implications of these findings are profound. Universities should invest in comprehensive leadership development programmes that include tailored coaching, mentorship, and ongoing support for deans. These programmes should focus on strategic leadership, effective relationship management, and fostering a positive organisational culture. Additionally, enhancing operational efficiency through financial and data management training is crucial.

To ensure the successful induction of new deans, universities should develop robust orientation programmes that provide continuous institutional support. Promoting reflective practice and emotional intelligence will further aid deans in their personal and professional growth.

Overall, this study highlights the critical role of leadership coaching in developing influential academic leaders. By implementing the recommended managerial strategies, universities can better support their deans, leading to improved leadership performance, enhanced organisational culture, and a thriving academic environment.

## **6.2 Limitations**

This study, while comprehensive, has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Understanding these limitations provides a more precise context for interpreting the findings and identifying areas for future research.

- 1) **Sample Size and Generalisability:** Conducted with a relatively small sample size of eight deans from a single public university in South Africa, the study's findings are limited to other institutions or geographic regions. The diversity within the sample in terms of demographics,



disciplines, and experience levels may only partially represent the broader population of deans.

- 2) **Qualitative Methodology and Subjectivity:** The reliance on qualitative methods, mainly semi-structured interviews, means the findings are based on self-reported data, which can be subject to biases such as social desirability or recall bias. Additionally, the thematic analysis process involves a degree of subjectivity in identifying and categorising themes despite measures taken to ensure accuracy and reliability.
- 3) **Snapshot Data and Lack of Longitudinal Insight:** The study captures a snapshot of deans' experiences and challenges at a specific time. This approach limits understanding of how these experiences and the effectiveness of coaching interventions evolve. Longitudinal data would provide more robust insights.
- 4) **Variability in Coaching Quality:** The study does not account for the variability in the quality and approaches of the coaching received by different deans. Differences in coaching styles, the frequency of sessions, and the relationship between the coach and coachee can significantly impact coaching outcomes.
- 5) **Context-Specific Challenges and Transferability:** The unique socio-political and economic context of South African higher education may influence the challenges and experiences of the deans. Factors such as institutional culture, governance structures, and external pressures may differ significantly in other contexts, affecting the transferability of the findings. Additionally, the study provides less detailed insights into the experiences of deans who did not receive coaching, limiting the comparative analysis between coached and uncoached groups.

### **6.3 Future Research**

The limitations identified in section 6.2 highlight several avenues for future research. Future studies should involve more considerable and more diverse samples of deans across various types of higher education institutions and geographic regions to enhance the generalisability of findings. Incorporating mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative data can provide a more comprehensive view of the effects of leadership coaching, including surveys, case studies, and statistical analysis to triangulate findings and validate results. Conducting longitudinal studies will allow researchers to track changes and developments in deans' leadership effectiveness over time, providing insights into the long-term benefits of coaching and its influence on career progression and institutional performance.

Moreover, future research should delve into the specific elements of coaching that contribute most to leadership development, such as examining different coaching techniques, the frequency and duration of coaching sessions, and the qualities of effective coaches. Investigating the direct impact of

leadership coaching on institutional outcomes, such as academic performance, faculty satisfaction, and organisational culture, can provide valuable insights for designing more effective leadership development programmes aligned with institutional goals. Conducting comparative studies between coached and uncoached deans across similar institutions can further illuminate the distinct advantages of coaching while examining cultural and contextual factors that can offer tailored insights for adapting coaching programmes to varying environments. Additionally, exploring how leadership coaching can be integrated with other organisational development initiatives, such as mentoring, professional development workshops, and peer support networks, can foster a more supportive environment for deans' continuous growth. By addressing these areas, future research can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of leadership coaching's role in higher education and help develop more effective and targeted leadership development programmes.

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