



# “In the trenches”: South African vice-chancellors leading transformation in times of change

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## Abstract

This paper examined the transformational goals and strategies of nine black university vice-chancellors in South Africa in order to understand how they direct transformation of higher education in the country. The paper draws from narrative inquiry underlined by transformational leadership theory, and focuses on in-depth interviews with university vice-chancellors. The study focused on the key themes that direct vice-chancellors' transformational leadership strategies. These are devolution of power, the needs to transform the institutional culture and attain social equity through putting students first, and addressing the next generation of academic scholars. Finally, the paper draws attention to the enduring imperative to transform universities through a social equity lens and the significance of vice-chancellors' transformational agendas and strategies in this regard. The local context of the university plays an important role in transformational leadership goals and strategies

**Keywords:** higher education, transformation, leadership, social equity

## Introduction: An overview of leadership in complex contexts

This article examines the transformational goals of university vice-chancellors (VCs) in South Africa given competing demands and desires for change. We sought to examine how black VCs understood their roles as VC, and their goals to transform their universities. In this regard, all these VCs were in themselves transforming higher education through being black and thus changing the apartheid profile of South African leadership in higher education.

In the context of transformation, leadership issues are particularly controversial because leaders vacillate between competing agendas. Over the past two decades, universities and other higher education institutions in South Africa have been placed under the spotlight (Council on Higher Education, 2004; Department of Education, 1997) as concerns were raised about the sector's success in widening access and participation, and its impact on economic development and social change (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2021). Several scholars articulated some of the competing demands and pressures on universities including the urgency to be globally competitive; ensuring research productivity; decolonising the curriculum; attracting, developing, and retaining talent; and addressing student needs (Cherrington et al., 2018; Habib, 2016; le Grange et al., 2020; Leibowitz, 2012; Walters, 2018).

The role of leadership from the perspectives of VCs is multifaceted and complex (Croucher & Lacy, 2022; Heffernan et al., 2021). VCs need to be fully aware of the critical role of universities in creating social and economic change and providing strategic direction for the benefit of the whole institution and for broader social impact (Shepherd, 2018). To investigate how VCs think of and signal transformational goals as being valuable and important, this article drew from nine South African VCs' own stories about leadership strategies in their contexts.

Theoretically informed by a transformational approach to leadership, the study used narratives from the nine VCs to elucidate four key themes that signalled their visions and the challenges underlined by the goal of transformation. These areas of transformation were central to all the VCs' understanding: consultative and open leading of institutions, changing the institutional culture, addressing social equity, and building the core business of the university in relation to its research culture. The idea of transformation as a core operating activity in the work of VCs is not unique to South Africa. As noted by several international scholars, transformation serves as a central organising principle for the ways in which VCs conceptualise their visions and challenges (Badillo-Vega & Buendía-Espinosa, 2022; Heffernan et al., 2021). However, to understand how VCs make sense of transformative goals requires an understanding of what they prioritise as goals and strategies necessary for transformation. This article aims to fill this gap by focusing on the key goals of nine South African university VCs in the context of transformation and the university's deeper goal of social justice and democratisation in the country. A key objective is to examine the

transformational goals of university VCs in South Africa given the plethora of competing demands and needs for change.

## Articulating leadership and strategic direction at higher education institutions

In South Africa, “public universities are internally striving to achieve multiple, sometimes competing, imperatives, while externally presenting a unified and coherent message about what the public university’s ‘core business’ entails” (Swartz et al., 2019, p. 568). A major issue in the postapartheid context is the need to alleviate historical inequalities brought about by colonialism and apartheid. Several scholars have situated the complexity of higher education in the country in relation to addressing past inequalities and transforming the institutional culture of universities (Council on Higher Education, 2016; Habib 2016; Jansen & Walters, 2019). Swartz et al. (2019, p. 568) added that “social justice is a core concern in higher education in South Africa, and that requires redistribution towards parts of the country and social groups that remain economically marginal and marginalised in terms of access to education.” Under apartheid, university education was stratified by race, and postapartheid South Africa continues to grapple with transformative goals around social redress, equity, and democratic participation (Habib, 2016; van Schalkwyk et al., 2021). Thus, given these historical inequalities, Habib (2016) stated that two important agendas for universities in South Africa should be to address historical inequalities, and for universities to be nationally responsive to the issues and problems surrounding them. In light of the grave sociohistorical and economic challenges that face the country, the associated university context is highly fragile and unstable. It is in this context that the core agenda and ability of VCs to strategically direct social change remains vital (Shepherd, 2018). But this is not an easy task and scholars agree that VCs across the globe face challenges in articulating leadership and strategic direction for their institutions as well as implementing them; reasons here range from the pressures of market forces to the dynamics of the impact of race and class on leadership (Dewan & Myatt, 2008; Heffernan et al., 2021; Shen et al., 2020; Shepherd, 2018).

At the heart of leadership in times of change and crisis is how to transform institutional cultures to fulfil key goals for ensuring a better society. In this regard, university leadership around its core goals and challenges remains an important area of research. What are the core goals and agendas that define VCs’ leadership strategies? This question has important policy implications for how transformation is being understood and deserves further study in South Africa where the empirical gap in researching and working with VCs remains, with few exceptions (Habib, 2016; Jansen, 2017; Manamela, 1997; Saunders, 2000). In the literature on leadership, a focus on VCs in South Africa is scarce, and knowledge of their goals and strategic visions in the context of transformation remains a critical gap. In light of this, Jansen (2017) called for further research to increase knowledge in contemporary times about university management. Although transformation can be seen as a rhetorical device mobilised without evidence of what it entails (van Schalkwyk et al., 2021), the question of how VCs

(from their own perspectives) situate their goals and agendas within this context deserves attention.

This article focuses on transformational leadership (TFL) in South Africa by situating the study within a narrative approach before addressing the key themes that frame the core goals of VCs and understanding the contextual basis of TFL in VCs' experiences of leadership.

## Situating TFL in South Africa

Leadership is critical for organisational performance and thus, the particular directions and goals of leaders and leadership are important (Dewan & Myatt, 2008). Although the focus in this article is on VCs who occupy a position at the apex of the university, leadership is diffused and not simply located in the hands of the VC. The particular focus in this article is on how strategic leadership is defined in relation to transformation goals in South Africa. Leadership scholars have drawn on different debates about leadership, for example, transformation leadership (Bass, 1985), distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006), or collective leadership (Denis et al., 2001). Even though there is significant critique and disagreement about what constitutes best leadership practice, there is agreement that VC leadership can be beneficial to universities (Bosetti & Walker, 2010). However, leadership is not a uniform practice and different VCs may have different conceptualisations of leadership. This article began with a VC who suggested that some VCs develop networks and “have tea” but for VCs in South Africa, leadership involves being “in the trenches.”

Leadership is considered to benefit the entire institution. The leadership of VCs in directing their university towards social and economic prosperity, as scholars have attested, involves a myriad of strategies and includes the need to strategically position the university to compete within a context of diversity (Bosetti & Walker, 2010). It also includes developing strategic alliances, creating local and international networks (Pilbeam & Jamieson, 2010), financial oversight, and strengthening the institutional culture (Jansen, 2017) while ensuring that the university is responsive to regional and national issues (Swartz et al., 2019). In this article, the ideal of transformation and its impact on the organisation and broader South African society was central to all VCs' understanding of their leadership vision and goals.

Vally (2007) argued that corporate models of managing higher education will demand new moral foregrounding because social justice imperatives may be pushed to the periphery as universities are forced to abide by the expectations of capitalism. Importantly too, Maistry (2021) made the point that higher education's yielding to the logic of capital has resulted in universities becoming subservient to the economy. Even though the overriding context is that university leadership is undertaken in a neo-liberal context, this paper looks at how leaders of universities make sense of their experience in leading for change and transformation and what their actual experiences, as articulated by them, have been.

Transformative leadership as proposed by Swartz et al. (2022), referred to leadership that engaged with others in ways that are positive and focused on lasting change. There are different types of leadership including but not limited to transactional, transformational, and

transformative leadership. Transactional leadership is based on power relationships where leaders direct others. In contrast, the VCs in this study were invested in bringing about change in higher education and, as Leibowitz (2012) has suggested, the VCs were directed by the social justice agenda and supportive of the role of the university for public good. Although TFL varies in how it is instituted, and can also refer to the ways in which leaders maximise profit, in this study of VCs, the focus is on change embedded in transforming the inequalities of the past and guided by the social justice agenda. As Swartz et al. (2022) noted, this focus on social justice stands in stark contrast to other kinds of leadership.

In the literature on leadership, several studies have emphasised the TFL style (Badillo-Vega & Buendía-Espinosa, 2022; Manamela, 1997). This is especially valuable in a context that requires substantial reform; transformational leaders are needed to strengthen the broader goal of social and economic prosperity. Leithwood and Sun (2012) suggested that TFL builds on common goals, creates positive work environments, shares decision making, and distributes leadership while strengthening the institutional climate of an institution.

For Bass (1985), TFL involved developing shared goals and commitments that move people to a common vision. This vision, as Bass highlighted, involves altering the ideas and values of an organisation based on a moral purpose. In other words, TFL seeks to create change and revise existing values by articulating visions and goals that work for the benefit of the organisation and surrounding community. Put simply, TFL tries to transform the organisational culture of universities (Heffernan et al., 2021). Bass (1985) noted that TFL involves inspiring a vision to challenge the status quo and to alter the environment. This vision is vital in setting a common frame through which to mobilise the university towards a common good. As noted by many TFL scholars, decisive leadership patterns, cooperation, and clear vision are some of the key elements of transformational leaders (Badillo-Vega & Buendía-Espinosa, 2022; Leithwood & Sun, 2012).

Although there are many elements to TFL, this article focuses on what VCs themselves suggest are key to their goals and visions in line with South Africa's historical processes and in line with transformation goals in the country. In other words, how do the VCs' goals and vision address the challenges and the transformation of their surroundings? What this means for TFL is that understandings are contextual, and that any understanding of TFL requires situational specificity. VCs emerge from their contexts, which shape TFL goals. Transformation leadership is vital in understanding VCs' goals of change, but these goals and visions are shaped by their contextual realities including historical processes, large-scale inequalities, poor research culture, and an inherited institutional culture that is embedded within colonial occupation (Cherrington et al., 2018). In other words, TFL is not a uniform hegemonic account of leadership. The underlying assumptions of VCs and their transformational goals are constituted by, and emerge from, the contexts within which they are located (Heffernan et al., 2021). Understanding TFL in this way requires serious consideration of the contextual relations that create specific challenges and directs attention towards particular goals.

As outlined earlier, South African higher education institutions are highly contested arenas in which the need to redress past inequalities remains (Habib, 2016; Jansen & Walters, 2019). The need for TFL is also critical for leaders to be responsive to the need for change and transformation (Habib, 2016). Thus, what kind of transformational goals are being led by VCs and what does this say about leadership? There remains a marginal consideration of university VCs' perspectives on the issues of effective leadership and how they arise—especially in the context of South Africa's turbulent higher education environment. Existing studies in South Africa have paid sufficient attention to VCs' understanding of transformation goals. Yet, on the whole, there are gaps in research on university VCs' leadership strategies. Even though some studies have focused on the functions and core business of university VCs (Swartz et al., 2019), less attention has been given to how they demarcate their goals in relation to transformation. Moreover, excepting a few studies that focused on qualitative methods based on the personal narratives of VCs themselves (Habib, 2016; Jansen & Walters, 2019; Saunders, 2000), few studies have addressed a range of VCs through narrative methods. To fill this gap, this article presents interview data arising from a narrative inquiry that focused on VCs' goals. It is not possible to focus on all elements of TFL and consequently, the paper is particularly interested in how VCs contextualise transformation agendas.

## Methodology

Given the complex task of leading a South African university, this research aimed to understand university VCs' leadership goals and the challenges of ensuring transformation of higher education in the country. The main scope of the study was to understand how VCs made sense of their experience in leading for change and transformation.

The research questions guiding this article were:

- What are VCs' experiences in leading universities for transformation in South Africa?
- How do their goals and visions shape their experience of leading for transformation?

This section of the article describes the research methodology. It explains the basis for adopting a narrative inquiry, and further provides a description of the research participants and overview of the research design, methods used to collect data, and analysis and findings of data and ethical considerations. Qualitative research guided the methodological approach in this article because, counter to a positivistic notion of knowledge, it views all reality as socially produced (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Knowledge is open to multiple interpretations and is always changing. Knowledge is also never value free, but is based on particular notions of power. In this article, we draw on the critical paradigm as a methodological framework. This approach is based on power, inequality, and social change (Fraser, 1989). Contrary to the positivist paradigm, the critical paradigm suggests that knowledge is always subjective. It is concerned with institutional culture and social equity. In relation to this article based on black VCs and their transformational goals, the critical paradigm is useful in that it begins with the premise that knowledge systems are oppressive and, in the case of

black VCs, race was an important axis of difference under apartheid and in their roles in transforming higher education in the country. As such, the intention of the critical paradigm was not only to see these power inequalities in VCs' experiences, but also how they are working towards transformational agendas and change (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell (2013) suggested that people experience the world subjectively and that these experiences are situational and embedded in material, social, and historical processes. This article draws on qualitative narrative inquiry as a methodology within the critical paradigm to understand the leadership experiences of black VCs in the context of transformation.

### Narrative inquiry

Clandinin (2013) stated that narratives provide the basis upon which we can interpret our experiences. In other words, this type of methodology is a means of understanding and inquiring into both the experiences of others and the researcher, who are all part of the social world where knowledge is produced. Narrative inquiry is both a phenomenon that can be studied and a method that informs the inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). Narratives are not simply personal renditions of one's experience; they are socially located and bound to the surrounding social world. In this article, the narratives of VCs and their experiences are vital but within a social context that is open to multiple realities and interpretations. In other words, VCs like all other people are both individually and socially located and their narratives provide thick data on their experiences. Polkinghorne (1988) indicated that narrative inquiry also views events and actions that can create and organise particular narratives. Similarly, in this article, the focus is on VCs' experiences of leadership strategies and goals in order to understand how their narratives and actions contribute to TFL.

Numerous studies using narrative enquiry have been conducted with university VCs in other contexts (Badillo-Vega & Buendía-Espinosa, 2022; Juntrasook, 2014; Wei & Xing, 2022). This article contributes to this body of work in that it addresses black South African VCs' narratives around leadership and in leading universities for transformation in South Africa.

### Participants

This article employed a purposeful sampling technique by selecting black VCs at South African higher education institutions. The participants were solicited through email invitation and nine VCs agreed to participate in the study. Of the nine VCs, only one was female and this is reflective of the higher education leadership landscape and its gendered manifestations where men continue to be in leadership positions. The sample size was thus limited to the nine VCs who were purposefully selected to obtain in-depth narratives of their experiences in leadership. All the VCs were born and raised in South Africa and had studied under apartheid schooling.

At the time of the study, pre-Covid-19, there were 17 black VCs in South Africa. Of these 17 black VCs, nine agreed to participate in the study. These VCs comprised one black female, two Indian males, two coloured males and four black males with PhD degrees in various fields. In order to ensure anonymity and protect confidentiality of the participants, a number

was assigned to each VC in order of the interviews, and these numbers were used when quoting from the data.<sup>1</sup>

### Data collection

All interviews were held at the university campuses and were conducted face-to-face after securing interview appointments with the VCs. Before commencing the interviews, signed consent forms were collected and a brief description of the study was provided. Interviews lasted between 90 to 120 minutes. The initial interview questions focused on demographics, age, and years of experience including factors that had led them to apply for the position as VC. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. To learn about their leadership experiences and goals, the interviews were based on a broad thematic guide. The initial questions focused on their roles as VCs and, within a broad set of questions, VCs were given the opportunity to provide their own narratives of their experiences. These questions included describing family backgrounds and the ways in which childhood experiences had shaped academic choices and career aspirations. Questions included: “How does your background inform your leadership style?” “How does race, gender, class impact on your leadership style?” “What do you think are the key attributes of a VC?” “What are the challenges of leadership?” “How does your context (and who you are) influence you being successful at your university?” In this article, attention is given to the VCs’ visions and goals in relation to TFL.

### Data analysis, findings, and ethical considerations

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thematic analysis refers to the process of assessing and identifying patterns and themes from qualitative data. This process followed three stages. In the first stage, all data were read and re-read to gain deep insight into the VCs’ own accounts of transformational goals and strategies. This process was carried out alongside a review of field notes. In the next stage, data were coded based on specific patterns. Similar themes and patterns were grouped together so that key issues were highlighted. In the final stage, the data in different patterns were further examined to ensure that these patterns were correctly assigned. When patterns were inconsistent, new labels were formed. In this way, major themes arose from the identified patterns following an inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Their narratives demonstrate that navigating their VC position was complex and that there is a distinction between “shared” and “common” experiences. As the participants described their pathways to their current positions, it became evident that many of them were headhunted and there was no evidence to suggest that any of them purposefully pursued the trajectory to become the VC of a university. Nor did all come through the trajectory of being head of department, dean, or deputy VC; rather, academics and political activism, the need for transformation, affiliation to activist and political organisations, enlightenment through

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<sup>1</sup> VC 1: Black female  
VC 4: Indian male  
VC 7: Coloured male

VC 2: Black male  
VC 5: Coloured male  
VC 8: Black male

VC 3: Indian male  
VC 6: Coloured male  
VC 9: Black male



the freedom struggle, and even "a series of accidents" had contributed to them becoming VCs. Hence, not all of the black VCs are captured in each of the themes. The range of themes and subthemes provided a scope to illuminate and understand the complex nature of becoming and being a black VC of a public university where transformation was fundamental to their experience.

Common themes that emerged with respect to critical influences that had shaped their career paths included family background, experiences in the university environment, mentoring relationships, navigating leadership positions in postapartheid South Africa, overcoming race challenges and white elitist ideologies, the importance of scholarship, and leading predominantly white higher education institutions. An examination of these themes points to particular patterns that may provide the basis for an understanding of how we could work towards further developing a cohort of primarily black academics for leadership positions in universities or, at the very least, begin to generate ideas and debate or discussion about black academic leadership. Each of the participants' stories illuminated the challenges along their career paths in coping with the inherent difficulties of the role of a university VC, and with one woman VC navigating her position as a black woman in an enduring white male-dominated profession. In this paper, attention is given to the transformational goals of VCs as they referred to their experience of becoming and being a VC. There are four major goals in this regard including TFL based on consultative processes, institutional culture and social equity, centring transformation around student needs, and developing the Next Generation Programme to enhance black academic research output and career trajectories.

Trustworthiness in this article was generated through open-ended questions that allowed the VCs freedom to express themselves in ways they found relevant. Another means through which trustworthiness was achieved was the use of field notes that were used to consolidate the major themes discussed in this article. In terms of credibility, each VC was given their transcript to verify the content. Ethical clearance was provided by the University of KwaZulu-Natal and participants signed informed consent letters detailing the project, and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed to participants.

## Discussion

Although the VCs varied in how they understood leadership, they did agree on some of the key issues described in this analysis as being critical for effective leadership. In what follows is an analysis of how TFL was perceived in relation to leadership and consultation, social equity, taking heed of students first, and transforming research cultures to advance black academic scholarship.

### Devolving leadership: Consultation and openness

In the first section of the analysis, we gave attention to VCs' understanding of leadership as defined by principles of openness and transformation. This notion of devolving leadership

ideals set the scene for understanding the ways in which leadership is directed towards supporting social equity, putting students first, and developing black scholarship.

VC 8: The big issue . . . is the fact that we are going through a period of very deep and broad transformations in the country. . . . so the university has been going through change. . . . If you are leading through a period of change, you have to give that transformation and leadership that is required in the institution. . . . Issues of consultation are really built in any organisation that I lead. I do have to make sure that there is as much consultation as possible. Which is required in this day and age in South Africa. . . . You can't have a stage where a vice-chancellor is seen to be a despot.

The VCs understood transformational goals as being embedded in democratic leadership. As a starting point, VC 8 pointed to the critical period of transformation in the country and being responsive to national principles tied to social justice and democracy. Emphasis was placed on the critical period of “deep and broad transformations” in South Africa. These transformative goals, as noted in the introduction, relate to complex social and economic problems in the country and the challenges related to these. But they also signify new strategies and responsiveness to a political climate based on consultation and change. Consultation was seen to be part of leadership strategies that collaboratively address problems and devolve traditional understandings of leadership. In rejecting the role of the VC as “despot,” the focus on consultation and participatory forms of leadership revealed that VCs are key strategists who understand their role within the organisation as democratic leaders. In this position, they understand that to lead effectively, consultative processes are key.

VC 5: It is a very complicated environment because there is so much that is not within your control because of the committee systems, you know, and they do things there and they make decisions there, and it is really trying to develop a strong sense of vision, mission.

In this excerpt, VC 5 pointed out that the participatory process through a committee system makes it difficult for VCs to take power. As he noted, “it is not within your control.” Organisational hierarchy was de-emphasised, which contributed to collaborative decision making. According to Northouse (2016), democratic leadership is a dispersed form of power where leaders permit the devolution of power. What is evident is the useful way in which TFL seeks to increase benefit for all in the organisation and on democratic leadership, based on positively engaging with all stakeholders. TFL thus relies on the recognition of the VCs to engage with a broader understanding of power, against traditional hierarchies that are of historical making, thereby stimulating the organisational environment and entrenching democratic participation. TFL is thus tied to consultative participatory organisational patterns, changing systems, and includes deep consideration of followers' needs to engage with the institution at all levels. Moreover, leadership is not a contained experience and not specific to a VC but, instead, a collective process (Northouse, 2016). TFL does not see leadership as despotic and in the hands of the VC. TFL flows through the organisation where different stakeholders and structures like committee systems are engaged in the collective

enterprise of doing leadership. In other words, TFL is a collaborative approach and involves a plurality of events within the organisation (Heffernan et al., 2021).

Of importance to the VCs was the need to structure the organisation through their roles as visionaries and to articulate the mission of the university. As Hanaway (2019) has indicated, followers in institutions are inspired by the vision of transformational leaders. Evident here in the operation of TFL is the focus on participatory democracy actively challenging apartheid formations of power, responsiveness to the national political climate, and respect for inclusion—and also the power VCs attach to their intellectual role as visionaries. As noted by Leithwood and Sun (2012), transformational leaders are visionaries and effect organisational change.

VC 8: You have got various stakeholders . . . students . . . staff members . . . academics . . . non-academics. . . . People are very well informed about what needs to happen in the country and therefore you have to lead a very democratic process. However, you also need to make sure that you can lead in your particular direction in terms of your vision. You have to be a visionary when it comes to issues of higher education so that you don't get pulled in one way or the other, but be able to lead towards a particular vision of the institution. Everybody needs to be brought in, in that sort of higher vision of the institution. . . . The openness that is required, the free debate that is required in institutions of higher learning.

The narrative by VC 8 is evidence of intricate connection with democratic processes in line with the postapartheid context: being responsive to various stakeholders, expectation of and support for consultative processes, and the role of the VC in directing the vision of the institution. TFL values cross-sector collaboration, inclusivity, openness, and free debate. Analysis of the VCs' perspectives on participatory consultative leadership and the value of different voices in establishing the vision and mission of the university remains important. VC 8 made clear the important role of being a visionary, which is deeply embedded in collaboration and representation from different stakeholders, and which maximises the benefit to the institution. As Lange (2014) noted, for transformation to be effective, a devolved sense of leadership is vital. These ideas of transformation, a distributed sense of power, and focus on VCs' goals as visionaries, build on the mission of the institution. According to Bass (1985), TFL creates a climate that enhances follower performance beyond individual goals. Visionary leadership, TFL, and democratic process all meld together to increase the capacity of the organisation.

### **"A home for all": Institutional culture and social equity**

Given the sociopolitical and historical contexts of black VCs, they embody transformation, social equity, and institutional culture in a way that white VCs cannot—and this is significant. It sends a powerful message to the university community and to broader society in transition.

When VCs addressed their transformation goals and visions and the challenges in which these are embedded, the historical setting, apartheid, and contemporary patterns of inequalities were deeply connected to their own experiences. Even though it has been almost three decades since the end of apartheid, institutional culture and social equity remain key concerns. Institutional culture and transformation are inextricably connected (Luvalo, 2019). Institutional culture is a slippery concept and difficult to define but, as some scholars have suggested, it can refer to cultural patterns, values, beliefs, and ideologies through which an organisation is constructed (Suransky & van der Merwe, 2016). Tierney and Lanford (2016) explained that institutional culture is never static and involves a number of issues including the mission of the institution, the environment, leadership, and strategy, amongst others. Historically, the staple that bound values, beliefs, and ideologies including leadership was based on apartheid inequalities. As Suransky and van der Merwe (2016) stated, although there are other systemic problems in higher education that need to be addressed, challenging the apartheid-imbued institutional cultures can play an important role in the process of change.

In alignment with the transformational agenda around institutional culture, the VCs positioned social change as a priority to benefit all or, as the VC below stated, to create a “home for all.”

VC 4: Two of the fundamental issues . . . institutional culture and social equity. Institutional culture at two levels. One is at the level of the, the historical legacy in connection with racial colonisation . . . how do you de-masculinise, how do you declassify, how do you decolonise intellectuals, and their projects ok. Uhm, how we come to grips with that, you know there is a difference between being an African University and being just a university in Africa. You know Oxford is a European University, not just a university in Europe. Yet we take our models, we take our governance structures . . . and all that from European Universities. So what does it mean to be an African University? Second is to get an institution like this to see and accept the diversity and to see that this is the diversity and be respectful of that, and grateful for that it will actually lead to a higher institution. . . . So question is, how to promote, er, respect for difference and diversity whether that is class, or race or . . . or gender or linguistics or national or cultural or geological or sociological or sexual orientation and so on. How do you make a home for all?

Transforming institutional culture is in direct response to legacies of the past, decolonising the university, and ensuring social justice. There was recognition that the institutional culture as defined by VC 4 above—racial European colonisation—and the need for respect for difference are key to his goals for transformation. Indeed, the historical bases of inequality shaped contemporary inequalities, and provide the context through which transformational goals are articulated in relation to institutional culture. Objecting to Eurocentric norms and the historical hierarchal systems of knowledge and culture that continue to occupy South African higher education, this VC made clear that the effects of history shape TFL and are central to his vision for change.

The goal is to dismantle the colonisation of the university (and its unequal manifestations in knowledge production, race, class, language, regionality, culture, and sexual orientation). Recognition of these areas of social inequity and the need for transformation reflect the mobilisation of VCs' visionary leadership based on social justice imperatives that serve to better respond to the internal and external needs of the organisation, the community, and the country.

VC 7: Because the institution was far more untransformed than it is right now and there were some epic challenges facing the university then, a radical, racist past. It still carries many of the traces and the residues of that in the culture and the demographics of the institution and so on. But then it was basically right at the beginning of transition to democracy. So, I would have adopted, you know, I guess different tactics and strategies to shock the system into the changes that we need to induce in it and to grapple with.

VC 7 connected the institutional culture with the heightening awareness to decolonise the organisation—situating the challenge firmly in the historically privileged Western constructs of knowledge, culture, and intellectual norms that have shaped South African higher education institutions (Cherrington et al., 2018; Walters, 2018). Changing the institutional culture, although not easy to do, is key to the vision and mission of the VC. It is precisely the complexity and high levels of inequality that drive the transformative agenda and new forms of governance and leadership, which prioritise these issues. The transformation intentions and goals, although embedded within competing forces including finance, serve to illustrate how social equity goals are prioritised in transforming the institutional culture of the university. This focus on institutional culture highlights the ongoing significance of examining how VCs are framing leadership in relation to social justice. This leads to specific issues around race and class inequalities and the imperative of addressing and supporting students and staff.

### Put students at the centre of the university

Historically, the institutional culture of universities has not taken into account the needs of black students. The historical and contextual milieu of black VCs in terms of how this is connected to their own experiences means that they understand the necessity to centre the needs of students in a context of transformation.

Tierney and Lanford (2018) identified environment, mission, socialisation, information, strategy, and leadership as key to understanding institutional culture. However, as shown in this section, what institutional culture means and how it is constituted is deeply embedded in the context of the history of the setting, and inextricably bound to transformational goals and leadership. These social, economic, and political processes affected the ways in which the VCs referred to the challenge and strategies for student support.

VC 5: What apartheid did was absolutely wasteful, and it located its geniuses in 10% of the people and robbed this nation of the intellectual gifts of those 90%. And so, our job in this nation essentially is to find that 90% so that we can bring to the university

level the very best minds that this country has available to it. So, I believe now that that is what our university now has to focus on. . . . How do we find them and nurture them.

Transforming the institutional culture, as noted earlier, is bound up with the legacies of apartheid and transformational goals that seek to emphasise social equity and support for black students. These goals are also set against the contemporary education system, which, like university organisations, continues to suffer the effects of inequalities, limited access to quality resources and schooling, and poor quality education (Spaull, 2013). Thus, challenges remain in attracting black students to university environments. However, VCs are navigating the space of broader structural inequalities. As VC 3 noted, the changing institutional culture of the university means doing “what it takes to put the students at the centre of the university. And for me that would be a determining factor.” On the one hand, transformational goals, strategies, and agendas have permitted a particular kind of leadership that supports social equity to improve student access to higher education but, on the other hand, the imperative to put students first is constrained by the surrounding social and economic malaise in the country.

VC 3: So the fact that our students are so impoverished, I mean just so many of them have only their financial aid backing to kind of survive . . . to really set people up to study . . . you have to find some organic way to do this and attract good people with PhDs and so on . . . and . . . it is going to be a university that is deeply embedded in this context, that it is going to work closely with the needs of the local development challenges. But then understanding that, actually, you may not have the right kinds of capacity to do that in an effective way, and trying to understand how to build that capacity.

Changing the institutional culture and transforming student lives is deeply embedded in the current context of major inequalities. Recognising these large-scale inequalities and their effects on student lives, VC 3 pointed to poverty and supporting students and attracting quality academic staff with doctoral qualifications while understanding that these visions are hindered by maldistribution within the economic, social, and education systems. Putting students first is also related to building capacity within the university in relation to academic staff. It is amid these tensions that TFL is enacted, based on social equity and support for new ways of envisioning a university culture.

### **Next Generation Programme: Black academics and research cultures**

In the context of centring the needs of students, it also makes sense to think about nurturing the next generation of academics for transformation. In this regard, the Department of Higher Education and Training initiated the Next Generation Programme, which recruits and supports the academic growth of black academics.

Changing institutional culture, it is argued, could lead to the successful transformation of higher education (Luvalo, 2019; Suransky & van der Merwe, 2016). In this regard, VCs

deemed the development of a research culture as a non-negotiable vision and one that allowed the university to be distinguished from other public entities.

VC 6: I am a hardworking, ambitious academic . . . I need to know that I am going to one day stand up and this university will be taken seriously as an academic institution.

VC 3: I would say that the accelerated research output is, well I don't know about accelerated research output, but I would say that building the research system, for me, you know is—let me put it this way. The key project of the university is the knowledge process and there are two aspects to this. The one is trying to understand how to create an environment and a learning environment that is good for the students. And the other side is really building the research system. . . . You know, the challenge I have is to understand how to build the research system from the bottom up.

In the first instance, VC 6 asserted the vision of the institution as being academic, tying this vision with his own stature as a “hardworking and ambitious academic.” The emphasis on building the research system and accelerating teaching and research was deemed a key aspect of the transformational agenda. In fact, the centrality of research informed all VCs’ roles as a leader (Goodall, 2006). VC 6 noted further that he understood the “pulse of the scholar” and had a deep appreciation of the value attached to research within the changing form of institutional culture. By deeply embedding transformational goals within the research project of the university, and by situating these goals and projects in a historical setting, the VCs were able to understand and interrogate the challenges associated with research development and social equity.

VC 2: Our social equity, we are doing that through the Next Generation Programme, to bring black students, bringing outstanding black students who are eligible for the Next Generation Programme, which is costing us a lot, costing us a million rand out of budget . . . we are seeing the fruits of that already with some outstanding black African academics. She came to us because she wants to be a serious academic . . . I've been with her for three years, she's going to produce a wonderful PhD. . . . As soon as she finishes . . . then we need to think about a 5-year plan, about how we will be able to help her, support her . . . in 15 or 20 years, she will be a VC at some university in South Africa, that's for certain.

By consciously understanding social equity and the development of research culture, VC 2 appraised the context and charted a course of action through the Next Generation Programme for black academics’ research growth and support. As Morrell et al. (2022) reported, beyond a technical exercise of supporting transformation and redress, the programme fosters and nurtures relationships amongst academics. In this regard, Leibowitz’s (2012) claim about social justice and its alignment with an ethic of care is key to how transformation is guided.

Vcs are navigating a complex terrain where, on the one hand, they pursue transformational agendas that seek to redress, encourage, and increase opportunities based on social equity as

well as an ethic of care and, on the other hand, they are also embedded within local settings where large scale inequalities and the remnants of apartheid continue to have effects on what it is possible to achieve. Thus, while their goals and aims are transformational, whether these goals are realisable remains to be seen. VC 2, however, did testify to the fruits of the Next Generation Programme.

## Conclusion

Since the end of apartheid, South African higher education has been in a state of transformation. Universities are embroiled in a range of social, political, and economic changes that reflect the highly unequal legacies of the past. In this context, transforming higher education continues to be a vital part of the leadership of universities (van Schalkwyk et al., 2021). With that in mind, this article examined the ways in which nine black VCs conceptualised their roles in the transformation of the university. South African university VCs' TFL strategies and goals showed acute knowledge of their organisation, the surrounding social contexts, and the need for university agendas to benefit all including staff, students, and the broader society. The analysis of the narratives suggests that South African VCs are not alone in their visions, strategies, and enactment of the transformational goals that are embedded within the goals of social justice (Heffernan et al., 2021; Shen et al., 2020).

In approaching VCs' thinking, agendas, and visions around transformation, TFL theory was put to work to demonstrate how VCs enacted goals of prosperity for all. Devolution of power, participatory democratic processes, transforming institutional culture, addressing social equity, and research development are key TFL strategies through which VCs' skills became apparent. Devolving power and implementing democratic processes illustrates contemporary university leaders in South Africa rejecting past inequalities and hierarchies. Secondly, transformation of the institutional culture of the organisation and the need for social equity were premised on objection to the Western epistemologies and intellectual norms that were the effects of colonisation. Revising the institutional culture was a key goal and was deeply connected to social justice. These strategies have helped to address historically derived forms of inequalities. The work of VCs to transform institutional culture was driven by the ethic of justice. Related to this goal is the attention given to student support and research development that are underpinned by social equity and racial and gender justice.

TFL theory is therefore valuable in understanding the role of VCs as strategists aiming to create new possibilities to address past inequalities. The particular demands placed on the university to transform white hegemonic structures, expand access for black students, and develop the next generation of scholars (black and female) were seen in the ways in which VCs conceptualised their visions and strategies. TFL was useful in expanding understanding of VCs leadership skills, and this paper shows how visionary leadership and democratic participatory forms of leadership are connected to transformation. As such, TFL should be seen in conjunction with other forms of leadership as presented by the VCs.



Significantly, TFL cannot be understood without contextualisation or unpacking the contexts within which VCs are situated. VCs' transformational agendas and strategies are demarcated by the legacies of apartheid and social inequities that drive particular visions and agendas for transformation. Broader social, political, and economic spheres shape VCs' agendas for change. TFL strategies are therefore inextricably caught up in the networks of politics, history, and economics. The particular areas requiring transformation are underlined by the local settings in the country.

As the narratives in this article suggest, efforts at transformation are premised on social equity and addressing the vast inequalities that still exist in the country and in higher education. These issues, and the conditions that constrain transformation, highlight the ongoing significance of examining how VCs frame their agendas and visions in relation to social equity and change.

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