

# Transformative Leadership Enhancing Community Engagement in Higher Education Institutions in South Africa

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**Abstract:** South Africa is a young democracy and its constitutional mandate is to make both basic and higher education accessible and affordable to its citizens. In particular, there is a growing demand for higher education sector to transform through decolonization of the curriculum, provision of free education, improving the employability of its graduates and ensuring its relevance to the communities it serves. While university leadership has responded to addressing these issues, dissatisfaction with the higher education system continues amongst communities and businesses. This dissatisfaction could also be attributed to the continuing exclusion of the previously disadvantaged race groups, delayed redress of the past injustices, separation of the university and the community it serves, graduate employability and the high youth unemployment rate in South Africa. This paper argues that more effective transformational leadership is required to enhance community engagement within a complex and rapidly changing environment. The research method is exploratory and is informed by documentary analysis of policies, journals, books and reports. The article reviews the context of higher education in South Africa and aligns the transformational leadership roles required to enhance community engagement. The findings indicate that both the higher education institutions and communities operates within a highly complex political, social and economic environment that could limit the role of the leaders to deliver on the constitutional mandates. The findings are significant as it reflects on the university leadership towards transforming communities to lead better lives. To this end, South Africa, as a developmental state, requires the state, communities and the higher education sector to align its vision and mission to ensure political and economic sustainability for the majority of the previously disadvantaged groups.

**Keywords:** transformation, leadership, community engagement, monitoring, evaluation, higher education

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## 1. Introduction

My aim in this paper is not to construct a comprehensive framework for transformational leadership that results in effective community engagement. I am more concerned with exploring a conceptual framework within the current higher education and community engagement contexts in South Africa. This paper is part of a broader study in community engagement supported by the National Research Foundation in South Africa.

Universities in South Africa are public sector institutions controlled by the Ministry of higher education and its associated enterprises that is required to show evidence of equity and redress of the previously disadvantaged communities. The post-1994 political dispensation introduced new tensions in the values and interests of higher education, quality and massification through free education and financial sustainability in light of reduced state funding and student fee income. In addition, there is an increasing demand for universities to be relevant to the communities it serves by delivering programme offerings that are in demand and to ensure the employability of its graduates.

According to Salmi (2009: 8) top universities require inspiring and persistent leaders, a strong strategic vision, a philosophy of success and excellence and a culture of constant reflection, organisational learning and change. The diversity and complexity of universities in South Africa require that leaders continuously consider both the content and direction of their leadership actions and behaviors to be able to deal with communities, academics, students and remaining key stakeholders. Therefore, successful university leadership requires leaders to involve student, academics in institutional matters in order to facilitate quality education delivery and outcomes by collaborative engagements, provision of resources and provide feedback on agreed upon targets (Bryman, 2008; Eddy, 2013).

## 2. Research methodology

As the quality of leadership styles is proven to facilitate change, enhance employment commitment and performance, and improve overall organizational performance, concerns over the leadership ability of education personnel has grown in importance within education research. This study is an exploratory study that uses documentary analysis to present the issues. The relevant policies, regulations, journal articles, books and reports have been used to develop both the conceptual and theoretical framework. Presently, this research method is

most appropriate, as higher education in South Africa has been challenged on a number of critical issues including free education, decolonisation, massification of higher education, relevance of universities and their role in communities that continues to bring about changes in different aspects of their daily activities. This research is part of a broader study supported by the National Research Foundation that evaluates the monitoring and evaluation of community engagement in higher education institutions in South Africa.

### **3. Higher education in South Africa**

Professor Thandwa Mthembu, the chairperson of Universities South Africa stated his concerns of higher education as “following the same route as the public school system that has deteriorated almost beyond repair due to the policies that focus more on growth of the system at the expense of infrastructure, funding and quality of entrants” (University World News: 2018). The higher education suffers from huge infrastructure backlogs from the apartheid era, state funding and student fees income is decreasing while majority of the students entering university do not have the required level of skills to successfully complete their academic programme in the specified time. In addition, Jansen (2017: 240) argues that the inevitable decline of the South African public universities would be caused due to its vulnerability (caused by underfunding and interference) and institutionalised violence causing instability. In view of the above, Akoojee and Nkomo (2007: 385) proposes that the transformation of higher education in South Africa requires a “synergy of creative strategies to engage issues of redress” and the sole focus on access without institutionalised quality assurance would not achieve the national transformation goals.

Bozalek and Boughey (2012: 688) evaluates higher education using Fraser’s normative framework on social justice issue. They contend social justice is the ability to participate as equals and full partners in social interactions. For this to occur the three dimensions, namely, economic, cultural and political should allow people to interact as equals to develop participatory parity. Many higher education institutions endure social injustices being a legacy from the apartheid era. For example the previously disadvantaged universities still experience poor infrastructure, poor quality of students entering due to the location of the university (Bozalek and Boughey 2012: 691). While Frazer proposes both affirmative and transformative approaches to deal with social injustices, the former approach does not suffice to address the underlying social structures while the latter deals with the underlying root causes of these inequalities. The transformative approach advocates universal entitlements (economic), acknowledging complexity and deconstructing binary categories (cultural) and engaging in a sustainable global environment (political).

### **4. Community engagement**

Despite the different understanding and definition of community engagement, it is gaining importance within the higher education sector thus creating debates around the impacts on the core functions of the university (Mtawa, Fongwa and Wangenge-Ouma: 2016). Community engagement is not only seen a service to communities but rather a key component of the university knowledge function. The key components of the community of practice includes an ethical code of conduct, mutual benefit, trust and addresses societies developmental issues and challenges through rigorous teaching, learning and research.

South Africa is a developmental state that had to deal with huge backlogs in infrastructure development and service delivery to the previously disadvantaged race groups. Communities are experiencing challenges of income inequality, poverty, high levels of unemployment and frequent service delivery protests. Historically, communities’ separation from universities through the lack of access and affordability, coupled with poor quality of both basic and higher education has allowed communities to view universities as the instruments of colonisation and privilege afforded to the rich. The state demands that universities need to be relevant by responding to the needs of the communities through scholarly engagement while students are demanding “free education” and the decolonisation of the curriculum to represent the local contexts thus making their education relevant to the community development. Jansen (2017: 252) comments that the “solidarity of community action would reinstate the value of higher education in public life and university leadership is now compelled to consider the needs of both students and communities in its teaching, learning, research and community engagement activities.

According to Boyer (1996) scholarly engagement involves “research, teaching, integration and application of scholarship that incorporates reciprocal practices of civic engagement into the production of knowledge” and is key to successful community-university partnership programmes. Despite the current attempts and practices,

Kearney (2015: 26) stipulates three challenges relating to community engagement in the higher education sector, namely, institutional perceptions of what is community engagement, community perceptions based on distrust and a lack of institutional support structures. The above issues would require transformational leaders to develop and implement a cohesive strategy and policy for community engagement. As such, the role of higher education is to support and build a strong human capital base towards a knowledge economy and to ensure that their staff and students are at the forefront of intellectual and knowledge development for improving the lives of the communities.

## **5. Transformational leadership theory**

According to Black (2015: 7) the challenges in higher education has led to the hierarchical, individualistic, collegial, collaborative and transformative approaches to leadership. The transformative leadership model is the most dominant since it align itself with human interactions and reflects the leadership roles of academics. Transformational leadership theory deals primarily with the manner in which leaders exert their influence on followers and can assist to use successful leadership to monitor and evaluate effectiveness in education (Bush 2014). Jyoti and Bhau (2015: 81) further describe transformation leadership as a process through which leaders convince followers to invest extra effort, help them to develop professional knowledge, skills and stimulate them to creatively deal with complex problems.

Burns (1978) define transformational leaders as purposeful in their efforts to unify individuals toward the advancement of common goals. Transformational leaders seek to instill a sense of intrinsic motivation within followers, which is guided by the desire to increase success among the group (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994). Ultimately, the success of transformational leaders lay in their ability to highlight the most important issues facing an organization and employ available individuals and resources to implement necessary changes that are both efficient and effective (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Yukl, 1999).

According to the Multi-Factor Dimension, approach to transformational leadership comprises four dimensions, namely idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bacha & Walker, 2013; Bass & Avolio, 1994; McCleskey, 2014; Washington et al., 2014). The dimension of idealized influence describes the influence those transformational leaders have over the thinking and behaviors of employees that make the employees want to imitate the good behaviors and qualities of the transformational leader (McCleskey, 2014; Washington et al., 2014). The influence that leaders exert over their followers is contingent on the exemplary qualities and behaviors that the transformational leader demonstrates that followers admire, respect, and trust (Bacha & Walker, 2013; Bass, 1999). The inspirational motivation dimension of transformational leadership describes what transformational leaders do to motivate and inspire their followers to support organizational ideals and to work towards the attainment of organizational goals (Bass, 1999; McCleskey, 2014). To be successful, inspirational leaders challenge the people they work with to actively support organizational processes in order to achieve set targets (Bacha & Walker, 2013). The dimension of intellectual stimulation describes what transformational leaders do to enable employees to consciously decide on what is appropriate or not for meeting set standards and for extending organizational ideals (Bacha & Walker, 2013). Transformational leaders' use of intellectual stimulation results in increased follower education and their awareness of workplace challenges and other issues that require the followers to be critical in their approach to addressing them (McCleskey, 2014; Washington et al., 2014). Finally, the transformational leadership dimension of individualized consideration describes what leaders do to attend to the individual needs of employees while helping the employees to develop qualities and competencies necessary for them to improve their potential and performance (Bacha & Walker, 2013; Washington et al., 2014).

However, the multifactor perspective of transformational leadership is criticized as lacking a clear and consistent path to guiding how leaders must influence subordinates to increase performance and to achieve set goals. There is also limited empirical evidence of how the above dimensions influence teams and work-groups (McCleskey 2014). There also seems to be an overlap between idealized influence and inspirational motivation and the lack of convincing evidence on the effect of context variations on transformational leadership effectiveness (Asare, 2015; McCleskey, 2014). Other criticisms include lack of a clear conceptual definition of transformational leadership; the common ground of the different transformational leadership dimensions is unclear; inadequate causal models describing how transformational leadership affects outcomes and how the effects of transformational leadership are contingent upon moderators and the conceptualization of transformational leadership confounds behaviors with their effects (Bacharach, 1989; Van Knippenberg and

Sitkin, 2013). Despite the above criticisms, the theory has demonstrated its utility for the educational administration community, and if it is reconciled with other theories in the field, it still has underdeveloped potential to contribute to the understanding of education as a unique arena for working and learning (Bush 2014).

## **6. Findings and discussions**

Alonderiene and Majauskaite (2014: 141) argues that the same form of leadership style and theory in businesses cannot be used in higher education institutions as the latter provides a public service, the degree of autonomy is dependent on the state policies and interventions and the historical context continue to influence how the universities operate. For example, the South African government demands that the higher education sector be engaged with the communities so that social awareness is nurtured among university students who could then play a transformative role in combating social injustices and inequalities in previously disadvantaged communities. According to Herbst (2017: 742) higher education institutions have been criticised for a lack of transformation and called into question the “capability of the leaders within these institutions to effectively lead change and transform the higher education institutional landscape”. Jansen (2017: xiii) proposes that current leaders now need to listen and attend to the needs of the student leaders to effect transformation. In addition, transformational leadership should be characterized by a leader who works with subordinates to identify needed change, create a vision to guide the change through inspiration, and execute the change in unison with committed members of a group.

Salmi (2009) argues that top universities require strong leadership, to create a bold vision and identify a niche market to build and maximise its comparative advantage. Practices of exemplary leadership to effectively transform organizations are modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2014; Quin et al., 2015). To survive and compete successfully in a dynamic environment, universities require proactive leaders, who remain committed to performing at high standards to generate sustainable competitive advantage through innovative ideas (Sadia, 2011; Pareek and Rao, 2007). For example, in an effort to transform the higher education sector in Denmark, great emphasis was placed on institutional autonomy, institutional leadership, quality assurance and internationalisation (Salmi 2006: 33). Community engagement and development present an opportunity to gain comparative advantage for the university by promoting its involvement and achievements in the communities it serves. Currently, higher education sector has differing views on the meaning and role of community engagement in student learning and teaching. Evidently, teaching and learning is given more focus than community engagement due to academics having competing workloads in teaching, learning and research and may perceive community engagement as not being part of their work performance. In light of the above, transformational leaders need to also address the resistance from academics and to create an integrated approach for community engagement.

To create a transformative vision, university leadership should have good managerial skills and excellent research career. The higher education leadership need to attract talented academics and students, manage costs, ensure good governance, develop a culture of success and excellence and champion change in communities (Salmi 2006: 20). In the absence of recruiting international academics, academic in breeding arises where there is little internal mobility of students and staff and stifles leading edge research and innovations. Internationalisation of curriculum and student and academic exchanges could encourage diverse viewpoints into teaching, research and community engagement.

This requires the transformational leader to create a vision for local, regional and international community engagement to develop global students. To enliven the vision, leaders need to provide followers and key stakeholders with accurate information in a timely manner, and encourage them to participate in organizational decision-making processes (Bacha & Walker, 2013; Bass, 1999). Leaders who seek to infuse strategic planning into the culture of their institution should act as visionaries for the process and should stimulate holistic thinking among those individuals who are crucial to the actualization of change. The responsibility of a leader as an advocate of the planning process aligns closely with the theory of transformational leadership, which is focused on the influence a leader exerts over the advancement of an organization through dedication to the overarching goals of the group (Bass, 1985). Allen (2017: 11) findings suggested that leaders in higher education engaged in transformational behaviors throughout the development and implementation of their institution’s strategic plan help to unite the institutional community toward a common purpose while also fostering a culture of improvement among constituents.

Transformative leadership should create a virtuous cycle of attracting top administrative and academic staff, funding from donors and research and goodwill from both public and private partners. To manage the challenges, universities need to operate within an enabling regulatory framework and enjoy both academic and management autonomy from the state. Externally, favourable government policies and support is required while internally, the transformational leader should develop a vision for success and excellence. The recruitment and placement of academics and administrative staff in key positions is critical function of transformational leaders at the strategic, tactical and operational management levels.

To inspire followers and get them to commit to institutional processes, inspirational leaders employ effective communication and employee participation in workplace decisions. Further, while showing how their actions align with the mission and vision of the organization, the leaders assign followers to more challenging, responsible roles that become learning opportunities for the employees (Washington et al., 2014). However, unless transformational leaders show commitment and integrity to achieving set goals through personal sacrifices and by being trustworthy, attempts to inspire employees will likely not succeed (Bacha & Walker, 2013).

There is consensus that the employability of graduates is a challenge in many higher education institutions. This could be attributed to the quality of academics, quality of programmes that lends itself to the course contents and faculty and departmental leadership to promote community education. There seems to be a lack of rigorous monitoring and evaluation of community engagement interventions. More so, higher education institutions find it a challenge to align and integrate its community engagement activities into a single working entity. Leadership needs to transform the way community involvement and support is provided to ensure its relevance.

The way forward is for university leaders to acknowledge that higher education in South Africa is a wicked problem that requires innovative ways to stay relevant and prepare its graduates for a global market. The traditional ways of distancing itself from the social, economic and political challenges of the communities it services does not make it relevant in a developmental state. Leaders need to ensure that community engagement is entrenched in innovative teaching, learning, assessments and research. In relation to research, the focus needs to be on quality rather than the quantity of outputs and the findings should address and attempt to better understand and resolve the challenges of society. Mtawa, Fongwa and Wangenge-Ouma (2016: 126) argue that the success of community engagement interventions significantly relates to the extent to which the practice of engagement is entrenched in the institutions core policies and practices.

Leaders who continuously examined the assumptions for undertaking organizational processes and permitted employees to exercise discretion in adopting different, new, or innovative approaches to deal with workplace issues felt a sense of pride and belongingness that their views were important to attaining organizational targets. Hence, those employees worked hard to advance organizational interests (Bacha & Walker, 2013). Therefore, transformational leaders' use of different techniques such as questioning, reframing, risk taking, and challenging underlying assumptions of adopted actions and principles are necessary to instill critical and innovative thinking skills in subordinates to prepare them to be creative in handling workplace challenges (Bacha & Walker, 2013; McCleskey, 2014; Washington et al., 2014). Their leadership ability helps to attain and retain the quality workforce in different organisations (Sharma and Jyoti, 2006). In the case of community engagement, transformational leaders need to also ensure the communities perceive the intervention has mutual benefit so as to develop trust in the partnership, its processes and its results (Judith 2015: 27).

The effect of individualized consideration is that employees become happy, motivated, and satisfied to willingly exert themselves to achieving organizational interests (Bacha & Walker, 2013; Bass, 1999; McCleskey, 2014). Transformational leaders pursue this ideal through mentorship and coaching in a supportive environment to encourage employee learning and preparation for future roles (Bass, 1999; McCleskey, 2014). According to Niessen, Mader, Stride and Jimmieson (2017: 51) transformational leadership positively affects the followers having low emotional exhaustion with increased vigour, emotional well-being and proactivity of followers. Transformational leaders play a great role in this context as they encourage followers' to learn, achieve their full potential and break through learning boundaries (Berkovich 2016).

For this to happen, university leadership should have good managerial skills and excellent research career. It must be noted that the influence of the university leader is influenced by the experience of the leader,



institutional readiness, organisational ideology and the independence and autonomy from the state and external politics (Jansen 2017: 17). The higher education leadership also need to attract talented academics and students, manage costs, ensure good governance, develop a culture of success and excellence and champion change in communities (Salmi 2006: 20). In the absence of recruiting international academics, academic in breeding arises where there is little internal mobility of students and staff and stifles leading edge research and innovations. Internationalisation of curriculum and student and academic exchanges could encourage diverse viewpoints into teaching and research. Transformational leaders results in mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and in turn leaders into moral agents (Simola et al., 2012).

While the higher education sector acknowledges the challenges, it has been unable to effectively manage these issues through effective collaborations with the state, businesses and communities. This implies that university leaders require a more transformative and innovative leadership style to “integrate” community engagement into its teaching, learning and research activities. To enhance community engagement, Talwar (2018: 1) suggests higher education institutions could become centres for the communities where adults could visit to socialise, attend and give lectures and participate in the universities research. At night, the facilities could be used for further education and to launch and run new businesses.

Jansen (2017: 249) argues that the underfunding over long periods, interference by the state and instability due to violent student protests would eventually cause the South African public universities to collapse. Against the above background, universities are still required to sustain itself and ensure adequate funding for community engagement. in a complex environment and needs to balance its expenditure for community engagement with the diminishing income from student fees, donations and state funding. As a result, community engagement is valued below teaching, learning and research and a transformational leadership style that could change follower attitudes, beliefs and behaviours and motivation to higher performance levels relating to community engagement is required (Kearney: 2015). According to Bass (1985) transformational leaders, engage both individually and collectively with employees to influence, inspire and motivate to achieve a new vision.

## **7. Recommendations**

The transformational leader needs to ensure that the three complimentary set of factors for creating a sustainable university, namely, high concentration of talent; adequate resources to create a rich learning and research environment in community engagement; and favourable governance that encourages flexibility and innovation without the bureaucratic constraints is in place. In addition, an effective and efficient monitoring and evaluation systems need to be developed and implemented to manage the outcomes and impacts of community engagement impacts.

A quality assurance system to evaluate the effect of transformation interventions relating to access with success, throughput rate, employability of the new graduates in a global market needs to be developed and implemented. The leader needs to address the relevance of the academic programmes offered, calibre of academics and quality of students’ entering university to increase levels of institutional community engagement While there is a need for the state to monitor the higher education sector, there should be sufficient institutional autonomy and effective engagements amongst the politicians and university administrators.

According to (Gaff: 2007) “departments too often function like silos where members attend to their own interests without collaborations to promote interdepartmental and institutional priorities. The faculty has the responsibility of ensure that the quality of students selected is suitable for the programme offering while the programme itself should be relevant to the community and industry it serves. More importantly, academics leaders need to ensure that the students acquire the learning outcomes and soft skills through community engagement to be more employable in a global market. To this end, transformative leaders are required at strategic, tactical and operational levels to encourage key stakeholders to work together towards a common goal of empowering the communities they serve.

## **8. Conclusion**

The key outcome of this article is to acknowledge that higher education, like sustainable development in South Africa, is a wicked problem. This implies that ensuring financial sustainability, staying relevant to their communities, relevance and quality of programmes offered, employment and employability of students and capacity development of academics and senior management requires innovative and transformative leadership.

The above outcomes have to be achieved despite the available resources at the disposal of the institutions are decreasing thus adding greater pressure to integrate the needs of both the students and communities. The article is limited to conceptualising the integration of higher education institutions and the communities it serves. Further research needs to be undertaken to evaluate the impact of transformational leaders in achieving the national socio-economic transformation and sustainability goals through community engagement.

The leaders' goal is to build vibrant universities that are engaged to transform civil society through innovations and knowledge management by developing sustainable partnerships with communities and the remaining key stakeholders. This requires transformational leaders who could ultimately enhance the effectiveness, efficiency and excellence of higher education quality and the development of the communities they serve.

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